

## FM1001

**Interrogation of Sgt. Warren Rachtman  
or  
The reversal of roles in “*Inglourious Basterds*”**

Quentin Tarantino’s “*Inglourious Basterds*” (2009) can be called many things: historical fantasy film, World War II fairytale (after all, it even opens with the words “Once upon a time...”), dark comedy, character drama or even film about films. But I believe not a lot of people would argue with the notion that first and foremost it is a revenge story. And a bloody one as well, because what is revenge really if not a reversal of roles between victims and perpetrators? The film takes place in France near the end of the fictionalized Second World War and can be divided into four main storylines: the mysterious dealings of the eccentric SS colonel Hans Landa (Cristoph Waltz); the carefully laid revenge plan of a strong-willed Jewish woman Shosanna Dreyfus (Mélanie Laurent), whose family was killed by the orders of the said colonel; British intelligence’s attempts to end the war by assassinating high command of Hitler’s Germany; and a team of nine Jewish-American soldiers (plus their leader, Lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt)), who, thanks to their brutal ways of killing Germans, become known as the titular “Basterds”. As we all know, Jews didn’t really have a chance of retribution against Hitler’s national-socialist party for the atrocities they have committed during Holocaust, nor did they have any special squads who, in the name of vengeance, scalped Nazis and Vermacht soldiers; therefore, having heavily fictionalized historical setting was quite necessary to tell this kind of story. More importantly, a story about Jew vengeance literally reverses the generally accepted Jew and Nazi roles in films – in “*Inglourious Basterds*” Jews actually start acting like Nazis and German soldiers sometimes become victims of their quite sadistic and unjust revenge. The best example of this reversal is in

the beginning of the film, during one of its most pivotal scenes – the interrogation of Vermacht Sergeant Warren Rachtman (Richard Sammel) and the second part of the Basterds' introduction.

The whole scene is told as a flashback of private Butz's (Sönke Möhring), the only German from his squad who survived the Basterds' ambush. It opens with the close-up shot of the Vermacht soldier (ironically, played by Quentin Tarantino himself) being scalped. This shot serves a purpose of bridging the scene with the previous one using a sound bridge – the same music is being played, thus, we are already aware that this is visual continuation of private Butz's tale. Moreover, the whole scalping process is realistically depicted and very graphic. This way we are familiarized with the Basterds' methods and the reasons of their notoriety during the duration of a single shot. The same sound bridge is being used to link the scalping shot with the next one, depicting a line of surrendered German soldiers being lead from right to left towards the camera by the Basterds. Medium shot is being used here; hence, we can clearly see the difference of power between the two groups. Jews are holding Germans at the gunpoint while they are watching the mutilation of their dead comrades, not the other way around. The reversal of roles is already evident. Blocking of actors also lets us see the entrances of a dozen dark tunnels in the background. These tunnels will play quite a big role later on. Finally, the establishing shot (joined by another sound bridge, this time one of the Basterds laughter) shows us the entire area in which the scene takes place – it is a small glade of the forest between abandoned war shelters. These three shots are edited in the backward manner of the narrative syntax – firstly we see what Basterds do, only later what they look like.

During the establishing shot the camera slowly pans from left to right, letting us clearly see how the Basterds are mutilating soldiers' corpses and removing their boots. Their casual attitude combined with off-screen laughter and quite romantic, western-like music that starts playing, invokes the feeling that Aldo Raine's squad regards this unnecessary brutality as something

common, just part of their jobs; quite a pleasant part, as this shot creates almost idyllic atmosphere. The following long shot introduces us with the key characters: three Vermacht survivors, most of the Basterds' members and their leader, Lt. Aldo Raine. The positions of these men are very important – Raine's soldiers are standing ground in the highest point of mise-en-scene, establishing their power over Germans, who are kneeling in the very bottom of this valley-like glade. Lt. Raine himself is standing in front of pitch-black tunnel, his position already hinting that some sinister power is waiting there behind him. After extreme close up of his rifle with the engraved words "Inglourious Basterds" (the first time their unofficial title appears in the film) Lt. Raine is shown in the medium shot while ordering one of his soldiers to send Stg. Rachtman forward. At this point the interrogation sequence begins.

The music suddenly changes – it becomes much more dramatic. The tracking shot is being used while Rachtman walks towards Raine in slow motion, his face depicted in a close up. The whole atmosphere of the scene quickly transforms – the few steps this German Sergeant takes appear like a long and hard walk. The close up and intense music let us experience the shot from his point of view – it becomes clear that Rachtman knows he is walking towards almost certain death (the subtle facial expressions of the character also support this notion). The whole helplessness of his situation becomes even more evident when, using an eye line match, a shot of fully armed Basterds' line is edited together with this one. The camera's position is very important during that little shot – low camera angle is being used; we clearly see how overpowering the Basterds are. Camera slowly zooms out, leaving Rachtman in the very center of a medium shot, while he gives Lt. Raine a proper military salute. The end of this shot tells us two things: firstly, that he is a central character in the entire scene; secondly, that even in the face of incredible danger this Sergeant keeps his composure and manners. In a contrast, Reye's salute is very casual; he doesn't even stand up while doing it. Furthermore, the music stops. The salute is depicted in the

long shot, thus, completely undermining the dramatic nature of Rachtman's walk. This suggests that for Raine it is a very standard situation, a mundane part of his job and that he is completely in control of. Afterwards these characters introduce themselves to one another and their dialogue starts.

During this dialogue common shot/reverse shot technique is being used; both soldiers are depicted in medium close-ups, the only difference being that Raine is presented in high camera angle, even though he is the interrogator. Position of power combined with the high camera angle suggests that he does not take this power over man's life or death seriously at all. When Raine introduces other German-born members of the Basterds (who can translate for Rachtman if needed), eye line matches are used. During one of the Basterds' introduction very interesting and humorous non-diegetic scene-within-a-scene occurs; unfortunately, if it should be analyzed here, its analysis would take as much space as the main scene's. Therefore, the only thing I will mention is this: during the sequence we witness quite a few brutal killings of Nazi officers and Wehrmacht soldiers alike; they are shown in a very humorous and upbeat manner. We (the audience) are laughing and cheering, yet the only explanation for their deaths in the film is that they serve under Hitler; thus, they are irredeemable and deserve to die. This is actually the same kind of demonizing and generalizing of their enemies that the real Nazis used. The reversal of roles is evident once again.

After it becomes clear that Rachtman is familiar both with the Basterds and their methods, Raine presents his ultimatum – either Rachtman divulges vital information about the other German squad (which then would meet a similar fate to his) to the Basterds, or Raine will call his right-hand man “the Bear Jew” (who, apparently, is even more notorious) and he will bash Rachtman's brain in with the baseball bat. The whole casual attitude of Raine up until those lines of dialogue now appears in a different light: the lieutenant knew all along that it will come to this, yet even

when threatening an unarmed man with incredibly gruesome death he still acts like it is something mundane. Famous social psychologist's Hannah Arendt's coined phrase "Banality of Evil" (1963) comes to mind; as evident from her study of a national-socialist officer Eichmann, great atrocities are often committed not by some deranged or disturbed individuals, but by simple men who are just doing their jobs as efficiently as they can. And Lieutenant Raine's job, as he puts it, is "Killing Nazis". Even though a lot of German soldiers he eliminates are clearly not the members of the party, it makes no difference, as Basterds tend to generalize and demonize their enemies; they regard anyone obeying Hitler as a Jew-hating Nazi, who deserves their vengeance. As we already discussed, this is as hypocritical as it comes.

At first Rachtman refuses to betray his comrades. Then, at the same moment that Raine starts talking about the Bear Jew (Eli Roth) and forms his ultimatum, the echoing, off-screen clanking-sound starts coming from the pitch-black tunnel behind him. We are now aware of the importance of this tunnel – the fact that we don't see the Bear Jew, only hear him, yet we know he sees and hears everything that happens in the scene, makes this character much more menacing (both for us and Vermacht survivors). The camera depicts Raine and Rachtman in the opposite ends of the screen, the tension between them is highlighted. Even though Raine is still quite casual, his voice significantly lowers, as it is the most important point of their dialogue. After a few seconds of silence the Sergeant not only refuses again, but even insults the Basterds; knowing his position this act could be viewed as spitting in the face of death. For the Basterds it is a moment where the tension is gone – soldiers depicted from the crane shot start laughing and applauding. Rachtman's refusal for them means the beginning of sadistic entertainment. Crane shot solidifies their roles as spectators in the upcoming execution. Raine's position changes – now, after everything is decided, he moves to a little bit higher ground and is depicted in a low angle

shot. The interesting thing is that this is the only time where he calls Rachtman “German”, not a Nazi; as if to somehow subtly acknowledge that Sergeant did the right thing.

The culmination of the scene commences. The camera now focuses on Rachtman’s face and the entrance of the tunnel using shot/reverse shot technique. The sound plays very important role here – only music, which increases the dramatic effect, and the clanking of Bear Jew’s bat are heard. A few shots in this sequence also show reactions of the spectators: private Butz (in close up, as this is his story, after all) is terrified and Raine looks completely indifferent. Yet Rachtman’s face is stoic; the camera slowly zooms in on it as the clanking gets closer and closer, but the Sergeant still shows no fear, he doesn’t even blink – he just waits for his death. Even though previously audiences were probably expected to identify themselves with the Basterds, this dramatic moment invokes feelings of sympathy and respect towards Sgt. Rachtman. As the camera zooms in on the entrance of the tunnel, the screen turns completely black and the music reaches its climax, The Bear Jew finally steps out of the darkness. His entrance is very cinematic even in the context of diegesis: the whole build up and bat clanking until this point raises anticipation of the spectators to the maximum, hence now the Basterds are cheering and applauding as if the Bear Jew was an actual movie star. His informal appearance combined with energetic walking manner, dog tags and the infamous bat makes him into some kind of primal force, emerging from the shadows to unleash his power and anger. Subsequently, after the Bear Jew taps Rachtman’s military medal with his bat in extreme close up, a very short, yet probably the most important dialogue in the scene commences. ‘Did you got that for killing Jews?’ asks the Bear Jew in a low angle shot. ‘Bravery.’ calmly replies Rachtman, depicted in the high angle shot. Even though the low and high angles clearly distinguishes their positions of power as a victim and his executioner, the camera is canted; as if to say that though Rachtman is about to get murdered, he still managed to accomplish some amount of victory by not betraying his military oath and principles. At the

same time he has proved that despite the fact that his medal is received from one of the most tyrannical governments in history, it is well deserved.

After this short dialogue the music suddenly stops and, while the Basterds are cheering, the Bear Jew starts beating Rachtman to death with the bat. The camera quickly zooms out in a long shot, sparing audiences of graphic details, at the same time making it worse, as our imaginations are filling the gaps. When Rachtman dies his agonizing death, the Bear Jew starts dancing around impersonating a baseball player in the medium shot. The shot, compared to the previous dramatic ones, looks completely ridiculous, funny and horrifying. The reversal of roles is complete – while a German soldier in Hitler's army, one who we should expect to be cruel and cowardly, dies a truly heroic death, a Jew executioner makes sadistic fun out of all this. Moreover, when terrified private Butz, after execution, breaks and divulges all the information the Basterds need, they mark him with a swastika carved on his forehead; to make sure that he'll be recognized as a Nazi for the rest of his life. Why does it sound so familiar? Who else in real history marked their victims this way? No other group than the national-socialists, who marked Jews with the stars of David.

Thus, this long scene solidifies the notion of the Jew vengeance as a reversal of roles between victims and perpetrators. What is more, it puts the audience into a Nazi-like mindset – after all, Basterds are the protagonists of the film. Not a lot of filmmakers had the courage or skill to commence such a feat. Using his usual wit, humor and imagination Tarantino transforms history and presents us one of the finest, darkest and funniest revenge stories ever told; and the interrogation of Sgt. Rachtman is one of the best examples of it.

**References:**

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