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Affect Unchained: Violence, Voyeurism and Affection in the Art of Quentin Tarantino

Abstract:
In the first part of the paper the author briefly revisits two of the most important traditions that stand behind the contemporary conceptualizations of affect: the Deleuzian tradition and the Lacanian one. Having pointed to the most important features of the two lines of thinking affect, as well as to certain difficulties that arise within them, the author proceeds to offer his own simple conceptual model that would be operative in thinking about film experience. The model involves feeling, emotion and affect as three distinct phenomena; the concept of "ex-spectator" is introduced in order to account for the crucial difference between emotion and affect. In the second part of the paper, the model is tested against the later films by Quentin Tarantino. The films are presented as "affective": by skilfully operating with "reflective images" they are able to deconstruct the subject of the ex-spectator into the split-but-real, affected self of the true spectator.

Keywords:
affect, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Quentin Tarantino, spectatorship

"To be a critic," the poet John Berryman once wrote, "ah, how deeper & more scientific." There was a time when it was not scientific enough to talk about feelings. We were supposed to talk about structures, texts and discursive formations. Then some smart guys came up with a sly idea: instead of talking about feelings or even emotions – this already sounds better but still not distinguished enough – we should talk about affects and we

will be scientific alright. And so we did start talking about affects. If one was not present at the beginning of this conversation and came only later, one is rarely bold enough to ask why we are not talking about feelings or emotions after all. Embarrassed, they substitute affects for feelings and try to participate in the exchange. Then, from time to time, a silly or brave person comes and does pose the question. Hey, guys, why affects rather than feelings or emotions? The answers are ready. Names are being dropped. You know, man, you are really simple. Everybody knows that feelings and emotions are structured, territorialized, chained by inherited linguistic categories, whereas affect is free-floating, nomadic, deterritorialized, revolutionary, you name it. Shoot, the idiot questioner thinks, it turns out I am not only simple, but also reactionary to boot. So they fall silent, wondering if the distinction itself is not all too simple. Wondering, if it is not rooted in the all too well known metaphysics of *Lebenphilosophie* with its dubious interplay between life and forms. Wondering, if on the ground of this terminology one is allowed to talk about different affects or only go orgasmic about the permanently self-differentiating drift of the affect as such, with no conceptual means to express these alleged differences. Just wondering.

I do not want to spoil anybody's fun. Perhaps, I should have read and reflected more upon these matters. And yes, I am willing to accept every conceptual distinction if only it turns out to be operative. And yes, I am going to come up with one which I hope is. It is home-made, improvised and, honestly, I am not very attached to it. I will give it up or modify it or refine it or drop it altogether at any moment I see why and how it should be done. And yes, it concerns one limited sphere of human experience, namely cinema only. And yes, once I have sketched it, I am going to talk about Quentin Tarantino.

1.

Before, however, I present my tentative conceptual grid it is perhaps fair to stop mocking others and take a more careful look at some of the earlier suggestions in the field in order to find out if they can be of some use after all. In this less militant spirit than at the opening of this paper, I would like to remind the reader of two handfuls of ideas developed in two different intellectual traditions, which then will work as sources of inspiration for my own proposition. What I mean is, predictably, the Deleuzian tradition and the Lacanian one.

It is Deleuze and Guattari that offered the now-popular and at least seemingly operative idea of affect which I alluded to above.[1] According to this famous duo, feeling is ascribed to the well-defined self that has passed through the subjectifying, disciplinary process of Oedipalization which has turned it into a nicely combed and shaved subject of the human world in general and of the capitalist system in particular. Affect, on the other hand, is the intensity, the nomadic energy of emancipation that is not ascribed to any subject conceived as a handle by which the territorialized systems capture and hold us. It is an energy of flight from the human. One of the key points of reference for Deleuze and Guattari is Freud's famous little Hans whom his father and Freud himself tried to squeeze into the Oedipalizing machine which was to produce a nice subject with feelings. A crucial tool of this cruel process is interpretation itself which attempts to present horses that Hans was both fascinated with and afraid of as standing for the father – and so to enclose the boy within the human, the meaningful and the Oedipal – whereas, in fact, horses were rather something that little Hans, following his nomadic affect, was "becoming" in order to run away from the terrible mechanisms of territorialization and rooting in the human. This is also why, in their *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari can offer the elegant definition: "Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man."[2]

1) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* especially pages 240–270, but also 341 and 400.

2) Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 169.

It is also in this very book that the two try to respond to the rather obvious and standard questions that I have raised above, even if their response is still inconclusive. First: Is the feeling (emotion) – affect distinction to be construed along the traditional lines of the opposition between the unstructured life and all too rigid forms or, worse still, between nature and culture? Deleuze and Guattari would protest. The affect is not to be conceived as something primary, but rather as something that can only *reappear* within the deterritorialization of feeling. Fair enough, but one may wonder, if – in order to conceptualize this attractive idea – one would not need to return to the dialectical mode of thinking that the two authors so strongly opposed. However this may be, this is what they write, both suggestively and problematically:

> The affect certainly does not undertake a return to origins, as if beneath civilization we would rediscover, in terms of resemblance, the persistence of a bestial or primitive humanity. It is within our civilization's temperate surroundings that equatorial or glacial zones, which avoid the diffentiation of genus, sex, orders, and kingdoms, currently function and prosper.[3]

Second: Can affect, which – as it is differentiation itself – goes against any territorialized stability and stabilized distinctions be in itself plural in any reasonable way? Can one talk of several different affects? Deleuze and Guattari answer in the affirmative – an equatorial zone is different from a glacial one – although one may still wonder what exactly guarantees these important distinctions. However this may be, it is the artists that, cutting across rigid structures of feeling, literally invent new affects:

> A great novelist is above all an artist who invents unknown or unrecognized affects and brings them to light as the becoming of his characters. . . . It should be said of all art that, in relation to the precepts and visions they give us, artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound.[4]

Together with the very notion of affect as breaking with standardized conceptualizations, the idea that the recipients of the work of art themselves participate in the affective becoming will be of importance for me later, even though in a rather different form. Meanwhile, let me just remind the readers that the Deleuzoguattarian distinction, now as the distinction between emotion and affect, is developed further by Brian Massumi, for whom the affect is an excess in any structure which both destroys and brings life and novelty to it. Here is what he writes, with all the above-mentioned doubts crowding in the head of the reader:

> An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.[5]

3) Ibid., 174.

4) Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 174–175.

5) Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

A bit later, Massumi presents the organized emotion as being inevitably deconstructible into the excessive affect which can always reestablish itself in its autonomy. This conceptual move is very attractive and yet, again, it brings the notion of affect dangerously close to being synonymous with some idea of the undifferentiated flux of life. Here is Massumi:

> Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture* – and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective. That is why all emotion is more or less disorienting, and why it is classically described as being outside of oneself, at the very point at which one is most intimately and unshareably in contact with oneself and one's vitality. If there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them. Their autonomy is the autonomy of affect.[6]

Now, let us take a quick look at a cluster of intriguing ideas that spring from a different, Lacanian tradition. In his seminar on *Anxiety* Lacan paradoxically defined this key affect as "that which deceives not"[7] and as something that is "not without an object."[8] The two formulae are closely linked. Anxiety deceives not, for it signals a peculiar object which is the cause of desire: the famous object small a. Thus, it is not without an object. However, it does not "have" an object, for the object small a can never be present or given. Anxiety unmistakably suggests that any object which can be actually given is not the object small a and so the affect excludes any deception. Thus, it is the site of absolute certainty which, however, cannot take propositional form: pace Descartes, there is no *proposition* that is certain. Moreover, this certainty points to the very core of our being but, at the same time, it questions our coherence and sovereignty as subjects that preside over their actually or potentially given objects, it splits us like – and more disastrously than – the Cartesian idea of God.[9] While pointing to our core, it reveals a deception, an illusion of stability in our subjective constitution.

Lacan's notion of anxiety as well as his general theory of affects have been lucidly discussed and developed by Colette Soler. According to Soler, the paradoxical certainty which accompanies anxiety (or as her translator has it: anguish) means also that this particular affect cannot be displaced (how could it, if its object is not to be given!) and hence it is of highest cognitive and clinical value. It is not a signifier, but an affect which points to the root of who we are. However, Soler characterizes anxiety/anguish as a moment of "subjective destitution." The advent of anxiety/anguish is an existential revolution and a temporal break which also does away with standardized forms of expression: "Whereas the subject consists of sliding along the chain that presides over the temporal vector, anguish arises in the form of a cut: it involves stoppage and immobility. . . . This has nothing to do with other types of moments that are generated by discourse. Moments of triumph, for example, are ego-based moments that curiously involve expansive gestures, like those we regularly see on our television screens on the part of athletes who have just won a race . . . I could also mention the moments of serious catas-

6) Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 35. The emphasis is his.

7) Lacan, *Anxiety,* 76, 218, 312.

8) Ibid., 89, 131, 171, 242.

9) Ibid., 218.

trophe that the media depict to us with mimicry and postures that are repeated identically from one tragedy to the next. Anguish, on the contrary, has no standard posture that would allow us to identify a person who is anguish-ridden as a member of any particular group. Anguish stops the clock, it stops one's movement and one's voice, creating a lived experience of imminence, a sort of epiphany experienced by an object-like being that is in abeyance. In this sense, it is an affect that has ontological import and that, as was seen by existential philosophers, reveals the subject's being."[10]

Later in her book, Soler suggests it is also a group of affects she calls "enigmatic" that could be of a similar "ontological import."[11] Without entering into her detailed discussion (which is related to the enjoyment of discourse beyond meaning) and rather arbitrarily hijacking her terms, I would just point out that what can be discerned here is an attractive distinction between standardized affects (or, better, emotions) accompanied by stereotypical forms of expression and truly enigmatic affects (or affects proper) that both point to the core of what we are and ruin the coherence of our constitution. With this observation, I have completed collecting bits of theories that I want to use as sources of inspiration for my own simple conceptual grid.

So, finally, here is the grid – which, it will be remembered, is to be applied to one realm of our experience only, namely, cinematic experience, even though, surely, lines of potential generalization will be easily seen. If we do have the three different words – feeling, emotion, affect – it seems reasonable to find some job for all three of them. Firstly, let us use the word "feeling" as referring to the states that we ascribe to the characters on the screen. This kid is sad, that woman is happy, this man is in love, that dog goes nuts. The art of the particular actor as instructed by the invisible director, the words spoken, the work of the camera, the use of editing, of music, and so forth, all combine to produce this impression of a character feeling something. At the same time, though, they produce a certain emotional reaction in the spectator. It may be a reaction to the perceived feelings of this or that particular character, or to this or that scene or to the film as such. This movie made me happy, that scene was terrifying, his triumph made me angry, and so forth. Thus, secondly, perhaps it makes sense to reserve the word "emotion" for what happens in the spectator in reaction to the film. All in all, then, feeling would be something that we ascribe to characters on the plane of the screen, emotions would be something that we find in or ascribe to ourselves as spectators who perceive the show on the screen.

Fair enough. But is there, then, any job for the concept of affect? Oh yes, there is, but it is slightly more difficult to explain. We may begin seeing that there is a place for one more concept like that by taking a look at the implicit framing of emotion as defined above. We go to the cinema. We buy the ticket. We sit down. We watch the show. We are emotionally moved in this or that way due to the tricks of the great cinematic machine. Inevitably, both the tricks and the emotions are depressingly standardized. This is rather obvious. The key issue, however, is the very position of the spectator as the one who sits and perceives, feeds his or her eyes with images and – in reaction to the images and events and feelings on the screen – lets him or herself go emotional about them. If this position goes unquestioned, then however novel the plot or acting or editing may seem to be, more often than not, the spectator will be what we may call *an ex-spectator*. An ex-spectator is subjectified by the film industry and the capitalist market in general into a subject of predictable, cognitive and emotional expectations, an always already former observer, one who watches but does not see, one whose eye leads an emotional life chained by the cinematic machine, one who goes emotional and moved, but remains untroubled and unaffected.

It is the affect that affects and changes the ex-spectator into a real spectator. It deconstructs the subjectified self which allegedly controls its visual field but is in fact controlled by the industry – no, not into

10) Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 27–28.

11) Ibid., 101–116.

a non-subjective flux of intensity, but into a broken-but-real, non-sovereign subject which emerges only in relation to the object that affects him or her. However, in order for the deconstruction to happen, the movie itself has to question the position of the spectator rather than just feed him or her with images. It has to shake his or her seat, make them radically uneasy, make them watch themselves watching and expecting this or that and ask what made them expect it. Thus, thirdly, I would reserve the word affect for what happens in the person who observes the show, when the person is questioned in her cognitive and emotional expectations, in their very position of the one who watches without grasping all the structures that subjectified her, and when due to this questioning, sometimes only for a brief moment, in a rift between the elements of the monstrous machine we are plugged into most of the time, the ex-spectator becomes a spectator – and the affective life of her eye goes unchained. The affect thus released, however, should not be imagined as something *fluid* as opposed to the rigid emotion. Rather, affects are stoppages, breaks and *sparks* that suddenly appear or, rather, get produced within the dialectical interplay between images (including represented feelings) and our emotions (actual, expected, disappointed). They can be very different and *sometimes* can be named, but they should not be confused with emotions of the ex-spectator that go by the same names. There is no affect without a radical questioning of the allegedly unproblematic situation of a person watching images on the screen, without a deconstruction of the ex-spectator's self conceived as the subject of emotions. Only the films that manage to trigger this process which results in the temporary emergence of the relational subjectivity of the true spectator, deserve to be called affective.

2.

Now, silly and playful as it may seem, I do think that Quentin Tarantino's art, at its best, is an affective art in the above defined sense. And, indeed, it is not very difficult to see how and why. Ever since *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino's movies have been full of quotations and pastiche. Of course, as the utterly stupid work of Robert Rodrigeuz clearly shows, quotation and pastiche are surely not enough to question the cinematic machine and unchain the affect, for it is rather well-known that the machine can easily accommodate much of the so-called irony. But a good start it is. And ever since *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino has been playing with the spectator's presuppositions, most often by discharging our expectations of violence by never-ending, silly conversations or surprisingly down-to-earth, everyday life events or solutions (see for example the impressive exploits of Mr. Winston Wolfe, the character played by Harvey Keitel). This, again, is not enough to deregulate the machine, because these solutions can easily lead to cheap sentimentalism which is just the obverse side of our market-formatted urge for violent emotions and/or because the laughter these solutions bring about in the spectator can easily act as a simple discharge of tension which does not really change anything in our position and/or because the solutions themselves get so easily standardized. But, again, a good start it is.

However funny and brilliant and moving the early films by Tarantino may be – *Jackie Brown* being surely the most moving of them and *Kill Bill* the silliest one – the real breakthrough comes, I believe, with what seems to be the most awkward of all his works, that is *Grindhouse: Death Proof*. For it is here, arguably for the first time, that Tarantino goes so forcefully beyond the play between the hyperbolic violence, the purposely trivial conversations and the more or less seductive sentimentality into the realm where films are not about anything in particular, but they are to do something. Namely, by addressing the very medium of film, they are to question, subvert or even accuse the position of the ex-spectator, thus, perhaps, unchaining the affect. In fact, if we disregard the clearly weaker *Hateful Eight* (apart from its wonderful last scene), the series that includes *Death Proof*, *Inglorious Basterds, Django Unchained* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* forms a consistent sequence of exercises in affective cinema. For brevity's sake, I shall omit the "basterds" movie in the following discussion.

If *Death Proof* tells any story at all, it is about a man known as stuntman Mike, (played by Kurt Russell), a former film double and a psychokiller who murders young attractive women. His weapon is a peculiar car which, apparently, he used in his work as a stuntman. The car is supposedly "deathproof:" it is almost entirely safe for the driver to crash it full speed into a wall or another car. Thus, stuntman Mike can batter a car full of young girls that attracted and annoyed him in a bar and thus kill them all at once with himself ending up in a hospital, but alive alright. Now, more significantly for our purposes, before Mike runs into the other car, he also kills a girl he was supposed to give a lift home. It is then that we learn about the nature of the car and about its true peculiarity. Namely, the car is deathproof only for the driver. The position next to the driver, however, is most precarious: there is no proper seat there, no seatbelts, not to mention any additional protection. Thus, the psychopathic driver can first torture the girl by violent turns that make her body jump and bump around the locked cabin and then kill her by just abruptly stopping the car. Most tellingly, however, this is exactly the place where one of the cameras would be situated during shootings and hence this is the position from which the spectator would watch the driver while watching the movie.

This highly perverse and brilliant vision of a killing machine is certainly open to a number of readings. The most obvious one would be that the stuntman Mike's murderous project enacts a displaced revenge on the film industry and its spectators. His body is battered, bruised and scarred: in particular he has a long scar running over his left eye, the same eye Kurt Russell had to cover when he acted as the main character in *Escape from New York*, the film that made him famous. In order for the film industry to sell violent images to all of us, the community of the sadistic voyeurs that crave for the pornographic orgy of violence, an anonymous guy, the stuntman, had to have his body bruised and wounded. Thus, the body is literally charged with violence it wants to return. Armed with his deathproof car, the stuntman strikes back. No wonder then, that when just before the final blow the murderer addresses the luckless hitchhiker and tells her that the car is deathproof only when one is sitting in his own, the driver's seat, Tarantino sees to it that the stuntman looks straight into the spectator's eyes.

But are we really hit – at least in our ways of looking? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, we do feel addressed, accused and – possibly – guilty. When observing the dying girl the stuntman looks into our eyes again, as if asking us: "Is that what you want?" On the other hand, we do, indeed, get what the industry wanted us to want, namely a pornographic sequence of images of a sexy blonde girl being killed by a psychopath in a most perverse way. Stuntman Mike is a product of the industry gone amok, a vengeful surplus that wants to return the violence he has absorbed. However, what he ultimately does is playing in one more movie and continuing the show of violence in front of the eyes of the voyeuristic ex-spectators who, sitting in their chairs, only for a brief moment might think they and their expectations are in real danger. The gaze of the stuntman Mike makes us tremble and reflect upon our expectations, but then the expectations are met alright.

Now, things get much more complicated in the second part of the film when the stuntman Mike finally meets his nemesis, that is, another group of girls. Characteristically enough, two of them are also stunt doubles. Famously, one of them is played by Zoe Bell – who plays herself. Bell used to act as a stunt double for Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* and from *Death Proof* on will appear in all Tarantino's movies apart from *Inglorious Basterds*. The association with *Kill Bill* suggests a simple reading. Yes, *Death Proof* is a story of revenge: a psychopath kills some women, tries to kill some more, they turn out to be too tough for him and so they strike back. In this sense, just like *Kill Bill* itself, *Death Proof* is feeding us with what we wanted and expected. Moreover, the gender aspect of the story rather shamelessly and consciously meets the expectations of the present day ex-spectator. And yet, it is not that simple. Especially in its second part, *Death Proof* is a stuntman or rather stuntwoman movie, indeed. One could even think of the girls in the second part acting as stunt doubles for those killed in the first part, with the single blonde hitchhiker being matched only by the spectator herself. To be more precise,

this can be only partly so, for only two of the new foursome are real doubles. Incidentally, one of the other two happens to be an actress of minor roles. She is wearing a highly sexualized cheerleader costume and so she is clearly part of the voyeuristic show that is ironically being presented to us. The irony reaches its climax when the cheerleader is left as a human deposit with a boor in overalls from whom the other girls borrow a car – an image in which Tarantino clearly hyperbolizes and parodies most boorish pornographic expectations.

However this may be, the final section of the movie shows something very different. The two stuntgirls and their friend who works as a make-up girl go for a ride in the borrowed car. The idea is that Zoe wants to do the one crazy thing she is addicted to: namely, to ride on the hood of the car while holding only to two thin belts. Now, this very treat demands our attention. As the girls are preparing themselves for the ride without revealing to their companion or to us what it is about and as we are watching a Tarantino movie, we catch ourselves on expecting something much more spectacular. Is what Zoe does difficult and crazy? Yes, by all means: most of us would not have the guts and the physical capabilities to do it. Is it spectacular, especially when compared to all the ballet, say, of *Kill Bill*? Well, not so much. This simple duality which can be easily overlooked is, I think, extremely important. When Zoe is riding the hood, what we are watching is an example of *a reflective image*, an image which makes us watch ourselves watching it. While watching Zoe, we are watching several things at the same time: her truly impressive exploit and her *feeling* of pure joy, but also our own *emotions* such as our disappointment (oh, is that it?) and our shame at our own disappointment (and what did you expect, flying?). It is also to be noticed how carefully Tarantino avoids voyeurism in this scene. Unlike when shooting the buttocks of a dancing girl in the first part of the movie, which are shown in a steoretypically sexualized way, here he sees to it that when Zoe hold her legs in the air the joy she feels may be erotic alright, but it is for her and not for us: we share it only and precisely by *not* sharing it.

Due to this process of reflective questioning of our expectations, we can unlock our voyeuristic selves established by the film industry and now, spectators rather than ex-spectators, we are exposed to the exuberant *affect* of admiration for Zoe's strength and joy. By the same token we are with her, when she – the brave one, the great one – is crying, terrified to death, when the psychopath Mike starts bumping the girls' car from behind, thus almost having Zoe killed. The affection we feel for her at this moment breaks through all the machines that produce expectations, all the machines that turn us into sadistic voyeurs and accomplices of the killer. These are, I think, the moments of the affect unchained, which would not be possible without the play of reflective images.

It is to be noted that the girls' revenge itself is also shot in a rather plain, rather than hyperbolic, mode. And yet, at the very end, another twist comes. One of the girls smashes the head of stuntman Mike with her boot – and so we seem to be driving back into the world of voyeuristic ex-spectatorship and the cheapest, vengeful emotions. Characteristically enough, though, it is not any of the stuntgirls, but the make-up girl that gives the fatal kick: unlike the others, who know the real violence this one, perhaps, begins to think she is playing in a movie. Moreover, she smashes the killer's head already after the announcement of the end of the movie has been screened. This, I think, is a reflective image again: aha, Tarantino says, this is how you were schooled to expect such movies to end. Well, if you are silly enough to want it – then be my guest!

Zoe Bell reappears for a few brief moments in *Django Unchained*. Her character, a masked member of the killer squad on the plantation where Django's love is being held captive, is merely sketched, though perhaps it is not without significance that in the final slaughter we actually do not see Django killing her – and so she appears to be a figure from a different, perhaps more solid level of reality. However this may be, the hyperbolic revenge at the end of the movie sufficiently goes to show that this is also a film about films. Setting aside this spectacular ending which certainly plays with our memories of how violence and race are represented in the tradition of Western movies, I would only point to two less vivid moments that precede the final massacre.

First, there is the crucial moment when Dr. Schulz, the Austrian bounty hunter (Christoph Waltz), kills Calvin Candie, the owner of the plantation (Leonardo DiCaprio). "Sorry, I couldn't resist it" says Schulz to Django, who is as surprised as anyone in the room. He should be sorry, indeed, for the act he could not resist ruins the plan of freeing Django's love at the threshold of the ultimate success. The killing, however, is just the culmination of the process which was triggered when Schulz and Django started their journey to the plantation. When confronted with the hell of slavery, the cool, calm, show-loving bounty hunter and killer is clearly shaken in his self-confidence. Although at the beginning he acts as the director and the creator of Django the actor, as they proceed with their journey he literally seems smaller and smaller, while Django grows and steadily becomes more confident in his role. Thus, when they have been unmasked but are to be set free at the price of Schulz's dignity (the owner of the plantation insists on them shaking hands), in a desperate attempt to keep or regain his humanity, the bounty hunter ruins the show. It is worth noting that this time Tarantino does not contrast the smooth crime story with clumsy trivialities of the everyday or the infinite, petty conversations, but rather he juxtaposes the standardized violence of movie killing with the unassimilable crime of slavery. As a most eloquent killer who makes no mistakes, Schulz is a perfect director who is expected by the ex-spectators to feed them with pleasures of cinematic violence. Thus, it is precisely his collapse in front of cruelty that knocks us out of our convenient position. It is not the question of *feeling* of the character or of our *emotions* of pity or empathy. It is the question of the *affect* of terror which goes unchained when, together with the fall of the smooth killer that we loved to watch, we are suddenly confronted with the crack in the show and with the sheer abomination of slavery that can be seen through it. Most importantly, however, we are confronted with the fact that we have been systematically overlooking it, while voyeuristically enjoying the violence of cinematic killing.

Second, there is the scene in which Stephen the butler (played by Samuel L. Jackson) rescues Django from being castrated, only to inform him that he is to be sent to the mines where he will be stripped of his name and die in oblivion. The sarcasm of his monolog is truly infinite. Himself black, he mocks his white masters for being rather mindless in their plans of revenge concerning Django. Perversely fascinated with his penis, they plan his castration – or fantasize about various forms of torture that would lead to his immediate death. The embittered, cynical butler feels only contempt for these projects which are just petty scenarios of the cinematic, voyeuristic pleasure of the big white kids who wonder how to squeeze more sadistic enjoyment out of a single massacre. What they do not get is that what is much worse would be the non-cinematic, invisible, slow suffering of the slave-worker in the mines. Most importantly, the butler holds the final part of his monolog while looking straight into our own eyes, thus addressing the ex-spectators with their spectacular, yet desperate sadistic fantasies that form the nether side of their supposedly self-confident subjectivity – and confronting us both with the stupid cruelty of our own expectations and with the bleak horror of the unnamed suffering that cannot be filmed.

Now, having briefly appeared also in *Hateful Eight*, Zoe Bell, the stuntwoman muse of reflective images in Tarantino's films, returns in his most recent movie, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Here, she plays a minor role of the stunt coordinator and, funnily enough, the wife of a character played by Kurt Russell. A self-assertive woman, she refuses to collaborate with a guy named Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt whose character in the *Inglorious Basterds* already *pretended* to be a stuntman) who works as the stunt double for the fading star named Rick Dalton (Leonardo diCaprio). The inconclusive, lazy story of their collaboration is intertwined with the story of the new star, Sharon Tate, who – together with her husband Roman Polański – happens to be Dalton's neighbor.

Let me focus on just two most important sequences in this rich film. First, let us consider Cliff's visit to the Spahn Ranch, the former site for shooting Westerns and now the home of Charles Manson's gang. The whole sequence multiplies and intensifies the effect which returns throughout the movie: that of playing with the spectator's expectations and disappointing them, and in particular confusing the spectator as to the

actual locus or source of violence. Again, a stuntman gives lift to a hitchhiker (first we voyeuristically watch the girl's buttocks just as we imagine Cliff imagining them), but the promise of hot sexual encounter of the couple does not find its fulfillment. The atmosphere on the Western-like ranch itself is constantly vibrating with tension which, again, finds no clear resolution. We are tricked into thinking that something terrible will happen in a moment, we follow Cliff in his suspicions that the members of the Manson Family have done some harm to the owner of the ranch, but then again nothing really happens and we get some picturesque images of horse-riding, while Cliff beats up a rather helpless member of the gang. We are left in utter confusion. This, again, is a sequence of reflective images that ask us an almost unlimited series of questions. And what did you expect to see? Monsters, Hollywood style? But also: aren't you forgetting that the attractive Cliff is a violent psychopath himself as he killed his wife and got away with it as a war hero? The owner of the farm, George Spahn, is blind, but he accuses Cliff of real blindness. And what about us? Aren't we the truly blind ones? Aren't we blinded by our Hollywood-produced expectations of viciousness and then blinded again by picturesque landscapes and attractive actor and then by the weakness of the silly member of the gang and again, and again? Who's to be pitied? Who's to be feared? Where is the ultimate source of violence? We cannot see – and we catch our eye on wandering, and wondering.

And then comes the brilliant ending of the film. From the moment we enter the theater we keep on asking ourselves if we really want to be there. A Tarantino movie on Tate murder? Do I really want to see it? The unease grows maddeningly as the film comes to its conclusion and the time is being counted on the screen, with the two distinct plot themes – the fictional Dalton/Booth one and the real Tate one – continued parallelly. "And now something you've been all waiting for," says a man on TV one of Tate's friends is watching on the fatal night. But no: for suddenly, reality swerves away into fiction. In a clumsy conversation which is the first and last characteristically Tarantinesque exchange in the movie, the young members of the Family decide to attack Dalton rather than Tate, in order to take revenge on the very people who taught them how to watch violence. With a minor character played by Uma Thurman's daughter (*sic!*) having fled at the last moment, the three would-be killers enter Dalton's house, but get massacred in the most hyperbolic and gorey way by the drunk actor and his stoned stuntman. Again, the sequence which shows the struggle is a series of highly reflective images which we watch and watch ourselves watching them. Were you afraid to see pornographic images of violence with a young pregnant actress being slaughtered by maniacs? So why did you come here and stay in the first place? Instead, you will get a hyperbolic orgy of violence which does not even pretend to be real. And how do you like *this*? Do you laugh? Are you relieved? Are you still sad because you know what these bright images on the screen actually *screen off*?

I cannot think of a more tactful and humane way a film can deal with a disaster like the Tate murder. While watching the unreal orgy of violence we stop caring about the people we see on the screen. We care about Sharon Tate and her friends, who – in the so-called real life – are actually being slaughtered *in the other house, behind the screen*. This time the hyperbolic violence, rather than being the source of cheap thrills, serves literally as a *screen* image and a utopia, an impossible way out which we simply beg for. And so we get it: after the slaughter, together with Booth we get invited to the utopian, dreamlike zone, the Polański house next door. "Is everyone ok?" asks Tate. Yes. No. Yes. And then we see them, the murdered ones. Or, as we see them only from above, are these only their stunt doubles? We are afraid they are. But it is also at this very moment, after the sequence of the reflective images has played with our expectations and questioned the structure of our emotional urges produced by the film industry, that we turn from the seemingly sovereign but actually subjugated selves into the fleeting-and-broken subjects that really watch and see, for it is also at this very moment that the affect goes unchained in us and – no, we do not laugh – we mourn, and we cry, and we badly, badly, badly want to save Sharon Tate.

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