

Racism and revenge: Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight*

By Hiram Lee
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In the months leading up to the release of his latest film, *The Hateful Eight*, director Quentin Tarantino made headlines with his denunciation of police violence during a protest in New York. “When I see murder, I cannot stand by,” Tarantino told a crowd of protestors, “and I have to call the murdered the murdered and I have to call the murderers the murderers.”

In response, police unions throughout the country lined up to attack the director and call for a boycott of his films. Patrick Lynch, president of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association of the City of New York, declared, “New Yorkers need to send a message to this purveyor of degeneracy that he has no business coming to our city to peddle his slanderous ‘Cop Fiction.’ ”

Pat Colligan, president of the New Jersey State Policemen’s Benevolent Association, said in a statement, “I am calling on our membership to join with our friend and colleague, Pat Lynch and our brother and sister law enforcement officers in boycotting Quentin Tarantino movies.”

The National Association of Police Organizations went further, saying, “We ask officers to stop working special assignments or off-duty jobs, such as providing security, traffic control or technical advice for any of Tarantino’s projects.”

To his credit, Tarantino, faced with tremendous pressure from police and the media, has refused to apologize.

We defend Tarantino against this reactionary campaign of police thuggery and intimidation. However, that does not absolve us of the responsibility of telling the truth about his film.

The Hateful Eight is a deeply unpleasant work, another in a long line of blood-soaked revenge fantasies. Set sometime in the decade following the US

Civil War, the film begins with the chance meeting of two bounty hunters during a blizzard in Wyoming.

John “The Hangman” Ruth (Kurt Russell) is transporting his prisoner, Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh), by stagecoach to the town of Red Rock where she will be hanged. As they pass through the snow-covered mountains, they come upon Major Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson), a former slave and Union soldier turned bounty hunter. Warren is stranded in the cold with the bodies of three men he has killed. Ruth reluctantly allows his rival to board.

Tensions increase when the stagecoach passengers encounter another stranded traveler, Chris Mannix (Walton Goggins). Mannix claims to be the new sheriff of Red Rock. A former Confederate soldier, he proves to be a loud-mouthed racist.

As the weather grows more severe, the three men, with their prisoner in tow, decide to take shelter at a nearby hotel and restaurant called Minnie’s Haberdashery. Among those already waiting out the storm at Minnie’s are professional executioner Oswaldo Mobray (Tim Roth), cowboy Joe Gage (Michael Madsen), former Confederate general Sandy Smithers (Bruce Dern) and Bob “The Mexican” (Demián Bichir).

Some of these men are not who they claim to be. Ruth and Warren suspect there will be an attempt to free Daisy. It doesn’t take long to prove them right. Ruth is poisoned, leaving Warren and Mannix to uncover the plot and bring Daisy to justice. From here, the story works its way toward the bloody denouement to which all of Tarantino’s films inevitably lead.

The Hateful Eight is a repugnant film. It marks the third time that Tarantino has projected his revenge fantasies into the past in order to settle scores cinematically. First, he sent Jewish-American soldiers

to unleash hell on the Nazis in *Inglourious* (fighting fascism with fascism, as we said at the time). Then came *Django Unchained* and the massacre of slave-owners. Now Tarantino drains the racists of the post-Civil War United States of their blood as well.

With each new film, Tarantino is compelled to outdo himself in terms of violent imagery and a depraved scenario. One of the most disturbing sequences in *The Hateful Eight* involves a story told by Warren to General Smithers, who has come to Wyoming to provide a tombstone for the grave of his son, missing and presumed dead.

As it turns out, the General's son went to Wyoming to kill Warren and bring back his head for a \$5,000 reward. He failed. Warren captured his would-be killer, stripped him naked and forced him to march through the snow for two hours. He then raped and killed him, all of which is shown in flashback. Tarantino intends his audience to find all of this hilariously funny and "cool." It is neither.

Tarantino's view of American history, to the extent that he has one at all, essentially conforms to the view espoused by those on the pseudo-left obsessed with racial politics. Racism is the root of all evil, the original sin of American society in which everyone is implicated. The most progressive thing one can do is expose how monstrous everyone was then (and is now).

At no point do the deep-rooted democratic sentiments that animated so many of those who fought to abolish slavery find the slightest expression in his recent films. For his part, Warren participated in the Civil War not for any great ideal, not even for his own freedom. He tells Mannix, "You joined the war to keep n-----s in chains. I joined to kill crackers." Most disturbingly, Warren and Mannix *do* ultimately find common ground—in the pleasure they derive from brutally executing another human being. What conclusions does Tarantino want us to draw from such filth?

Revealingly, Tarantino has made a film in which bounty hunters are the heroes and no sympathy is reserved for their prisoner (Leigh), who is every bit as nasty and cruel as any other character in the film. We are invited to laugh as they repeatedly beat her.

American filmmakers in an earlier period were far more critical of this parasitic and inhumane profession. One thinks of Anthony Mann's classic film *The Naked Spur* (1953), in which a bounty hunter played by James

Stewart is forced ~~Bastards~~ to confront the implications of his thirst for revenge and money.

Great works of art encourage empathy toward one's fellow human beings. Tarantino's films encourage contempt for them and require a certain alienation from them in order to enjoy the spectacle he inflicts on viewers. Those still making excuses for his work should take a long look at themselves.

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