

A culture at the end of its rope

By David Walsh
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Kill Bill, Vol. 2, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

Every social act has social consequences. Cinema is perhaps the most social of all the arts, by virtue both of the collective, cooperative nature of making films and the mass character of their distribution and exhibition. A film is an aggressive intrusion into the lives and thoughts of those who see it and therefore a factor in social life.

Every work in the cinema is ‘political’ and ‘polemical,’ i.e., it proposes a certain view of humanity—of its aspirations, its possibilities, its current social organization—and at the same time argues against others. An individual film may uncover or conceal important truths; it may demystify social reality or obscure it; it may encourage or help paralyze the viewer, enlighten or help disorient him or her.

Kill Bill, Vol. 2, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, is a repugnant film, symptomatic of a culture at the end of its rope. The second half of a two-part work, it continues the story of Beatrix, or The Bride (Uma Thurman), a former professional killer, who was shot and left for dead, while pregnant, along with her entire wedding party. Upon waking from a coma four years later, she sets about exacting revenge on the individuals responsible, including, above all, the “Bill” (David Carradine) of the title, her former lover, father of the child she delivered while in a coma and a murderous crime boss.

There is nothing new or interesting in the story and nothing new or interesting in its telling. *Vol. 1*, released last year, was memorable primarily for its extraordinary number of severed limbs (by samurai swords) and geysers of fake blood. The violence was gratuitous and appalling, but the film could be dismissed as essentially cartoonish. One simply forgot about it quickly.

Vol. 2 is a different case. Here events are slowed down and we have a far more loving attention paid to cruel and sadistic detail. Although Thurman’s character ultimately triumphs, the most memorable sequences by far involve her humiliation, subjection and abuse at the hands of three tormentors. She is trapped and bound in each instance—first, physically, by Bill’s brother Budd (Michael Madsen); next, “morally,” by her allegiance to her Chinese master in the martial arts, Pai Mei (Chia Hui Liu); and, finally, under the influence of a “truth serum,” by Bill himself.

Beatrix is essentially tortured in each instance. The Madsen sequence is the most horrific. Beatrix is shot in the chest with a shotgun blast of rock salt, left to writhe in pain, tied up with belts and ropes, dragged across the desert floor, threatened with having her eyeballs burnt out with Mace and finally buried alive in a pine coffin. Budd leers and gloats over her the while, deriving great pleasure from her agony. What is one to make of this?

This is a film whose subject matter is torturing and murdering and bloody revenge. It has the word “Kill,” as an imperative, in its title. Remove the pointless dialogue, the self-conscious references to countless other films, the various camera and editing gimmicks, the

heaps of self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement, and what remains? A work about a group of psychopaths eliminating one another. The first speech of the film contains the word “sadism.” When asked, under the influence of the truth serum, whether she regrets no longer murdering people, our heroine replies, “Yes.” The characters are, with the possible exception of Beatrix, uniformly foul, violent, brutal, cold. Why should we find any of this appealing?

We will be told that Tarantino doesn’t mean any of this seriously, that this is simply a great cinematic romp. The director himself tells us, “But also everything I’m doing, there’s just a level of playfulness. How can you take it seriously? How can you get hung up on it?” The film critics agree. One, for example, labels the director a “sadistic freak,” before expressing the opinion that *Kill Bill, Vols. 1 and 2* are “great fun.” Another critic writes that *Vol. 2* is “one wacky magnificent assemblage.” A third tells us that the new film is “the most voluptuous comic-book movie ever made” and a “deliciously perverse picture.”

And no doubt there are audiences that find this entertaining and amusing. But one must say that this is not a healthy phenomenon, that a great deal of social alienation has gone into making such a response possible. The critical, or rather, *uncritical* reaction reflects the same process, a cultural and moral regression.

The fact that Tarantino ‘doesn’t mean anything by it,’ that he is posturing, is no argument in favor of the film. In any case, he most certainly does mean *something* by the sadism. Does he think that human beings are this vile? If not, then why does he make films that argue for that proposition?

After all, the sequences mentioned above are the ones on which the director has obviously lavished the most attention. They are the only ones that get under the spectator’s skin. Whenever the characters sit and talk to one another, the results are simply tedious (one reason for the violent histrionics: to divert attention from the fact that the filmmaker has nothing to say and cannot construct a serious drama). The climactic speech in which Carradine’s Bill goes on about comic-book superheroes is simply inane, an embarrassment. Carradine, never more than an adequate actor, is very poor here. Thurman, an appealing if limited performer generally, is not the slightest bit convincing as a cold-blooded killer (fortunately for her sake and ours). The entire effort is frankly amateurish, puerile.

We will be told by some that Tarantino is merely reflecting the violence in the society around him, or even that he is holding it up to criticism. Nonsense. *Kill Bill* is not a critique of sadistic bullying, it revels in it. A calculated, manipulative (and orgasmic) heaping up of violent acts cannot possibly constitute a rejection or a critique. Tarantino’s work lacks entirely that “pathos of distance” characteristic of a reflective critique. The film itself is oppressive and bullying, as well unpleasantly pleased with itself.

Sadism in film is not the same as sadism in life outside the cinema.

But there is a connection between the two phenomena. A representation, a reflection bears *some* relationship to the thing represented or reflected. To be “entertained” even by imitations of torture, or to seek to entertain by such imitations, suggests a disturbing degree of indifference to the pain of others. It is already the result of a general process of brutalization in the culture and it helps further inure the population to suffering.

The “porno-sadism” of *Kill Bill* obviously speaks to a wider phenomenon in American society. Ironically, the film opened in North America on April 16, less than two weeks before the torture and abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison was exposed. Tarantino termed *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* a “black comedy.” He suggested that the violence was so outlandish and bloody that it was obviously set in “fantasy land. ... This is definitely not taking place on planet Earth.” But there is violence and sadism on planet Earth, plenty of it. Is it not a fact that the images of American soldiers—men and women—smiling, leering or giving thumbs-up signs beside naked Iraqi prisoners, would not be out of place in Tarantino’s cinema?

This is not to say that Tarantino is in any way morally culpable for the current situation, which he is obviously not, or that he even supports Bush and the Iraq war, which he probably does not. But the filmmaker is responding to certain social impulses.

Tarantino’s personal history and fixations interest us not in the least. By whatever process, however, the director has made himself into a sensitive antenna almost entirely unconcerned as to the signals he picks up. Indeed he makes a virtue of his indifference to the sources of his material, his addiction to kitsch and the B film, as well as his anti-intellectualism.

In this manner, Tarantino becomes an ideal transmitter for all manner of pent-up frustration, rage and paranoia that dominate certain social layers in America. He cynically chronicles and at the same time exploits these feelings. He both encourages and mocks them. So we arrive at this “turning on the dime,” in Tarantino’s words. “Getting you to laugh, laugh, laugh—stop laughing. Stop laughing. Stop laughing. Laugh again.”

And we arrive at the filmmaker as sadist: “I think the role of a filmmaker can very well be as a sadistic relationship to the audience’s masochist. I’ve always really believed that the audience needs to be tortured, all right, and the torture is not so bad. It’s a lot better than being glazed over. It’s a lot better than being bored and have images just glaze over you.”

Revenge as a central motif; the loose use of words like “kill”; approving references to sadism and torture—where could we be but in post-September 11 America, where bloody-mindedness has apparently become the stuff of polite dinner parties in Washington, New York and elsewhere? Tarantino thinks he’s behind the steering wheel, but every aspect of his work suggests that he’s being driven by powerful social forces.

The decayed state of American society is not the filmmaker’s fault. One senses that the disintegration of old institutions, the loosening of traditional affiliations, the economic dislocations, the violence and chaos of American life ... that all this sends Tarantino (and not only him) into a tizzy. The task of the artist, however, is to do something other than merely register these facts, much less “be playful” with them.

In accordance with the special means of his or her field, the artist must turn these sometimes abrupt and even terrifying realities into art. It has been done before, even in America, and even in the film industry. How else could we have a *Vertigo*, for example, which

transformed a ‘dizzying’ reality into a moving, haunting drama?

Tarantino, however, is entirely dominated by the social processes. He is thoroughly at their mercy. *Kill Bill* is little more than congealed disorientation, resentment and confusion. It contains no spirit of anger, protest or opposition. The film appeals to the worst in its audience.

The crisis in American filmmaking is reaching something of a crescendo. *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* comes on the heels of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*; nor should one forget the deeply misanthropic and cruel *Gangs of New York*, directed by Martin Scorsese, and the only slightly less morbid *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood). These are heady days indeed. The bitterness, pessimism and panic of layers of the American petty bourgeoisie is rising to the top in response to the advanced crisis of the social order.

The Passion of the Christ of course did not receive the approbation in general of the liberal and “alternative” critics. It is not immediately clear, however, in what way *Kill Bill* is morally, intellectually and artistically superior to Gibson’s deplorable film. It is nearly as mean-spirited (we have not mentioned the two episodes of eyes being plucked from people’s heads in *Kill Bill*, with one of them then crushed under a foot). And one must say that Gibson, in Pontius Pilate (Hristo Shopov), produced at least one memorable character. The drama in *The Passion* is more coherent, and the script superior.

As we have noted, the positive reaction to *The Passion* in some sections of its audience did not reflect entirely ignoble sentiments. Many quite oppressed people saw in the agony of Christ a means of coming to terms with their own lives and suffering. This was deeply misguided, but not ignoble. It would be hard to read anything positive into an enthusiasm for *Kill Bill*, in either of its volumes.

The critical approval is once again telling. The artist simply cannot be too bleak, sadistic, pessimistic or contemptuous of humanity for the so-called “radical” or “left” critic. Cynicism and misanthropy are one’s admission ticket. Anyone who believes in the betterment of mankind is automatically excluded.

One must say what is: Tarantino is a bad filmmaker. And—artificial, removed from life, self-referential, unmoving, unconvincing—*Kill Bill, Vol. 2* is very bad art.

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