The Ethics of Appropriation: Samson Agonistes, Inglourious Basterds, and the Biblical Samson Tale

GREG M. COLÓN SEMENZA*

Abstract This essay considers two appropriations of the Samson narrative (Judges 13–16)—Milton’s Samson Agonistes (1671) and Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds (2009)—in light of their controversial critical heritages. Both in Milton Studies and Tarantino criticism, scholars and critics are sharply divided on the ethical implications of the ‘terrorism’ plots the two works advance. Considering the striking parallels between these two historically and generically distant texts and their reception, the essay argues that only focused attention on the works as appropriations/adaptations allows us full access to their complex ethics.

Keywords Samson Agonistes, Inglourious Basterds, adaptation, appropriation, Book of Judges, ethics.

Though John Milton and Quentin Tarantino make strange bedfellows, both writers created controversial revenge narratives climaxing in the bloody triumphs of embattled Jewish protagonists over their cartoon-villain persecutors. Samson Agonistes (1671) and Inglourious Basterds (2009) appropriate Judges 13.9–16.28—the story of Samson’s murder of the Philistines in the temple of Dagon—and both shift the site of the Old Testament narrative’s bloody finale to contemporary theatres of public entertainment. Moreover, both the Restoration drama and the postmodern film are unusually self-reflexive texts, meditating on the social power and limitations of art, announcing their participation in complex histories of adaptation, appropriation, and intertextuality. This self-reflexivity is often acknowledged by critics, but only rarely in ways that recognize the texts’ significance as adaptations.

Though this essay will of course address this problem, its focus will be as much on the vitriolic rhetoric, even moral absolutism, of so many critical writings about both texts—and what adaptation studies might say about them. A strikingly similar debate marks both critical heritages, with a sizeable number of critics in each case judging the texts on what must be described as primarily moral grounds. The sense of energy and conviction, as well as the extreme divisiveness, marking the two critical heritages strikes the observer as unusual enough for post-transcendental criticism, but the commonness of moral judgments about the texts—and in a surprising number of cases, their authors—must be regarded as anomalous in modern textual criticism.

*Department of English, University of Connecticut. E-mail: semenza@uconn.edu.
Such moral judgments may seem quite a bit less anomalous, however, to scholars who work in adaptation and appropriation studies. As Robert Stam and others have shown, ‘The language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity’ (74). Stam’s comments apply equally well, of course, to adaptations of plays, poems, biblical passages, and especially to appropriations of history. Adaptations of textual sources that do not meet a critic’s approval often are lambasted as offensive in their desecration of the source. Appropriations that engage, and especially those that fictionalize, well-known historical events are labelled as everything from irresponsible to immoral. Is there something particular, one wonders, in the anatomy of adaptations that accommodates or even invites such ethical reflection and judgment?

Comparative analysis of *Samson Agonistes* and *Inglourious Basterds*, and their divided critics, yields general insights about the ethics of representation. I wish to show that, especially in the case of highly appropriative texts such as these, ethical positions are negotiated precisely through textual processes of appropriation and informed interpretations of them, rather than in the raw material of the stories. Indeed, careful consideration of these works through an adaptation studies lens reveals them to be moral *aporias*: expressions of doubt about the very appropriateness of the subjects they represent. Such a fact explains the origins and persistence of those critical impasses regarding both works and raises important questions about the ethical complexities of adaptation.

**APPROPRIATING JUDGES**

The *Book of Judges*, Chapters 13–16, tells of an Israelite child born in Judah during a forty-year occupation by the Philistines. His father is the Danite Manoah, whose barren wife is visited by an angel of the Lord and told to prepare herself for the birth of a son who ‘shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines’ (Judges 13.6). The single directive the angel issues is to avoid cutting the child’s hair, for the boy is to be a Nazarite; but the hair, we soon learn, is also a source of supernatural strength. Samson proves to be an extraordinarily flawed man whose questionable morality is offset only by virtue of his being favoured by God. His greatest deeds are tearing apart a lion with his bare hands, slaughtering and robbing thirty Philistine groomsmen, fire-bombing a Philistine rural village, murdering 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, and murdering thousands more in the tale’s bloody finale, which comes about thus: Samson is captured as a result of his dalliance with Delilah, his third Philistine lover, who tricks the love-sick hero into revealing the source of his strength. The Philistines shave off the seven locks of his head, gouge out his eyes, and bound him in chains in Gaza. He is then called to perform for the Philistines during a festival day in honour of Dagon, their God. His hair has begun to grow back, so he uses his might to topple the two middle pillars of the temple, bringing the entire structure down upon the heads of ‘about three thousand men and women’ and deliberately killing himself in the process (Judges 16.27).

The Samson story has been interpreted in diverse, often diametrically opposed ways, with Christian commentators especially attempting to reconcile the violence, licentiousness, and mental deficits of the central character with the role he plays as one of God’s
Elect. Augustine was one of the most influential commentators, responsible both for his rationalization of the violence and his reading of the character as a precursor to Christ. Since Augustine believed all murder to be evil, biblical heroes such as Samson and Abraham presented special problems. According to Augustine, Samson’s murders and his suicide were justified because he received direct divine inspiration—heavenly permission—to carry them out. This rationalization helped him as well to elaborate links between Samson’s eventual triumph over sin through martyrdom and Christ’s victory against the devil (Augustine 277). Augustine-inspired typological readings of Samson remained common and popular well into Milton’s time, though the seventeenth-century poet’s adaptation reveals tremendous anxieties about the character’s stupidity and immorality.

Samson Agonistes was published in 1671 as half of a volume that also included Paradise Regained, his poem about Jesus’s rejection of Satan in the wilderness—though the simultaneous publication of both works may be Milton’s only real nod to a typological interpretation of Judges. The single-act closet drama begins after the protagonist has been captured and blinded by the Philistines. It is structured upon three ‘temptations’ that also link it thematically to its companion poem. The first is Samson’s rejection of Manoa’s offer to pay a ransom to the Philistines, which would end his torture and imprisonment. The second is Samson’s rejection of Dalila’s promise of a luxurious, sensual life of ease. The final is his rejection of the Philistine giant Harapha’s taunting mockery of the Hebrew God, which demonstrates the regeneration of Samson’s own faith. Samson is then called on by the Philistines to perform spectacular feats of strength in a ‘spacious Theatre’ (1605). In a considerably ambiguous and controversial passage, Samson claims, ‘I begin to feel/Some rousing motions in me which dispose/To something extraordinary in my thoughts’ (1381–83), which might be interpreted as either God’s direct re-bestowal upon Samson of superhuman strength or as the return of the character’s faith. In any case, Samson breaks the main pillars of the amphitheatre, crushing the ‘Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councellors, or Priests’ (1654) but sparing the common people (‘the vulgar’ [1659]), not privileged enough to sit under the roof.

The commoners’ survival seems part of Milton’s effort to render the massacre less horrific. Milton introduces other details that highlight his anxiety about heroizing Samson. First he tells us in ‘The Argument’ to the book that Samson’s death in the theatre is brought about ‘by accident’, not as part of a deliberate suicide mission (Milton 800). Next, Milton makes clear that Dalila is Samson’s wife, not merely his lover. Milton downplays Samson’s biblical relations with prostitutes and the wantonness of his violence against the Philistines—in part by beginning the narrative after Samson’s blinding. Even the great spectacle of Samson’s destruction of the theatre takes place ‘offstage,’ being related second hand by a Messenger. Perhaps the most important alteration, however, is the expansion of Samson’s character from a cartoonish muscleman described only in the third person to an eloquent and introspective tragic figure. One strategy he employs is to de-emphasize the legendary hair, suggesting instead through those ‘rousing motions’ the possibility that faith alone is responsible for Samson’s strength. In short, Milton manages to adapt the Judges narrative by sticking carefully to plot details but, as in the case of Paradise Lost, he proves a liberal adaptor of the Bible, omitting or downplaying problematic details and adding others that suit his poetic goals. Though
Milton’s Samson is a more human, more moral character than his biblical ancestor; he nonetheless remains highly problematic.

Tarantino’s historical-fantasy film *Inglourious Basterds* has never been discussed in relation to Judges, and the extent to which the writer-director is intentionally engaging the tale is not clear (though, as every viewer of *Pulp Fiction* knows, Tarantino is not averse to daring appropriations of biblical texts). Parallels between the two narratives, however, suggest an unusually elaborate intertextuality that shifts the burden of meaning away from the film *per se* onto its relationship with numerous other texts and textual traditions. The film is built on a five-act dramatic structure involving multiple point-of-view characters, but the main thread traces the successful revenge plot of Shosanna, a French Jew whose entire family is massacred by Nazis led by Colonel Hans Landa, the ‘Jew Hunter’. Like the Israelites in the Samson narrative, the French people live under occupation by a foreign enemy, though it is their cinema, not their Lord, which eventually delivers them from evil. Converging on the Parisian cinema operated by Shosanna are the ‘Basterds’, a ragtag group of American soldiers and German military defectors, led by Lieutenant Aldo Raine, whose single goal is ‘Killin’ Nazis’. The Basterds scalp each Nazi they kill, one of several actions in the film that establish parallels between the Nazis, the perpetrators of Native American genocide, and perpetrators of atrocities against African Americans. Second, the Basterds carve with a knife a swastika onto the heads of any Nazis they release. The Basterds and Shosanna are completely unaware of one another’s existence, but they wind up in her theatre on the same evening for the premier of a new Goebbels film, *Stolz der Nation*, which is to be screened by Hitler, Goering, and much of the German high command. To carry out her own suicide mission, Shosanna arranges 350 nitrate films stored in the theatre into a massive pile behind the main screen. In the film’s bloody finale, the nitrate film is lit on fire. As the cinema burns, the surviving Basterds rain bullets down on the fleeing audience members until bombs attached to their own bodies detonate, destroying the theatre and everyone in it.

In spite of being labelled by his detractors as an amoral filmmaker, Tarantino constructs a far more self-aware narrative than the author of Judges. Like Milton, he stresses the point that innocents have been largely spared. During the planning stages of the event, Goebbels needs to be convinced that Shosanna’s 350-seat theatre isn’t too small for so grand an occasion; to convince him, the film’s star Fredrick Zoller talks up the benefits of excluding ‘every two-faced French bourgeois’: ‘Besides, to hell with the French. This is a German night, a German event, a German celebration. This night is for you, me, the German military, the High Command, their family and friends. The only people who should be allowed in the room are people who will be moved by the exploits onscreen’. Since these ‘exploits’ consist of Zoller re-enacting his murder of about 250 enemy soldiers, the implication is that even the ‘moved’ family members and friends are morally compromised.

Tarantino’s narrative also reverses the gender dynamic informing the Judges temptation plot, by which the mighty Samson is brought low by the charms and machinations of Dalila. Throughout the film, Shosanna is hounded by Fredrick, the young Nazi soldier and star of Goebbels’ film. Though she betrays a certain curiosity about the handsome cinephile, Shosanna is repulsed by Fredrick’s politics and unequivocal in her rejection of his romantic gestures. In the end, her plan to burn down the theatre
is nearly foiled by Fredrick, who enters the projection room in the hopes of tempting her away from the film and, inadvertently, from viewing/committing cinematic violence. In a crucial moment, however, his wooing turns violent when Shosanna tells him to get lost, and he threatens to rape her. Whereas the Judges narrative troubles the modern reader through its misogynist tropes of feminine disloyalty and sexual duplicity, Inglourious Basterds spotlights actual physical violence against women. Shosanna’s revenge against the Nazis is not only ‘Jewish Revenge’; it is also ‘women’s revenge’ against male tyranny.

As we will see, Tarantino makes several further moves to render ‘Operation Kino’s’ ethics more palatable than more straightforward revenge plots like the Samson narrative—largely, though by no means exclusively, by building in multiple levels of reflexive meditation on movie violence and historical appropriation. In the following section, I discuss how critics have responded to both adaptations before turning in the final section to the texts’ extraordinary adaptational architectonics—where the deep ethics of each text reside.

SCHOLARLY JUDGES
Since the radical 1960s, and especially since 11 September 2001, Samson Agonistes has accrued new political meanings that push it past even Paradise Lost as the locus of critical debate within Anglo American Milton Studies. In an essay entitled ‘Milton Scholarship and the Agon over Samson Agonistes’, Alan Rudrum rightly notes that the controversy ‘concerns the status of Samson: is he a true hero or a false hero; should the reader approve or abhor his final act?’ (Rudrum 1). Neil Forsyth summarises the same question in terms more appropriate to the current historical moment: ‘Is Milton’s Samson, in effect, “a suicide bomber” who “believes that his massacre is an expression of God’s will”? Does the poem glorify him as a hero or is it a “drastic rewriting” of the Samson story …?’ (Forsyth 2012).

Forsyth’s quotations refer the reader back to the scholar who initiated this debate. Though it was in 1969 that John Carey first called Samson ‘The Outmoded Hero’, suggesting that the play’s ending should be read as a ‘celebration of savagery’ (Carey 145), it was Carey’s more widely read 2002 TLS essay on Samson and 9/11 that altered the conversation. Reminding us that some ‘events in the real world inevitably change the way we read’, Carey claims that regardless of how we choose to read Milton’s drama, Samson is, ‘in effect, a suicide bomber’ and like the suicide bombers he believes that his massacre is an expression of God’s will’ (Carey 15). Scholars such as Stanley Fish, he argues, attempt to downplay the implications of this fact by reading the poem in more strictly formalist terms. If Samson is a mass murderer, according to them, he is a mass murderer within a specific context that deems his actions ‘virtuous’, and we are obliged to read according to the terms of that contextual system. But Carey wonders, ‘If this is truly what Samson Agonistes teaches, should it not be withdrawn from schools and colleges and, indeed, banned more generally as an incitement to terrorism?’ (Carey 15).

Carey is sceptical that this is truly what the poem teaches. He focuses mainly on the drama’s contradictions, especially the gulf between Manoa’s fantasy of his son slaying the Philistines (line 1531) and the Messenger’s horrified description of the climactic event:
‘O wither shall I run, or which way fly
The sight of this so horrid spectacle
Which erst my eyes beheld and yet behold:
For dire imagination still pursues me’. (1541–44)

Without spending a moment on Samson’s complex intertextuality, Carey shows from internal evidence alone that we have several alternatives to viewing Samson’s actions as ‘virtuous’.

Much of the debate hinges on how readers choose to read lines 1381–89, which describe Samson’s decision to heed the Philistines’ command to perform for them in the Temple:

‘I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary in my thoughts.
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
If there be aught of presage in the mind
This day will be remarkable in my life
By some great act, or of my days the last’.

If these ‘motions’ constitute God’s bestowal upon Samson of the terrorist plot idea, then we likely know where Milton stands in relation to the massacre Samson perpetuates. If Samson has simply realized the opportunity before him and attributed it to God, then we can be sure of nothing regarding Milton’s views of the massacre or of Samson. All readings place tremendous value on the relationship between God’s intentions and Samson’s understanding of them, and Milton’s own intentions in constructing that relationship so ambiguously. A postmodern reader might take a completely different position, of course, which is that the ambiguity itself is the point, for the multiplicity of interpretations it opens expresses rather precisely the problem of certainty regarding such foundational concepts as ‘God’s will’. Joseph Wittreich is one of the many critics to flirt with this idea, suggesting that ‘Samson Agonistes is a reminder that we must refuse easy answers even as we resist uncomplicated allegiances; that poetry repeals traditions and voids conventions; and that the truths of poetry are plural not singular’ (Wittreich 34).

Feisal Mohamed is a scholar who straddles the gulf between Carey and Fish. Demonstrating the commonness of seventeenth-century typological readings of Samson as a precursor to Christ, Mohamed is less interested in insisting on Milton’s guilt in advocating terrorism than he is in calling other scholars to task for trying to mitigate it: ‘Because Milton’s literary achievements are undeniably great while sometimes exhibiting what we would now call religious extremism and political radicalism, honest and clear-sighted criticism of his work can lead us […] [to see how he] frustrates uncomplicated narrativization of the Western tradition’ (Mohamed 337). Mohamed’s invitation to the Milton establishment to search its collective soul suggests precisely the ways that the opposed viewpoints of Fish and Carey might be reconciled. For example, Fish may be correct that Samson’s actions are represented as ‘virtuous’ within the poem, and Carey may be correct that we moderns are in a better position than Milton’s
contemporaries were to see how appalling seventeenth-century notions of virtue happen to have been. Mohamed’s work usefully, perhaps inadvertently, points out that what really is at stake in the critical agon is—unsurprisingly—Milton’s own reputation vis-à-vis twenty-first century scholarly and political ideology: is he a religious fanatic whose zeal distances him from right-thinking modern liberals or is he a writer radical enough to anticipate our own more enlightened ideals?

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In analyses of Tarantino’s work, as in Milton Studies, confusion about the politics of the artist looms large. Few recent films other than Tarantino’s own Django Unchained (2012) have sparked more ethical debate than Inglourious Basterds. Though 88% of the 268 reviewers on the Rotten Tomatoes website gave the film a positive review, and though it received standing ovations at Cannes and was nominated for eight Academy Awards, Inglourious Basterds is known more for the particular sorts of anger it generated, especially among several well-respected critics. David Denby of The New Yorker, for example, used the occasion of his review to call Tarantino ‘an embarrassment’ and an ‘idiot de la cinémathèque’ (82). The Guardian’s Peter Bradshaw called the film ‘exasperatingly awful’, and Christopher Hitchens exclaimed that seeing the film was like ‘sitting in the dark having a great pot of warm piss emptied very slowly over your head’ (quoted in Clayfield). While none of this seems very critical, other naysayers were more specific about what bothered them, namely the film’s engagement of the Holocaust. Liel Liebowitz, for example, worries that the film offers merely an ‘alternative to reality; a magical and Manichean world where we needn’t worry about the complexities of morality, where violence solves everything, and where the Third Reich is always just a film reel and a lit match away from cartoonish defeat’. Michael Fox of the Chicago Jewish Star calls the film ‘Shockingly superficial’, an example of the ‘creator’s hubris’ that ‘leaves uneducated moviegoers with an erroneous perception of where and how Adolph Hitler met his end’ (Fox 1). Bernard-Henri Lévy shares this fear, wondering ‘what a moderately informed adolescent in California or Minnesota or even Europe would make of such a film’ and declaring that ‘in the joyously macabre pranks of Inglourious Basterds lie the beginnings of historical revisionism’ (Lévy A15). The most extreme comments, though, came from Jonathan Rosenbaum, who condemned the film as ‘morally akin to Holocaust denial’ in its ‘blindness to history’.

Two particular themes, then, tend to mark most critiques: that the film is blind to history; and that the film’s purportedly unequivocal ‘cinephilia’ is self-indulgent. Although I suspect few of the film’s harshest critics would endorse literally Adorno’s famous 1949 claim that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (34), they express clearly if indirectly a shared belief that art can only treat the topic of Nazi-ism within certain narrative, stylistic, and historiographical boundaries, none of which are articulated by the critics themselves.

The film of course has many defenders, and a great majority of them highlight in some way the film’s metacinematic qualities. Thus, the defenders challenge the idea of the film’s mindless cinephilia. A collection of essays entitled Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds: A Manipulation of Metacinema was published in 2012, and several essays deal
with ethics. Alexander D. Ornella suggests that critics of media violence ‘tend to forget that narratives with and of violence do, in fact, serve a social and cultural function’ (224); in this film’s case, he continues, ‘a space for reflection and transformation’ is opened by Tarantino’s refusal to offer catharsis (216). Another helpful essay by Todd Herzog evaluates the controversy over the film and wonders whether it ‘might someday be viewed as the point at which the “limits of representation” of the Holocaust were breached’ (287).

Others argue similarly that the film’s self-reflexivity promotes historical and ethical reflection rather than forgetting. Charles Taylor, Eyal Peretz, and John Rieder all situate the film within a tradition of revenge literature whose cathartic functions should not need defending. As Taylor puts it,

> It’s not just refined and noble feelings that art should deal with. [...] Behind the moral disapproval of the film is the confusion of art with civic virtue, the belief that art must be ennobling and worthy, and the woozy fear that indulging our taste for bloodlust makes us depraved. Again, not an argument anyone is likely to make about Henry V’s St. Crispin’s Day speech. (106)

Rieder is more nuanced, arguing that ‘it is important to ask how deconstruction, virtuosity, catharsis and irresponsibility coexist in Inglourious Basterds than to decide which of them will rule our responses to the film’ (54). Again, the film’s ambivalence regarding the catharsis it apparently provides is said to promote productive reflection. Finally, Joseph Natoli, in defending the ‘Deep Morals of Inglourious Basterds’, argues that the film ‘affects the power of the Holocaust as a clear case of moral evil [...] by fantasizing a revenge drama that is itself [...] full or moral ambiguities’ (52). In conclusion, defences of the film tend to rely on the idea that the film’s self-reflexivity impacts its ethics.

In reviewing the critical debates about both revenge fantasies, I am struck by how passionate, stimulating, and productive these conversations happen to be. To a certain degree, the robustness of the debates themselves serves as a kind of evidence for the success of the texts as both historical, and historiographical, artefacts. To flesh this point out, each work’s formal status as an adaptation per se needs to be taken seriously. To this task I now turn, hoping to show some of the ways in which the complementary arts of adaptation and appropriation serve the construction of aporias.

SAMSON AGONISTES AS REFLEXIVE ADAPTATION

According to Jean-Francois Lyotard,

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher; the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work or art itself is looking for. (81)

With its emphasis on philosophy, the passage underscores the postmodern artwork’s positive labour, its creation of new categories and terms to replace the ones it interrogates. Rosalind Krauss has usefully pointed to postmodemism’s blurring of the critical and artistic acts: ‘If one of the tenets of modernist literature had been the creation of a
work that would force reflection on the conditions of its own construction, that would insist on reading as a much more consciously critical act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a postmodernist literature should be the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form (40). Indeed, it is not surprising that under postmodernism the critical text begins to function—epistemologically speaking—in a manner almost identical to the literary text. And so it should not be surprising either to realize we can easily reverse the terms of Krauss’s formulation, forcing ourselves to think about how the postmodern artwork assumes certain paracritical functions.

My own conviction is that criticizing Tarantino for having made a film that violates the ethical standards of filmmaking, or even historiography, is a bit like sending a child into a time out for asking whether he has been behaving well enough. One of the major goals of Inglourious Basterds, perhaps its major goal, is to encourage viewers to ask themselves what the ethical obligations of the filmmaker happen to be. In what follows, I take seriously both Samson Agonistes and Inglourious Basterds as critical artworks whose complexity, ethicality, and afforded pleasures derive specifically from their status as self-reflexive adaptations.

*Milton is no postmodernist, but both his self-reflexivity and the para-critical dimensions of his poetry suggest the validity of comparisons to postmodern art. This may be why so many respected Miltonists have of late been theorizing a fundamental Miltonic epistemology and/or poetics of indeterminacy. John Rumrich, for example, in a series of writings that interrogate what he refers to as the ‘Invented Milton’ (24), argues that Milton’s monism encompasses the idea that chaos is essential to God, thereby identifying a verifiable theological tenet as the source for Milton’s ‘poetics of becoming’, his remarkable ability to tolerate ‘uncertainty, doubt, and division in seeking truth’ (22). Catherine Gimelli Martin focuses more on Milton’s allegorical and linguistic indeterminacy, arguing that for Milton ‘nothing can exist without indeterminacy’ (162). Peter C. Herman argues that ‘Milton structures Paradise Lost according to […] a poetics of incertitude’ (21), finding in the poem the same features that caused Lucy Newlyn before him to conclude that Paradise Lost ‘contains an abnormal degree of indeterminate poetic modes’ (68). All of this adds up to the provocative idea, in other words, that in numerous ways Milton’s poetry anticipates postmodernism.*

Samson Agonistes refuses easy classification. It might be read, for example, as a Renaissance play, as a drama in the Greek tradition of Sophocles, as a closet drama with certain similarities to Senecan drama, as a religious poem engaged dialectically with its companion 1671 poem, as a Restoration political allegory, or as an adaptation of Judges. Like many great texts, it crosses multiple generic and formal lines and rejects convenient attempts to limit its range of reference and meaning. Due, though, to a self-reflexive extra-textual apparatus which is engaged directly by the drama itself, a unique metateatricality, and—in the palimpsestic sense—thick overlayers of accumulated critical and political import, Samson’s categorical elusiveness should be seen as a major component of its meaning. Certainly the text’s self-presentation and situatedness specifically as text within a larger textual tradition should guide how one reads it.
Milton’s contextualizing work begins on the 1671 title page, which includes an abbreviated Greek and longer Latin translation of Aristotle’s famous lines from the *Poetics* on tragic catharsis: ‘Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action, […] through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions’ (783). As the quotation’s placement might suggest, the concept of catharsis is central to the poem’s meaning and, by extension, its ethics. Although Miltonists have tended to complicate the issue unnecessarily by harping on ambiguities plaguing the concept—mainly by debating whether ‘relief’ applies to the protagonist or the audience—Milton is quite clear in the Preface that he is thinking about his audience:

> Tragedy, as it was antiently compos’d, hath been ever held the gravest, moralist, and most profitable of all other Poems; therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr’d up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. (799)

The final clause roots out any possible confusion regarding whom Milton envisions as the beneficiary of catharsis. The first two complete sentences of *Samson Agonistes*, then, are a quotation of Aristotle on catharsis, and a subsequent commentary on how catharsis specifically applies to a ‘reading or seeing’ audience.

The Aristotelian concept of ‘imitation’ raises a new set of questions. If Milton’s poem seems potentially un-modern in its initial identification with the mimetic literary tradition, it seems entirely *postmodern* in both its presentational self-reflexivity and emphasis on the primacy of textual forms over natural ones. As an adaptation of a biblical tale and a deliberate and explicit imitation of Greek tragedy, *Samson* begs to be read as a representation of representations. When an adaptation of a literary text turns inward upon itself in this way, Aristotelian divisions between the ‘mirror’ and ‘nature’ are either destabilized or prevented from emerging as relevant at all, being replaced by a series of complex intertextual relationships that obliterate or at least interrogate the category of the ‘real’. Whereas the major dichotomy operative in the case of presumably original reflexive texts is *art and reality*, in the case of reflexive adaptations it is usually the *adaptation and the original* or, at least, the *adaptation and other texts*.

Milton tells us both how to read and how not to read his poem. We are not to read it as a drama similar to Elizabethan plays, whose authors committed the ‘error’, among others, ‘of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity’ (799). We are especially warned against reading it as Restoration drama, which bastardizes tragedy by combining it with ‘common interludes’ to ‘gratifie the people’ (799). ‘This work never was intended’ for the ‘Stage’, he tells us, in spite of the fact that it is modelled on ‘Æshulus, Sophocles, and Euripides, … the best rule to all who endeavour to write Tragedy’ (800). In short, Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* is an adaptation of Judges, imitative in form of the three great Greek tragedians, which seeks to temper and reduce the passions of its *readers*—undoubtedly, Milton’s typical ‘fit audience […] though few’ (*Paradise Lost*, 7.31).

The drama later reengages this theatrical history in the denouement, when Samson is called upon to perform his feats of strength in a theatre—as opposed to the ‘house’ mentioned in Judges:
‘The building was a spacious Theatre
   Half round on two main pillars vaulted high,
   With seats where all the Lords and each degree
   Of sort, might sit in order to behold,
   The other side was op’n, where the throng
   On banks and scaffolds under Skie might stand’. (1605–10)

The spacious theatre is only described by a Messenger, not seen, of course, so the reader is free to envision a classical crescent such as the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus; with its pillars, scaffolds, and banks, though, the reader might imagine an Elizabethan theatre. Readers in 1671 might even have thought of the Theatre Royal, Bridges Street, built in 1663, which served as the ‘King’s theatre’ until it burned down in 1672. The ambiguity is functional, since the Messenger’s vague description allows one to conflate an entire history of theatre spanning the Greeks, the Elizabethans, and Milton’s contemporaries.

I say ‘functional’ precisely because the meaning of Samson Agonistes further hinges on its allegorizing of Milton’s royalist enemies as Philistines, a device most clearly revealed through the drama’s metatheatricality. The Prefatory apparatus’s establishment of an intertextual web, the alteration of the Judges ‘House’ to a theatre, and especially the systematic comparisons of Philistine and royalist sports and entertainment (1323–28) all work to clarify Milton’s own investment in the cleansing powers of cathartic tragedy. I have demonstrated elsewhere the drama’s numerous references to the Restoration government’s repeal of parliamentary ordinances against sports and pastimes: ‘Samson’s specific correlation between spectacular sports and false gods—his fear that making sport for the Philistines means honoring a false religion—plays upon late-seventeenth-century associations of sport, pomp, and popery. […] Philistine paganism is indistinguishable from Stuart Anglicanism’ (469). Bound up in this web of associations of course is the theatre, since Charles II reopened the playhouses that were officially closed down by parliament.

Milton was by no means opposed to all theatre, remarking in his commonplace book that ‘while the corrupting influences of the theater ought to be eliminated, it does not follow that it is necessary to abolish altogether the performance of plays … for what in the whole of philosophy is more impressive, purer, or more uplifting than a noble tragedy?’ (Milton 207). The key distinction here between a corrupting theatre and an ennobling one echoes Milton’s distinctions in the preface to Samson between the ‘common interludes’ of his own time and the noble tragedies of the Greeks. The problem, in other words, is not drama or even playgoing but, rather, the particular spectacles sought out by the Philistine/Royalist nobility. When Samson breaks the pillars and sends the theatre roof crashing down upon the heads of the ‘Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councillors, or Priests’, but sparing the vulgar, he demonstrates in one fell swoop the destructiveness—the ‘corrupting influence’, if you will—of staged spectacle. By insisting that Samson is not to be performed, it’s as if Milton is saying he doesn’t want to risk allowing his audience to lose sight of tragedy’s nobler purposes. And the final lines bring catharsis, not violence, back to the centre of attention:

   His servants he with new acquaint
   Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent. (1755–58)

The work ends as it begins, with a commentary of sorts on what the experience of bearing ‘witness’ (1753) to these events is supposed to bring about.

Metatheatricality establishes a hermeneutical framework, then, within which Samson’s violence might be read simultaneously as (1) Milton’s choice to celebrate the practicality of art, and (2) Milton’s choice not to endorse real violence. There is a difference between a work that advocates violence and a work that advocates violent literature’s ability to temper one’s violent impulses. The work’s status as an adaptation amplifies this distinction because Milton is also asking readers to consider how the famous story from Judges impacts them. The fact that he feels compelled to adapt that story with so profoundly explicit an emphasis on catharsis is perhaps one of the most useful indicators of how he himself responded to its ethical contradictions.

Whether Samson’s status as a self-reflexive adaptation can answer the ethical objections of critics to Samson’s terrorism is another question, of course. In spite of the way I read the poem, I find myself feeling considerable doubt that ‘All is best’ in the end (1745). While I would defend the ethicality of the drama on the grounds that it endorses the influence of tragedy on one’s violent impulses, not violence itself, I am left like so many others wondering whether Samson actually succeeds in achieving its intended effect. I won’t be so pious as to begrudge Milton the desire he must have felt to destroy his enemies. Because I agree with Milton that the impulses themselves are quite unavoidable, I’m more interested in what we do to temper them, and Milton’s notion that literature might help us wrestle with them seems perfectly sound. I would also admit, though, that if Milton’s intention was to calm our minds and quell our passions, Samson Agonistes must be regarded as a pretty monumental failure.

INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS AS REFLEXIVE ADAPTATION

Inglourious Basterds’ explicit intertextuality is precisely the engine driving its ethical meanings, helping to set the terms according to which it should be evaluated. To begin I want to focus on the ways the film simultaneously makes explicit and obscures its own status as an adaptation. By using the term ‘adaptation’, as opposed to ‘appropriation’, I’m by no means suggesting that Inglourious Basterds fails to ‘affect a more decisive journey away from the informing source’ (Sanders 26)); rather, I wish to emphasize the way a certain small group of texts both informs the film centrally and continues to resonate throughout its entirety.

As mentioned above, the film never explicitly acknowledges its debt to Judges, though this is only slightly surprising considering how it foregrounds the cinema as the true source of modern mythmaking and historical knowledge. The film does announce its status as an adaptation in its very title, which refers to Enzo Castellari’s 1978 exploitation war film Quel Maledetto Treno Blindato, known by its English title as The Inglorious Bastards. The title suggests various possibilities of derivation from the source, and freedom from it too, through its neo-punk overwriting of the original. Such a move is fitting since, with the exception of the title, Tarantino’s film bears almost no resemblance whatsoever to Castellari’s film. Yes, there’s the fact that Tarantino’s ‘bastards’
are on some level influenced by the central plot angle in Castellari, whereby a group of American war criminals seeking to escape Nazi-occupied France find themselves in a position to serve the Allied cause by stealing a German V2 warhead. That particular plot, though, is of course directly inspired by the earlier World War II film, *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), not to mention a number of lesser films in between (including Armando Crispino’s *Commandos* [1968]). Tarantino’s love of such films is well known. In fact, he once referred to *Inglourious Basterds* as ‘my Dirty Dozen or Where Eagles Dare or Guns of Navarone kind of thing’ (quoted in Lee). So why signal such indebtedness to Castellari?

In plot, Tarantino’s film actually is much closer to another World War II film, Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 *To Be or Not to Be*, which focuses on a Polish theatre company just before and after the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. Appropriating both *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* as part of its alternate-history fantasy of actors thwarting the Nazi plans to crush the Polish resistance, the climactic scene occurs in the theatre as the actors—donning their costumes as Nazi soldiers and officers—successfully dupe the foolish Germans and escape Poland in Hitler’s own airplane. Whereas metacinema functions in *Inglourious Basterds* both to interrogate and celebrate the power of the cinema, metatheatre serves the same functions for the theatrical world in *To Be or Not to Be*. Lubitsch himself admitted that he saw the film as both a loving tribute and a jab at thespians, satirizing ‘the attitude of actors who always remain actors regardless of how dangerous the situation might be’ (Lubitsch 247). Indeed, the Polish actors’ vanity, ambition, and myopia are precisely what allow them to defeat the Nazis.

Although some of the very same critics who’ve attacked Tarantino’s film as unforgivable have defended Lubitsch’s film on the grounds of certain (incoherently articulated) differences between them, Lubitsch’s explanation was part of an attempt to fend off harsh criticism. Of course the film was made before the full horror of the Holocaust was known, but even at the time of its release it was quite controversial. Lubitsch himself defended his blending of realism, political conviction, and satire (Lubitsch 247). Today the film is considered one of the great comedies of the studio era, seemingly forgiven for whatever transgressions it may have committed as a parody of Nazism.

The question that again emerges, however, from comparisons between the films is why Tarantino saw fit to allude to the Castellari film rather than a film such as *To Be or Not to Be*? In one case, Tarantino makes direct—albeit, incorrect—reference to a film he just barely engages; in the other case, he avoids referencing a film that obviously informs his own. In moving towards an answer, I want to consider *Inglourious Basterds*’ two most important remaining hypotexts, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the Samson tale. Again whereas Tarantino’s film appears to indirectly reference Griffith’s film, it avoids any specific reference to the biblical myth.

The Goebbels-directed film-within-the-film (actually directed by Eli Roth), starring Fredrick Zoller, is translated *Nation’s Pride* within the screenplay and in all English subtitles, but the title as seen on the German film posters is *Stolz der Nation* or *Pride of the Nation*. Tellingly the film is not called *Stolz einer Nation* (*Pride of a Nation*), since in the Nazi imagination there is no other nation than Germany, but the title is nonetheless indirectly referencing the film frequently enough labelled by scholars as the most important one ever made, *The Birth of a Nation*, not least for the way it ushered in the potential of feature film to generate (and profit from) massive controversy—in this case, due to
the racist propaganda it spread. The implied links between *The Birth of a Nation* and *Pride of the Nation* work to strengthen other links Tarantino builds in the film between the Holocaust, the Native American genocide, and institutional racism. Such links will provoke debates about Jewish exceptionalism, but I see them as effective vehicles for the film’s reflections on itself and on the cinema generally, not to mention its encouragement of viewers to reflect on cinematic violence.

*The Birth of a Nation* is an adaptation of Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel *The Clansman* (1905). It traces the lives of two Civil War-era families, the pro-Union Stonemans and the pro-Confederacy Camerons, linking the ‘birth’ of the nation not with the triumph of the north in the war but with the founding of the Ku Klux Klan as a response to the social disorder unleashed by Union victory. (Tarantino satirizes the latter event in *Django Unchained*). The film’s racism is stark and unapologetic, with white actors in black face portraying savages who, in their best moments, act like buffoons and, in their worst ones, assault and abduct women. The film’s two greatest scenes are demonstrations of the cinema’s unparalleled ability to capture spectacular violence. In the first, we witness the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in Ford’s Theatre by John Wilkes Booth. Griffith is meticulous in his reconstruction of the theatrical space, an intertitle informing the audience that we are seeing ‘AN HISTORICAL FASCIMILE of Ford’s theatre as on that night, exact in size and detail’. The scene is extraordinary in part because of the way it builds tension towards the inevitable through crosscutting between the drama enacted upon the stage and events in the theatre itself. The effect is the establishment of a line between the real and the represented which causes us to forget we are also watching a ‘play’. Once the shooting occurs, all hell breaks loose in the theatre, and we feel fastened in our seats, helpless to do anything about the tragedy unfolding before us. Tarantino exploits the same technique in his depiction of the violence at Shosanna’s Gamaar Cinema.

The second climactic scene in Griffith’s film is the final action sequence, when the Ku Klux Klan rises up and, to the rousing strains of Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’, frees the South Carolina town from its predominantly black occupiers. An intertitle informs us that ‘The former enemies of North and South are united again in defense of their Aryan birthright’. The scene has become a metonym for the film which, much like *Stolz der Nation*, epitomizes some of the central ethical dilemmas posed by the cinematic medium, which we might breakdown as follows: (1) the power of film spectacle to impact audience identification and emotional response (regardless of the audience’s moral relationship to the material); (2) the creative power of film as negotiator of reality and fantasy; (3) the propagandistic power of film as an ideological apparatus (disseminating, for instance, racist, sexist, or nationalistic ideas).

Tarantino’s oblique reference to Griffith raises questions about our own ethical relationship with *Inglourious Basterds* and films of its sort. While a common lament of the film’s detractors is that it ignores history, it might actually be said to prevent a paradoxical use of history for the purposes of forgetting. Rather than assuming that what ‘good history’ does is either clear or intrinsically ethical, we might think about how history served straight up in film allows a certain distancing of the audience from the material being historicized, precisely by relegating the depicted events to another time. The inter(con)textuality of this film, on the other hand, disallows any
such distancing by reminding us that *Inglourious Basterds* puts itself forward as a meditation on our fantasies, desires, and even nightmares regarding history’s continuing legacy.

As mentioned earlier, the film makes numerous references to the historical oppression of blacks and Native Americans. They serve less to de-exceptionalize the Holocaust than to prevent audiences from exceptionalizing it and thereby distancing themselves morally from the atrocities committed against the Jews. By reinforcing the transhistoricity of human intolerance, the film forces modern audiences to contemplate two fundamental questions: first, in what sense is the savagery perpetrated by the Basterds—including the scalping of dead German soldiers as a tribute to Aldo’s Native American blood—different in kind from that perpetrated by the Nazis? Second, in what sense are ‘we’, the modern viewing audience of these violent spectacles, different from the various audiences in the diegetic world of the film: Perrier LaPadite, who looks on helplessly as the Jewish family he’s tried to protect is slaughtered; the Basterds, who cheer on the ‘Bear-Jew’s’ beatings of countless Nazis; or especially the German film audience which applauds Zoller’s violent exploits in *Stolz der Nation*?

Certainly, our response to Shosanna’s murder of hundreds of Nazis parallels the Nazi response to Zoller’s murder of hundreds of soldiers. The climactic moment occurs with Shosanna’s change of reel three to four, which contains material she’s filmed and edited into *Pride of the Nation*. Until that point, the film plays to the delight of Hitler who laughs at Zoller’s exploits and tells an elated Goebbels that this is his ‘finest’ work yet. Reel four plays. Shouting at his enemies, Zoller looks directly at the screen and shouts triumphantly, ‘Who wants to send a message to Germany?’ At this point, a rough cut reveals Shosanna’s face in close up against a black background; the spliced-in material has been filmed at a low angle so that she appears massive, floating above the heads of the audience. ‘I have a message to Germany’, she says ominously and smiles. ‘That you are all going to die. And I want you to look deep into the face of the Jew who is going to do it’. She tells her black lover Marcel to ‘burn it down’, and he throws a lit cigarette onto the pile of nitrate. Shosanna’s final words then echo through peals of hysterical, punishing laughter: ‘My name is Shosanna Dreyfus, and this is the face of Jewish vengeance’. As the theatre burns, two of the Basterds begin shooting at the audience to prevent their escape. As the explosives attached to the suicide bombers’ feet detonate, Tarantino jumps to a medium shot of the theatre façade, only seconds before the building explodes. A final shot shows how the cinema has been transformed by the explosion into what looks like an Elizabethan proscenium stage (see Figure 1)—a final ghostly reminder of the cinema’s historical pasts.

*Inglourious Basterds*’ numerous references to such works as *The Birth of a Nation* and *To Be or Not to Be* are about more than the masturbatory playfulness of an amoral idiot—as some critics have suggested; they are in fact central to the film’s complex ethics. It establishes its own identity between the two Hollywood traditions emblematized by such source texts, both of which must be understood on some level as propaganda—the only real difference being that one is racist, the other anti-Nazi propaganda. In a key scene in Tarantino’s screenplay, Goebbels tries to articulate his vision for a new German cinema that will challenge the American propaganda machine:
We Germans are looking forward, not backward. That era of German cinema is dead. The German cinema I create will not only be the cinema of Europe, but the world’s only alternative to the degenerate Jewish influence of Hollywood. (62)

Whereas the unmentionable German-American director Lubitsch surely would be considered part of the degenerate pro-Jewish Hollywood machine the Goebbels character condemns, films such as The Birth of a Nation constitute actual evidence of Hollywood’s shameful past. What kind of film is Inglourious Basterds, Tarantino asks, and critics have ironically responded in diametrically opposed ways. It seems to me unequivocal, however, in imparting a conviction that Goebbels’ films were not very different from Griffith’s film, and that the consumers of German propaganda were not entirely different from the millions of Americans who joined the KKK after The Birth of a Nation made it fashionable to do so. In a recent interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Tarantino admitted to a certain obsession with—and even hatred of—Griffith’s film: ‘I’ve written a big piece that I’ve never finished that is about the thought process that would go into making The Birth of a Nation.’ Tellingly, he goes on to compare the original novel to German propaganda: ‘It really can only stand next to Mein Kampf when it comes to just its ugly imagery’ (Gates).

Inglourious Basterds forces us to ask, what kind of audience are we? How are we to be compared to the Philistines, the Nazis, the viewers of The Birth of a Nation, or To Be or Not to Be? To sustain this line of questioning and to make sure the message is explicit enough, Tarantino offers one final self-reflective gesture in the coda. After carving a perfect swastika in Colonel Landa’s forehead, Aldo says to his fellow basterd Utivich ‘You know somethin’ […]? ’This just might be my masterpiece’. It is the final line of the film before the cut to the first credit ‘Written and Directed by QUENTIN TARANTINO’. Numerous critics have pointed out the clear parallel between the violent artistry of Aldo the Apache and Tarantino the director. But it seems worth pushing the analogy further, really thinking, that is, about how Tarantino sees it functioning. As mentioned above, the reason that Aldo carves swastikas in the foreheads of those Nazis he spares has to do with his fear that their crimes will be forgotten after they blend back into civilian life. The ‘tattoo’ Aldo gives his enemies, therefore, is a permanent marker of their immoral pasts, a historical monument of sorts, a promise that the evil done by those men will not be forgotten. In linking his own film to such carvings, Tarantino

**Figure 1** The Gamaar Cinema as conventional theatre (frame capture from Inglourious Basterds).
quite literally suggests the violent crudeness, the historical functionality, and the moral
logicality of *Inglourious Basterds*.

Whether viewers wish to see it the same way will depend, in large part, on their
willingness to take seriously the film’s adaptational intertextuality as a guide to reading
it historically and ethically. My suspicion is that dismissals of the film as ahistorical and
amoral have mainly to do with attitudes towards postmodern modes of storytelling (and
Tarantino’s own reputation as a postmodern filmmaker). To dismiss the film’s metacin-
ematic intertextual play as synonymous with ahistoricity, for example, is to perpetuate
an erroneous idea about postmodernism which Linda Hutcheon claims is common
amongst nearly all of its detractors. Postmodernism actually ‘reinstalls historical con-
texts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire
notion of historical knowledge’ (Hutcheon 89). It does so not by denying the impor-
tance of history, that is, but by questioning what comes to be regarded as historical
truth: ‘the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which makes those
past “events” into present historical “facts”’. This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth”
[Gerald Graff] but an acknowledgment of the meaning-making function of human
constructs’ (Hutcheon 89). This now-basic notion—entrenched after the ’80s and ’90s
ascendancy of cultural anthropology, cultural materialism, new cultural history, and so
forth—predictably places texts, or discourses, of various sorts at the forefront of our
meaning-making, history-making human constructs. In the case of ‘historical metafic-
tions’ such as *Inglourious Basterds*, the meanings and shapes of history are present in the
palimpsest.

Thus, we return quite naturally to our questions about the film as an adaptation. Its
explicit acknowledgements of itself as an appropriation of several generic (con)texts
(i.e., *The Inglorious Bastards* and *The Birth of a Nation*), along with its silent appropriation
of textual fantasies of Jewish vengeance (i.e., *To Be or Not to Be* and Judges), work to posi-
tion it precisely as a historical document. Rather than positioning itself as an alternate
history representation of reality, *Inglourious Basterds* celebrates its situatedness in a massive
textual tradition which nonetheless has contributed directly to the ways the atrocities of
the 1940s are understood and narrated today. The Judges hypotext is most functional in
this regard because of its ancientness and cultural status, its unique straddling of narrow
lines—drawn differently by each individual audience member—between the historical
and the mythical, the real and the represented, and the sacred and the profane.

CONCLUSION

Reflexivity and intertextuality are capable of revealing the ethical anxieties and/or
ethical preoccupations of a text. Like the binoculars in the final scene of Pasolini’s *Salò,*
the reflexive gestures of *Samson Agonistes* and *Inglourious Basterds* provide ethical fram-
works for the spectacular fantasies they project. I am not suggesting, of course, that
such gestures give the works that employ them a pass on ethical responsibility. I would
argue vigorously, however, that critics of a particular work’s ethical content should at
least acknowledge how foundations for ethical judgment are transformed by a particu-
lar text’s redefinition of ‘reality’ as a discursive rather than ontological category. To
question the nature of the real is neither to deny nor to disrespect the existence of facts or
to be blind to history. There are entire histories to be found in an act of appropriation.
As intrinsically intertextual forms, adaptations may or may not establish similar ethical-hermeneutical frameworks as other self-reflexive texts. Underlying many debates about adaptations, especially those which presume to reimagine such sacred sources as the Bible or History, are more complex philosophical questions about such impossible subjects as truth and morality—topics which can seem off-limits, and maybe just a bit embarrassing, to many contemporary film and literature scholars. Even in the process of destroying classical hierarchies and dualisms, the most mannerist postmodern texts will also inevitably keep visible in the eyes of readers certain entrenched divisions between the ‘real’ thing (the source) and the simulacrum (the adaptation). Depending on one’s critical orientation and/or the particular subject under scrutiny, that ‘real’ thing will represent either a merely anterior text or an intrinsically superior one, and either position will have its ethical consequences. We adaptation scholars will benefit, I think, not only from a consideration of the ways in which adaptation scholarship and criticism are haunted by the moralistic language born of adaptation’s epistemological uniqueness, but also from deeper consideration of the opportunities adaptations offer for considering fundamental questions about art.

NOTES

Many thanks to Simon Yarrow and Bob Hasenfratz for their helpful feedback on this essay.
1 See Krouse, Milton’s Samson.
2 The quotation in question, of course, is Jules’ (Samuel Jackson) speech beginning ‘the path of the righteous man is beset on all sides […]’. Though inspired by Ezekiel 25:17, the quotation is actually a collage of several different biblical verses.
3 Though the screenplay specifies the enemies are Russians (52), the film does not. One clear homage to Eisenstein, however, when a soldier is shot through his eye glasses, suggests that the soldiers are indeed Russians.
4 See Rapaport.
5 See Crowther; Bergan.
6 Tarantino is one-quarter Native American by his mother, who is half-Irish, half-Cherokee.

REFERENCES


