

# Critical Analysis of Inglourious Basterds

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**How does Inglourious Basterds use sound effects, dialogue and music to evoke comedy, sympathy and loathing amongst other emotions towards characters and scenarios in such a deplorable period in history; World War II?**

This essay will answer this question by analysing Inglourious Basterds<sup>[1]</sup> in three sections which relate to how the sound of the film conveys emotions and why certain techniques are used. The first to be discussed will be dialogue, looking at its properties and the multiple languages and dialects used. The second will be the sound effects and how the apparent mix is altered to not simply provide sound effects matching on-screen visuals but utilising a second sense to convey emotion. The third will be how intertextual, diagenetic and anempathetic music are all used for evocative effect.

It is overlooked that the use of dialogue and all of its properties control the message which is conveyed. Sonnenschein states how “*rhythm, intensity, pitch, speed, shape or orderliness [can be used to] increase or decrease the emotional way of speech*” in his book; *Sound Design: The Expressive Power of Music, Voice and Sound Effects in Cinema*<sup>[2 p.138-139]</sup>. This is supported by Weis who states that “*a person’s actual words are less significant than his definition as glib or taciturn, voluble or quiet*” from the book: *Film Sound Theory and Practice*<sup>[3]</sup>. In an interview with the New York Times, Tarantino states that he and the casting department only hired actors who could speak their native language with a native accent<sup>[4]</sup>. In *Inglourious Basterds*, this relates to evoking emotions in the viewer specifically using these techniques of speech, languages and accents.

A specific example of this is Colonel Hans Landa who speaks English and German fluently and Italian and French to an excellent standard. Waltz, who plays the Colonel, is originally from Austria<sup>[5]</sup> but for his part in the film, he speaks with a very clinical German accent. How he portrays his lines is obviously determined by many theatrical techniques but is also determined by which language he is speaking. For instance, in the opening scene where he is speaking both French and English, his speech is much slower, more articulate and said more like one would read poetry. However, later on when he swaps to German, the colder language makes his lines more sharp and harsh but the properties of his speech, mainly his fast and aggressive tone, also greatly affect the feeling towards the character felt by the viewer. The way that he is unnaturally more articulate in foreign languages adds to the way that in-depth dialogue is evocatively used in these scenes. It provides a deeper insight into Lander’s character by showing the viewer that he is fast and straight to the point when delivering orders to the Germans. When it comes to executing Jews or comically interrogating the Americans in the Italian Escorts scene, however, he cruelly takes his time with articulate conversation. This portrays Hans Lander as being a more malicious character which is Tarantino’s indication to the viewer to feel loathing towards him. Cohen, the sound designer, uses what Chion describes as *Vococentrism*; “*The privilege of the voice over all the other sonic elements in audiovisual media*”<sup>[6 p.5]</sup>. This is supported by Lamberti in Coleman’s video;

“Inglorious Basterds” Sound for Film Profile <sup>[7]</sup> who discusses Cohen’s frequency mixing techniques for dialogue clarity.

Throughout the film, all of the dialogue is very clear, clean cut and easy to understand, even if the viewer does not know the language being spoken as supported by Minkler in Coleman’s video <sup>[7]</sup>. This feeds the viewer with auditory information about the characters and invisibly hints at loathing towards the strong clinical dictating Germans and passion and sympathy towards the French, especially Perrier LaPadite in the first scene. Comedy is also hinted at towards the Americans, especially towards the Tennessean Lieutenant Aldo Raine. This is due to someone with an Appalachian accent, described by Stephen L. Fisher as being a dialect stereotyped as being spoken by people who “are generally viewed as backward, unintelligent, fatalistic and quiescent people” <sup>[8]</sup>, trying to take down the entire Third Reich. By using dialogue and accents, Tarantino subjects the viewer to these emotive feelings towards the characters but in doing so subtly, it is not too overpowering and works on an almost subconscious level.

In the Italian Escorts scene, the Italian accents of the Basterds and the Colonel are compared and is how the Colonel confirms that they are in fact, not Italian. Even though the entire plot to bring down the Third Reich is being shattered, it is done in such a way which portrays comedy. The way which Lander moves seamlessly and very unexpectedly between fluent German and very articulate fast Italian presents comedy to the viewer. This comedy is accentuated by the humorously poor Italian accents of the three Basterds. This is again supported by Fiser’s stated stereotype as above <sup>[8]</sup>. To further this effect, Tarantino gets Waltz to get the Americans to comically repeat their poor Italian lines multiple times which was not included in Tarantino’s original script <sup>[9]</sup> and so must have been done on set to add to the humour in the scene. A sense of comedy could have been established in many ways using the sound track but by using the dialogue, Tarantino does so in a clever and not so obvious way which both comically lightens the mood and makes the viewer slightly anxious and unsure as to whether Hans Lander has actually metaphorically unmasked the Americans or not.

The next way that Inglourious Basterds uses sound to evoke emotions in the viewer is the specific sound effects and also the sound mix presented to the viewer. The first specific example is the anti-naturalistically selected sound effects of when the Jews are being mercilessly slaughtered through the floor boards of the cottage in the first scene. The choice of visuals for this is explained by Tarantino in an interview with Sordeau from Rotten Tomatoes; “I thought it could be more horrifyingly realistic if you didn't see the blood. If you just saw the sawdust.” <sup>[10]</sup>. The sound which is presented to the viewer in this scene contains no flesh wound sounds or any screaming from the Jews, instead it focuses solely on the firing of bullets and the sound of them entering the floor boards. Flueckiger, in the book *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media*, states “*This selection simulates the focusing of attention of a character as a function of his specific interests and objectives*” <sup>[11]</sup>. In the case of the opening scene of *Inglorious Basterds*, this technique makes the viewer aware of the emotional focus of Landa; specifically of the cold hearted ruthless killing with no sympathy or even regard for his victims. Tarantino did this to make it more “*horrifyingly realistic*” <sup>[10]</sup> by challenging the cliché set by the industry of using blood to shock the viewer. This evokes intense emotion in two ways;

the feeling of sympathy towards the helpless racially abused Jewish family and also feelings of severe loathing towards Landa and his cruel and unforgiving ways.

In the book, *Film Sound – Theory and Practice*, Hadanzo states that “*The primary purpose of mixing is usually to strike the right dramatic balance among dialogue, music, and effects*”<sup>[12]</sup>. The next example of how this is used in *Inglorious Basterds* is in chapter five. When the bombs attached to the legs of Donowitz and Ulmer are revealed at 01:52:38, the sound mix is altered so that the comedic cartoon style ticking can be heard well above everything else in the mix which is completely un-naturalistic. Sonnenschein discusses nonliteral sound as a narrative; “*It must be the right sound for the script and for what the director is trying to say on the screen*”<sup>[2 p.179]</sup>. Tarantino and the sound designers have specifically chosen to accentuate the level of the bomb ticking in the mix for a specific dramatic balance; to evoke comedy in the narrative of the film.

Another use of specific sound effects for an evocative outcome is in chapter four when Stiglitz is sat by Major Hellstrom and the film flashes back to Stiglitz’s torture. The flashback involves Stiglitz being whipped and when the film returns to the present, Hellstrom taps Stiglitz to signify he needs to respond to the game that they are playing. The sound used for this is one of the whipping sounds used in the flashback. This makes the viewer aware that it was Hellstrom who actually carried out the torture. Chion defines this technique; “*synchresis consists in perceiving the concomitance of a discrete sound event and a discrete visual event as a single phenomenon*”<sup>[13 p.492]</sup>. The tapping visual and whipping audio do not relate to each other but the viewer will perceive this as the same event. The way that Tarantino and the sound designers chose to portray the information in this subtle way mirrors the feelings of Stiglitz’s character. He has only just found out that the person sitting next to him was responsible for his torture but he reacts in a very subtle way, much like how this information is portrayed to the viewer. This makes the audience feel easier to sympathise with his character. Another way which the sound chosen in this scene supports the emotive suggestion presented to the viewer is by emotional realism. This is described in FilmSound.org as an “*anthropomorphic mirror placed in the diegesis. In the same manner as music does, the soundscape reflects the mood of the story and the characters feelings*”<sup>[14]</sup>. The powerful whipping sound effect used in this scene uses emotional realism to further induce the feeling of loathing towards Hellstrom.

The last major way *Inglorious Basterds* portrays emotions to the viewer is by Music. Sonnenschein states that “*Music not only plays the obvious role of scoring for film sound tracks, but also it is a nonverbal language that can reveal many insights in to the sound designer*”<sup>[2 p.108-109]</sup>. In *Inglorious Basterds*, Tarantino uses selected pre-recorded music which he feels gives it a more personal feel which is backed up by Sound on Sight’s podcast about the film which discusses the sound track as being “*Tarantino’s love letter to cinema*”<sup>[15]</sup>. Tarantino chose to use these songs at specific points during the film for evocative effect. *Inglorious Basterds*’s soundtrack<sup>[16]</sup> contains a variety of music which when placed in context becomes heavily evocative.

The first instance of this is in the music in the first scene, where Landa orders his men to ruthlessly slaughter the Dreyfus family beneath the floorboards of the cottage. The

changes in the music evoke different emotions in the viewer. Marpug states in his table of acoustic expression of emotional states<sup>[17]</sup> how specific emotions are conjured by the various properties of music. These will be married up to the changes in the music in *Inglorious Basterds* below.

At 00:18:12 dissonant music enters which gradually gets thicker in texture and more chaotic with an irregular inharmonious melody in the brass which pairs with Marpug's statement of "*Hate [is produced by] rough harmony and melody*"<sup>[17]</sup>. Dissonant running strings then enter, rising in pitch and become harsher in timbre. This is quickly followed by an overwhelming minor but dissonant high pitch choir part which matches Marpug's statement of "*wrath [is produced by] expression of hate combined with running notes... sharp violent movements; shrieking dissonances*"<sup>[17]</sup>. At 00:19:28 a single trumpet enters playing a major, triumphant melody as Shoshanna escapes which can be coupled to Marpug's statement of "*Hopefulness [is produced by] a proud and exultant melody*"<sup>[17]</sup>. This very dramatic score continues with a crescendo until it ends very abruptly at 00:20:16 where the juxtaposing sound of the gun cocking but not firing and a hard over-extenuated tom hit are used, sounding much like a gun shot. The hate and wrath emotions mentioned by Marpug support the feeling of loathing felt towards Landa. Tarantino and the sound designers used this effect to add another sense to shock the viewer and support the emotion already portrayed to the viewer by the action and expressions shown on screen. Also, the juxtaposing sound mentioned causes a comedic element which is supported by the smile on Landa's face. The synchronous visual of the gun cocking and tom hit show Tarantino playing with Chion's synchresis<sup>[13 p.492]</sup> principal for comedic effect. This technique of "*diegetic contradiction between a distinct sound and a distinct image*"<sup>[13 p.475]</sup> is described by Chion as "*audiovisual dissonance*"<sup>[13 p.475]</sup>. In this scene, the sound designing makes the viewer actually unsure whether Shosanna has actually been shot until the camera cuts to her slightly after. This makes the viewer unsure as to the current narrative for a few seconds while Landers smiling face is presented on-screen for comedic effect.

Off-screen exterior diegetic music is also used in the film for evocative effect. The military sound effects in the *Nations Pride* film at the cinema are present even when the screen is not in shot. Holbrook says that "*Diegetic music serves primarily to reinforce the realistic depiction...to enhance the verisimilitude of the narrative action.*"<sup>[18]</sup> In *Inglorious Basterds*, there is twelve and a half minutes of these diegetic military sound effects used as evocative music. Gunshots, a variety of explosions, flesh wound sounds and bodies hitting the floor are used as an undercurrent of violent emotions and to serve as a support for the chaos which will come next in the plot. As a way of making the viewer heavily sympathise with the owner of the cinema, Shosanna Dreyfus, this military sound track is cut completely at the end of the diegetic music and "*Un Amico*" by Morricone<sup>[19]</sup> is introduced.

This piece of music leads on to analyse Tarantino's choice of anempathetic music. Sonnenschein states "*When the music does not care what is happening, irony can create a counterpoint for the spectator to seek more actively what is really happening.*"<sup>[2 p.156]</sup> Tarantino uses this idea throughout the film with such pieces of music as "*Un Amico*" by Morricone<sup>[19]</sup>. This is a fairly relaxing and calm piece of music with a playful acoustic

guitar and strings. Tarantino plays this over the murder scene where Shosanna and Zoller kill each other causing an anempathetic ironic counterpoint. In this piece of music, there are specific points of the action which are synced with the music for evocative effect; the playful acoustic guitar enters at 02:14:35 when Shosanna realises that she has just killed the star of the Nations Pride movie, the strings enter at 02:14:51 exactly when the supposedly dead Zoller gasps and so the viewer finds that he is actually alive, at 02:15:17 the drums enter as Shosanna rolls Zoller over and at 02:15:19 Zoller fires three rounds hitting Shosanna exactly on the last 3 beats of the bar before the prominent bass line enters precisely on the subsequent bar. As this piece of music was recorded before filming, Tarantino would have filmed and edited this sequence around the music. Tarantino uses this synchronisation between the non-diegetic music and the on-screen action as it makes the viewer feel as if the music is actually part of the action and so makes it more emotive as if it were coming from the story itself. Chion describes this technique in his book, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, as temporal vectorization; “*sounds [which] orient the images toward a future, a goal, and create feelings of imminence and expectation*”<sup>[6]</sup>. The first three sync points detailed above involve the on-screen visuals and the non-diegetic music synchronising. This gets more and more obvious from the first until the third sync point in anticipation of the fourth where the visuals, music and sound of the gun shots meet to heighten the emotion of the scene exactly on the first beat of the subsequent bar. Using this technique creates a sense of expectation of the imminent death of Shosanna, intensifying the emotion of the evocative scene. Specifically, the synchronised anempathetic music works particularly well to cause a loathing towards Zoller and sympathy towards Shosanna.

Tarantino uses intertextuality in the music of *Inglourious Basterds* to evoke emotion by referencing other evocative films. Cataldo states in *Slant Magazine* that “[*Tarantino*] carefully lifted choices as stylistic complements to the action on screen, creating both a matching backdrop and an equivalent undercurrent for the pervading aura of film-reference fetishism.”<sup>[20]</sup> Genette in Chandler’s online book, *Semiotics for Beginners*, states a subtype of intertextuality which is used in *Inglourious Basterds*: “*hypotextuality [is] the relation between a text and a preceding 'hypotext' - a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends*”<sup>[21]</sup>. If the viewer has seen the film Tarantino is referencing, the music also takes a subconscious role further emphasising the emotions conveyed in the scene. Such an example is Tiger Tank by Schiffrin<sup>[22]</sup> which is taken straight from the film *Kelly’s Heroes*<sup>[23]</sup>. Haselbeck supports this reference in his website “*The Quentin Tarantino Archives*”<sup>[24]</sup>. In *Kelly’s Heroes*, the Germans soldiers are represented as amoral opportunistic capitalists whom the viewer grows to loath. In *Inglourious Basterds*, this piece of music is used during the cinema scene where Zoller, the notoriously dangerous German soldier, is walking to the projection room about to find out about the plan to destroy the Third Reich. This makes the viewer feel loathing towards Zoller using the hypotextual reference to *Kelly’s Heroes* via the music.

Another instance of this intertextual reference is the motif used in “*The Verdict*”<sup>[25]</sup> which is very similar to that used in *Für Elise* from *The Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor*<sup>[26]</sup>. This is a very memorable piece in the Polanski’s World War II film *The Pianist*<sup>[27]</sup> about merciless Jew slaughtering. This intertextual reference evokes sympathy in the viewer

towards the Jewish family which are murdered in the first scene of Inglourious Basterds. The score of Für Elise <sup>[28]</sup> supports this by the clearly visible E major pedalling technique used in the piano which is also clearly identifiable in “The Verdict” <sup>[25]</sup>.

To conclude, Tarantino and the sound designers use the dialogue, sound effects and mix level and music to evoke comedy, sympathy and loathing effectively. Nisbett in his book, *The Sound Studio*, states “*When combined with picture...film sound should always support, occasionally counterpoint and rarely dominate; its most effective role is to extend, strengthen and more closely define the information that comes first through vision*” <sup>[29]</sup>. In *Inglourious Bastards*, the sound track does exactly this. For example when the visuals show Hellstrom tapping Stiglitz but the audio track describes a whipping sound, the viewer does not believe that Hellstrom just whipped Stiglitz as the visual sense dominates. However, in this case the sound extends that specific scene and transforms the narrative. By incorporating sound into the narrative, it means that another sense is used to immerse the viewer into the story. This method of using sound to convey emotion is not strictly separate from the visuals of the film and so in this essay there are examples of how sound works with the emotive visuals. This is described by Chion; “*I call trans-sensory perceptions that belong to no one particular sense but that may travel via one sensory channel or another with-out their content or their effect being limited to this one sense*” <sup>[13 p.496]</sup>. Therefore, although this essay specifically analyses the sound of the film, this in itself conjures poignant images or chills the viewers. There will also be numerous visual techniques and other trans-sensory perceptions which one could write a thesis on. However, as a standalone sense discussed in this essay, sound is used well for evocative effect in *Inglourious Basterds*.

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