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Fictionalizing the Holocaust: Narrative Strategies and Elements of Denial

Abstract

The paper will deal with the fictional strategies employed to empower the historical fact of the Holocaust in the following movies: *Life is beautiful* by Roberto Benigni, *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Niki Caro and *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino. The aforementioned movies have been selected because each of them provides a different representation of the Holocaust: what is more, the Holocaust plays only a backdrop (or is represented pretty mildly) whereas the plot of the movie is concerned with something other than it. Simultaneously, the Jews in the movies are often being stereotyped or inadequately represented (as in *Life is beautiful*), marginalized (the main role in the movie is given to the Christian saviours, such as in *The Zookeeper's Wife*), or are almost equalized with the Nazis (as in the *Inglorious Basterds*, the Jews being prone to committing the same atrocities and crimes in the act of revenge against the Nazis as the Nazis themselves). The paper will try to determine whether these movies in truth possess the elements of Holocaust denial, or whether it is about an idiosyncratic Holocaust representation.

Keywords: Holocaust, denial, film, fiction, Benigni, Caro, Tarantino, marginalization.

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Introduction

Robert S. Wistrich defines Holocaust denial as "a postwar phenomenon at whose core lies the rejection of the historical fact that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis during World War II" (Wistrich, 2012, p. 1). However, Holocaust denial does not have to be an outright refutation of the Holocaust: in the majority of the cases it might include "the minimization, banalization, and relativization of the relevant facts and events, so as to cast doubt on the uniqueness or authenticity of what happened during the Shoah" (Wistrich, 2012, p. 1). Consequently, the Holocaust deniers might use a more "subtle" methods in order to achieve the same results: namely, to trivialize and diminish the horrors of the Holocaust.

Holocaust denial might be interpreted in the light of the perpetrators' endeavours to, in the words of Tingler (2016, p. 210), "evade any sense of accountability, and to restore psychological equity: through denial, not only can a group refuse to acknowledge any wrongdoing, but they can actively seek to expunge it from their communal history." Thus, through Holocaust denial the perpetrators endeavour to "wash their hands of" the accountability for the Holocaust victims.

Some of the (Holocaust) deniers espoused a belief that the Jews were, in insisting that the Holocaust perpetrators be punished, inspired by lucrative motifs, or as Moldovan states, "the Jews pretended to have been Holocaust victims so as to inflict a deep sense of guilt upon the German people and thus to be able to blackmail them for hard cash poured into the Israeli state bank" (Moldovan, 2005, p. 22). The given statement is further supported by Deborah Lipstadt[1] who, according to some Holocaust deniers, argues that "the alleged Hitlerian gas chambers and the alleged genocide of the Jews form one and the same historical lie, which permitted a gigantic financial swindle whose chief beneficiaries have been the State of Israel and international Zionism[2], and whose main victims have been the German people and the Palestinian people as a whole" (Moldovan, 2005, p. 17). Consequently, the Jews are being turned into usurers who want to profit from their (alleged) misfortune.

There is likewise, according to Wistrich, the so-called "deicidal justification" of the Holocaust, which states that "the Holocaust was the price the Jews

[1] As a historian, Deborah Lipstadt achieved acclaim for her book on Holocaust denial. After her defense against a libel suit brought by David Irving, a British Holocaust denier, she became a public figure, acquiring renown for her championing the cause of Holocaust survivors ("Deborah Lipstadt", n.d.).

[2] Jewish nationalist movement with the goal of the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jews ("Zionism", n.d.).

had to pay for having crucified Jesus Christ" (Wistrich, 2012, p. 51). However, the majority of the scholars find anti-Semitism and Judeophobia as the primary reasons for Holocaust denial (see Tingler, 2016, p. 212).

Whatever the reason(s) behind the Holocaust denial, the fact that it represents a massive threat to the memory of the Holocaust itself, remains indisputable. In the words of Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "punishing negationists is also aimed at halting the process of the gradual fading of the memory of the Holocaust and the crimes of totalitarian regimes, which are still not yet a thing of the past" (Gliszczyńska-Grabias, 2013, p. 247). If we do not preserve the memory of the Holocaust, if we let it be annihilated by negationism and the similar phenomena, the day is not far off when we will witness its (potential) repetition in the future.

The phenomenon of the Holocaust is a matter of further contestation when it comes to its representation in the movies. The Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész[3], according to Baron, states that "it is impossible to film the Shoah[4]" (Baron, 2006, p. 11). Elie Wiesel[5] likewise, according to Baron, argues that "the Shoah is the ultimate in terror: any portrayal would seem only to relativize or trivialise it" (Baron, 2006, p. 11). In the light of what has been said, any movie representation of the Holocaust might be considered a form of Holocaust denial because, after all, the Holocaust is such an unfathomable experience that no cinematic representation could ever effectively grasp it. One could then rightfully ask what is the point of making such movies: we ought to simply rely on the testimonies of the survivors or the documentaries.

However, one should also be aware of the fact that the survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust are, with the passage of time, fewer, so the day is not far off when there won't be living survivors. Professor Aleida Assman, according to Scott, suggests that "as survivors of the Shoah pass away, the memory of the event will increasingly be transmitted through media" (Scott, 2022, p. 135). Consequently, the Holocaust (Hollywood) movies play a significant role in the creation of the so-called "prosthetic memory" (see Scott, 2022, p. 135). Historian Alison Lansberg, according to Scott, argues that "like an artificial limb, prosthetic memories originate outside a person's lived experience

[3] Imre Kertész (1929–2016) was a Hungarian author best known for his semiautobiographical accounts of the Holocaust. In 2002 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature ("Imre Kertész", n.d.).

[4] The term "Shoah" will be used alternatively for the Holocaust.

[5] Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) was one of the most famous survivors of the Holocaust and a world-renowned author and champion of human rights. His first book, *Night*, recounts his suffering as a teenager at Auschwitz and has become a classic of Holocaust literature. In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize ("Elie Wiesel", n.d.).

and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory" (Scott, 2022, p. 135). The role of the Holocaust movies is, therefore, in engendering empathy and, consequently, prosthetic memory in its viewers, so that the future generations would be acquainted with the enormity of the Holocaust when no one is left to testify to it.

The (possible) reason behind the preference for public cinematic Holocaust representation lies in the life-affirming nature of the (Holocaust) movies (see Marshman, 2005, p. 14). According to Scott, "simplistic narratives allow people to empathize, and ultimately remember the event" (Scott, 2022, p. 139). Scott likewise states that "narrative strategies that depart from strict mimesis may in fact be better at communicating the human story of the Shoah and engendering empathy" (Scott, 2022, p. 137). Consequently, since "Holocaust film can never portray or evoke the full tragedy of Shoah", we as audience ought to at least be offered a cinematic representation that might arouse our sympathy and enable us to vicariously experience the crucible of the Holocaust.

Life is Beautiful?[6]

When we talk about imagination used as a way of escaping the daily horror of the camp, *Life is Beautiful* directed by Roberto Benigni is surely the movie that deals with the topic. What is more, the movie is probably the most poignant cinematic representation of the Holocaust. The film follows the life of Guido Orefice, an Italian Jew and a bookstore owner who uses his vivid imagination to protect his five-year-old son from the horrors of the camp in which they are interned. Though in the movie itself there is no an explicit representation of the suffering of the Jewish people in the camp, the segregation to which the Jews in Italy are subjected to is all-pervasive. Some of the examples of the said segregation are the Jews being forbidden to enter certain stores that bore the inscription "Forbidden for Jews", then being prohibited to use the promenade, the park and the public transport, while the culminating point is the internment of the Jews in the ghettos from where they would in most of the cases be transported to the concentration camps.

Something that might be quite appealing to the audience is the ways in which Guido, using his imagination, endeavours to create a parallel, more beautiful world for his little son and help him to live through the horrors of the war. Kobi Niv in his work *Life is beautiful, but not for Jews: another view of the film by Benigni* is even more explicit in his criticism of Benigni's film. For

[6] The question mark has been put by the author of the paper.

Niv, Benigni's "mitigation of the truth about the Holocaust" is tantamount to Holocaust denial:

> What Holocaust deniers crucially deny is the one thing that made the Holocaust what it was: the fact that in some of those camps, Jews were systematically massacred as part of the workings of the gigantic mechanism instituted by the Nazi German superpower specifically toward this end, the extermination of all European Jews. That, they assert, is no more than a figment of a sick imagination or a 'Jewish fabrication'. Hence, the image of a concentration camp in *Life is Beautiful* and, by implication, its image of the Holocaust as a whole is startlingly, alarmingly reminiscent of the lying claims of Holocaust deniers. (Niv, 2003, p. 10)

Niv likewise argues that "a true-to-life recreation of the most important feature – the actual living conditions, if 'living' is indeed the appropriate word here, of the people who were imprisoned in those places is all but impossible" (Niv, 2003, p. 1). Benigni himself was well aware of the gravity of the topic of the Holocaust: "According to what I read, saw and felt in the victims' accounts, I realized that nothing in a film could even come close to the reality of what happened. You can't show unimaginable horror – you can only show less than what it was" (Maurizio, 1999, p. 162). The representation of the concentration camp in Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* stands in the stark opposition to the genuine concentration camps, consequently leading some (especially those not acquainted with the historical facts of the camps) to believe in Benigni's "sanitized" representation, and that is precisely where the danger lurks.

Life is Beautiful arouses controversies mostly on the account of its being a comedy, the fact that makes it, in advance, an inappropriate film genre for the Holocaust representation. According to Baron, "it was because people were afraid of seeing this impossible subject (Holocaust) being treated lightly or even casually" (Baron, 2006, p. 122). However, the said criticism of the Holocaust comedies is undeserved since, according to Scott, "they (the Holocaust comedies) do not seek to make light of the Shoah, but to use lightness to cope with telling its story" (Scott, 2022, p. 143). Scott further argues that "comedy does not attempt the impossible task of representing the Shoah as it was, and so can restore humanity in inhuman situations" (Scott, 2022, p. 142). This humanizing aspect of comedy (humor) is something that the majority of the Holocaust survivors highlight. One of them, Renee Firestone, according to Marino, states that "people think of Holocaust survivors as not human. How can you live through such a thing? Well, this inner sense of humor and of wanting to see the good in life, not just the bad, that is what kept me alive…" (Marino, 2023, p. 9).

This Jewish tendency to use humor as a coping mechanism might seem to stem from the tradition of Yiddish theatre, "a tradition of Jews laughing at

themselves – engaging in a self-parodic performance – as a defensive strategy against being laughed at by non-Jews" (Brenner, 2020, p. 269). Radu Mihaileanu, a Romanian director of Jewish descent, further supports this claim: "This is Jewish humor, we speak a lot about ourselves, we do not criticize others so much. The French criticize the Belgians, the Rumanians the Bulgarians. The Jewish tell a lot of jokes about themselves… about their mother, about their rabbi, about their accountant, about God. They are always discussing with God" (Brenner, 2020, pp. 271–272). Pearlstein according to Marino emphasizes the therapeutic aspect of Holocaust comedies, claiming that "humor can have a role in helping us to come to terms with tragedy, even a tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust" (Marino, 2023, p. 10). Thus, employing a genre of comedy to represent a historical event of such gravity and importance may only have beneficial effects, both on the Holocaust survivors and the movie spectators.

Beningni's "sanitized" version of the Holocaust (tantamount to denial according to certain critics) is often equated with Italy's reluctance to admit her role in the anti-Semitic action during the World War II. According to Maron, "the cultural consciousness of postwar Italy was ripe for repressing the traumatic memory of its recent past" (Maron, 2006, p. 98). Though the Jews in Italy were better off than in the countries under direct German occupation (see Maron, 2006, pp. 12–13), the fact of Italian participation in the persecution of the Jews (though under the pressure of the Germans) remains indisputable. Consequently Benigni's film (Benigni being an Italian whose family also had its role in the war due to his father's participation in it) was put on a par with Italy's denial of its anti-Semitic action.

Apart from the Jewish matter, there were numerous Italian (Fascist) soldiers imprisoned in the concentration camps during the World War II. Guido's fabrication of the "game" in the camp to protect his son Giosué, somehow mirrors the endeavours of Benigni's father Luigi, who was a former Fascist soldier imprisoned in a German concentration camp for two years, to protect his family from the realities of the war (see Maron, 2006, pp. 96–97). According to Benigni himself, "the story of his father's imprisonment in a Nazi camp was told 'like in the film, like a fable. He was afraid to make us fearful. […] He told us about it in an almost funny way – saying tragic, painful things but finally his way of telling them was really very particular. Sometimes we laughed at the stories he told. He was protecting us like I am protecting the son in the movie'" (Maron, 2006, p. 97). According to Maron, this "distorted perception of the Holocaust in Italy" (see Maron, 2006, p. 96), this beautified version, depended on the repression of the stories such as that of Luigi Benigni, the fact that implies the "tension between family memory and public history" (Maron, 2006, p. 97).

The Zookeeper's Wife

The Zookeeper's Wife is a historical and biographical film directed by Niki Caro that dramatizes the lives of Antonina and Jan Żabiński, the director of the Warsaw Zoo in Poland, who had saved approximately three hundred Jews from deportation and extermination after the German occupation of Poland (see Septiana, 2022, p. 2). The film was based on the book of Diane Ackerman published in 2007, under the memoires prepared by Antonina Żabińska, *Ludzie i zwierzęta*, published in 2010. The film features Jessica Chastain, Johan Heldenbergh and Daniel Brühl and was released in 2017 (see Prykhodko et al., 2022, p. 125). For their special merits in saving three hundred (Jewish) lives, and for "Jan's active participation in the Warsaw Uprising", the Żabiński couple was recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteos Among the Nations" in 1965 (see Zueva et al., 2021, p. 5).

When it comes to the elements of the Holocaust denial in the film, the film itself does not provide any reason for such allegations. The Warsaw Ghetto is represented authentically, as are the sufferings of Jews upon the German occupation of Poland, the fact that is evident in Antonina's words to her husband Jan: "We are in Nalewki street today, and they're (the Germans) working the Jews like a pack of animals now" (Caro, 2017). The persecution and dehumanization of the Jews in the Ghetto is clearly visible: the spectators are not spared the scene of the rape of the young Jewish girl Urszula by the German soldiers, nor other atrocities (such as the execution of two women whom the Żabińskis had saved but who were later discovered).

However, one gets the impression that the Jews are being left "on the fringes" of the plot of the movie: the emphasis is put on the Żabiński couple. The rare glimpses of the Jewish sufferings we as the spectators get are the ones during Jan's visits to Ghetto (to get the leftovers and to smuggle the Jews out), of the Jews being hidden in Jan and Antonina's house within the Warsaw Zoo (their anxiety that they will be exposed by the Germans), and the Jews seen walking the streets and being used like the beasts of burden.

The main controversy which this movie might possibly arise is the placement of emphasis on the Christian saviours, the fate that was shared by *Schindler's List* in 1993 and *Sophie's Choice* in 1982. According to Niv, "Hollywood will digest Holocaust films as long as they are centered on Christian heroes" (Niv, 2003, p. 67), and that is, in great measure, applicable to Caro's film where the focus is primarily on Jan and Antonina, while the Jews are assigned a passive role of the victims waiting to be saved.

Though not hidden as in *Life is Beautiful*, it almost seems that the suffering of the Jewish people "isn't moving enough, doesn't bring about automat-

ic empathy" (Niv, 2003, p. 60), that it has to be given through the prism of the Christians, through their tribulations as they struggle to survive the war. Thus, one somehow gets the impression that the Jewish suffering is only made sense of through their salvation by the Christians: the Jews are marginalized, not important in and of themselves, but mainly considered in relation to their Christian neighbours.

According to Zueva et al., *The Zookeeper's wife* "quite fits into the row of the mainstream movies which have primarily gained viewers' attention around the world due to the painfulness of the theme (the Holocaust) and strong emotions provoked by the stories of Nazi crimes, the extermination of Jews and their salvation as an unexpected manifestation of humanity amid catastrophe" (Zueva et al., 2021, p. 4). However, the said fact is precisely the matter of contestation: namely, the transformation of the Christians into heroes, saviours, at the expense of the Jewish image of victims and "lambs to the slaughter".

Inglorious Basterds

Inglorious Basterds is a movie directed by Quentin Tarantino and set during World War II. The movie deals with the two conspiracies concocted to assassinate the Nazi leadership – that of Shosanna Dreyfus, a Jewish girl and the cinema owner, and of a group of Jewish-American soldiers called the "Basterds".

The movie is divided into five chapters, each of which is named distinctly and contributes to the whole. *Inglorious Basterds* represents a utopian version of the end of the World War II: namely, to gather all the Nazis in one place, on the occasion of the projection of the Nazi propaganda film, and then burn the whole cinema to the ground. For the sake of the poetic justice, the executors are the Jews themselves. The girl, the owner of the cinema where the projection is about to be held, is at the same time the fugitive girl Shosanna who lost her whole family at the beginning of the movie and who sees the perfect opportunity to reckon with Nazism, using the nitrite filmstrips. On the other hand, the Jewish-American recruits use this opportunity to blow the whole cinema up (alongside with the Nazis) and, at one stroke, put an end to the war and bloodshed.

Utopian in a sense, *Inglorios Basterds* is a movie that gives a completely different perspective on the World War II and pose a significant and interesting question: why spill the blood of thousands (and millions) of innocent people when it is possible to gather all the culprits of evil in one place and,

with a single lighting of a match, deliver all the humanity from suffering. Simultaneously, to give the malefactors an opportunity to leave this world while being watched and laughed at by the face of a Jewish avenger, a girl whose family the Germans killed and left her alone in the world. All the Nazis were put through represents just a "limbo", a small part of what they are about to experience once they get in the hell.

Inglorious Basterds, like Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, arose numerous controversies upon its release. Namely, the movie completely dispenses with any historical accuracy and gives an utterly new, idiosyncratic Holocaust representation. Rennett argues that "with *Basterds,* Tarantino follows the guidelines of both spaghetti westerns and World War II films, and provides the occasional twist on the genre; in this case, the reversal of the roles of the Jewish characters from being passive victims to being torturers and murderers" (Rennett, 2009, p. 1).

Daniel Mendelsohn, accuses Tarantino of revisionism, of "effectively turning the Jews of his film into the Nazis themselves" (Rennett, 2009, p. 2). However, this claim of Mendelsohn remains largely questionable. *Inglorious Basterds* exhibits what Daniel H. Magilow defines as "Jewish revenge fantasies". According to Magilow, "Jewish revenge fantasies are films or scenes within films in which avenging Jews enact stylized, spectacular, and typically graphic violence upon their clichéd cinematic enemies, usually Nazis but sometimes Arabs or others" (Magilow, 2012, p. 89). Magilow further argues that "revenge fantasies articulate an aspiration to break free of the constraints that filmic representations of Holocaust victimhood have placed on Jewish identity" (Magilow, 2012, p. 92). The Jews in Tarantino's film are not represented as the victims, the "lambs going meekly to the slaughter", but as the vengeful individuals who are able to strike back when being oppressed. What is more, many lauded *Inglorious Basterds* exactly on the account of their dispensing with the "stereotypical cinematic images of Jews as helpless victims of Nazi violence" (Magilow, 2012, pp. 90–91). Consequently, the accusation of revisionism seems ungrounded: *Inglorious Basterds* do invert the stereotypical cinematic Jewish images, that is just a simple fact, yet with the aim of providing a completely new Jewish perspective, apart from the established one.

Conclusion

In the paper we have dealt with the cinematic representation of the Holocaust in the following movies: *Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni, *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Niki Caro, and *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino.

Each of the aforementioned movies gives an idiosyncratic image of the Holocaust and we have tried to determine whether there was an element of its denial in them.

Through the thorough analysis of the movies (as well as the theoretical framework which consisted of the works the other authors have written on the given topic so far), we have reached the conclusion that neither of these movies denies the Holocaust. In *Life is Beautiful* the actual atrocities that the Jews suffered at the hands of the Germans, nor the real conditions of the concentration camp are not represented because that is the impossibility in and of itself: however realistically they were represented, they would be just a mere imitation, a mitigation of what had actually happened. *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Niki Caro does not deny Holocaust: on the contrary, the condition of the Jewish people in Warsaw Ghetto is represented rather authentically. Yet, the stereotypical image of the Jews as the helpless victims and the glorification of the Christian saviours (represented through Zabiński couple) could be considered the main shortcoming of this movie. Though accused of Holocaust denial and revisionism, *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino provides a completely new image of the Jews, far from the stereotypical one assigned to them by Hollywood industry. In the movie, the Jews are represented as avengers able to strike down their enemy when being oppressed, unlike the former Hollywood representation of the Jews where their rage had often been suppressed.

Considering the nature and scope of this paper we have selected only these three given examples for our research. Some of the future researches might deal with the representation of Jewish vengeance in the movies other than Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*.

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Fikcionalizacija Holokausta: Narativne Strategije i Elementi Poricanja

Rad se prevashodno bavio fikcionalnim strategijama korišćenim kako bi se osnažila istorijska činjenica Holokausta u sledećim filmovima: *Život je lep* italijanskog glumca i reditelja Roberta Beninjija, *Žena čuvara zoološkog vrta* rediteljke Niki Karo i *Prokletnici* Kventina Tarantina. Pomenuti filmovi odabrani su na osnovu toga što svaki od njih pruža jedinstven prikaz Holokausta: štaviše, Holokaust u datim filmovima predstavlja samo „pozadinu" (ili je prikazan dosta ublaženo), dok se radnja filma bavi nečim drugim. Istovremeno, Jevreji su u datim filmovima ili prikazani kroz stereotipe ili, pak, neadekvatno predstavljeni (kao u filmu *Život je lep*), marginalizovani (akcenat je stavljen na hrišćanske spasitelje, poput filma *Žena čuvara zoološkog vrta*), ili su izjednačeni sa nacistima (kao u Tarantinovim *Prokletnicima*, gde su Jevreji skloni da čine iste zločine i zverstva kroz čin osvete nacistima kao i sama nacisti). Rad je nastojao da utvrdi da li su u datim filmovima zaista zastupljeni elementi poricanja Holokausta ili je pak reč o njegovim idiosinkratičnim, jedinstvenim prikazima.

Ključne reči: Holokaust, poricanje, film, fikcija, Beninji, Karo, Tarantino, marginalizacija.

Fikcjonalizacja Holokaustu. Strategie narracyjne i elementy zaprzeczania

Artykuł koncentruje się na strategiach fikcjonalnych wykorzystywanych w celu wzmocnienia historycznych faktów na temat Holokaustu w następujących filmach: *Życie jest piękne* [*Life is Beautiful*] włoskiego aktora i reżysera Roberta Benigniego, *Azyl* (w oryginale znanym jako *The Zookeeper's Wife – Żona strażnika zoo*) w reżyserii Niki Caro oraz *Bękarty wojny* [*Inglorious Bastards*] Quentina Tarantino. Wymienione filmy zostały wybrane, ponieważ każdy z nich oferuje wyjątkowe przedstawienie Holokaustu: co więcej, Holokaust stanowi w nich jedynie „tło" (lub jest znacząco złagodzony), podczas gdy główny wątek fabularny koncentruje się na innych aspektach. Jednocześnie w tych filmach Żydzi są przedstawiani albo w sposób stereotypowy lub nieadekwatny (jak w *Życie jest piękne*), albo marginalizowani (gdzie nacisk kładziony jest na chrześcijańskich wybawców, jak w *Azylu*), albo zrównani z nazistami (*Bękarty wojny*, w których Żydzi dopuszczają się podobnych zbrodni i aktów okrucieństwa w ramach zemsty na nazistach). Celem pracy było ustalenie, czy w analizowanych filmach rzeczywiście występują elementy zaprzeczania Holokaustowi, czy też mamy do czynienia z jego idiosynkratycznymi, wyjątkowymi przedstawieniami.

Słowa kluczowe: Holokaust, zaprzeczanie, film, fikcja, Benigni, Caro, Tarantino, marginalizacja.

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