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## Genre, Justice & Quentin Tarantino

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Genre, Justice, & Quentin Tarantino

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

The films of Quentin Tarantino have held a significant influence on modern cinema, and therefore on cinema studies. As such, studies on the social and philosophical implications of his work have appeared over the years, mostly in regards to content. However, with the exception of references to his use of cinematic violence, studies of his *technique*—i.e., his cinematic style—have been rare, and rarer still have been studies of the social implications that arise from the patterns of his style as well as those his subject matter.

The following thesis seeks to use the concept of Auteur Theory—specifically, that Tarantino is the primary artist of the films directed by him—to propose that a specific artistic style conveys a specific worldview: namely, that the artistic choices made by the director, in content and technique, can and do convey a viewpoint regarding “real life” and the world.

Specifically, this work will culminate in analyzing and determining tenants to be gleaned from the Tarantino canon regarding issues of justice, both on an individual and societal basis. With his focus on crime—again, both societal and individual—Tarantino makes commentary on societal breakdown; the audience’s emotional support (or lack thereof) for characters and their actions corresponds with identification, and therefore draws real-life parallels. Such refers to the concept of “Realism”, which will be discussed in detail.

Further, Tarantino’s trend of recycling elements from prior films refers to artistic “Postmodernism”—use of “pastiche” and sampling to create a “new” work. The thesis will analyze the value and meaning of the major samplings in Tarantino’s films—particularly in

regards to genre--and concludes that, far from a simple conglomeration, a Tarantino “Genre-Blender” forms a cohesive whole, oriented towards specific impact of the audience.

From the above two issues of Realism and Postmodernism in art, and establishing the existence of a cohesive artistic vision in Tarantino’s work, this thesis identifies patterns in such that identify specific viewpoints on questions of “Good”, “Evil”, and “Justice”. Key to this is the dichotomy between objective principles and subjectivity in human interaction amid the *applications* of principles. Tarantino’s work conveys a belief in certain objective tenants; however, the applications that arise through interaction cause complications, arising through human limitations in perspective.

The ultimate purpose of this study is to link studies of social implications of film to not merely content, but in choices in cinematic style. It is a contribution at once to studies of film and to studies of artistic theory (in particular Realism and Postmodernism), using both to analyze how a specific, popular, mainstream artist reflects a worldview through the sensibilities that are channeled in creating his works.

## INTRODUCTION

“After all, *all* art is experience.”

—*Alfred Hitchcock*

As Aristotle noted, “the function of the poet”—that is, the dramatist—“is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity” (Aristotle 16). He went on to argue: “For this reason poetry”—including the visual arts—“is more philosophical and more serious than history” (Aristotle 16). With this in mind, I feel justified in using a notable interpretation of the first line: The artist, as opposed to the historian, depicts events “as they might be and ought to be.”

It might seem odd that I would begin a look at the films of Quentin Tarantino in this way. He is known for storylines at once sensationalist and (allegedly) simplistic, often arranged into a bizarre jumble—all powered by “banal” references to popular culture, and ultraviolent bloodbaths. And yet his films so often prove themselves the objects of fascination by analysts and film theorists of today. As far as this community is concerned, he does all of this for *reasons*—Tarantino is, like the dramatists of Aristotle’s day, making creative choices based on what he deems “necessity”; in his movies, he depicts what he feels “might be and ought to be”. It is my intention, essentially, to examine *what* “ought to be”, in the films of Tarantino—that is, how his artistic choices, both in content and technique, correspond to a specific worldview: a notion of what *should* happen, both for individuals (as signified by his films’ characters) and, in

a broader sense, for society (as signified by his films' universe).

Essentially, I will argue that such reactions correspond to how the filmmaker posits (however unconsciously) we should react to our own existence: life “as it ought to be” means “what *should* happen” as opposed to “what *does* happen”; a “happy” ending means things have happened as they “should” have—and an unhappy ending means they have not, and that something “wrong” has occurred. While, of course, “it is only a movie”, the fact remains that we, the audience, still are meant to *react* and respond to the events and the characters we see. To be sure, such does *not* mean that the maker of a gangster film approves of a real-world life of crime! It simply means (as I will discuss in detail) that, for example, the portrayal of *actions* of characters—gangsters or otherwise—reflect on the filmmaker's view on actions in the real world. And indeed, at times the issue of crime itself can actually *be* the “point”—particularly when the actions of such criminals are shown in the film to have effects outside the underworld.

All of this, of course, hinges on the notion that Tarantino—as the *director* of these films—is the person one should focus on in the first place, regarding these films. Is *he* the artist?—Are these “*his*” movies?

Such is the assumption of what is called Auteur Theory—the idea that the director, more than anyone else, is the primary artist of the movie. The most concise expression of this idea is the credit one typically sees in a movie: “A [director's name] film”, or more blatantly, “A film *by* [director's name]”. Also, there is the fact that “filmmaker”, whenever used in the singular, is typically a synonym for “director”—not “producer” or “screenwriter” or what-have-you.

The last sentence, of course, demonstrates in part the problem: there has been much contention—both in the filmmaking industry and in the academic community—on whether the director truly deserves such status, at the expense of other persons involved in the films in

question. Many high-profile screenwriters have often complained of their relatively low ranking in terms of credit for the films they write. Director Sidney Lumet, for his part, made it a point to emphasize the importance of Paddy Chayefsky as the writer of *Network*, even going so far as requesting that the credit read “By Paddy Chayefsky” as opposed to “*Written* by Paddy Chayefsky”.

And of course, there are the many “name-brand” producers such as David O. Selznick, Roger Corman, Joel Silver, and Jerry Bruckheimer—all of whom could arguably hold just as valid a claim to the title of “auteur” of the films they produce as the directors could—if not more, particularly if said producer(s) had a hand in *choosing* the director for the project. Certainly the name of George Lucas is more easily remembered regarding *The Empire Strikes Back* or *Return of the Jedi* than the directors of either.

The notion of the director being the primary candidate for the title of “auteur”—Auteur Theory itself, in fact—comes from the French New Wave writers, soon to become filmmakers themselves; in particular, from Francois Truffaut, who would use his theoretical framework to help shape general opinion of Alfred Hitchcock in particular as a master artist (which Hitchcock was all too happy to oblige). Once Auteur Theory was solidified in America, particularly through the efforts of Andrew Sarris, it quickly came under criticism from such voices as Pauline Kael. Still, even Kael—as if by instinct—came to speak of directors in her film reviews as though they *were* the primary artists, whether she realized the irony or not. Indeed, as Polan notes, the notion of the director as auteur is almost instinctual—it is certainly impossible to ignore, particularly in discussing a director with a considerable sense of creative control over “their” films.

Perhaps, taking a cue from Polan that “some directors are auteurs, some aren’t” (Polan



11), we can establish a set criteria for whether a *particular* director should deserve credit as auteur. Doing so could almost certainly encompass an entire work on its own; suffice it to say, my intent at the moment—justifying Tarantino’s status as an auteur—can easily be satisfied by presuming that the requirement for such entails having *creative command* over the films in question. Such applies both to style and substance, content and technique. To wit, the fact that Tarantino 1) directs his own screenplays, none of which were “assigned” to him by producers or studios; 2) has often talked of his clear sense of vision *communicated* to his cinematographers, editors, etc.—all of whom carry it out; and 3) has faced minimal interference from “higher-ups” (i.e. producers Lawrence Bender and Harvey Weinstein)...all would seem to confirm his title sufficiently.

If Tarantino *is* the auteur of the films he directs—as I feel we can safely conclude—where does this lead? It is my intent, here, to address the issues I raised at the beginning of this introduction—that is, to analyze and describe the implications of Tarantino’s creative choices as a filmmaker, specifically in regards to how he views things “as they might be and ought to be”. In effect, I will analyze the various ways in which his film style corresponds to a specific *worldview*—in regards to questions of ethics and justice, as well as how the film genres he takes part in have addressed such things. In so doing, I will establish what I find to be specific premises established by patterns I have observed in his films, from the notion of an objective sense of Good, Evil, and Justice—and how the common elements of crime, revenge, and violence fall under those premises—to the subjectivity arising from the ambiguity of character interactions.

Chapter One, “The Simple Art of Crime”, will focus on Tarantino’s films of the 1990s: *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown*. All three are clearly established “crime films”;

as such, I will analyze the tradition of crime cinema's connection to societal reflection and to theories of film realism—and then, how Tarantino's initial three films (and, to a certain extent, his screenplay for *True Romance*) both fit into that tradition and challenge its conventions and pretensions. Key to this analysis are questions raised in these films on pragmatism vs. “honor among thieves”, and morality in a life of crime—which will be expanded upon in Chapter Three. Further, I will focus here on Realism, as an artistic model, and how it centers upon character relationships—which itself has a major bearing on the central issues of the Tarantino worldview.

In Chapter Two, “Reflections of a Genre-Blender”, I will examine his films from *Kill Bill* to *Django Unchained*—all of which demonstrate a central focus on sampling from film genres in general, and from past cinematic sources in particular. Both elements of Tarantino's latter-day films correspond to the concept of Postmodern art—and here, I will analyze how he “blends” the ingredients of his Postmodern sampling into coherent, *unified*, and consistent works, and how he channels this for a desired emotional (and intellectual) effect.

In Chapter Three, “The Path of the Righteous Man”, I will draw upon the conclusions drawn in the first two chapters, to determine the implications of his unified works for a specific worldview that encompasses all his movies—implications regarding social (and perhaps political) standards of what is “just”. Certainly questions of revenge color his work, along with themes of “honor among thieves” and individual initiative. His approach to crime film Realism also encourages links to artistic parallels to the “real world”. Further, in addition to establishing central premises of the Tarantino worldview of Justice, I will discuss the parallels of the formation of such to the blending of genre prevalent in much of his work.

A note: Much has been made in analytical circles of Tarantino's use of cinematic violence. As this is the typical “go-to” topic when discussing his films, I will not make such a

centerpiece of this work, as doing so would almost certainly prove redundant to the conversation. Certainly, however, the issue *does* have implications to the notion of Justice—namely, is violence justified in such-and-such a situation? As such, I will refer to Tarantino’s preferences on that end, but only in service to the larger goal: that of ensuring a reevaluation of Tarantino’s work in addressing issues of justice, both for the individual and for society.

## THE SIMPLE ART OF CRIME

*Realism and Crime Cinema—Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, & Jackie Brown*

“Now, that’s what I’m always, kind-of, trying to do with my genre films—I don’t know whether I’m succeeding or not, but that’s the *attempt*...to take something you’ve seen before: I love it—I respect it—and I’m gonna deliver the *goods*...but I’m also trying to, you know, *reinvent* it, in a way...do it a much different way than you’ve ever seen before.”

—*Quentin Tarantino, 1996 interview with Charlie Rose*

Crime cinema from the beginning has as a rule striven to be realistic. Or at least, it has striven to *appear* so, if the opening disclaimer to foundational “gangster film” *Public Enemy* is any indication—claiming as it does that the film intends “to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life.” While the disclaimer (and its counterpart at the end of the film) was almost certainly attached in response to threat of censorship, the fact is that this film—along with all the other films responsible for initiating the “gangster film” genre—was released with the *air* of realism, the intent to create the sort of affect where the audience would connect the experience of the film to the “real world”, in some way. This air has since become a central “tradition” of the crime film, a manifesto of sorts for every incarnation of the genre, and thus it informs any film adhering to that tradition, by either its presence or its absence. This tradition, that the world depicted in a crime film holds a “realistic” connection to the world as it is, therefore points towards the notion that the film’s *elements*—narrative, character, atmosphere,

etc.—are therefore *reflecting* on the world as the filmmaker sees it.

Indeed, the fact that this tradition has proven so central to crime cinema (as I will discuss below) means that “new” entries into the genre have this tradition linked to them—however they may or may not adhere to it. Thus, in discussing the early films of Quentin Tarantino—*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown*—it is necessary to consider how he channels this tradition, and the implications of such for the worldview of his work.

Such a discussion springs from how crime films in general provide a worldview. To that end, however glamorized the role of the criminal may be for much of the average crime film, even the early entries of the gangster genre invariably sought to:

- 1) Touch upon *real-life* issues for the audience, regarding their own relationships with authority and the “establishment”;
- 2) Show as much as possible (i.e., within the limits of the period of the film’s release) the climate of violence amid the “mean streets” of the city of the night; and
- 3) Show the *effects* of this climate, in some way, upon the criminals in question and (however overtly or by implication) upon society.

Thus, the crime film—by its very nature—invariably makes a claim to an undertone of social reflection (if not, indeed, social *commentary*) of some kind, however hidden it may be under the veneer of “mere” entertainment. This reflection may be in the sense of actual analysis—of corruption in government or business, of the workings of the Mafia, etc. It may involve allegory or parallel. However the methodology may be, as crime is—by definition—a disruption of the social order, a crime film will therefore, in centering *upon* such a disruption, be reflecting on society.

This, then, corresponds with the central theme I wish to cover; out of the effort of a

filmmaker reflecting on crime in society, in a manner informed by their effort to approach the matter in a way that “seems” realistic, one can and should easily derive the presentation of a worldview regarding *justice* in society. “How should the audience view crime?” corresponds with “How should *society* view crime?”—and therefore, by implication, “How should society *approach* it?” This does not mean that a “realistic” crime film will necessarily have a social-political *message*—at least not intentionally; it simply means that its themes, on how we see crime on the screen, parallel how we see crime and justice *off* the screen. With that premise in mind, I will focus in this chapter on how the crime films of Quentin Tarantino—particularly *Reservoir Dogs*—are informed by this “air of realism”, and how they approach it, via his distinct stylistics and sensibilities; that is, how his films are informed by, consciously accept, and effectively *address* the “air to realism” as a cinematic trope. And the aforementioned connection of crime cinema’s “air to realism” to social reflection will, as such, inform the argument to come on how these films inform his approach to the subject of justice.

I must note here that my use of the term “air of realism” will not necessarily mean that the crime films discussed—Tarantino’s or otherwise—adhere to the standard definitions of Realism in the field of film studies. Crime films are fictional (or at least fictionalized) narratives; they are not documentaries. Stylization is a key element in these films—certainly in the films of Tarantino. But even what is unambiguously classified as “true” Realism in film could be construed as a style in itself—as terms like “*cinéma vérité*” can attest.

Arguably, in fact, the films in question do *indeed* follow the aforementioned definition, as “depicting things as they are”—the popular “nutshell” definition of Realism—becomes highly subjective to the artist doing the depicting. “Stylization” is inevitable—authors deemed “Realists” are not carbon-copies of each other, and distinguishing characteristics between artists

is the very definition of “style”. Thus, allowing for the Realist claim to “depicting objective reality”, the Realist artist—filmmaker or otherwise—depicts “objective reality through my specific eyes”.

Bazin, in fact—staunch as he was in advocating for greater realism in cinema—warned in “An Aesthetic of Reality” that, in discussions on what *counts* for cinematic realism, “One must beware of contrasting aesthetic refinement and a certain crudeness, a certain effectiveness of a realism which is satisfied just to present reality”—going on to celebrate how the Italian neo-Realists brought “an extension of [cinema’s] stylistics” (Bazin 25-26), not a rejection. There is, he indicates, more than one “style”, if you will, of realism—of which the “raw”, “bare-bones”, hyper-documentary aesthetic is only one example.

Such a mindset, in fact, did not begin with Bazin. Frankly, Lukacs himself did not seem to distance “realism” from stylization *as such*. In his “Realism in the Balance”, his list of artistic schools that truly stand in *opposition* to Realism consist of Expressionism and Surrealism—that is, styles that (he contends<sup>1</sup>) openly *reject* any pretensions of appearing “realistic”. Rather, he simply argues that Realism can and often does *transcend* stylization: “Great Realism, therefore, does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and immediately more significant, namely man in the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion. Over and above that, it captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential” (Lukacs 48). The “idea” for Lukacs, then, is not

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that film noir in particular tries for a stylistic synthesis between Expressionism and Realism, as Jason Holt’s definition of it as “stylized crime realism” (as I will discuss later) indicates. In the case of noir, essentially, the content, characterization, etc. is proposed as “realistic”, while the *mise-en-scene* is famously influenced by the Expressionism of German cinema. Also, Bazin has himself (in his “Ontology”) implied a link between Surrealism and Realism, in their similar appreciation for the photographic image.

documentary-like details so much as authenticity in *relations*—relationships in society; in a word, *characterization*.

All this leads to the inevitable debates as to where “realism” ends and “non-realism” begins—where a film is too stylized to be honestly called “realistic”, on whatever end of the scale. Langkjaer, for example, puts “realism” at a midpoint of sorts between “classical narration” and “art film”, having the comprehensibility and consistency of traditional genre pictures (reality as *knowable*) while allowing for ambiguity and complexity—and in Lukacsian fashion, a central focus on *relations*, involving character and society: a kind of “world-building”, as it were—though the world in question, of course, supposedly already exists as the world the audience lives in.

Such criteria implies a preference of sorts for deconstructions and reconstructions—in style as well as content—to make classic narratives more “believable” to an audience. And this “believability” is where my referring to an “*air* of realism” finds its relevance. This “air” is, in effect, a “conceit” in the popular sense of the term—a benevolent pretention, centered on whether the audience will find the film “realistic”. In effect, the “air of realism” is a simulation of what the *audience* would regard as a “true to life.” Realism, in the end, depends on the viewer.

In fact, it would seem audiences’ standards for “realism” increases over time. At any rate, each “era” for Hollywood has its quintessential crime films, and since the disclaimer of *Public Enemy*, they have as a rule sought to keep the “air of realism”—and further, to enhance it amid the constant maturing of filmmaking and film style. The 1940s saw the rise of *film noir*—introducing for the audience a “dark”, morally ambiguous world to coexist with the “climate of violence” introduced in the films of the 1930s. This world—with its chaotic and moody



atmosphere—is thus seen as a great leap in the effort of crime cinema to be “realistic”: the real world is not simple—and in the “real” world of crime, one is never sure who is trustworthy or loyal. Such leads Holt to refer to noir as “stylized crime realism”—the various motifs of *mise-en-scene* influenced (ironically) by German Expressionism serving as a stylistic means to the end of “realistic” content.

The 1950s saw the rise of the subgenre of the “heist film”: the narrative template of a set of criminals or would-be criminals who organize to pull off “the perfect crime”. These films centered upon the theme of “honor among thieves”—of a sense of loyalty in the members of the team to one another, despite their criminality—a theme, having its roots in the old gangster films of the 1930s, which remained central to crime cinema long after the First Wave of noir passed into history. Here, the criminals of the screen gained a new pretention of *heroism*—with codes of honor they hadn’t possessed beforehand. We may have admired the on-screen gangsters of the 1930s for their audacity and ambition for success, but we rarely *sympathized* with them, as opposed to the forces of law and order. With the “heist film”, rather than simply an admirable protagonist, the criminal of the screen became a tragic hero—a reflection of how such criminals would prefer to see themselves; we are asked to share in their perspective, by seeing them as characters to “feel for”. This mindset has remained popular even after the end of the First Wave of noir—re-codified in such masterpieces, of course, as *The Godfather*.

With the death of the Production Code and its imposed limitations of what could and could not be shown on screen, there arose new opportunities to achieve the aforementioned three goals of crime realism, through increased ability to show on-screen violence, etc.—as well as the removal of former requirements to end such films in certain ways (i.e., the requirement that on-screen crime be punished). The claim to realism was constantly invoked by filmmakers;

however, these claims constantly conflicted with the sense of “glamorization” that seemed to permeate every “new” incarnation of the genre. As I noted before, realism and stylization are not necessarily in conflict—nonetheless, the issue *of* such a conflict constantly arises throughout the history of crime cinema. It is almost comical how often a film (Coppola’s *The Godfather*, for example) purports to be a “more realistic” look at the criminal world—only to lead to a future film purporting to be “realistic” *in contrast to* the “glamorization” of crime in the prior film (Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*)—which then leads to a “realistic alternative” to the “glamorization” of *that* film, and so on!

Why does this conflict exist, rather than Hollywood accepting the reconciliations of Lukacs and Bazin? Perhaps it comes from the limited definition of “realism” Bazin warned about. On the other hand, Lukacs’s emphasis on *relationships* being a central tenant of realism may help provide a better context. In *The Godfather*, the relationships among the Mafia are akin to feudalism—the Don is a lord or king, and the gangsters are the knights pledged to serve him. On the one hand, the source material alleged to be based upon author Mario Puzo’s knowledge of the workings of the Mafia. On the other hand, much has been made of the fact that real-life gangsters, upon seeing the film, sought to *emulate* Mafia life as depicted therein: *The Godfather* showed relationships in the Mafia as members of “the life” *wanted* it to be like. *Goodfellas* is based upon the accounts of a real-life “wiseguy”. Here, what structure exists is somewhat “looser” and much less formal. However, the account is openly colored by Henry Hill’s nostalgia for his past experience. Thus, both *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* glamorize the relationships in the world of organized crime—*Goodfellas* simply being less “apparent”.

While Martin Scorsese had, much earlier than *Goodfellas*, given us a crime film with little, if any, “glamor” hampering the realism (*Mean Streets*)—such films, nonetheless, became

in general the remote and rare exception, not the rule. Even Brian De Palma's *Scarface*, with all its brutality (in language as well as violence), is immensely *stylized*—the life of a gangster is shown as prosperous and lavish between the “whackings”. Up until a fateful day in late October of 1992, organized crime on screen—however violent or “gritty”—was en masse akin to a “polished stone”: however brutal and painful it could be when it hits its target, the stone itself still shines smooth; however gritty and dirty the job could be, the life of the wiseguy *looked* glamorous and refined.

When Quentin Tarantino's breakthrough film *Reservoir Dogs*<sup>2</sup> was released, it established a new trend of the “air of realism”—a challenge to the “polished stone” aesthetic. From the very first scene, the contrast with the gangster films of the past is set...and the traditional dynamic is defied for all to see: the gangsters are not in the office of the boss's mansion; they are not on the job, driving down the mean streets to “whack” a target with style; and they are not sitting in a refined Italian restaurant owned by the boss. They are in a *diner*—an ordinary diner, and there is no indication whatsoever that it is Mafia-owned. They are not discussing the job, or their experiences in “the life” (as in *Goodfellas*)—they are discussing, of all things, the meanings of Madonna songs, the identity of the killer in Vicki Lawrence's “The Night The Lights Went Out In Georgia”, the identity of “Toby” (a name in an old notebook of the boss), and whether or not one should tip waitresses automatically. They are not dressed in tailor-made Italian suits—they are in simple, cheap, thrift-store suits with skinny ties. The boss, Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney) is not even *in* a suit in this sequence; nor is his son, “Nice-Guy”

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<sup>2</sup> *Reservoir Dogs* follows a group of low-level hoods (each assigned a color-coded nickname) organized by their mob's boss to pull a heist of diamonds. The main plot takes place immediately after the heist, which was thrown into chaos after the police unexpectedly arrive far too early—leading the gangsters to suspect that one of them may be a traitor. The subplots take place before the heist, each focusing on a key member of the group as they are recruited for the job—and each revealing new information about the current situation.

Eddie (Chris Penn). Aside from this subtle difference, Joe and his son are for all intents and purposes equals with the Dogs in this conversation: until Joe gives commands on the tip, there is no indication in the sequence (in content or style<sup>3</sup>) that he *is* the boss, just an older member of the group every bit as subject to “ribbing” (by Mr. White, in this case) as anyone. Indeed, there is little indication that the Dogs are anything more than men in suits—there is certainly no activity like the stabbing in the first scene of *Goodfellas*, to establish that the characters are gangsters; that fact is effectively treated as incidental. They are “guys” first, gangsters second.

The music throughout is far from jazz, let alone classical: indeed, the conceit is that most of it comes from radio station “K-Billy”, and its “Super-Sounds of the Seventies” show. There are no orchestras, and no Italian clarinets or mandolins—for nothing is “grandiose”: this is not the feudal “nobleman” structure of *The Godfather*. There are no Rat-Pack-style crooners, either—there is little to none of the (admittedly brutal) “class” of *Goodfellas*. In the place of these classical conventions is the rough, simple “swag” of the Dogs walking down the street, slow-motion, to George Baker’s “Little Green Bag” amidst the main credits.

There are no scenes in ballrooms—nothing to suggest any lavish lifestyles even for Cabot. (Indeed, he is even constantly referred to by all the Dogs as “Joe”—not “Boss”, or even “Mr. Cabot”.) When he and Eddie get together early in the narrative (but late in the film) with Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), they are in a typical bar and grill. When he briefs the Dogs on the plan for the heist, they are not in a sitting room of a mansion of his—they are in a *warehouse* (filled with, in an eerie foreshadowing, funeral caskets and coffins) which also serves as the meeting place after the heist, and therefore one of the primary locations

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<sup>3</sup> The scene famously consists of close shots panning around the table, each of the characters shown and obscured in sequence, treated equally by the camera. Joe is not visually signified as “larger-than-life” or king-like—nothing sets him apart, “boss” or not. No character is arguably more or less “prominent” than any of the others, here, with the *possible* exception of the seemingly downplayed Mr. Orange, possibly foreshadowing his status as “undercover”.

of the film. Indeed, as the narrative strongly implies, even the thrift-store suits are *not* their clothing of choice, in contrast to what often seems to be the case in the gangster films of old. The “backstories” show the Dogs wearing such things as loose Hawaiian shirts and jeans, prior to the “job”. In short, the gangsters’ collective identity as “Reservoir Dogs” is a fitting contrast to the titles of old: they are not classy and stylish “wiseguys” or “goodfellas”; they are “dogs” from the gutter, and they do not rise much further.

Is this “realism”? It arguably is, as far as Lukacs would be concerned: the realism springs from the *relations* of the characters—the Dogs are, or at least see themselves as, ordinary people whose “profession” happens to be organized crime. They discuss ordinary things, as if they do not consider themselves superior. They never appeal to one another’s duty to “the life”—there is nothing elite or larger-than-life about being a gangster here, certainly not in the vein of *The Godfather*. Instead, the Dogs appeal to one another’s *professionalism*—and whatever sense of “loyalty” exists is the “realistic” loyalty of “ordinary” relationships: Joe is their boss, not their king; Eddie is their supervisor, not an heir to the throne (and Mr. Blonde in particular has a brotherly dynamic with him); the Dogs themselves are co-workers, and in some cases may be friends.

This is not to say that *Reservoir Dogs* abandoned stylization—Tarantino’s films are well known for being what Dawson’s biography deems “the cinema of cool”. But while enjoyment and “fun” is certainly found here, it comes from far different sources. In the meantime, what Tarantino did with this film—and later, with *Pulp Fiction*—was take the polished stone of the gangster film and rough it up against the asphalt of the mean streets: the Dogs, and later the hoods of *Pulp Fiction*, carry no pretensions about “class” and refinement, only “professionalism”. The smooth sheen is scraped away—and the glamor and glitz of “the life”

along with it. In its place is a rugged rock, jagged and more open and blatant in its brutality... a gritty world of harsh pragmatism and near-nihilistic practicality, with little to none of the pretensions of old.<sup>4</sup>

The “pragmatism” issue deserves emphasis. Its main spokesman in *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) constantly reminds the others of the importance of “acting like a *professional*”—even if that could mean leaving the severely wounded Mr. Orange to die, so the other survivors of the heist gone wrong can flee to safety. Mr. White, by contrast—apparently the oldest of the Dogs aside from Joe himself—lives by codes seemingly arising from the “old days”: classical themes of loyalty and “honor among thieves”. As such, he will not abandon Orange, developing something akin to a father-son relationship with him. Pink condemns White’s “first-year thief” pretensions, warning him it would get him in trouble—and unfortunately, Pink’s fears turn out to be vindicated. Tellingly, his pragmatism is rewarded—when the film’s seeming constant bloodbath is over, Mr. Pink is presumably spared death (though he may or may not have been captured by the police) while Mr. White pays a fatal price for his stubborn adherence to “honor among thieves”.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, the issue of how the Dogs define “honor” is itself deconstructed—and shown almost from the beginning to be ambiguous, at best. For all White’s proclamations of moral standards, he has no qualms whatsoever about killing or torturing police—to the point

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<sup>4</sup> While Scorsese, again, provided an early incarnation of this “jagged rock” aesthetic in *Mean Streets*, it nonetheless proves an exception for the genre, its effect ultimately proven temporary; further, unlike *Reservoir Dogs*, the pretensions themselves are actually preserved—the protagonist views the higher echelons of the Mafia as something to aspire to, precisely *because* of these pretensions.

<sup>5</sup> The conflict between pragmatic criminality and “honor among thieves”, interestingly enough, arises also in the nature of Cabot’s specific instructions to the Dogs. First, he makes it a point to order them to *delay* the general formations of camaraderie (telling jokes, etc.) until after the heist, so as not to distract from the planning of the caper. Further, he specifically warns them to know each other *only* by their assigned, color-coded names; his explanation involves curbing a captured Dog’s ability to “rat”. With this, the sense of family present among onscreen gangsters arguably since *The Godfather* (if not even earlier) is severely downplayed (ironically *by* the “Godfather” himself), foreshadowing the ultimate beating the concept of “honor among thieves” takes by film’s end.

where, in a telling discussion with Mr. Pink early in the film, they both distinguish cops from “real people”. Ironically enough, Orange himself is an undercover cop—and when White, following the off-screen heist, unloads both his guns at a group of cops without batting an eye, Orange can only watch in pained, anguished silence as his comrades are murdered before his eyes. (A few minutes later, Orange himself guns down a woman who only shot him to defend herself and her car, and can only show a brief flicker of shock and regret.)

And yet, he still feels a loyalty of his own to White, who has long taken him under his wing and effectively mentored him. In yet another contrast to the gangster films of old, both White (the “noble” criminal) and Orange (the “cool” cop) can lay a valid claim to the title of “protagonist” of the film—and both are equally sympathetic in their characterization and their goals: Orange is not characterized as a mere traitor or “rat” any more than White is a mere criminal. Thus, when the two of them are left, bleeding, to be arrested by the police in the final scene, Orange ultimately confesses to being a cop, even though he knows “honor among thieves” will demand White kill him for the “betrayal”.

White, in the meantime, is forced to accept that his stubborn adherence to the “old ways” has led to the final downfall of what remained of the Dogs. And though he has already killed an enraged Joe and Eddie to protect his protégé, his code demands he now kill Orange himself, to “preserve” honor—rendering his earlier action utterly meaningless. Despite everything, he remains stubborn, following the code to the end: he kills Orange—ensuring the immediate barrage of police gunfire.

There are, of course, further subversions of the traditional conventions of gangster films. There is the narrative itself: as Tarantino himself has repeatedly noted, *Reservoir Dogs* is “a heist film where you never see the heist”. As such, all we know about the turning point of the

narrative is what we can piece together from the stated recollections of the survivors—and as their conversations make clear, they each remember what happened a little differently.

Such leads to perhaps the most obvious then-novelty of *Reservoir Dogs*—the non-linear structure of the narrative. Rather than a mere gimmick, this has a specific dramatic purpose: to give the audience the information of the narrative in a “new” way, so as to channel viewer response in a way it has not typically been channeled in this sort of film. To be frank, the narrative of *Reservoir Dogs* is nothing new—in fact, it is fairly typical: A professional criminal (Cabot) organizes a group of hoods (the Dogs) to pull a heist with a gargantuan “take”; one of the hoods (Mr. Orange) is an undercover cop; by the end, everyone in the group is either dead or (it is implied) under arrest. However, the structure of the film is arranged so as to give a new emotional “spin”: We are given a puzzle, which is pieced together as the story unfolds—much as the Dogs struggle to pick up the pieces after the unseen heist has resulted in chaos. The result is a case study in subjectivity and changing perceptions: All we know is what we see and hear on-screen—and the structure of the film keeps that abundantly clear. (This, indeed, connects to the stylistic theme of “postmodernism”—which I will discuss in the next chapter.)

This, incidentally, further links *Reservoir Dogs* to the “air to realism”: we are thrown into the situation with a perspective more limited than an audience would hold in watching a “linear” film, where we would *know* the essential facts of what is happening and what *has* happened—a claim to objectivity that is stripped from us by the nonlinear structure of Tarantino’s film. It is an ironic scenario, as nonlinear progression is not seen as “realistic”; nonetheless, it carries the conceit because of its enhancement of the “realism” of the limited perspective... particularly as we share the confusion of the characters. They must rely on “going back” over their memories, to make sense of the turn of events—as *we* “go back” along the film timeline, piecing together



the events that brought three of the Dogs into the fold. And true to life, the more we learn about the past affects how we view the subsequent events of the film—and the characters thereof.

This sense of subjectivity, then, is a *deconstruction*—an effective challenge to the conceits of “realist” art; that is, that it depicts objective reality, the world “as it is”. The subjectivity of *Reservoir Dogs*, coupled with the aforementioned challenge to the pretensions of prior crime cinema, defies this premise by proposing that, while objective reality does indeed exist (this film does not presume to challenge the idea), it is arrogant to assume that it can be depicted free of the subjectivity—the *limited perspective*—of the artist. White’s disagreement with Pink over the details of the events of the robbery symbolizes the notion that one does *not* know everything—any one person is limited by their perspectives and biases. The “realism” of *Reservoir Dogs*, then, is to challenge a premise taken for granted in “realist” art—proposing that said premise is, therefore, unrealistic. All we can depict “objectively” is what we see with our own eyes. The rest we must constantly re-evaluate, and question, due to the “realistic” issue of limited perspective.

As such, the audience is challenged to constantly re-evaluate their assumptions of what truly happened, off-screen. Consider the changing audience viewpoint towards Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen). Aside from his interactions with the other Dogs in the introductory sequence, our first perception of him comes from the conversation Mr. White and Mr. Pink hold regarding his behavior during the heist. As far as they are initially concerned, he behaved like a violent “psycho” that should never have been included in the assignment. When he finally reunites with them, however, he provides a cool head and a seemingly rational voice, and White and Pink are for a time pacified—particularly with his delivery of the cop, to interrogate. We then cut back to Blonde’s backstory: we learn he is a “stand-up guy” who did time in prison, refusing to testify

against Cabot. He is shown as deeply loyal to his boss, in the tradition of crime films of old. Amid all of this, an increasing doubt in our minds arises as to whether he truly *did* act psychotic, or whether Pink and White were exaggerating things. (We had already seen, after all, that they were unable to agree to a strict chronology of the events of the heist.) As it stands, after we cut back to the “present”, Blonde offers what sounds like a perfectly rational (for a criminal) explanation for his behavior during the heist, and we are for the most part satisfied...*until* he tortures the cop, ear and all, for sheer pleasure (as he declares). With this, our opinion of him shifts again—he *is* a “psycho”, for all his loyalty to Cabot, and his “cool head” is only to a point.

But there is another effect of this stylistic theme of subjectivity: as it emphasizes the limited perspectives of the *characters*, it foreshadows even more errors by the Dogs to come. When Mr. Orange gives his explanation for killing Mr. Blonde by claiming that the latter intended to betray them by burning them all alive, Mr. White believes him without a second thought, coupling the claim with his memories of what had happened at the heist. However, Eddie—whom we saw in the “Mr. Blonde” backstory sequence, with his father and Blonde—sees through the lie, and reveals to Orange and the others Blonde’s past, and his proof of loyalty. Orange’s lie was concocted out of ignorance of this past—all he (and White) knew is the “psychotic” side of Blonde, which he had *assumed* would give his story the appearance of validity. (Along the same lines, of course, we do not know of Mr. Orange’s loyalties until the moment he opens fire on Mr. Blonde, subsequently revealing his identity to his fellow cop. We then cut to the final—and longest—backstory sequence, detailing Orange’s undercover operation.)

The questions of subjectivity and realism are brought to the forefront in the memorable sequence of Mr. Blonde’s torment of the cop. The song played amid the sequence, Steeler’s

Wheel's "Stuck In The Middle With You", is portrayed as being diegetic to the scene: it begins after Mr. Blonde turns on the radio, and tunes in to the station of his choice; the DJ offers his commentary on the song, and it begins—for the first notes, quietly and almost in the background, as though it truly is "on-scene"; then, the music comes to the forefront—as is so often the case with allegedly diegetic film scores. Despite this non-diegetic turn, the song is nonetheless held to the standards of reality in an important sense: the jarring interruption of the music as Mr. Blonde exits the warehouse and closes the door behind him. There is no music—instead, we hear such sounds of "normal", day-to-day activity as children playing and dogs barking. (The fact of—and emphasis on—these sounds, as it stands, call the subject of limited perspective to the forefront: one does not know what happens behind the closed doors of others. As far as anyone walking by is—and indeed, *would be*—concerned, Mr. Blonde is an ordinary man with nothing suspicious about him; he is just bringing gasoline into the warehouse, perhaps to power a motor.) When he re-enters the warehouse with the gasoline to continue the torment, the music resumes; and further, it resumes at a later point than where the song was interrupted, as though it had been playing all along—as though it were diegetic, after all. But then, once the song concludes, the volume of what is allegedly coming from the radio drops—we hear, *faintly* (i.e. *in the background*) a commercial of some sort. No one changed the volume of the radio—and yet, unless if one is paying close attention to the background noise, one easily feels as though the radio has impossibly shut itself off with the end of the song. Commercial or no, the abrupt changes in volume signifies a clear and simple defiance of the diegetic conceit.

The sequence *plays* for realism—and yet technically, it is not 'realistic', as the song's all-too-non-diegetic changes in prominence emphasize. This sort of change is extremely common in films where the song allegedly comes from the radio—such songs often continue to play amid,

for example, a change in scene (e.g. from the interior of the car to the exterior). Though self-conscious play with “realist” stylistics such as (would-be) diegetic sound, Tarantino effectively calls attention, here, to the question of “Are such conceits ‘realistic’ or not?”—and with the aforementioned jarring changes to the soundtrack, he therefore deconstructs the conceits behind such claims to realism. In effect, he holds up these sort of claims to the scrutiny of *reality*.

So many things taken for granted in the film’s predecessors are undercut in *Reservoir Dogs*—and yet, with all this, Tarantino did not wreck the formal gangster film: the “polished stone” element of crime cinema would continue with such noted examples as Scorsese’s *Casino* and Steven Soderbergh’s *Ocean’s Eleven*, glitz and glamor intact. Indeed, Tarantino’s own screenplay for *True Romance*—notably written some years prior to *Reservoir Dogs*—is the blueprint (adhered to faithfully by director Tony Scott) for a more-or-less “polished stone” crime film, complete with Scorsese-esque mobsters (led in the movie by crime cinema veterans Christopher Walken and James Gandolfini)...albeit with the “twist” of the young couple as the central protagonists, lending an added element of “innocence” to the narrative.

Rather, *Reservoir Dogs* effectively expanded the full potential of crime cinema—at once deconstructing and reconstructing it for a new generation of filmgoers and filmmakers, and thereby bringing it to a new life free of the shackles of old and worn assumptions as to the genre’s limitations. In so doing, Tarantino brought a new dimension to the “gangster” genre’s claim to “realism”, breathing new life into such films, whatever their form—polished or rough.

This new life, of course, was effectively codified in Tarantino’s most well-known film, *Pulp Fiction*. The “new” pattern of realism established in *Reservoir Dogs* continues here: the central characters often converse in long digressions that have little to do with the storylines in question—the sort of conversations one would have not expected from, for example, a duo of hit

men. Early in the film, Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winfield (Samuel L. Jackson) drive to their destination—where they will “whack” a set of victims—and in a typical film of this sort, they would be discussing the job, or else some past experience in their career of crime (typically to share a laugh over). But this is a Tarantino film, with a Tarantino sensibility injected into the “realism” conceit of crime cinema, and therefore they discuss Vincent’s observations on how European sensibilities affect the naming of McDonald’s products<sup>6</sup>; indeed, when they *do* discuss such important plot points as the history of men who got too “close” to the boss’s wife Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), it leads to long deviations on the “meaning” behind foot massages. The “air to realism” is referred to, again: there are constant distractions and deviations in real life, and as such there are distractions and deviations throughout the structure of *Pulp Fiction*—both in dialogue and narrative. Indeed, the creativity of Tarantino as an *auteur*, here, lies in making these distractions and deviations compelling for the viewer—a balancing act between the “traditional” whittling down to what is “necessary”, and “fleshing out” to paint a vivid picture of the film’s universe.

But realism permeates in what the narratives *are*, as well: for *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino took the sort of stories that have long been cliché in crime cinema, and gave each of them the sort of narrative twist that, effectively, can best be described as “stranger than fiction”:

“Vincent Vega & Marcellus Wallace’s Wife” is the “typical” story of the gangster respected in the organization who is asked to entertain the boss’s wife (“but don’t touch her”, lest he suffer the same fate as certain predecessors who gave in to temptation), and finds himself

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<sup>6</sup> As Tarantino himself has repeatedly noted, this conversation’s main purpose is to signify that Jules and Vincent, hit men or no, are essentially two men going to work—and they are conversing accordingly. This, again, is a mindset so often missing in crime films prior to his—and again, conveys his “new” take on the “air of realism”. To be sure, the dialogue is stylized and “clear” as opposed to “real-life” conversation. The “air to realism”, rather, is shown in the content of the dialogue: what they are talking *about*; the invocation of the mundane.

captivated by her, as they find themselves becoming close...and *then*, rather than the inevitable (and potentially tragic) love story, we see Mia inadvertently snort heroin, leading to a race against time as Vincent and drug dealer Lance (Eric Stolz) struggle to save her in a darkly comical fashion.

“The Gold Watch” is the “typical” story of the boxer on the mob’s payroll who is paid a large sum to throw the fight and retire, and instead resolves to triumph one last time, and thus must suffer the consequences of defying the organization...and *then*, rather than any of the inevitable endings (the boxer and his lover walk off into the sunset as if the mob cannot hurt them...or else, he faces the boss and his hoods for a spectacular—or tragic—finish), we see Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) the boxer and Marcellus Wallace (Vig Rhames) the boss stumble in their fight onto a den of perversion, where they must face a common enemy—a duo of sadistic S&M aficionados and their mindless guard drone.

“The Bonnie Situation” is the “typical” story of a duo of hit men assigned to recover a piece of stolen property for their boss, and thus must exercise their skill at “whacking” to superb stylistic effect...and *then*, rather than this opening leading to any of the inevitable plotlines (they deliver the case and are subsequently given a more “complicated” assignment...or else, they find themselves curious as to why the boss values the contents so much, and whether it might be worth it to abscond with the property themselves), Vincent and Jules find themselves spiraling into a comedy of errors where escape means enduring considerable humiliation.

The prologue and epilogue encompass a “typical” story of a husband-wife duo of robbers a la Bonnie and Clyde (who establish in their opening conversation that they have a great deal of experience in what entails a successful robbery) deciding to pull yet another heist—which suddenly goes horribly wrong...and *then*, rather than the inevitable downfall of the robbers

through some sort of shootout or arrest, the “wrong target” happens to be a hit man in a “transitional period” who is looking for redemption, who thus spares their lives...but not until after lecturing the couple on their own need to be “shepherded” out of their dangerous lives—and thus, they leave humbled and a little wiser.

But the film is not a simple anthology: There is the constant indication that the stories share a universe, a limited span of time, etc. Secondary characters in one story become the focus of another. In this sense, the audience becomes a spectator of the various goings-on in the universe in *Pulp Fiction*. Again, such appeals to the “air of realism”: However unrealistic the precise nature of the film’s connections may be, people we encounter nonetheless each have stories of their own, of which we are not aware. There is, for crime cinema, a minor tradition for this: the “eight million stories” of *The Naked City* come to mind. This has been four of them.

However, there is another element to the film, which defies a classification as an “anthology”. Tarantino’s script gives as a notation an unofficial subtitle, “Three<sup>7</sup> stories...about one story”. There *is* a distinct unity to the film—in the end, there is one central narrative, an all-encompassing arc: the choice of Vincent Vega.

When placed in chronological order, the events of the film can be described thus: During a typical job, Vincent and Jules face a shocking near-death experience where a vengeance-seeker somehow manages to miss all of his clear shots. Jules interprets this as a miracle—a sign that they must re-think their lives with this newfound awareness of their own mortality. Vincent chooses to shrug it off as a freak occurrence. This debate is put off as they deal with the series of unfortunate events that power “The Bonnie Situation”, but arises again as they sit down in the diner (amid the prologue and epilogue). Jules’s awareness leads him to successfully diffuse the

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<sup>7</sup> The prologue and epilogue is often counted as part of “The Bonnie Situation”, as opposed to a distinct story all its own.

situation with the robbers, but Vincent's arrogance (which, as it stands, is a major reason for many of the problems of "The Bonnie Situation")—along with his loyalty to Marcellus Wallace—still keeps him from accepting the need to change. "Vincent Vega & Marcellus Wallace's Wife" emphasizes his intense loyalty to Wallace—to which everything else (his feelings for Mia, his awareness of his mortality, etc.) must be held subservient. At last, while "The Gold Watch" focuses on Butch, it nonetheless emphasizes Vincent's ultimate fate: he loses his life in a moment of random violence—a sorry coincidence that ironically parallels what he had dismissed as a "freak occurrence".

This is an arc that would probably have barely been noticed by a first-time viewer, had the film's stories been arranged chronologically. Here, then, is a continuation of the value of the nonlinear motif we observed in *Reservoir Dogs*: the emotional impact of the arc becomes heightened. When we watch the main portion of "The Bonnie Situation", we *know* (as we have already seen "The Gold Watch") what will happen to Vincent in the future. The shock of seeing him alive again (which subsides as we are reminded that this is a continuation of the "hit" sequence near the beginning of the film) cements this awareness in our minds. Thus, when we see his conversations with Jules over whether they should leave "the life", we know full well that Vincent is making a mistake—that in refusing to leave his life of crime, he has sealed his fate, and will 1) put Mia's life in unnecessary danger, through her discovery of heroin in his jacket, and 2) die senselessly, in a chance encounter with Butch.

This, indeed, corresponds with the theme of the "honor among thieves" concept being deconstructed that permeated *Reservoir Dogs*. Here, Vincent's arc is powered by his loyalty to Wallace—as his mirror monologue emphasizes, he views the choices before him as matters of *honor*, as "a moral test of one's self". But the lessons of *Reservoir Dogs*, again, include the



warning that “honor among thieves” can be and often is more harmful than valuable in the life of a criminal—that if it is to be invoked, it cannot be at the expense of pragmatism; the life of a criminal cannot sacrifice “professionalism”, lest it end tragically. This is not reversed in *Pulp Fiction*—far from it: Vincent is a fundamentally honorable man, whom we constantly identify with and *like*; however, he repeatedly proves himself highly impractical in his actions (keeping the bag of heroin in his pocket; holding the gun with his finger on the trigger while talking to Marvin; etc.), as though the pragmatism necessary in a life of crime has never registered with him...and thus, he repeatedly suffers for it.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, Jules (who is shown as more “professional” than Vincent) discovers in himself an awakened conscience through the incident he deems “divine intervention”, and thus finds himself “going through a transitional period”; he leaves his life of crime—all too aware of its incompatibility with his newly *moral* perspective. Vincent fails to recognize this incompatibility for what it is—and thus, he pays with his life.

However, this is not to diminish the importance of honor in a crime film *per se*: Butch’s arc involves redemption of a sort—a redemption that is rewarded, as his rescuing Wallace (from a “pit of Hell”, paralleling the lesson he had learned from Capt. Koons (Christopher Walken) as a child) leads to the boss pardoning him and allowing him to live. This is an instance where honor is indeed consistent with pragmatism and self-preservation: had Butch chosen to leave the boss at the mercy of his perverted tormenters, he would almost certainly have to continue suffering the fear of being targeted by Wallace’s organization for the rest of his life. Thus, whatever Butch’s motives, saving Wallace also ultimately proved the *practical* thing to do, for the long term.

But also, Butch’s act of honor corresponds with his *leaving*—abandoning his association

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when Winston Wolf (Harvey Keitel) briefly clashes with Vincent, Wolf notably questions whether self-preservation is an instinct Vincent possesses. The context involves Vincent’s demand for politeness—seemingly another consequence of his fundamental centering on “what is right”.

with crime. Honor *per se* is held as a positive value in Tarantino's film universe—but it is inconsistent with criminality, whenever it conflicts with professionalism and pragmatism. Thus, a life *defined* by honor and passing “moral tests of one's self” is not viable for a life of crime. It is a realistic update for the adage “crime does not pay”—here, it becomes “crime does not pay for those unwilling to abandon ‘goodness’”.

The theme of pragmatism as central and essential to the “upgraded” conceit is declared from the very beginning of Tarantino's third film (and arguably his last “true” crime film, as of this writing), *Jackie Brown*.<sup>9</sup>

The opening theme, Bobby Womack's “Across 110th Street”, extolls the need for pragmatism amid a hard life (“I'm not saying what I did was all right/ Trying to walk out of the ghetto is a day-to-day fight”). Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson) explains his shooting of Beaumont (Chris Tucker) to Luis (Robert De Niro) through the prism of professional self-preservation—with it doubling as a warning to the man to not become a liability, himself. And of course, the narrative involves Jackie (Pam Grier) and Max (Robert Forster) playing both sides of the law, as she *needs* to, so as to steal \$500,000—neither having any true qualms over this, as the money is the criminal Ordell's; as Jackie herself notes, “It wouldn't even be missed.” The issue is not honor or “what is right”; the issue is Jackie and Max taking advantage of an opportunity to improve their own lives—nothing more, and nothing less.

Indeed, as opposed to a lesson to be learned, the issue of pragmatism's centrality is accepted as a given: *Jackie Brown* is a conscious reconstruction of the “polished stone”, where

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<sup>9</sup> *Jackie Brown* focuses on an airline stewardess, the “Jackie Brown” of the title, who also works for arms dealer Ordell Roddie, shipping money to and from his contacts in Mexico, via her airline. She is approached by an ATF agent (Michael Keaton) who confronts her with the threat of a prison sentence unless she assists in his efforts to arrest Ordell. She conspires with Max, her bail bondsman, to manipulate both the agent and Ordell so she can lift \$500,000 from the crime boss, while steering clear of both the law and Ordell's wrath.

the jagged rock is smoothed out and shined once again. Though pragmatism is still held as the ideal in crime (whether by the criminals, or by the protagonists stealing *from* the criminals), it is not called attention to—the lesson has symbolically been learned by the genre, already.

Tarantino had, effectively, given the education necessary to practitioners of crime cinema with *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*—and opened up the genre to new possibilities; with *Jackie Brown*, he provided an example of what those possibilities could be.

Amid such lessons, Tarantino provided Realism of the Lukacs tradition—realism of relationships: from conversations on seemingly banal things to characters who see themselves as we would presumably see ourselves. All of this provides an affect the audience draws on—we feel drawn to these parallels, laughing with these characters, identifying with and perhaps rooting for some of them. And thus, we find ourselves reflecting on the conflicts described—relating to individuals or society. And if the traditions of crime cinema are any indication, we are meant to.

## **EXPLOITS OF A GENRE-BLENDER**

*Exploitation Cinema and Postmodern Art, from Kill Bill to Django Unchained*

“Even more than his other genre mash-ups, this is a switchback journey through Tarantino’s twisted inner landscape, where cinema and history, misogyny and feminism, sadism and romanticism collide and split and re-bond in bizarre new hybrids. The movie is an ungainly pastiche, yet on some wacked-out Jungian level it’s all of a piece.”

—New York Magazine *review of Inglourious Basterds*

Following a six-year interim post-*Jackie Brown* (the lull being an appropriate herald for a “reinvention” of sorts), Quentin Tarantino re-oriented his filmmaking around a different sense of genre play. Rather than merely expanding the possibilities of a genre, he sought (and still seeks) to expand the possibilities of cinema in *general*—precisely through genre, sampling the categories in question, mixing these samples into what can best be described as cinematic “blenders”, creating a specific combination, a product all its own. The extent of this “genre-blending” varies from film to film: Tarantino has indicated himself that *The Hateful Eight*, his upcoming movie, is essentially a “by-the-numbers Western.” For this chapter, however, I will examine the films he has made that fall under the aforementioned “genre-blender” classification—his sources, methodology, and the ultimate success of the resulting films in forming, via the blending of the samples in question, consistently formed works of their own. And as the above quote implies, a consistent work will prove to parallel a consistent worldview

regarding Good, Evil, and Justice, with social implications stemming from it.

“Consistency”, of course, seems to be an assumed virtue in matters of creativity. After all, without a sense of consistency there would be no use for “genre” in the first place. As it stands, when Aristotle originally codified the characteristics of the three basic “classical” genres—Tragedy, Comedy, and Epic—he set basic, *consistent* standards for each, in regards to such things as differing levels of willing suspension of disbelief. Intriguingly enough, these standards remain today—along with the three “basic” cinematic genres, which might as well be deemed “neo-Aristotle” due to the elemental parallels: Drama (the old name of “Tragedy” having long lost its general meaning) still has the hardest challenge to seem “realistic”; Comedy, by contrast, is still based upon exaggeration rather than “imitation” (i.e. realism)—and Action-Adventure, like the classical Epic, relies for much of its effect on exciting spectacle and “larger-than-life” exploits, and as such has less of a burden to be “realistic” than “true” Drama. That, of course, should not be particularly surprising: Altman notes that “all genre theory is little more than a footnote to Aristotle”, and that the assumptions involving consistency within genre “simply extends Aristotle’s intention to note the essential quality of each poetic kind.” (Altman 20) Thus it is both natural and frankly inevitable that his tripartite model would translate into film studies relatively unscathed.

Altman, for his part, emphasizes as one of the central assumptions regarding film genres that they “have clear, stable identities and borders” (Altman 16). Indeed, a major theme of his book is an address of the entire question of “Are genres stable?” in the first place. On the one hand, they are clearly not—Altman emphasizes the element of *process* in the nature of a genre: Westerns, for instance, did not always exist; the genre needed to develop over time before it could be noticed in the first place, let alone classified. It did not always exist. And yet, once

developed, the concept stays in our minds—and no matter how one “plays” with its conventions (or even if it ultimately vanishes into obscurity), a Western is a Western and quite probably always will be.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the three neo-Aristotle “basic” genres themselves transcend what we tend to think of as film genres: a Western or a Sci-Fi—or a crime film—may be a drama, or a comedy, or an action-adventure. Such, in fact, leads to “genre-play” of a sort, already: the aforementioned film genres are not subsets of the “basic” three—each set of genres works to “specify” the other, to determine what sort of film we are watching. This tradition of controlled chaos is a root element of Hollywood. It is inevitable that further experimentation would arise.

Orienting this back to Tarantino: While genre play is certainly present in his early films—still, they are not quite as consciously “genre-blenders” as those in his latter “era”. *Reservoir Dogs*, deconstruction or no, still falls squarely in the category of film noir, and of the “heist film” in particular. *Pulp Fiction* (as the title itself indicates) is a sweeping anthology of pulp/noir—certainly playing with the conventions, via all the narrative spins introducing “foreign” elements, but it is still a “true” pulp crime film. *Jackie Brown* is a quite faithful Blaxploitation film, not straying from the criteria of the category in any particular way.

The question, however, is what happens when a film does not adhere to one specific genre (which is one of the basic assumptions behind the entire *concept* of a “genre picture” in the first place), but does not shy away from the concept *of* genre (as many “art cinema” films do), either—instead taking various genres as if they were ingredients, and then “blending” them into its narrative, creating a curious new whole. I call this sort of film a “genre-blender”—and “genre-blending” *would* almost seem to be my own term, despite it being a frankly natural fit;

theorists seem to prefer “genre-mixing”, “genre-sampling”, “genre-busting”, or “genre mash-up”. Perhaps the disuse of the term implies a uniqueness of sorts in my argument involving a new wholeness achieved by the blending, which I will emphasize shortly.<sup>10</sup>

At any rate, studies of “genre-blending” are strongly informed by conversations on “postmodern” art—a term that has often proven difficult to define, in what amounts to an effective “I know it when I see it” sort of fashion. Certainly its *characteristics* have been more-or-less identified—at least if we accept the “classical” description, put forth by Jameson (however reactionary he ultimately was towards the postmodern aesthetic—as will be addressed later), among others. Most fundamentally, it is generally agreed upon—among those accepting that “essence”—that postmodern art indicates “pastiche”, in both senses of the word: referring to already-established works (or at least styles of works—genres, if you will), via intertextuality, homage, and “simulation”; and creating conglomerations of such references not normally held to “go together”.

Oddly enough, “genre-blending” is nothing new in Hollywood. The common mindset on postmodern film seem to view it as such, placing its initial “acceptance” into the mainstream, roughly, at the Hollywood Renaissance. However, the trend actually exists at least as far back as *Casablanca*: a wartime drama, an espionage thriller, a romantic melodrama, and even a comedy—along with moments akin to a musical, and visual stylistics most readily found in noir. It is, for all intents and purposes, a pastiche of film genres—and yet it is hailed as one of the greatest achievements of Classical Hollywood. It samples the many genres as needed, to provide the all-encompassing experience resulting in its status to this day as a cinematic masterpiece.

The “genre-blender” film is at its core quite self-aware—the genres it samples from are

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<sup>10</sup> Rennett arguably comes close to my point of view, in his “Quentin Tarantino and the Director as DJ”—however, even he uses “sampling” as opposed to “blending”, and refers to elements in specific films as opposed to genres.

noticeable to an audience with at least a passing knowledge of each ingredient's characteristics. However, the blatancy of this self-awareness varies from film to film—and arguably, self-reflectiveness in genre-blending seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon, if all the writings on “postmodernism” are any indication. *Casablanca* certainly appears relatively seamless in its sampling, whereas *Kill Bill* is noticeably jarring in its blatant switches among genres.

Certainly, Tarantino's works since *Jackie Brown* have demonstrated a clear desire to push the proverbial envelope even further than he had, crossing the lines of genre itself so that “nutshell” classification of his films prove far more difficult. This has led to him being referred to as an archetypical “director a DJ”: as Rennett has it, “this cut-and-paste, mix-and-match directorial style is similar to that of a music DJ, who borrows sounds from older songs and combines them to create a new song through a process called ‘sampling’” (Rennett 392). As such, Tarantino often directly refers—in the majority of his films—not only to genres, but to specifically noticeable *entries* in said genres.

Nonetheless, this is not to say he sacrificed consistency in his films *as such*. Perhaps his most blatant genre-blender, the *Kill Bill* duology, demonstrates this in its ultimately unified narrative of revenge and justice.<sup>11</sup>

The storyline of the two films is divided also into “chapters”—and following a pre-credits teaser where The Bride pleads to Bill for her life, each one effectively centers on a different genre, as noted by Tarantino himself<sup>12</sup>:

- “2”, where The Bride fights Vernita Greene (Vivica A. Fox), invokes the

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<sup>11</sup> *Kill Bill* follows a deadly former assassin-for-hire (Uma Thurman)—for most of the story referred to as “The Bride”—who, in seeking to leave her life of crime so as to raise her unborn child, lost all when her former employer, Bill (David Carradine), and his assassins massacre the wedding chapel—leaving her for dead. Regaining consciousness after four years, she seeks to avenge herself, her fiancé, and her child, by killing her former colleagues, one by one.

<sup>12</sup> Such comes primarily from his “behind-the-scenes” discussion of the films on their respective DVDs.



Blaxploitation movement of the 1970s, particularly the films of Pam Grier.<sup>13</sup>

- “The Blood-Splattered Bride” takes us back in the film’s timeline to the unconscious Bride, post-massacre, being discovered by the authorities—followed by a near attempt on her life by Elle Driver (Darryl Hannah), then by The Bride awakening four years later to discover the loss of her child, as well as her current predicament as an object of prostitution by a corrupt hospital orderly. This chapter invokes classical psychological thrillers, particularly in the vein of Alfred Hitchcock (even via the use of a Bernard Hermann piece, albeit not one composed for Hitchcock himself), Brian De Palma (the use of split-screen in an otherwise Hitchcockian sequence), etc. This chapter also refers heavily to Italian *giallo* cinema (which itself is informed a great deal by Hitchcock).
- “The Origin of O-Ren” is an anime sequence, detailing the backstory of O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu).
- “The Man from Okinawa”—which has The Bride receiving training, wisdom, and a perfectly constructed sword from retired master Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba)—invokes classical samurai dramas, particularly those involving a young hero (heroine in this case) receiving such wisdom from an old master.
- “Showdown at House of Blue Leaves” (the longest chapter, encompassing the entire latter half of the first film), in which The Bride fights O-Ren, invokes Japanese martial arts cinema—particularly those set in the feudal (“samurai”) period. It also has at the beginning a reference to Japanese mafia (*yakuza*) films.
- Following a “recap” for the beginning of the second film, we see “Massacre at Two

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<sup>13</sup> This despite the sudden “intrusions” of samurai references, which will be discussed later.

- Pines”, where Bill’s initial reunion with The Bride leads to the wedding (recital) massacre. The chapter at once invokes film noir (use of black-and-white; the woman with a mysterious past; sins of yesterday resulting in disaster for today) and Spaghetti Westerns (musical cues, along with shots emphasizing the steps of certain characters).
- “The Lonely Grave of Paula Shultz”, in which The Bride’s attempted confrontation of Budd (Michael Madsen) results in shocking failure—leading to her being buried alive—begins invoking modern-day takes on Spaghetti Westerns (particularly involving Budd’s occupation as a bar bouncer), and leads to elements of horror (The Bride being buried alive).
  - “The Cruel Tutelage of Pai Mei” invokes Chinese/kung-fu martial arts cinema—with a specific nod to the films of the Shaw Brothers.
  - “Elle and I”, depicting Elle Driver’s cruelties regarding Budd and culminating in The Bride’s battle with her, invokes 1970s action cinema, particularly in the “exploitation” subculture—where “grit” and “dirtiness” reached heights rarely seen.
  - “Face To Face”—the final chapter—depicts The Bride’s confrontation of Bill... which leads to her being forced to deconstruct herself and her motivations, with his ironic assistance. This is the hardest chapter to classify in terms of genre—except perhaps as “drama”—however, Tarantino’s own references to *Apocalypse Now* regarding the initial sequences of this chapter would seem to place it within the character-driven dramas of the Hollywood Renaissance.

Perhaps the difficulties in classifying the final chapter is part of the point: “Face to Face” is where *Kill Bill* effectively deconstructs itself—challenging the assumptions The Bride has made...and along with that, the assumptions *we* have made about what was “justifiable” and

what was not—and ultimately, what will come of all this revenge. Perhaps, then, it is best not to classify the chapter as a separate genre: it is simply the culmination of the other chapters—where we are forced to look back and consider all we have seen up to now, in these two volumes.

It is difficult—far more, arguably, than any of his other films—to classify *Kill Bill*. Is “revenge film” a genre? The revenge storyline frankly colors genres as diverse as crime film, Western, war film, and even comedy; thus, “revenge film” is not necessarily an answer. Neither, frankly, is “exploitation”—what is called “exploitation cinema” is essentially the taking of established genres to their logical extremes in terms of plot and stylistic elements—particularly the sensational/“lurid” elements, now brought to the forefront in lieu of the “serious”.

Looking at the three neo-Aristotle “basic” genres, is *Kill Bill* a comedy, a drama, or an action-adventure? While “action-adventure” may strike one as the obvious answer, the final chapter is more “drama/tragedy” than anything else—the climax more appropriate for *that* than for an “actual” action film (which surely *would* have demanded a stylized “old school” sword fight as Bill wryly suggests). Comedy is certainly pervasive throughout—and perhaps it would not be unreasonable to count the story as an “epic” in the modern sense of the word: it certainly has that sort of scope.

It is, in fact, a blend of the basic genres—as surely as it blends the various categories of exploitation cinema. It is a proudly self-conscious pastiche—both in referring to the past and in sampling various elements of it. And pastiche, as discussed, is fundamental to “postmodern” art. The question is what this element of pastiche *implies*.

Jameson, for example, acts quite reactionary towards “postmodern” art, claiming its element of pastiche indicates “a new depthlessness” and superficiality (*Cultural Logic* 6); “the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive

individual brush stroke” (*Cultural Logic* 15); “a wild in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (*Postmodernism* 4). He ultimately characterizes it as a sort of parody without meaning: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (*Cultural Logic* 17). On the other hand, he constantly refers to postmodern art as often being characterized by “nostalgia”—for a past era or simply past styles of art. Reconciling these two viewpoints, it is as though Jameson is of the mindset that, if art referring to the past is not a *critique* of its subject matter, then it has no cultural value—“critique” almost in the *negative* (that is, condemnatory) sense; thus, if “postmodern” art holds something like “commodities” as worthy of representation (the paintings of Andy Warhol come to mind<sup>14</sup>), then it must either be critical of such things as “commodification”, or else we should question the value of the art in the first place.

Putting such subjective notions as standards for “value” aside, perhaps the most problematic claim made above by Jameson involves the pastiche element of “postmodern” art not allowing for “stylistic innovation”. The implication is that there is nothing “new” in a

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<sup>14</sup> “Andy Warhol’s work in fact turns centrally around commodification, and the great billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell’s soup can... *ought to be* powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then *one would surely want to know why*, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital” (*Cultural Logic* 9, emphasis mine). Of course, a fairly obvious alternative interpretation—which Jameson either misses or dismisses—is that Warhol is proclaiming the value even of things trivialized as “commodities” as worthy of representation of art—perhaps, therefore, a *celebration* of the capitalist system responsible for such “commodities”. Such a mindset would seem to be rejected by Jameson, for whatever reason, as “not good enough”: edification/*defense* is not a “valid” concern for socially-conscious art—only critique; otherwise it lacks “legitimate” meaning.

pastiche-oriented film (for example), as it is simply sampling from previous films. The problem, of course, arises in looking at the film *itself*. *Kill Bill* enjoys a unified narrative of betrayal, murder, revenge, and emotional closure—and the varying genres the film navigates color each “chapter”. The innovation lies in the inclusion of the genre ingredients, so as to enhance the “flavor” of each plot point.

In academic terms, as Lyotard noted following a comparison/contrast between modernism and postmodernism in art, “It seems to me that the essay...is postmodern, while the fragment...is modern” (Lyotard 81). An essay quotes from various sources so as to enhance *the author’s* argument—and the blatancy of a film’s “sampling” parallels the citation of sources (its “argument”, of course, being the cinematic experience). Further, a poet who uses words or phrases clipped out of a newspaper and arranges them to form a verse does not sacrifice innovation because the words or phrases are “sampled”—the finished poem, constructed *from* the samples, is the author’s, and would not exist if the author did not arrange the samples in that particular way.

Of course, the genres and films referenced in Tarantino’s films are more apparent than the newspaper articles gleaned for poetic words. Still, this is more than mere nostalgia. When the secondary theme to *A Fistful Of Dollars* plays in *Kill Bill vol. 2* (following Budd shockingly disabling the Bride), those of us who saw that film are aware of the reference—and as a rule, the first thought that comes to mind is, “That’s from *A Fistful Of Dollars!*” Even the less-recognizable “Spaghetti Western” music playing throughout the two films alerts us to the genre being invoked: the mariachi trumpets and the acoustic guitars playing deep “Mexican” riffs are inextricably linked to the Spaghetti Western, courtesy of Ennio Morricone and the rest—and we know it. And we are, therefore, *meant* to reflect on these things, as we watch. Again, the

“genre-blender” film is at heart a self-reflective film, inviting itself to analysis by even the least academic audience member. Why is all this Spaghetti Western music played amidst anime and samurai-based sequences? Why, in the “Blaxploitation” chapter, do the Bride and Vernita briefly launch into formal, “highbrow” English worthy either of knights...or (more likely) samurai?

Here we see an example of “postmodern” art grounding itself in history. *A Fistful Of Dollars* is commonly regarded as the film that “truly” started the Spaghetti Western movement—and it is no secret that Sergio Leone’s film is in fact a remake of Akira Kurosawa’s samurai film *Yojimbo*<sup>15</sup>. Thus, a film that consciously and deliberately blends the stylistics of both at once reconciles these genres and gives a nod to those “in the know” regarding cinematic history. A similar nod, it can be easily argued, powers the dialogue (and use of martial arts) in the “Blaxploitation” chapter: the Blaxploitation movement, charged with themes of empowerment through willpower—and oftentimes, fighting skill—is both thematically and stylistically linked to the martial arts cinema of Bruce Lee, etc.<sup>16</sup> *Kill Bill* simply calls attention to such links, by bringing them to the forefront.

Further, on an *emotional* level, the entertainment value of the film’s blatant sampling lies in the feelings generated by the audience member’s awareness. The emotion of the element in the source material that the “genre-blender” is sampling—say, a musical piece from a Spaghetti Western—is invoked through memory. “The issue of synthesis is important to the director as DJ’s role as an artist since the multiple references, when compared intertextually, must create a

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<sup>15</sup> Amusingly enough, both *Fistful* and *Yojimbo* are musically self-reflective about their *own* respective origins. *Yojimbo* has a “jazzy” soundtrack seemingly meant to invoke classic American crime thrillers—appropriate, as the film is itself based on Dashiell Hammett’s hard-boiled novel *Red Harvest*. Meanwhile, the score for *Fistful*, when not using mariachi trumpets or guitars, often sounds as though it were composed for a samurai picture.

<sup>16</sup> Tarantino subtly refers to this relationship in *Jackie Brown*, in a scene where Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson) reflects on his arms business with Louis (Robert De Niro). Ordell notes that his black customers’ purchasing habits involving guns are highly influenced by their love of Asian action movies, such as John Woo’s *The Killer*.

comprehensible product for an audience as well as a rational dialogue. The quotations made by a director as DJ must create a coherent film text by weaving these references together in a manner which makes sense to the viewer” (Rennett 395). The “genre-blender”, in effect, stands on the shoulders of (as far as the filmmaker is concerned) cinematic giants, both in content and technique—but as with Newton, this does not prevent the postmodern filmmaker from “seeing further”, from providing *innovation*, both thematic and technical.

The “genre-blender”, then, brings pleasure to the film analyst, professional or amateur, through its self-reflective celebration of its own heritage, and the interactivity of such source ingredients to form the blend. The issue of course is whether the genre-blender—and any postmodern art—brings “innovative” pleasure *as a work unto itself*.

*Casablanca*, again, is hailed as one of Hollywood’s greatest masterpieces—and part of its “innovation” lies precisely in the blending of the genres. In that film, however, the blend is essentially seamless—it does not call particular attention to its ingredients. *Kill Bill* does—and it not only samples from genres, but from particular films: the “legacy” characters of Hattori Hanzo and Pai Mei, costumes of various Bruce Lee roles, and (most frequently) the music.

Nonetheless, just as *Casablanca* can be (and as a rule *is*) enjoyed sans any awareness of the film’s blending of genre, *Kill Bill* is wholly capable of being enjoyed as an original take on the revenge narrative—particularly in its deconstructive look at the emotional and moral implications of such quests. I will examine the moral side of the equation in Chapter 3. Emotionally, The films provide the enjoyment and bravado of a “fun”, stylized action narrative—and challenge the audience throughout on the *nature* of that fun, through the twists of plot (Budd’s shocking *defeat* of The Bride) and character (the appearance of Nikki as an inadvertent witness to her mother’s death at The Bride’s hands; Bill challenging the justifications

of *The Bride* regarding her actions, both before and after the massacre). Both cinematic agendas are provided *through* the blending of genres—there are different forms of enjoyment, coinciding with each chapter’s respective genres. And the self-reflectiveness of the sampling parallels the self-reflectiveness of the storyline on the implications of *The Bride*’s quest—and of her justifications thereof.

How, then, *do* we classify *Kill Bill*? Not through genre in the traditional sense; thematically, however, the narrative of the films—fully unified amid all the conscious crossing of genres—fits the criteria of Carol Clover’s classification of “rape-revenge film”. Although the “rape” in this case is solely symbolic on Bill’s part<sup>17</sup>, nonetheless, the elements are there: as in *I Spit On Your Grave* and all its imitators, the story’s heroine is violated, humiliated, and left for dead—only for her to return and hunt down the assailants, one by one.

As it stands, the male counterpart to the “rape-revenge” film tends to involve the attempted killing of the hero—and as a rule, the massacre of his loved ones (*Gladiator*, etc.). The fact that Bill and the Vipers do *not* actually rape *The Bride*, but rather take this latter course, links the two traditions together—as though, in another example of self-reflectiveness, *Kill Bill* is calling attention to a gender-oriented comparison/contrast: rape or mass-murder, the sense of violation is the same, regardless of gender. Obviously, this does not at all imply that matter of violation is in any way comparable—mass murder is not rape; rather, the parallel comes from the narrative requirement of there *being* a sense of violation. At any rate, the central theme is certainly the same: The protagonist has had all their dignity stripped from them—and their

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<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, there *is* a literal rape—series of rapes, in fact—of *The Bride* indicated to have been conducted by the orderly, Buck, who sells “use” of her to his “clientele”. Interestingly enough, when *The Bride* recalls this, she seems satisfied in only killing Buck for this, rather than looking for said “customers”. Whether this is due to a sense of practicality on her part (as it is doubtful she would successfully find the identities of these assailants), or simply to the fact that such would distract her from her current endeavor to avenge herself on her former colleagues, is left to the viewer to decide.



responsibilities with it. They are alone in their grief, and the only option left is to seek justice, such as it is.

Such a storyline is “primal” in its channeling of base emotion—rationally, we downplay “revenge” in favor of “law and order”; *emotionally*, we are most satisfied when the victims take justice for themselves—and such is the traditionally described motivation of exploitation cinema: to appeal to “the lowest common denominator” of emotion, bringing the appeal to its raw form. The elements of the genre picture are “boiled” down to the “bare bones”, and are emphasized to the extent of encompassing the entire movie. As such, exploitation cinema—whatever the genre—is an easy playing field for a narrative centered upon emotion-laden issues. Blaxploitation famously addresses concerns of helplessness due to perceived failures of the Civil Rights movement—and with them, questions of racially-oriented justice. Slasher films—and horror films in general—center upon fear of the Other, and take for granted that society cannot protect the victim from said threat. And again, revenge storylines are powered by the mindset that the victim needs justice by any means necessary—and if society cannot help, the victim must act on their own. Chapter Three will center on this; for now, Tarantino’s genre-play emphasizes the unifying themes among the several genres—both in style and content.

While his latter films have not displayed as systematic a sampling of genres as *Kill Bill* has, they nonetheless demonstrate a growing comfort on the part of Tarantino with genre play. The results vary from film to film:

*Death Proof*<sup>18</sup> is a self-conscious “grindhouse” exploitation film—that is, a “throwback”

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<sup>18</sup> *Death Proof* is Tarantino’s half of the *Grindhouse* double-feature project conducted with Robert Rodriguez. Tarantino’s film involves a psychotic action-film stuntman named Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) with a fetish for car-crash deaths. As his car—a stunt car—is designed to be “death-proof”, he therefore survives his murderous acts, though his victims perish.

to the exploitation cinema of the 1970s, particularly those included in “double-features”<sup>19</sup>. There is the play with the “Final Girl” trope (as codified by the writings of Carol Clover—which Tarantino himself emphasized as an inspiration for the content of his film<sup>20</sup>), via the character of Butterfly (Vanessa Ferlito) in the first half of the film. There is, therefore, the narrative emphasis on Clover’s theories on the thematic connections between the Final Girl and the Monster—in the interactions between Butterfly and Stuntman Mike. There is the sly “re-title” (from *Quentin Tarantino’s Thunder Bolt*, in the same style as the rest of the credits, to a superimposed *Death Proof* on a black screen shot) in the opening credits—calling attention to the sort of last-minute changes common to such “on-the-cheap” productions. There is, as indicated above, the clean division of the film into effective halves: the first is an easily classified slasher-film (with a shocking narrative twist that subverts expectations of viewers familiar with the tropes of the genre); the second, a car-chase film—a clear reference to the many instances of exploitation filmmakers combining two unfinished (or even merely “too short”) films into one, with only a loose sense of connection and coherence for the film. Here, the connection involves the character of Mike; aside from that, the moods of the halves are almost

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough, the *Grindhouse* project, when seen as originally shown in theaters, also includes a series of “trailers” for non-existent movies (initially, at least: *Machete* and *Hobo With A Shotgun* were both eventually filmed)—all highly self-reflective homages to various common narratives and trends in exploitation cinema. Edgar Wright’s *Don’t*, for example, channels the tendency to advertise British horror films in America by 1) renaming the film and 2) not having characters speak in the trailer, as though to “cover” the film’s British origins. Rob Zombie’s *Werewolf Women of the SS* announces an inclusion of Fu Manchu (Nicholas Cage), referring to certain exploitation films being given additional footage to “work it into” an established, successful series (e.g. Spaghetti Westerns re-named to invoke *Django* or *Santana*). Eli Roth’s *Thanksgiving* refers, of course, to the specific category of slasher films oriented around holidays. Robert Rodriguez’s *Machete* refers to the aforementioned trend of “boiled-down”, “bare-bones” essentials of social issues put on display (and often exaggerated) in racial-oriented exploitation films (in this case, immigration and drug cartels). *Hobo With A Shotgun* refers to “drifter” stories (a la Spaghetti Westerns and such “Vietnam Vet” films as *First Blood* and *Rolling Thunder*) linked to revenge narratives.

<sup>20</sup> Tarantino has noted that his intent, particularly for the first half of the film, is to “apply the lessons” of Clover’s book. Such led to his effective subversion of expectations regarding the Final Girl element (Peary 142). It has also “armed” him in defending the film against the charges of certain critics that *Death Proof* is “misogynistic”: it is the Final Girl, as opposed to the traditional male hero, who is given the “investigator gaze”, the awareness that something is “wrong”. It is she who notices the presence of the Monster, and the camera’s perception of the threat juxtaposes with *her* point of view.

completely different: the first half (which, tellingly, takes place mostly at night) possesses the foreboding, darkly sexual air of a horror or psychological thriller; the second (which takes place during the day) comes across as a more “on-the-surface”, somewhat-lighthearted “action flick”—heavy on dialogue, in a nod both to Tarantino’s own repertoire and to a tradition in exploitation cinema, where the films would feature a great deal of dialogue so as to cut back on the expense for set pieces. Here, the conversation itself gives a hearty nod to classic car-chase films *Vanishing Point* and the original *Gone In 60 Seconds*.

*Inglourious Basterds*<sup>21</sup> is a WWII “mission” film, in the “fun” spirit of *The Dirty Dozen*, but channeled with heavy elements of Spaghetti Western stylistics—mostly via the use of Ennio Morricone compositions. Unlike *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*, however, the film is not openly self-reflective on the *genres* it samples, per se: In place of that is an at times darkly tongue-in-cheek self-reflectiveness on cinema itself: Here, we see Goebbels’s role as Nazi Germany’s premier film producer brought to the forefront, through the plot point of the propaganda film *Nation’s Pride*, starring Private Zoller as himself. We also see characters in a tavern playing a game where, among other things, parallels between *King Kong* and (as a character puts it) “the story of the Negro in America” are invoked. We even hear a foreshadowing of sorts for the French New Wave and the origins of Auteur Theory, in Shoshanna’s explanation to Zoller that the French make it a point to single out directors for respect. And ultimately, film *itself*—early film stock, of the highly flammable variety—proves instrumental in the fictional destruction of the Third

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<sup>21</sup> This film focuses on two storylines that ultimately connect in an ironic fashion. One storyline involves a group of Jewish-American soldiers—led by Lt. Col. Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) and accompanied by the rogue German warrior Sgt. Hugo Stiglitz (Til Schweiger)—who wage an OSS-sanctioned guerilla war against the Nazis behind enemy lines. The other storyline focuses on Shoshanna Dreyfus (Melanie Laurent), a Jewish theater owner whose family was slaughtered by the Nazis—and thus hides her true identity. She discovers an opportunity for revenge when her theater is chosen for the world premiere of a new propaganda film starring young war hero Friedrich Zoller (Daniel Brühl). Meanwhile, Raine’s regiment is assigned to attack the very same premiere. The film also stars filmmaker Eli Roth as Sgt. Donny Donowitz, the most physical of Raine’s regiment—and Christoph Waltz as Col. Hans Landa, the SS detective who manipulates both sides of the war for his own purposes.

Reich. In short, the film provides an intense self-reflectiveness both on the power of cinema to *influence* the audience—through intentional propaganda or even inadvertent subtext, effective “argument through affect”—the capacity to be a powerful instrument, to be used for good or evil...and on those who wield such power: the “auteurs”.

*Django Unchained*<sup>22</sup> is a Blaxploitation Spaghetti Western—a combination which, as it stands, does have a tradition in 1970s cinema (via such films as *The Legend Of N—r Charlie*). Stylistically, Tarantino has emphasized links to the films of Sergio Corbucci—not only in the title’s nod to *Django* (and the cameo of Franco Nero in a sequence that calls attention to the name), but in the thematic sense: as Tarantino noted to Charlie Rose following the release of *Unchained*, the films of Corbucci have a curious element of “fascism” in the villains—and in American history, the closest institution to fascism (literally, tyranny masquerading as capitalism) is antebellum slavery. Beyond this, *Unchained* is also a deconstruction of the various elements of films oriented around antebellum Southern culture (a la *Gone with the Wind*), via an intense acknowledgement that underneath all the pretensions of such “gentry” lies the specter of slavery. Further, a farcical sequence involving proto-Klansmen parodies *Birth of a Nation*—beginning as it does with an operatic classical piece powering their introduction, an apparent reference to the use of Wagner in Griffith’s film amid a KKK ride.

Note that, although the element of genre play remains a constant in Tarantino’s work, his *genre-blending* appears progressively less blatant and self-conscious from film to film: from a series of chapters highlighting and emphasizing respective genres, in *Kill Bill*—to a self-

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<sup>22</sup> This film follows a slave named Django (Jamie Foxx) who finds himself and his wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) punished for attempting to run away, by being sold separately. He is rescued from a chain gang by Dr. King Shultz (Christoph Waltz), a former dentist who is now a bounty hunter. Shultz mentors Django in his business, and following a successful winter, they devise a plan to rescue Broomhilda from her new owner, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). *Django Unchained* also stars Samuel L. Jackson as Stephen, Candie’s chief slave—and most trusted advisor, who despises all freemen.

reflective exploitation film with each of its “halves” devoted to a similar (thematically) yet different (stylistically) genre, in *Death Proof*—to a film where various stylistics of different genres are blended so as to serve the narrative of *one* (“mission” war film), in *Inglourious Basterds*—to a film where the blending (perhaps due to having been done previously, somewhat) is more “natural”, albeit with the narrative placed in a relatively new setting (the Deep South), in *Django Unchained*. It stands as an effective parallel to his first “era”—where Tarantino gave a Realist deconstruction of the “polished stone” pretensions of crime cinema in *Reservoir Dogs*, and transitioned via *Pulp Fiction* to a reconstruction in *Jackie Brown*. Here, Tarantino leads us through the methodology of genre-blending in various ways, and then provides us with more “seamless” products—seamless, except that we are ourselves aware of the ingredients, in the spirit of *Casablanca*. And thusly, he again expanded of the possibilities of mainstream cinema—in this case, of the possibilities of genre. At the same time, each experimentation nonetheless serves a unified and coherent work, which provides an entertainment *of its own*—as any successful blend entails.

## **THE PATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS MAN**

### *Questions of Justice in the Works of Tarantino*

“I’m not trying to preach any kind of morals or get any kind of message across. But for all the wildness that happens in my movies, I think that they usually lead to a moral conclusion. For example, I find what passes between Mr. White and Mr. Orange at the end of *Reservoir Dogs* very moving and profound in its morality and its human interaction.”

—*Quentin Tarantino, 1993 interview with Graham Fuller*

In the preceding chapters, I have analyzed various methodologies behind the film techniques of Quentin Tarantino. As noted previously, these stylistic elements—his approach to “realism” in crime film and his self-reflective “genre-blending” in his latter-day work—convey specific artistic and thematic intent. This chapter will center on my argument that this intent conveys a specific worldview—particularly in regards to society and standards of justice, both individual and societal. Such will build upon my conclusions in previous chapters, regarding his approaches to genre—both in “realism” in crime cinema and the methodology of “postmodern” genre play. This, of course, is not intended to imply that Tarantino has specific messages he wishes to “teach” his audience, political or otherwise—simply that his stylistic choices reflect specific standards of morality, and what should (as far as he is concerned) be regarded as “just”.

This assumes, of course, that there *is* a moral framework to his films. Certainly, with his focus on anti-heroic protagonists often engaging in amoral (if not ultimately criminal) acts, his

films have often been accused of nihilism. After all, as I have argued in Chapter 1, a thematic constant in Tarantino's crime cinema involves the criminal protagonists having to approach their lives with "professional" pragmatism, whereas concepts such as "honor among thieves" prove fatal when coming into conflict with such practicality. However, this does not necessarily convey that he is *promoting* criminality<sup>23</sup>—never once in his films is a criminal protagonist portrayed as justified in *being* a criminal, as opposed to anything else<sup>24</sup>. To the contrary: in fact, the desire to *leave* a life of crime is constantly treated as sympathetic (Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, Jackie in *Jackie Brown*, The Bride in *Kill Bill*)—and in *Pulp Fiction* in particular, the fact is emphasized that Jules's "moral" choice was a "better" decision than Vincent's choice to remain a criminal, as Vincent dies and Jules does not<sup>25</sup>; in addition, Butch's act of deceit puts him in danger of Wallace's vengeance, whereas an honorable act allows him to leave the criminal world in peace. Tarantino himself, in an interview for the American Film Institute, has confirmed all this for *Pulp Fiction* in particular, noting, "It's not that the whole movie is about redemption, but redemption does keep working itself into the movie. Most of the characters in the movie are given *choices* to make...and they pay the price—the consequences—or they live to tell the tale, *because* of those choices.... If you just look at the case of [Vincent] and [Jules] it would suggest, 'Well, okay, [Jules] made the good choice—made the *right* choice—and thus he

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<sup>23</sup> Tarantino is famously vehement against any accusation that his films might encourage people to real-life violence.

<sup>24</sup> Kauffmann has suggested that even if the characters in Tarantino's films were not to be presented with moral choices, still, the sense of *irony* present in the films (e.g. Vincent's refusal to allow his life to be accountable to God's control leading to a rant which results in his inadvertently—and comically—shooting a man in the face) allows the audience to understand while watching that the lives of the criminals are not to be admired—rather, to be amused by. The audience fills in the role of the moral force: "The Good Guys are us" (Kauffmann 109). Of course, this still overlooks the "moral" storyline of Jules's redemption and acknowledgement of his "tyranny of evil men".

<sup>25</sup> This does not, in any way indicate that Vincent is a less "sympathetic" character, due to his choices. Far from it—as I emphasize in Chapter One, the point is not that Vincent or Mr. White are not (relatively) "good". Quite the opposite: it is the fact that they hold assumptions about morality *in a criminal context* ("honor among thieves", etc.) connects with the lack of a sense of pragmatism within them—and that such pragmatism is shown in Tarantino's work as being essential to a life of crime.

prospers, and [Vincent] pays no attention to it, and thus we know he dies.”

The above choice, of course, is emphasized greatly in the non-linear order of the storylines of the film: The fact that, following the story showing Vincent’s death, we then see the storyline where Jules’s and Vincent’s respective choices are made (whether or not to listen to the “sign” to leave their lives of crime) emphasizes for the viewer that Jules made the “right” choice, where Vincent did not.

Further, acts of kindness and “decency” are portrayed in a highly sympathetic light—whether or not they are, as I discussed in Chapter One, to be viewed as pragmatic. Mr. White, impractical as he is, is arguably the most sympathetic of the Dogs due to his fatherly protectiveness towards Mr. Orange. Vincent’s moments of tenderness and protectiveness towards Mia in particular (along with his constant reflections on right and wrong and justifications for actions) make him highly sympathetic to the viewer—leading, as it were, to a greater sense of emphasis for the audience on the choices he “should” have made, to avoid his death. The Bride (as I will analyze later) constantly seeks to justify herself, making it a point to come across as “the good guy” whenever possible—to other characters and (via her narration) to the audience. Thus, while Tarantino makes it a point to refrain from moral statements (as he notes in the quotation beginning this chapter), *questions* of morality nonetheless color his work—and justice along with it. He implies a moral judgement through use of our identification with and empathy for characters in his films, connected with what occurs to them, and how and *why* they occur. Again, this is not to mean that he centers his films *on* moral issues—simply that, powered as they are by his worldview, his films find these issues “working themselves into the movie.”

Nor does this imply at all that the worldview of Tarantino’s films signify a “black-and-



white” mindset of complete moral absolutes. Rather, we see a parallel of what I have discussed in Chapter One, in his approach to cinematic Realism: Just as he combined expressions of objective reality in his crime films with subjectivity in human *perception* (e.g. *Reservoir Dogs* continually unveiling objective facts about three key characters, which result in changes to our *perceptions* of the film’s “reality), the Tarantino worldview combines certain *general* absolutes with the inherent subjectivity of questions that arise in between the generalities. We will begin with establishing said general absolutes—addressing the subjectivities arising under them in turn.

Arguably the closest Tarantino has come to a direct “moral statement” in his work, ironically, is in his original screenplay for *Natural Born Killers*—which, as is commonly known, was rewritten and directed by Oliver Stone as an exploration and satire of American society and its approaches to and relationships with serial killers. It is worth noting that Tarantino’s original script *is* an examination of such things—focusing as it does on a team of sensationalism-oriented journalists preparing for and conducting an interview special with arrested serial killers Mickey and Mallory Knox. The differences between Tarantino’s vision and Stone’s, however, are quite telling.

The fact that Tarantino proved so vehemently defensive—not merely regarding the fact that changes were made to his script (he ultimately approved of the changes made, after all, to *True Romance*), but rather the *nature* of these changes—provides an important indication of the importance of *what* was altered.

Consider the change that proved so deeply offensive to Tarantino that it actually caused him to stop watching Stone’s film: the “sit-com” sequence—the “backstory” that provides Stone’s new context for the beginning of Mickey and Mallory’s life of mass murder. In Tarantino’s original script, the motivations for the couple’s slaughtering of Mallory’s parents are

noted in a conversation to have centered on the parents' refusal to give their blessing to the marriage of Mickey and Mallory. The act, thus, is to be seen as unspeakably petty—the parents are simply the first in a long list of “innocent” victims to the “senseless” killings of the Knoxes. As the script progresses, Mickey in particular repeatedly justifies himself (if it can be called justification) by proclaiming his and Mallory's inherent superiority to humankind—in a bizarre take on Nietzsche's *uber-man*.<sup>26</sup> Nowhere do either of them mention a desire to redeem themselves—they are murderers, distinguished only by their intense audacity, which seems to be a source of their popularity.

All of that is changed in a proverbial “180-degree” fashion, in Stone's film: Mallory's father is now an addictively abusive pervert who subjects his daughter to humiliating overtures; her mother is complicit, allowing all of this to take place without resistance. And thus, when the killings occur in the film, the victims are not innocent—they, in effect, “had it coming”. The killings are not petty; they are justified—and Mickey and Mallory leave the scene of the “crime” as heroes. As the film progresses, the implication arises—most blatantly in the “full” ending, where we see the Knoxes happily raising children and living a relatively “normal” life—that they desire simply to be left alone, so they will no longer “have” to kill.

This is not merely a reversal of characterization—it forever changes the “moral” dynamic of *Natural Born Killers*. In Tarantino's script, Mickey and Mallory are unquestionably “guilty”—the question is simply what should be done about them following their capture, i.e., how they should be “handled”: Should we lock them in an insane asylum? Should we imprison them for life? Should they be kept separate from one another? Should they be together?

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<sup>26</sup> Such a justification hearkens back to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, where the two murderers amuse themselves through an academic conversation with dinner guests (including their former mentor) on how an *uber-man* would be wholly justified in determining who is worthy of death and who may be spared.

Should we interview them to see “their side”? Should we view them as insane? Should we view them as evil? The question of whether or not they should be sympathized with, for Tarantino, never enters the equation: we are never invited to understand their reasoning (they believe themselves “above” humanity). For Stone, sympathy *does* become an element—and thus, the “new” portion of the film showing Mickey and Mallory in an “understanding” light, even to the point of regretting certain actions (the killing of the shaman).<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the respective depictions by Tarantino and Stone of the forces of law and order are similarly opposed. In Tarantino’s script, Detective Jack Scagnetti and the other representatives of the law may not be unambiguously “heroic”, but they are far from villains—Scagnetti in particular is arguably a highly sympathetic figure, a former hero who feels disenchanted with the world, and now simply follows his orders without enthusiasm—occasionally complaining of being relegated to routine duties, to no avail; his attacking of Mallory in the climax is implied to be an emotional “snap”. In Stone’s film, the authorities become blatant villains: Scagnetti is now a violent psychotic who has no qualms about killing innocents himself—and possesses an obsession with Mallory that has deeply sexual connotations (in possible parallel to Stone’s version of her father).

In Tarantino’s script, the Knoxes are the villains, with the “lawmen” as antiheroes; in Stone’s film, the reverse is the case. What the two versions of *Natural Born Killers* share is a view of contempt for the media (represented by Wayne Gayle and his team) in their sensationalizing of “real-life” killers to the point of making them cultural icons. (Even then, Tarantino does not have Gayle join in the final massacre as Stone does.)

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<sup>27</sup> Meaningfully, a scene exists in Tarantino’s original script, where a survivor of a killing tearfully faces Mickey in a courtroom—leading to Mickey killing her. Though filmed by Stone, the scene was ultimately cut—tellingly—“due to the filmmakers feeling it undermined the audience’s sympathy for Mickey and Mallory” (Sherman 88).

Tarantino described his approach to the Knoxes thus: For all the charisma he gives the characters—and the seeming authenticity of their feelings for each other, “I didn’t necessarily want the audience to sympathize with Mickey and Mallory. . . . You see them killing people that don’t deserve to die. Hopefully, the audience [would] say, ‘Wait a minute, this isn’t fun anymore. Why aren’t I having fun? And why was I having fun at the beginning?’ But Mickey and Mallory will still be charismatic. By the end, when Mickey is doing the big TV interview, the audience won’t know what it feels about these guys or what it wants to happen to them—which, actually, is my problem with serial killers. I don’t believe in the death penalty. . . . However, I find serial killers so foul that, in my heart, I wish they just could be executed. I don’t know if that worked into the writing. At the time I wrote it, I was kind of fascinated with serial killers; but I got sick of Mickey and Mallory really quickly” (Peary 44). Tarantino’s intent was to explore the appeal of serial killers—but then to deconstruct it, exploring its causes (media sensationalism, chafing against “the system”), and ultimately, to make the Knoxes’ appeal *disturbing* for the audience, dismantling the “aura” of the *Bonnie and Clyde* archetype. Their fans are shown as pathetic dupes, with a horrifying illogic and at times hypocrisy. As such, when Stone made the Knoxes more sympathetic/“understandable”—effectively asking the *audience* to join the fan base, however satirically—Tarantino was not pleased. The thematic “point” of the story was changed—and with it, the morality.

Thus, the first premise of the worldview of Tarantino’s work: **Evil—and therefore Good—objectively exist, and must be viewed and treated as such.** Such continues in films as late as *Death Proof* (sexual violence is “objectively” evil, and it is good to fight it), *Inglourious Basterds* (Nazis were “objectively” evil in their racist atrocities, and it was good to do whatever was necessary to defeat them), and *Django Unchained* (slavery and racism are “objectively” evil,

and it is good to pay violent retribution unto proponents of slavery). The very premise of *revenge*, in fact, presupposes a sense of “right and wrong”: it springs out of the notion that one has been “wronged”, and more specifically that the target of revenge has done *evil*—and thus, the seeker is (as far as they are concerned) “good” in seeking to punish them. Further, revenge—particularly of the kind displayed in Tarantino’s work—presupposes another premise: **Justice, as a concept, objectively exists**—and those who are “evil” must be punished for their actions of evil.

All of the above would seem to conflict with a popular academic interpretation of Tarantino’s work as, in some sense, highly Nietzschean. Artistically, Nietzsche analyzed in depth the value of excess in art (the Dionysian school)—invocation of violence and other “vulgarity” existed in Greek Tragedy for “pleasure”, regardless of how they would be denounced in “real life”—in contrast to art based upon balance, moderation, and “rightness” (the Apollonian school). Naturally, such easily lends itself to a connection with Tarantino’s work, as Anderson’s piece indicates (Greene 21-39). Philosophically, *Pulp Fiction* in particular has been analyzed as “nihilistic”—or at least, as Conrad has it, “In general, we can say that the film is about American nihilism” (Greene 125). Conrad points to the endless series of pop cultural references—not only in *Pulp*, but by extension into Tarantino’s work in general—as “the way these characters make sense of their lives.... In another time and/or another place, people would be connected by something they saw as larger than themselves—most particularly religion—that would provide the sense and meaning that their lives had and that would determine the value of things. This is missing in late twentieth-century (and now early-twenty-first-century)<sup>28</sup> America and is thus completely absent from Jules’s and Vincent’s lives” (Greene 127). The protagonists

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<sup>28</sup> As I will discuss later, expanding this society-wide nihilism into the twenty-first century is not necessarily valid—at least as far as Tarantino is concerned.

in *Pulp Fiction*, then, are responding to a societal “death of God” (i.e., the loss of a sense of universal, objective moral law)—and thus, in order to leave the meaninglessness of nihilism, they must choose their own moral codes: for Vincent, his Kantian “duty” to authority (personified by Marcellus Wallace); for Butch, his Bushido-esque code of a warrior, to honor his father’s memory; for Jules, acceptance of the existence of God (who therefore is *not* dead)—and with it, a Biblical moral code to which he must hold himself accountable.

But how, then, can this notion be reconciled with the aforementioned premises of *morality* in Tarantino’s films? If Good, Evil, and Justice *objectively* exist, then the societal “death of God” is a false premise. Or is it?

From this flows an element of Tarantino’s work already discussed in Chapter One—the notion that criminals cannot limit themselves by pretensions of “honor among thieves” or morality in general—and must live by pragmatism. The life of a *criminal*, by its very nature, presupposes an abandonment of societal values—and thus, the *criminal* world presupposes a “death of God”, and therefore nihilism; “honor among thieves” is an attempt to find new meaning in such a nihilistic world. However, in the worldview of Tarantino’s films, such is a pretention that leads to incompatibility—criminals cannot live by questions of “morality”, as they have rejected moral law as “dead”; they must instead live by “professionalism”, and therefore *pragmatism*, and reject the hypocrisy that would only harm them (as it harms Vincent, and Mr. White in *Reservoir Dogs*). It is worth noting that the nihilism in Tarantino’s crime films are thematically *limited* to his crime films—his later films have so far centered on revenge, and therefore the punishment of wrongdoing. As nihilism rejects meaning and therefore morality, it rejects the concept of justice—certainly *objective*, codified justice to be recognized by others as “just”.

It is also worth noting that, pragmatism or no, the emphasis in *Pulp Fiction* (along with *Jackie Brown* and *Kill Bill*) on leaving a life of crime being *admirable* indicates that, for all the nihilism the criminal world requires, the *universe* of Tarantino's films is, as he hints at in the quote beginning this chapter, in the end quite moral. Thus, while Nietzsche is certainly useful in analyzing certain elements of the Tarantino canon, in the end such is only one element to be sampled from.<sup>29</sup>

The question of “sampling” from various philosophies—in the above case, from Christianity and from Nietzschean Existentialism—invokes the questions that arise under the aforementioned absolutes: In the Tarantino worldview, Good, Evil, and Justice exist objectively—that is, as universal concepts. The question, however, is *what* should be regarded as Good, Evil, or Just. From this arises issues of natural ambiguity—most prominently, through the issue of *revenge*. I will address this in detail shortly. For now, the question of what *in* the Tarantino film universe is to be viewed as Good or Evil or Just—and the ambiguities of such—can arguably be answered in how his films *portray* the actions conducted by the characters therein.

Indeed, the entire premise of “good as good, and evil as evil” exists in the *form* of Tarantino's work, and not merely its content. Consider a pattern, not only in the fact of his use

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<sup>29</sup> For example, Nanay and Schnee attempt to classify Jules as a Nietzschean *uber*-man, effectively shrugging off the character's emphasis on “divine intervention” and “the touch of God” on the grounds that “he is not tempted to think that, through his ‘miracle’, he discovered some kind of universal meaning everyone should live by. ... [H]e doesn't claim that meaning is provided by an infinitely important heavenly realm. And there's no hint that he is now dogmatic, thinking that everyone has to see the world his way” (Greene 187). This fails to take into account Jules's *demand*, once the incident of the near-miss occurs, that Vincent acknowledge it as a miracle (and subsequent remark that Vincent is behaving like a “sheep” when he refuses to accept that interpretation), as well as his lecture to Yolanda and “Ringo” in the film's final sequence, as their “shepherd”. Jules *does* now believe in an objective moral law—a law which demands he abandon his life of crime. And of course, Vincent's rejection of this sign from God leads to his death. *Pulp Fiction* proposes a blend of Nietzsche's themes of nihilism and superseding established order with religious—and specifically Christian—themes of redemption and righteousness.

of violence in his films, but in *how* that violence is displayed. As a rule<sup>30</sup>, the acts of “evil” brutality—that is, brutality conducted against the (at times relatively) innocent—are *not* shown (or at least not shown in full), as though the camera is averting its gaze at the horror. The camera—and therefore, the eyes through which Tarantino has us witness the events of these films—has, effectively, a “sense of decency” that will not allow it, or us, to be “desensitized” to the evil. *Reservoir Dogs* notably has the camera panning away from Mr. Blonde’s torment of the cop, with the quips of the former and the screams of the latter filling in the blanks of our imagination as to *what* has happened in this “ear scene”. *Pulp Fiction* also obscures the assault of Marcellus Wallace at the hands of the perverted shop owners—aside from a fraction of a second, we do not see what is happening, instead *hearing* the horrifying effects. Murders at the hands of Ordell and Louis in *Jackie Brown* are either (partially) off-screen or far in the distance. The massacre at the wedding chapel in *Kill Bill* is never scene—the closes we have is the “kicking around” of The Bride in the anime sequence. The slaughter of Shoshanna’s family in *Inglourious Basterds* is merely shot *above* the floorboards—with the family below, their deaths off-screen. *Django Unchained* prevents us from seeing the death of the loser of a Mandingo fight, or the whipping of Broomhilda. It also keeps us from truly seeing the guard dog assault on a slave—focusing instead on the disgusted reactions of Django and Dr. Shultz.

The last example above, indeed, dramatically emphasizes the brutality and savagery—there is the use of slow-motion as the dog handler turns to receive his order from Candie, then as he releases his beasts, followed by their running to the slave. Throughout this, the sound

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<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, we *are* treated to a graphic death of the initial group of women in *Death Proof*. Such, on the one hand, could be taken as a deliberate concession to the typical tropes of exploitation cinema (where violence is notoriously emphasized and called attention to). On the other hand, it could also be a deconstruction of sorts of the comparatively “clean” violence so often depicted in film of death by car crashes. The *shock*, then, at the dismemberment is “the point” here—rather than the “horror” of our imaginations, which has (in *this* case) long *been* desensitized by “mainstream” cinema. The only way for us to truly “feel” the evil of Mike’s actions is to see it firsthand—a necessary exception to the general rule of the Tarantino universe.



effects—particularly of the barking of the dogs and the whoops of the plantation enforcers—are distorted, almost garbled into something alien. And as stated—aside from a quick establishing shot of the dogs grabbing ahold of the man, and a quick “peek” from Django’s point of view as they prepare to leave, the brutality is never shown. Instead we hear the slave’s screams, the laughter and encouragement of the slavers, and the gruesome sounds of canine aggression—all amid a series of reaction shots of Django, Shultz, Candie, and on-looking slaves.

Such has a tradition dating back to Classical Hollywood: Hitchcock famously preferred *suggestion* of off-camera acts of brutality as opposed to blatant showing of it—as in the shower scene in *Psycho*, which famously seems to show more violence than it does. Hawks’s *Scarface*’s portrays its initial killing off-screen, with sound and a shadow suggesting the doom of the victim. All this channels, indeed, a sense of “fear of the unseen”: What *is* shown to us does not frighten us, at least not as much as what is *implied* to exist outside the frame. We may applaud or may cringe at whatever blood or gore is shown—but *horror* is less of an issue when the audience fully sees—and therefore can *define*—the nature of the violence, with nothing left to the limitless imagination. There is almost, then, a reassurance—which concealment and implication does *not* provide. Thus, the above acts of violence are stylized as “horrifying”—not “cool” or worthy of celebration.

In the meantime, the actions of the “heroes” *against* evil—however violent, bloody, or brutal—are as a rule more likely to be displayed in full force: The Bride’s killings come to mind, as do the beat-down of Mike in *Death Proof*, the incidents of scalping by Lt. Raine’s squadron<sup>31</sup> (and their ultimate killing of Hitler) in *Inglourious*, and Django gunning down the villains in his

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<sup>31</sup> An exception to *this* is the obscuring of vision regarding the death of Sgt. Rachtmann at the hands of Donowitz—focusing instead at the other men cheering him on. This may be due to the limitations of visual effects, or to the deliberate portrayal of the German sergeant as, in his own way, a brave and honorable man—who is therefore shown “respect”, as it were, by the camera. More on this later.

film. The Bride's actions in particular are famously quite bloody—and yet the camera does not avert its gaze, except in the particularly gruesome case of Sofie Fatale (which is, not coincidentally, *implied*—by the dialogue—to be horrifying); this exception seems to be a stylistic choice, as dismemberment at the hands of the heroine is eagerly displayed regarding other villains in that film. As a rule, however, the camera is not “horrified” by her acts—we are meant to witness, and approve (at least visually).

Such refers to another cinematic pattern, since the early gangster-film classics such as *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and the original *Scarface*. Writers such as Stephen Prince have written in detail of the perceived effects that *on-screen* violence provides for the audience—and the controversies thereof: the premise being that such violence, particularly shown in prolonged sequences, is essentially “celebrated”. However, Prince appears to examine this at the expense of analyzing the effects of violence that is *heard*, but not shown: the moments of off-screen violence in *Scarface*, for example, are acknowledged briefly—but little if any contrast is discussed. Of course, Prince does provide a template for the “use” of violence that *is* seen—and emphasized, to the point of stylization.

To wit, consider the contrasting *manner* of the opposing kinds of violence in Tarantino's work: In contrast to the “dirty” and gritty sensibility coloring the “horrifying” violence, the “heroic” violence—which, again, is as a rule *shown* in full force—is highly stylized, set almost to a poetic beat (The Bride's swordplay). There are also, of course, moments when the “hero” is not necessarily being heroic (again, The Bride's torment of Sofie)<sup>32</sup>, or when the violent incident

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<sup>32</sup> By this, I mean the fact that The Bride seems to single out Sofie for punishment due to her apparent presence at the *aftermath* of the wedding chapel massacre (presumably overseeing the cleaning up of evidence). However, nowhere in the movie is it implied that she took part in the killings. The fact that we only hear her screams when The Bride torments her, as opposed to seeing it as we do the deaths of the other “villains”, indicates that we are not to “enjoy” the violence *here*. However justified The Bride's actions may be (she notes that her intent is to gain information as to the whereabouts of those who *are* “guilty”), they are not seen as “heroic”—a blatant example of moral ambiguity, amid seemingly clear absolutes.

is the punch line of a joke (Jules and Vincent unloading into their unsuccessful would-be assassin). The audience picks up these cinematic cues—editing, pacing, music—to celebrate or shirk away, depending on the context intended.

Thus, in form and content, the Tarantino worldview posits its third premise: **Violence is justified against those who do evil.**

This leads, naturally, to the issue of vengeance, and all its effects. A constant theme of revenge permeates the second “era” of Tarantino’s films—*Kill Bill* to *Django Unchained*. And revenge, by its very nature, is informed by questions of justice: In a revenge narrative, a wrong has been committed, and the victim or victims feel as though they have no option but to take justice for themselves, for varying reasons. Naturally, the entire assumption *behind* such a personal vendetta is that any system of law and order assumed to exist in the film’s universe is either disinclined or incapable of attaining a satisfactory justice for said victims—and as such, the revenge narrative invariably carries with it a subtle commentary on the standards of justice we hold ourselves, societally and individually. If we support The Bride or Shoshanna or Django in their quests for revenge, we accept the assumption that society cannot help them achieve justice—and therefore, that they are justified in avenging themselves.

Such assumptions actually link thematically to *Jackie Brown* as well: The title character works for one of the lowest-quality (and therefore, worst-paying) airlines in the region, as a result of a prior issue with the law; thus, she fears another “run-in” would result in a loss of all hope to succeed in her life. On the other hand, complying with the law would risk the wrath of Ordell—who has already proven willing to kill subordinates who even *consider* cooperating with the police. And so, we are meant to support her in playing both sides of the law to ensure 1) her safety, 2) her financial security, and 3) clearance with the law—and we are meant to approve

when she succeeds. Therefore, a fourth premise in the Tarantino worldview: **Individual initiative to achieve satisfaction/happiness is admirable—whether or not it is “just”**. (This connects to the notion of the villain that “you can’t help but admire”.) And as Jackie intends to be justified in the eyes of the law, her individual initiative is clearly not held to be “*unjust*”.<sup>33</sup>

Admiration for individual action leads, then, to the notion of society being inadequate for achieving the desired ends of the characters. And when this notion addresses the issue of *justice*—and when, therefore, societal legality is deemed inadequate for achieving justice—this, naturally, is where revenge enters the discussion.

And so, for an effective herald to his wave of revenge narratives, Quentin Tarantino provides in *Kill Bill* what amounts to an in-depth exploration of the subject of revenge—and the mindsets that justify it.

Throughout *Kill Bill*, The Bride constantly seeks to justify herself and her actions, arguing to others, to the audience, and ultimately to *herself* that her quest for revenge is “right”. In *vol. 1*, she narrates in a matter-of-fact and frankly self-satisfied tone that “When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other that not only does God exist, you’re doing his will.” As such, she views herself as the moral force of the film—who brings justice onto the representatives of evil. However, the film itself informs us that it is not that simple.

In the first sequence post-credits, Vernita tells The Bride that “You have every right to want to get even”—to which The Bride retorts, “To get *even*—Even Steven?—I would have to kill you, go up to Nikki’s room, kill *her*, then wait for your husband—the good Dr. Bell—to come home, and kill him. *That* would be even, Vernita.” And yet she is content to not fall back

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<sup>33</sup> The question of whether her stealing the money is honestly “just” is another matter: Jackie herself never argues that Ordell “deserves” to have the money stolen from him. She simply feels no moral qualms about this action.

upon “an eye for an eye”, on a “technical” vengeance for her fiancé and child—she only targets those who “had it coming”. She considers herself “above” anything more: her actions must be “objectively” *just*, and not merely for her.

In fact, she holds to this standard to such a degree that, when Nikki herself is discovered to have witnessed the murder of her mother, The Bride makes it a to 1) spare Nikki’s life, even though *practicality* would demand killing all witnesses—especially one with a personal connection to her “victim”, who would therefore have incentive to her *own* revenge—and 2) verbally authorize Nikki to seek that revenge, if she were to desire it when she matures. The Bride holds herself to the standard she holds others. Still, this in no way assuages her of the guilt she feels as she leaves the house—she has to gather herself emotionally, reminding herself of the words of Hattori Hanzo in order to move beyond the trauma of having deprived a little girl of her mother. While she never refers to this incident again, the fact that this chapter is placed near the beginning of the movie means it remains in our memories, however remotely, as we witness and enjoy the spectacular bravado.

Throughout *Kill Bill* is an undertone of the morality of revenge—when is it justified? *How* is it justified—i.e., what actions are justified in taking revenge? Is collateral damage “worth it”? Such deconstruction permeates *vol. 2*—not only in the sense of narrative (the complicated nature of her vengeance involving Budd), but also in the sense of *morality*. When Bill confronts The Bride with the blood on her own hands—and her *enjoyment* in shedding that blood—we are forced to confront our own enjoyment of the revenge narrative, and our own assumptions of the morality of vengeance. The Bride repeatedly asserts her desire to have left her criminal life to raise her daughter—as stated earlier, a morally praiseworthy goal. However, Bill confronts her with the delight that she—and we—had clearly felt amid her “new” acts of

violence, and she cannot escape this complication. She has to accept it. And so, we repeatedly witness her shedding tears during and following this imposed self-evaluation—up to and including the very last scene before the credits, where she is *sprawled* out in the bathroom floor, crying; far from unambiguously triumphant, The Bride is, in a sense, a broken woman. Thus, although The Bride ultimately succeeds in killing all those she swore vengeance upon...she cannot escape the emotional toll her quest has taken—and neither can we.

Of course, as stated before, for all the bravado and “fun” of *vol. 1*, that deconstruction—the questions of what entails “justified” vengeance—is also present early on, albeit in a less blatant manner. We hear Hattori Hanzo lecturing The Bride twice on the complications of revenge: The first lecture, tellingly, is heard at the beginning of the film (immediately following her confrontation of Vernita, and encounter with Nikki), where The Bride recalls his words in her mind—he speaks of the need to “suppress all human emotion and compassion”, to be emotionally detached on one’s quest, so as to approach the scenario both rational and determined; the second, near the end of the film (the Bride reflects on his words as she constructs the remainder of her list of targets), where he warns her that “Revenge is never a straight line. It’s a forest. And like a forest it’s easy to lose your way. To get lost. To forget where you came in.” For all the seemingly simplistic bravado of the first film, this hint of complication foreshadows the series of revelations that all is not as simple as it seems.

Revenge is inherently *complicated*—and this theme culminates one of the most deliberately memorable moments in the second film, where Budd wistfully waxes eloquent on the situation, noting, “That woman deserves her revenge, and we deserve to die. But then again, so does she, so I guess we’ll just see, won’t we?” Indeed, the samurai Bushido code is often (indirectly) referred to throughout the *Kill Bill* films, as to be expected for a film that emphasizes

samurai culture as much as it does (most blatantly through the constant visual of the Hatori Hanzo sword as The Bride's weapon of choice)—and frankly, as Johnson contends, Bushido would implicate both The Bride and Bill as “in the wrong”: The Bride, by abandoning her comrades and superior, and Bill (and the remnant of his squad), by their massacre of innocents (Greene 64-65). In the end, Johnson notes, the only character actively taking part in the narrative who faithfully adheres to the code is Hatori Hanzo himself.

Johnson uses this to argue that “it’s fairly clear that Bushido could not be used to defend Tarantino’s view.” However, this assumes that Tarantino is asking us to unambiguously view The Bride as justified, to the end—and as I argue here, one of the major elements of *Kill Bill* concerns how one *cannot* view her as unquestionably justified—that is, it is only *ambiguously* “just”.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, Bill makes sure The Bride cannot have the satisfaction of simply killing him and reveling in the triumph. He arranges so that she has no choice but to converse with him before the deed—and in the conversation, he complicates the entire set of justifications for her actions. For all the assurances throughout the film that The Bride was clearly “in the right” and therefore justified in killing, and her targets “in the wrong” and therefore worthy of death, the information we learn throughout the climax makes it all uncertain—Bill had, within the context of the situation, a wholly understandable reason for the *anger* that led to his actions (though not for the actions themselves—Bill himself notes that he does not intend to justify the massacre). He emphasizes the “cruelty” of her simply vanishing without explanation, letting him believe she had died. She, of course, had admirable motives for this—to ensure her daughter would have no ties to the past. However, it is not as simple as we had been led to believe. And in fact, we

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson also seems to assume, of course, that Tarantino’s worldview must adhere *fully* to a preexisting philosophy or cannot have been using it at all. More on this later.

cannot assume the series of “understandable” violence concerning The Bride is over—she herself, in the beginning of the first film, left open the possibility of Nikki taking her own revenge on *her*, admitting that such would itself be justified. The sixth premise of the Tarantino worldview, then, is: **Individual revenge is understandable/sympathetic—but ambiguous in regards to justice and morality.** We have closure (of a sort) in the end of the story—but beyond that, satisfaction is difficult to achieve, albeit not impossible.

The chaotic ambiguity of *Kill Bill* could actually be argued to spring *precisely* from the fact that the revenge in question is “individual”—as opposed to systematic. That is, The Bride is seeking to punish those responsible for a *personal* wrong—and nothing else; never once does she confront Bill or any of the other targets with the deaths of the innocents in the chapel.<sup>35</sup> She is not punishing them as criminals or even murderers—she limits her motives to avenging herself and her daughter, and nothing more.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, such ambiguity diminishes in Tarantino’s subsequent films—partly due to the fact that the “revenge” therein is not *solely* individual. *Death Proof* effectively mixes the “revenge” of the second group of women with self-defense—and though they are not aware of the fact, their actions are effective punishment for Mike’s previous acts of murder. Tarantino’s following two films, however, deserve particular scrutiny, as they touch upon society’s lawful institutions channeling desire for revenge into righting a societal wrong. In the case of *Django*, the title character becomes an apprentice bounty hunter, who is therefore allowed to enact

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<sup>35</sup> She does, however, give a vague challenge to Hatori Hanzo to assist her, asserting he has a “very large obligation” to do so, considering Bill’s crimes. The crimes are not established—and this is the only time The Bride discusses motivations beyond her own. But this is a challenge to Hatori Hanzo (who, again, is bound by Bushido), to justify *his* part in her quest—not hers: it is implied that his reasons for punishing Bill *do* involve “objective”, unambiguous crimes, i.e., “crimes against society”. She also tells the audience of the massacre—“showing” the terrible slaughter of innocents—as if to confirm justification in the audience’s eyes.

<sup>36</sup> Meaningfully, her discovery that her daughter is *alive*—and living under Bill’s care—shocks her into indecision, leading to the aforementioned discussion with Bill, and self-examination therein.



revenge on the former overseers who'd tormented him and his wife, because they are established criminals—wanted dead or alive. His ultimate acts of violence against the Candie plantation, while outside his jurisdiction as a bounty hunter, are nonetheless shown as “justified” as they are punishment for an “objective” crime against humanity: slavery.<sup>37</sup>

*Inglourious*, however, features a regiment of Jewish-American soldiers, organized by Lt. Raine, to wage psychological warfare against the Nazis “through our cruelty”. The members of the regiment are, as Raine notes, specifically *selected* due to their Jewish heritage—almost certainly due to their intense motivation to have vengeance against Hitler for the Holocaust. It is revenge officially sanctioned by the government—and it is shown as wholly, absolutely justified. Rather than raise questions over whether vengeance-seeking would interfere in one's clear thinking on assignment, such motivations are *approved* of, and channeled into the mission. And of course, the regiment are seemingly authorized to engage in any means they deem necessary, both in regards to interrogation (Lt. Donowitz's use of a baseball bat) and in general psychological warfare (scalping of dead soldiers, carving swastika-shaped scars onto live soldiers' foreheads, etc.). While there is certainly a parallel plot involving the individual vengeance of Shoshanna (which Raine's regiment knows nothing about), the titular characters deserve particular attention, specifically *because* their vengeance is sanctioned by the established authorities, and even encouraged as necessary—justified particularly in times of war.

It is, perhaps, no accident that *Inglourious*, and in fact the entirety of Tarantino's “revenge era”, was released in the post-9/11 world—whereas his previous films, focusing as they did on the criminal need for pragmatism before “honor”, were released in the 1990s, prior to the

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<sup>37</sup> In parallel to *The Bride's* assertion regarding God being on her side, a song used in a vital scene in *Django*, “Who Did That To You?” describes the firm belief that one is doing “the Lord's work” as a vigilante, against injustice—while also making clear that “I don't take pleasure in a man's pain.”

general sense of moral clarity proposed amid the beginning of the War On Terror. Certainly the sense of societal revenge<sup>38</sup> being justified is a common theme in this era—and with it, the famous “9/12” sense of camaraderie and clarity (“Everyone lost someone on 9/11”—the sense that all in American society were “touched” by the trauma, and therefore it stood firmly united in the desire to see justice done). As time went on, society demanded further justifications, particularly over debates over (interestingly enough) means of interrogation—perhaps due to, in some sense, said feelings of “personal” connection dissipating over time. Paralleling this, Tarantino’s post-9/11 repertoire progress thematically from simple individual/“personal” revenge to an increasing sense of the need for *societal* justification—or rather (to avoid the issue of differing societal standards of morality<sup>39</sup>), for *objective* justification—to the point where a seventh premise for the Tarantino worldview would read: **If motivations for revenge, individual or otherwise, correspond to society’s need for Justice—its justification increases.** Or, in a more universal/*objective* sense: **If revenge corresponds to the fighting of *objective* wrongdoing, it is justified.**

The first question here is whether societal need and channeling of individual revenge *does* correspond. Certainly the Nazis are eagerly portrayed as on the side of evil in *Inglourious*. However, Tarantino does make sure to characterize certain *individuals* on that side as admirable, even sympathetic. Sgt. Rachtmann, the man beaten to death by Donowitz, is portrayed as quite admirable in his brave refusal to betray the locations of his comrades—and in his refusal to cower in the face of torment and death. Private Zoller and Staff Sgt. Wilhelm (the soldier in the

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<sup>38</sup> “Revenge” here means retribution/justice achieved by the *victim* of wrongdoing, as opposed to by an outside party.

<sup>39</sup> Nazi Germany, notably, viewed its racial genocide as perfectly “moral”—which Tarantino, of course, fundamentally rejects, alongside the antebellum South’s justifications for slavery. “Societal justice”, then, does not necessarily mean that the society’s institutions are fully valid judges of Justice, let alone Good and Evil—leading again to the entire issue of individual revenge, inspired as it is *by* the failures of said institutions.

tavern celebrating the birth of his son) are seen as highly sympathetic—and there are even moments of sad regret from their respective killers on “our” side. Nonetheless, these men are also portrayed as ultimately deserving of their fate, for the simple reason that they never question the morality of the side they have chosen. Sgt. Hugo Stiglitz in particular is hailed for rebelling against Nazism, out of (it is implied) moral contempt towards them<sup>40</sup>—and Lt. Raine recruits him as a fellow “Nazi-killer”. The film, in the end, views its German characters with the mindset of “You are either with us or with the Nazis”—a further thematic link to the War On Terror. Nazism is unambiguously evil, the film argues—and if those in the position to rebel against it do not, they therefore sanction it, and are thus complacent in that evil.

Similarly, in *Django*, those in the antebellum South who benefit from the institution of slavery—and do nothing to rebel against it or even question it—are portrayed as complacent in the moral crime, and as such, all the victims of Django’s and Schultz’s bullets deserve their fate.<sup>41</sup> Further, early on in the film, Schultz makes it clear to Django that he must be willing to “get dirty” in his fight against criminals and evildoers in *general*—noting, for example, that a certain retired criminal should not be spared out of sympathy from his currently having a farm and a family: “If Smitty Bacall wanted to start a farm at 22, they would never have printed [his wanted poster]. But Smitty Bacall wanted to rob stagecoaches, and he didn’t mind killing people to do it.” As such, though Django is clearly shaken by the sight of Bacall’s son having to witness his father’s death, he comes accept that it had to be done—and even refers to this event later in the film when reiterating the need to “get dirty”. Such circles back to the moral premises that Good and Evil *objectively* exist—and that they are universal concepts, formulating a (for the

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<sup>40</sup> This is subtly indicated by the motto carved into his knife, translating roughly into “My duty is to my honor.”

<sup>41</sup> Meaningfully, the final villain Django must bring to justice is Steven, the head house slave who revels in the system and channels it to his own advantage for Iago-esque power. Because of his treason against other slaves, he is held as the guiltiest of all villains—more so than even Candie.

most part) clear sense of Justice. And in the Tarantino worldview, **Justice may be levied by any means necessary**—however “dirty”. Raine’s Nazi-hunters are shown as justified, however “dirty” their methods may be—and Django and Schultz are similarly justified both as bounty hunters and as liberators.

All of these premises, however—as stated before—leave open a great deal of questions, involving specific actions: they are *basic* premises. And these are questions only answered *selectively* by pre-established philosophies, which leads to a prominent point regarding the Tarantino worldview: By now, it should be apparent that Tarantino is effectively *sampling* from various philosophies—ranging from Nietzsche, to the code of Bushido, to even Christianity. I say “even”, due to the natural clash between Christianity and Nietzsche’s philosophy—though Tarantino, as stated before, effectively “reconciles” this through the notion that a *criminal*, having rejected the conventions of society, has rejected the *morality* of society—and thus should follow through on this to the end, lest their mixed premises come into conflict and cause tensions in inopportune moments.

And yet, “mixture” ironically conveys precisely what defines Tarantino’s worldview. Perhaps this explains all the prior attempts to “connect” the worldview of his films to one specific philosophy, despite the constant problems said writers inevitably encounter in doing so. Of course, their attempts miss the entire “point”: just as many of his films are “genre-blenders”, sampling from films and categories of films to create their unique respective experiences, the worldview of his work samples from various “codes” of justice and systems of morality. Indeed, such connects back to the complexities stemming from his approach to cinematic “realism”: the world and the relations between people within it are inherently complex. Our identifications *with* the characters in Tarantino’s works are also complex—causing us to repeatedly re-evaluate

them. Col. Landa of *Inglourious*, for example, may be a villain for his status as a “Jew-Hunter”—however, no later than his introduction sequence, he *deconstructs* the Nazi prejudice against Jews at length, concluding that it is fundamentally irrational. Such foreshadows his ultimate decision to assist Lt. Raine—he only hunts Jews because it is his job; when it benefits him to change sides (due, it is implied, to his viewing defeat for Germany as inevitable), he does so at the most convenient time. He is the ultimate pragmatist, having learned the lessons the *Reservoir Dogs* and Vincent Vega failed to comprehend: Having rejected morality in his career as “The Jew-Hunter”, he does not allow “loyalty” to the Reich to blind him to such practical concerns as his own well-being.<sup>42</sup>

Why does Tarantino do this? It would seem that no one established philosophy or code could define his own worldview—as the conventions of no one established genre could serve the stories he wishes to tell, or the style he wishes to convey. And like his genre-blending (*Casablanca*, et al), this has a tradition of sorts: Ayn Rand, for example, effectively sampled from Nietzsche, Aristotle, and Locke (and arguably Descartes) to create the new and unique “blend” of Objectivism.<sup>43</sup> But Rand was a conscious philosopher as well as a writer—and therefore laid out the tenants of her philosophy so that it flowed coherently. Tarantino, however, does not presume the need to state his full philosophy for the record—let alone the specifics of good and evil. As he notes in this chapter’s opening quote, conscious statements of his beliefs is

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<sup>42</sup> There is, actually, something deeply Nietzschean regarding Landa (appropriate, given his German nationality): like any good *uber*-man, he appears to have his own code to judge the universe. He respects those who pass his tests of interrogation, such as Shoshanna—whom he spares despite the implications that he suspects who she is; he non-verbally expresses contempt for those who fail, such as Brigitte von Hammersmark (Diane Krueger)—whom he strangles to death.

<sup>43</sup> My invocation of Rand here has a further motive: As I have argued, Tarantino constantly emphasizes individual initiative as worthy of glorification throughout his work. *Revenge*, in fact, is arguably a somewhat Libertarian notion—by its very nature, it indicates a lack of faith in government or authority to effectively engage in justice and the righting of wrongs, and emphasizes *individual* action in securing one’s interests. Whether this indicates an Objectivist streak in Tarantino doubtless requires a separate work to do the argument justice, as to the best of my knowledge the subject has yet to be examined.

not his intent—the worldview simply comes *out* of his work, as opposed to the other way around. It does so though both his approach to the film genres he invokes, and the elements he samples both from cinema and from philosophy. The questions his films raise may be specific, but they lead to general answers. The specifics are left to the conscious philosophers to decide.

## EPILOGUE

The final sequence of *Pulp Fiction* provides an ultimate moral stamp on the most recognized film of Quentin Tarantino—and thus, it would be appropriate to close on this moment. Here, Jules Winfield confronts the two robbers, Yolanda and “Ringo” (whose true name we never learn), refusing to let them take the notorious suitcase. He emphasizes that under normal circumstances, he would kill them as befits his career as a gangster. However, he is “in a transitional period”, about to leave his life of crime—and his first official act as a “new man”, redeemed, is to convince them to retire as well. Jules then repeats the paraphrased “Ezekiel 25:17” speech he delivered near the beginning of the film: “The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness—for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children. ‘And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger’—those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. ‘And you will know that I am the LORD, when I lay my vengeance upon you.’”

Jules admits that “I never gave much thought to what it meant,” but following his sign from God—his recognition of an objective morality behind the universe—he now has to do so. He gives three interpretations, all of which have implications both towards crime cinema, and the worldview of Tarantino’s work in general:

First, that “you’re the evil man, and I’m the righteous man, and Mr. 9mm here, he’s the shepherd”—that the gangster protagonist is the hero because he is fighting “bad” gangsters; this

is the “excuse” we see in *The Godfather* films, where the Don Corleone, Vito or Michael, uses his status to “understandably” fight against the “true” villains, making a point to not hurt innocents.

Second, that “you’re the righteous man, and I’m the shepherd—and it’s the *world* that’s evil and selfish”; this is the philosophy of the vast majority of “realistic” crime films, along the lines that the protagonists are *forced* into a life of crime by the harsh realities of the world.

But Jules rejects both pretensions, even though he admits he would like to excuse his criminality—and so, he chooses a third interpretation: “The truth is, *you’re* the weak, and I’m the tyranny of evil men. But I’m trying, Ringo. I’m trying *real hard* to be the shepherd.” And upon his acceptance of morality, he must leave his life of crime—and encourages “Ringo” and Yolanda to do the same.

Thus, Tarantino directly challenges the pretensions of crime cinema—and in a sense, he challenges the claims that his films are simply works of postmodern nihilism, without “purpose” aside from sampling for its own sake, powered by violence for its own sake. He does sample (in this case, from a monologue by Sonny Chiba), but it is with a purpose—to give a context, along the lines of a thesis citing previous established sources. In the same way, he samples from codes of morality, through discussion or action, so as to convey the complex and perhaps complicated morality of the world as he sees it. And through the audience’s sense of identification, Tarantino has us reflect on the fates of the characters we “like”—and as such, through our connection to what we see on screen, we connect that world to the world in which we live.



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