

# Pulp fiction



.. t a killer, but a thinker and a skeptic [sic] with vulnerability. And Samuel L. Jackson, in perhaps the film's best performance as Vega's partner Jules, gives his character an incredible intensity whether he's reading his victim a passage from the Bible as a prelude to execution or arguing about the intimacy of foot-massages. He shows how Jules has begun to develop a conscience and reveals the inner conflicts that it causes. The depth of the characters is greatly due to Tarantino's wit and insight." 11 I would claim that the argument quoted above is only partly right: Tarantino does concentrate on the characters rather than on the action, but goes nowhere near the exposition of the characters' private lives that makes Heat such a terrifying and deeply involving film.

In Pulp Fiction, we are never shown the homes of Vincent or Jules, and character relationships are, with a few notable exceptions, superficial - albeit still much less superficial than in "normal" Hollywood fiction. Compared to "Stallonegger"-type characters and many similar Hollywood products, even Travolta is a "thinker and a skeptic [sic] with vulnerability"; in the film, however, he quite realistically portrays a minor thug with plenty of cynical cool. (John Travolta as Vincent Vega) 3. 4 Tarantino Characters "The stereotyped American gangster, fictionalized in books like Little Caesar and realized on the screen by precise and deadly men like Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, has become yet another American folk hero and contributed a sizable amount to what is often called the American Dream." 12 Tarantino's characters lack some of the overtly cinematic qualities that the standardized "bad guy" types possess in mainstream Hollywood film. They are not, as frequently happens, assigned all the stylistic elements that

make us know, without having to think twice, that the person we see on the screen is the bad guy, and therefore doomed to failure because the good guys (easily distinguishable from the baddies) are going to win. A complex system of cinematic narration has us recognize the signs shown in the film, and "automagically" read them correctly, in most cases.

Pulp Fiction is not a film where badness is signified through makeup, lighting effects and plain simple nastiness. Instead, the characters are lifelike, behave and chat in fairly normal sort of ways, and do not use more violence than is deemed good and necessary in their own code of ethics. The Tarantino films Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction, as well as the Tarantino-scripted Natural Born Killers<sup>13</sup> and True Romance, all have crime and criminals as their main focus, and concentrate on characters who are involved in crime and seem to exclusively come from the lower and lower middle classes. The differences in ideology between the US' upper classes and its lowest classes is enormous; the inability to accept the values of the "ruling class" and the various forms of alternate value systems can be easily found in many books and in popular music. Be it today's tough-guy "pulp" novels - Andrew H.

Vacchs' Burke novels are a prime example - or the "gangsta" rappers, systems of values that have little to do with the supposed values of the United States of America is ever-present. On the Internet as well, discussions with many Americans shed some light on the ideology that seems specific to the US' worse areas of urban decay. <sup>14</sup> To put it in a concise (if overstated) way: A large part of the US' population, especially in poor urban areas, simply does not fit into the US' system anymore, and therefore has

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developed its own rules and codes of behavior. " We would not have such a violent culture if we did not want a violent culture, whatever its biological root, aggressiveness is learned. One need not even exalt violence (as our movies and television films do) to foster it: one need only create a culture that worships power, individuality, disconnection from others, and competition; and disparages the satisfaction of life devoted to affection, fellowship, and harmony, Since aggressiveness is learned it is a moral rather than a biological quality." 15 What Tarantino does in his films and scripts is to take one of these systems of beliefs, one of these quite radical and non-dominant ideologies - and make a film that stems from within it. Instead of portraying crime, drugs and violence in a critical light - as the Baddies - and having the Good Guys win in the end, which is a decidedly mainstream and dominant-ideology approach, Tarantino leaves all of the supposed values of upper-class US society aside.

His characters and stories stem out of an urban criminal subculture.

Tarantino's Pulp Fiction not only tells a story from within that subculture, it also tells it in a way specific to that subculture. He shows the characters and events not in the classical Hollywood way, which stereotypes such characters and their actions in a way that I feel stems from a detached fascination with crime and violence and originates from the (supposed) ideals of the upper class. Tarantino's depiction of events and characters uses the ideological framework of the criminal subculture depicted to construct the plot - and decide on which events and actions are shown, the way in which they are shown, and (quite importantly) which are funny or sad or important. " If some asshole starts to think he's Charles Bronson, break his nose on the butt

of your gun" 16 Violence in Pulp Fiction lacks the usual connotations of violence in film.

Violence, even deadly violence, is "no big deal" to most of the main Tarantino characters. Rather, it is a legitimate tool to use in a (sub)culture where the dominant values and beliefs don't count, and where it is impossible to have differences or fights settled by the authorities of a system one doesn't fit into. I see much of the impact of Tarantino's stories and films as coming from his characters' attitude towards violence as well as from the unusual and non-mainstream way that the director himself handles violence: Not as a spectacular show to impress the audience with, nor as the brutal wrong-doings of evil men, but as an accepted and in no way unusual part of the film's (and characters') system of reference. Certainly there are scenes of the same gruesome magnitude in Pulp Fiction, including an adrenaline shot given to Uma Thurman when she is overdosing on cocaine, and a scene involving Bruce Willis and two redneck homosexual rapists. But, what's amazing is Tarantino's ability to find humor and absurdity in even the most horrible situation.

You find yourself laughing at things that should just not be funny, and that is what's most memorable. 17 Pulp Fiction is structured, in some ways, not so much like a Hollywood movie than like a story one might overhear at a party, in a cafe, at a motorcycle club or in the drug subculture. It is a story, a story not unlike the stories of any other subculture. What distinguishes it from almost all the other stories related to audiences everywhere is its refusal to join the dominating culture and ideology not in the way that it presents its story or the way it was produced - Pulp Fiction is a high-budget film - but in <https://assignbuster.com/pulp-fiction/>

the way its story is presented with the aesthetics and ideas characteristic of the portrayed characters and their surroundings. These ideas and ideals seem both fairly realistic and very frightening, as the film is told in a style that, seen from the dominant ideology's viewpoint, must appear shockingly cynical and brutal, whereas to the viewpoint of the narrator of the story and its characters, they would seem perfectly normal. Again, the target of the enquiry is not the film itself, but the social process of making signs "stand for" something. A member of any part of society - except possibly the criminal subscene depicted - would not be able to agree entirely with the film regarding both its form and content (and the interplay between them), or be forced to think about their own acceptance of their roles in society; a mediated reading where the reader agrees in generally but finds at least some aspects of the film disturbing would again cause or maybe even necessitate a certain degree of self-reflection on part of the viewer.

If I assume correctly, then the film may be slightly subversive simply through causing [some of] its audience to think about their own roles within society and their own stances towards violence. 3. 5 Violence Violence is a much more inherent element of US society than European societies; indeed, the US ranks as one of the most violent societies world-wide. One specific element of US violence is that it is almost exclusively individual rather than collective violence that occurs. The willingness to use violence as a problem-solving mechanism seems to pervade all levels of American society, though violence itself is concentrated in the low and lowest levels of the social hierarchy. Rather than focusing on the prevention of violence, the "typically American" answer to violence is hard punishment, including the death penalty for

severe crimes and - in an international comparison within the " First World" - extraordinarily long jail sentences, especially for repeated convictions<sup>18</sup>. The US has a larger percentage of its own citizens in jail than any other " First World" country.

The inefficacy of prison in preventing crime has been well documented; conditions in many US prisons are such that it seems impossible for the prison system to fulfil its theoretical purpose: To allow society to reintegrate the offender after he/she has served the sentence. Rather, it is the social rules of the (a?) criminal subculture that are learnt; it is bonds to other criminals, not to society, that are formed and strengthened in a prison. It is, therefore, not surprising that the concept of reintegration through prison is not working; it is a simple fact that a criminal in prison will get to know many other criminals (and may choose to team up with them once freed). Indeed, in *Heat*, the criminals as well as the police discuss people's jail terms - in the criminals' case, the prison stays are compared and friends or enemies discussed, also in order to make sure each of the others is really a member of the criminal subscene they appear to belong to.

3. 6 Popular Culture " In 'Pulp Fiction', people play out their lives against a background populated by popular culture. Pop culture links the episodes in mood, just as the characters and interweaving plots link them as stories. Characters drop references to movies, old sitcoms and fast food until the idea becomes implicit that from their angle these are the basic elements of life." <sup>19</sup> Pulp Fiction draws deeply on its link with popular culture. The soundtrack is full of old hits, the characters and story almost constantly refer to old films and

television series, and quite a bit of dialogue has also been quoted directly from previous movies.

Even the actors themselves refer back to previous films, in scenes where - for example - Harvey Keitel replays his role as The Cleaner in the Hollywood version of the French classic Nikita, or where John Travolta gives a caricature of his early films in the scene where Vincent Vega, who has injected the strong narcotic Heroin, is forced into a twist contest by his boss' wife Mia, a cocaine addict (or at least abuser). Pulp Fiction appears as more of a collage than Europeans would notice at first glance once one realizes how many references to the popular culture specific to the USA - not as obvious a collage as the " multi-genre film" Natural Born Killers. Rather, Pulp Fiction is a film designed to fit well and successfully into popular culture - while constantly referring to other items of the same popular culture. [I must admit that I do not know enough about postmodernist theory at this point to attempt a longer foray into whether this aspect of Pulp Fiction makes it postmodernist. I do know that collage is a prominent aspect of postmodernism; but I hesitate to make bold statements especially when it comes to the degree that Pulp Fiction is - or is not - postmodernist.] 3. 7 Redemption " However, it would be a mistake to suggest that there is nothing to PULP FICTION but its visceral impact.

Tarantino does not place his characters in a universe of amoral anarchy; as RESERVOIR DOGS first indicated, he is fascinated with loyalty and moments of improbable selflessness. Two such moments provide the moral backbone of PULP FICTION. In one, Bruce Willis' Butch makes a decision which could cost him his life--even if he is successful--all to save another human being

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from torture. In the other, Samuel L. Jackson's Jules undergoes a sort of conversion, and in the course of explaining his actions gives one of the most stunning speeches in recent memory.

Both are showcases for career performances. Willis is better than his previous work had ever so much as hinted at, while Jackson delivers what is quite simply the best performance in an American film this year. It is at these moments when PULP FICTION, for all its frantic energy, reveals its real message: even in a world this violent, salvation is possible." 20 Even if its form and content do stem from within a very violent subculture within the US' generally comparatively violent culture, Pulp Fiction's story contains elements of loyalty and selflessness and other high ideals common to most ideologies - it is a story constructed according to the rules consistent with stories from all known cultures (comp. Propp's analysis of story elements). A condensed, simplistic analysis of the story elements' structures will help to illustrate this argument: Two friends work with each other (Vincent and Jules).

They overcome their enemies, run into unexpected trouble, and need a Helper to complete their mission. At the end, one wants to leave and be poor rather than a criminal. The friend who has remained a criminal gets killed. What is missing in Pulp Fiction to complete the story and offer a moralistic ending is Jules' survival or some view of his future. Since we only arrive at the assumption that Jules has, in fact, given up his criminal ways, and are shown nothing of his fate after the closing scenes of the film (which, within the time scale of the narrative, are located before Vincent being shot by Butch), we cannot reasonably claim that Jules was indeed saved or spared. In <https://assignbuster.com/pulp-fiction/>

big-budget films, such decisions are not often made by chance, and I assume Tarantino intended to prevent a moralistic ending.

An obvious, final morale to Pulp Fiction might have disturbed the aesthetic and ideological coherence of the film; just as a hard-boiled criminal might reply - to the question of what happened to Jules - " I don't know" or simply " I don't care". The film's story, then, does seem to suggest a strong moronic element, but some of the information vital to this moralic finishing-off of the tale has been left out from the plot, and therefore the film itself. 4

Bibliography Bordwell, T., Thompson, K., Film as Art - An Introduction, Fourth International Edition, McGraw-Hill 1993 Heller, Arno, Gewaltphantasien, Tbingen 1990 Madden, David (ed.), Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, London 1968 Todorov, T.: The Poetics of Prose, Oxford 1977, quoted in: Turner, G., Film as Social Practice, London 1988 Turner, Graeme, Film as Social Practice, Routledge: London 1988 Valasek, Thomas E., Frameworks, Dubuque 1992 About 15 reviews of Pulp Fiction that were originally posted in the newsgroup rec. movies. reviews were downloaded via WWW from the Paramount WWW server. 1 Questions such as " What is in the suitcase", " Why did Jules and Vincent take Marvin with them", " Why was Vincent Vega in Butch Coolidge's apartment alone", " What happened to Jules" etc. are left unanswered. 2 Todorov, T.: The Poetics of Prose, Oxford 1977, quoted in: Turner, G., Film as Social Practice, London 1988 3 Bordwell, T., Thompson, K., Film as Art - An Introduction, Fourth International Edition, McGraw-Hill 1993 4 James Berardinelli, Pulp Fiction: A film review, newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site.

5 Thomas E. Valasek, *Frameworks*, Dubuque 1992 6 At least, discussions on the internet seem to agree that Marsellus was on his way to Butch's apartment with some fast food when - Vincent already being dead - Butch spotted him and ran him over with the car. 7 Robbie Roberts: Fact: 'Fiction is great', newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site. 8 Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, Routledge: London 1988, p. 35 9 Rob Marcato, *Pulp Fiction*, newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site.

10 How does one handle the fact that six bullets just missed the two people they were fired at, from a few feet away? How does one behave while preparing for a murder? In a three-way standoff? After accidentally shooting someone in a moving car? With a headless body in the garage and two blood-splattered gangsters in the living room? High on Heroin, which reportedly makes one cool and happy but slow, very slow, relaxed than any other drug, and the speeding cocaine-sniffing wife of the Boss forces you to do the twist (of all things), on a stage, in front of dozens of people? How does one handle it? 11 Rob Marcato ("staff reporter"), *Pulp Fiction*, newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site. 12 George Grella, *The Gangster Novel - The Urban Pastoral*, in: David Madden (ed.), *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, London 1968 13 Tarantino wrote the story for *Natural Born Killers*, but refused to be named as scriptwriter due to director Oliver Stone's changes to the original concept. 14 Social Darwinism is held in high esteem on many newsgroups. One discussion I remember well ensued when a woman wrote about having been sexually assaulted the night before; she escaped unharmed, but complained

about the police being unwilling and/or unable to do anything. The ensuing discussion was a fight between "revolver people" and "automatic people"; it hardly seemed to occur to anyone that there might be other options than shooting the assailant and fleeing.

Women who participated in the discussion were admonished to always go out armed at night. Interestingly, all my attempts at explaining the cause of violence as being rooted in the urban decay and lack of social infrastructure in large areas of the US were brushed aside; the consensus seemed to be that the proper solution to the problem would be to carry supreme firepower and use it - or at least threaten to use it - on the slightest hint that something might be amiss. 15 Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, 1985, quoted in: Arno Heller, *Gewaltphantasien*, Tbingen 1990 16 Slogan on a poster for *Reservoir Dogs* depicting Mr. White (Harvey Keitel). 17 Rob Marcato ("staff reporter"), *Pulp Fiction*, newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site.

18 If I recall correctly, there is a law that prescribes a minimum five-year sentence for those who get caught in even a minor offence for a third time; shoplifting and use of soft drugs was among the cases described. Under the "War against Drugs" scheme, citizens convicted of drug offences may - apparently - have their possessions [eingezogen]. 19 Mick LaSalle, *Pulp's Blindside Punch*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 14, 1994; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site. 20 Scott Renshaw, *Review: Pulp Fiction*, newsgroup rec. movies. reviews; downloaded by FTP from the Paramount WWW site.

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