

Pulp fiction, directed
by quentin tarantino
essay sample



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Pulp Fiction, directed by Quentin Tarantino is a story about four different stories. Tarantino intertextually refers to other movies and aspects of historical society, so much so that Pulp Fiction has been referred to as not a movie but movies. ¹ He employs many generic narrative structures and proceeds to subvert them, not only in isolation but with one another as well. In doing this Pulp Fiction becomes a self-referential, post-modernist text using existing conventions to make a reflective comment about the society we live in today.

In this essay I will analyse the Jack Rabbit Slims sequence as an example of and reference to the intertextuality that Tarantino makes use of in his film. I will also discuss the way in which Tarantino has subverted genres in this film and finally, while using the characteristics that outline post-modernism, show how Pulp Fiction is a perfect example of post-modernism, engaging with particularly aesthetics and politics. To show how Tarantino has combined intertextual reference with the subversion of generic narrative structures one must understand these terms.

Although intertextuality is a broad term and can be broken down into further categories it refers to “ the relationship of media texts to one another in space and time... texts are not presented in isolation, but are surrounded by other texts, that... influence our readings” ² Generic narrative structures refer to the use of the conventions of genre to tell and structure a story. The intertextual references that Tarantino uses in the Jack Rabbit Slims sequence are diverse but most reflect the 50’s era. He uses the crime and gangster genre throughout the movie and subverts them with the codes of comedy.

Bertelson, (1999) says that while the crime genre keeps its viewer in suspense, the pleasure of the sitcom is linked to the release of tension through laughter. The Jack Rabbit Slims sequence takes place as the black boss, Marcellus Wallace has instructed one of his employees, Vincent Vega (John Travolta) to entertain his wife, Mia (Uma Thurman) while he is away on business. Prior to this sequence the viewer experiences Vincent's apprehension and anxiety at this request as Mia is as much a perfect example of the 'femme fatale' seductress as her husband is feared and protective of her.

A title card is displayed saying " Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife" in large white letters with a black background. The title cards that are used through out the film are reference to Jean-Luc Goddard's style³ and the words "... Marcellus Wallace's Wife" are used deliberately drawing attention to the generic convention of the employee entertaining his bosses' wife. Vincent Vega (John Travolta) looks typically like a character from a cheap, gangster crime film. He's dressed in the stereotypical black suit with slicked black hair.

Mia looks all the part of a sexy seductress and once again Tarantino pays homage to Goddard as Mia (Uma Thurman) is made to look like his lover Anna Karina. They arrive in a red Chevy convertible; an illuminated neon sign with a cartoon reads " Jack Rabbit Slims" " The next best thing to a time machine". This can be read as an example of the constructiveness of the film. Tarantino is deliberately parodying the 50's era (as the sign states) and is blatantly adding the comedy genre to the crime film to draw our attention and shatter our expectations.

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Bertelson (1999) describes Jack Rabbit Slims as “ an extraordinary retrorestaurant... whose over-the-top synthesis of fast food, popular music and film epitomises the world of Pulp Fiction... ” The interior of the restaurant is straight out of the 50’s, posters from 50’s movies decorate the walls, ‘ golden oldies’ play out of a jukebox and instead of the windows looking out onto the street they look out onto the streets of old black and white movies. The waiters look like famous Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Buddy Holly, James Dean, Zorro, Donna Reed, Phillip Morris and The Phillip Morris Midget.

Ironically Vincent (John Travolta) admires these Hollywood icons as him and Mia walk to their table made from a cut out 50’s style car. Here John Travolta is “ performing his own fabricated image” 4 as we as viewers are aware that he is a star of the same calibre. The dialogue they share is filled with intertextual references mostly to well-known genres, icons and film lines. They order the “ Douglas Sirk Steak” and the “ Durwood Kirby Burger”. Here the names of the fast food are drawn from a famous 50’s movie icon and TV personality respectively.

We also witness the American consumer culture of the milkshake as Mia orders a “ Five Dollar Shake” and asks for it in the “ Martin and Lewis” style. This is just one example of the consumer culture we observe throughout the film. “ The film is suffused with consumer commodities... ” 5. Bertelson (1999) also argues how these commodities are not irrelevant but play an important role in plot developing. In this case a great deal of conversation stems off this milkshake. Tarantino draws on the Western genre in the dialogue as Mia says, “... oll me one cowboy! ” and Vincent replies, “ You can <https://assignbuster.com/pulp-fiction-directed-by-quentin-tarantino-essay-sample/>

have this one cowgirl! ” The dialogue also makes reference to well known sayings such as “ That was my fifteen minutes [of fame]” and “... I don’t have kooties! ” When the characters experience awkward silence, Mia goes to the bathroom to “ powder her nose” an outdated action of femininity. Tarantino overwrites this with a humorous twist as Mia proceeds to do a line of cocaine and during the rush exclaims, “ I said, Goddamn! ” in the voice of the famous 60’s rock icon, Steppenwolf.

The next important intertextual sequence to take note of is the dance sequence. An announcer broadcasts a dancing competition and Mia forces Vincent to dance with her. We as viewers are constantly aware of the ‘ baggage’ that actors bring with them in subsequent characters they play. In this case Tarantino overtly relies on intertextuality and his viewers filmic knowledge as reference is made to John Travolta’s dancing in Grease and Saturday Night Fever. The couple dance and twist while we as viewers recognise all the dance moves as most of them at this stage are of cultural knowledge.

Tarantino is drawing from the Musical genre, as Mia and Vincent are pictured smiling and singing alone to the last verse of the song. I have mentioned that Tarantino uses the conventions of crime film, film noir and gangster film and subverts them using the comedy genre or by adding a humorous light. Bertelson (1999) believes the crime genre is made up of conventions such as “... urban settings, stereotypical... characters with predictable attributes and dress... femme fatales, cars and guns, killings and corpses... While all these characteristics are true to Pulp Fiction, the way in which it’s characters are developed, their witty, faced paced dialogue and their interactions which <https://assignbuster.com/pulp-fiction-directed-by-quentin-tarantino-essay-sample/>

drive the narrative are drawn from the sitcom comedy genre⁶ displaying how Tarantino has uses both of these conventions to subvert one another. Film Noir were cheap black and white thrillers made in the 30's and 40's, of course like all genres they did not remain static and their conventions changed over the decades but characteristically they represented their characters in inescapable doom and reflected the a dark pessimistic world.

Tarantino especially reflects this in Vincent's character as he dies with his character undergoing little development. Although most of the dark thriller elements of Film Noir are reversed by Tarantino into dark humour⁷. One of the most prevalent examples of the subversion of the Noir, crime film genres can be seen in the characterisation of the characters. On the one hand the main characters, Vincent and Jules are shown as the stereotypical, crime heroes.

They are brutal murderers that commit crime with non-chalance and no remorse however on the other hand they are shown as two humiliated men who make mistakes and are unable to deal with the consequences. The best example of this is when Vincent accidentally blows a bystanders head off by going over a pothole in the road. They are unable to rectify the situation and call for the aid of Jimmy and The Wolf which consequently leave them feeling humiliated poised in tourist, suburban style clothing. Here we see Tarantino using the stereotypical crime characters while showing them in a humorous light.

Intertextuality and the subversion of generic narrative structures engage with post-modernism as they reflect the same ideas. Nothing is unique;

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everything is just a rearranging of existing conventions. 8 Post-modernism refers to the view of the world that means seeing things from an ironic, knowing, cynical, powerless, pleasurable point of view. 9 These are some of the characteristics that I wish to draw on to outline how Pulp Fiction engages with post-modernism, both aesthetically and politically.

While post-modernism deals with the unified world we live in (as a result of globalisation and the Internet, to name but a few.) it also deals with the fragmentation of it. Fragmentation is concerned with the breaking apart and recombination of different structures. 10 Perhaps one of the best examples of Pulp Fiction as a fragmentary text is the aesthetics of its narrative structure. By now, we as viewers are aware of the classic narrative structure. It is one that follows a linear pattern, where events occur chronologically and realistically.

The transitions in different plots are unnoticed and unambiguous. Tarantino deliberately subverts this narrative structure to undermine the conventional structure by allowing the various plots to occur in non-chronological order. The narrative structure he employs is similar to television as television also segments the stories we watch by the use of adverts and other interruptions. 11 In this way Tarantino abides to the fragmentary characteristic of post-modernism. Throughout this essay I have referred to the inter-textual references that Tarantino makes in his film.

These can be seen as having a post-modern effect as one of the aspects of post-modernism is hybridisation. O'Shaughnessy; Stadler, 2002 define hybridisation as a feature that results from the recombination of fragments

of conventional texts and structures. Tarantino performs these hybrids with a knowingness and cynicism¹² that also defines post-modernism. In a post-modern society we, as is Tarantino are aware of the power the media has over us and are aware of it's various constructions. Tarantino draws attention to this in the aesthetics of his film in various ways.

One of the best examples takes place in the Jack Rabbit Slims sequence where Vincent and Mia are in the car. Vincent looks at Slims apprehensively and Mia says, " Don't be a... Daddio! " While simultaneously drawing an outline of a square on the screen with her hands. This is accompanied by an actual square that is drawn on the screen. As viewers, we are startled by this non-conventional addition and Tarantino purposefully combines this intertextual reference with this construction to draw our attention to the artificiality of the film and the world we live in.

The political engagement that Pulp Fiction has with post-modernism is evident in the portrayal of race and masculinity and comments on the irony of post-modernism. Something is ironic when it indirectly contradicts its surface meaning. ¹³ Pulp fiction is supposed to be ' post-race' although it purposefully subverts generic conventions by being blatantly ' non-politically correct' and changing traditional depictions. The casting of the film is an example of this, a black and white man working for a black boss.

In two instances a black man married to a white woman, a black man raped by a white man and a black man rescued by a white man. Dowell (1995) also says that " Racial politics played a subtle role in the off screen vignette, providing an ironic contradiction to the assumptions on which the movie's

displays of racial interaction are based. " As Pulp Fiction is meant to be ' post race' so is it meant to be ' post feminism' and again achieves a post-modern effect with regards to politics. It purposefully reflects masculinity in a traditional manner to make an ironic comment about the way that masculinity is reflected in the media.

It does this by reflecting male archetypes from the boss to the boxer to the ' bad ass brother'. 14 It also reflects women in a derogatory manner where they are reduced to vulnerable passive victims in need of saving. 15 By analysing the Jack Rabbit Slims sequence it is evident that Tarantino uses intertextual hybrids throughout his film, not only does he make references to other texts and structures but he also subverts traditional generic conventions turning his film into a self-reflective, pastiche of post-modernism.

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