

Attempt to stylistically  
analyze the film, pulp  
fiction essay



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In this essay I will attempt to stylistically analyze the film, Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, 1994), concentrating on stylistic systems such as sound, editing, cinematography and mise en scene. I will relate these cinematic techniques to the themes (particularly redemption), as well as the characters and story, found within the film. In so doing illustrate how they influence the way in which the spectator perceives these themes. Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, 1994) can be categorized as a cult comedy/gangster drama. Key themes of such genres are violence, loyalty, retribution, and redemption.

All of these themes are found through out the film, contained within several primary scenes, which vary in the way that they convey these themes. Mise en scene is an important stylistic devise used well within this film to communicate the main thematic elements. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the four fundamentals of mise en scene within certain scenes and how they relate to the film as a whole. The lighting in the film is used very effectively to bring across mood and time as well as give the viewer an idea of how we should react to the character concerned in the shot.

In scene in the film where we are introduced to two new characters, Marcellus and Butch, the lighting in this scene is tinted red, this could connote the sleazy nature of the bar that they are in (a strip bar) or even the mood that Butch is in. He is being asked to throw a fight and he is not very happy about doing this. Red is a colour that we associate with blood and violence, and ties in with the themes of violence and retribution. The scene that I have transcribed takes place in the morning so the light is very soft so as not to detract from the reality of the scene, or the verisimilitude (Bordwell and Thompson: 1997).

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Through lighting we assume that it is morning, we are not told that it is so. The characters, Jules and Vincent, are lit from the side to create definition of features as they are in a badly lit car. It is the first time the audience is introduced to them, the lighting doesn't hint at anything about the characters and remains rather neutral, the costume appears to contain no meaning, but gains relevance in the scene which follows. Camera shots and angles have an extremely vital, yet unconscious, effect on the viewer.

The scene starts with an establishing shot of the two characters within the car, as an introduction, a straight-angle profile shot. The camera then moves to an area between the men placing the viewer as a third party within the car. The camera is placed slightly behind the characters, placing the viewer as an alienated third person in the car rather than trying to allow identification. We are not encouraged to make any character judgements but this soon changes when the two enter the block of flats.

Jules and Vincent are walking along a corridor, on their way to murder several people; the only light is coming from the ends of the corridor. This could possibly be symbolising the light at the end of the tunnel, often talked about as being what one sees when one dies. Light in this sequence has a biblical effect and alludes to future events in the film. When they enter the flat where the boys are having breakfast, Jules is lit from the back and the top creating a halo effect, giving him an angelic appearance.

This links in well with the biblical speech that he says just before he opens fire on the boys. The lighting is complimented by camera angle, lack of sound as well as costume. Jules stands alone, centred in the frame offering

no distraction allowing the viewer to understand the importance of the speech. The camera is placed low; to give Jules an intimidating, God-like, persona and the silence amplifies the tension felt by the spectator as Jules delivers his Ezekiel speech. Here is where the costume really comes into play.

The black and white costumes worn by Jules and Vincent in the opening scene are similar to priests outfits and reinforce the biblical undertones in the film. These outfits worn by Jules and Vincent are only really changed at one point in the film, when they change into shorts and t-shirts after the accident in the car. This change is used to complement Jules's epiphany had in the diner scene. The change of costume out of the priestly outfits, which represent their violent characters as hit men, and into "nerdy" outfits, signifies the leaving behind of Jules's old persona.

Jules redeems himself by realising that his job may not be as righteous as he felt that it was. The violence that he perpetrates in acts of retribution for Marcellus Wallace is not as noble as he had once thought and not worthy of his time. This use of costume to represent his epiphany is called, according to Bordwell and Thompson (1997), Metonymic mise en scene; it is used as cinematic shorthand to represent something larger. The props in themselves add another dimension to the film.

The book that Vincent is reading in both his bathroom scenes is an old pulp novel (according to the Oxford English Dictionary is a "book containing lurid subject matter, being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper. "), Modesty Blaise, this intertext strengthens our feelings that this world, as

false and fantastical as it may seem, is real. Tarantino uses this particular intertext in the film to highlight moral problems in American society. The film is concerned with very similar subjects to the old pulp books, sex, violence and the lack of meaning in a commercial world.

Costume is used well in flash backs to indicate era, as done in the part of the film when we are taken back to Butch's childhood during one of his dreams. The scene set in Jack Rabbit Slims is an interesting scene from the point of view of costume, the waiters and waitresses are dressed as characters from the fifties and sixties when the pulp fiction movement was at it's strongest. The briefcase is another fascinating prop, it is a central part of the film as it brings together Vincent and Jules's story and Hunny-bunny and Pumpkins story.

We never find out what is in the briefcase but it has been suggested that it is yet another intertextual homage to Robert Aldrich's 1955 film, " Kiss Me Deadly". Another explanation for what the briefcase contains is that it holds Marcellus's soul, which he has sold to the devil, which is apparently why the code for the case is 666. If this is true then it only strengthens the theme of social degradation and immorality in the film, although Marcellus does appear to gain back his soul towards the end of the film, he redeems himself. This is communicated to the spectator when he releases Butch from his dept in the cellar of the store.

Pulp Fiction (Tarantino: 1994) is filled with stereotypical characters, the cold-hearted contract killers, the hardcore mob-boss, the hillbilly southerners etc... This " cinematic shorthand" (Jane Stadler, 22. 07. 03) allow us to easily

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identify characters and understand their behaviour without having to give us details about their pasts. All the characters, even the minor ones, are well cast and each one can be said to be credible as well as emotionally resonant, meaning that the audience responds to the emotional cues that we are given by the actors, they are emotionally convincing.

We are not given any background information about two of the central characters in the film, Vincent and Jules, other than that Jules lives in Inglewood and that Vincent has just spent an extended period of time in Amsterdam. This may have been done to illustrate that they are constantly in character; we never see them as themselves. They are the only lead characters whose homes we do not see which is a clever way of alienating us from them. The action in the film, although at times excessively violent, has moments of revelation.

The end scene in the diner when two of our stories come together and Jules speaks of stopping killing people is a key scene as it is the principle instance of redemption (one of the key themes) in the film. Yet another example of redemption is in the scene set in the basement of a store where Marcellus and Butch have been captured by Zed. Butch manages to break free and can save himself yet he goes back to help Marcellus, thus redeeming himself for killing his opponent earlier on in the film. Even the violence in the film makes a thematic related point; it sends us the message that violence is, in the end, pointless and harmful to you.

This can be seen in the final scenes of the film where we see that the only people who have not suffered are those who have redeemed themselves or

those who have no need to redeem themselves. The editing in this film is amazing and complements the script in the best possible manor; this combined with the cinematography produces a very slick film. The temporal continuity of the film is disjointed in such a way that if one did not watch the last two scenes one would never know that anything of any importance had been left out of the film in the time that elapses from scene to scene.

The last two scenes bring every thing together and explain the film to us in a more comprehensive way. The pacing of the cuts is not very fast through out the film, in the transcribed scenes the cutting is very slow this illustrates how calm Jules and Vincent are about killing people this communicates to the viewer that they don't get nervous at all, the cuts in the first part of the transcribed scene, however, are marginally faster than those towards the end, indicating that these two men get more worked up about mundane things like the names of hamburgers than any thing else.

The principle cuts used throughout the film are fades and straight cuts, fades are used between the different stories when the screen goes black and then the action continues. Straight cuts are used during scenes where there is a lot of dialogue, as can be seen in the first scene that I have transcribed. This is done to speed up the pace of the film so all the dialogue does not bore the audience as there is very little other sound involved in these scenes.

Non-diagetic sound is only used in the film during scenes where the character concerned is high or between scene changes. Most of the sound is diagetic; we are often lead to believe that music is non-diagetic and later find out that it is in fact part of the story world. The scene where Vincent is

driving to fetch Mia is one of the only instances of music being non-diagetic in the film; this is done to make us understand that Vincent is not in his right state of mind.

Most of the sounds that are heard through out the film are those of traffic and birds, general, every day sounds. This can be seen in the transcribed scene when Vince and Jules are driving in the car. Sound bridges are regularly used to create continuity, the best example is found midway through the credits when the music suddenly changes as if being tuned in on a car radio, there is a fade in and we see Jules and Vince driving in the car listening to the same song on the radio.

Certain scenes in the film are used to show how each story interacts with another this is well illustrated in the prologue where if we look very carefully we can see Vincent walking to the bathroom just before Hunny-bunny and Pumpkin hold up the restaurant. This is also done just after Butch's fight when we hear on the radio that some one has just stolen the dance trophy from Jack Rabbit Slims, we, the audience, know that Vincent and Mia have the trophy and so we realise that our assumption that they had won the trophy is wrong.

I have therefore analysed all cinematic elements involved in the filming of Pulp Fiction (Tarantino: 1994). I have related the mise en scene, editing, sound and cinematography to the themes of the film, particularly the theme of redemption. I have also discussed how these cinematic elements influence the way that the viewer perceives certain characters and the story as a



whole. It is these carefully constructed techniques that make Pulp Fiction the cult classic that it has become.