

# ESSAY BRIEF

Drawing on relevant texts and making use of definitions of postmodernism make an analysis of a cultural object (artwork, film, building, designed objects etc) that has been described as postmodern, situating it in historical and cultural contexts. (2000 words)

## Pulp

(pulp)n.

1. A soft shapeless mass of matter.
2. A book containing lurid subject matter, and being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper.

*American Heritage Dictionary  
New College Edition*

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## Postmodernism n.

a style and movement in the arts that features a deliberate mixing of different styles and draws attention to artistic traditions.

- DERIVATIVES **postmodern** adj. **postmodernist** n. & adj.

*Oxford English Dictionary*

*Drawing on relevant texts and making use of definitions of postmodernism make an analysis of a cultural object (artwork, film, building, designed objects etc) that has been described as postmodern, situating it in historical and cultural contexts. (2000 words)*

Postmodernism is thought to be rather arduous to define in a single, straightforward definition. This is due to it largely depending upon to what the term postmodern, is being applied. It was in the realm of architecture that postmodernism came to the fore as a label.

There is one description of Postmodernism that *must* be included here:

'Postmodernism is a movement, a set of aesthetics, a cultural logic, an ideology, a Zeitgeist, an age, an ethos, a mood. It's a bandwagon. It's a scam, a con trick, an example of the emperor's new clothes, nihilistic nonsense, dangerously fascist and right wing. It's the only surviving form of Marxism. It's a continuation of modernism. It's a rejection of modernism. It is what you need before you can have modernism. It is nothing to do with modernism. It is the only way to understand now. It's all over now. It never existed. It's.....

Postmodernism is difficult to explain and certainly difficult to define,'

(Butler & Ford, 2003, p. 7)

Jean Baudrillard wrote much about issues surrounding postmodernism. Suggesting that meaning had imploded due to the blurring between the real and simulated. That television was 'The Postmodern Medium' and peoples' reality had become what they saw and heard on television. Baudrillard famously claimed the possibility that the Gulf War never happened. His thinking behind this was that, we (the public) had only seen images on television and in newspapers of the war. He suggests the Gulf War may have never happened, as we had not actually been there and seen it. This seems to be a ludicrous idea, but illustrates how we rely on the many televised images of world events. Baudrillard's postmodern thoughts centred on the term 'Hyperreality'. A new kind of information dense culture. Our perceptions of the everyday world overlap with and are shaped by models of the world.

Baudrillard wrote about four stages to the history of the image, ending with 'the simulacrum', or fourth stage. He suggests at the first stage, the image offers the reflection of a basic reality. This is where our perception of the image and the reality are interchangeable. The second stage is the one in which the image is a misrepresentation of a basic reality. It may be a romanticised image or offers a grubbier version of the reality. In the third stage, the image has no presence of reality; we take something to be real when it is not. Then the fourth stage, the simulacrum itself. The image has no relation to any reality whatsoever. The image has overtaken and replaced reality.

In 1979 Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his essay 'The Postmodern Condition', considered postmodern ideas at length. Lyotard does this by describing the student population of the time as being sectioned into three groups. He saw students as fitting snugly into one of these descriptions, or types. Those who are going into the professions who are given enough knowledge to do their jobs, a new technological elite who are being given new knowledge and then a whole mass of people who are actually unemployed but do not appear in the official figures because they are registered as students.

Lyotard's most famous quote 'There has been a failure of the Grand Narratives' suggested progress was connected to destruction and that it took apart history. The Grand Narratives (or metanarratives) was the term given to the stories that explain why things are the way they are. In the Middle Ages this was Christianity, in the twentieth century it was (is) scientific rationalism. Lyotard defined postmodern as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.

Zygmunt Bauman saw instead, that postmodernity was 'Modernity conscious of its true nature', suggesting there little difference between modern and the postmodern, only that the later is more choice based. Many fruitful definitions of Postmodernism have been offered since the terms emergence, but Dominic Strinati's view on Postmodernism really seemed to sum it up well, if looking at the term from an artistic point of view.

Dominic Strinati (Strinati, 2002, p. 223 - 228) gives five meanings of Postmodernism. These are 'The breakdown of the distinction between culture and society', 'An emphasis on style at the expense of substance', 'The breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture', 'Confusions over time and space' and finally 'The decline of metanarratives'. These will later be referred to in relation to *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

So where does film and cinema fit into this pandemonium of postmodernism? Postmodern films for some are 'those which emphasise style, spectacle, special effects and images at the expense of content, character, substance, narrative and social comment' (Strinati, 2002, p. 229).

The 1990s and 80s, a decade of films increasingly dominated by formula Hollywood offerings, *Pulp Fiction* appeared refreshingly different. Since its 1994 release, it has inspired many imitators, but even today, it is still strikingly bold and remains to be eclipsed, even by its creator Quentin Tarantino. *Kill Bill – Vol. 1* (2003), Tarantino's latest offering, does indeed break new ground for film, but *Pulp Fiction* still remains high up in film history, as it came at a time when a minimal amount of new films had *Pulp Fictions'* level of originality. There has been much discussion about the Postmodernist nature of Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. The films' release occurred during the height of the Postmodernism era of film.

*Pulp Fiction* has no specific location or setting in time or history. The present or early 1990s seem to be referenced in the McDonald's chat, Jules's mobile phone, but a lot of the retro-cultural references (music of the 1960s and 1970s; Vince's 1974 Chevy car and the style of some of the dialogue) are in an ambiguous area of 'no-time'.

Huge stretches of Tarantino narrative are devoted to 'trivial' conversations. From foot massages and burgers to pot bellies or tummies, in *Pulp Fiction* real screen time, or syuzhet time, is given to mundane discussions. These are interestingly often about verbal definition (what is the status of a foot massage? etc). These trivial conversations seem to relate both to a kind of realism (most of us spend a lot of time in trivial conversations) and to postmodernism's sense of the slipperiness of the signified, for example, words (Jules's puzzling over the meanings of the Bible) or the opening title's double dictionary definition of 'pulp' (inspiration for the front cover to this essay).

Strinati's postmodern meanings are at play in *Pulp Fiction*. 'An emphasis on style at the expense of substance' (Strinati, 2002, p. 225) is evident when Tarantino includes those seemingly trivial conversations between characters. He is using syuzhet time to express his cinematic style instead of giving the films' story any added substance. Yet it could be argued that those conversations are the substance of Tarantino's work, because those little signature filmmaking treats are what makes his films original greats.

*Pulp Fiction* has three main storylines. 'Filmic narratives based on pulp fiction' (Hayward, 2002, p. 279). These are, a member of the gang taking out the mobster's wife whom he must not touch, the boxer who is supposed to throw the fight and gangsters on a mission to kill. The film's narrative is fragmented and disorientating in terms of time and space, giving a fragmented sense of location and history, and is therefore postmodern. 'Confusions over time and space' (Strinati, 2002, p. 226) is prevalent in *Pulp Fiction*. The following diagram illustrates how the plot, or syuzhet order differs from the story, or fibula order.

### Plot / Syuzhet Order



'Prologue' (Honey Bunny and Pumpkin in diner, up to the start of the robbery)

### Story / Fabula Order



(Early section of 'The Gold Watch' with Butch's father's friend giving him the watch when Butch was a child)



'Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife'



'Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife'



'The Gold Watch' (including death of Vincent)



The Bonnie Situation



The Bonnie Situation



Prologue



Epilogue (in the diner; during the robbery and its aftermath, taking us to a few minutes after the end of the Prologue)



Epilogue

Intertextuality is fundamental in a postmodern film and *Pulp Fiction* displays many examples. Its genre is a mixture of gangster, boxing, war, musical, romance and arthouse. Tarantino's love of French New Wave film director, Jean-Luc Godard's, work is on show in many aspects of *Pulp Fictions'* use of intertextuality. The name of the production company for *Pulp Fiction* is 'A Band Apart'. This is also the title of a Godard film; also The Jack Rabbit Slim's scene in *Pulp Fiction* is homage to a similar scene in the same Godard film. The character of Mia in *Pulp Fiction* deliberately looks like



Anna Karina, an actress closely associated with Godards' life and work.

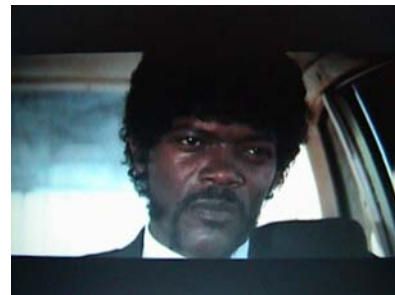
'Tarantinos' films are exemplary in the way that they refer to other texts' (Hayward, 2002, p. 279). This is so very true. As well as referring to Godards' work Tarantino also intertexts similar characters from his previous films into *Pulp Fiction*. It is well known that Tarantino deliberately made it a possibility for Vince (in *Pulp Fiction*) to be the cousin or brother to Vic 'Mr. Blonde' Vega in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

Tarantino imitates artist Edward Hoppers' painted worlds, and decors, on the big screen during *Pulp Fiction*, most notably in the diner scenes. Robert Aldrich's 1955 film, *Kiss Me*



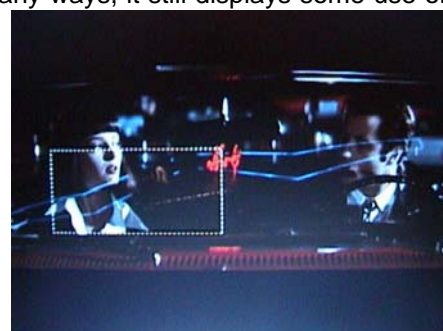
*Deadly*, is referred to as the character of Butch in *Pulp Fiction* displays significant resemblance to the character of Mike Hammer in Aldrich's work. *Pulp Fiction* uses many old ideas, from differing sources, in tandem and therefore is expressing 'retro-nostalgia' (Strinati, 2002, p. 230)

Postmodern thought, whilst claiming to delight in the breakdown of old hierarchies, are not much interested in questions of representation, since postmodernism does not believe either in 'the real' or in the ability of language, or media, to represent it. However, postmodernism is seen as liberating and celebratory. In *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino chose to have Samuel L. Jackson star along side John Travolta, in a leading role. This could be said to be Jackson's break into the film industry and the 'big time' because since *Pulp Fiction* he has gone on to play many starring roles in big budget films. This use of a black male actor in a leading role could be said to be postmodern as it celebrates black actors ability



(obviously colour should not make a difference to someones acting ability!) and liberated Jackson, and many fellow black actors and actresses, into the film business.

Although *Pulp Fiction* is thought of as Postmodern in many ways, it still displays some use of conventional film making techniques. Tarantino lights his stars in a 'Hollywood style' and uses traditional editing techniques where he wishes to create clear meaning. Yet, he does play around with the 'Hollywood style' with use of some very long takes and



where Mia mimes drawing a 'square', which unexpectedly appears on screen.

*Pulp Fiction* certainly is not about a real world however; Baudrillard may consider the Gulf War to be just as fabricated as the events occurring in *Pulp Fiction*. That is the extreme end of Postmodernist thought. *Pulp Fiction* is, however, an extremely interesting film to look at from a postmodern standpoint. As it offers a vast variety of examples of the artistic movement, that is postmodernism.