

**Explore some of the key themes and devices within *Pulp Fiction*.**

American independent cinema has formed a significant proportion of the landscape of US cinema, since the 1980s. This movement in cinematic history has been highly instrumental in transforming representations of ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, at the same time as experimenting with narrative forms and generic expectations.

Both economics and aesthetics come into the equation when discussing American independent cinema. Before the 1980s, there was a pre-American independent cinema era where there was a sense of renewal and experimentation in Hollywood related film-making. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970s and could be illustrated with films such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1972). The narratives of these films are led more by character than plot. After this, there was a real slump in studios wanting to make innovative features, after the success of mainstream *Jaws* in 1975.

Robert Altman's films of the 1980s depended on minor independents (such as Cinecom, Cannon and New World) after his 1970s features had generally been financed by the major studios. There were also previous kinds of independent cinema, operating at the far end of American Hollywood. This was mainly the Leftist film-makers, Frontier Films in the 1940s.

John Pierson sees the American independent cinema period starting with Jarmasch's 1984 *Stranger than Paradise* and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) as the end point. He suggests it is very hard to define *Pulp Fiction* as independent as it 'starred John Travolta and Bruce Willis, cost \$8 million, was originally set up at TriStar and was released in 1200 prints by Miramax, by then a division of Disney.' (Hillier, 2002, p.xv). The top grossing films in *Pulp Fictions'* release year, 1994 (in America) were: *Forrest Gump*,

*The Lion King, True Lies, The Santa Clause, The Flintstones, Dumb and Dumber, Clear and Present Danger, Speed and The Mask. Pulp Fiction*, sadly, did not take as much as these at the box office (1994 in film, n.d.).

*Pulp Fiction* was released during an interesting time in American history, where violence and sex scandals dominated the American media in the 1990s. It was a decade of scandals starting with the Tailhook affair in which Navy and Marine Corps fliers were accused of sexually abusing 26 women. Then President Clinton kept the gossip flowing as several women accused him of sexual misconduct. The ten years ended with this president narrowly surviving a trial to remove him from office for perjury and obstruction of justice. President Clinton's escapades were proving to be a hindrance to his Vice President Al Gore's campaign for the oval office and polls were reporting that 70% of the American people were saying that they were "tired of the Clintons".

Violence seemed a part of life for most Americans in the 90s. In 1992, the South-Central Los Angeles population rioted after four white policemen were acquitted of video-taped assault charges for beating a black motorist, Rodney King. During the 1990's, the United States would like to think it played the role of world policeman, sometimes alone but more often in alliances. The decade began with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the resultant Gulf War. In 1993 the war was in the African country of Somalia, as the television images of starving children led to an attempt to oust the warlord, General Adid. By September, 1994, the U.S. was once again sending troops to a foreign country to overthrow a military dictatorship, this time in Haiti.

There was good news, too. The booming economy led to record low unemployment. Minimum wage was increased to \$5.15 an hour. The stock market reached an all

time high as individuals learned to buy and trade via the internet. Americans enjoyed the country's affluence by travelling more (up 40% since 1986), by revelling in sporting events such as the Atlanta Summer Olympics, and by "consuming" as never before. America faced the new millennium with an open, diversified society, a functioning democracy, a healthy economy, and the means and will, hopefully, to face and overcome its problems. And of course, with a richer film history after *Pulp Fiction's* 1994 release.

The Rough Guide to Cult Movies suggests the phrase "A royale with cheese" can sum up the 1990s film decade, this being a quote from *Pulp Fiction*, suggests its importance in film history, or at least cult film history. *Pulp Fiction* was written by Tarantino and his usual collaborator, Roger Avary and it followed *Reservoir Dogs*. Tarantinos' initial idea was to make *Pulp Fiction* a portmanteau film, with more than one story and a different director for each. It started off as being structured into four unconnected crime stories, in a similar style to *New York Story* (1995).

However, it became a Tri-partite structure with three parts: a) Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife b) The Gold Watch and c) The Bonnie Situation. Unlike a portmanteau film, these stories do merge and were all directed by Tarantino. There are only fifteen different locations in the film and Tarantino shows trivial interest in keeping the stories hermetically-sealed as there are no establishing shots to introduce the new stories and the captions for the different stories arrive late, which leads the audience to forget the short story structure. Tarantino is quoted as saying 'It's a get-it-out-of-your-system movie, three movies for the price of one.' (Hillier, 2002, p.240).

*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'. This ties in with the national aspects of this film, as the 1950s style retro restaurants (Jackrabbit Slim's), the cheap 24 hour coffee shops of LA and the very fact that Tarantino himself is American and enjoys reflecting that in his work, as well as his film buff status.

The crime films of Jean-Pierre Melville were the inspiration for the look of Vincent and Jules' black suits in *Pulp Fiction*, as Melville stressed that his characters needed a 'suit of armour'. Tarantino believes any good action film should make you want to dress like the characters. Towards the end of the film however, they both end up dressed in total antithesis of their black suits, volleyball wear – which is not cool.

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'. Tarantino tends to start scenes mid-sentence, for example, 'Forget it, too risky!' is the first line of the film. This illustrates the fact that Tarantino delights in changing the expectations of film.

*Pulp Fiction* has three main storylines, as I mentioned earlier. '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. The momentary disunities contribute to broader patterns and thematic meanings. This is present in the diner robbery where the film climaxes, as Jules' religious conversion is given greater moral significance, since we know that his partner, Vincent, will soon meet the violent end that we witnessed earlier.

Please see Appendix A for a diagram that illustrates how the plot or syuzhet order differs from the story, or fibula order. The disjointed narrative structure mimics the uncertainties and extreme relativism of postmodernity. Temporal frequency is present as single story events appear more than once, for example the robbery of the diner, shown at the start, takes on its full significance only when it is repeated at the climax. '*Pulp Fiction* lacks a bit of closure in that it never reveals what is inside a briefcase that is at the centre of the gangster plot.' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, p.56). This briefcase is an example of a McGuffin – something Alfred Hitchcock is famous for, a redundant aspect of the narrative, a red herring.

*Pulp Fiction* displays many examples of intertextuality. 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 Jackrabbit 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 Godard's life and work.

'Tarantino's' 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 Godard's 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 Vincent (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)

Tarantino's love of director and actor, Martin Scorsese's, use of pop music in films is given great airing in *Pulp Fiction*. The clearest acts of homage are the ideas that scores can be made from fragments of pop songs, that using songs in ironical ways can work well and the technique of songs jumping out of the score and being part of the narrative world all of a sudden. All of these techniques were influenced by Scorsese and in turn Tarantino and Scorsese influenced Danny Boyle.

*Pulp Fiction* is a personal film for Tarantino for a few reasons. Firstly he describes it himself as his get-it-out-of-his-system movie, but also his love of musical sequences in films is vented in *Pulp Fiction*. He admires Jean-Luc Godard's use of out of place musical interludes, especially in films that are not supposed to be musicals. Tarantino's favourite example of his is in the Godard film *Le Petit Soldat*. He says the musical interludes are just so infectious and so friendly. Sometimes he feels they might even ruin a movie, as you just love them so much you wish you could rewind

and watch them over and over again. He also pays tribute to Howard Hawks by using the same characters names and snippets of dialogue from *Saturday Night Fever*, *On the Waterfront*, *Psycho* and *Charley Warrick*.

Tarantino has a way of revealing the depth and complexities of his characters, rather than just showing them as one dimensional killing machines. He does this by showing what they do when they are at work, but Tarantino tends to concentrate on what the characters do before and after work. Travolta is fantastic in showing us that as hit man Vincent Vega is not just a killer, but a thinker and a sceptic with vulnerability.

The Classic Hollywood Narrative (CHN) describes the range of conventions that have governed film storytelling since the great studio era of the 1920s and 1930s. CHN is concerned with inconspicuous editing, stars as organisers of the narrative so the audience empathises with their story, cause and effect rule and narrative resolution. *Pulp Fiction* does not wish to be totally anti-CHN, like most independent films and especially much of the European art and counter-cinema, but instead it wants to simultaneously celebrate and deconstruct standard ways of storytelling.

Its celebratory fragments are that *Pulp Fiction* has a strong sense of cause and effect rule. Character's actions normally lead to an equal set of reactions and other actions. The film does resolve itself, where Jules' redemption is a culminating moment. The editing is kept simple and the act of devotion is present as a love for old Hollywood B movies is expressed by the use of shaky back projection for the taxi scenes.

The deconstructive elements of *Pulp Fiction* that break away from CHN are that time is played around with a lot. CHN depends on a secure knowledge of temporal and spatial relationships, but *Pulp Fiction* dances with this playfully. The lives of

characters are fragmented and not told in a chronological order, for example, Vincent is killed by Butch, only to return in the epilogue.

Tarantino makes odd gestures, for example, Mia's voice is heard in Vincent's head as he reads her note when he gets to her house before taking her out for dinner. Then just before they go into the restaurant, she draws a square in the air with her fingers; the square is shown on screen. These techniques are never repeated, as the audience might expect to see more of the same, but Tarantino refuses to let his audience slouch in their seats for a settled pattern of viewing.

There is no denying that Pulp Fiction broke cinematic barriers, yet it came to us sugar coated, with some big stars and a substantial PR budget. Tarantino was, and always will be, considered one of the most influential film makers of the 1990s, and certainly gave a lot, and still does, to American independent cinema.