

Style and Meaning in Films of Tarantino

INTRODUCTION

Quentin Tarantino can be seen as a unique and entertaining figure in cinematic history. The power he has wielded within the film industry comes from writing about all he knows - from old and obscure films to fast food and popular television shows - pop culture and genre traditions will continue to be Quentin Tarantino's life within his works, but what is interesting to see is how he feeds these elements of life back into those very same traditions. The purpose of this dissertation is to reveal some of what lies beneath the surface of Tarantino's work explaining some of the images and techniques that have become his hall mark. There has been much criticism over the years about the work of this ex video store clerk, yet I would argue that he could be seen as one of the most charismatic voices in cinema today. This is due to his daring style, which is characterized by the use of witty dialogues, his unique structures and generally making movies about the movies.

From this I feel a need to prove through a lengthy discussion of his recognized qualities that Tarantino's works are not necessarily artless and that they do function on an entertaining level. What I aim to do in Chapter One is discuss the formal traits of this director's work. I will examine and identify the key concerns of Tarantino's main texts: how he revitalized the art of film dialogue, rejected linear narrative style and his use of repeated images and motifs.

Chapter Two will then take a closer look at the underlying social discourses and debates within Tarantino's productions. I want to find

out through a discussion of gender and race whether he is just using such issues to entertain or if this director is actually talking about the outside world of cinema through his works. I will endeavor to find out whether he wanted simply a reaction from his audience, usually one of disgust, or if he presents issues that cause reactions for their own sake.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WORLD TARANTINO LIVES IN: PLOT, STORY AND STYLE

Popular cinema of the nineties saw some radical and interesting experiments with predictable notions of narrative, time and logic. What first became apparent when watching any of the Tarantino films being looked at in this dissertation is the stress placed on the chosen plot, story and style in each one. This chapter shall look into the formal aspects of how Tarantino expanded upon the ideas of this postmodern era, “the director is seen to redeem and recast the pulp of postmodernism by embedding in the texts, narratives of re-invention and re-birth.” Tarantino is definitely regarded as a director with something to say. He is very cinematically literate and familiar to the limits of screen tension. He is so certain of how far to stretch a sequence’s credibility without losing the audience that he can keep violence funny, produce honor amongst criminals and turn the bad guys into the good guys thus resulting the ability to get rid of a good character all together. I believe that he is not a visual cinematic genius, yet he does keep the viewer on their toes because of the way he places the camera or the way he moves it. Film analysis centred on the director has been around since the beginnings of the auteur theory in the fifties. The main focus on this theory is on “visual style” on the way in which films are composed and constructed for the viewer' As I will discuss further in this chapter, since it seems to be nearly impossible to name a genre for Tarantino's films, the director's name is being used to

indicate a certain style in cinema, a genre of his own even, “Tarantino-esque”. It is obvious indeed that Tarantino’s style has a certain flavor to it; a common cinematic style, common story elements and perhaps an image that is characteristic to his films. It is within this section of the assignment that I will discuss the aspects of Tarantino’s work that could perhaps make him one of the greatest contributors to contemporary cinema.

Toying with Chronology and Narrative Structure

A striking and popularly noticed feature within the films of this highly acclaimed director is his chosen method of narrative structure, the chronology of the film’s story from start to finish. Within the postmodern world the approach towards narrative is well known. Foucault, who believed that a narrative with a beginning middle and an end was no longer satisfactory, made an analysis of narrative structures, “Narrative, which posits an enabling beginning point and a vindicating goal, is no longer adequate for plotting the human trajectory in society. There is nothing to look forward to: we are stuck within our circle” I believe that Tarantino thought along these lines too. The rotating mini narratives that he adopts do not have this basic set of implications. Pulp Fiction is his finest example of this as it has a very clear circular path, the film does not “conform to mainstream narrative structure, and it is only comprehensible because we as viewers hold on to an understanding of narrative and formal conventions through our experience of the mainstream.” It is rebellious in the way that it manipulates all usual plot structures by twisting time to satisfy its own organization. The segmented structure is Tarantino’s way of playing with the audience’s perceptions. Due to the large amount of entertaining content throughout the film, the audience is forced to piece together the segments in order to form one complete story. It is constructed in such a non-linear way that you could see it a dozen

times and not be able to remember what comes next. It doubles back on itself telling several interlocking stories about characters that inhabit a world of crime. Placing the scenes out of chronological order is a very postmodern idea, it could be said that the end product also creates an alarm in the audience because the totally irrational happens and the audience is left to deal with that, "Postmodern society is characterized by instantaneity which makes it difficult for individuals to set events in their context; it is if everything is here and now." In the one scene John Travolta's character, Vincent Vega is shot and in the very next scene that same person is alive again, not because he is reincarnated but because the scene where he was shot took place later in time but was put first in the film.

Due to Tarantino's constant rejection of linear narrative and closure, the foreshadowing of the narrative results in an unconventional way also. The effect is more of a post shadowing. The best example of this is with the character Vincent Vega. If the scenes were put in chronological order the audience would see Vincent go into the bathroom with a book and then reemerging from the bathroom a few minutes later with the same book pointing a gun at someone. Then later on in the film the audience would again see Vincent emerge from the bathroom only this time Butch would be pointing a gun at Vincent. However, due to these scenes being out of order, the audience sees Vincent get killed by Butch first and then a scene later of Vincent emerging from that bathroom holding his book and gun. "By coming at the film's conclusion these portions receive an emphasis they would not have if they had remained in their chronological story order."

The emptiness of life seems to be mirrored in the non-linear structure of the film, in the impossibility of narrative unity. By leaving everything

unexplained Tarantino carries out his intention - one of undermining the typical closure that illustrates most of those from Classical Hollywood. His narratives are filled with an unremitting and malicious force that reduces freedom and frightens our imagination by subjecting it to the aesthetics of evil. However, Pulp Fiction's open ended ness may be an advantage as it does not leave us with us with sheer chance, though stories cross and coincidences occur - what we make of these is the central question of the film.

Tarantino is clearly influenced by Stanley Kubrick from his classic B movie, The Killing as in this film too; the idea of a progressive narrative is also reworked and undermined to allow for a more objective telling of the adventure within the film. In general, the effect of Tarantino's strange chronology seems similar to browsing a pulp novel that one already knows, only reading the good parts and missing out the rest - which might be the intention of a very good film maker. The circularity found in Pulp Fiction (the film ends with a continuation of its very first scene) is purely structural. The story itself however, has hardly any circular sections to it as most of the threads of the story end with the main characters getting killed or leaving Los Angeles. The film keeps referring back to itself, presenting chains of cause-and effects in a muddled and seemingly unfounded order, yet the plot is based on a logically consistent order.

Pulp Fiction's plot purposely leaves out particular aspects of the story (as a whole), so that we are left guessing at parts of it. The non-chronological assembly of the plot disrupts many of the stories otherwise believable cause-and-effect chains, and places the film's closing scene somewhere in the middle of the narrative. However, it is not the action or the plot, which forms the tension and strange appeal

that this film has, but the characters in the film “it is not what circumstances the characters get into that matters, but how they respond to them. The film’s overall configuration, which jumps backwards and forwards in time has a clear vocal structure to it. It is as if the film’s contents were being told by somebody in a verbal form“ perhaps Tarantino, with all the consistencies and lack of chronology that seem typical of multipart stories.

“A closer look may show that unusual artwork has its own rules, creating an unorthodox formal system, which we can learn to recognize and respond to. Eventually, the new systems offered by such unusual works might themselves furnish conventions and thus create new expectations”

Cinematic Style

There is definitely a distinct cinematic style visible in Pulp Fiction and his earlier film Reservoir Dogs that could belong to Tarantino. I would argue that his style leans much more towards the realist than the expressionist traditions in filmmaking. To keep his audience calm and relaxed, there is much use of lengthy static camera shots. Instead of cutting from one character to another during a discussion, which tends to create tension, Tarantino has the camera just sitting and remaining totally static for long amounts of time. We see this at the start of Pulp Fiction where Jules and Vincent are riding in a car on their way to carry out a job for their boss. This scene could be particularly tense except through Tarantino’s use of direction we see the two actors to be at their coolest that they can be. In order to develop this effect, Tarantino uses just two different camera shots in the car. One of these looks directly at the face of Jules and the other is a view of the two gangsters from just inside the passenger window“ the latter helping us as the

viewer to feel comfortable with the two characters as it makes one feel like they are moving with them in the car. The long staticness of this shot is calming. Often in many cinema conversations we as the viewer follow the camera switching from one character to the next, yet Tarantino prevents this within his second shot as he gives the viewer the choice of which character they want to look at thus resulting in a sense of security for the viewer as they can be in control.

However, I believe that often these long static shots can be seen to be uninteresting. For example, when we are first introduced to Butch talking to Marsellus Wallace, Tarantino chooses to place the camera on Bruce Willis' face and leave it there for over a minute. It is clear that Tarantino does this to serve a purpose. Conventionally, shots that stay on a character's face are meant to get the viewer to focus on that character and to think about what they might be feeling or thinking. Here the audience will immediately note that Bruce Willis, a customarily type cast heroic actor, being told what to do "this would interest the viewer as Tarantino leaves the camera on him so that the viewers are forced to consider how powerful the boss is and how weak a character Butch is. This could be seen as a rare technique in the filming of today as often we see many contemporary films being excessively produced and cut" Tarantino seems to allude to many things of films past, this being just one of them.

It is very noticeable, however when the director returns to using conventional shots of looking at the person who is speaking and then cutting back and forth between the two. This is because Tarantino believes that the viewer should not always want us to feel that every one of his characters is cool at all times. An example of this is the opening scene of the two amateur thieves having a conversation and

because it is fast moving, the cuts that follow are also very fast. Immediately, this gives the audience an agitated view of these characters. Tarantino's aim was that through out the film whenever we watch a scene with these two in, we are not to see them as laid back thus we do not feel that they are as calm as central characters, Jules and Vincent.

Reservoir Dogs is far more subtle and classical when regarding its style. Although the sequence of events within the film might be complex in their structure, the editing is sharp and simply to the point. We see his use of camera work similar to that in Pulp Fiction moving only when necessary, for example in the opening scene, the restaurant table where all the characters sit, is circled by the camera in order to establish them as a team. The panic of the thieves is then shown by a rapid tracking shot along a street. Tarantino uses his camera shots to great advantage "they create a great sense of mood for the viewer. This is greatly noted in the scenes within the warehouse, the compositions of the shot are normally more static partly resulting in the anxious, claustrophobic mood of the characters' forthcoming wait and entrapment and partly to focus the viewer's attention mainly on the actors.

Considerations of Genre

"Writer/director Tarantino has merged film noir with the gangster tale and pulled them both into the nineties."

When looking at the works of Tarantino, especially Pulp Fiction, I feel that they are strongly, intuitively genre-based, yet the hybrid forms of genre interwoven make the films difficult to classify as belonging to any

one genre. It could be said that films within a genre often lose their vitality as the conventions become predictable and the fundamental myth can become boring. I feel that Tarantino has borrowed a traditional allegory from the gangster genre, and then by subverting it he subsequently sets up a new, unconventional myth in its place. A film that goes beyond the established confines of the gangster genre is Tarantino's end result. The major innovations he includes in Pulp Fiction make it hard to place the film within mainstream cinema. I agree with John Cawelti when he says, "it is difficult to know what to call this type of film." There are definite acknowledgments to the rules of the gangster genre, yet it is merely a springboard for the director. Tarantino introduces enigmatic characters and complex absurdities, which combine to effectively remove his film from the "conventions of a traditional popular genre". His gangsters do not behave in a traditional manner so the myth associated with the gangster genre is thus undermined. Tarantino now has a clear path to set up his own version, thus resulting in entertaining the viewer by causing reactions. It could be said that this is the start of a re-energized genre.

Mise en Scene

"His mise-en-scene seems to take place in no particular era or every particular era."

All of Tarantino's works are set in big cities, most often Los Angeles. The mise en scene is significant as the characters and narrative would make little sense in other settings. Props are seen to be utterly realistic, as the films really do not need anything over exaggerated to make them realistic. This distinguishes Tarantino's films quite clearly from other Hollywood "gangster" or "cop" movies as often we see a large range of usually very destructive weapons playing a significant role in defining the distinction between the good character and the bad.

Tarantino directs the scene where Butch chooses a weapon to help defend Marsellus with the intention of making the audience laugh; he has a choice between a hammer, a chainsaw, eventually choosing the Japanese sword. It is the absurdity of what he chooses that occupies the viewer's attention, not the forthcoming result of its action. There are a few scenes where props are of major importance often being shown in major close-ups. This is clear in the scene where Vincent saves Mia from a heroin overdose "the adrenaline shot needle's tip is in extreme close-up.

Use of Dialogue

One of these aspects is his choice of style and exploitation of interesting yet meaningless dialogue. In many films, the dialogue is designed to cue the next dramatic twist in a plot or to further the narrative, yet for Tarantino it seems to suggest that action itself is of secondary importance "the character's dialogues, responses and attitudes seem to be the centre of the attention within his films. He takes the flowing street talk from his favorite authors of pulp novels and produces a vocabulary of naturalistic wording, which in turn is seen to often hide the amoral attitudes of the characters. This pattern is noted in many scenes, for example we never get to see the actual boxing fight in Pulp Fiction, but we receive information about it afterwards by listening to the taxi driver asking Butch some questions. Also, the shooting of Marvin could be seen to be so much more dramatic and gruesome, yet it takes place in the middle of a conversation between Jules and Vincent thus resulting us as the viewer to feel that it was just a small if unfortunate accident.

In many scenes as well, it is the faces and emotions of characters that are fore grounded rather than the action itself. We see this when Butch

returns to free Marsellus from the rapists “it is this scene that illustrates my argument as it is the attitude and emotions of Butch that are placed in the main focal point of the viewer’s attention. The deadly stab made by a large samurai sword is backgrounded. I feel that Tarantino is keen to present tense moments and show how the characters in the film respond to them. This can be seen in Reservoir Dogs also. In the closing scene during a three-way gunfight, we see the characters being placed by the director into emotionally intense situations and then calmly waiting to see what will result from the situation. The main point seems to be how people behave in weird situations that they are placed in. Tarantino’s main aim seems to lie in portraying not so much the action itself, but the actions of people in and to intense, strange and dangerous situations.

Characterization

Tarantino shows a passion for discreet gestures, character’s reactions to unusual and intense situations and as already discussed, dialogue. It is obvious to see the care this director took in the smaller and non-action scenes. The depth of many of the character performances is so huge that we notice a lot of the time the intensity between all the actors.

“He reveals their complexities and depth by not showing them when they are at work, but concentrating more on what they do before and after they work. For example, Travolta is fantastic in showing us that as a hit man Vincent Vega is not just a killer, but a thinker and a skeptic with vulnerability.”

I would argue that this quote taken from a movie review is only partly right. I feel Tarantino does concentrate on his characters rather than

the action, yet we never see into their private lives and the relationships between the characters are often superficial. It could be said that his characters lack the blatant cinematic qualities that the average bad guy possesses in mainstream Hollywood. They do not possess the stylistic elements that help us to realize at once that this character we are watching is the bad guy. As we can see in *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, they are not films where badness is signified through make up and lighting effects. What Tarantino wants us as the viewer to see is that the characters are believable, they behave and talk in normal ways and do not use more violence than is deemed necessary in their own way of thinking. All Tarantino's films are centered around crime and criminals focusing on the characters that get involved. It can be seen that they are most always from the lower and lower middle classes. As an alternative for portraying crime, drugs and violence in a critical light (the good guys win in the end over the bad guys typical to the mainstream and dominant ideologies) I feel that Tarantino leaves all of the hypothetical values of upper class US society aside. We see the characters and events not in a classical Hollywood way, which typecasts such characters and their actions in a way that I feel comes from a separate interest with crime and violence and originates from supposed ideals of the upper class.

Violence as Entertainment?

“Tarantino's scripts are punctuated by violence“ without exception, his drama is hallmarked by instigating, catalyzing and redeeming acts of brutality.”

Violence seems not to be a big deal for Tarantino's characters. It lacks the usual undertones of violence in a film. For the director it is seen to be a justifiable tool to use in a culture where the law does not play a

part and where it is impossible to have fights settled by systems of authority that one does not fit into. The attitudes of Tarantino's characters towards violence make quite an impact. However, it is Tarantino's attitude himself, which is so unusual and non-mainstream. He does not use it to create an impressive show to attract audiences but as an accepted part of the films' system of references. The scenes of shocking magnitude do not go unnoticed however "Tarantino has the ability to find humor and illogicality in even the most horrifying situation. His most violent or shocking scenes seem to draw the viewer in until they suddenly realize what exactly they are laughing at. The accidental shooting of Marvin prompts laughter in the audience but then suddenly they are confronted with the reality of what has just occurred. When asked in an interview about his juxtaposition of humor and violence, Tarantino answered "I love it. I think it's like a Reese's Cup, two great tastes that taste great together." Although his films are alleged as being very violent, there is actually very little shown in either *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction*. It is more implied than actually seen and it is the viewer's imaginations which leave them believing that the films have been much more violent than they actually are. However, this violence that is not actually shown generally has much more realism and effect than cartoon violence for instance. No glamour is seen, for example, we can only feel agony for Mr. Orange lying in a pool of blood after being shot. "People go on about Tim Roth bleeding to death in *Reservoir Dogs*, but that's the reality. If someone is shot in the stomach, that's how they die." This does not make one consider a life of crime. A lot of suffering is shown resulting in a disturbed feeling "the violence is seen to be transgressive. In most mainstream films, a character is most often killed and that is the last we see of them.

The infamous ear-amputation scene is "popular to consumers of violent movies'. The significance of analyzing it is to show its embodiment of

the “issue of boundary testing” thus attracting a large amount of media attention “the scene is a “cultural magnet for media headlines and promotional gimmicks’. This scene is often discussed in great lengths perhaps prompting it to exist independently from the rest of the narrative, it could be seen as a subject in its own right. The stylistic features involved aid the depiction of violence in this scene. The audio effect of the song “Stuck in the Middle with You” is both amusing, yet disconcerting. The music works against the violence as Michael Madsen dances around his victim. It is amusing to see such a violent character be so lighthearted about what he is about to do. The audience feel unease at enjoying the music as an act such as this continues. In contrast, the cry of the policeman is distressing as his pain is repressed due to his lack of ability to move and help himself. The audience will always be aware of this notorious scene, yet this does not mean that they only enjoy watching pure violence, they react to the situation of the scene as a whole. Through Tarantino’s clever characterization, the viewers engage with the characters and then draw from them what they need in order to understand the violence. I believe that the violence within Tarantino’s films is essential to their aesthetics, he meant for the audience to laugh. With intent Tarantino violates the conventions of an action/violence film, he recreates stylized moments of violence and embellishes them until they are almost surrealistic and I think this is why he gets away with testing those boundaries to the extent he does. The fact that the violence depicted in Tarantino’s films has an excessive, unreal quality is precisely what gives the viewers the emotional distance they need to enjoy it.

Popular Culture

Popular culture is drawn on deeply in Tarantino’s films. It could be said that there is no point to this commentary on popular culture, yet Thomas Hibbs states that, “in the absence of the old distinction

between high and low art, sophistication now involves witty commentary on pop culture". Tarantino's characters coolness is defined by their mastery of modern civilization. Within their lengthy discussions, we see the characters to never miss a trick when picking up on these references that others make. The continual references to cult heroes, famous people, films, music etc. sets up a direct line of contact and involvement with the viewer, which exists above the storylines. We discover a lot about American culture, the most irrelevant detail can sometimes be the most educational. As an audience we learn about Elvis, for example, as Tarantino had a great enthusiasm for him and his music, "the man who undoubtedly sits at the top of the American pop culture tree has made a significant impact on Tarantino's acting and writing".¹⁶ References such as this encourage us as an audience to think about the director and his films in the same way that we find so addictive. We feel recognition from this meaningless dialogue - it is a welcoming feeling. However, I believe that occasionally the continuous long-winded chats about this pop culture are inclined to slow the narrative down. It rarely serves any real significance in terms of plot or characterization. It could be said that Tarantino uses this to show off his knowledge of certain peculiarities in order just to please the audience. Through his characters he shows that such knowledge is cool because it is both true to life and apparently effortless. This could be seen as intense spectatorship as he rewards his loyal viewers, his cult following with in-jokes that he knows only the ones, as Chip - as he is will understand. His films can be seen as puzzles, which in turn draw the viewer in giving us a sense of playing a game. Each reference to popular culture acts as a piece with which we are supposed to place together to form a coherent film. Often it takes more than one viewing of a film to be able to do this. Tarantino designs his films to fit suitably into popular culture, while constantly referring to other items of the same popular culture.

Redemption and a Fascination for Loyalty

The idea of redemption runs strongly through Tarantino's works. Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction have a very different sub-text, the first showing its characters preoccupied only with the settling of scores. This revenge is definitely apparent in Pulp Fiction, yet Tarantino does not place his characters in a world of unethical disorder "he is merely fascinated with the ideas of reliability and selflessness, "the film is more obviously concerned with the journeys its characters make to earn or learn redemption." An example of such a moment is the character of Bruce Willis making the choice to save another from death, even if it means putting his life on the line, "an appreciative Marsellus learns the value of mercy and Butch leaves the scene of the crime on a chopper called Grace.¹⁵ Also in another moment, Jules undergoes a change "he is spiritually reborn as the many bullets miss him in a shoot out. The form and content of Pulp Fiction does tend to come from within a violent subculture, yet its story contains loyalty and altruism. This is unlike the closing of Reservoir Dogs as retribution breeds ignorance and is therefore self-destructive in the end. Jules walks away from the closing scene of Pulp Fiction a new man having discovered the importance of morality. However, some of the information vital to the moral ending of the story has been left out of the plot and therefore the film itself.¹⁷

It is from this idea of redemption and loyalty amongst characters, that I am lead to think that there is more to the films of Tarantino than just a discussion of style thus prompting my discussion for the following chapter. Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction can be read as morality plays about masculinity "the main characters are all enmeshed in the problems of loyalty and honor amongst their peers. It is within the next chapter that I will discuss issues that have prompted much social criticism.

CHAPTER TWO

TARANTINO'S APPROACH TO GENDER AND RACE

Tarantino has the real nihilism of our times down. He represents the ultimate in white cool: a hard-core cynical vision that would have everyone see racism, sexism, homophobia but behave as though none of that shit really matters, or if it does it means nothing because none of it's gonna change.

After discussing Tarantino's formal qualities in Chapter One, I wanted to further my investigation through this next chapter by finding out to what extent Tarantino is actually talking about society outside the world of cinema. His films seem to connect with broader social discourses and debates, in particular notions of gender and race. Both *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* provide a raw and rather disturbing portrayal of the way men respond and react to their worlds and the issue of race that surrounds them. However, I would argue that this chosen approach is due to Tarantino wanting simply a reaction from his audience, usually one of abhorrence, instead of presenting an issue that causes a reaction for its own sake. I believe that he does not use these debatable subjects for social critiques, but merely for effect - this director was not concerned in using his films to provoke discussion about important topics such as gender and race. However, as a result of this approach to entertainment, Tarantino has quite obviously attracted a wide collection of social critiques on his works. It is within this chapter that I will look over these issues to see if this really is the true of Tarantino. Is he merely setting out to entertain his audience through his provocative approach to filmmaking or does this man feel it necessary

to include strong underlying political concerns within his texts so that he could claim great critical attention?

Perceived Male Stereotypes

“Tarantino seems more comfortable establishing complex relationships between males characters, then he does between males and females.”

Tarantino's approach to gender is often seen as transgressive in his regard for masculinity. There are a lot of male on male relationships within his circle of characters. Through this analysis of Tarantino's approach to his men, I will argue that he just wants his audience to watch and listen, to be entertained by their actions, yet through this he manages to attract more critical attention than he ever imagined. It seems evident that there is a reflexive form of machismo in his first two films - the prime weapon is a gun and the standard operating procedure is force perhaps portraying these films as the definitive tough-guy movies of which are very male centred. Within Reservoir Dogs the use of nonspecific names using a designation of a colour for the characters initially seems appealing, but when taking a deeper look at it, it could be said that the imaginative use of this device is to make each man a representative of a type rather than being a real person. The men are cinematic creations, stereotypes from other film genres, yet they talk like real people - like people we know. The pointless conversations that the men have at the start of the film can on the surface seem entertaining and humorous: “eight men sit round a dinner banquette talking heartedly about the trivial and the mundane,” but once again by looking at this further I would argue that Tarantino is just making a comment on the pointlessness of many conversations that men hold together. It becomes apparent that discussions of emotions among these men never really occur, they just talk a lot about

irrelevant details connected to everyday life, for example the ethics of tipping waitresses and Madonna. They never give anything away; the audience certainly find it hard to grasp any emotional elements from the men. I believe from this brief analysis that Tarantino did set out to entertain his viewers through, for example his use of popular culture references and his stylized violence and special effects as discussed in chapter one, yet Tarantino unintentionally has produced issues that people feel the need to discuss critically. Through a more detailed analysis of the films I will attempt to confirm this.

Reservoir Dogs is a film that “conflates masculinity, violence and the underclass.” It is noticeable as the drama unfolds that each survivor represents a different stereotype of masculinity. The mise en scene of the warehouse provides the scene for the meeting point for all the gang members to return to after completing the heist. It is large and empty and has a secluded feeling about it. From this we are invited as a viewer to see men’s worlds as bleak, unfriendly and distressing. A suggestion of a dysfunctional environment is made about where the men are hiding out - it is cold, detached and hostile. As a viewer we automatically are shocked at the sight of the wounded and bleeding Mr. Orange. He lies on the dirty floor of this uninhabited building that is hard and uncomfortable. Tarantino works hard to cover up this feeling that we may have for this man by playing in the background seventies music from the radio. The irony of this is alarming, as the director overlays the severity of the physical environment by incorporating seventies rock music, a form known for its upbeat mood and enjoyable listening capacity. During the violent torture scene discussed in chapter one, the well-known track “Stuck in The Middle with You” by the Stealers Wheel is played suggesting that men engage popular culture as a solution or an escape from the real world. For men, the music is suggested as an element to help avoid the truth instead of realizing it.

The thieves within this film could be seen to be representations of the stereotypical modern man who will not talk about anything to do with their personal life. They will never allow their personality to be susceptible and certainly do not allow other men into their emotional world. The image that the men strive for is that of an expert in what they do. They want to be good at their job, get it done with no mistakes and then most importantly walk away with the benefits. We see this obsession in the two characters of Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi). They both claim that, although the heist has gone drastically wrong, they still undoubtedly have the experience of a skilled bank robber - a professional. As all the plans fall apart around their feet, they are surrounded by blood and suffering, yet they both scream at each other about what is left to do. As a result of this Tarantino is presenting a macho world that is collapsing, a new entertaining form of a gangster movie, yet once again providing an abundance of material for a social critique on men.

The character of Mr. Pink represents a very negative male stereotype, "he is the physical embodiment of rodent." He is arrogant and is openly proud of supposedly killing Mr. Blonde for his dishonourable behaviour. He is a man full of audacity that is immediately squashed when he sees that this man still lives. At the first sign of an argument his aggression results in him holding up his gun as a first reaction, he is a needy man that needs to be protected behind something. Narrow-minded and holding strong opinions, Pink eventually shows a deep insecurity and fear as he backs away with his tail between his legs showing the weakness in his character. Mr. Blonde also represents a negative male stereotype in the form of a monster, as he simply cannot possess any feelings as we learn in the torture scene. Interestingly, Tarantino lets the audience in closer to this particular character as we learn his real

name, Vic Vega and a little of his past, that he was on the team as a reward for serving a jail sentence to protect the boss of the heist. We are to see that this character is not the average filmic psycho killer; he is a man who gets through his life with the use of violence and control and is obliged to nobody. I would argue that the reasons Tarantino lets us in on this character's details and not the others is so that we are left feeling more uncomfortable about him, as a viewer we squirm in our seats when he is on screen not knowing what he will do next - a reaction that the director strives for in his films. He is not simply a type like his colleagues whom we feel nothing for due to only knowing them in the present situation of the action. Extra knowledge of Blonde's character gives us a stronger understanding why he carries out such brutal attacks as we have learnt he is has been capable of such crime before.

The stereotypical male way of pretending to be something you are not is indicated by Tim Roth's character, Mr. Orange who has a falsity surrounding his whole identity. He is representative of a man that lives a lie and who develops entertaining stories to strengthen his deceptiveness and gain acceptance with other men. Mostly always alone, we see this character very clearly die alone too. Before the policeman goes undercover with this gang of thieves he reassures himself that they have no clue of his real identity. In order for his own survival he has to start believing his own falsehood.

It is interesting to see Tarantino connecting the moral goodness of Mr. Orange's character with Mr. White who seems to provide the film with its honourable centre. They strike up an unstoppable bond from the beginning sharing a careful understanding resulting in the more adult character of Mr. White acting like a father figure to Mr. Orange, "his

character incarnates a certain paternal authority of experience.” There is a hint of an internal buddy movie subplot with these two characters, yet Tarantino can never say it. This would take away the element of cool that surrounds the men. Advice on how to control the public before committing a crime is passed down to the younger man. White then shows unusual boldness from a known criminal by pulling Orange out of danger on the streets and into somewhere secure. In his reasoning to Pink, although White is cruelly realistic about his reasons for not leaving him outside a hospital, he is still able to offer genuine care and support for the suffering policeman. This allegiance stems from this stereotypical male paternal instinct he has felt towards Mr. Orange. However, throughout the film everyone is unaware of Orange’s real identity - this provides a source of real pathos as the only real encouraging relationship in the film is based on dishonesty. All the way through the film the audience watches Keitel’s character get close to another man, we discover White has told Orange where he is from which breaks a rule set down by the boss of this mob. The only reward we see for this loyalty is in the closing scene when Orange lets him know the painful truth of his identity. Mr. White is a symbol of the outcome of letting others get too close.

It is clear that Tarantino wants to mess with the male stereotype in order to entertain the audience in an unusual way. After watching *The Godfather* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, it is noticeable immediately that this film is about organized crime. I would argue that Tarantino presents a study in films about organized crime. Coppola captures the audience within his story and only at the end of the film does the viewer return to the real world. Tarantino on the other hand takes his male characters and just puts them in a gangster role. With the gangster personas ascertained, he then exploits the viewers’ expectations by placing this male stereotype in non-traditional

scenarios. It is all just a performance for this director. He uses his male characters to role-play being “cool” instead of being authentic like Coppola’s Don Corleone. The director’s second directorial production can also be seen as a series of character outlines about men and their relationships with one another. Within the three-fold narrative of Pulp Fiction, the most striking example is the story involving Bruce Willis’s character, Butch. It seems strange that someone would go back after narrowly escaping themselves to save their hated enemy, yet “faced with a moral choice, Butch chooses to save the man who moments earlier tried to kill him.” The thought of a man raping another man, whoever they might be, fills Butch with the desire to return to that dangerous place and save this man from a humiliating rape scenario. The character knows that he will once more be putting his life at risk by returning, but saving another man’s male pride seems the most moral thing for him to do. Butch is far from the ideal male hero or the good guy that has been seen before in more conventional films. At first he tries to drive over Marcellus as he is a bully and an idiot, but as with all other characters in pulp Fiction, he is on the wrong side on the side of the bad guys. However, through Tarantino’s choice of portrayal of these chosen masculinities, we as the audience are on the same side too. We are forced to sympathize with Butch and most of the other characters as well due to the line between good and bad guys being blurred and our more usual identifications are disrupted.

We see Tarantino push his idea of machismo to its limits when he shows his male characters’ intolerant stance towards homosexuality. Jules presents an infuriated response to his partner Vincent during a debate about whether either of them would massage a man’s foot like they would to a woman. Homosexual relationships are not put across in a positive light. I would argue that Tarantino prefers to portray the most sophisticated and realistic relationships between heterosexual

men who share silent ties and careful loyalties. Tarantino's male characters can easily tolerate disloyal and selfish behaviour within a relationship as long as a woman or a homosexual does not threaten it.

I like the idea of following a female lead character. I think I have an extremely unfair rap from people who say, "Ah, but can he write women?"

This evidence thus suggests that Tarantino shares very little with his female characters. It is clear to an audience as discussed above that the male stereotype is stylish and complex, yet highly attuned to their surroundings. The women on the other hand are often portrayed as simple-minded and trivial. To receive any grounding of their characteristics, the viewer has to look into their relationships with the men in order to get any definition of their personality. However, it is in Tarantino's third directorial piece that we are caught in an unexpected situation. The film Jackie Brown is still a film about men and their relationships, yet we notice that they are defined and interceded through female personalities, "there are two strong, well-drawn characters." The director attempts a film with a female point of view and I would argue that this results from a reaction against the people who have labeled him as a macho director. The narrative is motivated by the clever ideas of the central female character - she is determined to get the better off the villainous Ordell who is cold-blooded and easily capable of murdering her for her actions if all was to go wrong. Loneliness seems to surround Jackie Brown; her independence becomes obvious from watching her in many scenes alone. Nevertheless it is implied that she is not lonely for male friendship. The potential romance between her and Max is never quite reached as Tarantino is keen to keep his female character independent. We see

her as possessing a kind personality unlike many of the director's past central characters. As she enlists the help of the infatuated bail agent in an illegal scheme against both the police and the villainous Ordell, she does not become selfish or shrewish. Instead, the director's female character is more like an archetypal male hero who is allowed an intricacy of character adequate to allow good and bad to co-exist without fear of cinematic vengeance - as a result she does not come to her death at the end of the plot.

This director likes all his central characters to walk away at the end whether they are male or not as it entertains the audience - they are left wondering about what the future will hold for all his characters. This film can be seen as recognizable as one of Tarantino's as all his gangsters give up in one way or another at the close of the narrative. Tarantino is keen to portray Brown as a survivor. Brown knows the kind of poverty she is heading for as a middle aged, single black woman with few salable skills. The director opens and closes this movie with a long shot of her alone and moving symbolizing the extent to which this is Brown's story alone. The film explores the image of black women who are good people, but who turn to crime in order to help fund the life they desire. Through this observation of Tarantino's approach to gender, we can note that his fame is due to his willingness to substitute an aesthetic realism for a political and moral one. As much as the director might try to merely entertain, it is the surfacing of his own politics and values conveyed through his storytelling that stand out as serious points for critical discussion.

The CNT Word

"I just don't feel the whole white guilt and pussyfooting around race issues. I'm completely above all that."

The overt issue of racism is clear amongst not only Tarantino's directorial works but also his screenplays too. The racist language is the most obvious element here. Verbal assaults and racist insults are plentiful in his works. Reservoir Dogs has been claimed to be the "new acceptable white male art form" but within this representation of a new cinematic tradition, the quality of the language seems to be regarded as very disturbing. There is a supposed humourous quality that surrounds the language - the naturalistic and racist form seems largely to be aimed at white audiences, "You've given white boys the kind of movies black kids get." The repeated use of the word "nigger" stays clearly in a viewer's mind. It could be argued that the word is seen as the most volatile word in the English language. Tarantino believed that "no one word should deserve such power in our culture." It was intended in his films that the frequent use of the word "nigger" would considerably smooth out its racial overtones. It could be said that Tarantino shows a naivety to the history that stems behind the word. The remark is powerful for a number of multifaceted reasons, an example being that the use of the word by different groups of whites and blacks has different undertones. Tarantino parades the term with no care before audiences for whom the suggesting power of the term is far from unlimited. However, as "black street culture and its vocabulary are at the heart of the mainstream, if black people insist on using the word in public, then there is no justifiable reason why people from other races should not be able to do the same."

Within his films that are largely white and male orientated, Tarantino does very little to enhance his supposed moral sensitivity to the implications of this racist language. Not only do we see racism within the language of the films but also in the representation of blacks themselves. An example of this can be seen in Pulp Fiction. The two

black characters are portrayed as a drug dealer and gangster hit man. In developing these characters, the director provides subtle frustrations. The drug dealer, Marcellus is married to a white woman, however, I would argue that the issue of race at this point is placed on the back burner as the interracial marriage is never fully developed within the film. He then toys with the idea of punishing his villainous black character by placing him as a victim of homosexual rape by two white men. The scene is shocking in its dealing with gay bashing, yet no reference is made to its racist undertones of whites picking on a black man to get their pleasure. I would argue from this last point that racism is never placed at the forefront of Tarantino's movies because he has an unwillingness to tackle it as a political issue mainly because of his lack of knowledge for its details. He merely wants to provoke a reaction with its subject matter instead of producing moments that will historically stand as extreme racial examples in the future.

With regards to race, his black male characters are "just into a dick thing," they get involved and do what is right in a white dominant world. Protest can be raised when regarding this issue as the audience notes that Jimmy's wife in Pulp Fiction is black, yet we never get to see her face. Bell Hook believes that this is the "fun thing^{T34} about Tarantino's movies as he makes "that shit look ridiculous so everybody is gonna get it and see how absurd it is.^{T34} I would agree with Hook as there is a definite entertaining element here, but as a result I believe that Tarantino picked up this discussion surrounding the colour of Jimmy's wife and returned with his following film. Tarantino cannot avoid social critique over the issue of race when it comes to his third directorial piece, Jackie Brown. This film comments on race relations (especially placing a black woman as the central character), as it is beholden to the history of the black media and the film genre of blaxploitation films. I believe that Tarantino cannot avoid connecting

with broader social discourses and debates within this film, as it is one suited to the study of race as “there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger and that this explains racism.”³⁵ Black and white characters interact throughout the film, yet their difference is made clear. The white characters are sexually ineffectual and captivated by drugs, the black characters are seen to be violent. The difference between the colours of these people however, is shown through the director placing the white characters as enduring the hardships that come their way, whilst portraying the black characters as causing their own.

Connecting the issue of race with the already discussed issue of gender, we see Jackie being placed above all the other characters in terms of constructing an effective plan. Her clever ways stretch beyond the wit of Ray, the policeman and Ordell, the villain, “what is so neat about Jackie’s character is that she isn’t revealing at all.” She pro-actively builds a relationship with both of them for her own gain. As the narrative concludes, the female character symbolizes the only victorious one to walk away from the plan. Ordell, on the other hand represents the main black male character in the film that is far from successful at the end. It seems obvious that this character likes to surround himself with white people. Throughout the film, he spends time with Melanie and Louis, he dresses in very light clothes and lives in an apartment, which is decorated throughout in a light beige colour. As the narrative progresses, however, we see his character returning to his black identity - an example of this is the dark clothing he chooses to wear before he murders someone. His character turns off all the lights in the small apartment placing it in darkness before attempting to kill Jackie. I would argue that Tarantino chose to present these subtleties around the character of Ordell in order to highlight his blackness further. It is interesting to see the character of Max adopting like

Ordell, cross-colour relationships. Unlike the disrespect and cruelty that Melanie suffers from Ordell, Max and Jackie produce a relationship that is based on equality and respect for one another. Ordell and Max continue to mirror each other's images - we see this in the black assistant Max hires; Ordell has Louis. There is a small subtlety of the issue of the soundtrack - Ordell listens to Country music while Max grows a passion for soul music sung by a black group called the Delfonics. As the narrative closes, we learn that Jackie, although a hero, is unable to enjoy her position and despite the fact that she overcame both black and white characters, she is still left without a relationship with Max. The film shares with us that in despite of colour; any character can endure success or failure.

The presence of the racial issues that run through Tarantino's work is most valid for critical discussion as proved above, yet I would argue his inclusion of them could be due to the simple influence of blaxploitation films of the seventies that he gained while working as a film store clerk. It could be said that Tarantino pays respect to characters such as Jules and Jackie Brown who hold "roots in a genre that celebrated characters' blackness and portrayed them as powerful, influential figures." Unintentionally, however, the director has created racist characters that will not be forgotten by critics in the future when it comes down to discussing racism as a political issue.

Tarantino simply wants his audiences to react to his work in as many different ways as possible. I would argue that he is aware of his approach to gender and race within his films, yet feels they are there merely there to entertain. To do this Tarantino simply messes with the stereotypes that exist in social discourses and debates. After watching *The Godfather* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, it is noticeable

immediately that this film is about organized crime. I would argue that Tarantino presents a study in films about organized crime. Coppola captures the audience within his story and only at the end of the film does the viewer return to the real world. Tarantino on the other hand takes his male characters and just puts them in a gangster role. With the gangster personas ascertained, he then exploits the viewers' expectations by placing this male stereotype in non-traditional scenarios. It is all just performance as a means of entertainment for this director. He uses his male characters to role-play being "cool" instead of being authentic like Coppola's Don Corleone. I would argue that this element of "cool" applies to Tarantino's fascination with blackness and black culture in the same way. The performance seems to be the most important element for this director. Dargis remarks, "For Tarantino, race and masculinity are conspicuous, determining and never beside the point." However, I believe this director uses these social issues merely for artful entertainment.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this study, I have come to believe through my investigation of Tarantino's directorial style that he is most definitely an artful and clever entertainer, yet at the same time possesses qualities as an artist that are most engaging. Within Chapter One, I discovered through my analysis of his stylistic approach to making films that he is a man that does something in order to cause an effect within his audience - good or bad, he does not seem to mind. His different approach to film dialogue and his refusal for a conventional narrative style creates interest in the audience as it is something that has not often been seen before in the world of film, thus creating a piece of work with a postmodern flavour.

I addressed Tarantino's approach to gender and race within my second chapter. There has been much social criticism of his ideas surrounding these areas, but I would argue that as a director he holds a distinctive quality by being very much aware of such social discourses and debates. Nevertheless this awareness is not an element he wanted to install in his audience. In fact, he wanted the exact opposite. It was not his intention to make films about anything in particular, just merely to entertain his viewers through a celebration of the thrills and glammers of contemporary film. I do believe however, that as much as Tarantino would like to ignore the criticism from the world outside of cinema, there is definite evidence of him acting upon some of it. An example of this is after *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino was criticized for his macho approach to filmmaking (as discussed in Chapter Two) so in return came back at this observation by placing a female as his central character in his third piece, *Jackie Brown*.

Tarantino shows us within his films that life can be compelling, enjoyable and utterly fulfilling. He includes elements that run close to life - if an audience wants to draw a social message from them (it is within my second chapter that I have shown it to be possible) then all the more beneficial for Tarantino as a film director. Such social criticism can only heighten his media persona, creating great interest from an audience who will long to return and be entertained once more.