

Pulp Fiction

(1994, Tarantino, USA) 18, 148mins

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

Core Study Area: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Narrative (AL) Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study

- The film remains Tarantino's defining work. Its circular narrative and atypical representations of both antagonists and protagonists plus its now trademark script make it quintessential Tarantino. He announced his post-modern styling with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and in his script for *True Romance* (1993) but with *Pulp Fiction* he achieved mainstream success.
- Of his body of work only *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012) have grossed more worldwide. *Pulp Fiction* was the first American Independent film to earn over \$100 million at the USA box office and heralded the arrival of Indiewood as a production phenomenon. It won the Palme d'Or and an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, both in 1994.

STARTING POINTS – beginnings and endings

00:27 – The opening shot

- Two small-time criminal lovers (Pumpkin – Steve Roth and Honey Bunny – Amanda Plummer) chat about the etiquette of robbery at length in a characteristic dialogue heavy scene (largely shot as a low angle two shot) before they hold up the diner they're eating in. Aside from establishing Tarantino's novel approach to

screenwriting (holding scenes for a long time and building rich characterisations - even for antagonists through whimsical dialogue) we also see the germination of characters (two psychotic lovers) later developed in Tarantino's story material for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1995) – itself a classic example of post-modern film. Honey Bunny's transformation into a horrifically violent robber is immortalised in her words – “If any of you fucking pricks move... I'll execute every mother-fucking last one of you.” The image then freeze frames and the iconic music that intros *Pulp Fiction* from *Dick Dale and the Del Tones* (a 60s surf rock guitarist) runs over the intentionally ‘pulp styled’ titles.

02:23:15 to 02:23:30 – The end shot

- Vincent and Jules leave the diner having sent Honey Bunny and Pumpkin packing. The film cuts as they comically exit the building – dressed in their borrowed summer clothes (definitely not in character), walking in unison like a comic duo and holstering their guns in their short waistbands. It seems like every criminal in the diner (as in the film as a whole) failed to fulfil stereotypical expectations.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- 06:47: Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) in a deep-focus, two-shot, close up. As in the diner sequence that precedes this scene the dialogue is rambling and inflected with cultural references ‘the little differences’ between Europe and the USA: hash is legal in Amsterdam (where Tarantino wrote the screenplay) where one can also buy beer in movie theatres. McDonalds and Burger King also get namechecked. The conversation continues to the next scene as they walk to do ‘a hit’ this time revolving around firstly the nature of

TV Pilot shows and secondly the etiquette of giving foot massages. Their sharp suits look similar to the suits worn by the key protagonist in Tarantino's first feature, *Reservoir Dogs* and have a retro 60s styling not unlike the choice of music Tarantino used to score the film.

- 08: 45 : The now classic 'boot/trunk shot'. Tarantino didn't invent this low angle shot but popularised it and has used it in a number of his films. The film has many low angle shots although this is the most extreme example.
- 20:22 & 22:23: Our first close-up of the film's star Bruce Willis – playing a fading boxer, Butch. He is being spoken to by Marsellus Wallace (off-screen) who is telling him to take a dive in a fight. Butch barely says a word and Tarantino holds the shot for 2 minutes before cutting to a wider over-the-shoulder-shot. Tarantino lets the script direct rather than following the conventional mechanics of shot-reverse-shot. The effect is to create an unsettling intensity and build characterisation.

Mise-en-Scène

- Vincent opens the enigmatic briefcase, the property of his gangster boss Marsellus Wallace. We never see what is in the case and only the golden glow on Vincent's face and his awe suggest it contains a real prize.
- The faux restaurant – Jack Rabbit's Slim – is full of movie and music references: the Douglas Sirk steak, Marilyn Monroe and Buddy Holly waiting staff, film posters on the wall. The dance scene that follows between Vincent and Mia is a homage to a dance scene in Goddard's movie *Band a part* (1964) which is also the name of Tarantino's production company – A Band Apart (1991 – 2006).

Editing

- 29:00 :The 'cooking-up' montage where Vincent gets high, floating, as if in a dream, against poor back projection.
- A graphic ECU of a hypodermic contrasts with the surrealism of the driving. (29:31 – 29:34)
- 33:04: Mia draws a post-modern square on the screen as she tells Vincent not to be square.

Sound

- The music. There is real retro feel to Tarantino's choice of music something he had already pioneered in *Reservoir Dogs*. The music also embellishes character rather than merely driving the narrative.

- The tendency to hold shots and do long-takes mean songs can be played for the duration or at least for much longer than the snippets heard in many conventional Hollywood films. Sometimes the music is diegetic as when we first meet Mia Wallace (shown only through her lips, feet and hands and heard on an intercom) a song is playing diegetically, stopping when she takes the needle off the record and later, after Mia and Vincent return from their night out, Mia puts on a tape recording of yet more diegetic music.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

Ethnicity, gender, age

- The film is notable for its heavy use of the racist term 'nigger' – something that Spike Lee in his occasional war with Tarantino has taken exception too. However Alan Stone in his 1995 review in the *Boston Review* reads the film as 'politically correct': "There is no nudity and no violence directed against women.... [It] celebrates interracial friendship and cultural diversity; there are strong women and strong black men, and the director swims against the current of class stereotype."

Aesthetics

- The film opens (00:14) with a definition of the term 'pulp' from the *American Heritage Dictionary, New College Edition*. The two definitions are: "1. A soft, moist, shapeless mass of matter and 2. A magazine or book containing lurid subject matter ..." Tarantino arguably achieved the first definition with his narrative structuring of the film and the latter with his thematic exploration of the seamier side of L.A. life. Indeed an interest in 'noir' themes permeate many of his films.
- As a one-time Video store worker and self-confessed cinephile, Tarantino's influences range from golden age Hollywood films to cult art cinema and B-movies from around the world. Toilets are a motif as are guns and drugs and suits. Dialogue motivates many of the scenes and low angle camerawork, long low tracks all feature heavily.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts – Post-modernism – the decontextualized theory

Post-modernism

- James Woods in *The Guardian* scathingly noted: “Tarantino represents the final triumph of postmodernism, which is to empty the artwork of all content, thus avoiding its capacity to do anything except helplessly represent our agonies.... Only in this age could a writer as talented as Tarantino produce artworks so vacuous, so entirely stripped of any politics, metaphysics, or moral interest.” (November 12th 1994) At first glance Woods seems correct and there are few Historical/Social/Political insights that can be gleaned from the film other than its prominent position as a leading example of classic post-modern filmmaking... and that is more than enough! Post-modernism is a tricky concept but Tarantino’s take on it certainly fits the profile: ironic, intertextual, self-referential, full of homage and pastiche, playful and stylish. All style and no substance.
- However on reflection I believe Tarantino is more subversive. He doesn’t just break the rules of genre but he humanizes genre – and so he shows that the rules for cinematically representing and classifying people are at best inept. Tarantino’s ability to humanize stock characters like Vincent and Jules is important for this very reason as, no matter how amoral they are, we find ourselves empathizing with them. And generic convention too, with its comforting narrative arcs and neat resolutions, is something Tarantino also challenges – thus Vincent dies an inglorious death and Marvin is shot by accident in the car and Jules has a religious epiphany.
- Tarantino’s famous set pieces also subvert convention and unsettle the comfy moral universe of genre films, but to argue that they are merely style over substance is to miss the point. Tarantino’s humanist irony is a moral position by which to view the world where the old structures no longer apply but where moral outcomes are still achievable. So, for example in *Pulp Fiction*, (as in more recently *Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*) Jules becomes the good shepherd rather than the avenging angel; Vincent saves Mia’s life; Butch outwits Marsellus and runs off with Fabienne; Marsellus ‘gets medieval’ on the sadistic rednecks and Butch retains his father’s gold watch. All ‘happy endings’ by most standards.
- Amable and laconic Vincent is however less fortunate and his fate suggests further room for analysis. Peter and Will Brooker note, “In three significant moments Vincent retires to the bathroom [and] returns to an utterly changed world where death is threatened.” (Brooker, Peter, and Will Brooker (1996). “Pulpmodernism: Tarantino’s Affirmative Action”, in *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and Karen J. Shepherdson (London and New York: Routledge) The threat increases as the narrative progresses chronologically leading to his death. The Brookers’ analysis continues, “Through Vince . . . we see the contemporary world as utterly contingent, transformed, disastrously, in the instant you are not looking.”
- It is perhaps in the area of ‘influence’ and enduring cultural resonance that Tarantino has had the most impact. His films haven’t changed the moral or political landscape but they have certainly contributed to film culture. Phil Hoad in *The Guardian* (15th January 2013) asked this very question ‘Is Quentin Tarantino the World’s most influential director?’ They went on to cite the Collins Dictionary that had then defined the adjective ‘Tarantinoesque’ as referring to or reminiscent of the violence and wit of Tarantino’s films. His influence remains and according to the article above can be found in “any lippy thriller featuring pop culture-fried dialogue and flip violence.” Guy Ritchie take note!

Institutional

- The film was originally the property of Columbia Tristar but fell out of favour while still in the development stage. The film was then picked up by Harvey Weinstein at Miramax – then a leading independent distributor. *Pulp Fiction* was the first major production of Miramax once they had been bought by Disney in 1993 for \$60 million). Bruce Willis signing onto the picture guaranteed good overseas sales due to his waning but still potent star status meaning the picture soon went into profit.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - NARRATIVE AND AUTEUR - STARTING POINTS - Narrative

- The film’s most post-modern trait (aside from irony, homage, intertextuality and self-referencing) is a narrative playfulness. The narrative can at best be described as episodic

and circular but only a written breakdown can do it justice as it is convoluted and complex.

So:

- *Scene 1:* Honey Bunny and Pumpkin hold the diner up.
- *Scene 2:* Vincent and Jules drive to their 'hit' – dressed in sharp black suits. We learn that Vincent has been asked to look after his Boss's wife the following evening. They kill the young men who have cheated Marcellus Wallace (their Boss) and retrieve his 'goods' in a mysterious briefcase.
- *Scene 3:* In a bar. Titled: Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife. Marcellus Wallace tells Butch to throw a boxing match. Jules and Vincent walk in with the briefcase but oddly dressed in shorts. We learn Vincent's 'date' with Mia Wallace is the next evening. Butch and Vincent eyeball each other.
- *Scene 4:* Vincent scores some heroin from his friend and dealer.
- *Scene 5:* Vincent gets high and drives to pick Mia Wallace up.
- *Scene 6:* Vincent and Mia eat and dance at Jack Rabbit Slims.
- *Scene 7:* Vincent and Mia return to her house. She OD's.
- *Scene 8:* Vincent drives Mia to Lance, his drug dealer's house and resuscitate Mia.
- *Scene 9:* Vincent drives Mia home.
- *Scene 10:* Butch as a kid getting a visit from a soldier who knew his dead dad in a Vietnam POW camp. The man presents Butch with a family heirloom, a gold watch that his Dad hid up his arse for 5 years. His dad died of dysentery and so his friend kept the watch for two further years up his own arse.
- *Scene 11:* The Gold Watch. Butch's fight – only heard not seen. He doesn't go down and escapes the venue in a Yellow cab driven by a beautiful foreign lady, Esmerelda. Marcellus wants him dead. Esmerelda and Butch talk about killing as the fighter who fought against Butch has died.
- *Scene 12:* Butch returns to a hotel room and his foreign girlfriend. He discovers his Father's watch is left at their old apartment.
- *Scene 13:* Butch returns to get his watch and shoots Vincent in the toilet.
- *Scene 14:* On his way back he meets Marcellus at a crossing, runs him down and is then concussed in car accident. Marcellus chases Butch.
- *Scene 15:* Both injured men end up in a pawn shop run by sexually sadistic red necks.
- *Scene 16:* Both men wake up, tied to chairs in a darkened basement used for torture. Two men seem set to torture them and the leather-clad Gimp' is brought out from a box. Butch escapes his bonds while Marcellus is being raped in a back room. He almost leaves the shop but decides to stay and rescue Marcellus with a samurai blade. Marcellus and Butch make their peace.
- *Scene 17:* Butch gets a chopper motorbike and rides off into the sunset with his girlfriend Fabian.
- *Scene 18:* The Bonnie Situation. We return to the end of scene 2. A Fourth Man, hiding in the bathroom, appears but doesn't successfully shoot Jules and Vincent. Jules has a religious epiphany. They decide to take the lone survivor, Marvin to Marcellus.
- *Scene 19:* Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin in the car. They call a friend, Jimmy (Tarantino doing a cameo).
- *Scene 20:* 'Mr Fix It' – The Wolf is summoned (Harvey Keitel). He arrives 'nine minutes and thirty seven seconds later...' according to on screen text.
- *Scene 21:* Jules and Vincent clean the car, strip their bloody clothes and wear some of Jimmy's summer cast offs.
- *Scene 22:* They take the car and body to a breakers yard. Mr Wolf drives off.
- *Scene 23:* Jules and Vincent end up at the diner where the film begins and witness the attempted robbery by Pumpkin and Honey Bunny. Jules, still feeling religious, talks them out of it.

STARTING POINTS – Auteur

- Tarantino is clearly an auteur in the sense that he has a vision which emerges in his control of the medium. This ranges from effective collaboration with such actors as Uma Thurman, Tim Roth and Harvey Keitel to his late editor Sally Menke. He writes acts, produces and of course directs and his choice of music as well as his frequent cinematic homages makes his control of the medium intense if not complete. Certainly the themes and style explored in this fact sheet would give strong evidence for his auteur status.