

UPDATED PREVIOUS CASE STUDY FOR POSTMODERNISM CHAPTER: *PULP FICTION* (US 1994)

Many have called *Pulp Fiction* (US 1994) a typically **postmodern** product, so it seems worth testing it against some of the features argued to characterise **postmodernism**.

- In what sense can it be called postmodern?
- Which of its characteristics might this term describe?
- Through what other theoretical approaches can it be discussed ?

Applying 'postmodern' textual criteria to 'Pulp Fiction'

Intertextuality is evidently in play. The film makes references to gangster, boxing, war, musical, blaxploitation, romance and even arthouse genres (in its homage to the French [modernist] director Jean-Luc Godard).

Echoes of Godard

- The name of the production company for the film, 'A Band Apart', is (almost) the French title of a film (*Bande A Part* (France 1964) by Godard (who is reported to have said of the tribute 'Why doesn't he just give me the money?')
- Vincent and Mia's dance in Jack Rabbit Slim's is a homage to a similar scene in the Godard film
- Mia/Thurman's hairstyle and 'look' deliberately echoes that of Anna Karina, an actress closely associated with Godard's life and work, who in turn was echoing the silent star Louise Brooks.

The references include possible ones across to other Tarantino films (is Vince the cousin or brother to Vic, 'Mr Blonde' Vega in *Reservoir Dogs*? Or related to Suzanne Vega, the singer, as he says at one point?). They include the stars' other performances: Harvey Keitel as 'cleaner-up of murders' in Abel Ferrara's *The Assassin*; Travolta possibly acting here the future of Tony Manero, the dancer from *Saturday Night Fever*.the potential references are almost infinite, and certainly partly intended by Tarantino.



Figure 1 The scene in Jack Rabbit Slims is full of references to 50s stars and movies. © 1994 Mirimax and Buena Vista, courtesy British Film Institute

‘Yeah. Keep it in the shot. Movie geeks like me’ll be analysing this scene for years to come.’
Tarantino on the accidental inclusion of an orange balloon in a shot from *Reservoir Dogs*
(Clarkson: 161)

- **Modernist techniques.** *Pulp Fiction* makes fairly traditional use of editing for continuity, of cinematography for ‘legibility’ of meaning, of conventional lighting and sound, as well as of stars. But the film also represents some variation on these. There is some use of disruptions to the ‘Hollywood style’ (though compare the *Naked Gun* spoofs or *Wayne’s World* films) The film occasionally works with some odd angles (such as the shots of the backs of Jules’ and Vincent’s heads); some unusually long takes, and moments such as the one where Mia/Thurman mimes drawing a ‘square’ which unexpectedly appears on screen, or where the exact time it takes Mr. Wolf to get to the house is flashed up.
- **Absence of history** The film has no specific location or setting in time/history. The present or early 1990s seem to be referenced in the McDonald’s chat, Jules’ cellular phone, the talk of body-piercing, 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’.
- **Hybridity** As well as intertextual references, the tone of the film is disorienting in the way it clashes different kinds and levels of feeling. So, for example, Vincent is killed, absurdly, while on the toilet, reading a piece of pulp fiction just as Butch’s toaster alarm goes off-- in fact, *because* it goes off.

‘Butch doesn’t move, except to point the M61 in Vincent’s direction.
Neither man opens his mouth.
Then...the toaster loudly kicks up the PopTarts
That’s all the situation needed.’

From the screenplay of *Pulp Fiction*

Several scenes feature offhand shootings (deliberate and accidental) where the killer does not even look at the victim in a shocking juxtaposition.

- **Narrative structure:** it’s argued that the narrative of the film is fragmented and disorienting in terms of time and space (working with **micro-narratives**? giving a fragmented sense of location and history?)—and *therefore* postmodern. Several more recent films show a similar fracturing of conventional narrative, for example *The Usual Suspects*, *Magnolia*, *Run Lola Run*, *Memento*.

The relationship of plot and story

- One of the favourite parts of the narrative for fans is the way that much of it is devoted to ‘trivial’ conversations—about foot massage, burgers, pot bellies/tummies etc. This is *not* like the time given in *Psycho* to the apparently trivial action of Norman cleaning up the bathroom, for example. This in fact serves the narrative-- giving audiences relief after shock, and swerving suspicion away from Norman and perhaps towards ‘the mother’.

In *Pulp Fiction* real screen/syuzhet time is given to mundane discussions or activities without any such narrative function. (Though in a few cases, one could argue that a kind of ‘realist’

function is served. Anthony Lane suggests, of Travolta sitting on the toilet reading *Modesty Blaise*, that it shows ‘the nerve, in the midst of an action movie, to remind us of the pleasures of inactivity; the deep need to hang out.’ [Lane: 80])

Interestingly the banal conversations are often about verbal definition, and the difficulty of making it (what *is* the status of a foot massage? the difference between a tummy and a pot belly?). These conversations about trivial meanings seem to relate *both* to

- a) a kind of realism (most of us spend quite a bit of time in trivial conversations) and to
- b) postmodernism’s sense of the slipperiness of the signified, of words—like Jules’ puzzling over the meanings of the Bible, or the opening title’s double dictionary definition of ‘pulp’.

Let’s look at two other aspects of the organising of this narrative, using the concepts of story and plot, or fabula and syuzhet as they are sometimes called (see the *Wuthering Heights* exercise in the *Psycho* case study on this website).

- **Plot/syuzhet order**

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

‘Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace’s Wife’

‘The Gold Watch’ (including death of Vincent)

The Bonnie Situation

Epilogue (in the diner, during the robbery and its aftermath, taking us to a

few minutes after the end of the Prologue, at the beginning).

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 and Marcellus’ wife

The Bonnie Situation

Prologue

Epilogue

The ending of ‘The Gold Watch’ and the escape of Butch and Fabien

Q: Which is the last event of the story (fabula)?

A: Fabienne and Butch making their getaway on the chopper, at the end of ‘The Gold Watch’.

Q: Which is the last event in the plot (syuzhet)?

A: Vincent and Jules walking out of the diner (well before Vincent is killed during ‘The Gold Watch’).

Q: Is this complex narrative structure unprecedentedly random?

Does it have any sympathies, any key characters?

Does it belong to anything as conventional as a genre?

A: No, several other Hollywood (and independent) films, have been comparably complex, including *The Killing* (US 1956) which Tarantino acknowledged as one of many influences.

It clearly plays with traditionally male *genres* focused on honour: ‘you don’t leave a guy you’ve shared hell with’ (as when Butch goes back to save Marsellus, an act which echoes that of his father’s friend. The context is male bonding, (missing) father-son relationships, male professionalism (Mr Wolf/Keitel making a brutal parody of a housewifely ‘clearing up’), coping with violence in this small time killers’ underworld.

So how to interpret the decision to end the syuzhet (and film) where it does, with Jules having turned his back (perhaps temporarily) on violence, and Vince jauntily walking out of the diner (to be shot on the toilet a little later)?

ACTIVITY 1

To explore its points of identification you could try literally, or in summary form, re-editing the film's events (summarised above) in chronological order.

The Brookers argue that the narrative is arranged so as to emphasise transformation and 'new lives':

- Butch's decision to act honourably, save Marsellus and begin a new life free of boxing with Fabienne (at the end of the fabula)
- Mia's resurrection (brought back from the dead) from the overdose, in a scene whose tone shifts the film's generic base almost to that of a vampire or horror movie
- Vincent and Jules' gaining of new purpose as they stride out of the diner at the end of the syuzhet (instead of the film ending close to the time when Vince is slumped dead in the toilet).

(One could add that, in industrial terms, John Travolta's career was resurrected by this film.)

Q: What do you think of this way of understanding the narrative's shape?

Does it suggest a 'random postmodernity' 'about nothing but style'?

Pulp Fiction: the production and promotion history

One of the problems of postmodernism as a theory is that it tends to be uninterested in histories of production, preferring to imply that a successful film somehow mysteriously expresses the 'spirit of the age'. The production history of this film suggests another way of understanding it: as a post-studio independent movie—remembering the complexity of that term 'independent' now.

It was assembled as a package deal: after the success of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) Jersey Films (with Danny de Vito a key player), owned by Tri-Star, paid Tarantino \$900,000 in advance. This enabled him to go to Amsterdam to work on a screenplay. However, when Tri-Star saw the script, they were anxious about the film's length, and the scene where Vincent injects himself with heroin. They sold it to Miramax who had bought *Reservoir Dogs* and knew the foreign earnings potential of its successor. Pre-sold foreign sales in fact covered the \$8m production costs of *Pulp Fiction*.

However the success of the film was also partly determined by the fact that just before its US release (May 1993) Miramax was bought by Disney. This meant that Disney's huge conglomerate clout (through its distribution company Buena Vista) enabled the expensive gamble of releasing what was basically an arthouse movie into 1300 US cinemas.

The gamble paid off; the film opened with \$9.3 receipts, top of the U.S. charts, which enabled further publicity and marketing possibilities. Disney exploited these with a promotional budget eventually as big as the production costs, and Tarantino proved a talented salesman for the film, especially on the festival circuit after it won the Palme D'Or at Cannes Film festival. (A further historical determinant: some sceptics pointed out that the jury at Cannes was headed by Clint Eastwood and that it ignored the claims of more obvious contenders, such as Kieslowski's *Three Colours Red*. Others suggested the Cannes award was a French effort to sweeten the Americans after rumours that they would in future boycott the festival in retaliation for the G.A.T.T. controversy.)

Thus the film was able to appeal to several different potential audiences. In addition, Disney launched it with a U.S.TV ad campaign promoting its humorous aspect, with posters featuring Travolta dancing. They coped with the fear of controversy about its violent content with the slogan ‘YOU WON’T KNOW THE FACTS UNTIL YOU SEE THE FICTION.’

The successful British release can be read as partly ensuing from Tarantino’s previous notoriety : the release of *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992 had overlapped with the shocking Jamie Bulger trial (when two young boys were convicted of brutally murdering a 2 year old child) and an accompanying moral panic over the effects of violent film material. This ensured high media coverage and cult status (as ‘forbidden texts’) for both films. In addition, *Reservoir Dogs* had still been refused a certificate when *Pulp Fiction* was released on video (though with one well publicised alteration: a change of the angle of shot when Vincent plunges the heroin needle into his arm).

Tarantino, authorship, postmodernism

Oddly enough, for a figure so often called ‘postmodern’, Tarantino has been very traditionally marketed as, and talks of himself as being very much an ‘auteur-star-director’, like others in post-studio Hollywood (Scorsese, Spielberg, and now Peter Jackson). Certainly his use of music, of albums which include key dialogue sections, and of casting decisions can be argued as innovative (though you might like to debate how helpful it is to think of them as ‘postmodern’). Like Hitchcock and others he often makes appearances in his films (in *Pulp Fiction* as a polite, domesticated coffee geek).

It is possible to read the adulation of him in a number of ways:

- as generational: a familiar delight by the young in anti-authority figures, and also in someone who’s ‘made it’ in ways that many (young men?) could hope to emulate. The idea of a smart kid from a single parent family, a one-time video shop salesman, ‘the slacker as auteur’ (Brooker) is one which understandably appeals. It makes a refreshing change from terms like ‘genius’ and more pompous celebrations of authorship.
- as class based. His career/branding does not start with time spent in elite Film Schools or privileged access to the industry via family connections (like Sofia Coppola). It works with a sense of the world as risky, as full of nooks and crannies, not the old established certainties—a point of identification for many would-be film makers. (Though see the role of powerful old Disney in his career, above.)
- as a search for stable meanings by some fans (‘*what is in the suitcase? Tarantino can tell us*’) among the sliding signifiers and relativism of *Pulp Fiction*, not to mention the world outside the film.
- as expressing a sense of the individual as the source of meanings, authenticity, intention, which, contradictorily, postmodern theorists have suggested has vanished from the world.

Tarantino himself takes a postmodern stance on meaning and authorship, at least in some of his statements.

Of Oliver Stone’s more political films (such as *Platoon*, *JFK*, *Wall Street*, *Nixon*) he has said: ‘He wants every single one of you to walk out thinking like he does. I don’t. I made *Pulp Fiction* to be entertaining. I always hope that if one million people see my movie, they saw a million different movies.’ (Brooker: 142)

ACTIVITY 2

If you have access to the Net, look up some popular Tarantino web sites and take notes on how his author-director star image is constructed there.

- How is he being understood/celebrated?
- What are the words that most often occur? Which anecdotes, quotes ?
- One of the main websites is called ‘*godamongdirectors*’: how might this relate to ‘postmodern’ theories of the individual and authorship?

Questions of representation

Postmodern approaches, while claiming to delight in the breakdown of old hierarchies, are not much interested in questions of representation, since they do not believe either in ‘the real’ or in the ability of language, or media to represent it.

In contrast to this (‘it’s all ironic’ ‘it’s all postmodern play’) are questions of **representation** (see Chapter 5 of MSB 4th edition), which we can pose of this film, as of any other.

- Though young women often enjoy the film, and its lack of simple sexism, some have seen it as yet another male centred story revelling in violent action and talk (not to mention employment for male actors) in a cinema dominated by such films. It broadly constructs its female characters mostly as either femmes fatales (like Mia) or the child-woman Fabienne. Even the vivid ‘Honey Bunny’ of the first scene is reduced to hysterical screeching in the last one, as though the film doesn’t know quite what to do with her.

Such critics would also point to the phenomenon of ‘laddishness’, and suggest there are problems in the kinds of jokes which particular films (and DJs, writers, singers etc) circulate, however the films situate them. This raises one of the central riddles of postmodern textuality: is the ‘ironic’ reading of an emphatically ‘reactionary’ character/text/joke necessarily a progressive thing? (See comments on ‘retro-sexism’, in Chapter 5 of MSB 4th edition).

- Opponents of this position have suggested that both men and women enjoy the film, and the key status of the bulk of its fans is as *students* rather than male or female. They’d also say you have to take each film on its merits, and *Pulp Fiction* is not sexist or racist in its totality.
- Tarantino’s repeated scripting of racist language in the mouths of his black characters caused most controversy in relation to his later film *Jackie Brown* (1998). In reply he has argued:
 - The black actors involved do not object, therefore why should anyone else?
 - Such language is natural for his characters, and does not mean the same in the mouth of a black American as it does for others
 - Critics such as Spike Lee are jealous of his standing in the Afro-American community (interview with Barry Norman, BBC, March 1998)

‘Sam Jackson uses ‘nigger’ all the time in his speech, that’s just who he is and where he comes from... I’m a white guy who’s not afraid of that word. I just don’t feel the whole white guilt and pussy-footing around race issues. I’m completely above all that.’

Tarantino, *Sight and Sound* magazine, March 1998

His critics argue:

-The characters are *constructed*, not just *described* by Tarantino: to argue ‘that’s just how they are’ is thus a cop-out

-Spike Lee has said that if he had put anti-semitic words (like ‘kike’) into the mouths of his black characters in *Mo’ Better Blues* (US 1990) to the extent that Tarantino does in his films, he would have been in deep trouble.

-Tarantino seems to be fascinated by, deeply desirous of having, ‘black cool’. But this is defined in very stereotyped, some would say negative, ways--as though it has to mean coping with extreme violence, being street smart, ‘dealing’ with women.

- Gay viewers have felt his films to be unsympathetic if not threatening, in their unproblematic sympathy for violently macho characters and, here, in the location of ‘the heart of darkness’ in the grotesque rape scene. This could also be said to re-circulate the oldest prejudices about the ‘redneck’ South of the USA.

References and further reading

There are now scores of books and articles on this film. But the following provide interesting perspectives. You could also try websites such as Senses of cinema, or Scope, for more advanced study.

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