

Pulp Fiction: Something or nothing?

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According to the public relations mill, *Pulp Fiction's* director, Quentin Tarantino, a high school dropout, spent the 1980s working in a Los Angeles video store watching every film in stock. Why should we assume, as the publicists imply, that this would have entirely positive results?

The film is an uptempo, smirking, occasionally mischievous rearrangement of movie and popular culture images of gangsters, gangsters' girlfriends, drug addicts, boxers and assorted psychopaths and lowlifes. It is a pastiche, perhaps even a pastiche of pastiches.

The very weakest aspects of *Pulp Fiction* are its lack of spontaneity, its self-consciousness and its posturing, which serve as a substitute for a serious look at life. Tarantino, to be blunt, is a show-off. He is obliged to call attention to everything in his film which he considers clever or daring.

The film is above all intended to make an impression on the spectator. One is not meant to know something more about the world by the end of the film—or it's perhaps an accident if one does—but to develop a certain attitude toward the filmmaker. Every grimace and every laugh, especially every *knowing* laugh, is a personal triumph for Quentin Tarantino. This is fairly childish.

Pulp Fiction is a film primarily composed of conceits. The first one concerns its title. Before the film begins, in case the spectator misses the point, the director places on the screen a dictionary definition of pulp fiction which suggests that it is work of a low-brow, lurid character.

Does Tarantino (screenwriter of *True Romance* and *Natural-Born Killers* and director of *Reservoir Dogs*) really think his film is trash? Of course not. One can be certain he has a high opinion of it. No one—or no one whose work endures—consciously sets out to produce a valueless film, novel, painting or anything else. Even most of the pulp fiction writers of a previous day whom Tarantino evokes in his title were undoubtedly working

to the best of their limited abilities.

In 1950, detective story writer Raymond Chandler, commenting on the pulp fiction of the late 1920s and early 1930s, made the following points: "Most of the plots were rather ordinary, and most of the characters rather primitive types of people. Possibly it was the smell of fear which the stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong.... The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night."

If we still read authors such as Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, Horace McCoy, et al, it is because these writers were able—to certain moments or in entire works—to go beyond "pulp" to art. The vast majority of pulp fiction writers have been justly forgotten.

Why does Tarantino in a self-consciously brazen fashion embrace and promote lurid, trashy material? Is this an affectation, or yet another symptom of the long, drawn-out decay of bourgeois culture? It may very well be both of those things, but there is another side to the problem.

The antagonism between "high culture" and "low culture" has reached a particularly malignant point. The denizens of the opera house and concert hall go about their generally mediocre business, steadied by the dead hand of tradition, as if nothing in the world has changed in the past half-century, while the creators of popular music and films, like tabloid journalists, feed almost exclusively off the surface ephemera of modern life, without thought, without a sense of history, without coherence.

Tarantino is undoubtedly foolish and shallow, but is he malicious? And once one sets aside the frantic, cartoonish goings-on, is there anything left of the film?

There is no point in waxing indignant about the incidents Tarantino depicts: innumerable casual

killings, an addict shooting up, a drug overdose and its "treatment," homosexual rape and so forth. First of all, for better or worse, the events are not particularly convincing.

One of the director's strong points seems to be his relatively cheerful approach to existence. Isn't there a danger in dealing lightheartedly with quite sinister activities and, in effect, making them attractive? Yes, there is. But the film has to be seen within its context—a social climate in which "traditional, family values" and "individual responsibility" are extolled and an unending series of Hollywood films and television programs whose protagonists are policemen, FBI and secret service agents and the like.

One has the impression, for example, that Tarantino would not be able to direct a film at this point which glorified corporate wealth, or the forces of law and order, or the "American way of life" as such. He would not be able to direct, say, *Forrest Gump*. There is a strand of revolt in Tarantino, perhaps faint, but nonetheless present, as well as a certain sympathy for the underdog, the outsider.

What is it that Tarantino seems to oppose? A staid existence, suburban respectability, conventional uprightness. The words and actions of government, religious and "community" leaders have no impact, indeed no presence (apparently), in the film's universe. Taken at face value, *Pulp Fiction* depicts a chaotic, disintegrating world in which each quite discrete experience or situation invokes (or fails to invoke) its own moral code. It's every man for himself and only the clever, fast-talking and fast-acting have a hope of surviving.

Is there a genuinely subversive slant to the film? Not really. The lowlifes it depicts are themselves all little entrepreneurs, envious of those with more cash and more power. The highest aspiration is to make a bundle and take off for the South Seas. The criminal world (even in this imaginary form) is thoroughly bourgeois. There's not a hint that things could be any other way.

One might reasonably conclude that *Pulp Fiction*'s widespread appeal reflects the prevailing ideological confusion as much as the film itself. Tarantino's film rejects, at least by implication, the well-intentioned, gradualist, ordered view of the universe associated with middle class liberalism. It revels in its own anti-intellectualism and disorientation. There are hints of a

sort of right-wing populism in this. On the other hand, it promulgates a kind of anarchistic disgust with official society and institutions which also obviously strikes a chord. Its backwardness and its vaguely oppositional character are bound up with one another.

The film has its charms, particularly the comic turn of Samuel L. Jackson (which could, however, have been whittled down) as one of two hitmen, and the performance of John Travolta as the other. The latter demonstrates that despite everything (the Church of Scientology, a string of dreadful films), he is an extraordinary actor. His Vincent Vega is slightly overweight and gone to seed, a bit dense, continually perplexed, oddly well-meaning.

When he doesn't overdo things or indicate his cleverness with a dozen exclamation marks, Tarantino does demonstrate a certain feeling for the banality of lower middle class existence, for its linguistic rhythms, its social patterns, its kitsch, even at certain moments—when he can be bothered—the pathos of dead-end lives.

The film's positive qualities, however, are swamped by Tarantino's perpetual smirk. Moreover, the highly-praised inane dialogue genuinely is inane and calls attention to itself far too often. One reviewer thought it a compliment to note that "Tarantino's world is like *Seinfeld* with profanity and hard drugs: the characters talk and talk, about nothing." That's not entirely true, but true enough to be damning.

All in all, Tarantino has, one senses, a thoroughgoing, perhaps unremediable ignorance about where his strengths lie or what he might be able to say if he looked a little closer at the reality in front of his nose. Some of the same problems will remain with us as long as American film makers prefer to dump chaos and violence on the screen in an essentially unthought-out fashion rather than consider the set of social and psychological circumstances which produced it.



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