

Pulp Fiction

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When Quentin Tarantino traveled for the first time to Amsterdam and Paris, flush with the critical success of "Reservoir Dogs" and still piecing together the quilt of "Pulp Fiction," he was tickled by the absence of any Quarter Pounders with Cheese on the European culinary scene, a casualty of the metric system. It was just the kind of thing that comes up among friends who are stoned or killing time. Later, when every nook and cranny of "Pulp Fiction" had become quoted and quantified, this minor burger observation entered pop culture with a flourish as part of what fans call the "Tarantinoverse."

With its interlocking story structure, looping time frame, and electric jolts, "Pulp Fiction" uses the grammar of film to explore the amusement park of the Tarantinoverse, a stylized merging of the mundane with the unthinkable, all set in a 1970s time warp. Tarantino is the first of a slacker generation to be idolized and deconstructed as much for his attitude, quirks, and knowledge of pop-culture arcana as for his output, which as of this writing has been Jack-Rabbit slim.

Each segment rises to a giddy crescendo. The hitmen played by John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson retrieve their boss's valuable suitcase but accidentally shoot their informant in the face, leaving a horrible mess in the car that needs to be cleaned up ASAP. Vincent Vega (Travolta) takes the boss's wife (Uma Thurman) out for an evening, at the end of which she ODs and is brought back from the dead like something out of a low-budget horror movie. A boxer (Bruce Willis) refuses to take a dive but can't leave town until he retrieves the watch his father took great pains to leave him (he hid it in his rectum in a POW camp), and which was inadvertently left in his now heavily guarded apartment. The boxer and the crime boss he stiffed (Ving Rhames) stumble into the hell of a redneck S&M dungeon. And two young lovers (Amanda Plummer and Tim Roth) try to rob a diner but come up against what just might be divine intervention.

These escalations also amount to pissing contests, with the winner advancing up the toughness ladder



Harvey Keitel (left) and Quentin Tarantino attempt to resolve "The Bonnie Situation."
Courtesy Library of Congress

(something a new generation certainly related to through video games, which are similarly structured). Travolta gets to stare down Willis (whom he dismisses as "Punchy"), something that could only happen in a movie directed by an ardent fan of "Welcome Back Kotter." In each grouping, the alpha male is soon determined, and the scene involves appeasing him. (In the segment called "The Bonnie Situation," for example, even the big crime boss is so inexplicably afraid of upsetting Bonnie, a night nurse, that he sends in his top guy, played by Harvey Keitel, to keep from getting on her bad side.)

All of this takes place in the course of twenty-four hours, although the stories are shuffled so that one character who has recently been shot to hell on a toilet seat is back in business, unaware of his fate, in a subsequent scene.

On Internet newsgroups, debates rage over such minutiae as what was inside the glowing briefcase, but like many Internet debates, it misses the point. The briefcase was an homage to "Kiss Me Deadly." Fans are correct in assuming there's a reason for everything in the Tarantinoverse, but they persist in focusing on the literal (the director's fondness for certain breakfast cereals, for example) instead of the broader inspiration of directors such as Godard, whose work Tarantino soaked up as a high-school dropout toiling for minimum wage at a Southern California video store. The dance scene at Jack Rabbit Slim's, for example, is an homage to Godard's "Bande à part," which is also the inspiration for the name of Tarantino's production company (A Band Apart).

Godard aside, it's true that much of the movie's accessibility is due to how much of himself and his fast-food rev-

eries Tarantino injected into the mix. he really does think a five-dollar shake had better be damn good to justify the price. He has himself been known to lounge all day in his bathrobe, eating Cap'n Crunch and watching cartoons like the drug dealer played by Eric Stoltz. Tarantino was able to tap into the zeitgeist at just the right moment in part because he was living it. Hordes of minimum-wage earners with dreams of overnight fame that would leave them free to continue eating cereal in their bathrobes embraced Tarantino as their White Knight, conveniently ignoring that it is not Tarantino's slackerhood but his knowledge and appreciation of film that makes "Pulp Fiction" so effortlessly entertaining and which got the critical response rolling from the moment of its debut at Cannes.

Along with the hero worship came a different kind of legacy, the evil spawn of "Pulp Fiction" (and of "Reservoir Dogs"). For the remainder of the 1990s, film-school brats churned out dark, jokey, hard-hearted movies where characters babbled on about insignificant and arterial blood sprayed with abandon. Without Tarantino's style, good humor, and firmly rooted love of all things cinematic, these clones were squeezed from the same pastry bag, leaving a nasty smear. Other filmmakers have inspired misguided adoration, but the Tarantino effect was particularly pernicious, perhaps because of the sheer buoyancy of "Pulp Fiction," its characters, its soundtrack, its *joie de vivre*.

Above all, "Pulp Fiction" is fun, a celebration of the possibilities and inconsistencies of cinema. It puts you on familiar movie ground—the boxer who refuses to go down, the lovers who goad each other into pulling a robbery they can't handle. And yet there is a touching concern with what's happening behind the scenes. How do you remove a blood stain, and who do you do it in a hurry? The hitman is on a long stakeout, so when exactly does he get to go to the bathroom? It is a movie for people who love movies, who believe the movies belong to everyone, who talk endlessly into the night about movies, whereupon they digress to why there are no Quarter Pounders with Cheese in Europe, then realize the sun has come up and they could really go for a breakfast of blueberry pie.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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