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Premonitions of the Past: An Analysis of Pastiche in the films of Quentin Tarantino

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Premonitions of the Past:
An Analysis of Pastiche in the films of Quentin Tarantino

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by

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Critical Studies in Global Film Cultures

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the work of contemporary director Quentin Tarantino in light of the concept of pastiche. After beginning with an outline of recent scholarship on postmodern pastiche, an analysis of criticisms of Tarantino's use of pastiche in both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* will provide a reference point for engaging with his later use of the mode. Richard Dyer and Ingeborg Hoesterey's concept that pastiche can facilitate a critical potential in cinema will be privileged. Accusations of mistreatment and nontreatment of females, and of prioritizing a white masculine cool nostalgia for performative cool black masculinity will be challenged by *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*. A textual breakdown of both films showcases Tarantino's proposed re-contextualization of gender in regard to genre. Through a grounding of history the use of pastiche allows Tarantino to comment on the nature of nostalgia and what this can tell us about our relation to history. The purpose of this analysis is to assess both the films' exploration of cultural memory in relation to film history, and to document how Tarantino reframes his own conventions for screening both gender and race.

Death Proof, gender, history, *Jackie Brown*, masculinity, memory, pastiche, postmodern, *Pulp Fiction*, nostalgia, race, *Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino

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Introduction

In a highly promoted episode of NBC's *Community* ("Critical Film Studies", 03/24/11), Jeff (Joel McHale) plans a *Pulp Fiction*-themed surprise birthday party for Abed (Danny Pudi). Jeff is disappointed, however, when Abed announces that he no longer cares for pop culture. Instead, Abed suggests that he and Jeff have a "real conversation". Jeff displays his contempt for serious conversing, while inadvertently revealing his own insecurities about not being liked. As he continues to grow comfortable with the openness, a waiter reveals that that the dinner is meant to be a re-enactment of *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981). Jeff is annoyed by the deception, but he changes his tone when Abel assures him the intention was to bring the pair closer together. In a final voiceover, Jeff states, "I doubt I'll ever forget my *Dinner with Andre* dinner with Abed". "Critical Film Studies"—while not the full-on *Pulp Fiction* homage that NBC promoted—provides an insightful take on the critical potential of pastiche. Abed does not really want to have a serious conversation; he merely performs a version of what he thinks an actual conversation should be. He explains that he and Jeff have been drifting apart, and he suspects it has to do with Jeff maturing and not always wanting to talk about pop culture references. By imitating the plot of *My Dinner with Andre*, Abed is able to access Jeff in a way that allows him to connect with his friend. Though the conversation may be based upon artifice, the intention is sincere. Abed genuinely wants to show Jeff how important their friendship is to him, and this is the only way he knows how to do so. Tom VanDerWerff, in *A.V. Club*, writes that "Critical Film Studies" is "an elaborate film homage, yes, but it's also one of the most humane things the show has ever done, a half hour of TV about what it means to be a

good friend” (Web). *Community* relies heavily on its use of meta-humour and pop cultural references, but not all critics have celebrated this strategy. As Matt Zoller Seitz proclaimed in *Salon*, shows like *Community* may have “a lack of durability” (Web). Seitz suggests that as time goes on, future generations will probably not “get” these references, however, he misses the point that you do not necessarily need to “get” the references for pastiche to have vitality and resonance. I would be hard pressed to believe that the average twenty something fan of *Community* has seen or even heard of *My Dinner with Andre*, yet the episode succeeds because all you need to understand is what Abel is doing. Having a detailed knowledge of *Dinner* might enhance enjoyment for some viewers, but it is certainly not necessary.

Using *Pulp Fiction* as a backdrop for “Critical Film Studies” was both a clever promotional strategy and an interesting comment on the allure of Tarantino’s film. Many expected a full blown homage to the iconic film, and the website *ScreenCrave* devoted an entire article to guessing how the homage might play out (Clark, Web). Aside from the cast dressing as characters from the film and a subplot devoted to the abstract appeal of *Pulp Fiction*’s briefcase, the episode fails to imitate either the narrative or the energetic style of the film. By framing the pastiche around *My Dinner with Andre* and not *Pulp Fiction*, the show seems to be positioning Tarantino’s film as representative of a less serious approach to referencing pop culture. Abel feels he needs to disconnect himself from his appreciation of *Pulp* in order for Jeff to believe that he is capable of a real conversation. In other words, *Pulp Fiction* is enjoyable because it never takes anything too seriously. Critics of Tarantino’s postmodern pastiche have long rallied behind a

similar assertion, and this thesis will explore ways that Tarantino attempts to challenge such accusations in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Death Proof* (2007).

Like him or not, there is no denying that Tarantino has made a huge impression in cinema. 'A film by Quentin Tarantino' is a credit that carries the weight of both success and contempt. He has been a fixture in the American independent scene since his breakthrough film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and his work has had a polarizing effect on both audiences and critics. Adolescent boys and young adult males are the demographic normally associated with Tarantino, as his films are often considered to be "cool in their style of maleness" (Fraiman xi). Their coolness stems from an addiction to fan-boy film knowledge that involves a desire for traditionally "masculine" film genres use of violence-based sensation. Tarantino is a director who is a fan first and foremost. His Horatio Alger-like ascent from die-hard fan to powerhouse director, producer, and actor is well documented. His films showcase graphic brutality, snappy dialogue, and vibrant music that are always connected through his pastiche of past films. He uses multiple allusions and an unpredictable management of genre conventions to shape his narratives to what he considers to be contemporary tastes and desires.

I myself have been fascinated with Tarantino since I began taking film seriously. In my opinion he is one of the most interesting American filmmakers in the business as his work, while polarizing, has grown out of independent cinema and now appeals to a mass audience. Young males may be the largest demographic of the Tarantino fan base, but his films seem to reach out to a wide variety of groups. What initially drew me to his work was not his dialogue or his over-the-top violence (though I do at times enjoy both) rather it was his passion not just for earlier films, but for his love of all things cinema.

When I first watched *Grindhouse* (2007), I appreciated that Tarantino and Rodriguez were trying to re-capture the look and feel of a grindhouse double bill. I also thoroughly enjoyed what Tarantino was trying to do with *Death Proof*. I remember arguing with my friends over which segment I would watch again. They pronounced their admiration for *Planet Terror*, while I thought it was a slightly entertaining one note film. With *Death Proof*, I had fun sifting through the different exploitation genres and the seemingly endless bouts of dialogue. I tried to explain myself, but I could not figure out how to articulate my fondness for the film. The struggle thus carried over into my Master's thesis, and now, with the hindsight of three complete overhauls, a back and forth relation to my own analysis, and many sleepless nights, I can say without doubt that I admire the ambition of *Death Proof*. The same can be said about my relation to *Jackie Brown*. At first, I only wanted to study *Death Proof*, but as I continued to learn more about Pam Grier and Robert Forster's stardom, I began to appreciate the complexity of Tarantino's undervalued third film. In no way do I see either title as a masterful work, but I do believe that both offer a unique portrayal of postmodern pastiche that aims for vitality and a critical relationship to the past.

Film history is a central preoccupation for Tarantino. For any artist, a fascination with history is always connected to memory. Memory establishes life's continuity as it provides meaning to the present. Tarantino has made it clear in interviews and in his films that he grew up worshipping cinema. His status as a cinephile has never been in question. After *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino's celebrity became fully aligned with his cinephilia, and fans embraced what they saw as an encyclopaedic knowledge of film history. In 1997, Tarantino further added to this image when he began the semi-annual

Quentin Tarantino Film Festival in Austin Texas (QT fest for short). During the festival he screens prints from his own collection and introduces fans to his favourite cult films. He wants to keep the memory of these titles alive, as many of the prints are rare, and a lot of the films are not well-known amongst today's younger audiences.¹ His status as a star auteur also affects the promotion of his own films. When a new Tarantino film comes out there is a pre-established fan base. Fans may not know what is going to happen in the film, but they know Tarantino's cinephilia will be represented somehow. His cinephilic pastiche is his calling card, and it is tied to his own memories of being entertained at the movies.

Before postmodernism, the past often signified the good old days. Tarantino imitates pop culture from the 1970s to suggest that maybe we do not remember the era as accurately as we think. He presents what he remembers from exploitation and genre filmmaking to create nostalgia for nostalgia. In prioritizing the memory of low brow cinema, he is suggesting that history has overlooked these important cultural artifacts. His films offer the ideal recovery operation, redeeming a past for those that lived it, but that also missed it (Willis, 197). The popularity of his films suggests that in some ways his redemption of forgotten or misremembered work says a lot about our own relationship to the past. The specificity of his recovery operation also exposes the limits of his pastiche. In "Critical Film Studies", Abed distances himself from *Pulp Fiction* because he wants to show that he is capable of a mature, thoughtful engagement. He imitates a conversation from *My Dinner with Andre* because the film is straightforward and focused, and thus in contrast to the sporadic adrenaline fuelled world of *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino

¹ An example would be *Hammerhead* (David Miller, 1968), which was shown at the QT Quattro line up in 2000.

does redeem the past, but it is a select past. He exposes missed artifacts of culture, yet his process is circumscribed by his own attachment to the history of exploitation and genre films.

In my argument I propose that both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof* represent more than just a simple redemption of the past. I will argue that through a grounding of history, they exhibit a critical potential in their pastiche that both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* lack. While Tarantino is still referencing his own connection to 1970s pop culture, he troubles the notion of an idealized past much more effectively than he does in his first two works. His focus is on the use of gender in connection to genre, and in both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*, he places past filmmaking in dialogue with the present to posit whether or not we can ever know that past other than through its textualised remains.

I am not commenting on *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004), as Tarantino states it is his one film that is meant to be entirely disconnected from the real world.² *Kill Bill* is meant to be pure senseless fun, and my argument is concerned with the Tarantino films that strive to be both fun and a re-evaluation of our connection to the past. I have not devoted a chapter to *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) either. *Basterds* differs in plot from *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof* by making a dissimilar connection to history, as it is Tarantino's first film to be set in the past. *Basterds* is a work of historical fiction that is concerned with how Hollywood has portrayed the Second World War. Pastiche is used in a critical manner, but in a different way than the films I am writing on. *Basterds* deals specifically

² "Kill Bill is the film I've made that takes places in the Movie World. This is me imagining what would happen if that world really existed, and I could take a film crew in there and make a Quentin Tarantino movie about those characters" (as cited in Charyn, 168-169).

with history as depicted through film, while *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof* work to explore our cultural memory of film history. Also, although *Basterds* has a female protagonist (Mélanie Laurent), issues of gender are not fore-grounded like they are in his other works. I have, however, devoted a brief discussion of *Basterds* to my conclusion, as I suggest its place in Tarantino's oeuvre marks yet another example of the critical potential of pastiche.

Before I move into a close analysis of both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*, I have dedicated a chapter to the theoretical angles that have been taken in regard to cinematic pastiche. Frederic Jameson's critique of postmodern pastiche is discussed alongside the prominent theorists who have directly challenged his criticism. Ingeborg Hoesterey, Linda Hutcheon's, and Richard Dyer's work on pastiche will instead be used to explore the critical potential of the mode. All three critics support pastiche as a potential tool for creating emotion and progressing our understanding of our relation to the past. A brief analysis of Todd Haynes' film, *Far From Heaven* (2002) will serve as testimony to these claims, and will set up a comparative examination of Haynes' use of pastiche versus that of Tarantino in his early work. The second half of the chapter will then summarise and explore the criticism posed by Susan Fraiman and Sharon Willis in regard to the Tarantino aesthetic in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. I devote such a lengthy portion of my thesis to setting up and acknowledging criticisms of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* because little to no serious theoretical writing has been published on Tarantino's later work. In my opinion, the lack of recent scholarly work is both a testament to the quality of Fraiman and Willis' assertions and a failure to acknowledge the aesthetic transition Tarantino made in both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*. In these two films he

makes an effort—through pastiche—to place the past in dialogue with the present in order to both critically comment on the cultural memory of film history, and re-frame his conventions for screening gender.

Judith Butler describes terms such as masculine or feminine as “notoriously changeable” and notes that conditions of gender designation are constantly in the process of being remade (Butler, 2004, 10). Butler also stresses that there can be no concrete truths with regard to gender and the body, as they are thoroughly ideological and typically “*a corporeal style an 'act,' as it were*” (Butler, 1988, 362). While gender for Butler often has a “strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame,” she insists that “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Ibid). In other words, the performativity of gender repeatedly contests the very norms that it seems to uphold. In my analysis of *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*, I will be arguing that Tarantino critically uses pastiche to investigate gendered tensions in both 1970s cinema and contemporary American culture.

Chapter two is focused entirely on *Jackie Brown*, and how stardom and music are used to re-contextualise performative black masculinity. Tarantino made *Jackie Brown* as a star vehicle for Pam Grier, and the entire film is informed by this association. I will analyse how aspects of Grier’s stardom are put in dialogue with Jackie’s characterization. Particular emphasis will also be placed on what is left out from Grier’s past, as Tarantino is concerned with re-framing Grier’s image to be less associated with the more exploitative elements of blaxploitation. Inherent in this re-contextualization is a changed relationship to the performative black masculinity that typically anchors the popular memory of blaxploitation cinema. Robert Forster and Samuel L. Jackson’s star images

will also be investigated in terms of how race and gender is represented through their characters, and comparisons will be drawn to Jackie / Grier. I will also explore the relationship of music to stardom, character, and pastiche; focusing in particular on the film's connection to both nostalgia and history. I will continually foreground the affective power of the film's pastiche and how it allows Tarantino to break away from previous criticism and critically comment on the notion of cultural memory in relation to film history.

Chapter three investigates the intended genre revision and partial gender critique of the seventies exploitation film, in *Death Proof*. I will begin by unpacking what connotations are associated with both exploitation films and cult films. Robin Wood's analysis of gender and ideology in 1970s horror films will form the basis of the breakdown, and my focus will be on how the re-contextualization of 1970s gender norms affects both genre and our relationship to history in a contemporary film. Carol Clover's seminal study on the slasher film genre will also be applied to examine how Tarantino re-frames established tropes from that film cycle. Emphasis will be placed on the hybridization of genre in *Death Proof*, and how such transitions influence both the characters and the audience. I will discuss how the split structure of the narrative is used to shock the audience and mark the intended shift in genre prioritization. The second half of the film foregrounds the proposed re-framing of gender conventions inherent in seventies exploitation films. Tarantino places women in an aggressive position that suggests they are capable of enjoying and participating in activity traditionally coded as masculine, therefore challenging the label that action films are just for men. Also, Tarantino's primary goal with *Death Proof* was to simulate the experience of watching an

exploitative horror film, and the film both succeeds and fails in its attempt to create and sustain a truly horrifying context. I argue that pastiche hinders the intended display of abject terror, thus suggesting that some exploitation tropes may be difficult to successfully recontextualise.

In view of Mary Harrod's acknowledgement that there is something seemingly paradoxical about an auteurist study of a practice which, in citing works by other artists, "downplays the significance of the single creative vision", it is important to emphasize Tarantino's position in regard to her comments (Harrod, 22). His marginalization from auteurist based studies (within academia) is reflective of the view that he does not strategically and critically use pastiche, and that instead, it may be using him. At times, this study does border on a Barthesian repositioning of the author in the reader, in the implication that pastiche is a task of interpretation (Barthes, 1977). However, although Tarantino works in Hollywood, he retains creative control of all his films, and there are enough noticeable consistencies in his body of work that I feel confident privileging his authorial input. His vision takes precedence in both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*, and he deliberately utilises the critical potential of pastiche.

Chapter One

The Politics of Pastiche: Todd Haynes meets Quentin Tarantino

I'm never bothered that people say I don't make films "from life" and that I have "nothing to say." I don't try to *say* anything but to create characters and tell stories out of which meaning can appear. What's more, I think I make films about life since I make films about *me*, about what interests me...I don't consider myself just a director, but as a movie man who has the whole treasure of the movies to choose from and can take whatever gems I like, twist them around, give them new form, bring things together that have never been matched up before (Tarantino, quoted in Peary, 87).

In her analysis of Richard Linklater's work, Mary Harrod proclaims that "Pastiche may be more fundamental to cinema today than any other time in the medium's history"

(21). That may be so, but the term itself is one that remains mixed in ambiguity.

Frederic Jameson refers to pastiche as representative of "blank parody" and argues that the "disappearance of the individual subject, alone with its formal consequence, the

increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche" (16). In other words, he sees parody as having

been replaced by pastiche, but at the cost of losing the "ulterior motives" and "satiric impulse" that constitute the most successful aspects of parody (17). Linda Hutcheon

takes aim at Jameson by opposing his notion that pastiche and parody can be separated, as she stresses that both are unique and able to comment on history through political

irony (113). She suggests that Jameson's position is one too closely aligned with Marxist history and that he fails to consider other ways in which pastiche can be used critically.

She argues that pastiche works through parody to "both legitimize and subvert that which it parodies" thus creating a critical dialogue between past and present (101).

Many theorists have taken aim at Jameson's views of pastiche, with Ingeborg Hoesterey and Richard Dyer publishing two of the most prominent works arguing in

favour of the mode's potential for purpose and meaning. Hoesterey, in her book *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature*, asserts that postmodern pastiche is about cultural memory and the uniting of perspectives past and present, and that the mode sets itself in popular culture beyond a high-low dichotomy (xi). She stresses that postmodern pastiche aspires to be art that demands critical thinking. For Hoesterey, cinematic pastiche is not merely quotation; it is a "complex medley, and a layering of different styles and motifs" (46). She sees pastiche as a combination of imitation and Italian *pasticcio*.³ In *Pastiche*, Richard Dyer views the mode as a form of imitation, noting that it is a "kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation" (1). He stresses that that imitation typically imitates other art, and not life or reality, but he also argues that pastiche can be utilised to help us make sense of the real (*Pastiche* 5). For Dyer, although pastiche sets out to imitate other works, it is not simple recreation. He proposes that through accentuation, exaggeration, concentration, and selection, pastiche can facilitate an experience of previous works, while also providing an avenue for artistic progressiveness and the expression of emotion (*Pastiche*, 54-62). Both Hoesterey and Dyer argue in favour of pastiche being capable of vitality, and this is the claim that has yet to be proposed in connection with the films of Quentin Tarantino.

Pastiche and *Far From Heaven*

Pastiche is a mode that has often been associated with negative connotations. As Dyer stresses, many artists try to avoid it at all costs (*Pastiche* 52). However, it can be

³ Hoesterey refers to Italian *pasticcio* as a hodge podge of different artistic styles that historically began in the Renaissance. She states that it was an imitative approach that synthesized or stirred together the styles of major artists, "often with seemingly fraudulent intention" to deceive viewers and patrons (1). The figurative meaning was to signal the work as a bad work or "a mess" (1). She highlights how pastiche is rooted in this definition but that it does not share connotations of being a bad work.

used both effectively and critically, and one film in particular that has been praised by many, if not all critics for its strategic and affective application of pastiche is *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002). We live in an age where the past is justifiably put into question or is simply erased, forgotten, or re-written, and Todd Haynes is a filmmaker who knows this better than most. Jameson would argue that all pastiche is capable of is the imitation dead styles, but *Far From Heaven* provides evidence that it can be used to place the present in a productive dialogue with the past.

Far From Heaven was far from a commercial success, but it was critically acclaimed and widely considered to be successful in its display of sheer emotion via melodramatic forms. Haynes shows throughout his films that he is well versed in film history. His aesthetic displays not only a keen knowledge of previous works, but also of previous film practices and styles. When he is referencing or alluding to a past film, he does not merely imitate; he uses previous practices and narratives to enhance and to complement the problems and themes that he wants to address. *Far From Heaven* may be the strongest example of Haynes' aesthetic, but his entire career has been reliant upon earlier work. *Safe* (1995), for example (which also stars Julianne Moore), is indebted to the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, however, *Far From Heaven* is more appropriate for a study on pastiche, as it is more overt in its mimicry than *Safe*.⁴

Anyone who has seen the Douglas Sirk melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) should be able to tell right away that *Far From Heaven* is trying to imitate its look (along with other Sirk titles, including *Written on the Wind* [1956] and *Imitation of Life*

⁴ *Safe*'s most direct reference is Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), and the form/style of the film is very Antonioni-esque.

[1959]).⁵ Both worlds appear overtly artificial, with an extravagant colour scheme and a surface that seems all too perfect. Julianne Moore (Cathy) is the ideal 1950's housewife with her exquisite gloves and eye catching skirts, and Dennis Quaid's (Frank) masculine jaw line and stern business persona represent the hardworking, breadwinning patriarch. Like Sirk's films, however, things are not as they seem. Underneath the surface there exists homosexual infidelity, loneliness, and an unrelenting desire to break through the restrictive confines of hegemonic America and to live in a manner that is true to oneself. Haynes is able to go further and expose issues that Sirk could not address due to the production code restrictions of the time. Although Sirk's films were ahead of their time, and ripe with irony, he would have never been able to openly deal with homosexuality the way that Haynes does. By imitating the look and feel of a Sirk melodrama, Haynes is able to present a hypothetical continuation of issues Sirk may have investigated if he were given the opportunity.

Haynes, like Sirk, presents his characters at odds with societal pressures to be 'normal', and he uses colour to highlight both the freedom and entrapment inherent in the notion that their identities are merely roles. Hard reds, greens, and purples (the house, Cathy's wardrobe at times) often show how domestic life can be prison like, while soft autumn shades (Raymond's wardrobe at times, and the woodland lake he takes Cathy to) tend to signify happiness and the possibility of freedom. As Scott Higgins states in his

⁵ *Far From Heaven* also references and is indebted to Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), which also adapts Sirk's melodramas. Niall Richardson in his piece, "Poison in the Sirkian System: The Political Agenda of Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*", suggests that *Ali* should be read as a film in between *All That Heaven Allows* and *Far From Heaven*, as *Heaven* shares a similarly less optimistic narrative with *Ali*, that Sirk's film lacks.

essay concerning colour in the film, “the great achievement of *Far From Heaven* is that it is not a cold and ironic comment on the quaint and repressive 1950s. Rather Haynes manages form in a sincere manner, creating a colour score that classically emphasizes and punctuates drama, at the same time that it remains artificial” (104). The significant aspect of what Higgins is saying is that in *Far From Heaven* Haynes creates emotion that is tied to his formal experimentation. Dyer has a similar response when he notes that there were “moments when I could not see the screen for crying” (*Pastiche* 174). Both Dyer and Higgins stress that the film can work affectively through, rather than despite, pastiche. In other words, *Heaven* debunks the common belief that pastiche and emotion are incompatible while also exhibiting the political dimensions of the mode (*Pastiche* 174). Haynes does this through a successful relationship between film form, emotional engagement, and cinematic citation.

Far From Heaven works on an emotional level, as the characters are presented as having real problems. Though Cathy is seen as an “ideal housewife” amongst her clique, Haynes subtly invites the viewer to see through her facade. She looks stunning in her colourful dresses and perfectly styled hair, yet this is all surface level. In one scene, Cathy is sitting around with her friends comfortably chatting when one of the women gloats about how often she and her husband make love. Kathy and the other women become uncomfortable as they find this information awkward because their sex lives are much less satisfying. One of the issues that Haynes continually poses is the notion that Cathy’s happiness resides in the fact that she always appear as ideal woman, wife, and

mother in the eyes of the society in which she lives.⁶ At times, the most important aspect of her life seems to be her social status. For an ideal woman in the fifties, sex is something that is not normally discussed, and thus in mentioning her satisfaction, Cathy's friend challenges such conventions, and exposes Cathy's own fear of the position. Cathy is trapped within the confines of a conservative society based around patriarchy, and yet the viewer is also able to recognize that women today often face similar obstacles. Cathy prides herself on her ability to be a good wife to her husband, yet Haynes suggests that even she may see the artificiality of her own persona, though she does not acknowledge it. This is exemplified in the scene in which she runs into Raymond at the art show:

Raymond Deagan: So, what's your opinion on modern art?

Cathy Whitaker: It's hard to put into words, really. I just know what I care for and what I don't. Like this... I don't know how to pronounce it... Mira?

Raymond Deagan: Miró.

Cathy Whitaker: Miró. I don't know why, but I just adore it. The feeling it gives. I know that sounds terribly vague.

Raymond Deagan: No. No, actually, it confirms something I've always wondered about modern art. Abstract art.

Cathy Whitaker: What's that?

Raymond Deagan: That perhaps it's just picking up where religious art left off, somehow trying to show you divinity. The modern artist just pares it down to the

⁶ In an interesting occurrence of intertextuality, Haynes has Moore again play the lead role. She also plays a similar, yet slightly different character in his 1995 film *Safe*. Both are upper class housewives who question (both directly and indirectly) the validity of their happiness.

basic elements of shape and color. But when you look at that Miró, you feel it just the same.⁷

In this seemingly insignificant conversation with Raymond, we learn as much about Cathy, or possibly more, than in any other scene. She reveals her interest in creating her own mode of engagement with the discourse of modern art, which suggests that she can be true to herself and make her own choices, and yet her life reflects the exact opposite. Her motivation to keep up appearances dictates most of her options, and Haynes thus indicates that this is the source of her problem and 1950s society in general. Raymond's response that the various art movements are more similar than we think can be read as allegory for how society functions. We separate each other into classes and often stress the differences between constructed identities, yet most of us want to live our lives true to ourselves and be happy. This sentiment is also a generic cliché of the melodrama. By using pastiche, Haynes is thus able to keep an intriguing dialogue open between melodrama and the real. Frank's character contributes to these themes as well. He gets the most upset with Cathy when he hears through the rumour mill that she has been associating with a black man. We know that he is not heartbroken to hear she has been with another man; instead, he is concerned that the constructed nature of their marriage will be exposed. Frank is aware that to stay successful and enjoy the status he is accustomed to, appearances must be maintained. He cannot have people questioning the validity of his union with Cathy, as the truth about his homosexuality may arise and thus destroy the "perfect" image he has created.

⁷ Kathy and Raymond's conversation also mirrors what Haynes is doing within the film. He is not interested in telling a story in a typically realist Hollywood fashion. His choice in using a postmodern mode enables him to create a film in a way that is meaningful to him. By imitating Sirk's work, Haynes is suggesting that Sirk's films have been a significant influence on his life and career.

The use of pastiche in *Heaven* only adds to the affective power of the work. Haynes not only imitates previous filmmakers, he also uses contemporary film styles and practices throughout the film. Many of the shots are substantially shorter than Sirk's, and the movement of the camera is much more on display.⁸ Haynes himself has also pointed out that there are numerous instances of broken dialogue in scenes of emotional strain, which is a variation on the articulate dialogue inherent in Sirk's work (Haynes, 2002). Higgins refers to this as an appeal to the psychological realism of contemporary culture and points out that it adds to success of the film's pastiche (110).

According to Dyer, the film succeeds not only in its imitation and variation of Sirk, but because it allows us to consider our relationship to the past:

[a] tension between a sense that people in the past were like ourselves, with desires, dreams, hopes and fears like us, and yet that we cannot know that for sure, and moreover that much of what they felt seems strange, opaque, other.

Pastiche can embody that tension at the level of how we feel about people in the past (*Pastiche* 178).

Obviously we cannot look at the 1950s simply through the lens of melodramas at the time, but they are a key resource, as they can show the ways culture often shapes emotion and identity. *Heaven* not only presents a historicity of its affect, but it can also permit us to see the historicity of our own feelings (*Pastiche* 178). By situating the narrative within the mode of previous melodramas, Haynes is able to tell "a story of the 1950s in a style of the 1950s" (*Pastiche* 176). The contemporary viewer can gain insight into how current

⁸ *All That Heaven Allows* average shot length is 13.2 seconds, while *Heaven's* is 8.2 seconds. This, however, could also be a nod to the cinematography of Max Ophuls, as his film, *The Reckless Moment* (1949), is also a text that Haynes pastiches within the film.

societal trends have been influenced by the historical, and the film also suggests what was missing in the cinematic past. As noted earlier, Sirk could not have approached the same issues that Haynes does. By using pastiche, Haynes exposes the limitations that 1950s cinema had,⁹ while simultaneously calling to mind the limitations that film makers today also face. The fact that Haynes can use the mode of Sirk to tell a contemporary story and have it succeed an emotional level goes a long way towards showing us that the present day shares many similarities with the 1950s. Artists are encouraged to openly engage with contemporary views of homosexuality and race in mainstream in films today much more than they were in the 50s, but there is still a reluctance to be too critical. Often the most progressive works are composed on tiny budgets, and like Haynes' work, normally marketed to a limited art house crowd.

Jameson categorizes pastiche and postmodernism in general as often reactionary, and he argues that it typically ceases to be critical. He states that its closeness to what it imitates disallows for any type of critique (Jameson 17). *Far From Heaven* defies this logic in its ability to be affective and engaging for the viewer. Not only does Haynes provide a work that provokes critical analysis of the dominant ideology, but it also suggests the effects that culture, and more specifically film, may have on our society. Haynes uses pastiche to look at the history of film and identity politics in America in a progressive and thought provoking way. Not all filmmakers, however, have used pastiche in such a positive and intelligent fashion. Roland Emmerich, for example, is a German director working in the Hollywood system who often uses pastiche in the opposite manner. His blockbuster films (*Star Gate* (1994), *Independence Day* (1996),

⁹ Not to mention the fact that it was not until the 1970s that Sirk's melodramas received the critical interest and praise that was overlooked upon their original release.

The Day After Tomorrow (2004), to name a few) are full of cinematic clichés, “and locate their collective unconscious entirely within movies” (Hasse 102). Emmerich’s films are marketed towards spectators who desire something spectacular to look at, as narrative realism is often unaccounted for. His version of America is normally one indebted to a Hollywood portrayal, with a blatant disregard for the realities of the country. Christine Hasse goes so far as to call his films reminiscent of the traditions of propaganda often found in Nazi cinema (104). Whereas Haynes uses pastiche to comment on society and culture and to pose questions, Emmerich uses it to fantasize a world of spectacular entertainment that exists outside current ideology and politics. The question thus remains, to what camp does Tarantino’s pastiche aesthetic fall? At first glance it would be tempting to place Tarantino directly in the middle of both Haynes and Emmerich, but as my analysis will show, his categorization is difficult to place.

Criticisms of Tarantino’s Pastiche in both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*

Criticisms of Tarantino’s work have generally focused on four key aspects: their use of violence, their depiction of gender, their depiction of race, and their use of postmodern pastiche. This is not to say that there are not supporters of his work, because there are plenty, but in film studies his name tends to be associated with fandom, and a directorial style disconnected from critical filmmaking. Tarantino’s aesthetic is one that has polarized critics since his arrival in the film world. His films often feature stylistically excessive violence, non-linear storylines, random dialogue, and an emphasis on pop culture references. The most common critical charge against Tarantino is that his characters often show no clear cut morals. Anthony Lane complained in *The New Yorker*, *Pulp Fiction* is nothing but “blank morality and wicked accouterments” (97).

Lane further notes, however, that the entire film is like one “long, loud party” (95). Even opponents of Tarantino’s work often state that his films can be thoroughly entertaining.

Supporters of Tarantino will tell you that his films do more than just entertain. Advocates also tend to write with a defensive edge, as if they constantly need to challenge those who disagree with their affinity for his work.¹⁰ It seems odd that such a personal stance is taken within a discourse that is founded on disagreements and debates. I believe that is why Tarantino has become such a household name. His work not only polarizes audiences, it polarizes critics and academics alike. In no way have I set out to provide an answer to which side may be more correct; instead I want to explore how auteurist strategies are created through pastiche and how this is viewed by academics. I do not think that anyone would argue that Tarantino is trying to produce work that is new, and that he sees himself as a full on auteur. Why then are there so few auteurist studies of his work? In comparison to Haynes, there has been little scholarly work published on Tarantino. Susan Fraiman’s chapter on his presentation of coolness (from *Cool Men and the Second Sex*) and Sharon Willis’s work on race and gender in his films (from *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*) are the only two widely recognized works. Aaron Barlow’s recently published book, *Quentin Tarantino: Life at the Extremes*, offers a textual analysis of Tarantino’s films, but it is more journalistic than

¹⁰ One of the strongest examples occurs in Stanley Crouch’s book, *The Artificial Whiteman: Essays on Authenticity*. In his chapter on Tarantino he begins by attacking the opinions of *New York Review of Books* contributor Daniel Mendelsohn for being “shallow” and guilty of “lightweight academic posturing”. In other words, he feels that Mendelsohn obviously just “misses the point” in terms of how Tarantino’s film work (138-140). Crouch believes Tarantino understands the complexities of race relations better than any other white filmmaker as he is able to recreate the ups and downs, attitudes, and friendships inherent in biracial friendships. Crouch sees Tarantino’s characters as authentic because of their realistic banter, and realistic attitudes towards each other (145).

critical.¹¹ For a filmmaker as influential as Tarantino it is odd that his work has not received more critical attention.

Reservoir Dogs

With the release of *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992, Tarantino became an instant star in the American independent scene. Once in the spotlight, he declared his love for violence within film, and immediately the critical polarization began. One key aspect of *Dogs*, and of his later work, is the use of non-linear narratives. The film begins with a group of gangsters sitting around a coffee shop, bantering about Madonna lyrics and their upcoming heist, while the camera circles, and basically hangs out with the men. The world we are given access to is most certainly dominated by an over-bearing masculinity. The men are proud to be vulgar as they objectify women in their banter and curse and swear in a style of one-upmanship. Tarantino is also at times critical of the men's posturing of hypermasculinity, as he shows an interest in exploring male vulnerability and masculine instability through men's potential to be repudiated as feminine (Fraiman 3). After a disagreement over tipping procedures, the men leave, the opening titles come and go, and we are suddenly in a speeding car with one of the men injured (Mr. Orange). Basically, what began as a heist film is now one in which the heist is never actually shown. The film frequently uses flashbacks to fill in blanks over characterization and plot points. Comparisons to Stanley Kubrick's noir film, *The Killing* (1956), can clearly be made, but as Dyer says, the point of postmodern pastiche is not merely homage, even

¹¹ As far as Haynes' career, multiple auteurist studies have been published, with two major books released in last decade: Hastie, Amelie. *Todd Haynes: A Magnificent Obsession*. Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004. Print., Morrison, James, ed. *The Cinema of Todd Haynes*. Londres: Wallflower, 2007. Print.

though homage does play a major role in the film (*Pastiche* 37). In *The Killing*, a criminal team is also assembled, and a man is killed during the heist. After the heist, the men also meet in a designated place to split their loot, and there is also a gunfight at the rendezvous. *Reservoir Dogs* echoes Kubrick's film with regard to the botched robbery plot, but not through anything else. Kubrick plays up the more melodramatic aspects of his film, as the relationship between one of the crooks (George, played by Elisha Cook Jr) and his wife (Sherry, played by Marie Windsor) is central to the narrative. In *Dogs*, Tarantino only develops the relationships between the crooks themselves. He never reveals their personal lives to the viewer because the men do not share these details with each other. Tarantino wants the focus of the film to be about how the men can minimize emotion in regard to professionalism. In the diegesis of *Dogs*, emotion is antithetical to success. The same can be said of Tarantino's pastiche in the film. He selectively uses references associated with masculinity because he believes they are representative of the type of film he wants to salvage. Femininity is thus relegated to domesticity, and domesticity equals male vulnerability.

Dyer refers to *Reservoir Dogs* as a kind of pastiche gone mad, as it displays "a heightened sense of ironic intertextuality" (*Pastiche* 129). Constant references are put forth, and Dyer positioned the film in terms of referencing the memory of film noir.¹² In accordance with Dyer, Tarantino is not using homage to simply pay tribute to previous films (though he is doing this as well), he is also trying to create something new, or in other words, to make the film his own. Dyer is only partly accurate in his belief that

¹² Dyer never specifically goes into the critical potential of this relationship. A few other examples of this categorization would be Greg Tuck's article, "Laughter in the Dark: Irony, Black Comedy and Noir in the films of David Lynch, the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino", and Mark T. Conard's discussion of the film in his work, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*.

Tarantino is using irony though. He points to moments in pop culture to see if the viewer knows what he is referencing, and he places them in the film to add humour to scenes. In other words, he uses references and allusions in *Reservoir Dogs* because he thinks they are cool. His attitude towards pop culture seems to be one of a fanboy, as he often uses references to highlight his favourite cult-based films. James Naremore uses the example of Godard to stress the issue:

For all his talent, Tarantino's hypertext is relatively narrow, made up largely of testosterone-driven action movies, hard-boiled novels, and pop-art comic strips like *Modesty Blaise*. His attitude toward mass culture is also much less ironic than that of a director like Godard. In effect he gives us Coca-Cola without Marx (165).

His references in *Reservoir Dogs* function initially as a "guess where I got this from?" exercise, and then possibly in an ironic manner. For example, in having all of the men in *Reservoir Dogs* receive nicknames associated with colours (Mr. Pink, Mr. Blue, etc), he is referencing *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (Joseph Sargent, 1974). The criminals in that film also go by aliases associated with the colour spectrum, and like *Dogs*, their group unity implodes after the heist. In Tarantino's referencing of *Pelham*, he is foreshadowing what will become of the men in his film, and the purpose of this revelation seems to be more associated with a shared wink with the informed viewer than it is with irony. Tarantino is thus justifying how satisfying it can be to be an informed fan. He wants everyone to know that he learned how to make films by watching films. *Reservoir Dogs'* allusions to the plot of the *The Killing* without keeping any trace of the film's melodramatic aspects, reflects Tarantino's aim. He wants *Dogs* to succeed based

on the characters struggles with masculine coolness, and their associations to each other; not make any overt comment on their lives outside of their identities as thieves. In one scene, Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) tells an enraged Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) that he needs him to be cool. Pink tells White that he is cool and White further suggests Pink take a moment to pull himself together. Coolness in *Reservoir Dogs* (and *Pulp Fiction*) is about steely self control, and its payoff is control over others (Fraiman 2). White is able to secure a mastery over the situation by not showing any vulnerability. For Tarantino, vulnerability is gendered female, and it must be forcefully renounced by the male characters. Coolness is associated with spectatorship as well. Tarantino's aesthetic in *Reservoir Dogs* is based around referencing genres traditionally coded as masculine, and whenever he presents moments of vulnerability, he follows them with a masculinizing intervention of violence (Fraiman 11). Such strategies remain entertaining and often amusing, but Tarantino's intention is first to impress, and then possibly to enlighten. My analysis of *Death Proof* and *Jackie Brown*, will propose that Tarantino gives equal measure to entertainment and critical intent through the grounding of historicity. In other words, his later references are used strategically and ironically in an effort to critically comment on the ways in which cinema can engage with the past.

The characters in *Reservoir Dogs* exist in a world where "coolness" seems to be the main theme. They fight amongst themselves to prove who is cooler, and there is no place for women. Instead, the film fixates on the threat of femininity within its male characters. In other words, femininity is only presented as dangerous and antithetical to a masculine sense of coolness, and in the world of *Reservoir Dogs*, only coolness prevails. Jonathan Rosenbaum sums up *Reservoir Dogs* well as he states, "It's unclear whether this

macho thriller does anything to improve the state of the world or our understanding of it, but it certainly sets off enough rockets to hold and shake us for every one of its 99 minutes" (Web). Rosenbaum's assertion that the film tries to shake the viewer accurately describes Tarantino's intent to shock and surprise. His goal is to position the viewer into a receptive passivity (essentially coded as feminine), so that he can flaunt his own masculine desire to break filmic and thematic conventions and be the bad boy film auteur.

Thematically, *Dogs* plays on the same masculine vulnerabilities in the viewer as it does on its characters. Willis refers to his shock tactics as a way to pair extreme violence with humour. She compares the act to the shame of "being caught with our pants down in a breach of social discipline" (190). Willis sees the aesthetic as infantile and notes: "Part of the reason that bloodletting can be humorous in Tarantino's work is that blood really operates like feces, so that the spilling of blood is very much like smearing. But smearing, in all of its evocation of infantile activity, not only provokes laughter, but also implies violence" (191). The scene that best exemplifies this approach and that is arguably Tarantino's most infamous display of violence is the ear cutting scene. As Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) calmly moves to the rhythms of "Stuck in the Middle with You" (Steelers Wheel), the viewer is drawn to his coolness while he absurdly taunts a captured police officer. The viewer gets to re-live the sugary sounds of seventies pop songs through the music, but the connection is not one of an idealized nostalgia. Instead, the effect is a disturbing sadomasochistic affect that Willis reads as "an ambivalent mix of desire and hostility through recourse to adolescent, boyish, bathroom humour" (201). The act is aligned with both anxieties and desires about feminization in both Mr. Blonde and the viewer.

Pulp Fiction

Susan Fraiman asserts that coolness for Tarantino is one that lies within a masculine desire for mastery, in which the threat of the feminine is also attached to white male anxiety about black masculinity (3). Both race and gender work to inform the binary of cool/uncool, and Fraiman also stresses that this coolness stems from Tarantino's own satisfaction in flaunting formal and thematic conventions, providing hidden allusions, and displaying intense violence in his films (1). Black men are viewed by Tarantino as the ultimate proprietors of masculinity. Blackness for Tarantino acts as the defining regulation for what may be deemed cool or not cool, and coolness problematically operates as a central motivation for all of the male characters in *Pulp Fiction*.

Pulp Fiction is Tarantino's most famous work, and if *Reservoir Dogs* declared his arrival in the film world, *Pulp Fiction* solidified his position. The film was a crossover success, as it won an Oscar (original screenplay) and blurred the lines between indie and mainstream. Though much bigger in scope than *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* is a continuation of the style of its predecessor. The film is characterized by a non-linear narrative, snappy dialogue (containing an arsenal of references to pop culture), and a penchant for awkward humour and abrasive violence. The story is an interconnected crime saga, filled again with macho characters inhabiting a frighteningly—yet always unstable—masculine world. Women frequent the diegesis much more than in *Reservoir Dogs*, but their function is regulated to being the antithesis of cool, as they represent the ordinary and the domestic. Like *Reservoir Dogs*, gender in *Pulp Fiction* is examined in relation to masculinity. Fraiman asserts that:

Whiteness, closeness to women, closeness to men, bodily display, bodily sensation, the cheap thrills of mass culture—*Pulp Fiction* shows men made as vulnerable as “women” by all of these and then disowns any hint of cross-gendering by killing the character in question, arming him, or otherwise introducing the *dues ex machine* of sudden violence Tarantino’s signature move, I have argued, is to shatter again and again the intimacies of breakfast, bedroom, or banter with a hammer blow of death, and the result is a narrative jagged as broken glass (15).

Tarantino again shows an investment in exploring male vulnerability, but only in an effort to eradicate it. Vulnerability is once more coded as feminine, and he uses violence as a means to re-masculinise both characters and situations. He fails to sustain any exploration of male vulnerability because it would go against his salvaging of low brow culture. Tarantino’s approach to gender is fully influenced and shaped by his filmic references. Unlike Haynes, Tarantino is focused entirely on prioritizing “masculine” genres and tropes in his pastiche, and at times, this acts to limit the critical potential of his work. Take the character Vincent Vega (John Travolta), for example. He plays one of the hit men who work for Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). He and his partner Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) are shown killing, swearing, and shooting up heroin (Vincent). However, they are not your normal cinematic hit men. As opposed to the quiet, proficiency of the title character from say, *Léon* (Luc Besson, 1994), Jules and Vincent enthusiastically discuss their feelings and fears while they gossip. Tarantino is complicating gender norms commonly associated with crime films, but again, he does not sustain it. As the two men banter over foot massages, television, fast food, and the

severity of adultery, one cannot help but think of the pulp novels that the film's title and structure imitate. Consumers of mass culture have long been described as feminine, and Tarantino is suggesting that even hardened criminals enjoy feminine genres. In other words, when Jules and Vincent are not at work, they enjoy the normalcy of everyday life. However, when Jules and Vincent reach their intended destination, anything and everything associated with femininity is relegated to being uncool. They stop in front of an apartment door and Jules tells Vincent that it is time "to get into character". By character he means that there can be no more chitchat, and that they need to let the inhabitants of this apartment know that they are not to be messed with. When they enter the apartment, Jules does all the talking, and he mocks the inhabitants for their connection to the aspects of everyday life. He taunts Bret (Frank Whaley), by pretending he is interested in the fast food company that Bret bought his breakfast at. What was formerly considered valuable for Jules and Vincent to discuss, is now coded as banal when aggression is part of the equation. Bret and his friends become increasingly nervous as Jules keeps the discussion ordinary, as they know he and Vincent are here because of a deal that went bad involving them and Marcellus Wallace.

The transition that Jules takes is significant when considering how Tarantino uses pastiche. Jules goes from participating in conversation that Tarantino poses as entertaining and valuable, to embracing the characteristics of someone who can access and effectively use violence whenever he wants. Tarantino uses pastiche to connect Jules' character with a performative display of hypermasculine blackness from seventies blaxploitation films. He is presented as a "bad mother fucker" (as his wallet will later reveal) who always stays cool and masters the situation with aggressive violence—thus

distancing himself from a former position of feminization. Also, the formerly chatty Vincent no longer speaks as he lets Jules do all the talking. His job is to stand in the back and keep cool while Jules leads. He too is performing masculine coolness as he is unfazed when he and Jules decide to shoot Bret and his friends. He plays second fiddle to Jules' lead, however, as Jules' race provides him with a more authentic depiction of performative hypermasculine blackness.

Aaron Barlow argues that Tarantino's use of violence never reduces itself simply to spectacle, but he fails to consider how Tarantino aspires his violence to be a kind of realism. Vincent and Jules can chit chat and gossip all they want because they retain their masculine coolness whenever they draw their weapons, and as Fraiman notes "Everything becomes banal in contrast to the high meaningfulness of butchery, and this banality is implicitly labelled "feminine"" (7). *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* try to brand a connection to the real through what Tarantino believes is a realistic portrayal of everyday violence, and he prioritizes it in a way that is problematic (Fraiman, 16). It is not about how many deaths occur, or even how they occur. What matters is how the violence contributes to a constant performing of white masculine coolness that is always related to a nostalgic view of 1970s hypermasculine blackness and, arguably, a highly selective memory of the gangster/crime genre. To return to Vincent, he is someone who is familiar with pop culture, knows when to be polite, and yet has no problem killing when the situation requires it. His flaw, though, is his inconsistent performance of hypermasculinity. In regard to Travolta, Tarantino plays on his star discourse through pastiche, and this contributes to Vincent's constant connection to behaviour coded as feminine. For example, when Vincent takes Mia (Uma Thurman) out to dinner, the two

end up in a dance contest. Vincent is shown to be a more than adequate partner (the pair come in second), and the scene reads as reference to Travolta's iconic role from *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). Prior to the contest, Vincent expresses his desire to stay completely in control during his night out with Mia, and to be as professional as possible. His subsequent engagement in behaviour seen as unprofessional causes him to let his guard down, and the result is Mia overdosing on heroin. She mistakes Vincent's heroin for cocaine, and the incident occurs because Vincent has had to seek shelter in the bathroom so that he can get back into character. As Vincent stares into the mirror he states that he needs to stay loyal to his boss (as he knows Marcellus will kill him if he does not behave). His nostalgia for black hypermasculinity is again apparent, as his answer for accessing this loyalty is to stay cool and master the situation so that he does not have to face Marcellus.

Tarantino is pulling from his favourite films of the seventies, but at what cost? His pastiche suggests a reinscription of sexual and racial difference, as Sharon Willis states:

His films seem designed to capture the fascinated and transgressive identifications of white male fans. Tarantino's films imagine a fandom for "boys" that would recognize itself through an identification with a bad boy fan auteur. Both the films and the fandom, however, depend on a reinscription of sexual and racial difference to mark the border that sets this band apart. (209)

The masculine coolness he offers is one based on a fantasy of co-opting African American masculinity. The white subject essentially wants to take the place of the other,

without leaving its own privileged position (Willis, 210). Tarantino is trying to displace some of the barriers that racism has created, but his mode is problematic. His intent to displace comes from the notion that he is a cultural outsider due to his use of pastiche. He is taking old works and putting them together to make something new, but there is a step missing if he wants to have his work be about real life. Willis refers to the situation as Tarantino thinking he can be both outsider and insider at the same time (212). There is no doubt that his intention is to show that racism need not exist, but he needs to let up on mimicry and ventriloquism.

Everything is reversible in *Pulp Fiction*, and the bathroom is often the space of transition. This notion mirrors Tarantino's use of pastiche in the film, as it suggests that the past can be pulled from its respective place in history without any consequences. Reversibility is thus used as means to void the past, and start fresh. In the second instance in which Vince is shown in the bathroom, he is on the job, waiting at another man's house (Butch), in hopes of capturing him or killing him on his return. Vincent makes a grave error (clearly thinking that there is no chance that Butch would be stupid enough to return), as he leaves his gun in the kitchen and sits down on the toilet to read *Modesty Blaise* (Doubleday, 1965). Butch returns, and to the audience's amazement, spontaneously kills Vincent when the sound of a toaster breaks the tension. Vincent's lack of coolness is ultimately his downfall. He chooses to indulge in disposable literature (pulp) to make his visit to the bathroom more enjoyable, and the result is his death. The book itself is reminiscent of the kind of literature women are stereotypically associated with, and the fact that it is a toaster that sets off his death reaffirms the anxiety connected with domesticity and femininity. The film's connection to an African American 1970s

hypermasculinity frames Vincent's reading of *Modesty Blaise* as uncool. His connection to feminine genres is thus his downfall. Thanks to the non-linear narrative, however, Vincent is featured in the final section of the film, and once again he finds himself in a bathroom with his book. However, this time he has taken his gun in with him, and upon returning to his seat, he stumbles upon two would be robbers pointing their guns right at Jules. Vincent takes a full on masculine approach to the situation as he pleads with Jules to allow him to take action. Now that he has safely returned from the bathroom, he can resume his persona of a bad ass hit man. His earlier death can perhaps be forgotten by the audience now that he is no longer vulnerable. Vincent's pseudo re-birth implies that in *Pulp Fiction's* world, the past can be voided.

Many critics have argued that the film and the characters have no relation to the real world. Most would agree that on a technical level, Tarantino is more than proficient, and that he certainly has an eye and an ear for cinema, but nevertheless his over reliance on postmodern pastiche causes his characters to exist in a moment disconnected from any historical specificity. For Tarantino, macho gangsters drawn from crime cinema are cooler than real people, and violence is arguably the most *real* experience. Mark Conard ends his analysis of *Reservoir Dogs* by offering the question, "...if it's choice between being a cool gangster and being a dorky real person, who wouldn't choose to be cool?" (113). Tarantino is the dorky real person, but he seems intent on showing us how he uses this to his advantage. In his mind, cinema can make you cool, or at least let you feel cool. His first two films are thus his way of spreading coolness around to us dorky people.

As noted, Dyer emphasizes the tendency of pastiche to accentuate, exaggerate, concentrate, and select. For some, this seems to be the basis for displeasure with

Tarantino's pulp. All of the characters and plots are based solely around what he considers to be cool, and the end results are films designed to only display the desires of their creator. Basically, if you consider the same things that he considers to be cool, then you will probably love his film(s). Tarantino wants his audience to see cinema in the manner that he does. He wants them to appreciate the joys that can be had at the theatre, and he wants to be the cool guy that guides them through. His primary concern is sharing with the world the one thing that brings him more happiness than anything else: to be entertained and enhanced at the movies:

If I hadn't made *Reservoir Dogs*, and someone else had made it and I went and saw it, I'd think it was the best fuckin' movie of the year. With these two movies I've done so far, I've enjoyed giving the audience a real ride. But it's not a roller-coaster ride like *Speed*. It's more the fact that you're confounding the audience's feelings about how to watch a movie. Everybody's a film expert these days. We all know a lot about movies, particularly because the movies of the last ten years have been so much the same. But you can take the audience another way, and I do this....but what makes my movies special, if they *are* special, is that—even though they're wild genre movies—they're connected to a human heart. The people in them are not puppets; they're characters, living out their lives doing what they do. That is very important to me (as quoted in Peary 93).

The above quote shows that Tarantino does have a particular way he wants his films to come across. Due to his seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of films, he wants his films to stand out and give the audience an experience to which they are not accustomed. He relies on his intimate knowledge of cinema to take what is old and make it new. Aaron

Barlow compares Tarantino to Stephen King in that both understand where they need to start their works. For example, Tarantino begins most of his films as set in a certain genre, or in other words, a place that viewers are familiar and comfortable with. He then moves away from traditional conventions and “tutors” the audience toward understanding a new way of getting into his work (Barlow 9). The process of tutoring through pastiche takes a much more central position in both *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*. Tarantino uses his knowledge of past works to inform his diegesis in those two films, as he uses references and allusions to place specific historical periods in dialogue with the present. In *Dogs* and *Pulp* he pastiches character and film types from the 1970s, but he does not situate them in connection to contemporary types or eras. His tutoring in those films is more of a tutoring of style and affect (through shock), whereas *Jackie* and *Death Proof* also brings the critical weight of the past meeting the present. These two films rework the limitations of *Dogs* and *Pulp* by showing how current views of the 1970s can be put in dialogue with past views of the 1970s to compare and contrast cultural memory with history. No longer can the past be voided through reversibility. Tarantino does not simply take the old and make it new; he shows the ways in which the past informs the present. In regard to gender he focuses on the ways in which genres traditionally associated with masculinity can now be more conducive to women. Femininity is thus no longer trivialized or distanced through violence in the same manner as *Dogs* and *Pulp*. Race is also less prioritized as Tarantino places nostalgia for black seventies hypermasculinity in a position where it can be critiqued.

Frederic Jameson states that our society is more interested with current perceptions of the past than it is with the past itself:

[I]n a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of that past. (18).

Todd Haynes shows with *Far From Heaven*, that pastiche can be used to successfully comment on the real and the artificial. Haynes' success exists partly in his ability to take from films that are in themselves often progressive and socially relevant. Pastiche is not the issue for Tarantino, what is the issue is that he needs to be more selective, and in *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*, he places the past in dialogue with the present in order to re-evaluate our relationship with nostalgia.

Chapter Two

Doing what she can to Survive: Pam Grier is *Jackie Brown*

Mr. Pink: ...Hey, I know what I'm talking about; black women ain't the same as white women. Go ahead and laugh, you know what I mean. What a white bitch will put up with, a black bitch won't put up with for a minute. They got a line, and if you cross it, they fuck you up.

Eddie: I've got to go along with Mr. Pink on this. I've seen it happen.

Mr. White: Okay, Mr. Expert. If this is such a truism, how come every nigger I know treats his woman like a piece of shit?

Mr. Pink: I'll make you a bet that those same damn niggers who were showing their ass in public, when their bitches get 'em home, they chill the fuck out. - *Reservoir Dogs*

"Well, I've flown seven million miles. And I've been waiting on people almost 20 years. The best job I could get after my bust was Cabo Air, which is the worst job you can get in this industry. I make about sixteen thousand, with retirement benefits that ain't worth a damn. And now with this arrest hanging over my head, I'm scared. If I lose my job I gotta start all over again, but I got nothing to start over with. I'll be stuck with whatever I can get. And that shit is scarier than Ordell." - Jackie Brown

After Mr. Pink finishes lecturing Mr. White on the differences between black women and white women, Nice Guy Eddie (Christopher Penn) seconds his opinion by referencing a black waitress (Elois) who worked at one of his "daddy's" restaurants. He rudely describes her as the kind of woman that every guy who met her "has had to jack off to at least once." Eddie compares Elois to the police woman from the blaxploitation inspired television series *Get Christy Love* (1974), and his story ends with him explaining how Elois got so fed up with being mistreated by her husband that she super-glued the man's penis to his belly. The men cringe at the image, but they are seemingly impressed by a woman who is both sexually desirable and physically aggressive. Eddie believes that the character Elois resembles was played by Pam Grier, but Pink quickly corrects him: "No, it wasn't Pam Grier—Pam Grier was the other one. Pam Grier made the movies. Christie Love was like a Pam Grier TV show, without Pam Grier." Pink's response acknowledges the similarities between the two women (Teresa Graves played

Love), but he also suggests that Grier should be viewed as the definitive example of a hot, bad-ass woman. The sequence is one of many of seemingly insignificant moments from *Reservoir Dogs*. The discussion has little to do with the plot, but it does have a lot to do with Tarantino. Mr. Pink and Eddie's racially charged rant coincides with Tarantino's own fascination with black women being sexually desirable yet also dangerously aggressive, even masculine. Tarantino here lays out his nostalgic view of Grier's screen persona, but he also highlights men's anxiety over women's anger, specifically the rage of a black woman.

Sharon Willis points out that the same anxiety is addressed in 'The Bonnie Situation' segment from *Pulp Fiction*. After Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin (Phil LaMarr), he and Jules have to stop in at Jimmy's (Quentin Tarantino) house to clean up the mess. Jimmy is infuriated by the unexpected visit as his wife Bonnie is due back from work within the hour. Jules explains the "severity" of the situation to Marcellus, and Marcellus—surprisingly empathetic—enlists the services of one of his top employees (The Wolf, played by Harvey Keital) to make sure the situation is cleaned up before Bonnie returns home and freaks out:

If Marcellus Wallace may figure the law of the film, his authority is superseded by that of the black woman, Jimmy's wife, whose image, after all, he supplies for us...This very address shows the father to be deficient. The figure of the black woman interrupts his authority, since even Marsellus fears Bonnie. Of course this is part of the segment's comic effect: all these violent, aggressive males, including the most hypermasculinized, Marsellus, are intimidated by the absent, unseen nurse—the phallic Mommy (Willis 206).

Willis goes on to further discuss Bonnie as Tarantino's alibi for using racial epithets. This goes back to the notion of Tarantino trying to be an outsider with insider privileges. In other words, by placing a black woman in a position of power, Tarantino is attempting to resolve his own guilt about his dialogue's appalling treatment of blacks and women. The same could be argued in regard to the entire impetus for *Jackie Brown*, but either way, he is making an effort to distance his work from claims of misogyny and racism. By giving Grier narrative agency in *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino's portrayal of femininity can no longer be relegated to mere sexualized conversations and off screen dominating mother figures. In *Jackie*, he distances himself from his previous repression of femininity by using Grier as a means to contest the idea that aggression is solely connected to masculinity. The film re-contextualises Grier's star image with the goal of both homage and re-invention. Tarantino uses pastiche in *Jackie* to inform the viewer of Jackie's past and showcase Grier's talent as an actress. At the same time, he highlights the ambiguity and instability of both masculinity and femininity by showcasing Grier's ability to access behaviour associated with each gender.

Tarantino became a star after *Pulp Fiction*, and his status as the indie auteur of the nineties was set. He was in a position that most directors can only dream of, as he had the freedom to do a project of his choice. After a brief string of acting roles in Robert Rodriguez films (*Desperado* [1995] and *From Dusk Till Dawn* [1996]—which he also wrote), Tarantino returned to directing with the highly anticipated *Jackie Brown*—an adaptation of the Elmore Leonard novel, *Rum Punch* (Delacorte Press, 1992).¹³ The film

¹³ The move was surprising as Tarantino frequently refers to himself as a writer/director and often focuses on his ability to start from scratch. *Pulp Fiction* had also just won him an Oscar for best original screenplay.

is a highly faithful revision of the Leonard work, with the biggest variation being that Tarantino's protagonist is African American (Pam Grier). In the novel, Jackie is white and her last name is Burke. Tarantino uses Brown for the film version because it works as an allusion to Foxy Brown, Grier's iconic blaxploitation character. Grier made a name for herself in the early seventies with roles in action films produced by American International Pictures.¹⁴ She became a movie star within the blaxploitation cycle but was only marginally known by the "vast majority" of the filmgoing audience at the time (Jacobson, 43).¹⁵ After her contract with AIP ended (1975), Grier tried to branch out into more mainstream studio pictures (*Drum* [Steve Carver, 1976], and *Greased Lightning* [Michael Shultz, 1977]), but had little success. She failed to land any major releases, and by 1978 she was not able to acquire any lead roles. Her quick rise and fall from stardom thus seemed representative of a success limited to a particular market and cultural moment.

With *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino gave Pam Grier the role that she had long been denied. His intention was to revive her career in the same way that he did with John Travolta. People wanted to know if Tarantino could surpass his previously successful casting moves by reigniting a career that was less memorable than Travolta's. *Jackie Brown* was conceived as a star vehicle for Grier, and since it had been over twenty years since her last leading role, the anticipation was high. When constructing a star image, one of the most straightforward and deliberate of all textual strategies is promotion (Dyer,

¹⁴ The films are categorized as Blaxploitation and they include: *Black Mama, White Mama* (Eddie Romero 1973); *Coffy* (Jack Hill 1973); *Scream, Blacula Scream* (Bob Kelljan 1973); *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill 1974); *Friday Foster* (Arthur Marks 1974); *Bucktown* (Arthur Marks) *Sheba, Baby* (William Girdler 1975)

¹⁵ Even at the time of her success, a handful of middlebrow and highbrow publications recognised the irony in Grier's position as a star. She was the cover story for *Ms. Magazine* in 1976, and was profiled by both *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*.

Stars, 60). As seen in the second trailer for *Jackie Brown*, the film was partially promoted around the improbable circumstances of Grier returning to stardom (the trailer begins with Quentin repeating “Pam Grier is” three times before saying Jackie Brown). Dyer states that a star image is defined by the fact that stars appear in films, but that the star is also “a phenomenon of cinema” (*Stars*, 61). Grier’s presence in *Jackie Brown* thus adds to her star image—not only through her placement in the lead role—but by also highlighting her long absence away from the spotlight. By drawing attention to Grier’s lack of leading roles, *Jackie Brown* seems to pose the question: How has this happened? In other words, if a cinema lover like Tarantino wants her in his film, how come no one else has?¹⁶ Immediate reflection on Grier’s career would suggest (as I mentioned earlier), that perhaps her success was dependent on a particular audience at a particular time, but it also suggests that Hollywood offers little to no substantial roles for African American women even today.

Jackie Brown is not a blaxploitation film, but it's fully informed by the history of that film cycle. In choosing Grier to play Jackie, Tarantino brings the complexity of her star discourse into play in his pastiche aesthetic. Grier necessarily brings the baggage of her acting career to the role of Jackie Brown, and the result is a film that ultimately comments on stardom, aging, and Hollywood. Throughout *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino uses music, mise-en-scene, and dialogue to connect Jackie to Grier's former roles and star persona. Janet Staiger, in reference to *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), states that a postmodern approach to history in film can position viewers to “recognize that the movie is a subjective version of the past” (53). Although not a specifically historical film, *Jackie*

¹⁶ Of course the irony is that this works to also add to the star power of Tarantino himself.

Brown employs a similar strategy, as Tarantino uses music to inform the viewer that Pam Grier and Jackie Brown are linked: the soundtrack, in fact works to emphasize how important Grier's star image is to the overall logic of the film. In doing so, Tarantino reframes her cinematic history to suggest that she is (and was) more than a hypersexualised action heroine. Grier's past roles signify a screen persona that can perform the same rage fuelled aggression of Elois, but Tarantino wants to show that this is only half the story.

Through an analysis of music, narrative, and stardom, I will highlight how Tarantino uses pastiche to put Grier's performance in dialogue with her own star image as well as to comment on the nature of cinematic nostalgia. Comparisons will also be drawn to how Robert Forster's star image is referenced, with an emphasis on his relationship with Jackie. This chapter will explore these issues in order to suggest that previous criticisms of Tarantino's pastiche cannot be fully applied to *Jackie Brown*. The star and music-focused uses of pastiche in *Jackie Brown* tend to foreground issues of time and history in a significantly different manner than both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino is no longer taking from wherever he wants. *Jackie Brown* is, in fact, a pivot film for Tarantino as his postmodern aesthetic begins to embrace more of the critical potential of pastiche. Dyer proposes that through accentuation, exaggeration, concentration, and selection, pastiche can facilitate an experience of previous works, while also providing an avenue for critical potential and the expression of emotion. In *Jackie Brown*, the references and allusions come from a specific place and are applied strategically to critically question how we connect with the past.

In her analysis of cultural memory, Marita Sturken argues that “all memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting; to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed by memory” (*Tangled 7*). *Jackie Brown* is as much about resurrecting Grier’s career as it is about both remembering and forgetting the fraught history of both blaxploitation and seventies America. Grier brings her cinematic and social history to *Jackie Brown*, but the film is far from a complete vision of this past. As Sturken notes: “What we remember is highly selective, and how we retrieve it says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance” (*Tangled 7*). Grier’s past is used as part of the film’s pastiche aesthetic, but time has also led to a reimagining of her star image. Scenes involving gratuitous nudity or explicit violence are nowhere to be found in *Jackie Brown*. Tarantino selectively leaves out these aspects of blaxploitation in order to focus on Grier’s acting ability. He wants to show that she can carry a scene through sheer charisma and dramatic performance, therefore, exploitative aspects of the genre are held to a minimum. Sharon Willis states that Tarantino’s films advocate that we read history “by sifting through the father’s waste. But that they do not go on to read what they find there” (216). In *Jackie Brown* though, Tarantino wants to show that Pam Grier’s blaxploitation past was never simply about senseless violence and nudity. He tries to lift Grier up from exploitation by giving her extended sequences where the viewer simply hangs out with her and watches her work through problems verbally, rather than violently. By successfully showcasing Grier’s acting talent, he argues that blaxploitation represents a moment in film history when African Americans showed that they had the capacity to flourish in the film business. By allowing Grier to carry a contemporary film,

Tarantino suggests that her post-blaxploitation career decline was tied more to a lack of opportunity than it was to any limitation in her abilities.

Sharon Willis points out that Tarantino is interested in turning "film history into nostalgia" specifically in relation to visions of masculinity as seen in seventies pop culture (215). While masculinity in seventies popular culture is hardly uniform; Tarantino is clearly drawn to the more aggressive depictions, and this is what Willis takes issue with. She also notes that, in his first two films, the diegetic world is without a specific historical place; thus, his references ultimately fuel a separation between history and film. In contrast to his earlier work, though, I'd argue that *Jackie Brown* provides a historical placement specifically through Pam Grier. Grier brings her blaxploitation past to the film: she stays cool under pressure, she is proud of her black heritage, and she is adored by men. In *Jackie Brown*, however, physical action is replaced by speech. Instead of exposing her breasts and throwing punches, she now uses her intelligence to get what she wants. The fact that she has changed from being physically aggressive to cognitively aggressive shows the progression that has come with time. Just as Grier's career quickly faded out in the late seventies, the often violent racial politics of blaxploitation diminished from popular American film more generally, at least until the New Black Cinema of the 1990s.¹⁷ *Jackie Brown* marks a similar progression in Tarantino's career

¹⁷ Ed Guerrero highlights the factors that contributed to the fall of Blaxploitation in his article, "The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation." He notes that several factors need to be accounted for: film industry economics, political influences, and changes on the cultural front in regard to a shifting of styles (i.e. soul to disco). As Guerrero notes: "By mid decade black people had shifted from the collective "we" of black rebellion and "equal rights" to the economic self-interest of the "equal opportunity" "me"..."(90). The result was that Studios also did not need to create projects solely concerned with black issues because African Americans were now going to the theatre to see all types of Hollywood films. The fiscal state of Hollywood also started to improve by the mid-70s and low budget exploitation pictures were not as necessary now that the general public (including African Americans) were flocking to see films such as *The*

as well. In the decision to explore female agency and the critical potential of pastiche, Tarantino is able to showcase his development as a director.

Jackie Brown no longer sacrifices femininity in her aggressiveness, but the prioritization of her past in the film, suggests that she has only gotten to this point because of her previous experience. In other words, Jackie is able to successfully embrace and utilize feminine behaviour because she has previously embraced actions coded as masculine. Her newfound ability to use speech and deception to her advantage is Tarantino's way of distancing her from her former image, while simultaneously alluding to it. Her transition from hypersexualised action heroine to middle aged femme fatale is meant to show Grier's flexibility as an actress and Tarantino's talent as a pastiche artist. By using her stardom as a driving force of the film, Tarantino is also trying to reframe his previous conventions for screening race and gender. Through Jackie he foregrounds aspects of femininity and race that his previous films showed little interest in developing.

Jackie Brown tells the story of a 40-something stewardess who gets caught illegally carrying money and cocaine. Two federal agents (Ray and Mark, played by Michael Keaton and Michael Bowen) take her into custody and pressure her to reveal for whom she works. Jackie plays it cool; she knows if she says too much she will probably be killed by Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson), her employer. After Ordell bails her out of jail and then threatens her with violence, Jackie enlists the help of her bail bondsman, Max Cherry, to assist her in a plan to fool the federal agents and to steal Ordell's money. She

Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). See Guerrero's chapter, "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation", from *Framing Blackness*, for a more detailed outline of the history of Blaxploitation.

wants to make one last attempt at acquiring the life she feels she deserves, and with Max's help, she succeeds. In many ways, *Jackie Brown* follows the plot structure of the standard heist film: an original problem is set up, a plan is made, problems arise and are accounted for, the protagonist succeeds, and the film ends. By the conclusion, Ordell is dead, the Feds are satisfied, and Jackie is rich. However, the ending is not as optimistic as one would expect. Though Jackie is clear, there is a subdued tone to the conclusion. While the money is clearly the end goal, the excitement and the process of obtaining is almost as important. Tarantino speaks similarly about the overall film:

It's always unfolding: it's not a movie about Jackie figuring out in the first ten minutes how to get half a million dollars and doing it—no! It's like little by little it starts coming to her, as life and situations change and she's being torn in this direction and that. It slowly evolves, and then from that point on, it's straight ahead until she does it. It's very novelistic, in that the first ninety minutes are just about characterization. Then, it's all execution: the last half-hour is just them doing it, the money switches and all that. (quoted in Bauer 9).

The characters are driven towards a common goal (success), and Tarantino uses dialogue as a means to expose each person's desire. A large majority of the film involves characters sitting around talking about their lives and what they want in the future. He wants us to spend time with the characters so that we understand how everyone has gotten to their respective places. Tarantino has stated that he would like viewers to walk out of *Jackie Brown* saying, "I know those people now" (cited in Otto 1). In the context of the project, knowing the characters takes on a double meaning, as it refers to both their on-screen personas and their star image.

By paralleling film history with contemporary filmmaking, Tarantino pays tribute earlier work, and puts his personal spin on former characters. Instead of casting a woman to imitate former Grier roles, he uses the real Grier to bring authenticity to the characterization and to portray what it may be like for a former action heroine to live in the present day. No longer are references thrown in just for the sake of it; instead, pastiche becomes a process to both celebrate and critically comment on Grier's place within film history.

Star Discourse: Pam Grier / Jackie Brown

Before *Jackie Brown*, Grier had not had a starring role in over twenty years, and Christopher Sieving calls her casting "one of the most improbable movie star comebacks in recent memory" (9). Grier spent the late seventies and all of the eighties in supporting roles in both television and film, without appearing in any considerable hits. Sieving points out that her descent from star to struggling actor is partially reflective of a "lack of major financial success, coupled with the image of resolute independence and contempt for the film industry conveyed in her interviews" (29). Grier's contempt came from her frustration with being typecast. Sieving notes that AIP attempted to somewhat re-work her image through the trimming of violence and nudity in her later blaxploitation films (*Sheba, Baby* and *Friday Foster*), but that the response was negative. In other words, the studio failed to realize that violence and nudity contributed to the central appeal of both Grier and blaxploitation in general in the early seventies. Of course Grier was not the only casualty when blaxploitation fell. With reference to Grier and Tamara Dobson (another female star of blaxploitation), Ed Guerrero describes the damage done to black female stars when Hollywood ceased to make a profit from a particular formula:

Both women's talents were pretty much confined to articulating the sex-violence-action scenarios of cheap Blaxploitation vehicles, and when the studios unplugged the genre, both were unceremoniously dumped, their fates in this sense paralleling those of so many black women with talent and high expectations before and after them in Hollywood's long discriminatory history (99-100).

What added to the sense of disappointment in Grier was that she felt as though her roles were making a difference for everyday women: "I have fan mail that you read and sometimes I almost weep from what women were getting out of it. They were saying I was doing and saying what they wanted to say" (quoted in Mask, 94). In describing Grier's blaxploitation roles, Mia Mask refers to them as, "encapsulat[ing] the ethos of personal frustration, sexual frustration, and political upheaval permeating American society" (60). In other words, Grier was more than just a "bad-ass chick," she was also representative of her cultural moment.

Though blaxploitation films were all about over-the-top action, some actually paused (albeit briefly) to consider the morality behind violence. Take *Coffy*, for example. *Coffy* is a revenge film where Pam Grier plays a woman who has lost her sister to drugs and now seeks vigilante justice. The film begins with Coffy luring a drug lord into an intimate encounter so that she can blow his head off with a shotgun. In the same sequence, she also lethally injects a junkie (off-screen), and both deeds are supposed to be justified because she has a younger sister whose life has been destroyed by these men. The film does not fully support Coffy's actions though. Later on, Coffy discusses the idea of vigilante justice with her friend Carter (William Elliot). Carter, a by the book police officer, disagrees with Coffy's eye-for-an-eye mentality. He states that killing one

man, or a few men, does nothing in the overall scheme of fighting the war on drugs. Later in the film, Coffy begins to tell Carter about her own violent act and how it was driven by a dreamlike fury, but the conversation is interrupted when the phone rings. Coffy never does get to finish her confession, as Carter is violently attacked a few minutes later by masked hoodlums. Consequently, Coffy goes on to commit more violent acts in her quest for justice, but her own self-doubts are re-confirmed in the final scene. After killing her corrupt boyfriend (Howard, played by Booker Bradshaw), Coffy throws her shotgun down in disgust and walks aimlessly towards the beach. She is distraught for having been deceived by the man she loved, but the scene can also be read as her starting to see the logic in Carter's words. When leaving the house, Coffy pauses to take one last look at her destruction. The viewer is not granted her point of view though, as the camera never presents a reverse shot. However, the screams of Howard's mistress can be heard in the background, and they work to expose the horrific nature of violence. In order to avoid further glorification of murder, the viewer is denied one last look at Howard's bloody corpse. Instead, the final shot is a freeze frame of Coffy walking down the beach accompanied with the sound of the Roy Ayers and Carl Clay song, "Shining Symbol." Her slow, methodical walk away from the camera combined with the hopeful music suggests that she is going to put violence behind her, as she is now beginning to realize that killing dealers, pushers, and crooked politicians does nothing to solve the overall problem. Coffy sees first hand that societal conditions are to blame, and that no single individual can be the cause or remedy of widespread suffering.

Foxy Brown, which was originally set to be a sequel to *Coffy*, saw Grier once again team up with director Jack Hill. While *Foxy* shares the revenge plot of *Coffy*, the

tone and execution are in sharp contrast to *Coffy*'s contemplative take on violence. *Foxy* is more of a straight forward action film that glorifies reactionary violence, and that lacks the more subdued tone of *Coffy*. Right from the opening titles, *Foxy* announces a departure from *Coffy*. The film begins with Grier (in multiple outfits) dancing in front of brightly coloured silhouette images of herself. She stylishly combines dancing with martial arts as she moves to the beat of Willie Hutch's title track. The revenge plot in *Foxy* is driven both by the murder of Foxy's boyfriend and by her own rape at the hands of white rednecks who work for the villainous Katherine Wall (Kathryn Loder). Katherine and her partner Steve (Peter Brown) run a corrupt prostitution ring that fronts as a fashion company, and they specialise in protecting members of a drug syndicate by providing sexual favours to criminal judges. Foxy manages to bring down Katherine's empire with the help of a local black power group, and in the film's climactic moment, she and the group castrate Steve. In the final scene, Foxy delivers the penis to Katherine—before shooting her in the arm—and then drives away with one of the group members who helped her out. The tone at the end of *Foxy* is one that suggests she and the group are just getting started with their vigilante justice and that violence is a viable political tool.

The tonal differences between *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy* are reminiscent of the differences between *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown*. Whereas *Pulp* is primarily concerned with over-the-top entertainment, *Jackie Brown* is a nuanced character study. Adrenaline pumping, infantile violence is the norm in *Pulp*, and more realistic problems, such as one's place in society, are dealt with in *Jackie Brown*. Tarantino strategically re-contextualises Jackie's blaxploitation past, but *Coffy* is the film he most directly imitates.

Jackie is a character who is at odds with her lifestyle. Even before she gets busted by the authorities, the opening titles reveal her as struggling with her situation. Jackie is a woman who suffers from many of the limitations that black, middle-aged women in America face every day as she struggles to make ends meet. Jackie is Coffy twenty years later; only instead of being a nurse who is distraught over criminal behaviour, she is an airplane stewardess who is distraught over her own lack of success. Tarantino replaces the doubly motivated plot of *Coffy* (clean up the streets and avenge her sister), with a singular focus that sees Jackie breaking out of her own situation.

Like Coffy, Jackie has the ability to use violence when the situation demands it. For example, when Ordell attempts to threaten her, she turns the tables on him:

Ordell: Is that what I think it is?

Jackie: What do you think it is?

Ordell: I think it's a gun pressed up against my dick.

Jackie: Well you thought right. Now take your hands from around my throat, nigga.

Ordell: What the hell's wrong with you, Jackie?

Jackie: Shut the fuck up and don't you move! (as she presses him against the window)

The only time Jackie uses a racial slur in the film is when she is using force. She temporarily resorts back to Grier's old persona because the situation demands it. Unlike Grier's previous films though, Jackie does not kill Ordell. She knows that this would only hurt her chances of living a better life, and like Coffy, she no longer stands for the same sort of vigilante justice that she used to. In blaxploitation cinema, the protagonist

often sought revenge for the assault of a loved one; this violence was normally directed at pimps, war lords, and other urban criminals. Guerrero points out that those revenge scenarios were meant to stress community concerns, yet it was often only the protagonist who triumphed at the end. He also states that although defenders often cite the films as accurate portrayals of "social reality", the truth is that black women "could find little in their adolescent-male-fantasy-orientated roles to identify with" (Guerrero 99-102). In other words, the depiction of social conditions and the motivation for action may have been somewhat accurate, but the actual application was pure self-indulgent fantasy. Jackie cannot be an exact version of Coffy, but she can keep parts of Coffy alive, and what Tarantino does, is place Jackie in a position where there is no confusion over what she is fighting for. She does everything solely for her own benefit, and this is one of the ways Tarantino separates the film from being an updated version of a blaxploitation work.¹⁸ Instead, the film works as a means to re-think blaxploitation cinema.

Throughout the film, in spite of her relative separation from the black community, Tarantino keeps Jackie aligned with a black sensibility. One way he does this is through the mise-en-scène of her apartment. She keeps the set-up quite basic, but an assortment of African decor marks the space as her own. One of the main portraits visible to the viewer is "Visions of Black" by Frank Frazier. Frazier released a majority of his work in the 1970s and was known for foregrounding issues of "the black experience". He often used images that promote ancestry and tradition, and Jackie's link to his work further

¹⁸ In some ways this also mirrors the individualist focus of blaxploitation heroics as well. Tarantino has also stated that having Jackie as a black woman does however change her characterization from the original novel: "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?' The only reason they're saying that is because I did *Reservoir Dogs* first. I really love the idea of following a black woman in her forties. It's funny, but I do feel that Jackie Brown is mine. She's the same character as in the book, but making her black affects her because her life experiences are different and her dialogue is different" (quoted in Bauer, 237).

suggests that she was and is concerned with maintaining an identity associated with racial politics.

Star Discourse: Samuel L. Jackson / Ordell

Jackie is a character often informed by Grier's authentic connection to blaxploitation while Ordell's is informed by Samuel L. Jackson's connection to Jules from *Pulp Fiction*. There is no denying that Ordell's quick, rhythmic dialogue is on display whenever he is in the scene, but his character works in opposition to Jackie. Ordell certainly has his moments where he thinks he is in control, but he is completely dependent on others to create this facade. Through his manipulation of both Lewis (Robert De Niro) and Melanie (Bridget Fonda), Ordell embraces a performative depiction of seventies African American coolness. He makes Melanie answer his phone, when he can easily do it himself, and he refers to her as his "little surfer girl". Ordell likes the fact that Melanie is white, and he uses this fact to enhance his masculinity. He also goes out of his way to impress Lewis by using violence, and his knowledge of the streets likewise suggest how authentically bad-ass he is. Ordell strives to be associated with the same kind of aggressive masculinity of blaxploitation cinema, but unlike Jackie, his character lacks the kind of history that Grier can provide.

In terms of star discourse, *Pulp Fiction* was undoubtedly Jackson's most famous role to date (Jules).¹⁹ In the film, he famously delivers long, pseudo-intellectual speeches that are meant to be quoted and remembered. Also, by the end of the film Jules has a

¹⁹*Do The Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1989, 1991) are also well known at this point, but he was a supporting actor in both.

spiritual epiphany that causes him to turn away from a life of crime. In some ways, his role as Ordell can be read as an alternate version of Jules—who instead of leaving the criminal world, decides to branch out on his own. They both talk in a loud, rhythmic style, and they both fear black women (Bonnie in *Pulp*). The difference between the two, though, is that Jules exists in a diegetic world where his personality is seen as the ultimate form of coolness. *Pulp* is a film characterized by energetic rhythms and exaggerated styles, whereas *Jackie Brown* is more nuanced and soulful, and thus more closely aligned with reality.

Ordell's performative display works to separate *Jackie Brown* from *Pulp Fiction* in terms of authenticity. Jackson's posturing of black masculinity from *Pulp* is re-framed within Ordell. With Tarantino placing Ordell against Jackie, he is able to show the difference between a performance with no relation to history and a performance directly informed by film history. The same goes for the two films, as *Jackie Brown* embraces a more critical approach to pastiche than *Pulp*. Ordell's connection to in-authenticity can be read as Tarantino trying to distance himself from his earlier characterizations.

Ordell represents a traditional form of masculinity whereby women are seen as objects, success is only limited to how much ambition you have, and anything is possible as long as you are willing to put in the work to get it. Ordell has made his money through hard work, and although he is a criminal, Tarantino wants you to respect his desire for success. He may be a monster in that he kills those who stand in his way, yet this is presented as logical for someone who must work the streets. However, Melanie points out that Ordell "moves his lips when he reads" and that he only repeats what he hears from others. Tarantino thus has Melanie deliver this information because he wants the

viewer to know that Melanie also sees through Ordell's performance. Even though Jackie is the center of the film, her success is dependent on triumphing over Ordell, and to do this she must further expose the performative nature of Ordell's "cool" black masculinity. Like Melanie, Jackie can already see through Ordell, but she cannot let him know this. Instead, she has to let him think he has control, only to undermine his credibility by enlisting the help of Max Cherry. Tarantino's use of Samuel L. Jackson in the role helps foreground his intent to re-frame his previous convention for screening gender and race. Black masculine performativity is mocked in *Jackie Brown*, where it is celebrated in *Pulp Fiction*. No longer is performative black masculinity the definitive form of coolness, and Tarantino is thus showing a transition towards taking a critical stance in his work.

Star Discourse: Robert Forster / Max Cherry

Though *Jackie Brown* is primarily a star vehicle for Grier, it also works as one for Robert Forster as well. He plays Max Cherry, a man who has successfully run a bail bond business for over twenty years. Max is the kind of guy who lives by the book and takes few chances when it comes to his situation. Max is single and good at his job, he often reads, and goes to the movies. Like Jackie, Max's character is also informed by Forster's cinematic past. Forster's most famous role is arguably as John Cassellis in *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969). In the film he plays a television news reporter who has a desire to cover real stories from the streets of Chicago. One of his stories is a piece about a local African American man who finds \$10,000 in the back of a cab and turns it over to the police. In one of the film's most pivotal scenes, John is following up on his interview with the man and is approached by 3 or 4 of the man's friends. They are

described as black militants, and they confront John on what his intentions are. Taken aback, John tells the first man that he will not listen to anything he says if it is presented via aggression. The man replies by telling John that he cannot successfully present a story on a black man's troubles because he is "not black enough." The camera then cuts to two other militant men as they break the fourth wall while they elaborate on the challenges the media presents to African Americans. What gives the scene an added sense of power is that a reverse shot of John is never shown. We do not see his response as the film suggests that he may not have one.²⁰

In *Jackie Brown* there are no direct cues or references to *Medium Cool*, but the numerous similarities between the two characters suggests that Tarantino wants Max to be read as an alternative, older version of John. Both men are consumed by their professions, both stay cool in the face of conflict, and both are confronted about their association with blackness. For example, when Ordell comes to Max's office he immediately notices that Max has a picture on the wall of himself and his employee Winston (Tommy 'Tiny' Lister) in a friendly embrace. Ordell comically comments on the size of Winston (in the novel he is a former boxer), and suggests that it was Max's idea to take the picture. Ordell thus implies that the reason Max took the picture was to show that he is close friends with a black man, and that he has protection if anyone wants to messes with him. Ordell reads Winston's presence as evidence of Max's insecurity in dealing with aggressive black men. Max neglects to comment, but when placing his character in connection to John Callis, the placement of the photograph does read as Max partly trying to legitimize his position as a friend to the black community. The scene also

²⁰ John seems almost like a stand in for mainstream journalism as a whole, and this could be why the characters address the camera directly.

mirrors Tarantino's placement of Grier in the film. By having a black woman as his protagonist he is able to combat earlier criticisms of racism in his films.²¹

Tarantino alludes to a specific moment in Forester's past to set up Max as someone who is very aware of it how it looks to be working in and with the black community. Ordell continues to pressure Max into doing what he wants. However, while Max may be overly-aware of his whiteness, he shows no signs of fearing Ordell, and he never lets him get the upper hand. He states, "Is white guilt supposed to make me forget I'm running a business?" Ordell—realizing that Max is a cooler customer than he imagined—backs down. In regard to *Medium Cool*, the black militants are given priority (and the last word), but in *Jackie Brown*, Ordell is mocked. Max is unfazed by Ordell because he does not view him in the same way that John viewed the militants, and this suggests that Max is also able to see Ordell's persona as one of imitation. Max's connection to history also allows Tarantino to suggest that Max may be more capable of convincingly accessing black "coolness" than Ordell. In the logic of the film, Max's connection to the past allows him to accurately separate authentic black masculinity from inauthentic posturing. His self assured awareness—in comparison to Ordell's over-the-top attitude—implies that race is no longer the defining factor for understanding, or at least recognizing, the black experience. In other words, the speech made by the black militants in *Medium Cool* no longer carries the same connotations, as Ordell shows less of an awareness of "blackness" than Max. Max's display of steely self control represents a re-framing of coolness for Tarantino. Max's humbleness and assertiveness (as opposed to aggression) is in striking contrast to the performative hypermasculinity of the men in

²¹ Interestingly enough, there is a picture of Grier and Tarantino in a close embrace on the inside of the DVD jacket of the film.

Reservoir Dogs and *Pulp Fiction*. In some ways, however, it may be Max's whiteness that Tarantino is now privileging.

In *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino continually mocks what he considers to be inauthentic depictions of blackness, while prioritizing authentic depictions throughout the film. By using star discourse as a means to show Robert Forester's character is superior to Samuel L. Jackson's character in terms of masculine coolness, Tarantino is using self-pastiche to showcase the differences in approach between *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown*. The unresolved issue, though, is the way in which white men are seemingly returned to a primary position. However, Jackie and Max's relationship somewhat complicates this potential, as the pair view each other with mutual respect. Tarantino continues to advocate that there can be authentic depictions of "blackness", but he is now critically using past experience to support his claims. He selectively uses the actors' star images to inform their characterizations, and he also uses music to further strengthen this intended re-contextualization.

Music as exposition

Both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* have been celebrated for their soundtracks and *Jackie Brown* is no different. We learn a lot about Tarantino's characters through their taste in music and their preferred mode of playback. Like Tarantino, many of his characters enjoy the sounds of the past. For Tarantino, memory and nostalgia are linked to pop culture, and music seems to fall right below film in his personal hierarchy of pleasures. *Jackie Brown*'s soundtrack differs from his earlier films, though, as it has a much more defined role within the plot. Both non-diegetic and diegetic music are

utilized in *Jackie Brown* to reveal aspects of character that are not necessarily accessible through visuals or narrative. Claudia Gorbman refers to the process of integration between diegetic and non-diegetic music as metadiegetic:

Significantly, the only element of filmic discourse that appears extensively in nondiegetic as well as diegetic context, and often freely crosses the boundary line in between, is music. Once we understand the flexibility that music enjoys with respect to the film's diegesis, we begin to recognize how many different kinds of functions it can have: temporal, spatial, dramatic, structural, denotative, connotative—both in the diachronic flow of a film and at various interpretive levels simultaneously. (22)

Tarantino switches between diegetic and non-diegetic (sometimes within the same scene) inserts in *Jackie Brown* to signify which character may be in control of the situation.

In *Reservoir Dogs*, the music is diegetic, and, as Ken Garner points out, it exhibits a certain mood and rhythm for the characters that establishes their tastes and desires (194). The soundtrack also acts as an ironic counterpoint to the visuals, as in the film's infamous ear cutting scene. In *Pulp Fiction*, the soundtrack is similarly used to indicate mood (though not always diegetically). Dick Dale's surf guitar instrumental *Misirlou* opens and closes the film, and the song functions as a sort of testament to not only the psyche of the characters but to the style of the production as a whole. *Fiction* is a film that tries to sustain a strong element of energy through a non-linear narrative, quick clever dialogue, violence, and shock tactics that work to keep the viewer entertained.

Garner refers to it as a “distinct kind of musical intensity of style, to complement the film’s verbal and visual exaggeration (196).

In *Jackie Brown*, music guides and informs the viewer to specific time periods and films (the seventies being the main one), so that the intended connection with the past can be made. In many ways the soundtrack functions to set up the mood of both the characters and the film—as in *Dogs* and *Fiction*—but the difference lies in Tarantino’s strategic use of pastiche in *Jackie*. Without the addition of music, *Jackie Brown* would be a very straightforward heist film. The soundtrack thus brings an added dimension to the characters that often helps the film explore aspects of their identity. Musical cues present the viewer with a deeper level of insight at which the dialogue and narrative only hint, and this allows the film to explore the character’s history and their motivations for the future.

The metadiegetic potential of music allows Tarantino to further develop his re-contextualization of Grier’s blaxploitation history. Since Grier plays the protagonist, a majority of the songs used within the film come from blaxploitation soundtracks. *Jackie Brown* is not meant to be read as a contemporary blaxploitation film though—it works instead as an homage to these films. The placement of songs from past films works to give Jackie a particular history. Also, the lyrics act as a guide to what she may be going through, and the suggestion is that perhaps not too much has changed since the 1970s. In other words, life in the 1990s may be just as challenging for a black woman as it was in the 1970s.

Jackie Brown begins with a shot of a blank wall at LAX. Bobby Womack's song "Across 110th Street" plays and the titles begin. Jackie glides into the frame as she stands still on travelator. She looks cool and calm in her stewardess uniform as the titles appear in front of her. As the lyrics explain:

I was the third brother of five / Doing whatever I had to do to survive / I'm not saying what I did was alright / Trying to break out of the ghetto was a day to day fight / Been down so long, getting up didn't cross my mind / I knew there was a better way of life that I was just trying to find / You don't know what you'll do until you're put under pressure / Across 110th Street is a hell of a tester.

Right when Womack says tester, the title of the film appears and takes over the frame (appearing in the *Foxy Brown* font from the original movie poster). As opposed to the actor's names which appear in front of Jackie, the title covers her face and the lyrics continue with: "Across 110th Street / Pimps trying to catch a woman who's weak." In the original film of the same name (Barry Shear, 1972), Womack's song was combined with shots of a Cadillac driving towards Harlem, establishing the setting of the film. In *Jackie Brown*, the song sets up and confirms both the character's background and the actor's performed past (Garner 193). Right away, Tarantino displays his intent to have a single character as the primary focus of the film.

The staging of the title sequence is also an obvious reference to *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), and thus nods to the disillusionment (of Jackie and Grier) as a key focus of the film. *The Graduate* is likewise famous for its use of music as it employs a soundtrack driven by pop-music (with "The Sound of Silence" by Simon and Garfunkel as the opener). The difference between the openings is that while Ben (Dustin Hoffman)

is being passed by others, Jackie is the sole individual in the frame. She knows that being a single, middle-aged black woman is a tough spot to be in, and she has knows that she can no longer let anyone stand in her way. Both films have protagonists are uninspired by their surroundings, but Jackie and Ben are in opposing positions. Ben is youthful and unsure of his place in the world, while Jackie is middle-aged and tired of having to struggle to make ends meet. Ben is also able to fall back on his upper-middle class parents, whereas Jackie has no one. The lyrics to "Sound of Silence" tell of a person who notices how distant and lost society is becoming: "People talking without speaking / People hearing without listening / People writing songs that voices never share / And no one dared / Disturb the sound of silence." Both *The Graduate* and Simon and Garfunkel's score are indicative of an evolving youth culture in the 1960s that began to question society. The placement of "The Sound of Silence" therefore connects Ben to the present. "Across 110th Street" instead connects Jackie to the past, the early 1970s when racial struggles were at the forefront of soul music, and the songs placement suggests that she is still facing the same problems as she was then.

The lyrics to "Across 110th Street" highlight that Jackie has not lost her edge though. She "will do whatever [she] has to do to survive," and the song expresses her desire to change her life for the better. The character of Jackie Brown brings the knowledge, experience, and maturity to "The baddest One-chick Hit-Squad that ever hit town" (Original *Coffy* Poster), which guarantees that she is not to be confused "with a woman who's weak." The same goes for Grier as an actor. She brings to the film the history of someone who has been in the business for over twenty years, and although she has aged, Tarantino wants to show that she can still be a star. Jackie is associated with

seventies R&B music throughout the film. Her identity is based around themes and implications within the music, just as it was in Grier's earlier roles.²² Jackie mimics the style of the music as she always adopts a calm and cool demeanour. When Ray is interrogating and threatening her, she stays calm; when Ordell tries to kill her, she shows no signs of losing control.

In *Jackie Brown*, music acts as guide for the viewer to understand who is in control of what sequences. As Jackie's music opens the film, we know that it is going to be her story, however, she is not the only character associated with seventies R&B music. When Max first sees Jackie walking out of the prison, the R&B song, "Natural High", by Bloodstone, plays non-diegetically. The music is accompanied by long shots of a downtrodden Jackie slowly walking to the gates, intercut with close-ups of Max that continually zoom in as Jackie approaches. The song is representative of Jackie's "musical point of view" being dominant, and Max falls for her right away (Miklitsch 293). From that point on, Jackie has control over him, and this is reflected through Max's embrace of her musical taste. The lyrics further enhance Max's star struck gaze: "Why

²² She may not be the aggressive crime fighter she used to be but she is still cool. She has dealt with hardship before and she will do it again. Music does not always allude to merely positive aspects of Grier's persona though. When she is shown in prison the song that plays on the soundtrack is her own "Long Time Woman". She recorded the song for the prison film *The Big Dollhouse* (Jack Hill, 1971) and its placement within *Jackie Brown* suggests that she is somewhat responsible for her own fate, as Tarantino could be making a loose connection to her public bad mouthing of the film industry. When she gets picked up by Ray and Mark for illegally transporting Ordell's money, her imprisonment is a wakeup call. Her situation with Ordell has been one of desperation, and with her arrest she now knows her position needs to change. She should never have been working with Ordell in the first place, and her introduction to Ray provides her with an opportunity to do something about it.

do I keep my mind on you all the time, when I don't even know you? Why do I feel this way, thinking about you every day, when I don't even know you?"

Max's passion for Jackie can be read as a re-visioning of interracial relationships from Grier's blaxploitation films. As Chris Holmlund points out, "In the blaxploitation films, whites are never her partners, let alone (by choice) her lovers: those privileges are reserved for black men" (102). When there are white men in Grier's blaxploitation pictures, they objectify her hypersexualised look, and some have been rapists (*Foxy Brown*). Max Cherry's look of love represents a welcome change in terms of blaxploitation's take on interracial relationships. Instead of only seeing her as a sex symbol, he falls for her sheer presence and charisma.

In a later scene, Max stops by Jackie's apartment and she puts on some music for him. Max comments on her vinyl collection and asks her why she has not embraced the CD revolution. She responds by telling him that she put too much time into her collection and that she cannot be bothered with new music. Jackie's fascination with and attachment to the past actually mirrors Tarantino's use of Grier's star image in the film. When she chooses to play "Didn't I Blow Your Mind this Time?" by the Delfonics, she is showing Max a piece of her identity and providing him with a sense of her personal history, just as Tarantino uses Grier to show what kind of films he grew up on. The song is used diegetically to further emphasize Jackie's connection to the music and the time period. As she puts the record on, she slowly lights a cigarette, and casually moves to the rhythm as she walks towards Max. Max watches affectionately, as he knows he is in the company of a woman who thrives when in her element. Max relishes in Jackie's intense connection to soul music of the seventies, and he realizes that twenty years of trying to

make it as a stewardess has forced her to put aside her true self. Her charisma is strong in the scene, as the viewer is also meant to share in Max's fascination. The diegetic music works to showcase Grier's appeal. She is shown as passionate and desirable, and Tarantino captures her image without objectifying her body. Her performance elicits emotion through a non violent, non-objectified presentation that is connected to a nostalgic and knowing view of the past. As Max sits back and watches, he sees Jackie as a woman who was, and is, an incredible presence, fully framed and informed by her past experiences.

Tarantino acknowledges that Jackie's (and Grier's) plight is the driving force of the film, but he also states that "Ordell is the rhythm, the soul of the movie" (Quoted in Bauer, 238). Ordell's quick, rhythmic dialogue is on display whenever he is in the scene, but I disagree that his character is the soul of the film. Ordell certainly has his moments where he thinks he is in control, but the soundtrack also works to undermine his presence. Like Jackie, Ordell brings a seventies African American coolness to his persona. On two occasions the soundtrack alludes to Ordell being connected to the soul music of the 1970s, but it also undermines this connection. When Ordell prepares to kill Beaumont (Chris Tucker), he plays "Strawberry Letter 23" by the Brothers Johnson. The Brothers Johnson were an R&B group in the mid seventies, and they were best known for backing up both Bobby Womack and the Supremes. Since Jackie has already been aligned with Womack, the scene signifies that Ordell is not going to be able to compete with her past. Also, as Ordell prepares to kill Beaumont (who has been tricked into hiding in the trunk), he methodically slides on his gloves while attentively listening to the music. At this point, it is safe to assume that his calm and cool demeanour suggests to the viewer that he

is going to take care of Beaumont in a precise manner. Instead, he drives around the corner (to a spot directly in front of house), turns off the car (and the music), opens the trunk, shoots Beaumont twice, re-starts the car (and the music), and leaves. Tarantino captures the sequence in one long, high angle shot that shows the absurdity of Ordell's act. The fact that the music is off when Ordell commits the murder suggests that his relation to R & B of the seventies is yet another performance. Whereas Jackie is in her element when she embraces music, Ordell uses it for performing black macho coolness.

Tarantino further uses the soundtrack to signify Ordell's performative nature when he waits outside Jackie's home. While Ordell sits in his car, he listens to a Johnny Cash cover of "Tennessee Stud" (originally recorded by Jimmy Driftwood). The chorus goes as follows: "The Tennessee stud was long and lean / The colour of the sun and his eyes were green / He had the nerve and he had the blood / And there never was a horse like the Tennessee stud." Michel Chion refers to music that "directly express[es] its participation in the feelings of the scene, by taking on the scene's rhythm, tone, and phrasing" as empathetic sound (8). The fact that "Tennessee Stud" is a cover further suggests that Ordell may not be authentically "cool" as his persona is one of imitation. Johnny Cash was also a white man with the nickname "The man in black", and this adds to the suggestion that Ordell's display of African American masculinity is merely posture—as opposed to Jackie who embraces the real thing, as her past makes her a true representative of "blackness" in the logic of the film. Also, the lyrics, "he had the nerve and he had the blood", further work as empathetic sound, as they mock Ordell when he fails to exert his power over Jackie.

Ordell enters Jackie's house with the intent of either killing her or scaring her in a way that keeps her quiet. The sequence echoes a similar scene in *Pulp Fiction* where Jules and Vincent enter an apartment to retrieve a briefcase that belongs to their boss. In *Pulp*, they briefly lose control of the situation, but regain dominance by killing everyone who is a threat. When Ordell confronts Jackie he immediately loses control as he is unprepared for her own aggressive response. Ordell's unsuccessful attack can be read as Tarantino alluding to the exaggerated and unrealistic nature of the *Pulp* sequence. In other words, Ordell does not share the same kind of invincibility that Jules does, as *Jackie Brown's* diegesis is one more closely aligned with the real world. Violence still plays a part in the film, but not in the overstated fashion that it does in *Pulp*.

Tarantino further highlights Ordell's performative display of hypermasculinity by continuing to prioritize Jackie's musical point of view. When Jackie takes off with Ordell's money, Ordell makes one more attempt to bring her down. Max meets up with Ordell and explains to him that Jackie was only keeping his money so the Feds would not get it. Ordell is unconvinced, but quickly changes his tone after he speaks to Jackie on the phone. Tarantino sets the conversation off screen so that Jackie is not shown in a position of inferiority to Ordell as well as to keep the viewer from knowing the truth. When Ordell and Max set off to meet Jackie, Ordell gloats about how the usually "too cool for school" Jackie is now scared. As the viewer, we do not know the plan—could Jackie really have lost her cool and decided to give Ordell his money back? All of our fears are then put aside when Ordell turns on Max's car and The Delfonics play once again. The diegetic placement of the song signals to the viewer that Jackie still retains control. Ordell, surprised, says to Max: 'I didn't know you liked the Delfonics?' Ordell

is too concerned with beating Jackie and he cannot see that she and Max are setting him up. Max's connection to the music also further suggests that he is more closely connected to the soul music of the 1970s than Ordell. Max's connection to soul music reflects a white cool posturing through black music that can be accredited to Tarantino as well. Though Tarantino is re-framing his previous conventions for screening race, shadows of his former portrayal can still be found.

The soundtrack also functions to showcase what Tarantino sees as uncool behaviour. Though the film works to re-frame black masculinity, at times, the music reflects Tarantino's condescension towards characters that signify domesticity. For example, before the heist begins, Ordell calls Lewis to make sure that he and Melanie are ready to go. When he finds out they are still at the apartment, he yells at Lewis and tells him to grab Melanie and "drag her ass out". The scene echoes an earlier sequence where Ordell yelled at Melanie and forced her to leave the house. In this case, Lewis is unable to take a dominant stance like Ordell and "control" Melanie's behaviour. For Tarantino, uncool or overly feminine women need to be controlled so that they do not inhibit the actions of men. Moreover, when men are unable to "control" these women, they also become "uncool". When Melanie finally gets in the van, Lewis asks her to turn down her music. She plays "Midnight Confessions" by the Grass Roots, and Lewis ends up turning it down himself because again, he cannot control her.²³ After the two of them grab the bag and head back out to the van, Melanie begins to mock Lewis, and Lewis shockingly shoots her twice. When he re-enters the van, The Grassroots play for a few seconds, stop

²³ Earlier she was listening to "Undun" by The Guess Who. Her musical point of view is thus associated with Rock music and not R&B like Jackie. Also, Bridget Fonda is connected to the 60s white hippie scene from her father's days (Peter Fonda).

when the vehicle stalls, and then resume (paralleling Ordell's killing of Beaumont). Lewis thus assumes Melanie's musical point of view, and the result is that he officially becomes 100% uncool. His violent rage is depicted as his last gasp at retaining his former masculine self, but the re-occurrence of the Grass Roots suggests that his act was one of reaction and desperation, and not cool masculine aggression. When Ordell confronts Lewis about what happened he discovers that he was tricked by both Jackie and Max. He then blames Lewis for not seeing through the charade. He asks him: "What happened to you? Your ass used to be beautiful".²⁴ In terms of star discourse, the scene can be read as Tarantino alluding to the formerly cool persona of De Niro. In the diegesis of the film, what happened was that Lewis spent too much time on the couch with Melanie and lost his cool. When The Grass Roots play without Melanie, Tarantino is signifying that Lewis has now taken her position as someone who has no real value. In Tarantino's world, those with streetwise "black" masculinity (Max and Jackie) stay cool when under pressure. As Lewis spends more time with Melanie, he gets a taste of the banal life. No longer is he the hardened, cool criminal that he used to be. Melanie and Lewis represent Tarantino's disdain for domestic behaviour. All they do is sit around and watch television. When forced to actually go out and be a part of something they are unable to cope. They both rely on Ordell for security, and while his performative masculinity is mocked in comparison to Jackie, it is still shown as a form of superiority in relation to Lewis. Susan Fraiman's criticisms of Tarantino and his prioritization of coolness thus

²⁴ The line also hints at the previous power dynamic of Lewis and Ordell's relationship. To further stress the notion that Lewis is coded as feminine, refer to Willis' notion that to be 'fucked' in a Tarantino film, is to become coded as a bitch (Willis 199-201). Ordell referring to Lewis's ass as beautiful suggests that while the two shared time in prison, their relationship may have been sexual, whereby Ordell was the dominant figure.

remain alive in this section, but Tarantino further troubles these notions by the end of the film.

When Ordell finally confronts Jackie, he is shot and killed by Ray. Jackie gets away with stealing his money and the feds get their man. In the very last sequence, Jackie returns to see Max and thank him for everything he did. She sits at the front of his office and Max—shown through extreme long shot—is in the back. The scene is a reversal of their initial meeting as it is now Jackie who waits for Max. She tells him he should have taken more money and that she is leaving. Max cuts her off as he spots Ordell's car and Jackie responds, "Haven't you ever borrowed someone's car before?" Max replies, "Not after they're dead." Jackie looks away—taking a more serious tone—and assures Max that she did not use him. Max says he knows that and that at his age he cannot blame anyone else for what he does anyways. Max's line of questioning suggests that he feels uneasy about Jackie's coolness concerning Ordell's death. Jackie playfully asks Max if he is scared of her, and he says "yeah a little bit". From an over the shoulder position (Max's) the camera then follows Jackie as she slowly gets up and grabs Max's hands. When she moves close to him, the camera slides over to the side and frames the pair in medium close up as they sensually rub noses and begin to kiss. The camera continues to zoom in until their lips and eyes fill the frame. They pull back to look over each other and delight in the moment, and Jackie tells Max she will send him a postcard. Max kisses her again, but the intensity is lost when his phone goes off. The two stand motionless for two rings before Jackie says, "You're running a business, Max". Max, without breaking eye contact, answers the phone, "Cherry Bail Bond". Jackie raises her hand in leaving and walks out as Max reluctantly lets her go. The camera alternates from

straight on shots of Max to his point of view of Jackie leaving, before finally zooming in on his face as he tells his client to call him back. As Max lowers the phone, "Across 110th Street" plays for the final time, and the camera lingers on his distraught face for what seems like minutes. Max, unsure of himself, turns and walks to the back. As he moves away from the screen, the frame gradually goes out of focus. The camera returns to Jackie driving away, and the song continues to play as she is framed in a close up. Tarantino holds the shot for 35 seconds before the song is revealed to be playing diegetically in Jackie's car. She slowly lip synchs the lyrics and her expression is one of remorse. She has once again claimed the musical point of view for herself, as both she and the film have left Max behind.

Like the film's opening, its final image also mirrors that of *The Graduate*. Nichols' film ends with a close-up of both Ben and Elaine as they ride the bus and ponder what to do next. The camera pulls out and sits on the road watching the bus drive away. In *Jackie Brown* though, the camera stays on Jackie. She has \$500,000, but she is also alone. In view of Dyer's assertion that "pastiche facilitate[s] the experience of the imitated work", it is also important to recall the significance of the ending to *Coffy* in order to understand what Tarantino is doing. In that film, while Coffy walks aimlessly along the beach, the Roy Ayers and Carl Clay song, "Shining Symbol" plays non-diegetically. The lyrics convey a strong message of pride: "Revenge is a virtue / you stood up like you should / standing up strong / like we all wish we could". Although Coffy has learned a lesson about violence, there is still the question of what to do now.

In terms of Grier, the extended shot of Jackie in close up is Tarantino's way of providing her with one more moment in the spotlight, but it also works as a reflection.

The final line Jackie mouths is “you can find it all on the street”, and Tarantino thus connects the street to Hollywood. Grier’s career represents both sides of stardom; she went from success to failure and back to success again. Tarantino made *Jackie Brown* as a star vehicle for her, but unlike Ben’s position at the end of *The Graduate*, or Coffy’s final moments, Grier does not face uncertainty; she faces the truth that Hollywood rarely has leading roles for middle-aged black women. The ending is not only a moment for Grier to savour her return—it is also a moment for Tarantino to relish in what could be the final sight of Grier as a leading lady.

In regard to Jackie, however, her connection to the music is of an ambiguous nature. She did what she “had to do to survive”, but is she in a better position than she was at the beginning? While hindsight has provided Jackie with the knowledge that she can change her own position, she seems to regret her choice to leave Max behind. Jackie’s lip synching to “Across 110th Street” also connects the sequence with the ending to the film *Across 110th Street*. *Across* is one of the darkest, least glorified blaxploitation films of the cycle. There is plenty of violence, but at its heart, it is a police procedural—as equally interested in criminal justice as it is in racial politics. In the film, the final shot is a freeze frame of a black hand and a white hand failing to connect. *Jackie Brown* ends with an allusion to *Across*, and the implication is that she and Max also failed to connect. Of course they had their long awaited kiss, but Max’s subsequent reaction combined with Jackie’s sombre drive suggests that there could have been much more. Tarantino has Jackie and Max part ways because the film is her story—but there is more to it than that. Jackie and Max are connected to the star discourses of Grier and Forster, and Tarantino uses this connection to critically comment on the notion of cinematic nostalgia.

Nostalgia / History

In contrast to the film—where the two do not physically connect until the end—Max and Jackie have an active sexual relationship in *Rum Punch*. Max falls in love, and he questions Jackie's feelings throughout the story. The book, however, ends with Jackie asking Max to come away with her. The reader is denied Max's response, but the impression is that he will probably go with her. In *Jackie Brown*, on the other hand, there is no ambiguity. Max lets Jackie walk out of his life. As the frame goes out of focus, he can be seen with his head in his hands. Tarantino goes out of his way to show that Max and Jackie have intense feelings for each other, as their embrace is arguable the most intimate moment of a man and a woman in all of his films. He convincingly captures the characters' affection for one another, and he presents Jackie's feelings as equal to Max's. The dilemma, however, is based on Jackie's nostalgic connection to the past. The film cannot end with Max and Jackie together because it would perhaps undermine Grier's position as "Godmother" of blaxploitation. Max also resists fighting for Jackie because, perhaps, like John Callis, he believes that he is not "black enough". Throughout the film, Max shows that he can stay cool under pressure, except when he is around Jackie. In the logic of the film, she represents an authentic display of blackness, and this makes Max feel apprehensive about his own masculinity. At one point he tells Jackie he is leaving the bond business, but by the end he has changed his mind. Max questions Jackie for taking Ordell's car because he cannot understand how she could be unaffected by her role in Ordell's death. His anxiety reflects a sensitivity that Jackie does not have. Max sees that she is connected to a particular fantasy of black masculinity that he thinks he cannot match. In other words, he feels as though he will never be enough for her. When Max

interrupts Jackie to answer his phone, she too sees that a relationship could never work. His inability to sustain intimacy shows that he is scared of her, and the former “bad-ass” Jackie knows that she needs a strong man.

As mentioned earlier, blaxploitation films rarely had blacks and whites working together. *Across 110th Street* is a film that deals with inter-racial cooperation (Lt. Pope [Yaphet Kotto] and Captain Matelli [Anthony Quinn]), but in the end, it showcases the struggles, without providing any answers. Tarantino suggests for a moment that an interracial couple could work, but then he shuts it down. He has no problem portraying Grier as less aggressive and less sexualised, but he will not let her find happiness with a white man because it would arguably go against her performative identity. Jackie is confident and capable because she can access parts of Grier’s screen identity. If Tarantino had Jackie end up with Max, he would be suggesting that blaxploitation should have been more about presenting races working together, and not about black power. In many ways, critics of blaxploitation would view this as a positive strategy, but Tarantino wants to pose a question, not to provide an answer. He does not want to re-invent the political aspects of blaxploitation; he wants to draw attention to them. His pastiche is meant to help re-think our relationship to blaxploitation, not to re-invent the cycle. By refusing to create an interracial couple Tarantino is also declining to compromise his own nostalgia for blaxploitation cinema.

Richard Dyer states that “the historicity of a pastiche involves both the historically specific aesthetic forms within which it works and the prevalent perception of what it is pastiching” (*Pastiche* 131). As such, Tarantino uses pastiche to maintain Grier’s alignment with the black struggle, even though Jackie is now completely focused

on herself. In some ways, the ending works to further highlight the critical potential of pastiche. Although Grier's image is revised, she is still connected to a film cycle that portrayed black authority as the ultimate sign of strength. Jackie's love for Max troubles the presumed authenticity of a segregated struggle, but in the end, it is not enough to over-power a nostalgic view of the past. When *Across 110th Street* ends with a white hand and a black hand failing to connect, there has just been a murder of a white police officer by a black criminal. The tone is solemn, and the viewer is left wondering why society is the way it is. In *Jackie Brown*, the film closes with a missed opportunity at love, and the question becomes less about society as whole, and more about individual accountability. Neither Max nor Jackie can separate their present condition from the past, as neither has fully come to terms with what the past represents. Tarantino is thus suggesting the same thing about our own relationship to blaxploitation. He re-frames Grier's star persona to distance her from the exploitative elements of the film cycle, yet he only cast her because he is a fan of her original connection to performative black coolness. Grier became a star because she could convincingly portray a black action heroine at the right time. Tarantino succeeds in showing she can also do much more, but he is simultaneously nostalgic for her time in *Coffy*, and concerned with re-framing the fraught history that blaxploitation represents. He shows an awareness of the troubling exploitative aspects of the film cycle—and what this represents in terms of cultural history—yet the pastiche of *Coffy* and *Across 110th Street* works in tandem to suggest a forgetting of the other, less subversive films of blaxploitation—films that have historically, albeit negatively, defined blaxploitation as a unique period in film history. Tarantino's ending to *Jackie Brown*, can therefore, also be read as his way of keeping his

own (and many others) nostalgic take of Grier's star image alive by not permitting her to completely sacrifice her connection to the cool aspects of black popular culture. But at the same time, just as Jackie remains uncertain and uneasy about her decision to walk away from Max, so too does *Jackie Brown* remain ambivalent about its engagement with the past by means of the present. Moreover, in lingering on Jackie's (and Grier's) poignant rehearsal of "Across 110 Street" at the end of the film, Tarantino both enacts the affective power of pastiche and simultaneously questions whether we can ever really know the past other than through its textualized remains.

Chapter Three

A Blast from the Past: Genre and Gender in *Death Proof*

By definition, all films belong to some genre(s)...but only certain films are self-consciously produced and consumed according to (or against) a specific generic model. When the notion of genre is limited to descriptive uses, as it commonly is when serving...classification purposes, we speak of "film genre". However, when the notion of genre takes on a more active role in the production and consumption process, we appropriately speak instead of "genre film", thus recognizing the extent to which generic information becomes a formative component of film viewing (Altman, 1996, 277).

The thing that makes the slasher film work so well is how similar all the films are to each other. I mean, that's actually one of the comforting things about the genre. That's why you can write about it with a very big picture—because so many movies fit. It's such a specific that that if you try to fuck up the balance, you might not be fucking it up to good effect—you're just kind of fucking it up. I just kind of realized, oh man, this is just going to be too reflective...and that's not what I do—even though people accuse me of doing that. That is not what I do; I reinvent - Tarantino (quoted in Wise, Web)

Death Proof has been widely perceived as Tarantino's personal homage to exploitation cinema. With its emphasis on coolness and its signature desire to shock, *Death Proof* has been embraced by Tarantino worshippers on the same grounds as his earlier films and shunned or ignored by others for the same reasons. I am not going to argue that these responses are entirely misguided or that they have no relevance, but I will argue that they fail to highlight how vital Tarantino's use of pastiche is in terms of the films attempted genre revision. Positioning *Death Proof* as yet another product of what is considered typical of Tarantino, is to overlook the films intended hybridization of action and horror cinema. Such a perspective also ignores the films partial critique and re-imagination of gender norms that is proposed through its pastiche aesthetic.

Steve Neale's notion of a "generically marked film" can be applied when a film relies on a certain generic identification by the viewer in order to make sense of what he

or she sees (28). *Death Proof* is multiply marked as it sets out to create varied moments of generic identification and combines them so that the viewer does not always know what genre is being prioritized. Conventionally, when a viewer understands generic traditions, expectations are set, and films progress in ways that make sense for the genre. What Tarantino does in *Death Proof*, though, is to combine multiple genre expectations in order to manipulate the viewer into an uncertain state of knowing and not knowing. If you are able to pick up every single reference and allusion, then you may be able to predict where the narrative will go. But Tarantino's intent is to play with formulaic expectations and to re-contextualize generic traditions in an effort to both critique earlier tropes and to re-invent them for a contemporary audience. As Dyer notes, pastiche can be both elitist and critical, and in *Death Proof's* engagement with a selection of exploitation genres, it manages to be both (*Pastiche* 3). The desire for re-invention is certainly strong in *Death Proof*, as indicated mainly by the film's re-contextualization of gender in relation to genre. Tarantino's hybridization of the slasher film; the road film; the action film, and the rape revenge film works to further complicate the blurred boundaries between masculinity and femininity that is often found within both action and horror cinema. He places Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) in a position where his evident, macho persona is figured as outdated, and he also suggests through narrative agency and action—that contemporary women are capable of carrying an action film through their own form of hypermasculine posturing.

In a sequence eerily similar to the opening of *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino presents his revisionist goals. During the second half of *Death Proof*, the female protagonists (Zoe, Kim, Abernathy, and Lee) have lunch at a diner, and the camera slowly circles (in

one long take) around the table, framing each of them in close up as they speak. The scene intimately places the viewer within the conversation in an attempt to show how cool it is to hang out with these women. By alluding to the opening of *Dogs*, Tarantino suggests that women can be as interesting to watch (and listen to) as men (without being objectified) and that he can skilfully write dialogue for them.

The diner scene comes to a climax when Zoe (Zoe Bell) states that she wants to drive a car like the one in *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1971). Kim (Tracie Thomas) tells Zoe that “most girls” have never heard of the film, and Abernathy (Rosario Dawson) takes offense at Kim’s stereotypical labelling of most girls. Kim further explains herself by saying how a lot of girls grew up only watching John Hughes films. Abernathy challenges Kim by asking her who she thinks, she and Zoe are, while Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) giddily remarks that she loves *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986). Kim’s response is indicative of Tarantino’s revisionist approach to gender and genre in the film. She states that of course she watched John Hughes movies; she is a girl after all. But she adds that she and Zoe are also ‘gearheads’ so she watched car shit too: “*Vanishing Point*, *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (John Hough, 1974), *Gone in Sixty Seconds* (H.B. Halicki, 1974), the real one, not that Angelina Jolie bullshit”.²⁵ Kim’s response is representative of an attempt by Tarantino to imply that seventies action films are no longer just for men and that women can appreciate them if given the opportunity to explore so-called masculine interests (i.e. gearheads). He proposes that the

²⁵ Some have mistakenly described the banter in *Death Proof* as insignificant. For example, James Rocci from *Cinematical* calls the dialogue jibber-jabber and time filling, and describes the entire film as the equivalent of watching a rock star play guitar hero (<http://blog.moviefone.com/2007/06/02/cannes-review-death-proof/>). Anton Bitel similarly refers to the dialogue as padding that functions as ‘loquacious idling’ (<http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/reviews.php?id=6378>).

labelling of these films as predominantly 'for men' is no longer applicable in contemporary society, and his line of attack is to place women in a position that showcases their skill for behaviour coded as both feminine and masculine. To put it simply, Tarantino argues that women are just as capable as men at enjoying and participating in activity traditionally coded as masculine.

During Kim's rant, however, Zoe can be seen laughing at the idea of only watching John Hughes movies, while Lee is presented as a joke when she appears to zone out in a nostalgic daze at the mention of *Pretty in Pink*. Rather than allowing his women characters to express diverse cinematic tastes, Tarantino stacks the deck. For him, it is apparently fine to like feminine films, so long as you also appreciate masculine films. He thus ends up prioritizing masculinity as being "cooler" and superior to femininity by making Lee look sillier than everyone else. In other words, she is too "girly" to be taken seriously.²⁶ One must also keep in mind that Tarantino's pastiche aesthetic rarely, if ever, borrows from so called "feminine" films. He attempts to provide an avenue for celebrating women by giving them narrative agency, but then he mocks them if their behaviour is antithetical to his notion of masculine coolness. Keeping in line with his overall aesthetic, it is important to note that it is a white woman who is dismissed and not a black woman. Kim and Zoe are thus more closely aligned to the coolness of Jackie Brown. Tarantino wants the viewer to recognize that women can successfully carry a film traditionally associated with males—the catch, though, is that this is only true when they perform masculinity.

²⁶ She also continues to wear her cheerleader uniform from the film she is shooting throughout the entire film. Tarantino seems to be marking her as inferior to everyone else, as she is never taken seriously.

In *Death Proof*, Tarantino uses audience expectations inherent in genre film viewing to create a dialogue between past depictions of performative hypermasculinity and current depictions of femininity. He uses women as means to reframe hypermasculinity and shows that they can carry a film associated with traditionally “male” genres. Their presentation as empowered postfeminist action heroines works in contrast to the film critique of Mike’s hypermasculine posturing. In this chapter, I will highlight the ways in which gender is re-contextualised and re-imagined in *Death Proof* by focusing on how the film moves across different genres. *Death Proof* places its female protagonists in opposition to its singular, male antagonist (Stuntman Mike, played by Kurt Russell) through both narrative and form. The film works within a two part structure that sees Mike’s hypermasculine agency, reminiscent of the 1970s car film, reframed as psychotic violence, straight from a seventies slasher film.

The protagonists are presented as two different sets of women, with the first set (Julia, Abernathy, Shanna, and Pam) representing relatively traditional slasher film victims. When they are killed off at the halfway point of the film, they are denied the more ambiguous, arguably progressive status of the final girl. The second set of female protagonists thus represents a collective embodiment of the slasher’s final girl that also incorporates elements of the contemporary post-feminist action heroine. Both groups’ encounters with Mike reflect how the parallel character transitions work in opposite directions. Over the course of the film, Mike moves from a position traditionally associated with agency and superiority over women, to one of vulnerability and inferiority. The women, however, shift from a site of powerlessness to one of action and relative independence. Action and violence act as catalysts for both shifts, as Tarantino

imitates the exploitation film through his generic pastiche. What he is unable to account for, though, is the contextual dissonance that comes from a process of revising outdated generic forms (and gender norms) in a contemporary cinematic context. In one respect, by highlighting the cultural specificity of certain exploitation tropes, Tarantino draws attention to specific transformations in both gender and genre since the seventies. His pastiche works to align the seventies exploitation film with contemporary depictions of gender by showing how the present is always in dialogue with the past, and on this level, the film succeeds. On another level, the goal of re-invention implies that *Death Proof* will use genre hybridization as a means to re-create a similar viewing experience to multiple 1970s exploitation films. I will highlight the slippages and tensions that emerge when he tries to capture the experience of watching a 1970s exploitation film in a contemporary work. While *Death Proof* deals with the same lurid subject matter as the genres it imitates, Tarantino is unable to use violence and abject terror in a similarly critical manner as in the earlier works; consequently, *Death Proof's* contradiction (and commercial failure) suggests that perhaps these genres cannot be convincingly revised when pulled from their original historical contexts.

A Return to Seventies Exploitation

Exploitation films are not for everybody. They do not attract a mass audience, but they are often popular with a loyal group of fans. The horror genre has a variety of exploitation sub-genres with devoted followers who see every title. The films normally adhere to a familiar formula, and they are categorized by low budgets, lurid subject matter, non-professional actors, and an overall absence of critical acclaim (at least initially). Many exploitation filmmakers are not out to make political statements or to

influence audiences in any substantial way—they just want to make some money. That being said, there are individual titles and cycles of exploitation films that have garnered substantial critical attention.²⁷ There are also those that have achieved cult status by fans. A film may attain cult status from a comedic or a camp reaction to low production values and bad execution, or by crossing boundaries in terms of time, custom, form, and even good taste (Telotte 6).²⁸ Their ability to live on and continually be embraced by fans creates a cultish appeal, but it is the tendency to “envision a world where an audience can feel comfortable... and entertain contradictions or radical views with no difficulty” that truly makes a work cult (Vonalt 55).²⁹ Films that transgress common cinematic boundaries work to establish an audience that revels in this display of difference. Most Hollywood output is designed to reach a broad audience and the result is often a film that plays it safe. Controversial topics are regularly avoided so as to assure mass appeal, and, as such, audiences seeking a different experience and a display of potentially divisive subject matter may turn to exploitation cinema.

Exploitation cinema often falls into the category of cult, and J.P. Telotte identifies some common characteristics typically found within seventies midnight movies:

²⁷ See Carol Clover, *Men Women and Chainsaws* for an overview of 70s slasher and rape revenge films. And for a overview of exploitation in general see: Mathijs, Ernest, and Xavier Mendik. *The Cult Film Reader*. Berkshire: Open UP, 2007. Print; Telotte, J. P. *The Cult Film Experience: beyond All Reason*. Austin: University of Texas, 1991. Print.; Schaefer, Eric. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: a History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.

²⁸ Works of classical cinema may also reach cult status, as loyal fan groups continue to appreciate all aspects of the films. See Umberto Eco's piece: "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage" for a detailed example of this occurrence.

²⁹ Eco refers to this as narrative situations that allow audiences to look both ways at once (4).

Midnight movies fashion a context of difference—of rebellion, independence, sexual freedom, gender shifting—that helps us cope with real-world conformity. In common, they offer a kind of loving understanding that acknowledges our own sense of difference or alienation, even as it mates us to other, similarly “different” types in the audience or the film themselves (10).

Some examples from the 1970s that fit this categorization—and that surely influenced *Death Proof*—are *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (Dario Argento, 1970). Tarantino is both a loyal fan and a self-proclaimed critic, and his pastiche approach covers a variety of exploitation films that he associates with cult status. The key differences between *Death Proof* and these films are tied to both exhibition and reception. The credit, ‘A film by Quentin Tarantino’, places *Death Proof* into a different category because Tarantino’s newer films come with a pre-sold cult status and a guaranteed mass distribution and exhibition. When he begins a work, there is already an established fandom, whereas a film like *Last House* gained cult status through its notoriety.

Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez came up with the idea for *Grindhouse* while watching exploitation films at Tarantino’s house. Rodriguez noticed that they both owned the same double bill poster and the excitement grew from there. Promotional campaigns for exploitation films often set out to frame the film as cult before it was even released. Posters were used as means of drawing in a crowd based on their originality and their emphasis on lurid subject matter. Rodriguez and Tarantino wanted to make a film that could live up to the cult potential that the exploitation posters once displayed.

The goal was to create a film that mimicked the title and premise of an old grindhouse movie, while also having the production values and competence of a Hollywood work.

The concept was based around a nostalgic view of the past that sought to revitalize exploitation cinema for a contemporary audience. In other words, to bring current filmmaking more in line with the past so that today's audiences could see the kind of film Tarantino and Rodriguez dreamed of seeing when they were younger. *Death Proof* also used Tarantino's status as a cinephile and pre-sold cult director (one could argue that Rodriguez's films falls into the same category, but certainly not on the same scale) to bring the history of the seventies exploitation film to the project. The idea was also to recreate the grindhouse theater experience by offering a double bill where the audience would get to see two exploitation films for the price of one. The two would each direct a segment and fake trailers would play between the two features.³⁰ Rodriguez elected to do a blood-filled zombie film titled *Planet Terror*, and Tarantino's *Death Proof* has been described as a slasher film with cars. Despite mostly positive reviews from popular critics (77% at metacritic.com, and 83% on rottentomatoes.com), the film was a financial flop.³¹ In response to the underwhelming performance of the film, executive producer Harvey Weinstein decided to break the film into solo features, and the result was that

³⁰ Eli Roth, Edgar Wright, and Rob Zombie directed the trailers, and Jason Eisner, who won a contest at South by Southwest festival, got to display his trailer for *Hobo with a Shotgun* (which has recently been released as feature film) in Canadian cinemas.

³¹ All in all, the entire film came in at well over three hours, and Tarantino also believes this added to its poor figures. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/3664742/Quentin-Tarantino-Im-proud-of-my-flop.html>). The opening weekend in America brought in \$11.6 million and the worldwide total for the film is just over \$50 million (a number much below expectations).

Death Proof was restored to its original length.³² Tarantino has stated his disappointment in the performance of the theatrical cut, and he blames the changing face of the industry as the defining factor:

I understand why things change, and I put the reason for them changing precisely on the price of a ticket. It was different when everything cost \$3, or \$3.50, or at the most \$5. You could pay to see a cheap *Jaws* ripoff and pay the same money to see *A Star Is Born*, no worries. But now you're talking about \$10, \$12, it doesn't make sense. [B-movie producer] Roger Corman always knew what was gonna happen in that market, like, two years before it happened. So when, all of a sudden, his movies weren't playing theatrically anymore and they were just going straight to video - I was working in the video store at that time - it was like, 'Oh man, this is the end. If he's doing it now, then that's just the way it's gonna be.' And it made sense. Now, there were some good movies made during that period, a couple, but when you didn't have the chance for theatrical exposure, something was lost. Not that these movies ever normally had very good reviews but there always was that chance. There was the chance that you could get a good review, and then your work could be known, and maybe you could go on from there. But when it goes straight to video, it's like that chance doesn't exist anymore (quoted in Wise, Web).

It seems that one of the impetuses for *Grindhouse* was also its downfall. Tarantino sought to capture what he believed to be the positive aspects of exploitation cinema, yet

³² Some 27 minutes were added to the new version of the film and for the purpose of this essay I will be referring to the restored version of the film. Also, *Death Proof* on DVD has made more than \$36 million since its release.

he failed to foresee history repeating itself. With the advent of YouTube, reality television, and other avenues for low brow entertainment, there was and is less of an appeal for seeing exploitation cinema at the theatre. It seems to me that the film's lengthy running time combined with easy access to low brow entertainment via alternative media forms was most likely an issue for movie-goers; however, the main reason that I believe *Grindhouse* failed to draw a crowd was that most average film fans may have assumed that they were not knowledgeable (or old) enough to "get" the references. There is an inherent elitism within both Tarantino films and cult films in general, let alone one that is explicitly designed as one big wink to cult film fans.

Outdated Masculinity: Stuntman Mike as Psycho Killer

At the core of *Death Proof* is Stuntman Mike. He is a middle-aged former stunt driver who still lives for the thrill of the road. Mike is presented as someone who no longer fits in and who lives a life of singularity. He represents an aging version of the kind of masculinity that Burt Reynolds was associated with in films such as *Smokey and the Bandit* (Hal Needham, 1977) or *Hooper* (Hal Needham, 1978).³³ He loves to drive fast and live dangerously, as the thrill of the road fuels men's belief in their own masculinity.³⁴ The masculinity of road film protagonists in the seventies, though, was

³³ Shari Roberts, in her essay, "Western meets Eastwood", points out that the masculinity inherent in 1970s road movies stems directly from the Western. She states that it is focused on individualism and aggression, and that John Wayne was one of the pioneers of its inception in mainstream film. To further add to Mike's connection with this masculinity see the scene where he impersonates John Wayne while mimicking the apprehension Arlene shows when asked to give him a lap dance.

³⁴ Kurt Russell's star image also factors into the film's pastiche. Tarantino has stated: "For people of my generation, he's a true hero...but now, there's a whole audience out there that doesn't know what Kurt Russell can do. When I open the newspaper and see an add that says 'Kurt Russell in *Dreamer*, or Kurt Russell in *Miracle*,' I'm disparaging these movies, but I'm thinking: When is Kurt Russell going to be badass

often one connected to ambiguity. Men went to the road to embrace their manliness in a similar fashion to the protagonists of the western genre who went to the frontier. The frontier was often viewed as a site of national identity as individualism was connected to the American Dream. As Shari Roberts notes, "The road stands in for the frontier, but, instead of symbolizing a romanticized America in which the American Dream will come true, it simply asks over and over...what does America mean today?"(52). In other words, men may go to the road to reclaim a lost masculinity, but what they really experience is a spiritual journey based on finding their own version of masculinity, and not a return to a pre-existing masculinity.

Many road films were also categorized by a buddy dynamic that privileged male relationships. Wood notes that these films also played on the vague nature of national identity in seventies America as the protagonists displayed no connection to family, women, or any specific concept of "home" (231). The ambiguity of their masculinity was thus connected to a male camaraderie that replaced the often central love story (heterosexual) that categorized many other Hollywood films. Women are marginalized in the road film, and this has often been viewed as a backlash to the growing women's movement of the seventies (Wood 227). Wood cites *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (Cimino, 1974) as a strong example of the buddy cycle, and he analyses the differences between Thunderbolt's (Clint Eastwood) relatively unambiguous masculinity and the more feminized Lightfoot (Jeff Bridges).³⁵ Wood plays up the key tensions with regard

again?" (Nashawaty, Chris. "Bloodbath and Beyond". *Entertainment Weekly*. (March. 30, 2007). Pp. 27-30.)

³⁵ When *Death Proof* begins, the first title that comes on the screen is *Thunderbolt* (but is quickly covered by *Death Proof*), and this can be read as a possible allusion to *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*.

to gender norms as the pairing of the two men complicates the presumed singularity and coherence of patriarchal masculinity.

Mike represents a man who still embraces an unambiguous masculinity. He has no male buddy to perhaps introduce him to a more contemporary masculinity, and he travels alone. His relation to his car is similar to Kowalski in *Vanishing Point*, wherein it means everything to him. He also shows no connection to any women, family, or "home". He looks like he just stepped out of 1972 and he is mocked for it. When Dov (Eli Roth) and Nate (Omar Doom) notice him at the bar they laugh at his appearance, and when some of the local women are asking him about his past he becomes irritated that no one knows anything about the television shows he worked on. Mike's alienation is depicted as a form of vulnerability, as the film initially labels him as someone who needs to get over his connections to the past. Mike displays a disdain for women because they are no longer marginalized in the manner he wants. He longs for a return to an earlier era (the 1970s) where he believes the individualised man was viewed as superior to women. This helps to explain why Mike attacks women in groups because it plays against the notion that strength comes from numbers. The film never reveals why he chooses these women as his victims, but Julia's celebrity seems to be a logical choice. Tarantino presents Mike's masculinity as outdated and in need of re-vision because Mike's contempt for women is no longer the norm in mainstream cinema, particularly given that women have more narrative agency in popular film. Tarantino wants to update the exploitation film to make it viable now, so he needs to showcase which tropes no longer fit. Critiquing Mike's hypermasculine posturing is a means of acknowledging how gender in exploitation cinema has changed since the 1970s; however, it is also a way for

Tarantino to leave his own mark on the film. Mike's very presence in the film suggests that although his image is at times mocked, his persona still signifies (at least in Tarantino's eyes) as an entertaining characterisation. Normally, a misogynistic antagonist would be depicted as having little to no redeeming features, but Tarantino goes a different route with the Stuntman. Mike's appearance is laughable and his disdain for women is coded as outdated and pathetic, but his skill as a stunt seeking driver (which works as entertainment) is still held in high regard. Mike is both revered and despised so that Tarantino can simultaneously pay tribute to exploitation genres and ostensibly advance their approach to gender. Mike's capacity for daring behaviour is coded as both positive, as one is meant to relish his affinity for dangerous stunts, and negative, as his motivation derives from an insecure and resentful stance in relation to the changing landscape of gender norms in society. Mike's outdated hypermasculinity, which slips easily into homicidal impulse, allows Tarantino to present women as superior opponents by depicting their motivation as justifiable and their stunt skill as equally impressive. In other words, if women can convincingly beat Mike at his own game, then the violent behaviour associated with exploitation films fails to be associated solely with men.

Mike's persona may be that of a man clinging to 1970s masculinity, but his presence in the film is related to the slasher sub genre. Carol Clover states—in her seminal study on the horror film, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*—that there are five essential components to the slasher film: the killer, the locale, the weapons, the victims, and shock effects. In reference to the killer, she stresses that his desire to kill almost always comes from a psychosexual fury (27). Mike's need for violence stems from an inability to have actual sex with women, and as Sheriff McGraw (Michael Parks) states,

“it is the only way the sick bastard can shoot his goo.” Mike’s problems involving sex stem from his troubled connection to an outdated hypermasculinity. The idea of being as hypermasculine as a 1970s action hero presumes a certain sexual potency. Thunderbolt may not have any lasting interest in women, but as the film shows, he is able to please them when the opportunity arrives. Mike’s disdain for women freely expressing themselves comes from his failure to control them sexually. He is unable to gain control because his hypermasculinity is outdated. In most contemporary films, women no longer throw themselves at the solitary hypermasculine man the way that they used to in the 1970s. Mike’s failure to adapt to contemporary gender norms renders his persona ineffective when it comes to impressing the opposite sex (or even men, as younger males laugh at him as well). Tarantino’s critique of the allure of the hypermasculine man is thus a means to highlight holes in Mike’s posturing and to re-enforce how dependent Mike is on his image as a stuntman.

In line with Clover, the weapon and the locale (or “terrible place”, as she calls it) are represented collectively in the form of Mike’s death proof car. The car is the culmination of everything Mike stands for, and as long as he can hide inside it, no one can expose his vulnerability. The car becomes a phallic extension of Mike’s performative display of murderous masculinity. The term death proof alludes to the notion that nothing can kill the spirit of the hypermasculine man, as long as he wears it as armour. Eighties action stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone wore their hypermasculinity in the form of muscles (Tasker, 1993, 1). Mike’s car carries both the mental attitude and the presumed physical dominance of both a 1970s and 1980s hypermasculine man. His placement as a killer is an attempt by Tarantino to show how

these particular forms of performative masculinity are out of style for a contemporary film. He wants the film to be critical of his traditional masculinity, and his means of doing this is to show the kinks in Mike's posturing.

Exploitation films are built around exploiting lurid subject matter, and the more critically acclaimed titles often use violence as a means of commenting on society. Robin Wood points out that the critical potential of violence in exploitation cinema comes from the interconnection of positions with which the spectator is forced to identify. When discussing *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), Wood refers to the shared experience of vulnerability between character and spectator as an intimate encounter that creates a "vivid, personalized aliveness (128)". He highlights how these positions then demonstrate the potential for violence that exists within our own social and personal relationships (Wood 128). For Wood, it is the innate humanity displayed by the characters in *Last House on the Left* that allows the film to foster such a reading, and this is what Tarantino tries to re-create in *Death Proof*. Exploitation films are known for long stretches of dialogue, and Tarantino attempts to use dialogue to humanize his characters and to reveal their vulnerabilities in the same vein as Craven; however, by having Mike break the fourth wall and smile at the screen, he also positions the viewer with the killer. Consequently, when the spectator is purely aligned with Mike, the film prioritizes his desire to hurt women, as evidenced by the direct smile that implies that the viewer is just as eager as he is for the real "fun" of the violence to begin. What Tarantino fails to account for is that context is a crucial component in creating terror. He wants to use a disturbing realist aesthetic in a similar fashion as Craven, but he fails to sustain it.

The Loss of the Final Girl

With Mike being figured as the killer, the women are the victims. Clover states that in the slasher film there is always a final girl. The final girl stands out from the other characters as she is tomboyish and “watchful to the point of paranoia” (39). She is normally the surviving female who fights head on with the killer and who often succeed by adopting a phallic weapon; however, her fate can be misleading. Tony Williams points out that while the final girl is victorious over the killer, she is not free because she is still stuck in a world dominated by patriarchy, as her success is almost always dependent on the acquiring of the phallus (170).

Death Proof begins with an introduction of three friends: Julia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier), Shanna (Jordan Ladd), and Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito). The three are preparing for an evening of drinks and partying, with the intent of spending the rest of the weekend at Shanna’s family cabin. The deal is that there will be no boys and that the girls stick together. Julia is the outgoing leader of the trio, Shanna is her sidekick, and Arlene is the most cautious of the three. Before heading to the cabin, the women stop in at their favourite bar, and it is here that Tarantino uses Arlene’s cautious persona to set her up as the final girl. She is the first one to notice Mike and the only one wary of his presence. The rest of the girls laugh him off as if he is some sort of harmless redneck, and Pam goes so far as to ask Mike for a drive home. Mike’s psychotic nature, however, is revealed when Pam enters his car. He asks her which way she is going, and she tells him right. Mike laughs and responds “Ah that’s too bad”. Pam then politely asks “why” and Mike’s responds “Well that’s because there was a fifty-fifty chance you would be going left or right. You see, we’re both going left. You could have just as easily been going

left too, and if that was the case it would have been a while before you starting getting scared.” Pam is tortured and killed, and Tarantino has the viewer share Pam’s abject terror throughout the sequence. During the ordeal, the camera cuts from outside shots of the car swerving and driving fast, to alternating medium close-ups of Pam’s terrified state—taken from both Mike’s point of view and the backseat. It is not until Mike stops swerving the vehicle that Pam’s point of view finally takes over. She begs Mike to let her go, and, for the first time since the incident began, his face is clearly visible. Mike ignores Pam’s cries and continues to look increasingly satisfied with himself while she pleads for her life. The camera then cuts back to Mike’s point of view and zooms in on Pam’s face as she begins to realize that he is going to kill her. Before she is murdered, the final shot (Mike slams the brakes, causing her head to smash off the steel dashboard) reverts back to her point of view, and we are thus aligned with Pam in the final moments, sharing her experience of abject terror. After her death, we continue to see Mike from Pam’s viewpoint, and instead of looking down to see his successful kill, Mike runs his hands through his hair to indicate how unfazed and cool he is. After a few seconds he does turn to look at Pam’s bloody corpse, but he is also looking directly into the camera, and his stare is one of arrogance—as if to say, “I dare someone to make fun of me now”.

Clover refers to the use of abject terror in horror cinema as “gendered feminine”. She adds that “the more concerned a given film is with the condition—and it is the essence of modern horror—the more likely the femaleness of the victim” (51). After seeing Pam tortured and subjected to abject terror, one can only assume the group of women (with the exception of Arlene) is going to face the same fate. When Mike later kills the other women in one devastating blow, there is a noticeable avoidance of scenes

of abject terror, and therefore less emphasis on the femaleness of the women. The difference between Pam and the other victims is that Tarantino codes women in groups as masculine. Clover points out that the male victims in slashers are always killed swiftly, while female victims have time to contemplate their fate while they scream, cower, cry, etc. The final girl is one that the audience expects to survive because of her awareness and resourcefulness, and Tarantino counts on the viewer pegging Arlene as the final girl; therefore, Mike's killing of her is meant to shock. For Clover, it is, however, the shared experience of abject terror that can also function to feminize the viewer, thus foregrounding what she sees as the masochistic pleasures of horror cinema. With Mike's swift attack there is no shared experience between victim and spectator as Mike's point of view is prioritized.

Instead of continuing to build and sustain abject terror in *Death Proof*, though, Tarantino goes a different route and fully aligns the viewer with Mike. When Mike goes after the other women, they do not utter a single scream because there is simply no time to. Mike catches the group by surprise and slams his car straight through theirs, killing them all at the same time, and leaving no opportunity for a final girl. In line with Clover, Tarantino sees the strength of the final girl as tied to her adoption of masculine qualities; *Death Proof* also suggests that contemporary females may already have access to such qualities when in groups. When Mike kills Pam, he is able to torture her because she is isolated.³⁶ The group killing then reads as further evidence that Mike needs to kill women because of a lost sense of superiority, as he hates the fact that they are no longer

³⁶ To add to this reading, Pam also complains about Julia and her friends picking on her in the schoolyard when they were younger, thus further coding groups of females as more masculine in behaviour.

marginalized. He cannot risk taking his time to kill these women because their group status could pose a threat if he has to leave his car.

Mike's act reads as a man trying to reclaim the title of ultimate proprietor of masculinity. Tarantino repeats the women's murder three times in slow motion to fully glorify Mike's act, and this suggests that although the women are not coded as feminine (via abject terror), they cannot compete with men in terms of physically demanding stunts. The viewer is aligned with Mike throughout the repeated shots of the crash, and the stunt is meant to be a definitive display of hypermasculinity. After the crash, Tarantino has the camera follow Mike's vehicle as it crashes and rolls for what seems like minutes, with the final shot being that of the overturned death proof car sitting on the side of the road. In fully acquiring the frame, Mike's action is prioritized, and it is as if Tarantino here encourages the viewer to revel in what they just witnessed. There is no reverse shot of the damage, no remorseful music, just a celebration of aggression. In other words, these women may be more developed than those that have come before them, but they still cannot compete with a man who brings the aggressive skills to handle a killer car. Mike's Stuntman title plays on this notion, as it presumes a guaranteed connection to hypermasculinity. Tarantino thus figures action as the last defining characteristic that separates men and women in exploitation cinema. Positioning the women as necessary victims seemingly recuperates hypermasculinity and aligns it once again with the male. Tarantino takes time to critique Mike's posturing of hypermasculinity as old fashioned, but he then prioritizes it as the definitive mode of excitement by using audience expectations of the final girl to shock the viewer and then

highlighting ways that hypermasculinity combined with daring action can still carry a film.

The Final Girl as Action Heroine

When the film's second act begins, the only connection to the first half is Mike. The setting is a hospital and two sheriffs discuss what to do about the Stuntman. They both know that Mike is guilty of murder, but instead of building a case, they force him to leave the state. The film then moves to Lebanon, Tennessee and the song "It's So Easy", by Willy Deville, accompanies the transition. The song is taken from the controversial film, *Cruisin*, (William Friedkin, 1980), which is renowned for its problematic depiction of homosexuality. The song plays in a transitional moment in Friedkin's film when Steve—an undercover police officer (Al Pacino) who is sent to investigate a string of murders occurring in and around gay S&M clubs— starts to show instability in his sexual identity, tied directly to his adoption of gay macho styles and routines. In using this track as a transitional tune, Tarantino is again alluding to kinks in Mike's "armour", but considering the amount of baggage a film like *Cruising* carries, and the placement of the track, he seems to be making more than just a minor connection via this reference. Wood suggests that *Cruising* should be read as an incoherent text, in that it really has no definitive reading without the viewer committing to a radical stance (67). He argues that the issue of homophobia is central in the film.³⁷ I see the placement of "It's So Easy" as

³⁷ Wood states that "The issue of homophobia is at the thematic heart of the film, in its revelation of the reasons why the murders are being committed and that Stuart Richards is told to commit the murders by a father who would otherwise despise him: the killings are his way of proving himself "the man" his father wanted him to be. By killing gays, that is, he is symbolically destroying the gay culture within himself "in the Name of the father"—a long-dead father interiorized as superego...Further, all the victims...are Stuart's doubles—i.e., the tangible embodiments of his repressed gay self: the killings are the projection

an indication that Tarantino wants to further trouble notions of hypermasculinity, by critiquing its ties to both misogyny and homophobia. Mike's killing thus represents a man who relies on traditional notions of masculinity to feel confident. Killing women is his way of proving himself "the stuntman" Hollywood wants him to be. Mike may represent a type of performative masculinity that does not have the same box office power that it used to, but if the first half of the film is any indication, his hypermasculinity can still be celebrated within a contemporary film. Mike's use of gutsy stunt work in the first half is prioritized as the ultimate form of hypermasculine behaviour because it is presented as pure aggression. He kills in a spectacular fashion, to ensure that he is still capable of overpowering women. Such women may no longer be solely coded in feminine terms, but Mike wants to make sure that those who continue to adhere to a fantasy of unambiguous masculinity will reign supreme. It is no coincidence then, that two of the women within the second group of girls that Mike goes after, are stunt women. Following in the footsteps of Stuart (*Cruising's* killer), Mike wants to destroy their interest in presumably masculine behaviour to protect his claim to patriarchal power, and he plans to do this by again inciting forms of abject terror in his female victims.

Once the second half of the film begins any trace of the conventional slasher film is gone. We are introduced to four new women: Kim (Tracie Thoms), Abernathy (Rosario Dawson), Zoe Bell (herself), and Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). Moreover, the genres now being used are: the car film and the rape revenge film, often seen as a sub-genre of the slasher. Like the first group of women, characterization occurs through

of an internal violence directed against himself. Somewhat explicitly but more by implication, the film's real villain is revealed as patriarchal domination" (66).

dialogue, and a good deal of time is set aside for getting a feel for the women and learning what they are about. The women all work on a film set: Kim and Zoe are stuntwomen, Abernathy does make-up, and Lee is an actress. We know that they have a few days off but *Death Proof* never explains where they are actually going, as there is a sense that it does not matter. What matters most is the genre transitions that have occurred. The first group of women in the film are closely aligned with the slasher genre even though they partially trouble gender norms inherent in seventies slasher film victims. The second group of women represent a collective embodiment of the final girl (a position the first group was denied), and they also embrace elements of the contemporary post feminist action heroine. Furthermore, whereas Mike brings the history and posturing of hypermasculinity (inherent in the car film) to the persona of a killer, the women now bring their post-feminist final girl / action heroine personas to the movie genre. Tarantino animates this transition through action and narrative, and the intent is to have the women convincingly inhabit roles traditionally given to men. He uses the spectacle of the "stunt" to try and reframe the rape-like connotations of Mike's attack on the women, and then turns the tables and has Mike on the receiving end of their action heroine fueled revenge. The combination of female character types and tropes from both action and horror genres further suggests that Mike's hypermasculine posturing is not as death proof as he would like it to appear.

The two characters that are coded as the most masculine in the film are Zoe and Kim; they are both stunt women and the actress playing Zoe is an actual stunt performer. While certain female reviewers have praised Tarantino for his portrayal of writing

dialogue that women can make their own³⁸, others have pointed out that they are merely vessels for how Tarantino wants women to talk.³⁹ The absence of men in the narrative also works as pastiche for the 1970s road movie, as there were often little to no women in those films as well. One of the defining features of the road film is that there is a preference for the road over the home, as men who took to the road were doing so to escape the pressures of feminine domesticity and seemingly embrace a euphoric feeling of freedom. In *Death Proof*, the one character most directly connected to the home is Abernathy. Kim and Zoe attempt to exclude her whenever they engage in “thrill seeking behavior” because she is a mother, and Abernathy takes offense to this. She sees being a mother as insignificant when it comes to her having fun, and she sets out to prove Kim and Zoe wrong. Abernathy’s insistence on breaking through this mould is Tarantino’s way of placing her within the road movie in a manner normally reserved for men. The goal is to show how women have come to the point where they can compete with men for action roles, and yet Tarantino still prioritizes masculinity as the definitive mark of a good role, once again relegating femininity to a position of relative inferiority.

Women performing masculinity is hardly a new phenomenon, and in *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne Tasker details the rise of the hypermasculine action heroine women’s

³⁸ Dana Stevens, female writer for the *The New York Times* and *Slate*, states that, “Here, the women emerge as separate, vibrant personalities: not the slut, the nice girl, and the quiet best friend, but three rowdy unapologetically sexual party girls who care more about each other than dudes trying to get into their pants.” (“Bloody Good”, <http://www.slate.com>).

³⁹ For example, Mary Johanson, a film critic who writes for the website “Flick Filosopher”, admires the film, but also raises questions over how the women are portrayed: “It’s all about the girls: Q.T. likes girl talk, or at least how he thinks girls talk, and he indulges along to do his thing. It would be one thing if the film suggested that Mike got a kick out of seeing girls be all girly before he killed them, but that’s not the case...it’s Tarantino getting off on these girly chats himself in long sequences of gals hanging out and talking about boys and stuff before Mike comes along” (Web).

enhanced narrative agency in 1980's action cinema. She refers to the androgynous physicality of Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* films (Ridley Scott, 1979, James Cameron, 1986) and Linda Hamilton in the *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) as a form of "musculinity". For Tasker, the presence of enlarged muscles in action films were traditionally used as a sign of natural and super-natural "physical strength that women do not generally match" (*Bodies*, 78). Eighties action cinema, though, emphasized the performative quality of hypermasculinity:

The masculinisation of the female body, which is effected most visibly through her muscles, can be understood in terms of a notion of 'musculinity'. That is, some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the muscular female body. 'Musculinity' indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters (Tasker 149). In regard to more contemporary versions of the action heroine, Tasker draws attention to how the 1990s and early 2000s saw an increase in glamorous, highly sexualised depictions that moved away from the physically androgynous females of 80's action. Action stars such as Angelia Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001), Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, and Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) and Carrie-Ann Moss in the *Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) were shown to be trained in martial arts, while also maintaining a highly desirable feminine figure. Tasker points out how such potentially empowering images of female physical confidence and strength are often overshadowed by the male gaze. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn likewise argues that while post feminist representations of both the action heroine and the final girl are a small step in the right direction, they are ultimately too un-realistic to have any sort of connection to the everyday:

Interestingly, our culture has yet to create such exercises in female imagination in the genres of realism, which continue to consign girls and women to traditional roles. “Supergirls” like Buffy, Xena, Sabrina the teenage Witch, and Sidney remain thinkable only in the realms of fantasy (185).

In *Death Proof*, Tarantino indirectly deploys eighties female musculinity by having the women want to drive a muscle car. Like Mike’s death proof vehicle, the car can be read as their masculine armour, and when they are inside it, they can compete with Mike on equal terms. While *Death Proof* is hardly a realist film, Tarantino troubles the assumptions inherent in Tasker and Karlyn’s criticism by refusing to sexualise the women with the camera and by showcasing the realistic aspects of the stunt (as opposed to using CGI). He also foregrounds women’s issues through genre by placing the group within the context of the road film’s buddy dynamic.

There have been plenty of road movies that have had women at the centre of the narrative, and, as Katie Mills points out—in *The Road Story and the Rebel*—films like *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) have been successful in bringing the genre back to an emphasis on troubling cinematic depictions of gender (195). Shari Roberts, however, points out that the female protagonists of road films are often fleeing real men, and real abuses of patriarchy—in contrast to the men, who often “flee the feminine figure which stands for that which is limiting, cloying, and degrading” (64). When women in road films attempt to escape patriarchy, they are unable to avoid cultural constructions of femininity, and the results—while containing critiques of the dominant ideology—often imply that escaping the effects of patriarchy is impossible. As Roberts puts it, “While [Clint] Eastwood’s characters successfully flee the limitations of ‘feminine’ civilization

by creating a revitalized, masculine world on the road, these female characters attempt to flee not just men, but patriarchy, which is omnipresent and which in part defines the road and the genre, and so are ultimately unsuccessful" (66).

Tarantino uses Abernathy to represent the independent woman who does not want to accept her role as merely a passive mother. She wants the freedom to move back and forth from activity coded as feminine (mothering) to activity coded as masculine (taking to the open road for excitement). Abernathy's goals, though, remain complicated, even stifled by, Tarantino's strategic use of pastiche. Earlier in the film Abernathy stated how she is frustrated with the man she likes because he has not made his intentions clear to her. The other women advise her to "break him off a piece", but Abernathy explains that when you sleep with him you cannot become one of his girlfriends. In other words, Abernathy is aware that if she throws herself at him, he will sleep with her, but she will become his regular, and not his girlfriend. On the other hand, her love interest has shown his affection by making her a mix-tape and going on casual dates with her. Abernathy seems to want him to be straightforward and properly court her like a traditional man would. She wants him to make all of the moves, as his remote passivity has her frustrated. Her desire to embrace the road is thus accompanied by a frustration about the lack of assertiveness that contemporary men show when it comes to mutual attraction. She is able to be independent and free only because she does not have the affection from a man that she truly wants.

Before the women can head off to the road, they need to convince the man selling the car (Jasper) to let them borrow it. Abernathy takes initiative by convincing Jasper that if he lets the three of them (herself, Zoe, and Kim) take the car, they will leave Lee

behind so that he can get to know her better. Leaving Lee behind is significant because again, she is being punished for a lack of interest in recreation coded as masculine. What makes this even more troubling is the implication that when the others leave, she might be raped by Jasper. Jasper is played by Jonathan Loughner, who also plays the man who attempts to rape The Bride in *Kill Bill*. His character is a slow witted redneck that refers to the women as “horny gals”, and the assumption is that Lee will be unable to defend herself due to her lack of masculine aggression.

After the group acquire the car, they pull over to the side of the road and Kim and Zoe prepare for their stunt. They debate over who gets to wear the leather jacket that they brought, and Kim eventually wins because it is Zoe who convinced her to get the car in the first place. The jacket is seen as a “bad-ass” costume that connects stunt work and performing masculinity. Kim puts it on because it allows her to get into character and to embrace her aggressive side. As soon as the women drive off, the camera cuts to show Mike watching from a side road. He smirks and then begins to follow them. Mike waits for the women to head off in the car because he listened in on their conversation at the diner, and he wants to attack them when they are performing masculinity. He could have terrorized them before they borrowed the *Vanishing Point* car, but that would have been too easy. In his mind he needs to teach them a lesson by proving that stunt work is not for women.

Before Mike shows up, Zoe climbs out of the car window, and uses two belts to balance on the hood, and literally rides the car. Kim’s job is to drive as fast as she can, and the whole game is figured as a form of sexual pleasure. Zoe screams with enjoyment and urges Kim to go faster. The portrayal of the game shows that women can become

excited through aggressive behaviour, but this is totally dependent on performing forms of hypermasculinity. Even before the women hit the road Zoe says, "I want to drive a Dodge challenger, fuck me swinging—balls out!"

The realistic aspect of the stunt comes from a lack of CGI and a clear vision of Zoe actually being on the hood of a speeding car. Tarantino foregrounds her status as a real life stunt woman by having the scene seem as authentic as possible. Kim cheers Zoe on, and the initially passive Abernathy sits in the passenger seat completely amazed and excited. Everything is going as planned until Abernathy spots Mike quickly approaching from the rear. The camera stays with the women until right before Mike smashes into their car. After the initial collision, the camera sits on Mike's car—foregrounding the hood ornament as a phallic symbol—while he continually bangs into the back of the other vehicle. The scenario is figured as one in which all-female sexual pleasure turns into heterosexual violence, as Zoe is forced to remain on the hood throughout the attack. She is helpless to fight back as Mike retains the presumably superior position of aggressor. Mike shouts degrading lines such as, "So you wanna get hot?! Suck on this!," indicating his awareness of the sexual dynamic of the situation. Much like Pam's torture earlier, the scene fluctuates between the point of view of Mike and the women, and Tarantino continues to showcase Zoe's authentic display of the stunt. Through long shots, the viewer is able to see the actual risk that went into the sequence, and as Zoe cries and screams, the intention is to create a sense of abject terror for both the character and spectator. Carol Clover states that "A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psycho killer because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psycho killer" (12). The problem,

however, is that the sequence has the dual function of presenting Zoe Bell's skill in stunt work (coded as masculine), while simultaneously coding her as a feminized victim. Tarantino thus uses Zoe's daring performance to foreground women's capacity for performing masculine behaviour, while once again glorifying aggressive violence. The spectator is in a position of both experiencing abject fear, and celebrating Zoe's intense skill. With the sequence reading as a rape scenario, the troubling aspect is that Mike's vicious attack figures as catalyst to make Zoe's impressive feat even more spectacular, thus implying that the experience is both positive and negative. As stated earlier, abject terror can work to elicit a masochistic experience for the viewer, and in Zoe's case, it does for her as well. To further trouble the intended progressive stance that Tarantino wants, Zoe is shown to be in high spirits immediately after the incident. Kim and Abernathy wait quietly for a sign that Zoe is ok, and then she pops out from the bushes seemingly unharmed. All three women then appear totally unfazed by what just occurred—in some ways, appearing happier than they were before Mike showed up. In other words, this moment of abject terror actually figures as pleasure, which indirectly suggests that the women enjoyed the experience. The preferred reading that I believe Tarantino is going for is that the women are supposed to come across as unfazed because they know that Mike's hypermasculinity is not as powerful as he presumes it to be. With their own stunt skills and an armour inducing car, they know they can match up evenly to Mike when the element of surprise is taken away. However, when the scenario is coded as rape, there are pre-existing power structures that cannot be ignored. By having the women's true potential to perform hypermasculinity figured as a reaction to male aggression, Tarantino is complicating the women's ability to perform the same kind of

masculinity as men. In other words, the stunt is only spectacular when the women are forced to compete with Mike.

By having the women's strength reside in their collective presence within the vehicle, Tarantino is playing with the notion of groups within the rape revenge film. *I Spit on your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) infamously depicts a group of men repeatedly feeding off each other's masculine aggression while they terrorize and rape a solitary woman. The film showcases the sadistic potential that men in groups (and men in general) possess in regard to aggressive sexuality, and *Death Proof* works to re-contextualize this potential in terms of gender. The women use their collective power to seek revenge on Mike, and the notion is that, if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us. Tarantino wants the reactionary element of the revenge to showcase women's ability to access aggressive behaviour when they need it, but his failure to sustain abject terror once again undermines his intent. In showing the women as unharmed, he downplays the traumatizing power of potential sexual violence. Also, if the women are not shown as traumatized, is their revenge really justified?

In the original *I Spit on your Grave*, Jennifer (Camille Keaton), transitions from an unassuming, confident woman, into an emotionless killer.⁴⁰ Her change is hardly reminiscent of a progressive feminist stance, but at least there is an attempt to reflect (and to avenge) on the traumatizing experience of sexual violence. Clover singles out the unrealistic nature of the revenge in *I Spit on Your Grave*, by highlighting how easily Jennifer can drive a speed boat, rig a spring-noose, and get rid of a body (to name a few)

⁴⁰ In no way am I attempting to validate *Grave's* narrative as progressive, I am simply detailing the differences between the two films.

(143).⁴¹ Similar disapproval has been shown towards the remake of *Spit* as well. Andrew O'Hehir from Salon.com refers to the film as "Bogus feminist torture porn", and he draws attention to the fact that Jennifer's revenge is entirely implausible, yet the rape scenes that spawn her fury are convincingly portrayed (Web). Tarantino uses a somewhat realistic aesthetic (real cars hitting real cars) for both the rape and the revenge scenario in order to avoid claims that either attack is unrealistic.⁴² In doing so, however, the revenge reads more like a traditional rape (from a rape-revenge film) than the initial attack, and Tarantino wants it to be this way so that he can continue mocking Mike.

When the women go after Mike, they find him pulled over on a dirt road. He is crying because before he left the women, Kim shot him in the arm (he was outside his car of course). He screams and shouts in a manner normally reserved for female victims and further exposes the limitations of his hypermasculine posturing, while also showing his dependency on his armour). From this point on, Mike shows intense fear as he flees from his assailants. The sequence is shot in a similar mode as his first attack, only this time there is no sense that the victim (Mike) is receiving any type of pleasure. Mike's worst fear has come to life, as women are using stunt work to defeat the stunt man. Also, the viewer is forced into alternating positions of victim and attacker, as the camera switches from Mike's terrified look to reverse shots of the smiling women. Normally forcing one to identify between both positions is a means of presenting the distressing and horrifying

⁴¹ In a moment of intertextuality, the women smash into a canoe on the side of the ride, and Abernathy shouts, "Did you just hit a boat!" The moment is clearly meant to be read as an allusion to *Spit*, and Tarantino is suggesting that these women are surpassing Jennifer in terms of a realistic revenge.

⁴² Tico Ramao, in his article, "Guns and Gas: Investigating the 1970s car chase film", states that in the 70s "the car chase became Hollywood's action sequence *par excellence*" (Ramao 131). Tarantino wants to pay homage to these former car chases by not using CGI and have real cars going really fast.

nature of rape in the rape revenge film, but that is not the case with *Death Proof*. The viewer does not share in Mike's fear because his descent from hypermasculine agency to abject terror is one of mockery. When his point of view is dominant, the viewer is meant to appreciate the women's aggression and to relish in Mike's misery because he is a phoney. In other words, one is supposed to "get a kick out of" watching the intended gender reversal because Mike is not an authentic man.

Mike's entire persona is based around outdated hypermasculine posturing that seeks to keep women down. The women are therefore coded as authentic because their posturing is representative of contemporary times. They represent the increasingly flexible gender norms of the present day, while Mike represents an outdated view of gender. Also, Mike is figured as inauthentic because his posturing is dependent on gender performance as well. In his insistence to be called "Stuntman" he is revealing his "need" to be associated with hypermasculinity. Tarantino, though, is not actually critiquing hypermasculinity when he mocks Mike; he is mocking a male who needs to masquerade as hypermasculine. Part of the reason Mike's position as victim is meant to be enjoyed is because he is not Thunderbolt or the Bandit. Both of those characters went to the road because they liked cars and they liked independence. Mike uses his car and the road to hide from who he really is—a weak male who wants to be seen as strong.

Marking Mike's assault as one without a shared connection (in terms of coding the viewer as feminine through abject terror) between victim and spectator works to further complicate Tarantino's pastiche. By placing the women and the spectator in a shared relationship of sadism, Tarantino is suggesting that Mike "is asking for it". By using the women's aggression as evidence that they can surpass Mike at his own game,

Tarantino loses the critical potential that the rape-revenge genre is known for. Clover states that rape-revenge films can be critical of rape when they expose common misconceptions of the crime such as “she was asking for it”—*Death Proof*, though, unwittingly celebrates sexual violence (116). By placing women in what he sees as a position of empowerment, Tarantino effectively showcases the elasticity of gender in terms of genre, but he unknowingly complicates his own intent by marginalizing the women’s agency.

When the three women finally run Mike off the road they pull him out of his car and collectively beat him unconscious. Mike is marked as helpless without his armour, and Zoe gets the final shot as she spin kicks him in the head. Mike falls to the ground, the frame freezes, and the end credits begin. The action resumes, however, when the song (‘Chick Habit’ by April March) begins to play and Abernathy walks over and slams her heel into Mike’s throat, thus killing him. Tarantino has Abernathy deliver the fatal blow because she is the one who was coded as the least masculine due to her inexperience with thrill seeking behaviour. Her action now places her beside Zoe and Kim as “bad-ass” females, and the lyrics of the song work to further justify that it is Mike’s behaviour that spawns the women’s true capacity for performative hypermasculinity: “Hang up the chick habit / hang it up, daddy / or you’ll be alone in a quick / hang up the chick habit / hang it up, daddy / or you’ll never get another fix / I’m telling you it’s not a trick / pay attention / don’t be thick / or you’re liable to get licked.” The song suggests that men need to change their misogynistic views, or women will punish them. Mike’s defeat at the end of *Death Proof* is thus a signification for women’s

capacity to access performative hypermasculinity just as well (or better) than men, when the situation demands it.

Clover refers to the rape and murder in *Last House on the Left* as “conducted with considerable sexual energy, but when they are over, the assailants look at the girl’s limp body in a kind of dumbfounded shame; it is a very long take indeed...the most disturbing moment in this most disturbing of films (137). The ending to *Death Proof* is in stark contrast to *Last House* because Tarantino has no interest in exploring violence in the way that Craven does, even though one of his goals is to imitate the viewing experience of an exploitation film. He clearly falls short in his imitation as he fails to sustain the realist aesthetic that earlier filmmakers made use of. Tarantino fans do not rush to his films to experience abject terror or be exposed to progressive politics; they go to have fun, and Tarantino knows this. Unfortunately, with *Death Proof*, he tries to have it both ways, and the result is a film best categorized by its incoherence.

I have continued to highlight the contextual dissonance that occurs when Tarantino updates genres and cycles from a previous era into a contemporary context. There is a tension that emerges when he places one era in line with another, and in some ways this suggests that maybe 1970s exploitation films cannot be convincingly re-
visioned. The 1970s represent a period when certain exploitation filmmakers were trying to make sense of what was happening around them (Vietnam, Watergate, Black Power, recession). When Tarantino uses the slasher film to re-contextualise Mike’s hypermasculine posturing, he undermines the potential subversive qualities of the killer, as Mike’s violent acts are prioritized as spectacle. Moreover, by framing an exciting car chase as an intended rape revenge scenario, he diffuses the potentially traumatic power of

sexual violence. By focusing on the women beating Mike at his game, Tarantino also prioritizes presumably masculine, thrill-seeking behaviour over everything else. He shows that women can be as “bad-ass” as men, but at the cost of further figuring femininity as inferior. Mike is not defeated because women are better than men at posturing hypermasculinity; he is defeated because he is coded as too feminine.

Conclusion

Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* sets up its relation to history right away: the title "Once Upon a Time...In Nazi-Occupied France" frames the film as intended historical fiction. *Basterds* blends fantasy with fact in a way that allows Tarantino to put his own personal spin on World War II films and World War II. The film takes place between 1941 and 1945, and its five chapters pursue two separate plots to assassinate prominent Nazi officials (including Hitler) at a Paris movie theatre. The film combines aspects of spaghetti westerns and World War II combat films to create, as the tagline noted, "An Inglorious, Uproarious Thrill-Ride of Vengeance". As Once again, Tarantino is not concerned with the actual details of the Second World War; he is concerned with how pop-culture has dealt with the war. Highly indebted to the Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *Basterds* employs a similar strategy of figuring war films as both vicious and fun. The Basterds use ultra violent tactics to kill Nazis, and their trademark to scalp their enemies after killing them or to carve a swastika into their foreheads if they need to keep them alive.

Unlike Tarantino's previous films, though, *Basterds* uses pastiche primarily as means to showcase how cinema is directly connected to both our sense of and relationship to history. Whereas *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof* use pastiche to explore our cultural memory of film history, *Basterds* deals specifically with history as depicted through film. Daniel Mendelsohn notes that the film "represents an evolution for the director", based on the fact that "in this new movie, the movies aren't just a subtle (or not so subtle) element in an allusive aesthetic game; they are, at last, front and center"(Web).

Basterds not only suggests that war films often re-write history, it also suggests that watching violent war films can be fun—even cathartic—for the viewer.

In a sequence involving the screening of the fictional Nazi war film, *Nation's Pride* (directed by Eli Roth), Tarantino alludes to the moral consequences of film spectatorship (Walters, 22). Dyer states that any film-within-a-film is liable to be pastiche as: "The very act of framing one work within another in the same medium or mode tends to bring out the sense that the medium or mode of the framed work is being used differently to its use in the framing work" (*Pastiche*, 64). *Nation's Pride* depicts a Nazi soldier, Frederick Zoller (Daniel Brühl) sniping 250 enemy soldiers from a bird's nest position in a bell tower (presented as non-fiction in *Basterds*). The camera sits in the tower and captures a re-enactment of Zoller killing all 250 soldiers. While the film-within-a-film can be seen as Tarantino's critique of the low quality of many Nazi propaganda films, the primary aim of the sequence is to parallel the reaction of the Nazi's audience with our own. Hitler and Goebbels laugh and cheer after each death, and Ben Walters rightly notes that "only a thoughtless viewer will not see him or herself reflected in shots of Hitler cackling as he watches Americans being slaughtered in *Nation's Pride*" (22). Tarantino here suggests that cinema can be cathartic, but such a release often comes at the expense of undermining the horrific power of violence. By aligning us with Adolf Hitler, he critiques his own use of aestheticized violence, at the same time that he recognizes (even celebrates) the potential power of cinema.

In *Basterds*, Tarantino re-writes history to turn the tables on the Nazis and have Jews enact suitable vengeance for the atrocities that they endured during the Holocaust. Inversion is used to signify the deeply emotional aspect of a desire for historical revenge,

as Hitler's fictional slaughter is meant to be read as pure catharsis for the viewer. However, if Jews are celebrated for their violent mimicry of Nazis, and we are also aligned with Nazis in the film, then what exactly is *Basterds*' stance on the horrors of war and genocide? Honestly, I am not sure that Tarantino necessarily cares. He made *Basterds* to explore the role of cinema in relation to the cultural memory of a historical trauma. Through strategic reversals, he suggests that this is the type of a catharsis that viewers want in a war film. Closure is offered here in the re-writing of the war for those who see vengeance as the ultimate depiction of justice. The film's closing scene, however, once again points to a moment of self-critique. As Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) savagely carves a swastika into Hans Landa's (Christoph Waltz) forehead, he states "I think this just might be my masterpiece." The moment parallels an earlier scene when Goebbels announces that *Nation's Pride* will prove to be his masterpiece. The association points to Tarantino's understanding of the one-sided nationalist propagandist approach that war films normally embrace, but it also suggests that he sees this sensationalist approach as perhaps representative of the primary allure of cinema. He both celebrates and laments films that re-write history, and thus continues to use pastiche in a critical manner.

Tarantino has come a long way from his first two films as he continues to develop and alter his use of postmodern pastiche. Since *Reservoir Dogs*, he has expressed his love of cinema through his own films. By exploring the trajectory of his career, one can see how increasingly important it is for Tarantino to articulate his attachment to the cinematic past in his work. Through his use of pastiche in his later work, he has also shown an engagement with criticisms of his output, as he frequently tries to re-frame his

conventions for screening gender, race, and violence; thus showing his desire to be viewed as both an entertainer and a critical filmmaker.

In 2012, Tarantino will release his seventh film, *Django Unchained*. The story is said to be a Spaghetti-Western-inspired take on the American slavery. Django (Jamie Foxx) is a slave-turned-gunslinger who pairs up with a German bounty hunter (Christoph Waltz) to free his enslaved wife from the evil Mississippi plantation owner, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). Matt Holmes, from *Obsessed with Film*, writes in his script review of *Django* that “this isn’t a movie that young teenagers, unless they are huge fans of Tarantino, will get off their ass[es] to see in their droves. Tarantino is playing for a niche market here – nobody has really made a movie about race like this for years, and when they did it was never for a mass audience” (Web). *Django* will likely contain some of the persistent tensions in relation to the politics of race and gender in Tarantino’s work. The slave rebel is, in fact, an iconic figure of resistant black masculinity. It will be a challenge to blend the spaghetti western and the slavery tale in a way that critically places American history in dialogue with mythology. He will no doubt take full advantage of the exploitative, violent opportunities inherent in the re-framing of another historical trauma. This, however, is what makes his films so interesting. His approach to pastiche can be erratic, ideologically uneven, and, at times, offensive. However, it can also be engaging and significant. Love him or hate him, you can always count on Tarantino to be unpredictable.

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