

# BEYOND NON-LINEARITY: TRACING *PULP FICTION*'S STRUCTURE AND MEANING

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## ABSTRACT

This article, inspired by Taborda-Hernández's audiovisual essay, examines *Pulp Fiction*'s non-linear narrative and its role in the story that is told. Quentin Tarantino's 1994 masterpiece transformed cinematic storytelling by deviating from traditional narrative structures. Tarantino's non-linear approach mirrors the deliberate fragmentation seen in postmodern literature, eliciting diverse audience interpretations. Taborda-Hernández's audiovisual essay delves into Tarantino's departure from linear storytelling, introducing an experimental linear perspective that prompts inquiries into the story's efficacy in both linear and non-linear frameworks. This exploration highlights the complex interplay between narrative, characters, and the film's non-linear structure. Thematic depth within non-linear storytelling enriches the viewing experience prompting reflection on the complex interweaving of human existence and morality, echoing *Pulp Fiction*'s multi-layered structure. This article contends that the film not only promoted but successfully achieved a continuous dialogue between the audience and the filmmaker, catalyzed by the film's use of a non-linear structure and its consequential effects.

Keywords: Non-linear storytelling; Postmodernism; Quentin Tarantino; *Pulp Fiction*; Narrative structure.

"*Pulp Fiction* is not so much a film as a phenomenon. [...] The significance of *Pulp Fiction* is not located objectively in the structure of the work itself but in the resonances this work has [...]." (Polan, 2000, p. 7). Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) stands as a cinematic watershed, a testament to the potential of non-linear storytelling. The film's fragmented structure, coupled with its appropriation of materials from other films and pop cultural works in a somewhat post-nostalgic (DeGenerao, 1997) and /or post-historical world where reality has been transgressed and surpassed (Laist, 2013), positions *Pulp Fiction* as a prime example of postmodern cinema (Hill, 2012). It represents a pivotal shift in filmic narrative approach, fostering intricate and unconventional storytelling while drawing inspiration from novels and the ethos of postmodernism.

Postmodernism, a paradigm that is inherently resistant to categorization and temporal boundaries, emerged primarily in the aftermath of World War II (circa the 1950s). Rather than heralding a new era, postmodernism manifests as a direct response to and departure from modernist ideals, encapsulating a multifaceted essence, as Bertens (2003, p. 3) noted when describing it as "several things at once". This movement re-explores and re-examines features already found in modernism, such as fragmentation, irony, subjectivity, critical revision and reassessment of history and the past, amongst others. In the domain of literature, postmodern novels serve as exploratory grounds for the nuances of subjectivity and fragmentation in constructing narratives, plots, and characters. This deliberate fragmentation invites readers to indulge in the creation of multiple interpretations and readings, a fundamental trait embedded within the essence of postmodern books. It fosters a conscious and creative engagement from the reader while presenting narratives and characters open to diverse renditions. Furthermore, postmodern literature employs specific narrative techniques, some of which trace their roots back to features inherent in modernism. These techniques encompass fragmentation, paradox, metafiction, and historical metafiction – coined by Linda Hutcheon (1988). The deliberate use of irony, black humor, and intertextuality further enrich the complex tapestry of postmodern narratives and books.

Delving into the narrative characteristics of postmodernism, Tarantino himself speculated on the hypothetical release of his film as a book. He suggested that, had this occurred, its presentation and reception would likely have been unquestioned in terms of structure: Novelists have always had just a complete freedom to pretty much tell their story any way they saw fit. And that's kind of what I'm trying to do. Now the thing is, for both novels and film, 75% of the stories you're going to tell will work better on a dramatically engaging basis to be told from a linear way. But there is that 25% out there that can be more resonant by telling it this [non-linear] way (Tarantino as cited in Berg, 2006, p. 5).

While Hollywood had sporadically experimented with alternative narrative forms since roughly the 1970s (Elsaesser, 2009), the 1990s

ushered in a more profound exploration of novel narrative modes, largely spurred by Tarantino's groundbreaking work, which served as inspiration for other filmmakers (Poulaski, 2014). David Bordwell laid the groundwork for understanding a poetics of narration (Bordwell, 1985) and established the concept of "puzzle films" (Bordwell, 2006) to delineate movies like *Pulp Fiction* – films that compel viewers to reassess the sequence of events, promoting post-viewing analysis or rewatches to uncover concealed clues. This characteristic resonates deeply within the film, where both the audience and the characters grapple with piecing together the intricate narrative.

Taborda-Hernández's audiovisual essay, *Narrative Structure in Pulp Fiction*, examines Tarantino's deliberate use of a non-linear storytelling approach. Beyond the film's surface, the essay questions whether Tarantino's deviation from linear storytelling was a conscious departure from convention. The essay invites reflection on the intricate process of conceptualization (and scriptwriting) that occurred prior to the film's editing and filming stages through the interweaving of three distinct yet interconnected stories.

Syd Field, a prominent figure in the realm of narrative cinema, offered insights into Tarantino's structural intentions upon reading the script. The script intriguingly opens by asserting that it comprises "three stories... about one story", followed by two distinct definitions of "pulp". Notably, on the third page, it deviates from the norm of screenplays by presenting a table of contents, a rare inclusion in this form of writing.

That was odd, I thought; who writes a Table of Contents for a screenplay? I saw the film was broken down into five individual parts: Part I, was the Prologue; Part II, Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife; Part III, The Gold Watch; Part IV, The Bonnie Situation, and Part V, the Epilogue. (Field, n.d.)

In fact, as Field observes, the film is divided into five separate parts, all of which revolve around the central inciting incident of Jules and Vincent retrieving Marcellus Wallace's enigmatic briefcase. This concept of "three stories about one story" functions as a cohesive motif, similar to the "bookend" technique found in other narrative structures. Understanding the film's construction reveals the intentional setup in the Prologue, freezing on the brink of action. The subsequent segments navigate the characters' intertwined fates, ultimately converging in an Epilogue that cyclically echoes the Prologue's initial tension. Despite its non-linear structure, the film follows a unified structure, beginning with a beginning, moving through a middle, and concluding with an end, echoing Syd Field's paradigm. "It became clear to me that no matter what the form of the film [*Pulp Fiction*], whether linear or non-linear, there is always going to be a beginning, a middle and an end." (Field, n.d.)

Taborda-Hernández's audiovisual essay interestingly accentuates this aspect, emphasizing the parallel essence of structure, whether linear or non-linear, underscoring the meticulous design inherent in the film.

Tarantino's film would have worked had it been linear which leads one to believe the director made a deliberate structural choice that is not simply a stylistic preference but an integral element of the narrative – a raw, unpolished canvas that beckons active audience participation in piecing together its intricacies.

Tarantino strategically uses non-linear storytelling to immerse viewers in the story. This approach not only compels the audience to pay close attention to nuanced details but also fosters a heightened level of engagement. By blending non-linear narratives with dialogue-rich scenes (some of which Taborda-Hernández also chooses to highlight in his audiovisual essay), the director challenges audiences to reconstruct the fragmented plot, intensifying their involvement in the film's orchestrated chaos.

Beneath the surface of its intricate narrative, *Pulp Fiction* delves into a thematic exploration. The film explores existential questions, moral ambiguity, and the unpredictability of fate. Characters grapple with themes of redemption, fate's intervention, and the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, the structural approach chosen subtly reflects societal constructs and the characters' attempts to navigate and deconstruct them. Jules' transformative journey, prompted by a brush with death, serves as a profound exploration of redemption and divine intervention. This thematic depth, which is seamlessly intertwined with the non-linear storytelling, elevates the viewing experience, inciting audiences to ponder on the intricate tapestry of human existence and morality (equated with the film's intricate structure). The film's legacy thus echoes through contemporary cinema. It continues to inspire a new generation of storytellers, encouraging them to experiment with narrative structures and engage audiences at a deeper level, challenging the traditional confines of linear storytelling.

Taborda-Hernández's insightful essay not only sheds light on the film's deliberate intricacies, but also serves as a homage to Tarantino's structural quandary. It is a form of reappropriation in which the film is essentially reconfigured in a linear fashion, perpetuating a cycle of questioning, reimagining, and reconstructing – an apt tribute to the ethos of "pulp" culture and the film's raw, unfinished essence. At the beginning of the screenplay, two definitions of "pulp" surface: "1. A soft, moist, shapeless mass or matter. 2. A magazine or book containing lurid subject matter and being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper." (Tarantino & Avary, 1994, p. 1). True to Tarantino's vision, the film remains "unfinished", as its ongoing structural reanalysis and reimagining pay homage to the ever-evolving dialogue between filmmaker and audience, inviting an active engagement that extends far beyond the screen. The continuous reexamination and reinterpretation of *Pulp Fiction* serve as a testament to its stature as a cultural cornerstone. Much like an eternal work-in-progress printed on coarse paper, the film persists in its evolution, fostering an enduring dialogue, continually reshaping itself in the minds of each viewer – exactly as Tarantino seems to have intended.

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