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Putting the Pulp in Pulp Fiction

Seth Klamann



Seth is a junior from Kansas City. His major is Journalism Print and Digital News with an emphasis in news reporting. He is an honors student, a contributing writer for Vox Magazine, and will be an assistant city editor this

summer at the
Columbia
Missourian.

Between interlocking story lines and black humor, few films have gained such universal critical acclaim (without winning Best Picture) as Quentin Tarantino's 1994 mob masterpiece *Pulp Fiction*. Dominated by brilliant dialogue, violence, and subtle criticisms of American culture, the Best Original Screenplay-winning film intertwined food to further each of these critical plot threads. Indeed, Tarantino's use of food was central to every major scene in the film, heralding impending violence and offering a tangible and relatable avenue for a commentary on American culture at that time. Food is involved heavily throughout the film, with Tarantino acknowledging that he "likes to [shoot] in restaurants" (Tarantino & Peary, 1998, p. 86). So for the sake of brevity, this paper will focus on a handful of the most prominent scenes.

Pulp Fiction opens with Vince (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) driving to kill a group of young men who have wronged the two hit men's boss, Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). After eating their breakfast and simultaneously intimidating the boys, Jules kills all three and retrieves a mysterious suitcase belonging to Wallace. Leading up to the hit, Vince tells Jules that he has been charged with taking Wallace's wife, Mia (Uma Thurmon), out for a good time that night. After scoring some highly potent heroine, Vince picks up Mia and the two travel to Jack Rabbit Slim's, a 1950s themed diner complete with period car booths and wait staff dressed like pop icons of the day. After a meal riddled with sexual tension and subtle critiques of America, the two retire to Mia's house, where the former actress overdoses on Vince's heroine. After saving

Mrs. Wallace, Vince takes her home and all is well.

A series of scenes involving Bruce Willis' boxer character Butch Coolidge follow. Coolidge decides not to throw a fight, much to the chagrin of Wallace. After a brief manhunt, Wallace, carrying a breakfast of donuts and coffee, spots Coolidge by chance and pulls a gun on him. After Coolidge wrecks his car running over Wallace, the two battle, staggering, through the streets until they end up in a shop run by a pair of suspect men, who hold both Coolidge and Wallace at gunpoint before sodomizing Wallace. The mob boss escapes with Coolidge, and the two call it even after this disturbing experience. The film ends with Jules and Vince eating at a diner, which is robbed by two lovers midway through the henchmen's meal. Despite the ease with which he inflicts violence earlier in the film, Jules abstains from killing the two, instead giving them money and telling them to leave.

In each of the four scenes described above, food plays a critical role in advancing the plot. Using food in this manner is not exclusive to Pulp Fiction, or to any of Tarantino's films. Indeed, as far as violence goes, Keller (2006) states that, "The respective representations of violence and food can be equally engaging and, interestingly, these [two] ingredients [often] stand in for each other" (p. 4).

Keller's belief that food can represent violence is very much present in the first scenes discussed in this paper (The Big Kahuna Scene). Rather than torture Wallace's disloyal business partners physically, Jules illustrates his complete control and dominance by eating the boys' breakfast of hamburgers and sodas. By demonstrating this power, he is showing that he could pull out fingernails or beat

the hell out of the boys, but instead decides to torment them psychologically using food.

Furthermore, the interaction between Jules and the boys in the Big Kahuna Scene offers a first commentary on society. In an essay about Pulp Fiction, Epstein (2004) describes the meat eaten by Jules in the first scene as representing “the most manly of foods” in society (p. 199). Epstein’s point is a good one, as carnivorous desires are indeed considered essential parts of masculinity in American culture, evidenced by any number of television advertisements.

One simply has to watch Burger King’s “I Am Man” ad campaign to get an idea of the ties between masculinity and meat. In his book about gender and food, Charles and Kerr (1988) breaks down Epstein’s point further, stating, “Food seems to have an association with gender ... some are ‘strong’ and ‘masculine’ while others are ‘weaker’ and ‘feminine.’ The difference between red and white meat is the most striking example of this” (p. 77). Obviously these are not universal rules, but as Charles and Kerr say, it is often the perception. Thus, when Jules takes the meat from the boys and “slowly savors it,” he is forcefully illustrating his “masculine prowess,” and robbing the other men of theirs (Epstein, 2004, pp. 198-199).

The second scene (The Jack Rabbit Slim’s) does not involve violence, but instead furthers the commentary on society and gender initiated in the Big Kahuna scene. Vince takes Mia to Jack Rabbit Slim’s, where the two sit in a Cadillac-turned-booth. They are seated by a Marilyn Monroe hostess, and waited on by Buddy Holly. Both of these pop icons had died young and tragically and were major parts of American culture in the 1950s, but rather

than being treated with respect, they are turned into a gimmick at a restaurant. It is a sort of irony – both were larger than life figures, absorbed and died in the spotlight, but whose images are relegated to serving food. Tarantino built this scene to represent how Americans view these kinds of people more as cultural possessions than people of flesh and bone. A restaurant staffed by doppelgangers of Lincoln and Kennedy would be unacceptable, but Holly and Monroe are allowed because they are perceived as water in the cultural stream.

Similar to the food in the Big Kahuna scene, the dinner choices of Vince and Mia illustrate roles in American society. Radtke (2005) in *Pulp Fiction – an analysis of Storyline and Character* – believes it is one of the most pivotal scenes. “Food in general is very important to Tarantino ... Action is set in a diner, a coffee shop, or an eatery” (p. 9). Vince orders a steak, “bloody as hell,” while Mia gets a small burger and milkshake. Again, the red meat – extra red, in fact – shows the masculinity of Vince, who seems uncomfortable with his role as Mia’s girlfriend than a man. When he first gets the menu, he immediately begins looking for the steak – it is the only thing he considers and orders it immediately. After he orders, he becomes more relaxed and talkative.

The milkshake ordering is similarly important – Buddy Holly asks if Mia wants her shake “Martin and Lewis or Amos and Andy.” Martin and Lewis were two white comedians, while Amos and Andy were black comedians. The waiter is asking if she wants chocolate or vanilla – a subtle drop of racism that is accepted by the waiter, Vince, and Mia, but probably would have offended an African-American.

As the dinner progresses, the two become more intimate and comfortable. Radtke

(2005) describes the mood as originally “shallow and distant,” but grows increasingly familiar as the two share Mia’s vanilla milkshake (p. 10). Mia describes her fifteen minutes of fame in television and the sexuality of some of her fellow actors in the show. The concept of sexuality in television and the need for fifteen minutes of fame are distinctly American ideals. Author Shane (2001) describe how women would line up at 5 a.m. outside of the Today Show in a bid to get on air. “Why? Because it would be so cool to be on TV and have two seconds of fame” (p. 56). But, as Shane describes, that fame is short lived. For Mia, it ended after just a pilot episode, and she ended up marrying a certain rich mobster.

While the Jack Rabbit Slim’s scene lacked in the food and violence combination, the third scene in this paper (The Torture Scene) was rife with it. On-the-run boxer Butch Coolidge has a chance encounter with Marcellus Wallace on the street, much to the shock of both. Wallace is carrying what appears to be a box of donuts and coffee, which he promptly drops to chase Butch. This is the only sign of food in the scene, but it immediately serves its purpose as the harbinger of violence, as Wallace is hit by Coolidge’s car, causing bloody injuries to both the boxer and the mob boss.

The chase is on, as the two move through the streets, Wallace limping and Coolidge delirious from injuries suffered during the car crash. They end up in a pawnshop, where the temporarily surprised owners pull a shotgun and force the two men downstairs. Wallace is raped and tortured while Butch waits, presumably for his turn. Remember, the mob boss was carrying donuts – the first time a major male character has anything but red meat, which Charles and Kerr say represents masculinity and strength, as well as sort of carnivorous

savagery. It seems to foreshadow his humiliation, loss of that masculinity, and his forced submission at the hands of the men. Indeed, after the former foes free themselves and incapacitate their attackers, Wallace lets Coolidge go – on the condition he tells no one of the attack. By doing this, Wallace chooses his overall pride over the insult of his orders being ignored.

Masculinity is of paramount importance to Wallace, who views being raped as the ultimate sign that he is not a man, let alone a mob boss to be feared. Letting Butch go is part of keeping that pride. The other part is “getting medieval” on his wounded rapist. By torturing his torturer, Wallace seeks to gain his power and masculinity back.

It is, also, important to note that this is the first time we fully see Marcellus Wallace. In previous scenes, we get descriptions, hear a voice, and see an outline. But as Butch’s car pulls up to the stop sign, there he is, bathed in sunlight, carrying a box of donuts and two cups of coffee. Up to this point, Wallace is represented in the film through his henchmen, who carry out his wishes (almost always) in the presence of meat. But in his first full appearance, Wallace carries not sausage, nor bacon, but donuts. Does this suggest that Wallace is not as masculine or violent as his underlings? Probably not, but it does seem to draw a line between meat eaters Jules and Vince, who are the dealers of death and violence, and the donut-carrying Wallace, who in a matter of minutes will be held at gunpoint and violated.

Wallace’s momentary movement away from violence and masculinity foreshadows a similar movement in Jules. In the fourth and final scene discussed here (The Diner Scene), Jules and Vince enjoy a nice meal at a local diner. However, unlike in the opening scene, Jules abstains from meat –

he orders pancakes, and rejects an offer from Vince to split some bacon. As the two discuss the day's events, a robbery of the diner ensues by a gun-wielding couple. The boyfriend, Ringo, demands Jules' wallet. In response, Jules pulls a gun. At the same moment, Vince returns from the bathroom, with his pistol trained on the similarly armed girlfriend, Honey Bunny. But instead of killing both, Jules allows them to leave, even giving Ringo the wad of cash in his wallet. This is the same character that shot a group of young men after completely crushing them solely by eating their breakfast.

In a similar scenario to Wallace's in the Torture Scene, Jules change of heart seems to be foreshadowed by his decision to ignore meat. In the Big Kahuna scene, Tarantino uses the hamburgers to indicate imminent violence, and Jules uses them to show his masculinity and power. The diner scene seems eerily similar; Jules could easily have sat the man down, eaten the plate of bacon before him to symbolically show his control and masculinity, and then gunned down both Ringo and Honey Bunny. Instead, he completely abstains from the pork Vince ordered, calling it "filthy." It is here that he seems to hit the moral peak of his character development. He has seen and caused too much death. He will not eat meat anymore, and he similarly will not kill anymore.

While Pulp Fiction will always be remembered for its intricate storyline and excellent dialogue, the consistent use of food as a plot device makes it especially relevant to food film aficionados. While not strictly a food film, Tarantino's masterpiece used food throughout, indicating impending violence and offering subtle commentary on society, gender, and race.

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