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Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction Has Altered the Art Film
And Has Changed Popular Culture.

The traditional fine art forms such as painting, sculpture, and architecture have been around for centuries. In the twentieth century, technology introduced the motion picture which was quickly adopted by creative individuals as an artistic medium and the art form they produced was labeled art cinema or film art. Though the traditional fine art forms differ from film art and from each other in their forms of distribution, their intended audience, and the tools and materials used to create them, they all share similarities between them. English painter John Walker believes film art can be analyzed by such methods as structuralism and psychoanalysis, and in terms of style, genre and content/iconographic characteristics. "There is a considerable literature employing the terms 'film art' or 'the art of film' by writers convinced that cinema deserves to be considered as serious an art form as, say, paintings" (Walker 67). Just as painting, sculpture, and architecture have gone through influential changes spearheaded by avant guard artists, film art has changed throughout the decades and these changes were set in motion by the filmmakers and directors. Philosophy professor Bery Gaut said that "originally filmmakers thought themselves sometimes as scientists, sometimes as explorers and even entertainers; but most of them never considered themselves artists" (Gaut 1).

Even today, the majority of film is created for entertainment and for a mass audience without the intention of labeling itself as art. Adding to the fact that the majority of films produced are created for entertainment, is the difficulty for an art film to break new ground with new creative elements. When Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* was released in 1994, the film managed to bridge films produced for the mass audience and art film. The large groundbreaking moments in history started from D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and then to Orson Welles *Citizen Kane*. It drastically changed again with Jean-Luc Godard's [Breathless](#) and to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: Space Odyssey* and arrived finally at Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in 1994; and like the titles released before it, caused controversy and outrage and at the same time also received praise and acclaim. *Pulp Fiction* not only broke new ground in the artistic views of cinema but surprisingly also appealed to a mass audience and became part of popular mainstream culture which is something none of the films I listed before it were able to accomplish.

Literature has always been the fundamental basis of the academic art form and *Pulp Fiction* has been designed to be a self relative awareness of literariness. Right in its prologue the film reads "PULP (pulp) n. 1. A soft, moist, shapeless mass of matter. (n2) A magazine or book containing lurid subject matter and being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper." ([Pulp Fiction](#) 94) Writer Annette Hill explains that *Pulp Fiction* tries to give itself a visual narrative as a book containing chapters and chapter titles; of course all set out of order to keep the audience's interest throughout. "It is a labyrinth of verbal and visual intertexts, and even defines itself as a book" (Hill 23).

There are three major elements in *Pulp Fiction* that fit the criteria of an art film because of the methods and style applied throughout the film. The first one is the cleverly written dialogue between several of the characters within the context of its story. The second is its form

of structuralism and its creative use of narrative which is not only split into several parts but rearranged chronologically as well. The third and most discussed is the portrayal of violence and how the violence is used as psychology on its style and how it can affect the audience emotionally. These three points that I will dissect not only contain elements of artistic merit but they also helped the film become well received in the eyes of popular culture. The 80's were considered one of the worst decades for film which brought upon the blockbuster film. Writer Paul Gormley believes that after the creative innovations of the 70s, films of the 80s were less experimental and original and became more formulaic, and were designed and packaged for mass audience appeal with plots that could be summed up by one or two sentences. "In the first ten minutes of nine out of ten movies...the movie tells you what kind of movie it's gonna be. It tells you everything you basically need to know...you just know what's gonna happen. You don't know, but you know (Gormley 159).

Pulp Fiction was released in the mid 90's, which was the decade considered by many critics as the reimagining of new independent filmmaking which started with Quentin Tarantino's earlier film Reservoir Dogs and John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood. This new independent style of violence and substance was controversial because of its raw, realistic violence and gore; and how it also reflected issues on modern society. It also signified a new aesthetic direction in Hollywood film. A lot of modern audiences wouldn't deny Pulp Fiction's popularity and influence in popular culture but many might not be able to grasp the idea that the film is also labeled as an art form in the 'art house' culture.

The hip and yet sensational dialogue in Pulp Fiction was one of the several controversial and groundbreaking elements that were discussed when the film was first released. It angered a lot of the public for not only its excessive use of the four letter word but of its screenplay which

was full of racial slurs and racial generalizations. Yet no one can deny its witty and clever dialogue that is as much of an homage to classic hard-boiled novels and classic film noir. You know your film has become a staple in modern pop culture when you can say words like ‘foot massage’ or ‘quarter pounder with cheese’ and most people know what you’re referencing. A lot of films include very dull and flat dialog for the characters within the story and yet Pulp Fiction is the type of film that you could listen to on tape as an audio book and be as entertained as you would be if watching the film on the screen. Film critic Roger Ebert believed Quentin Tarantino made the dialogue humorous without ever seeming to ask for a laugh from the audience. “Dialogue drives Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction, dialogue of such high quality it deserves comparison with other masters of spare, hard-boiled prose, from Raymond Chandler to Elmore Leonard” (Ebert 3).

Tarantino creates long dialog takes which discuss mindless simple everyday things and we as an audience can relate to its pop culture references of ‘McDonalds’ and ‘Pepsi’ and can understand a lot on what the characters are saying. Most film producers or editors would cut those long drawn out dialog scenes in most conventional films because they believe the audience will either get restless or it would slow down the movement of the story. Film historian Edward Gallafent believes these dialog scenes establish more character development to the audience because they chat about everyday relatable themes. “What we learn from their opening scenes in Pulp Fiction can be summed up as one in which they see what they do as inhabiting the realm of the ordinary, or the routine” (Gallafent 47).

Pulp Fiction’s unconventional narrative is another part of what makes Pulp Fiction such an artistic film. It was one of the first films to actually break up the chronology timeline of a film’s story and mix it up like a jigsaw puzzle. “By constructing a violent nonlinear narrative full

of ellipses, Tarantino cracks open traditional genres to show how original variations can still be generated within the gaps” (Slocum 82). Writer and Professor David Slocum realized that this narrative technique became part of the mainstream structure of movie-making and also changed viewer’s perceptions on how they feel during the film. The breaking up of a film’s timeline inspired countless other films like Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*, Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* and Robert Rodriguez’s *Sin City* and having the audience watch a film where its story is chronology out of order is an interesting experiment to play on a person’s thoughts and expectations on the outcome of the story. Most conventional films do one or two things in the way they lay out the structure of a story. Either the audience knows as much as the characters do right from the beginning or the characters know more than the audience and the audience has to catch up by figuring it out. “A character killed in one part of a film can be seen again later on alive and well (as in *Pulp Fiction*.) These creative choices were made to play with the audience’s perception of the story” (Slocum 81).

The final and most interesting aspect of *Pulp Fiction* is the controversial violence that is portrayed in the film. When *Pulp Fiction* first was released most people attacked it for its violence; in some ways this helped the film grow in popularity with the mainstream masses. Professor Thomas Inge questions why people are drawn to violence and asks, “is the violence commonly found on film there because we prefer to watch those films which use it, or do we prefer to watch it because our baser instincts have been stimulated by its frequent use” (Inge 2)? Author Edward Gallafent points out three different types of ways an audience member views violence whether if it’s on-screen or not. “There are those categories implicit here: (a) violence as we understand it on a cinema screen, as simulated. (b) violence as we understand it in, say, a news report, as edited but connected to actual pain and horror, and (c) violence as it appears in,

our presence, in , say, the car accident or the fight we see or participate in, unmediated by any form on screen“ (Gallafent 39). Violent films don't necessarily make violent people but if a person cannot distinguish the difference between the three listed above then there is something clearly not right with their thought process and moral compass. Pulp Fiction is a vicious crime film, more or less, that embraces the goriest and most improbable elements of its exploitive, B-grade film inspirations. But Pulp Fiction is not necessarily exploitive itself because it has a style and energy and self-awareness that transcends the sources Tarantino is homaging. The power of its violence was so offending and shocking to many viewers and yet when going back and watching it frame by frame I realized most of the violence was suggested or off-screen. For instance in the second story where Marcellus Wallace was being raped by the two southern hillbillies, Butch of course decides to go back and save his enemy and chooses to kill the rapists with a samurai sword. The slashes and stabs are all shown off-screen, (as so is the rape.) In the third story when Jules accidentally kills Marvin in the back seat of the vehicle, you actually never see the bullet shoot Marvin in the face but just see the splash of blood that suddenly covers the whole vehicle. And of course one of the most memorable scenes of the film was when Mia OD's and Jules takes an adrenalin needle and stabs it in her chest to revive her. At the New York Film Festival premiere of Pulp Fiction someone had a seizure during that scene of the needle plunge because of its intensity and yet it clearly never shows the needle actually contact Mia's chest bone. My mother always described that horrific scene for years and when I finally watched it I remember being shocked because what she clearly described to me was never even shown on the screen. Using your imagination in a film not only makes it scarier but can even have the viewer believe the horror that their creating is something they are actually witnessing on the screen.

At the time *Pulp Fiction* was released there was much talk on it getting an NC-17 rating and yet other films that were considerably more violent than *Pulp Fiction* were getting ignored. Many of those reasons are because of the creative and artistic way Tarantino uses the violence to tap into an audience's repressed subconscious which most people don't necessarily want to reflect on. For instance when showing the scene of Marvin accidentally getting shot in the face to my uncle who has never seen the film before, he chuckled because of how strange the characters were dismissing this violent act and instead were treating it like they had just spilled milk. After my uncle chuckled at the scene he quickly dismissed his laughter and didn't want to admit that even a dark scene of grisly murder could be seen as humorous. He then stated the movie was twisted and morally reprehensible, but I believe it's because that scene made my uncle feel emotions that he usually wasn't used to feeling. Journalist and film critic Alan Stone says, "When most directors would cut away from the violence, Tarantino stays with the aftermath" (Stone 6).

Genre is a word that already is informing the audience what they should expect and how they should feel. A film like *Scream* can be as violent, disgusting and exploitative as it wants to be but since it's labeled in the 'horror' genre; audiences aren't offended or shocked because they are expecting to see what a horror film usually delivers. When going into an 'action' genre like *Face-Off* the audience already knows what they're going to see, so seeing 10 to 20 guys getting mowed down by automatic machine guns isn't going to bother them. Genre films already tell an audience how they're going to think and feel and Critic Roger Ebert stated that famous director Alfred Hitchcock called these type of films, 'machine for causing emotions' (Ebert 2). *Pulp Fiction* doesn't really classify itself in a specific genre and while some may think it's a black comedy others might think it's a gangster flick or a B picture. When my uncle found himself

laughing at the death of a human being it made him very uncomfortable with himself and had him question his own character since it confused him morally and ethically. This also partially explains why the torture and rape scene makes audiences laugh as well because it combines shock with references to past black exploitation and hip violence in popular culture. But at the same time the feelings of coolness evoked by the realistic and disturbing portrayal of violence can make the audience uncomfortable and yet at the end of it all, Tarantino meant the audience to laugh. Pulp Fiction stands out differently from many other films that glamorize violence because the film has substance, style and richly drawn characters which make the violence in the movie much more effective and profound.

Art films are confident enough to have the audience go to these despicable violent characters and learn to inhabit them; instead of passively letting the characters come to them. While watching Pulp Fiction, Tarantino asks the audience to be patient and to take in the most we can from the characters and at the end the audience arrives at their own moral conclusions on what they think and how they feel on the violence and the characters. This is the cinema of empathy, with unfortunately isn't don't very often because it's a more intelligent artful approach to filmmaking. At the same time violence is also a very popular attraction for young mainstream audiences and because of that, in good taste or not; it helped Pulp Fiction gain a place within popular culture. Pop culture is a global phenomenon that can come in several forms and different shapes and sizes and is mostly used as a commercial product; most prominently marketed towards the youth. American writer Thomas Inge believes that MTV, reality shows, violent TV and movies, popular pop music, and ethnic racial generationizations have become the popular norm and in a lot of ways can define our society. "Popular culture, in other words, is a mirror wherein society can see itself and better understand its own character and needs. One unresolved

circular question this approach poses is whether the mass media merely reflect what society wants or whether they influence it to want what the media provide” (Inge 2). As artistic and well crafted as *Pulp Fiction* is, it also has several ‘pop culture’ attributes which make it well accepted in popular culture. There has been a lot of talk on the racial portrayals in Tarantino’s films and how he gives a cool representation of American black culture in the 90s which was also during the rise of popular rap and hip-hop music most endomentaly in the white suburban community. “Throughout pulp fiction, there is a contradictory construction of African-American culture as both having the cultural authority to see through the artifice of post modernity and white cultural identity. *Pulp Fiction* in its equation of black culture and contemporary cinematic affect, and hipness” (Gormley 161).

Popular pop music is another theme that Tarantino loves to sample in his films, which also gives the film a more mainstream appeal. Tarantino has stated that he loves listening to music as much as watching movies and like the way Martin Scorsese places hit pop songs in his films; he also uses them to add a layer of emotion to his scenes. For example, in one of the most iconic scenes in *Pulp Fiction* the audience witnesses Vincent and Mia participate in a twist dance off competition in a 1950s themed restaurant called Jack Rabbit Slims. During their dance off Tarantino chooses to use Chuck Berry’s classic pop tune ‘You Can Never Tell’ for them to dance to. Using that pop song not only gives the scene a sort of hip mainstream appeal for pop culture; it also adds artistic appeal for the ‘art house’ crowd; since it clearly is an homage to other classic films like Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* and John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever* which ‘art house’ fans can relish in with great delight. Because of Tarantino’s sudden overnight popularity in pop culture, critics soon labeled him as the first ‘rock and roll’ art director. “Quentin Tarantino is the

Jerry Lee Lewis of cinema, a pounding performer who doesn't care if he tears up the piano, as long as everybody is rocking" (Ebert 1).

Tarantino's slick, glossy and colorful style is mostly homages to the pop culture genres of popular American films that he grew up loving as a child. Most of his films are purposely attended to come from B pulp pictures, black exploitation, film noir, spaghetti westerns, B samurai movies and cheesy gangster flicks; which can greatly satisfy any mainstream viewer. And yet he always puts his own artistic spin on it to make it seem fresh, controversial, new and vibrant; which greatly can satisfy any 'art house' viewer as well. Tarantino's films could never cross completely over to either side as well because his films are not obscure and experimental enough to become completely an 'artsy film' like David Lynch's *Eraserhead*; and at the same time, his films are too shocking and controversial to be labeled as a 'mainstream film' like Michael Bay's *Transformers*. Right in the prologue of *Pulp Fiction* it gives the dictionary definition of pulp; and in many ways the title is perfect for the meaning of the film. "The other predominant metaphor is the transformation of this meaningless waste into something of value. Tarantino talks about trashy popular culture, like pulp fiction novels, as sneaking through the gaps and evading critical scrutiny" (Gormley 162).

Pulp Fiction is now considered one of the most important films in the history of the cinema. Not only did Tarantino create a film that broke revolutionary ground in the style of its screenplay, the structure of its story and its portrayal of grisly violence; he achieved something that many people believed was the impossible. He created a film that brought together the divide of 'art house' and 'pop entertainment.' Before the arrival of Tarantino you've never had college students put up posters of Orson Welles or Yasujiro Ozu in their dorm rooms because those film artists never gained the attention of the popular masses and were never considered 'hip'. And yet

students who aren't even in the film department have posters of Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction and Kill Bill and young men who wouldn't dare watch a Federico Fellini or Ingmar Bergman film know every single line from Pulp Fiction.

Because of this miraculous breakthrough between these two very different audiences; how has this sudden merge changed our modern culture? This artistic breakthrough can now make the mainstream movie watcher get more involved in watching more mentally stimulating films that can at the same time satisfy all their mainstream desires. And for the artistic film watcher, they can watch a quality film with artistic attributes and yet lighten up and enjoy its mainstream and commercial appeal. Within this last decade fantasy films like The Lord of the Rings and comic book films like The Dark Knight have now been given a more artistic and intelligent approach, when earlier on in history were only treated as amateurish and unimportant. Maybe the videogame genre will be the next one in the near future to be given an artistic and quality touch that can at the same time be kept within the 'blockbuster' mentality. You've heard the classic saying that 'without trash, how then would you tell apart great art?' Well Tarantino somehow created the impossible and invented a way for an artistic film to include trashy attributes; which will make the future of art and pop culture very interesting indeed.

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