A Rhetorical Analysis of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*

Quentin Tarantino first arrived on the movie scene when *Reservoir Dogs*, which he wrote and directed, was released in 1992. He became the darling of the independent movie culture, and his follow-up movie *Pulp Fiction* cemented the place in film history he has continued to build on. One of Tarantino’s greatest gifts is his ability to write dialogue that resonates with his audience. As Seitz put it, “Tarantino doesn’t just explore language’s capacity to reveal and conceal motives and personality, he shows how people pick words and phrases (consciously or subconsciously) in order to define themselves and others, and describe the reality they inhabit (or would like to inhabit).” With Tarantino, dialogue and wordplay are given a power far greater than that of the average action movie, which is why exploring his movies is such a treat from a rhetorical standpoint. Beyond his mastery of subtle turns of phrase—or even his ability to create instantly recognizable catchphrases—is Tarantino’s heavy use of references, particularly pop culture references. When his first couple of movies came out, it was very hard for critics to pin down his style because of the combination of his male-dominated, pop culture-laden dialogue with intentionally ironic gratuitous violence. Over the past twenty years, a style has essentially been spawned by what Tarantino began doing in the early 1990’s, and *Pulp Fiction* will forever hold a place in movie history as one of those movies everyone just has to see.

Because *Pulp Fiction* is not told chronologically, it is difficult to try to dissect it from beginning to end, since it is debatable what should even be considered “the beginning.” It is broken up into chapters, each one telling what is nearly a self-contained story, except that certain characters reoccur, and we accept that all the stories are loosely intertwined and occurring over the course of a couple of days. The reason this movie works so well is that the characters are so appealing and memorable without the audience ever developing any emotional affinity for them.
While most filmmakers work to develop pathos, to create a world and characters that draw an audience in emotionally, Tarantino does exactly the opposite. Let’s focus first on the characters of Jules and Vincent, played by Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta, respectively. They play the role of hired goons for Marcellus, who is a big-time gangster in town. The first conversation they are having in the film revolves around how commonplaces can differ. After Vincent explains how marijuana laws differ in Amsterdam, a topic that captures Jules’ imagination and attention, Vincent says “The funny thing about Europe is the little differences.” (Tarantino) He then proceeds through a short list of commonplaces that are different between America and Europe, such as that you can order a glass of beer in a movie theater or at McDonald’s in Europe, and then in more detail that a “Quarter Pounder with Cheese” is called a “Royale with Cheese” because of the metric system. This organic conversation works brilliantly in establishing the characters as reasonably ordinary people to the audience. When they “get into character” and enter the apartment as intimidating henchmen sent to kill small time crooks, they effectively take advantage of their situated ethos as Marcellus’ henchmen to do so. (Tarantino) They have shown the audience that they are relatively good-natured guys because of the lengthy conversation we have already been privy to, but when they enter the apartment they are stone-cold cool.

I cannot think of a director who is able to evince laughter from his audience with gruesome deaths as consistently as Quentin Tarantino. Beyond the lack of pathos I have already mentioned, it is the delivery of the actors that allows the audience to take these situations lightly. As Curtis puts it, “in Pulp Fiction there are no heroes in the traditional sense. The protagonists are extremely violent and show no remorse for their actions yet, due to the way that the violence is handled or styled in the movie, plus that it is treated as normal behaviour and is accompanied
by rather inane dialogue, the characters become sympathetic and likeable.” After the apartment scene, Jules and Vincent are driving away with Marvin—their informant who had been in the apartment—and Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin in the face in the backseat of the car, and Marvin’s head explodes. We rarely get to laugh at the idea of someone being shot in the face, but in this instance it creates a rhetorical situation that becomes hilarious. Jules and Vincent had been involved in a deeply philosophical and theological conversation at the time sparked by the events at the apartment. Jules believes that he and Vincent had just been saved from being shot themselves by divine intervention, while Vincent believes that it was just a freaky coincidence. In the middle of this conversation, Vincent turns to ask Marvin his opinion, and is mid-sentence asking “do you think God came down from Heaven and stopped that b—“ and his gun goes off. (Tarantino) Blood is everywhere, but between the sudden departure from such a heady conversation and the looks on both Vincent and Jules’ faces as Vincent very meekly says “Oh man, I just shot Marvin the face...” one cannot help but laugh. (Tarantino)

Neither Jules nor Vincent ever expresses any remorse for Marvin’s death, instead Jules’ anger at Vincent revolves around how likely they are to get in trouble driving around Los Angeles with a dead body in the back seat and blood all over the place. As Vincent repeats that he is sorry, the clear annoyance in his delivery is evidence that he considers Marvin’s death little more than an inconvenience for which he has to hear grief, even nearly immediately making excuses by telling Jules that he must have “gone over a bump or something.” (Tarantino) The detachment of the characters involved from life itself, the lack of any heartfelt emotion when dealing with death, helps the audience do the same thing.

Tarantino brilliantly avoids creating pathos because he is not trying to pull on anyone’s heart strings in this film, but that does not mean that he does not want to make people think about
the repercussions of the actions of the characters. His use of foreshadowing within the film is brilliant, and I will go in to some examples shortly, but first I want to talk about the references he makes within the film to other films of his. Anyone who had seen Reservoir Dogs might hopefully notice that one of the primary characters had the last name “Vega,” which is also the last name of Travolta’s “Vincent” character. The audience is never expressly told that they are brothers, but it is not a difficult leap to make once we begin to recognize the similarities in the characters, and it foreshadows the fact that Vincent will be shot down suddenly just as the Vega in Reservoir Dogs was. There is another character in the film, Mia, played by Uma Thurman, who goes into detail about how she had played a part in a television pilot. While it is an interesting tale that helps develop her character within Pulp Fiction, the characters she describes in the pilot, and the entire plot of it, are very much a prequel to the Kill Bill films Tarantino would create nearly a decade later, starring none other than Uma Thurman in the role she described. There are other instances of Tarantino tying his films together, but these are the strongest examples in Pulp Fiction, and they help Tarantino the director develop a closer relationship with his audience because he makes them feel like they are in on an inside joke.

Tarantino does a great job not leaving loose ends, which is particularly noteworthy because of the number of tangents the characters tend to go on conversationally. This is where his use of changing chronology comes into play so effectively. The opening sequence of the movie is of a British couple in a diner who have just come to the decision that they are going to rob the place. The sequence cuts with the woman jumping up on her table and telling everyone they are being robbed, and jumps to the opening credits, then segues into Vincent and Jules’ commonplace conversation. In the final scene of the film, we find ourselves back in that diner, but we are following the characters of Jules and Vincent eating after they had finished taking
care of the Marvin situation. At this point, after a few intriguing twists and turns conversationally, they return to the conversation they were having when Marvin was accidentally shot. They reach a level of stasis, with Jules content believing that God got involved in his life and had presented him with a miracle, while Vincent is content calling the situation a “freak occurrence.” Jules has decided that he is going to quit the life of a gangster and “walk to Earth like Kaine from *Kung Fu*”—ironic foreshadowing again because the actor who played Kaine in *Kung Fu* reprises a similar role years later in *Kill Bill*. (Tarantino)

In a twist that ties the whole film together, the British couple picks this moment to rob the diner. Jules and Vincent have no trouble disarming and overpowering the British robbers, but the speech Jules makes during their encounter is one of the greatest examples of created ethos I have ever seen. During the apartment encounter, Jules energetically quotes Ezekiel 25:17 right before Vincent and he unload their guns on everyone in the room. When we reach the diner scene, with guns drawn, he repeats tells the robbers about the Bible quote he has memorized, and repeats it again in a subdued manner—as his entire speech in the diner is. He explicates the quote, talks about what he used to think about it, what he would like it to mean, and finally what he truly believes it to mean. He boils the quote down to mean that he himself represents “the tyranny of evil men” but proclaims he’s “trying real hard to be the shepherd.” (Tarantino) Because of this, combined with the decision he has just made over breakfast to quit being a gangster and walk the Earth, he chooses not to kill the British couple, but instead allows them to leave with all of the money they had just stolen. This is a sudden shift in character that he literally invented on the spot, but it works marvelously. It also explains why Jules was not present when Vincent was shot coming out of a bathroom in a scene shown earlier. It leaves one
wondering if Vincent died because he made the wrong conclusion about the divine nature of their encounter, or if Vincent died because Jules was no longer there to protect him.

*Pulp Fiction* won awards worldwide, most notably the Best Original Screenplay Oscar. It helped establish Tarantino’s ethos as a director who truly understood how to make a great film from top to bottom. The theatrics and hyperbolic action of his movies is tempered by refreshingly realistic dialogue that tends to be somehow analogous to some greater point he is trying to make. It is an easy film to fall in love with, especially as a Writing and Rhetoric major, because of how seamlessly he ties rhetorical devices together.
Works Cited

