

Contextual Studies

“The works of Quentin Tarantino in relation to the visual imaging industry”

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Topic <i>The works of Quentin Tarantino in relation to the visual imaging industry.</i>	References:
Introduction Postmodernism Conceptual Imaging Visual Language Contemporary themes	
Postmodernism -Grand Narrative is gone -Subjective Realities	(Postmodernism and film, n.d.)
Postmodernism -pop culture dialogue -the readymade -polsemy -Pulp fiction's multiple interpretations -Cliché characters and the audience	(Postmodernism and film, n.d.) (Lafrance, n.d.) (Carter, 1990, p.16). (Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.253) (Saravia, n.d.) (Butler, n.d.).
Conceptual imaging -Audience interpretation -story telling is dead -genre characters	(Rose, 2001, p.24-27). (Smith & Gavin, as cited in Lafrance, n.d.) (Dargis as cited in Lafrance, n.d.)
Visual Language -Intertextuality of influences -various homages -faux reflexivity	(Walker & Chaplin, 1997, p.142-143) (Internet movie database, n.d.) (Postmodernism and film, n.d.) (Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.265-266)
Visual Language -Index/iconic -emulation of older films	(Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.253-255).
Contemporary themes -Characters/audience relationship -Tarantino as a metaphor for audience -	(Butler, n.d.) (Carter, 1990, p.8).
Contemporary themes -Genre environments -Fractured storyline -redemption -pulp fiction as a whole	(Butler, n.d.) (Saravia, n.d.) (Lafrance, n.d.) (McDonnell, 1998, p. 93).
Conclusion Summing up of: Postmodernism Conceptual Imaging Visual Language Contemporary themes	

In this essay I will be discussing how the works of Quentin Tarantino relate to the concepts of postmodernism, visual language, conceptual imaging and contemporary themes in regard to the visual imaging industry .

Firstly I will discuss the presence of postmodernism in Tarantino's films, talking about the ideas of subjective realities, interconnected cultural icons and the readymade.

Acting as the core theme for the other ideas I will follow on from postmodernism by discussing conceptual imaging. Relating to this, I will then discuss the on screen visual language used in Tarantino's films. Finally I will expand on the contemporary themes prevalent in Tarantino's works such as identity and place.

Postmodernism superseded the need and desire for a grand narrative in film. Ingmar Bergman's 1957 *Det sjunde inseglet*, which has an epic story of life, death and philosophical motifs illustrates the modernist antipodes to what would be Quentin Tarantino's pop culture pastiches. The grand narrative has been superseded, just like celluloid (Postmodernism and film, n.d.); in lieu of independent, subjective views of the truth. Quentin Tarantino shows this in various ways. His characters stories are divided; told again and again, with different versions coming out each time from various angles. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) the main characters identify each other with a code name, they never really know who the other characters are, only us as the audience can piece together the puzzle. *Reservoir Dogs* is complex and faceted, even in the ending, it is left open to the viewer to decide what really happened. As the audience, we are treated as Tarantino's equal in the interpretation of the film.

Tarantino's films often present you with situations involving "...seemingly meaningless chatter about TV shows, pop music, B movies, and celebrity gossip" (Postmodernism and film, n.d.). For Example, *Reservoir Dogs* has the main characters discussing the merits and the concepts behind Madonna's Lyrics; this interjection of superfluous content into the story through dialogue ironically makes Tarantino's ideas much more powerful. This is because they relate more closely to the audience and leave an impression. As Lafrance said "Tarantino knows what makes a film's dialogue memorable and has incorporated this knowledge into his own work." (Lafrance, n.d.).

This sort of found dialogue shows a lean towards the realistic, phrases chosen and appropriated from everyday life, in a sense they are Duchamp's readymade (Carter, 1990, p.16).

In postmodernism there is also the idea of polysemy, which is the way in which texts can have multiple meanings (Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.253). Tarantino's own works engage the audience in such a fashion that by nature they are open to both multiple meanings and also various interpretations. Firstly *Pulp Fiction* (1994) can be viewed gratis; as nothing more than a "comic-book movie masquerading as noir" (Saravia, n.d.). Beyond that it explores the idea of redemption and character relationships. Furthermore it is the idea of identity in regard to our own perception of those cliché characters in film such as hit men, and how similar to us they really are (Butler, n.d.).

Following on from the ideas of postmodernism we come to conceptual imaging. What is trying to be said, and how? Ultimately idea is designed by the author, but how it is interpreted is at the site of the audience (Rose, 2001, p.24-27).

As Tarantino said "story telling has become a lost art. There is not storytelling, only situations. Very rarely are you told a story". (Smith & Gavin, as cited in Lafrance, n.d.)

Tarantino stated in an interview, "the idea is to take genre characters and put them in real-life situations and make them live by real-life rules" (Dargis, as cited in Lafrance, n.d.).

Tarantino's films are both situation and visually based, with the concepts firmly open to interpretation and subject to the minds of the audience. This further relates to the original idea of postmodernism, with multiple realities and interpretations.

Visually, the idea of intertextuality (Walker & Chaplin, 1997, p.142-143) is very present in Tarantino's works. There are deliberate references and nods towards the works of Tarantino's influences such as Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Sergio Leone, and Jean-Luc Godard (Internet movie database, n.d.). *Kill Bill Vol: 1* exemplifies intertextuality; it includes title graphics appropriated from Shaw Brothers, a 1970's kung fu film production company. It contains a segment of cartoon anime in the Japanese style, utilising a mixed media that adds an extra dimension to the film. Alongside this, many key scenes are in black and white. Tarantino cast the late actor David Carradine in the titular role as Bill, Carradine had also starred in *Kung Fu* (1972) which features similarities in plot and style to *Kill Bill Vol: 1*. *Kung Fu* is referenced again in *Pulp Fiction*. Adding to this, in *Jackie Brown* (1997) Tarantino cast the actress Pam Grier (Postmodernism and film, n.d.), relying on her past image as a 1970's sex symbol to give the film a cultural foundation. Tarantino's use of this inter-media pastiche is one of his key trademarks.

In *Pulp Fiction* (1994) the character played by John Travolta self reference's his own previous film role in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) with dancing in a restaurant. These references form a "reworking of nostalgia that is both affectionate homage and a reconfiguration of history." (Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.265-266)

Tarantino furthers his status as a postmodern director visually by utilising a film grain effect in *Death proof* (2007), as well as hard cuts and purposeful errors in continuity and out of sync sound to illustrate his desire to emulate the feel of B films of his generation. In a way it is a faux reflexivity (Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.253-255).

Contemporary themes in Tarantino's films are not addressed in a standard sense.

The idea of identity is explored through the relationship of characters and audience.

Butler said "Ours is a world filled with low-lives and criminals, yet we distance ourselves from these people and treat them in conversation like they're fictional characters. We abhor the thought that we could share any common ground with these people." (Butler, n.d.).

In *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino explores the character/audience relationship. Tarantino acts as a metaphor for this, starring as Jimmy, arguably the most legitimate character in the film, who aids other characters to dispose of a murdered body. He brings the violence of the film into the everyday life of the audience, as the director his likeness is not real estate like the actors, he is on par with the audience. This particular scene causes the true audience to think introspectively about their own position in relation to the film. It is aligned metaphorically with Baudrillard's notions of simulacra, the blurring of the virtual and the real. (Carter, 1990, p.8).

Tarantino also takes an approach to place in the way his characters are often situated in genre environments, Tokyo, Los Angeles and breakfast café's. He redefines what it means to reside in those places though, and he creates "a bridge between the common perceptions of fiction and reality." (Butler, n.d.)

Another aspect of Tarantino's films is the non-linear order of events. *Pulp Fiction* is held together through the indexed, and not the iconic. We are able to make sense of the 3 parallel stories due to the way Tarantino seamlessly weaves them together (Lafrance, n.d.). This is due to the underlying ideas that penetrate each character. In a sense gestalt theory applied to film, where the whole is greater than the individual parts and we are able to make the connections. John Travolta's character dies midway through the story, but this does not hamper the film. His character's arc is seamlessly completed when the film comes to an end,

“it is only after the film is finished that we can piece together all the causes-and-effects and all the befores-and-afters” (McDonnell, 1998, p. 93). The order of events in *Pulp Fiction* shows a reworking of the concepts of time, the movie starts and ends in the same time period and in the same café, but from different points of view. *Pulp Fiction* jumped from the normal linear lines of time and space to the fractured timeline that was necessary to show the redemptive end of the hit man played by Samuel L. Jackson (Saravia, n.d.).

In conclusion I have discussed the works of Quentin Tarantino in relation to the concepts of postmodernism, visual language, conceptual imaging and also contemporary themes in visual imaging. I have illustrated how his films achieve postmodernism by the use of subjective realities and the readymade. Following on from that I have shown how Tarantino allows the audience to take from his movies what they want by being openly postmodern in his conceptual imaging. I have also discussed his use of visual language to convey his reality to the audience, but at the same time letting his audiences dictate what that their reality is. Lastly I discussed the contemporary themes prevalent in Tarantino’s works in regard to how his films relate to our current world.

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