

# THE SURVIVING IMAGES OF QUENTIN TARANTINO\*

In a scene in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1995), Vincent Vega (John Travolta) takes Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), the wife of the gangster Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), out for dinner. The chosen restaurant is Jack Rabbit Slim's in Los Angeles. The place is decorated with numerous images of fifties pop culture. The walls are adorned with B-movie posters. Buddy Holly, Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren lookalikes serve the customers and the background music is made up of old hits from the early years of rock'n'roll blaring out of an old jukebox. Tarantino immerses us in a world of lookalikes. This is something that could have become extinct but that has survived thanks to its myths and icons. At one point, the couple starts doing Chuck Berry's twist, establishing anachronism as the referential space. The actor that takes the dance floor to move his body to the rhythm of "You Never can Tell" is John Travolta, himself an idol from another era who is back to take the centre of the dance floor once again. His presence serves to show that something has remained of the seventies, when he was the disco king in John Badham's *Saturday Night Fever*

(1977). The effect produced by Travolta in a fifties set also alludes to the *Grease* musical (1978) by Randal Kleiser, another markedly camp celebration of a bygone era in which teens discovered rock'n'roll in the hallways of their high schools.

In *Pulp Fiction* we witness the way Tarantino revisits the icons of the fifties to relocate them in the referential context of nineties cinema. Retro trends are used to reawaken the echoes of something long gone that re-emerges as an icon of a de-contextualized present. However, in the universe drawn by Tarantino, myths and symbols from other times overlap. The whole heritage of popular seventies cinema is represented by John Travolta, turned into a replica of himself. The effect that Tarantino produces on the spectator is not one of nostalgia for what is lost but a reaffirmation of *ahistoricity*. The past does not exist as a precise historical period because it coexists with a present made up of the various layers of what is gone and what has managed to survive in the new mass culture. We live in a present that is a sedimentation of the past. Today is eclipsed to make way for the forms and remains of a culture

that has achieved timelessness through the conversion of art into iconic signs. In a classic text on postmodernism, Frederic Jameson argues that the great aesthetic transformation that marked the birth of postmodernism took place when artistic creation was incorporated into the creation of merchandise and the symbols of popular culture came to occupy a privileged place in art. In this context, Jameson says that we “consume the past in the form of glossy images [so] that new and more complex ‘postnostalgia’ statements and forms become possible” (JAMESON, 1991: 287). *Pulp Fiction* operates like a rescue operation for these images of the past to create an amalgam of different references in which films, actors, old television series, pop music hits and certain industrial design models are mixed together to shape a world that acquires a unique appearance thanks to the recycling of remains. The act of cinematic creation functions as a new mythic iconography design operation based on the recovery of what can be rescued from the rubble of mass culture.

In his first three feature films, Tarantino draws on classic cinema, on gangster films, but eschews any psychological density. His goal is to reinvent the archetypal role of his characters. In contrast to Martin Scorsese’s or Brian De Palma’s films, which return to genre characters in order to update them or vest them with a new density, Tarantino “returns to pre-existing models, rejects the idea of revisiting them for the purposes of updating their content, [and] highlights the significance of their forms by giving them an intense uniqueness through a series of modifications in their portrayal that are small but perceptible” (AMIEL and COUTÉ, 2003: 94). If we begin with the first images of the film *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) we will see that the effect caused by the search for the new on the basis of the old is something inherent to Tarantino’s approach to filmmaking. In the scene that functions as a prologue to *Reservoir Dogs*, a group of criminals with aliases taken from the colours of

the rainbow talk about Madonna, her possible sexual attraction and the loss of her virginity. The existence of a mythical figure of contemporary pop culture seems to distract the main characters from their criminal business and helps to prolong the scene. With an interesting detour into something apparently secondary, this conversation introduces us into a plot about the perfect robbery. The dialogues between these henchmen reveal the banality of their own daily lives, slow down the action and show the use of distraction as a new method to create a suspense based on an ingenious use of language. Later, as the film’s plot progresses, we find out that the action—the thwarted robbery—is a tribute to the *film noir* of the fifties: *The Killing* (1956) by Stanley Kubrick, or *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) by John Huston, a style that took its most stylized turn in France in the sixties with the brooding films of Jean Pierre Melville. From the very first images, Tarantino seeks a way of resurrecting what is lost through the mixture of elements from past and present. The filmmaker wants to retrieve and alter the images of the past to renew the cinema of the present. Creation is only possible through the process of transforming the anachronistic.

Film critic José Luis Guarner said of *Reservoir Dogs* that “it has the audacity to beat Kubrick’s *The Killing* at its own game. It brings to mind both Samuel Becket and an Elizabethan tragedy, whose unexpected meanderings are filmed with the imagination of a Fuller and the spirit of a Scorsese” (GUARNER, 1993: 232). In this affirmation by Guarner, who died a few months after writing this critique, there are

two intuitions that have become characteristic of Tarantino’s work. The first intuition has to do with his desire to seek the essential by playing with delay and digression. In the dramatic structure of *Reservoir Dogs* there is a search for and an affirmation of the essential that is brought to a climax in *Pulp Fiction*. The second issue has to do with the use of language as an essential element for stretching out time. In US action cinema, killers don’t talk; they do. Tarantino’s characters are beings lost in the realm of social exclusion, who represent a world with no moral codes dominated by corruption and the lust for revenge. What makes his work unique is the fact that the avengers talk, discuss trivialities and articulate a drama based on the word as a system for creating conflict, although most of the time these conflicts are based on absurdity. As Pascal Bonitzer said of *Pulp Fiction*: “the time of the film is not one of action but of discussion: it is a free and endless time, because every discussion is endless. This entails an exotic distribution of events compared to the canons of the classic American screenplay” (BONITZER, 1995:43). In the middle of a universe in which sadism and violence constantly manifest themselves in all their cruelty, the presence of the word is an invitation to life, the affirmation that existence functions through

*Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1995) / Courtesy of Savor Ediciones S. L.



language. Tarantino's time is a stretched time in which the essential is the creation of suspense based not on what the characters do not know and the spectator does, but on the way the use of language distracts the characters and makes them forget the dangers they are facing.

The double play between the essential and distraction perhaps finds its most refined expression in *Death Proof* (2007), where Tarantino carries out a process of deconstruction of narrative structures, establishing the boundary between duration and attraction. In *Death Proof*, the use of everyday language ends up generating a particularly Beckettian form of absurdity around the conversations of a group of girls who only care about having fun and maintaining the seductive charms of their bodies. In the second part of the film, we see four girls travelling in a 1972 Ford Mustang who are constantly exchanging references to certain films and TV series featuring car chases. They refer to the film *Vanishing Point* (1971), directed by Richard C. Sarafian with a screenplay by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and discuss this legendary road movie while Tarantino constructs *Death Proof* as if it were a process of rewriting of the old film. On the side of a road, a poster for *Scary Movie 4* (Zucker) alerts us to the fact that what we are watching takes place in 2006 and that the cars and the jukebox belong to another time. At the time of its release, *Death Proof* was promoted as a tribute to the *Grindhouse* aesthetic that inspired a whole subgenre of horror films. The spectral character of Stuntman Mike, the incarnation of evil on wheels, is played by the actor Kurt Russell, who was also the star of some of the mythic films of John Carpenter. The cars, the films and the songs in *Death Proof* transport us to a world that dissolves into a present that only exists as a remembrance of the myths of the popular culture of the past. This past seems to invoke a golden age located at the very heart of the contemporary world.

The figure of the *revenant*, the woman who rises from the dead in



*Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1995) / Courtesy of Savor Ediciones S. L.

another world to take justice into her own hands is the key element of both of the *Kill Bill* films (Tarantino, 2003; 2004). Based on a certain logic inherited from martial arts films, we witness a process of rebirth/birth in which the heroine rises from the threshold of death to be trained in the mastery of the katana (the Japanese sword) and learn the art of combat. This learning process viewed as an act of rebirth not only emerges as a thematic link but is also related to the multiple genres revived by the diptych itself, from the Shaw Brothers' martial arts films to the most legendary spaghetti westerns. Tarantino recovers what is lost to configure new forms. He articulates an amalgam of images and structures from action films that rewrite elements inherited from manga, Bruce Lee's films, Sergio Leone's work, and elsewhere. In Tarantino's films, the bygone is simply a spectre that penetrates the story to attest to its continued existence. David Carradine appears transformed into a survivor of the television series *Kung Fu* (Spielman, 1972-1975), while Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino, 1997) is the spectral queen of the seventies blaxploitation films disguised as a flight attendant. On occasions this technique drifts into the

realm of the phantasmagorical, such as the presence of Franco Nero, who is transfigured into the surviving actor of Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966). In a scene of *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012), Nero meets Jamie Foxx, but the film's referential framework is closer to Richard Fleischer's *Mandingo* (1975). Tarantino is not interested in recreating cinematic sensations from the past by means of a perfectionist's replica based on rewriting. His strategy consists of positing different variations around the evocation of certain blurry memories. In *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), the bastards are wandering characters taken from *The Inglorious Basterds* (Quel maledetto treno blindato, Castellari, 1978), but the Italian film serves merely as a pretext for the creation of characters with a secondary role to the central axis of the plot: the vengeance against the Nazi leadership plotted by a young Jewish cinema proprietor in occupied Paris.

M. Keith Booker defines the mixture of genres, styles and time periods employed by Quentin Tarantino as the culmination of truly postmodern cinema (BOOKER, 2007: 47-48). *Pulp Fiction* would make sense if looked upon as a true production of the culture of the palimpsest, where there is no history be-

cause we are at the end of history, and there is no linearity in the story because what Jean-François Lyotard defined as the crisis of the *meta-narratives* aimed at the emancipation of the modern rational human subject and Hegel's idea of history as a universal spirit are no more (LYOTARD, 1979). Thus, the association of Tarantino's films with post-modernism would be set in opposition to the way that cinematic modernism formulated the cinephilic event and transformed the text itself into a substratum for reflection.

In a theoretical essay on cinematic modernism, Giorgio de Vincenti considers that modernism was articulated through a dual movement that combined the desire to make the world visible with the act of remotely capturing the iconic referents through a clear operation of self-consciousness, starting from the "combination of metalinguistic desire based on reflexiveness and the recovery of the value of the reproductive aspect, functioning as an ontological basis of the medium" (DE VINCENTI, 1993: 19). Modernity opened up an important pathway to reflection on the very processes that constitute cinema, inspired critical detachment and promoted the use of metalanguage through which the very nature of the images is questioned. However, in a small treatise on modern cinema, Fabrice Revault d'Allonnes posits the idea that metalanguage may also be present in classic cinema and cannot be defined as an exclusive trait of modernity. With this affirmation, Revault d'Allonnes places himself in clearly phenomenological terrain as he considers that the characteristic feature of modernity lies primarily in having glimpsed how in the years immediately following World War II the relationship between the human being and the world had given rise to a new cinema characterized by

its capacity for non-signification (REVAULT D'ALLONNES, 1994: 57). Jacques Aumont, however, is more sceptical in his definition, as he argues that cinema has always sought its own label of modernity but that the essential question we need to ask is whether cinema has really been contemporary and whether it has been able to capture the flow of its time and its artistic manifestations (AUMONT, 2007: 12).

Jacques Aumont's criticism of cinematic modernity opens up a series of key questions that may help us to better define and analyse Tarantino's

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position as a cinephile. They may help us to analyse his passion for creation based on pre-existing images and his own particular model of appropriation opposed to any form of replication. In order to better define this question and to place it at the heart of the debate on postmodern cinema, we should accept that postmodernism decided to transform modern self-consciousness into postmodern appropriation to show, through multiple processes of rewriting different cinematic elements from the past, that it is possible to construct a new reality that is designed as a reality of images. A kind of cinephile legend has always identified Quentin Tarantino as the filmmaker who learned his trade in a video shop, who was trained to have a taste for all types of films and is capable of dignifying and exalting forgotten films and subgenres marginalized by traditional cinephile

culture. As Carlos Losilla wrote, "Tarantino is the custodian of a legendary city that only exists in his imagination, which is a refuge for certain cinematic forms spurned by the official historiography... His apparent flood of references becomes a book on the history of cinema, of the other cinema, that makes Tarantino a sort of Herodotus of trash culture, both are marked by the same passion for the tireless research, the same preferences for a plurality of the sources consulted, the same desire to record a barbaric time through the patient reconstruction of its ruins" (LOSILLA, 2007: 24).

If we classify Tarantino within the generic coordinates of postmodern cinema we find that he is not a filmmaker like Brian de Palma, who is an expert in processes of stylization, rewriting a cinematic legacy. Although, for instance, the opening scene of *Inglourious Basterds* draws on the beginning of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), there is no intention of rewriting or expanding on the scene. He merely borrows some visual motifs, such as the composition of the arrival of the German officer Hans Landa, which recalls the arrival of Ethan Edwards at the beginning of Ford's film. He is not a filmmaker who likes to play with pastiche as a process of ironic distancing from the past either. Nor is he a director who thinks of the reference as a mere act of tribute. The character of the leader of the basterds, played by Brad Pitt, does not recall the protagonist of Enzo G. Castellari's film on which it is based but the actor Aldo Ray, the protagonist of Raoul Walsh's *The Naked and the Dead* (1958). The use of the name is not a tribute but a sign of appropriation of some of the traits of Sergeant Croft's character, played by Ray in that film.

Tarantino's position is more complex than the principles articulated accor-





*Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) / Courtesy of Paramount Home Media Distribution Spain

ding to the postmodernist creed with respect to the models of cinephilia, according to which, at the time of *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino would be a filmmaker who “recovers images from the sixties to toss them into the nineties like visual confetti” (DELGADO, PAYÁN and UCEDA, 1995: 12). It seems as if, throughout his film career, he had wanted to show that what is truly important is not to understand the creation of a film as an act of creation of something “already experienced”, but rather to understand creation as a chance to articulate an extensive “unloading of cultural baggage that goes on as far as the eye can see” (VIEILLESCEZES, 2013:14).

The key issue in contemporary cinema no longer lies in how to rewrite the past, but in how to integrate it and create an image that survives and that can help revisit the present through the anachronism. George Didi-Huberman has adopted a certain conception of art inherited from Aby Warburg’s *Atlas Mnemosyne* to articulate the concept of the surviving image. Huberman argues that historical time does not function as a continuum but by strata, rediscoveries, returns, resurrections and survivals. Art belongs not only to the history of culture but also to the history of its

dissemination and its survival. Images survive the past and become embedded in the present (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2002). Clearly, Tarantino’s logic is not that of a systematic researcher of cinema, its history and its myths. His own culture possesses something of an amplified cinephilic bulimia. However, if we consider that his approach has something of the historian who recycles and transforms history, the key to his relationship with the cinema may simply be the construction of a setting filled with surviving images with an *ahistorical* nature that ultimately reveal something hidden from history itself.

Italian historian Franco La Polla suggests that in the last few years there have been some significant variations in the conception of postmodern cinema that have transformed it into something else: conceptual cinema (LA POLLA, 2000: 19). La Polla identifies the work of the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino as examples of this model of conceptual cinema. In contrast to the entertaining and superficial nature of a type of cinema in danger of burning itself out with its own formulations, a new model is being constructed, a new atmosphere in which playing with

composition has given way to the presence of ideas.

Although the definition of Tarantino as a conceptual filmmaker emerges from his three first films and the fascination that his narrative and stylistic twists generated when those films appeared, I do not feel that it adequately defines Tarantino’s way of operating. If we return to the realm of ideas, we may begin to glimpse a filmmaker who uses his fictional devices—those surviving images—to vest them with an ethical dimension in a setting where society itself has driven them in a state of crisis.

Tarantino began his career with a blood bath out of which emerge certain values that contradict everything that is being shown. If we analyse *Reservoir Dogs* as Elizabethan tragedy as Guarner intuited, we will find that around the big pool of blood surrounding the injured body of Mr Orange (Tim Roth), the undercover cop who had infiltrated the gangsters’ community, a strong sense of friendship for Mr White (Harvey Keitel) emerges. It would seem that the value of friendship in an apparently nihilistic film serves to highlight the need to find a human value that will allow the cha-

acters to survive amid the tragedy. *Pulp Fiction* can be seen as a film that shows that redemption is possible thanks to the miracle of revelation. In the end, Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson), who has been proclaiming a quote from Ezekiel throughout the film, experiences a strange miracle when he is shot at directly yet escapes unharmed. In the coffee shop he talks about the significance of the miracle and his need to leave the world of the wicked in which it occurred. At the time, this scene was considered an ironic ending by the cynical Tarantino. However, Pascal Bonitzer suggested that the scene shows how amid the chaos of a world where talking or killing has little importance, the absentminded hit men shared their indifference to cruelty with the rest of the world (BONITZER, 1995:43). This miracle serves for Jules to realize that his world is that of the tyranny of evil men. Tarantino is not being ironic here; he is looking for redemption through the presence of a certain level of humanity. If we turn to *Kill Bill*, we find that the path to redemption stretches back to childhood. The first scene shows us The Bride (Uma Thurman) bursting into the house of Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox) ready to kill her in revenge. Both women start fighting but then stop when Vernita's daughter arrives from school. It is as if their adult world, merciless and vengeful, were alien to a childhood that needs to be preserved. In spite of the truce they call, the moment comes when this is broken, and the girl witnesses her mother's murder. The final scene echoes the opening one: The Bride finds her daughter, B.B., discovers the reasons that led Bill to turn to violence and decides to save the child. The last shot is a window on the future, as if the salvation of childhood allowed a break with the sick heritage of the present. B.B. is luckier than Vernita Green's daughter because she can go on into the future, and because her mother has fought to protect her innocence.

All these examples of the hypothetical redemption of the characters in Tarantino's films find a new direction in the diptych formed by *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*, where the redemptive act does not consist of trying to find paths to humanization in a present that emerges as a residue of fiction, but of reinventing history through fiction. This operation is very curious because it involves altering the limits of the plausible in order to give clues about what really happened. In *Inglourious Basterds* the idea of salvation has great political force. The cinema that Emmanuelle Mimieux/Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) runs in occupied Paris is a symbolic space. It is the cinema *par excellence*. It is the great container of every fiction, the receptacle of all surviving images. But the cinema not only functions as a receptacle, as it achieves the status of utopia since it can rewrite and transform what has gone down in history and can even give another dimension to reality. Emmanuelle/Shosanna takes revenge against Nazi barbarism on behalf of the Jewish people by using nitrocellulose film. The

film thus becomes the lethal weapon that ends up killing Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. It is as if a path towards consciousness could be established out of the dream of fiction and that history could be reclaimed out of *ahistoricity*. It seems as if the dilemma between *story* and *history* identified by Jacques Rancière dissolves into a single meaning: that of the dual meaning of story and science which in many Latin languages are merged into a single word, such as the French *histoire* (RANCIÈRE, 1992).

In the final scene of *Inglourious Basterds*, Hans Landa (Christopher Waltz) is marked with a swastika while he tries to integrate into the new world emerging after the fall of Nazism. Aldo and his basterds decide to carve the swastika into his forehead so that his evilness will be identifiable and cannot be erased. The political gesture that ends the film shows how, behind the surviving images, lies memory. This same battle against oblivion sums up the denouement of *Django Unchained*, a film that is presented as a journey into the epicentre of terror: Candieland. This space of slavers that recalls Xan-

*Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) / Courtesy of Paramount Home Media Distribution Spain



adu, Manderley or Shangri-la is a place where the taboo can be made visible, exposing the epicentre of a silenced American barbarism: slavery. Tarantino shows us how in the lost paradises of the past there was also torture, depravity and contempt for other humans. Tarantino's message becomes a message of conscience. We need to immerse ourselves in the fiction, recover the surviving images and break the taboo. Entering Candeland entails a symbolic act of breaking into the dark side of history. Tarantino's message is again endorsed in the thought of Jacques Rancière, when he writes of the relationship between history and fiction:

There are two classic ways of relating cinema and history, by turning each of these terms into the object of study of the other. In this way, history is approached as the cinema's object of study by considering its capacity to report the events of a century, the style of an age, the way of living in a specific time. We can also look at it the other way round, with the cinema as history's object of study, which studies the arrival of a new form of entertainment, the forms of its industry, its artistic evolution or its characteristic features. However, I think that the most interesting problems only arise when we move away from the relationship between object and subject and try to grasp the two terms together, when we try to see how the notions of cinema and history intermingle and compose a story together (RANCIÈRE, 1998: 45).

Through fiction, recycling and the resurrection of what had been concealed, Tarantino has composed his story as a battle against oblivion and as a way to recover that lost humanism present in that space located in the *between-the-images* of his films. ■

## Notes

\* The pictures of *Pulp Fiction* (1992) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) that illustrate this essay have been provided by Savor Ediciones S.L. and Paramount Home Media Distribution Spain, respectively. *L'Atalante* is grateful to both of them for the permission to publish them. (Editor's Note).

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Àngel Quintana is Professor in History and Theory of Film at Universitat de Girona. He is a film critic in several media such as *Caiman*, *Cuadernos de cine* or *El punt avui*. Among his latest books we can find *Fábulas de lo visible* (Acantilado, 2003), *Federico Fellini* (Le Monde/Cahiers du cinéma, 2007), *Virtuel ? À l'ère du numérique le cinéma est le plus réaliste des arts* (Cahiers du cinéma, 2008) and *Después del cine* (Acantilado, 2011).