Intersections: Baudrillard's Hyperreality and Lyotard's
Metanarratives in Selected Tarantino Visual Tropes

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To Dad and Mom, in loving memory.

Declaration of Own Work

I, the undersigned, declare that this dissertation, entitled *Intersections: Baudrillard's Hyperreality and Lyotard's Metanarratives in Selected Tarantino Visual Tropes* is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This dissertation examines two films directed by Quentin Tarantino, whom I have situated as a postmodern film director, within the theoretical context of the philosophies of two postmodern philosophers: Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. I argue that the major institutions of society, such as the family and religion, are viewed as grand narratives, in Lyotard's sense of the term, which Tarantino repeatedly subverts. Overlapping with this intersection of Lyotard's philosophy in Tarantino's films is the Baudrillardian loss of the real, which manifests as hyperreality in many scenes. I suggest that Tarantino makes a conscious effort to create such hyperreality with the creation of playful signifiers in his films. I examine selected scenes to find Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image" (Baudrillard 2010:6) that lead to the creation of a simulacrum. The compelling intersections between the creation of Baudrillardian simulacra and the subversion of Lyotard's grand narratives are explored within selected scenes which are deconstructed by means of film narratology, semiotic analysis and narrative analysis. The combination of the various methods of media research in this thesis enables what Jane Stokes calls "a more textured understanding" (2008:27) of the films under discussion. A close reading from a semiotic point of view facilitates a deconstruction of some obscure elements, such as the embedded meaning in lyrics and dialogue or the messages implicit in the *mise en scène.*

Key terms: Postmodern Film; Jean-François Lyotard ; Grand Narratives; Jean Baudrillard; Hyperreality; Simulacra; Semiotics; Narratology; Quentin Tarantino; *Mise en scène*

Introduction

As an element of media culture, film has done much to transform the general public sphere, constituting in the process what Norman Denzin calls a "new visual legacy"[1] and what George Ritzer refers to as a "new cathedral of consciousness."[2] In a historical context, cinema occupies a space where the global forces of corporate domination, consumerism, technology, and popular culture merge into a hegemonically powerful *ensemble.*[3] I will explore two films directed by Quentin Tarantino and analyse how they have subverted these "global forces" and established a new mode of storytelling in the genre of film. In the process I will examine the methods he has deployed to bring about a change in the grand narrative of film-making. I will explore the compelling intersections between Baudrillard's simulacra and Lyotard's grand narratives that are evident in selected visual tropes in Tarantino's films where Lyotard's "metanarratives"[4] are often contested, and examples of Baudrillard's "hyperreality"[5] visually portrayed.

Tarantino has been hailed as an innovative *auteur* by various critics and theorists who have analysed his films for their portrayals of violence,[6] racial stereotyping,[7] homophobia,[8] machismo,[9] gender stereotyping,[10] religious conversion[11] and as a literary genre.[12] The films have also lent themselves to postmodern analyses as they contain many postmodern features such as *bricolage, pastiche* and intertextuality. However, the intersections of the two philosophical discourses of the metanarrative and the hyperreal in these films opens a field of investigation. My investigation positions Tarantino's films within the realm of the postmodern and applies the philosophies of Baudrillard and Lyotard in the narrative analyses of two films: *Reservoir Dogs* (dir. Tarantino, 1992: USA, Artisan Films) and *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Tarantino, 1994: USA, Miramax). To uncover the intersections of Baudrillard's hyperreality and Lyotard's metanarratives a syntagmatic and narrative analysis of relevant syntagms and *mise-en-scènes* in Tarantino's films will be undertaken and the hyperreal aesthetic aspects examined, together with a discussion of how various metanarratives are challenged.

As a film director, Tarantino has earned the reputation of being an *auteur* because of his many innovations and his recognisable personal style. The significance of his début film, *Reservoir Dogs*, is that it established him as an *auteur* skilled in the execution of postmodern theory within the realm of entertainment. That this theoretical knowledge has been applied within popular culture and has found an appreciative audience beyond the realm of cult art cinema is perhaps to the detriment of the film's academic sub-text. The characteristics and trademark features of the *auteur* are equally evident in *Pulp Fiction*, which followed on the success of *Reservoir Dogs,* and won great critical acclaim. Critics have taken such an interest in Tarantino's *oeuvre* that it could be argued that he has created a particular genre of film. Tasker points out: "beyond the media phenomenon, Tarantino's films have proved sufficiently distinctive to generate the adjective 'Tarantino-esque'" (2002:341). Such Tarantino-esque features include various postmodern devices including *pastiche*, *bricolage*, *homage,* hyperreality*,* references to popular culture and non- consecutive storylines. These features are often played out within an environment of violence and implied violence where bloodstains become both signifiers and significations of violence. It is at the point of extreme violence, whether in the service of execution or torture, that Tarantino's trademark comedic scenes appear and serve as antidote to the inevitable audience revulsion and the alienation that could ensue. Boggs and Pollard have dubbed his films "What might be called a cinema of mayhem involving a turn toward motifs of Hobbesian civic turbulence" and situate Tarantino among directors like Scorsese and Brian DePalma in this regard (2001:166). Giroux sees this kind of hyperreal violence as a stylised use of filmic norms whereas, according to Perry (1998:1):

> Umberto Eco (1987) employs the term hyperreality to invoke what he understands as those culturally specific situations in which the copy comes first, whereas for Jean Baudrillard (1983b)[13] it corresponds to that altogether more general contemporary condition in which both representation and reality have been displaced by simulacra (defined as copies without originals).

I see Tarantino's films as texts that articulate a postmodern view of society and representation. In postmodern society language is transparent and thus words serve only as representations without functionality (Klages 2006:169). Klages argues that modern societies depend on the idea that signifiers always point to signifieds, and that reality resides in signifieds. In a postmodern view of reality, however, there are only signifiers. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears, and with it the signifieds to which signifiers in a 'realist' epistemology point. Rather, in postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no signifieds and Baudrillard calls this separation of signifier from signified a 'simulacrum' (Klages 2006:170).

I will explore the semiotic situation of empty signifiers, which Baudrillard identifies as 'simulacra', in the two film texts under discussion by means of syntagmatic analyses. Such resonances occur in various scenes of the chosen film texts and the films will be analysed individually in separate chapters. To identify scenes where the intersections of hyperrreality and the undermining of metanarratives occur, I undertake a semiotic analysis of the narratives of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. Bignell (2001:195) sees one of the pleasures of narrative as its putting into play and resolution of cultural contradictions and problems. Narrative analyses of Tarantino's filmic syntagms will examine the cultural problems that are 'put into play' when Tarantino challenges cultural grand narratives such as religion and high culture and replaces them with misguided zealotry and pop culture. Reality, too, is put into play at Jack Rabbit Slim's diner (*Pulp Fiction*), when reality becomes nothing more than simulation and fact becomes fiction, and later, in the drug overdose scene, when the dead come to life.

In my semiotic analyses of the scenes in Tarantino's films, I will use the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, and Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher (Chandler 2002:17). In Chandler's view, these are the two leading models of what constitutes a sign. He describes the Saussurian module as a "dyadic" or two-part model. Focusing on *linguistic* signs such as words, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) defines a sign as being composed of a "signifier" and a "signified". Contemporary

commentators tend to describe the signifier as the form that the sign takes and the signified as the concept to which it refers: "For Saussure, both the signifier (the "sound pattern") and the signified (the concept) were purely "psychological". Both were "*form* rather than *substance*" (Chandler 2002:18). Chandler sees Saussure's model as being adapted in a more materialistic way these days. The signifier is now interpreted as the material or physical form of the sign; the sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified and this relationship is referred to as "signification" (Chandler 2002:19). Chandler's three examples of signification (the word "open" on a shop window, on a button inside a lift and on a box with a flap) give worthwhile contextualisation of this signification system. Chandler reiterates the point that "the Saussurean (linguistic) sign is a feature which tends to be neglected in many popular commentaries" (2002:20).

Obviously, this explanation only touches on the Saussurean sign system, and Chandler addresses many issues, including the "arbitrariness" and later modified "relative arbitrariness" of the sign (Chandler 2002:30). However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the definition of signification in the previous paragraph will be used as a model.

At the same time as De Saussure, Charles Peirce was working on a model of the sign, "semiology" and taxonomies of the sign in the United States. According to Chandler:

> In contrast to Saussure's model of the sign in the form
> of a "self-contained dyad", Peirce offered a triadic
> (three-part) model: The *representamen*: the form which
> the sign takes (not necessarily material). An
> *interpretant*: not an interpreter but rather the sense
> made of the sign. An *object*: to which the sign refers.
> (2002:32)

The interaction between the *representamen, interpretant* and *object* Peirce calls "semiosis". Chandler points out that Peirce's model includes an object or referent which is not included in Saussure's model. The *representamen* and *interpretant* have a similar meaning to Saussure's *signifier* and *signified* (Chandler 2002:33) and in my analysis I will refer to Saussure's terms

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"signifier" and "signified". A signified can itself play the role of a signifier as is familiar to anyone who uses a dictionary to go beyond the original definition to look up yet another word which it employs. This concept can be seen as going beyond Saussure's emphasis on the value of a sign lying in its relation to other signs.

Peirce also classified signs in terms of differing "modes of relationship" between signs and referents. These, as described by Chandler (2002:36), are:

> … symbolic, a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified but which is fundamentally *arbitrary*, e.g. language and traffic lights;
> iconic, a mode in which the signifier is perceived as *resembling* or imitating the signified, e.g. a portrait and sound effects;
> indexical, a mode in which the signifier is *not arbitrary* but is *directly connected* in some way (physically or causally) e.g. natural signs such as smoke and medical symptoms such as pain.

For example, I argue in my first chapter that the "scarecrow" signifier in the torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs* falls within Peirce's symbolic mode, and is "fundamentally arbitrary" as it symbolises the impotence of the police officer, who is nothing more than a guy about to be torched, in the mode of Guy Fawkes firework celebrations.

My syntagmatic analysis of Tarantino's films will employ these Peircean distinctions within a broadly Saussurean framework, as identified and clarified by Chandler (2002).

I will analyse *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* within the framework of postmodernism. Postmodernism is discussed by Lyotard as the undermining of the grand narrative or "metanarrative" (Lyotard 1986:xxiv). Lyotard's own examples of grand narratives are "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (1986:xxiii). According to Lyotard, grand narratives exist in every belief system or ideology: for instance, Marxism's grand narrative involves the

belief that capitalism will implode, resulting in the evolution of a utopian socialist world. Lyotard sees all aspects of modern society as dependent on grand narratives, including science as the primary form of knowledge. Lyotard posits that in our postmodern culture, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1986:37). He argues that this is the result of "the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means" (Lyotard 1986:37). Although Tarantino's films exemplify such use of postmodern "techniques and technologies", one could argue that they pay homage to the metanarrative of high culture through the use of literary devices such as the use of chapter titles and non-linear storylines. On the other hand, his characters often involve themselves in long discussions about popular culture, effectively placing the discourse in the realms of low culture. This *pastiche* of discourses is a postmodern device that puts the "culture" metanarrative into play and my argument will, accordingly, take such unstable signifiers into account. Tarantino does not reject all grand narratives, but subverts them at times, while also paying homage to them at other times. In this way he evinces a discontinuous response to them that is in harmony with his *auteurial* style of fragmentation and incongruity.

Lyotard identifies two key types of modern metanarrative namely: the speculative narrative and the narrative of emancipation. Malpas argues, "The central idea of the speculative grand narrative is that human life, or "Spirit" as Hegel calls it, progresses by increasing its knowledge" (2002:26). Malpas explains that this account of the speculative narrative materialises from Hegel's argument that "the True is the whole" (Hegel 1977:11 cited in Malpas 2002:26), which means that the truth or falsity of any statement or language game is determined by its relation to the whole of knowledge. It is thus concluded that this whole of knowledge is the speculative grand narrative (Malpas 2002:26). The grand narrative of emancipation has taken various forms over the past few centuries. During the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on "reason, logic, criticism and freedom of thought over dogma, blind faith and superstition" (Wilde 2001:2), it focused on the idea of the

freedom of people from religious superstition that curtailed their lives and placed power in the priests. The Marxist version focused on the freedom of the workers from exploitation by their masters and the development of their ability to control their own lives. The aim of this type of grand narrative is the emancipation of an enlightened humanity from dogma, mysticism, exploitation and suffering (Malpas 2002:27).

Lyotard's analysis of the change in the legitimation of knowledge in the twentieth century begins with the working hypothesis that "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Lyotard 2005:1). In a historical perspective, Lyotard finds it justifiable to refer to present history as "the postmodern age" because, since at least the 1950s, a "crisis" of "legitimation" has come about with regard to all forms of knowledge, making it impossible for discourses to be legitimated by "an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (Lyotard 2005:xxiii). Hence, Lyotard calls discourses of self-legitimation "modern" and defines "the postmodern condition" as the *crisis* of legitimation (Lucy 1997:129).

Lyotard argues that, in modern societies, totality is maintained by means of "grand narratives", which signify the practices and beliefs of those societies. In each belief system or ideology there is at least one grand narrative. All aspects of modern societies depend on these grand narratives. Storey explains Lyotard's view of metanarratives as operating "through inclusion and exclusion, as homogenizing forces, marshalling heterogeneity into ordered realms; silencing and excluding other discourses, other voices in the name of universal principles and general goals" (2006:132). However, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard 2005:37).

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Postmodernism, in Lyotard's opinion, critiques grand narratives that are put in place to mask the instability of social orders. Such critiques are evident in Tarantino's films, where he undermines the very milieu of the film maker's craft with self-reflexive commentary by his characters, the omission of pivotal scenes around which the action occurs and injecting seemingly pointless discussions on popular culture into suspense-filled scenes. All of these unsettling filmic devices play with and subvert viewers' expectations of a coherent linear narrative.

I view the major institutions of society as metanarratives, namely: "the family, education, religion, political systems and the economy" (Cree 2000:11) and will explore these in my analysis of Tarantino's films. Cree explains that the base comprises the economy and class relations. It is the foundation on which a superstructure of social institutions is built, including the family, the education system, ideas and beliefs (what Marx calls "ideologies"), the law and the political system: "The base thus determines all other relationships and institutions in society: in Western society, the capitalist economic system and, central to this, the unequal class structure, are supported and maintained by all other institutions in society (Cree 2000:13). In Tarantino's films the institution of the family is undermined by the concept of honour among thieves, where the staunch loyalties of gangsters and thieves to their crime bosses subsume any personal ties of blood. Such honour among thieves is evident in both film texts under discussion, where loyalty is often established through fear and intimidation rather than the family's ideal of love and respect.

In rejecting grand narratives, postmodernism favours "mini-narratives", or small practices, such as local events, as opposed to global concepts. Such "mini-narratives" are "situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability" (Klages 2006:169). I claim that Tarantino splinters the films under discussion into "mini-narratives" by constructing them in a non-linear fashion and thus subverting the conventional narrative structure of films.

I will apply Jean Baudrillard's concept of "simulacra" (2010:1) to identify the "hyperreal" elements of the films. Baudrillard defines the "hyperreal" within the context of a Borges fable entitled *On Exactitude in Science* about a map that was so detailed that it replicated the territory it represented and eventually covered it totally. As the map rotted away, it was the real, not the simulation that remained. To Baudrillard, this is "the most beautiful allegory of simulation" (2010:1). However, Baudrillard's theory is that, unlike the Borges map, models today are generated without "origin or reality: a hyperreal" (2010:1). Hyperreality is essentially a copy without an original and Baudrillard calls these *simulacra*. In consumer-driven societies, such as Dubai (where I live), *simulacra* are everyday sights, from the hyperreal snow ski slopes in the desert to the hyperreal man-made islands in the sea. A more universal version of a *simulacrum* created by consumerism is the brand name, where the designer label becomes the reality, with its functionality a secondary consideration.

Baudrillard further describes the evolution of the *simulacrum* in terms of the aforementioned Borges fable of the map of the Empire: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a 'hyperreal'" (Baudrillard 2010:7). In other words, the signifier has no signified. Merrin (2005:29) takes issue with this view of the simulacrum as postmodern and argues that "The simulacrum is an ancient concept but its force appears or is discoverable within the philosophical, theological and aesthetic tradition of every culture, centring on the concept of the image and its efficacy." Baudrillard's opening rubric is in agreement with such a sentiment: "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true." – Ecclesiastes (Baudrillard 2010:1). Merrin also argues that "Baudrillard himself appeals to the real as a critical force against the simulacrum" (Merrin 2005:30). He offers this latter comment in defense of Baudrillard against his critics, who, he says, naively believe him to be nihilistic.

Baudrillard's view of the simulacrum can be integrated with De Saussure's theory of the sign and its postmodern transformation in Tarantino's films in the following ways. The signifiers of hyperreality in Tarantino's films, such as role plays, themed restaurants and discussion by his characters of popular culture, will be analysed in the chapters that follow. In my argument, I focus on Baudrillard's identification of the *simulacrum* and its relevance in the postmodern world. Within this context, *simulacra* in Tarantino's films will be analysed within Baudrillard's description of the successive phases of the image in a four-step process:

> it is the reflection of a profound reality;
> it masks and denatures a profound reality;
> it masks the absence of a profound reality;
> it has not relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own
> pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard 2010:6)

In the extreme Baudrillardian form described in the final step, the loss of the real seems to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering. Although the use of the adjective 'playful' might appear incongruous in the context of violence, I argue that the playfulness of the signification in the violent scenes sets Tarantino's films apart from the gratuitous violence of many mainstream Hollywood films. I will undertake a semiotic and syntagmatic analysis of the scenes that illustrate a loss of the real and legitimise indifference to suffering in later chapters.

My methodology will employ the theories of Lyotard and Baudrillard, as well as film narrative techniques and semiotics to explore Tarantino's *oeuvre* and demonstrate how he uses a postmodern approach to reality in his films. Stam *et al* define film narratology, also referred to as film narrative theory, as "the semiotics of narrative" (1992:69). They describe the narrative analysis of film as being the most recent branch of semiotic inquiry to emerge from the critical initiatives that redefined film theory in the 1970s. They explain that, although it has developed its own terminology and modes of investigation, its roots clearly lie in the major semiotic movements of our time. Bal explains: "Narratology is the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artefacts that 'tell a story'" (2007:3). The basic concepts of film

narrative theory are drawn from two sources of semiotic thought, namely structuralism and Russian Formalism. In line with this dual influence film narrative theory attempts to designate the basic structures of story processes and to define the aesthetic languages unique to film narrative discourse. In the words of Stam *et al* (1992:69):

> Like all semiotic inquiry, narrative analysis seeks to peel away the seemingly "motivated" and "natural" relationship between the signifier and the story-world in order to reveal the deeper system of cultural associations and relationships that are expressed through narrative form.

Using semiotic methodology, the conventional elements of narrative structure, namely characters, plot patterning, setting, point-of-view and temporality, can be regarded as systems of signs that are structured and organised according to different codes. These signs communicate precise messages which relate to the story-world in various ways.

In the preface to the second edition of her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (*2007*)* Bal expresses the need to revise her earlier work in the light of developments in the field of narratology and mentions that film studies, with its particular narrative subject matter, has "bloomed over the past ten years" (2007:xiv). Similarly, Berg refers to developments in the field of film narratology: "Needless to say, narratology has developed significantly since then, developed in film studies in large measure by the likes of Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, and others" (Berg 2006:5). As a result of their work, film form, content and narration is analysed in a more exact way: "The terms proposed by Chatman for Comolli and Narboni's form and content are story (what the film is about) and narrative discourse (how the filmmaker tells the story)" (Berg 2006:7). Berg explains further that Bordwell, in turn, adopted two terms from Russian formalism: *fabula* (the story material, the series of events that are narrated) and *syuzhet* (plotting, how the filmmaker relates story events). As *fabula* and *syuzhet* apply to all narratives and not just to film, Bordwell makes his approach specific to film by adding the analytical element of "style," which simply names the film's orderly use of cinematic devices. In

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the view of Stam it is important to adopt an eclectic analytical approach in the study of film:

> As a multi-track sensorially composite medium, heir to all the antecedent arts and discourses, the study of cinema virtually compels a multi-disciplinary approach. Film semiotics has been inclined, furthermore, to what Gauthier calls disciplinary "polygamy," a tendency to "mate" with other disciplines and approaches.
> (Stam *et al* 1992:xiii)

In addition to this qualitative analysis, I will undertake a quantitative analysis of the number of scenes in these films that indicate "Intersections" of grand narratives and hyperreality to validate my research. I will do this within the philosophical milieu of postmodernism and will address the issue of what the adjective "Tarantino-esque" implies in the field of cinema. In the view of Hjort and Bondebjerg (2001) it "has become a "byword for both pop-culture reference and popular post-modern cinema". But it has also become "critical shorthand for hackneyed, would-be-hip, low-budget crime thrillers"" (cited in Tasker 2002:369). The relationship between Tarantino's films and postmodernism is clear and manifests in various ways such as the use of "self-conscious artifice" (Tasker 2002:369) including the use in *Pulp Fiction* of "intertitles, the back projections during cab rides or Mia Wallace's finger-drawing indicated by dotted lines on the screen" (Tasker 2002:369). Also significant is the blurring of cultural boundaries, particularly those between exploitation and mainstream cinema and between genres, for example "The Bonnie Situation" in *Pulp Fiction,* is characterised by Polan as a noir/sitcom hybrid (Tasker 2002:369). A further conspicuous postmodern device is the use of intertextuality. Tasker differentiates between internal intertextuality, as when *True Romance*'s Alabama is mentioned in *Reservoir Dogs,* or more explicit intertextual connections, as in the discussion of Madonna in *Reservoir Dogs* (Tasker 2002:369), which will be analysed in Chapter 1. Tasker identifies a third aspect as involving references to other films, such as placing John Travolta in a dance contest in *Pulp Fiction*, which conjures up *Saturday Night Fever* (dir. Badham, 1977: USA, Paramount).

Tasker points out that these elements are either celebrated or condemned as style over substance. It is her opinion that condemnation usually occurs when the politics, rather than the aesthetics, of postmodernism are at issue:

> Since postmodernism has been defined as the failure of grand narratives, it tends to unite critics from left and right against it, whether their preferred narrative is humanist or Marxist. Thus a hostile attitude towards postmodernism tends to determine critical attitudes to postmodern films. (Tasker 2002:342)

This 'failure of grand narratives', I argue, is parodied in Tarantino's films where he, for instance, subverts the grand narrative of religion with deliberate misquotes from the Bible and uses the religious fervour of hitman Jules, played by Samuel L Jackson, in execution scenes loaded with irony, which is, in itself, a mode that is admirably suited to postmodern discourse.

Notes

[1] Cited in Boggs, Carl and Pollard, Tom. 2001. Postmodern Cinema and Hollywood Culture in an Age of Corporate Colonization. *Democracy and Nature*, Vol. 7: 1, 159.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Lyotard, Jean-François. 2005. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (page 37).

[5] Baudrillard, Jean. 2010. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press (Page 1).

[6] See for example: Giroux, Henry. "Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyper-Real Violence: Pulp Fiction and other Visual Tragedies" in Giroux, Henry A. 2002. *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics.* Massachusetts: Blackwell.

[7] See for example: Gormley, Paul. 2001. Trashing Whiteness: pulp fiction, se7en, Strange Days and Articulating Effect. *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 6:1, 155-171; and:

Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey, 2004. Performing Whiteness. Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema*. Melus,* Vol. 29: 2, 306-309.

[8] See for example: Kimball, A Samuel. 1997. "Bad-Ass Dudes" in Pulp Fiction: Homophobia and the Counterphobic Idealization of Women*. Quarterly Review of Film and Video,* Vol. 16: 2, 171-192.

[9] See for example: Willis, Sharon. "'Style', posture, and idiom: Tarantino's figures of masculinity" in Gledhill, Christine and Williams, Linda, eds. 2000. *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Arnold Publishers.

[10] See for example: Kimball, A. Samuel. 1997. "Bad-Ass Dudes" in Pulp Fiction: Homophobia and the Counterphobic Idealization of Women*. Quarterly Review of Film and Video,* Vol. 16: 2, 171-192.

[11] See for example: Bidwell, Duane R. 2001. Let's get into character: A Narrative/Constructionist Psychology of conversion in Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction". *Pastoral Psychology* Vol. 49: 5, 327-340; and

Davis, Todd and Womack, Kenneth. 1998. Shepherding the Weak: The Ethics of Redemption in Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction*. Literature/Film Quarterly*, January 1, 60-66.

[12] See for example: Jewers, Caroline. 2000. Heroes and Heroin: From True Romance to Pulp Fiction. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 33: 4, 39-61.

[13] Perry refers to an earlier edition of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*, whereas I have referred to the 2010 edition in my discussion.

Chapter 1:
Intersections in *Reservoir Dogs*

Reservoir Dogs (dir. Tarantino, 1992: USA, Artisan Films) marks Tarantino's cinematic début and is therefore an appropriate point of departure for a study of his work. In this chapter, I will begin with an investigation of the structure of *Reservoir Dogs* and thereafter analyse selected scenes in the film in relation, first, to Baudrillard's four stages of the simulacrum; second, the detachment of signification from the signifier; and third, the use of hyperreal violence. In the process, the film narrative will be examined to contextualise the concepts appropriately. The screenplay[1] will be a reference point for dialogue allusions as well as diegetic and non-diegetic music lyrics.

I argue in this dissertation that the formula used in classical Hollywood film screenwriting is a grand narrative. Bordwell (in Stam *et al* 1992:189) claims that classical Hollywood narration consists of a particular pattern of standardised options for representing the story and manipulating style. The classical Hollywood film, he points out, presents psychologically defined individuals as its main causal agents, battling to solve a clearly defined problem or to attain specific goals, the story ending either with the problem being resolved or a clear attainment of the goals or not (Stam *et al* 1992:189). In Bordwell's opinion, "Causality revolving around character provides the prime unifying principle, while spatial configurations are motivated by realism as well as compositional necessity" (Stam *et al* 1992:189). I argue in the conclusion that Ridley Scott uses a conventional style of film-making in *Blade Runner* (dir. Scott 1982: USA, Warner Bros), in spite of the science fiction subject matter lending itself to more experimental methods. Scenes are distinguished by a unity of time, space and action. Classical narration tends to be omniscient and highly communicative. If time is skipped over, a montage sequence or scrap of dialogue informs us; if a cause is missing, we are informed about its absence. Classical narration poses as an "editorial intelligence" (Bordwell in Stam *et al* 1992:189) that selects certain stretches of time for full-scale treatment, pares down others, and presents others in a highly compressed fashion, while presumably cutting out insignificant events. Cuddon

explains that the Russian Formalists' theory of narrative made a distinction between plot and story:

> Syuzhet ('the plot') refers to the order and manner in which events are actually presented in the narrative, while fabula ('the story') refers to the chronological sequence of events. (1998:328)

These *syuzhets* and *fabula* are described by Stam as composites of the classical style of film-making.

> Classical style, meanwhile, (1) treats film technique as a vehicle for the *syuzhet's* transmission of *fabula* information; (2) encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space of the *fabula* action, and (3) consists of a limited number of technical devices organised into a stable paradigm and ranked probabilistically according to *syuzhet* demands. (Lighting, for example, may be 'high-lit' or 'low-key,' three-point or single-source, diffuse or concentrated. In a comedy, high-key lighting is more probable.) (Stam *et al* 1992:189)

Tarantino's film style is viewed as "unconventional" variously by Berg, Bordwell and McKee, with the synonyms "unorthodox" (2006:5); "experimental" (2006:6); "non-classical" (citing Bordwell in Berg 2006:7); "narrative pyrotechnics" (2006:9); "alternative" (2006:11); "innovative" (2006:24); "idiosyncratic" (2006:25); "Tarantino has challenged dominant filmmaking" (2006:25) and in screenwriter McKee's words, "(Tarantino) violates the classical paradigm" and "Tarantino's flouting of Hollywood's screenwriting rules" (cited in Berg 2006:25). These comments point to the power of the conventional film-making 'script', which, in turn, supports my interpretation of it as a grand narrative. The legitimacy bestowed on certain narratives, in this particular case the classical paradigm of film-making, can be interpreted, in Lyotard's terms, as a language game: "Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do" (Lyotard 1986:23). Such legitimacy has kept the "classical paradigm of film-making" (cited above) in place as a grand narrative, with film makers 'doing what they do'. Tarantino's subversion of the grand narrative of film-making as a linear process is

therefore the first example of the identification of a metanarrative at play in Tarantino's films.

> It's not so much I don't believe in it [linear storytelling], it's not the fact that I'm on this big crusade against linear storytelling ... but it's not the only game in town. If I had written *Pulp Fiction* as a novel ... you would never even remotely bring up the structure.... A novel can do that [non-linear storytelling], no problem. Novelists have always had just a complete freedom to pretty much tell their story any way they saw fit. And that's kind of what I'm trying to do. Now the thing is, for both novels and film, 75% of the stories you're going to tell will work better on a dramatically engaging basis to be told from a linear way. But there is that 25% out there that can be more resonant by telling it this [non-linear] way. And I think in the case of both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, it gains a lot more resonance being told in this kinda, like, wild way.
> (Quentin Tarantino, on "The Charlie Rose Show" (in Berg 2006:1))

This revealing interview indicates Tarantino's conscious subversion of linearity in conventional film narratives. This subversion is identified by Berg (2006) in his attempt to classify the 'Tarantino effect'. Berg highlights various idiosyncratic narrative techniques used by the *auteur*, which affect the *syuzhets,* or plots, of his films, one of which is the disjointed circularity of his storyline. I will discuss Berg's other observations on idiosyncratic features in Tarantino's *oeuvre* in more detail later in this chapter.

In Tarantino's created world, the unfolding narrative shows that first things do not necessarily come first. In fact, the words of Eddie (Chris Penn), son of the gangster boss: "First things fucking last"[2] adequately, if not academically, sum up the non-sequential action of the film. The plot of *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) is deceptively simple. A heist is planned, executed and fails. Yet, contrary to expectations, the heist is not shown and, in the aftermath, viewers are only let into the consequences of the failed attempt through hearsay. It could be argued that such hearsay is a signified without signifier and enters Baudrillard's second order of simulation, where "the image … masks and denatures a profound reality" (Baudrillard 2007:6). This reality in the context of the film is the failed jewel heist, which is exemplified by the suffering and excruciatingly slow bleeding out of Mr Orange (Tim Roth), an undercover cop. Tarantino creates a tension between the reality that is not witnessed and the

simulated reality of that event, which is slowly revealed with the use of non-chronological timelines.

The omission of the actual heist from a film which has been identified as a heist film is one of Tarantino's major modifications of genre formulae which frustrate viewers' expectations by omitting obligatory scenes, "typically the very ones that define the genre and provide it with action and spectacle" (Berg 2006:1). Another such omission, identified by Berg, occurs in the narrative about Butch (Bruce Willis), "a mini-boxing film with a familiar set-up: a gangster, in this case Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), tells the fighter to throw a fight" (Berg 2006:25). In this scene Tarantino skips the boxing match, which would be the moment of truth in the boxing film genre.

The second Tarantino idiosyncrasy discussed by Berg is filling the gaps created by the omission of the major 'action' of the film with extended conversations that lengthen scenes well beyond "the accepted two- to three-minute average length of most recent Hollywood filmmaking" (Berg 2006:25). Berg cites screenwriter Robert McKee's opinion that "The average scene length of two to three minutes is a reaction to the nature of cinema and for the audience's hunger for a stream of expressive moments" (2006). Tarantino's conversations achieve authenticity because they are long and enlivened with plenty of allusions to pop culture. However, his dialogue "violates the classical paradigm" (Berg 2006:25) by giving characters long speeches, which is generally regarded, according to McKee, as "antithetical with [sic] the aesthetics of cinema" (cited in Berg 2006:25). Moreover, Tarantino's characters' speeches are often tangential and create texture and atmosphere, but do not contribute to the narration of the story. This kind of conversation is more typical of films in the genre of drama, where characters are more prone to metaphysical and allusive speculations than gangsters. By establishing mood, texture, and atmosphere in this way, the film's forward momentum is slowed down and no information is given to enhance the understanding of the main plot lines. For this reason, McKee argues, filmmakers working in the classical paradigm generally minimise or avoid it altogether. The gangsters' discussion of Madonna's music during the pre-credits scene, which occurs in Uncle Bob's Pancake House (1991), is a memorable

example of "Tarantino's flouting of Hollywood's screenwriting rules by including dialogue that would not have survived most screenwriting workshops" (Berg 2006:2).

It is worth returning to the notion of signification and applying it to the ongoing narrative of the film to note that the tension created by Tarantino is multidimensional. The tension between the signifiers of high and low culture, as manifested in the literary devices of chapter titles and the aforementioned non-linear narrative usually found in novels on the one hand, and frequent discussion of popular culture by the characters on the other, are evident throughout the film. To begin with, the title itself is idiosyncratic, lending itself to interpretation on the levels of high and low culture. Edwin Page points out, for example, that the title of the film *Reservoir Dogs* "conjures up images of feral dogs, ones that hunt in packs, are separate from normal society and live beyond its rules" (Page 2005:33), a rather literary interpretation. This connection is immediately established in the opening scene, where the characterisation of the jewellery heist gang members appears. These men indeed live beyond social norms with their male chauvinistic, sexually explicit dialogue and liberal use of profanity. During this scene the audience is made aware that these are criminals and that a crime is going to be committed. On the other hand, interestingly enough, some movie trivia on the title reveal that it comes from two of Tarantino's favourite films, *Au Revoir Les Enfants* (Malle, 1987), which Tarantino referred to as "that reservoir movie" and *Straw Dogs* (Griffiths 2006). Both these films are examples of popular culture.

Popular culture is often discussed by characters in the film. The discussion of Madonna and her hit song "Like a Virgin", situates the gang members as consumers of popular culture, or "the principle of legitimacy … bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the 'mass audience'" (Bourdieu 1993:51). This undermining of the grand narrative of "high" culture further indicates their status as living outside the more rarefied discussions of theatre, opera or literature, for example. Page (2005:35) points out that Tarantino juxtaposes this "low" art with the traditional literary technique of "high" art with the aforementioned use of chapter titles and a non-linear narrative, usually found in novels. Page sees this device as playing with generic expectations by using humorous and often irrelevant dialogue that "breaks generic stereotypes" (2005:35).

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I agree with Giroux when he sees the 'tough guy vernacular' as mediating and authenticating the graphic violence in the film: "The violence embedded in language, a central structural principle of the film, becomes clear in its opening scene" (Giroux 2002:212). The 'working-class machismo' so prevalent in the opening scene is identified by Giroux, who sees it as offering a link between violence and larger social forces. Their language is punctuated with terms like "cooz", "niggers" and "jungle bunnies": "This is in-your-face language, guilt-free, and humorously presented so as to mock even the slightest ethical and political sensibility" (Giroux 2002:213).

The opening scene also establishes the hierarchy of the gang members, with Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney) clearly established as the boss, as he and his son, Eddie, are the only members without aliases. The power relations are further affirmed when Mr Pink's (Steve Buscemi) strong aversion to tipping waitresses is contested by Joe, who insists "Come on you, cough up a buck, you cheap bastard. I paid for your goddam breakfast." Mr Pink, who sticks to his principles throughout the film, capitulates to Joe, "Alright - since you paid for the breakfast, I'll put in, but normally I would never do this" (1991). With this seemingly inane banter about the bill, Tarantino creates strong characterisation. At this point the film narrative does not give viewers access to the way the aliases were acquired (this is discussed later in this chapter as these monikers have powerful semiotic resonances).

After the gang has been characterised, the titles roll and a slow-motion shot of the gang walking down the street, dressed in black suits and ties, establishes them as gangsters in the order of Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film, *The Wild Bunch* (Page 2005:38). Apart from paying homage to one of Tarantino's favourite directors, homage as a feature of postmodernism is evident throughout the film. Homage as a particular form of allusion, designed to express admiration of a role model, is defined by Eco as a form of intertextuality, in which a given text echoes previous texts. Eco finds this device most interesting "when the quotation is explicit and recognisable, as happens in postmodern literature and art, which blatantly and ironically plays on the intertextuality" (1994:88). Page points out that subsequently Tarantino himself was paid homage to in *Swingers* (1996), where this scene is echoed (2005:38). The similarity of the attire also suggests depersonalisation, in the same vein as the

aliases. This postmodern feature of homage, it could be argued, is one of the fragmentary features of postmodernism identified by Lyotard as mini-narratives, which are taking the place of grand narratives in postmodern society. For Lyotard, the spread of capitalism has put an end to grand narratives. These days knowledge is valued in terms of its efficiency and profitability. Lyotard claims that in our postmodern culture, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1986:37). He argues that this is the result of "the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means" (Lyotard 1986:37). By contrast, my research on Tarantino illustrates that some 'grand narratives' are alive and well: the grand narrative of the conventional Hollywood film; that of religion; and of the family. Although these are susceptible to subversion, they are still powerful. Although Tarantino's films exemplify use of postmodern 'techniques and technologies', one could argue they pay homage to the metanarrative of high culture with the use of the literary devices referred to on page 6. Such homage to high culture is evident throughout *Reservoir Dogs* with the inclusion of inter-titles for scenes, "Mr Blonde", "Mr Orange" and so on, which work similarly to chapter titles in prose fiction: "These chapters are stories within the greater story of the narrative entire. They add character background as well as additional plot definition including power relationships" (Page 2005:39). This works in stark contrast to the profanity and popular culture references to Madonna in the opening scene, as mentioned on page 18.

As I discussed in the Introduction, Lyotard's view of the grand narrative can be applied to the major institutions of society. Tarantino pays homage to the family as a grand narrative in various scenes, including the one that follows the titles, where the scene is set for most of the film. Here we witness Mr Orange in a blood-soaked shirt for the first time as he moans on the back seat of the car while Mr White (Harvey Keitel) drives them to the warehouse, the venue for their post-heist meeting. As Mr Orange is half-carried into the warehouse, his utterance, "She had a baby, man. She had a baby" (1991), gives the audience a clue to the magnitude of what has transpired. It also reflects the monumental guilt that he feels in spite of his own critical medical condition. As the film narrative evolves, it becomes evident that Mr

Orange was shot in the stomach by a woman when he tried to commandeer her car. The baby, as the most vulnerable member of the family, validates the woman's action in shooting Mr Orange in her effort to protect her child. It will also become evident that Mr Orange instinctively shoots back and kills this young mother and his guilt at the enormity of his crime only makes sense once the background to her violence is explained. In this scene Tarantino indicates the value of the family as a grand narrative. In terms of this narrative, the lives of a mother and her innocent baby have greater value than that of a criminal. The irony of Mr Orange being an undercover cop is lost on the audience at this point, as the non-sequential narrative withholds such knowledge. As the narrative unfolds and Mr Orange's status as undercover cop is revealed, the audience's sympathy shifts and his suffering takes centre stage.

As the scene unfolds in the warehouse, where most of this film is situated, the relationship between Mr Orange and Mr White develops and the mini-narrative of 'honour among thieves' is established within the film. In my opinion, these mini-narratives are more powerful than the grand narratives he subverts so assiduously. For instance, the intentional development of their bond culminates in the *dénouement* at the end of the film where Mr Orange tells Mr White "I'm a cop. Larry ... . I'm sorry. I'm so -- so sorry. I'm a cop" (1991). By establishing the 'honour among thieves' mini-narrative throughout the film, Tarantino undermines the grand narrative of the family. Apart from the powerful alliance established between Mr White and Mr Orange, there is evidence of great affection and solidarity between Mr Blonde (Michael Madsen), Joe and Eddie Cabot. Mr Blonde's loyalty to the gang boss, Joe, is unequivocal, as revealed in a later scene where Joe, his son Eddie and Mr Blonde interact:

> MR. BLONDE
> I want you to know I appreciate all the packages you sent me
> on the inside.
>
> JOE
> What the hell was I supposed to do, forget about you?
>
> MR. BLONDE
> I just want you to know it meant a lot to me.

> JOE
> It was the least I could do. I wished the hell I could've done a
> lot more.
>
> MR. BLONDE
> Thanks a lot, Joe. (1991)

At this point Eddie, Joe's son, enters Joe's office and the affection between the younger men ends up in a wrestle on the floor. Joe's rebuke recalls a father speaking to two recalcitrant children:

> JOE
> All right! Enough of this shit! Break it up! Come on! This ain't a
> playground! You guys want to roll around on the floor, you do it
> in Eddie's office, not mine. (1991)

In a later scene it transpires that Mr Blonde, in an earlier job, had taken the fall for Joe without revealing his identity:

> EDDIE
> The man you just killed just got released from prison. He got
> caught at a company warehouse full of hot items. He could
> have fucking walked. All he had to do was say my dad's name,
> but he didn't; he kept his fucking mouth shut. And he did his
> fucking time, and he did it like a man. He did four years for us.
> (1991)

Before moving away from this scene, it is worth looking at the powerful signification of the décor in Joe's office, where a huge pair of elephant tusks adorn his desk chair. This is a symbolic sign where the signifier does not resemble the signified, but is fundamentally arbitrary, in this case signifying Joe's great power. In the animal kingdom, the elephant's tusks are used as a display of power and a defensive weapon when attacked. In addition, their phallic shape and inordinate length dominate the room to the extent that the viewer has no option but to be aware of their presence. This iconic signified of machismo and masculine sexual dominance supports the sexually loaded dialogue of the opening scene on the one hand. Yet, on the other hand, this is undermined by the sensitive reading offered by Brintnall on the "brutalized male body" (2004:66). Brintnall refers to the observation by Manohla Dargis:

> A history of American cinema could be traced on the bruised,
> besieged male body, from westerns to gangster sagas to male
> weepies to war films.... [F]ilm after film features men ... at risk

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who can only find redemption through pain, theirs or someone else's.[3]

From a Christian theological viewpoint Brintnall draws an analogy with "a particular brutalized male body" (2004:66) and in so doing raises the question of the redemptive significance of suffering: "Tarantino's film is, on one reading, a *reductio ad absurdum* on the cult of masculinity. It shows a world of powerful men at its absolute, and self-destructive, worst" (2004:66). Brintnall then goes on to analyse the tenderness of the interaction between Mr White and Mr Orange and the way in which their behaviour towards one another "violates the norms of traditional masculine behaviour" (2004:66). In so doing, Tarantino critiques culturally dominant scripts of gender identity, which I see as a grand narrative. In contravention of this grand narrative, Brintnall points in particular to Mr Orange's emotional outbursts and Mr White's physical tenderness and reassurances that Mr Orange will not die, in spite of the powerful signifier of blood seeping out of Mr Orange onto the warehouse floor. Brintnall sees such emotionality and tenderness as feminine behaviour: "Thus, both characters are feminized and rendered ambiguous in terms of gender and erotic identity" (Brintnall 2004:66). The brutalisation of Mr Orange's body gives Mr White 'permission' to display tenderness, such as cradling Mr Orange in his arms and unbuckling his belt to ease the pressure on the belly wound.

For the viewer the signifier of blood with its signified of pain and suffering becomes more and more uncomfortable to witness as the blood pool grows exponentially with each filmic syntagm. Such visual manifestations of blood as a signifier of violence are signatures in Tarantino's films and are discussed further in my next chapter.

In spite of the graphic detail in the film, Page (2005:50) makes the point that there are very few action shots in the film. This comes as a surprise, but a content analysis shows that there are only three, namely, the shooting of Mr Orange in the stomach, the torture of the captured cop, Marvin Nash (Kirk Baltz), which is discussed below, and the Mexican standoff at the end of the film. However, the violence is profound and it is argued by Giroux that this is a characteristic of Tarantino's films. Giroux (2002:201) identifies three forms of visual violence, namely, ritualistic, symbolic and hyperreal violence. For him, hyperreal violence exhibits "technological wizardry and its formalist appeals, irony, guilt-free humor, wise guy dialogue, and genuflection to

the cultural pap of the 1970s" (2002:205). Technological wizardry apart, *Reservoir Dogs* falls squarely into such a definition of hyperreal violence, and certain incidents, for example the torture scene of Marvin Nash in the warehouse, fall into the definition of hyperreal violence. It is appropriate to analyse such hyperreal violence, as it is an aspect of the film that falls within the realm of Baudrillard's *simulacra*.

Regarding Giroux's 'irony' as evidence of hyperreal violence (2002:201), the 'honour among thieves' mini-narrative plays itself out in the burgeoning relationship between Mr Orange and Mr White. This is ironic indeed, considering that Mr Orange is an undercover cop who has betrayed Mr White and other heist members. The intensity of the relationship culminates in the final scene where Mr Orange feels obligated to confess his undercover status, so loyal does he feel towards Mr White.

Giroux's "guilt-free humour" (2002:201) as an ingredient of hyperreal violence manifests itself in a macabre scene where Mr Blonde sets about torturing a cop named Marvin Nash, whom he has kidnapped during the heist. The torture includes severing the cop's ear, using a cut-throat razor. Although the camera does not pan in on this violent detail, the aftermath displays black humour and Giroux's 'wise guy dialogue' as a feature of hyperreal violence (Giroux 2002:201) where Mr Blonde, speaking into the severed ear, says, "Hey what's going on?" and then turns to Marvin Nash to ask "Hear that? That as good for you as it was for me?" (1991). This particular line sexualises the violent act. All this is done with Mr Blonde dancing to the beat of the 1970s Stealers Wheel number *Stuck in the Middle with You*. This use of music is one of many examples in Tarantino's films of "genuflection to the cultural pap of the 1970s" (Giroux 2002:201). In fact, before starting his sadistic torture, Mr Blonde turns the radio on and finds "K-Billy's Super Sounds of the Seventies" (1991), a radio programme which is referred to on three prior occasions by three different characters, thereby consciously drawing the viewer's attention to the lyrics and, at the same time, emphasising the role of 1970s pop culture in the film. A further result of this juxtaposition of extreme violence with dance and music, while torturing Marvin Nash, is the creation of what Giroux sees as "the most riveting scene in the film, one that has become a hallmark of Tarantino's style" (2002:212).

Dettmar and Richey view the soundtracks to Tarantino's films as "an aesthetics of pure cheese" and feel that "the director's fondness for bad music is unmistakable" (1999:319). Such 'cheesy' aesthetics are seen by Newitz as a new kind of humour which is haunting U.S. popular culture and she explains that, although dubbed 'cheese' by critics and consumers, there are no formal definitions of the term, only textual associations. Newitz gives as examples Bruce Lee and nearly all Kung Fu movies: "John Woo is sometimes cheesy; and Quentin Tarantino is the auteur of cheese" (2000:59). She defines clothing and music from the 1970s as 'cheesy' and sees the 1980s as "quickly becoming cheesy too" (2000:59). Like camp, cheese describes both "a parodic practice and a parodic form of textual consumption" (2000:59). The term also encompasses the production of, and appreciation for, "what is artificial, exaggerated or wildly, explosively obscene". Cheese is also "a way of remembering history, a kind of snide nostalgia for serious culture of the past which now seem so alien and bizarre as to be funny" (Newitz 2000:59).

Within this parodic milieu it is worth analysing Tarantino's use of the Stealers Wheel number, as the lyrics bear a close resemblance to the action and at times include elements of dark humour that alleviate the brutal sadism of the scene. This works powerfully as signification and as Bignell points out:

> Modern cinema's impression of reality is heavily dependent on the representation of sounds occurring in synchronization with the visual events which appear to cause them, known as 'diegetic' sound. (Bignell 2002:193)

Tarantino's use of Mr White to make a point of mentioning the radio and dancing to its music gives emphasis to the signification of the lyrics. The audience then has access to an iconic sign, a signifier that closely resembles the signification:

> MR. BLONDE
> You ever listen to K-Billy's Super Sounds of the Seventies? It's my personal favorite.
>
> RADIO
> Joe Egan and Gerry Rafferty were a duo known as Stealer's Wheel when they recorded this Dylanesque, pop, bubble-gum favorite from April of 1974. That reached up to number five, as K-Billy's Super Sounds of the Seventies continues. (1991)

This piece of information, delivered by Mr Blonde, followed by the announcement by the radio DJ, is a powerful signifier as it, once again, situates the film within the realm of popular culture and within the postmodern genre. The music is firmly positioned as relevant to the scene that will follow and the lyrics become iconic, where the signifier is perceived to be imitating the signified as classified by Peirce (Chandler 2002:17). The signifier in this instance is the following verse from the Stealers Wheel number "Stuck in the middle with you":

> Well, I don't know why I came here tonight
> I got the feeling that somethin' ain't right
> I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair
> And I'm wonderin' how I'll get down the stairs
> Clowns to the left of me
> Jokers to the right
> Here I am stuck in the middle with you
> Yes I'm stuck in the middle with you.
> (1991)

The signification of the first line of the song is the rhetorical question that Marvin Nash, the cop, must be asking himself. He is tied tightly to the chair with no chance of falling off, so the signifier of line three of the lyrics is pure irony. The signification of the "clowns" in line 5 is undoubtedly Mr White's bizarre, comedic behaviour, while the "jokers to the right" signifies Mr Orange, the undercover cop, who is role-playing, much as a joker or jester in a royal court would. The repetitious last two lines signify the cop's powerlessness, signified by the signifier "stuck" and "the middle" signifies his position in the middle of the warehouse. A few lines further, when Mr White cuts Marvin's ear off, the corresponding lyrics point to the dismemberment with the signifying phrase, "I'm all over the place" (1991).

When the torture reaches its climax, the corresponding lyrics reflect the police officer's desperation, particularly in the last line, which is an iconic signifier as it could be perceived as imitating the signified, namely Marvin's agony:

> Trying to make some sense of it all
> But I can see it makes no sense at all
> Is it cool to go to sleep on the floor?
> I don't think that I can take any more. (1991)

Then follow the most poignant lines of the song in the context of the film, a plea that the police officer cannot verbalise as his mouth is taped:

> Ple-ee-ee-ee-ee-ease
> ple-ee-ee-ee-ee-ease. (1991)

Peirce classifies signs in terms of differing "modes of relationship" between signs and referents as symbolic, iconic and indexical (Chandler 2002:36). The repetitive use of the word "Please" in the lyrics is an iconic signifier as it is perceived as imitating the signified, in this case the moan coming from behind the tape over the cop's mouth.

The "guilt-free humour" (Giroux 2002:201) surrounding murder and torture is best exemplified by a contrast with the guilt-laden Mr Orange over his actions. Mr Blonde has no conscience about the pain he is inflicting, and to make his point tells the cop that he enjoys torture for torture's sake:

> MR. BLONDE
> Look at that fucking shit. Look, kid. I'm not going to bullshit
> you. OK? I don't really give a good fuck what you know or don't
> know. But I'm going to torture you anyway… regardless. Not to
> get information. It's amusing to me to torture a cop. You can
> say anything you want 'cause I've heard it all before. All you
> can do is pray for a quick death… which… you ain't going to
> get. (1991)

To emphasise the point, he tapes the cop's mouth. The torture therefore takes its place in the order of Baudrillard's hyperreality in that it exists as entertainment and not as a means of information extraction (as torture is conventionally designated). The process of torture as a means of extracting information is examined by South African author, J M Coetzee, who grapples with issues of state-endorsed torture and its representation in fiction.[4] Gallagher claims that Coetzee objects to realistic portrayal of torture in fiction on the grounds that the writer participates vicariously in the atrocities, validates the acts of torture, assists the state in terrorising and paralysing people by showing its tyrannical methods in detail (1988:277). Coetzee's character Colonel Joll explains the process of torture to the Magistrate: "First, I get lies, you see - this is what happens - first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth." "Or as the Magistrate sardonically restates the torturer's creed: 'Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt'" (Howe 1982). Without taking into account evidence of the cultural differences among the indigenous peoples, Joll uses torture "to generate 'evidence'

against them, thus, reducing them to bodies in pain and 'proving' they are indeed barbarians, that is, secretive, violent, unsophisticated people who threaten the security of the colonial fort community, the outpost of civilization" (Eckstein 1990:87). Joll thus seeks to validate state-endorsed torture as a means of obtaining the truth, a validation that Mr Blonde deliberately subverts. Once Mr Blonde has severed Marvin Nash's ear, Tarantino intentionally 'decelerates the violence' by allowing Mr Blonde to leave the warehouse in search of something from the car. As Giroux points out, "Rather than relying on fast-paced images of brutality, Tarantino decelerates the violence and gives it a heightened aesthetic twist as it unfolds between a homage to realism and rupturing scenes of numbing sadism" (Giroux 2002:212).

It is a relief for the viewer to have a temporary respite from the brutality, yet it is a foregone conclusion that the violence will continue upon Mr Blonde's return. It could be argued that this expectation of violence gives the scene its "heightened aesthetic twist". This is carefully constructed by Tarantino, who sets the scene for the ear slicing with Mr Blonde's *double entendre* "Alone at last" (1991). When used by lovers, the sexual innuendo of the phrase holds the promise of intimacy and pleasure. In the context of the heist, the kidnapping and the warehouse, this is an ironic prelude to a different type of intimacy, which will result in pain and terror. Adding to the sado-sexual overtones, after the mutilation, Mr Blonde asks the question, "That as good for you as it was for me?" thereby confirming the *double entendre.* He then cautions the cop not to go anywhere, "I'll be right back" (1991), much like a satisfied lover reassuring his partner, and exits the warehouse.

The film set adds to the expectation of further violence with chains, coffins and a sign above the warehouse door, which ironically reads "Mind your head". The expectations of the audience are met when Mr Blonde returns with a can of petrol and at this point he removes the tape from the cop's mouth before pouring petrol over him and onto the floor. The removal of the tape is a powerful signifier as it gives the cop the opportunity once again to introduce the grand narrative of the family: "Please look I got a little kid at home, now please" (1991). Formerly introduced by Mr Orange, who, unbeknown to the audience at this point, is an undercover cop, the grand narrative is reinforced and becomes powerfully associated with law and order.

The grand narrative of the nuclear family is, however, not part of the reality of Mr Blonde's life experience and the plea therefore has no relevance and is lost on him.

The removal of the tape also gives the audience the opportunity to share in the cop's anguish as he begs for mercy. The violence then resumes with petrol being splashed over the police officer's face and over the raw wound where his ear once was. More 'wise guy' dialogue ensues with Mr Blonde's pun, "That burn a little bit?" (1991). The signifier 'burn' is an indexical signifier in Peirce's classification (Chandler 2002:36) as it is not arbitrary but directly connected physically, as a natural sign, indicating a medical condition, in this case a burning sensation as the petrol comes into contact with the raw wound, and it is also a natural signifier in the indexical mode as it signifies a literal fire. The latter is about to reach fruition with Mr Blonde lighting his lighter and saying, "Have some fire, scarecrow" (1991), when Mr Orange, who has been slipping in and out of consciousness, blasts him with his gun and kills him. The ensuing discussion between Mr Orange and the police officer then reveals, for the first time, that Mr Orange is a police officer too.

The "scarecrow" signifier above falls within Pierce's symbolic mode, in which "the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary" (Chandler 2002:32) and symbolises the impotence of the cop, who is nothing more than a guy about to be torched, in the mode of Guy Fawkes firework celebrations.

The "representations" in the ear-slicing scene include the literal sign "Mind your Head", which could be viewed as a signifier signifying a literal and imminent beheading. The "Mind your Head" sign enters the Baudrillardian hyperreal, where it is seen as a signifier of death rather than a polite reminder that the door has a low lintel.

The severed ear, likewise, can be read as a simulacrum when it loses its significance as a viable body part. Once severed it is unable to assist the auditory canal in the reception of signals, yet Mr Blonde's macabre enquiry, "Hey what's going on?" directed into the ear and the next direct question to the cop "Hear that?" plays with signification. The ear becomes hyperreal in the process. Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image" (Baudrillard 2010:6) could be represented in the following four

stages within the context of the ear-slicing scene: in the first instance, the ear when attached to the head is the reflection of a profound reality; then the severed ear masks and denatures a profound reality; thereafter, Mr Blonde's enquiry to the cop, who is now without an ear, masks the absence of a profound reality and finally, Mr Blonde's enquiry directed into the ear has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

Furthermore, the *mise-en-scène* in the warehouse, although minimalist, provides interesting signification and includes a set of shrouded coffins, apart from one unshrouded white one. These symbolic signifiers with their signifieds of death set the scene for the ongoing violence and deaths of the protagonists. The signified of the white coffin almost certainly is Mr White, the lone stalwart who backs Mr Orange, and unwittingly, one metanarrative, security in the guise of a police officer. The semiotics of the shrouds have been fruitfully analysed by Edwin Page who suggests that:

> The wrappings on the other coffins could be taken to stand for
> the anonymity of the characters thanks to the suits and aliases.
> The character who shows the most of what's beneath,
> including his real name, is Mr White, and therefore the white
> coffin is devoid of any covering. (Page 2005:46)

Page (2005:46) sees the almost-naked sets as anonymous, like the aliases and suits of the characters. The overall starkness of the scene, on the other hand, is strongly contrasted with the finely honed characters and Page sees this as increasing the film's emphasis on plot, filmic techniques and character. The paradox of the anonymity of the characters contrasted with their 'finely honed' characterisation is also analysed by Page (2005:47), who sees this as a feature of postmodernism. However, it could also be argued that there is a certain simulation going on here, in that the characters are men without names, without distinctive dress styles and with anonymous backgrounds. They are simulacra of bandits as the signifiers do not have signifieds. Anonymity is key to their *raison d'etre*. The colour ascription of the gang's aliases does, however, have other semiotic significance, (discussed later in this chapter), and their attribution occurs in a later non-sequential scene. Joe's status as gang boss is once again affirmed as he makes the decisions about the aliases. In the process of assigning the names he warns the gang members that they are not to

use any personal names whatsoever or they could end up "sitting in a bullpen, San Quentin" (1991). This use of the name of the prison is a masterful piece of irony, playing as it does with the real name of the director of the film. It is also a piece of self-reflexivity which puts Joe in the position of doing exactly what he warns his 'aliases' not to do, personalise a member of the gang:

> Right now it's a matter of business. With the exception of Eddie and myself, whom you already know, we're going to be using aliases on this job. Under no circumstances do I want any of you to relate to each other by your Christian names, and I don't want any talk about yourself personally. …Here are your names… Mr. Brown, Mr. White, Mr. Blonde, Mr. Blue, Mr. Orange and Mr. Pink. (1991)

Mr Pink is immediately defiant, as he was in the opening scene where he balked against leaving a tip. His resistance is demolished by Joe and he begrudgingly acquiesces to Joe's rules:

> MR. PINK
> Why am I Mr. Pink?
>
> JOE
> Because you're a faggot, all right?
>
> MR. PINK
> Why can't we pick our own colors?
>
> JOE
> No way, no way. Tried it once, it doesn't work. You get four guys all fighting over who's gonna be Mr. Black. But they don't know each other, so nobody want to back down. No way. I pick. You're Mr. Pink. Be thankful you're not Mr. Yellow.
>
> MR. PINK
> Jesus Christ. Fucking forget about it. It's beneath me. I'm Mr. Pink. Let's move on. (1991)

Once again, as in the opening scene, where he finally acquiesces to paying a tip against his will, Mr Pink dissociates himself from the mini-narrative of 'honour among thieves'. He is always the recalcitrant member of this alternative 'family', yet once he accepts the rules, he adheres to them indisputably. His dissociation from emotional involvement becomes evident at the end of the film, when he tries to break up the Mexican standoff and his use of the word "professionals" affirms his unemotional approach to the job and his fellow gang members when he says, "Come on guys.

Nobody wants this. We're supposed to be fucking professionals" (1991). The rules so painstakingly spelled out by Joe are central to the strength of this unit, and Mr Pink's use of the word "professionals" is key to the relationships that Joe is trying to establish. Joe's insistence on anonymity is a means to avoid emotional ties from developing and depersonalising relationships within the gang, which proves to be a sensible approach. For, after all, it is Mr White's emotional entanglement with Mr Orange that destabilises the group when he makes fundamental mistakes such as revealing his name, failing to read the signs pointing to Mr Orange as the rat and choosing to defend him to the death. Unlike the blood ties of a family of origin, the rules of simulated families require strict obedience and disloyalty results in death. This is borne out in the closing scene of the film.

Smith is of the opinion that the colour-coded names that Joe allocates to the heist employees have significance beyond guaranteeing anonymity. Mr Pink is "certainly the least macho of the main characters, the effete, nervy one – a characterisation that's virtually shorthand for homosexuality in Golden Age Hollywood film" and he does not deny it when Joe calls him a "faggot" (Smith 2005:26). Larry is "Mr White" and he is "the purest": the character who is "exactly who he says he is, never lies and always does as he says he will" (2005:26). He goes on to point out that "'Orange' is the colour of warning on traffic lights", a warning that Joe identifies when he says in the final scene that he should not have gone ahead when he "wasn't one hundred per cent" about Mr Orange (2005:26). "Equally there's obviously something wrong with Mr Blonde from the off. Blonde isn't a colour in the sense that pink, brown or blue are" (2005:26). This is probably an allusion to blonde's reference to hair colour. Simplistic as such an analysis might be, it does raise issues of identity, the real and simulation, which are constantly in play in *Reservoir Dogs*.

This final scene has resonances with many spaghetti westerns (so named as many of the westerns of the sixties were directed by Italians)[5] and "spaghetti" signifies the popularity of this ingredient in Italian gastronomy. This scene culminates in a Mexican standoff involving Eddie, Joe, Mr Pink and Mr White. This has been caused by Mr White's loyalty to Mr Orange in the face of the remaining gang members' contention that Mr Orange is a cop. So intense has the friendship between Mr White and Mr Orange become in the filmic time space in the warehouse that Mr White buys

wholeheartedly into Mr Orange's innocence and is prepared to die for him. Mr Orange is similarly emotionally invested and it is this that leads him to the aforementioned confession to Mr White that he is a cop, a confession that leads to his death when Mr White shoots him in the head. This culminating scene therefore fulfills the prophecy of the film set, as the coffins now have a purpose. Tarantino's focussed use of the stage set to create meaning invests his film with an extra layer of signification in the order of Pierce's *interpretant* "a sign in the mind of the interpreter" (Chandler 2002:33). The viewer is thus enticed to view the backdrop critically and take cues from it as a predictive element in the film.

The question of Mr Orange's role as the moral centre of the film is handled in an interesting way. Although he, as the only police officer in a gang of crooks, is "from society's point of view rightly the hero of the piece", he is the villain to all the other speaking characters in the film. Smith writes: "The betrayer is the man trying to do good. The characters who insist they treat each other with respect and professionally are – even the best of them – murderous and selfish to the point of near sociopathy" (Smith 2005:25). Within functional analysis, "One of the key approaches to narrative analysis derives from Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1968)" (Stokes 2008:68). Stokes explains that Propp's model of analysis can be applied to any narrative using Propp's identification of key characters in the text and their classification according to function. These include, among others, the "hero", the "villain", the "princess" who needs saving and the "donor" who enables the hero to achieve his quest. Mr Orange's role as the moral centre of the film makes him the hero. But his betrayal of the trust that Mr White has invested in him makes him the "villain" on another level. Propp's analysis provides for such a change in the status of the characterisation, so for example the "hero" can become a "villain" and *vice versa*. Using Propp's analysis, we see a change in the status of Mr White, who is the "donor" in his heroic efforts to keep Mr Orange alive, and becomes the "villain" when he shoots Mr Orange after learning his true status at the end of the film. Berger also uses Propp's morphology, to draw up a table that offers suggestions of formulaic aspects of some important genres, "the kinds of characters we find in them, their plots and their themes and so on" (2005:54). He identifies one of the functions of the hero of spy stories as the uncovering of moles, a function that is subverted in

Reservoir Dogs, where Mr Orange's role as the mole carries a similarly unstable signified.

Self-reflexivity is an interesting postmodern device used in the film, especially in the creation of a fictitious scene by Mr Orange, who has been coached by Holdaway (played by Randy Brooks), a colleague, in the art of storytelling. The scene that Mr Orange creates is then played out in real time and is a pure simulacrum created by Holdaway with the following lines:

> HOLDAWAY
> Look, man an undercover cop's got to be Marlon Brando. To
> do this job, you got to be a great actor. You got to be
> naturalistic – you got to be naturalistic as hell. 'Cos if you ain't
> a great actor, you're a bad actor, and bad acting is bullshit in
> this job. (1991)

The signifier "actor" has two connotations in this context, namely: the actor in the film as well as the actor in the role of undercover cop. The playfulness and ambiguity of the denotation in this ambiguous signification is a feature of postmodernism.

The character name "Holdaway" is a denotation of an illustrator of comic books, Jim Holdaway, whose most memorable work was the *Modesty Blaise* comics (Holdaway 2004:1), another pop culture reference that might be intentional. Under the direction of Holdaway, Mr Orange learns his lines by heart, so that he can recite them realistically to the gang members. The development of his acting ability from the delivery of stilted lines to a seamless performance meets Holdaway's expectations and he does indeed become "as naturalistic as hell" (1991).

The next chronological scene, the "commode scene", puts Mr Orange's acting skills to the test as he tells his story of a fictitious experience to Joe, Eddy and Mr White and a pure simulacrum is created as the camera cuts to the imaginary situation. As this story has no foundation in reality, it is a copy without an original, and Baudrillardian representation and reality are displaced by *simulacra* (copies without originals) (Perry 1998:1). The "representations" are figments of Mr Orange's imagination with no corresponding reality, whereas the filmic codes and conventions belie this, with Tarantino using the same camera work, lighting and sound as he does for other scenes in the film. Mr Orange's story is set in the time of "the Los

Angeles marijuana drought of 1989" and involves the carrying of a "brick of weed" into a men's room where a group of police officers with a German shepherd are chatting:

> So I tell the connection I'll be right back – i'm (sic) going to the boys' room. So I walk in the mens' (sic) room, and who's standing there? Four Los Angeles county sheriffs and a german (sic) shepherd. (1991)

Interesting oppositional elements arise in this scene, with the group of police officers in the men's room telling stories about law enforcement. Bignell is of the opinion that "One of the pleasures of narrative is that it puts in play and resolves contradictions and problems in our culture" (2002:195). Such a contradiction is evident in this scene where the police officers' conversation is related to law enforcement as opposed to that of the gang members which relates to crime. Yet, the expletives and disrespect of the police officers towards the criminals is no different from that of the oppositional group's similar antagonism towards police officers:

> SHERIFF 1
> Shut up! So anyway, I've got my gun drawn, right? And I got it pointed right at this guy. I tell him. "Freeze! Don't fucking move," and this little idiot's looking right at me, nodding his head yeah, saying, "I know, I know, I know." But meanwhile his right hand's creeping towards the glove box. I scream at him. "Asshole! I'm going to fucking blow you away right now! Put your hands on the dash!" And he's still looking at me, nodding his head. "I know, buddy, I know, I know." And meanwhile his hand's still going for the glove box, and I said, "Buddy, i'm (sic) going to shoot you in the face if you don't put your hands on the fucking dash!" And this guy's girlfriend – this sexy oriental bitch, you know? She starts screaming at him, "Chuck! Chuck! What are you doing?" (1991)

The signifiers 'little idiot', 'Asshole' and 'sexy oriental bitch' diminish the characters and position them as objects of derision. Yet this monologue serves as a mere backdrop to the simulated story and heightens the 'reality' of the simulation. Mr Orange painstakingly tells the story, creating two tensions, namely the mini-narrative of his loyalty to his gang members and the need to sound authentic to them, and the fictional story of his encounter with police officers and their dog in the men's room. This fictional story involves carrying the bag of drugs past the dog and then drying his hands under an electric hand drier. The sound track authentically reflects the diegetic sounds of barking and the hand drier and, in so doing, distracts the police

officers from their conversation, thus fixating their interest on Mr Orange. To heighten the effect, and further heighten the simulated "reality" of this scene, Tarantino takes a close-up, slow-motion shot of the face of the barking German shepherd. Further tension is created via the signification of Mr Orange's fear of being caught by the policemen, which exists in binary opposition to his real-life status as undercover cop. For the audience, this *simulacrum* of an encounter with the law is 'real' as the film codes show no disparity between reality and representation, apart from one small anomaly. The anomaly is created when Mr Orange's narration switches from the bar, where he is speaking to the gangsters, to the men's room where he is encountering the police officers. His narration moves seamlessly from one scene to the other and as the camera pans to his face in the simulated scene he is still describing the scene that is being reenacted. This conscious playful encounter of the simulation with reality creates a hyperreal twist in the narrative of the film.

Catherine Belsey makes the point that the cinema screen marks "that common-sense distinction between fact and fiction; *Fiction* isn't *real*" (2005:3). But in the Commode Scene, Tarantino plays with the signification of reality by bringing in a binary opposition of fiction/reality within his fictional construct. Belsey argues that such playing with generic expectations is probably "a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, postmodern metafiction" (2005:7). However, "that does not eliminate the possibility that it is also a cultural symptom, indicating an increasing uncertainty about the borderline between fiction and fact, between the lives we imagine and the simulacra we live, and a corresponding anxiety about the implications of that uncertainty" (2005:7-8). Belsey's use of the word 'simulacra' is compelling in the context of this dissertation. Her assertion that 'we live' lives of simulacra, that the divide between fiction and fact in our daily lives is slipping, is not only borne out in Tarantino's film but in our own social-media-drenched society.

In a turnaround of the simulation created by this scene-within-a-scene, Baudrillard discusses the danger of simulation of law and order and sees it as "infinitely more dangerous because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation" (2010:20). His discussion opens up more problems of the real and he says that "it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real" (2010:21). In Mr Orange's

imaginary commode scene, there are so many layers of reality that Baudrillard's comment is particularly relevant, for instance, should the cops have been real, and should the dog have detected the marijuana, would they have believed that he was an undercover cop playing a make-believe scene to impress real gangsters.

Baudrillard's four "successive phases of the image" (Baudrillard 2010:6) could be represented in the following four stages within the context of the Commode Scene: Mr Orange's practising his lines with Holdaway is the reflection of a profound reality, namely, the requirement of his job to sound like a criminal and not a cop; his description of his carrying of a banned substance masks and denatures a profound reality, namely, he is a police officer, not a criminal in the guise of a drug dealer; the response of the gang members masks the absence of a profound reality; they are convinced of the authenticity of Mr Orange; the director's cutaway to an actual scene, based on the fictional story told by Mr Orange, has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. Here again the postmodern element of hyperreality surfaces as a simulation in Tarantino's film, a conscious use of the device that has become evident in his subsequent films as well and to which homage has been paid by other film directors. It is ironic indeed that *Reservoir Dogs*, a low-budget, independent début film has established a "new visual legacy" (Denzine in Boggs and Pollard 2001:159) for the entertainment of viewers and the emulation of a new breed of film-makers. Examples of these include Bollywood film *Kaante* (dir. Gupta 2002: India, White Feather Films) the plot summary of which leaves little doubt that *Reservoir Dogs* was the inspiration for film-maker Sanjay Gupta: "Six bank robbers trying to pull off the perfect heist discover one of them is an undercover cop".[6] Another example is *Things to Do in Denver when you're Dead*, (dir. Fleder 1995: USA, Miramax): "Owing more than just a nod to Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, Gary Fleder's *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* tries to tell the same sort of hip tale about sympathetic gangsters whose crime goes horribly wrong."[7]

My next chapter will take the argument further by exploring scenes in *Pulp Fiction* that display the intersections of Lyotard's grand narratives and Baudrillard's hyperreality. By investigating these intersections, I will demonstrate that *Pulp Fiction*, no less than *Reservoir Dogs*, adopts the strategies of postmodern film-making in order to subvert dominant ideas and grand narratives within society.

Notes

[1] Tarantino, Quentin, 1991. *Reservoir Dogs Script*
[http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/redriver/540/script.html (accessed 20/09/2009)]

[2] All references to the script of *Reservoir Dogs* are to the online version, which is available at http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/redriver/540/script.html, no page numbers are available for this source.

[3] Dargis, Manohla. 1992. 'Who's Afraid of Red Yellow and Blonde?'. *Artforum International* 31: 3, 11.

[4] Coetzee, J. M. 2004. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Vintage.

[5] For example:

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (dir. Sergio Leone,1966: USA, United Artists);

The Big Gundown (dir. Sergio Sollima, 1966: USA, Columbia);

Django (dir. Sergio Corbucci, 1968: USA, Euro International Films).

[6] IMDb Kaante [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0294662/(accessed 02/05/11]

[7] Berardinelli, James. 1996. *Things to Do in Denver when You're Dead: A Film Review*.
[http://www.reelviews.net/movies/t/things_to_do.html (accessed 02/05/11)]

Chapter 2:

Postmodern Resonances in *Pulp Fiction*

Pulp Fiction (dir. Tarantino 1994: USA, Miramax) is the second film directed by Tarantino and provides rich material for the analysis of Tarantino's use of mini-narrative and simulation. The loss of the real is greatly in evidence in this film, where masquerade and Wittgenstein's "language games" (Lyotard 2005:10) replace reality. A syntagmatic analysis of various scenes, including the first execution scene, where Jules plays the role of God, will be undertaken to illustrate these language games. In so doing, the undermining of the metanarrative of religion will be discussed in detail. In addition, the scene at Jack Rabbit Slim's diner, where waiters masquerade as celebrities from a bygone era, will be analysed in terms of Baudrillard's fourth stage of the sign, where "it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994:456). Finally, the drug overdose scene, with its initial spy genre atmosphere and the climactic hyperreal 'resurrection' of Mia after her drug overdose, will illustrate the replacement of the grand narrative of 'high culture' with 'pop culture' and, in this instance, 'drugs, sex and rock 'n roll'. Following these discussions, a brief analysis will be made of The Gold Watch scene in terms of its omission of the grand narrative of film-making.

A hallmark of Tarantino's films is the subversion of what I have called the "grand narrative of film-making", with particular reference to the gangster and crime genres. This subversion occurs on various levels, including the narrative structure, which is non-linear and contains clear circularity; the content, which consists of frequent allusions to popular culture through both the dialogue and the film sets; and the omission of scenes which would, in conventional film-making, be considered central to the film. These anomalies will be addressed as they occur in the narratology.

The opening credits of *Pulp Fiction* start with a referenced definition of the word "pulp", as follows:

> PULP (pulp) n. 1. A soft, moist, shapeless mass or
> matter. 2. A magazine or book containing lurid subject
> matter and being characteristically printed on rough,

unfinished paper. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, New College Edition)[1]

This emphasis on the signifier "pulp" is a conscious and explicit directive to the audience to analyse the title of the film. A semiotic analysis of the first definition could include 'beaten to a pulp', while the second has as signification the 'penny horrible' or intellectually stultifying types of trashy novel or comic book that adherents of 'high culture' abhor. These allusions both to violence as an element of postmodernism and genre as a signifier of popular culture are highly relevant to my argument in this dissertation. Examples of these collocations include the execution of a group of young criminals by Jules (Samuel L Jackson) and Vince (John Travolta) on the one hand, and the colourful conversations by various characters on a range of topics (ranging from Vince and Jules's discussion of McDonald's burgers to Vince and Mia's (Uma Thurman) discussion of film stars of the fifties) on the other.

The film consists of three intertwining stories, or "Three stories … About one story …",[2] each introduced with its own screen title, "Vincent Vega And Marsellus Wallace's Wife"; "The Gold Watch"; and "Jules, Vincent, Jimmie And The Wolf", with Tarantino employing the same structural anomalies as in *Reservoir Dogs*. These include the non-chronological narrative of the film and the use of chapter titles, which I analysed in the previous chapter. Within the context of *Pulp Fiction*, the purpose of non-chronology is viewed by Davis and Womack (1998) as an opportunity for the redemption of Jules to be highlighted in the last scene, where he becomes aware of his own weakness, which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter.

Similarly to *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction* begins with a scene before the titles, identified as the Prologue, set in a restaurant and the characters have aliases, in this instance Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) and Pumpkin (Tim Roth), who played Mr Orange in *Reservoir Dogs*. Although these aliases take the form of endearments, they provide anonymity for their characters in the same way as the colour aliases do in *Reservoir Dogs.* They are also gangsters and are also involved in mundane conversations: however, theirs relate more

directly to the task at hand, which is armed robbery. Intertextual connections between Tim Roth's roles in both films are accentuated by his names, Mr Orange and Pumpkin, which both have the signification of the colour orange.

After the prologue, the credits roll and the audience is introduced to Jules and Vince, who are dressed in black suits and ties, looking much the same as the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs.* This scene is rich with significations of popular culture as Vince compares his experiences of culture in Holland with that of America. The cultural differences all revolve around popular culture, ranging from the use of drugs to fast foods. This break with genre conventions and viewer expectations of the behaviour of gangsters in a crime film is discussed by Page as follows: "From viewing other films in the gangster/crime genre you'd expect Vince and Jules to talk about the job at hand or to remain ominously silent" (2005:112). Instead Vince talks about the little differences he noticed in Amsterdam, "A lotta the same shit we got here, they got there, but there they're a little different" (1993). At Jules's request he then goes on to give examples:

> VINCENT
> Also, you know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in Paris?
>
> JULES
> They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese?
>
> VINCENT
> No, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter Pounder is.
>
> JULES
> What'd they call it?
>
> VINCENT
> Royale with Cheese. (1993)

Lyotard refers to the transmission of narratives as:

> usually obeying rules that define the pragmatics of their transmission. I do not mean to say that a given society institutionally assigns the role of narrator to certain categories on the basis of age, sex, or family or professional group. What I am getting at is a pragmatics

of popular narratives that is, so to speak, intrinsic to them. (Lyotard 1986:20)

Tarantino's narrative in the example under discussion is about a couple of hitmen, having a chat on their way to an execution. This is not an unusual narrative — it happens regularly within the gangster and crime genres. However, within the narrative of *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino breaks with the pragmatics outlined by Lyotard by creating dialogues that are unusual for gangsters, and in so doing, subverts the grand narrative of film-making within the gangster genre.

This subversion also occurs in the scene that follows, where Jules and Vince go into the apartment where they have been contracted to execute enemies of their boss, Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). But before doing so, they discuss Vince's impending date with Mia, Marsellus's wife, whom Vince has been instructed to entertain. It is clear from their conversation that a colleague has been thrown from a multi-storey balcony for giving Mia a foot massage, which leaves Vince in a fraught state about the impending 'date'. This is another subversion of the convention of the gangster film, where the 'tough guy' image of stereotypical gangsters would not include depictions of their vulnerabilities, least of all, fears about dates with attractive women.

The opening scene of the execution story allows Jules to set the scene for simulation with his line "Let's get into character" (1993). Much in the same vein as the *Reservoir Dogs*' coaching scene, where Mr Orange is coached through his lines by Holdaway, Jules's words suggest that the scene that is to follow requires a performance from them. By injecting the discourse of acting methodology into the script, Tarantino, once again, consciously plays with viewer expectations by creating a self-reflexive awareness of the actor's craft. As Page comments: "Such conversations bring to our attention the fact that we are only watching a constructed piece of entertainment, not something 'real' as such" (Page 2005:18). The signifier "character" has two connotations in this context, namely: the character of Jules in the film entire as well as his "character" in the scene that is about to unfold, where he is about to play the role of the executioner. Once again, as he did in *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino

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creates a simulation, within the order of Baudrillard's *simulacra*, by suggesting that they have to start a performance. Jules repeats the line "Let's get into character" after they are sidetracked by a further conversation relating to Mia, wife of the gang boss. Then, prior to opening the door in the apartment building they have entered, and as a final emphasis on the need for performance, Jules says, "Get yourself together like a qualified pro" (1993). The scene that follows is pivotal to the film as it introduces the viewer to Jules's role playing on another level. Not only is he performing as a hitman, but he also is taking on the role of God.

On entering the apartment, Jules and Vince find a group of young men lounging about, having a breakfast of burgers, and Jules resumes his earlier discussion about burgers, "the cornerstone of any nutritious breakfast" (1993). He ascertains that Brett (Frank Whaley) is having a "Big Kahuna Burger" and politely asks permission to taste it, takes it from him and comments on how delicious it is. He also tastes his fries and Sprite. Although the underlying threat is undeniable, these references to popular culture have the purpose of bringing comedy into a violent situation and once again, as he did in the torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino is creating the scene for the impending violence that is to follow. He once again subverts the rules, mentioned above, that define the pragmatics intrinsic to the transmission of popular narratives as outlined by Lyotard (1986:20). In addition, he plays with signifiers of the commodities of popular culture by creating his own brand name ("Big Kahuna Burger") and then drawing attention to it, comparing it with existing brand names and in this way addresses the issue of 'reality' in our postmodern condition.

> JULES
> No, I mean where did you get'em?
> MacDonald's, Wendy's, Jack-in-the-Box, where?
>
> BRETT
> Big Kahuna Burger.
>
> JULES
> Big Kahuna Burger. That's that Hawaiian burger joint. (1993)

Here Belsey's questions relating to simulation are relevant: "What we now ask, is real, and what a culturally induced illusion? Is there a difference between the two?" (Belsey 2005:3). Other such brand names in *Pulp Fiction* are "Jack Rabbit Slim's" diner and in *Reservoir Dogs*, "Uncle Bob's Pancake House" and the radio programme "K-Billy's Super Sounds of the Seventies". Tarantino's invention of 'franchise-style' brand names, familiar to us in our own popular culture, illustrate both his "genuflection to the cultural pap of the 1970s" (Giroux 2002:205) and his subversion of the grand narrative of postmodern capitalism, which Jameson identifies as the third phase of capitalism (Klages 2006:166). According to Jameson, modernism and postmodernism are cultural formations that accompany particular stages of capitalism. In the third phase that he identifies as the phase of present society, the emphasis is on marketing, selling and consumption: "multinational or consumer capitalism (with the emphasis placed on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, not on producing them), associated with nuclear and electronic technologies, and correlated with postmodernism" (Klages 2006:166). In his subversion of postmodern consumerism, Tarantino plays with the very signifiers of branding and advertising that dominate our media-saturated lifestyles. His inventions also include "Toaster Pastries" and "Red Apple" cigarettes in *Reservoir Dogs* (Page 2005:123). However, in addition to the simulated "Red Apple" brand, it comes as some surprise to find that he uses the signifier "Chesterfield" in *Reservoir Dogs* when Mr White offers Mr Pink a cigarette. Ever mindful of Tarantino's playful use of signifiers, it does not come as a surprise that Chesterfield is distributed by Philip Morris and that there is then an intertextual connection with the Philip Morris dwarf in *Pulp Fiction's* Jack Rabbit Slim's Diner. *Death Proof*, directed by Tarantino and *True Romance*, written by Tarantino, both include references to Chesterfield. Chesterfield sponsored Glenn Miller's Radio Show and early editions of *Dragnet* and *Gunsmoke*,[3] popular culture references that resonate with Giroux's previously mentioned assertion regarding hyperreality and its association with popular culture. Further examples of intertextuality are references to "Big Kahuna Burger", which occur when Mr Blonde grabs a meal from "Big Kahuna Burger" in *Reservoir Dogs,* as does George Clooney's

character in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, as well as in the previously mentioned scene when Jules bites into one and remarks how "tasty" it is.[4] Several real-world restaurants have since stolen the name, while even more advertise as having a "Big Kahuna Burger" on their menu.[5]

Once Vince has found the suitcase, which, it now transpires, was the purpose of this 'visit', and opens it, a golden glow emanates from it, caused by mysterious contents which are never revealed but left to the viewer to deconstruct. The band of young crooks, with their clean-cut looks and regular boy-next-door engagement in popular culture, once again undermine preconceptions of gangsterism and expectations of what gangsters should look like. Brett is polite and apologetic:

> BRETT
> I just want you to know how sorry we are about how
> fucked up things got between us and Mr. Wallace.
> When we entered into this thing, we only had the best
> intentions. (1993)

The respectful use of "Mr Wallace", rather than the first name basis with which Vince and Jules interact with "Marsellus", indicates politeness and is out of place within the gangster culture. More in line with the expectations of the audience when viewing a gangster film is the response of Jules, who, as a reward for such politeness, executes one of Brett's partners in an offhand manner and shortly thereafter delivers his Biblical 'sermon' before he and Vince kill Brett with a barrage of bullets. In Jules's delivery he misquotes the Biblical passage from Ezekiel 25:17:

> There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate
> for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17. "The path of the
> righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities
> (sic) of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed
> is he who, in the name of charity and good will,
> shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for
> he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost
> children. And I will strike down upon thee with great
> vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to
> poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my
> name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you.
> (1993)

This speech, a signifier of his great power over his disempowered victims, is pivotal to the film and is rich in signification. Tarantino constructs a binary opposition between the metanarratives of religion and crime in two ways. Firstly, he misquotes the biblical passage: the actual reference is:

> I will execute terrible vengeance against them to rebuke them for what they have done. And when I have inflicted my revenge, then they will know that I am the Lord. (Ezekiel 25.17 New Living Translation Version) (1993)

Second, he puts into Jules's tone a degree of self-righteousness, which can be construed as comedic, in which Jules, a gangster, assumes a sanctimonious tone in shepherding "the weak through the valley of darkness". In doing so he elevates himself to a true "brother's keeper and the finder of lost children", which, in this context, relates to saving souls. Tarantino, through the Ezekiel misquote, takes this a step further and raises Jules to the level of God with the words "And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you." Putting word to deed, Jules then executes "the weak" with a barrage of gunfire. This subversion of religion, and specifically the Christian religious metanarrative and splintering of a belief system, is achieved with great irony.

Within a modern-day setting, this irony is far less comical in the subversion of the metaphor of priests as "shepherds" of their flock of congregants amid ongoing media reports of child molestation by the clergy in the Roman Catholic Church. The resulting cover-up within the hallowed halls of the Catholic oligarchy adds justification to the secularisation of postmodern society and corresponds with Lyotard's view that the grand narrative in postmodern society is becoming splintered and is being replaced by mini-narratives, in this case of conspiracy and concealment, which result in a powerful legal system being created to back up the Vatican. Within the milieu of Tarantino's world, the 'priest' becomes not only a molester, but an executioner, and fulfils his role with the required pomp and ceremony.

Although Lyotard does not write about religion, his definition of postmodernity as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" and "the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation" (1986:xxiv) is seen by Storey as referring to "the supposed contemporary collapse or widespread rejection of all overarching and totalizing frameworks which seek to tell universalist stories ("metanarratives"): Marxism, liberalism, Christianity, for example" (2006:132). The metanarrative of the Christian religion has given great power to the church for two millennia and does indeed tell 'a universalist story'.

In addition to its allusion to the metanarrative of religion, the execution scene enters the milieu of Giroux's hyperreal violence (2002:201), as it displays various elements mentioned in the previous chapter. The three forms of visual violence are ritualistic, symbolic and hyper-real violence. For Giroux, hyper-real violence exhibits "technological wizardry and its formalist appeals, irony, guilt-free humor, wise guy dialogue, and genuflection to the cultural pap of the 1970s" (2002:205). Analysed within this context, the murders executed by Jules and his sidekick Vince (John Travolta) are ritualistic, exhibiting the ritual of the Christian church service, where prayer pre-empts the ritual of holy communion, and also in the burial service where bodies are interred subsequent to prayer. They are symbolic in that they emulate the Christian absolution through prayer. Yet this symbolism is hyperreal and has entered Baudrillard's "second phase of the image (where) it masks and denatures a profound reality" (Baudrillard 2010:6), namely the verse in the Christian Bible, which seeks to instil obedience into Christians. Until Jules has his mystical experience, there is no intention of communion with God: there is simply the drive to intimidate his victims and have power over them. Jules's mystical experience occurs right after he and Vince have executed Brett (Frank Whaley) when a "Fourth Man" appears from the bathroom screaming, "Die...die...die...die...die...die!" and then "fires six booming shots from his hand cannon in the direction of Vincent and Jules. He screams a maniacal cry of revenge until he's dry firing" (1993). Miraculously, Vince and Jules are left untouched by the bullets. The chronology of the film now skips to a "chapter" entitled "Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife", so Jules's reaction to his miraculous survival of the onslaught of the Fourth Man remains unknown to

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the viewer at the point. However, from an analytical point of view, it is important to make the connection that this is the point of conversion for Jules, where he believes a miracle has occurred. Vince is more cynical than Jules about this bit of luck that has befallen them and gives it no more weight than a random occurrence. The "Prologue" ends on this note.

Jules's use of the religious narrative recurs in the closing scene where he is confronted by Honey Bunny and Pumpkin, who are attempting a robbery: "Previously employing the Ezekiel passage as a means for delivering death, after the advent of his conversion Jules reinterprets the passage and discovers the horrible truth about his past existence" (Davis and Womack 1998:65). In this scene, Jules realises, for the first time, the value of human life, and his own ability to sustain it when he does not kill, despite great provocation: ""The truth is you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men," he tells the thieves. "But I'm tryin'. I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd"" (Davis and Womack 1998:65). Davis and Womack argue that, although Jules pledges himself to the promise of spiritual redemption, he realises nevertheless that this commitment necessitates faith in "the intensity of his cataleptic impression, and in the unknowable ways of God" (1998:65): "If it takes forever, I'll wait forever," Jake tells Vincent (1993). Davis and Womack continue:

> In this way, Tarantino establishes Jules as the moral center of his film, and, for this reason, *Pulp Fiction's* achronological narrative takes on greater ethical force when Jules spares Pumpkin and Honey Bunny in the film's final moments. (1998:65)

Pumpkin and Honey Bunny feature in the film's opening scene or "Prologue" before the credits, and the closing scene or "Epilogue" is a continuation of the opening scene, so the story ends at the beginning, exhibiting clear circularity and thus overtly undermining the conventional film narrative. Botting and Wilson describe the misfiring of the gun as a "traumatic experience" (1997:93) for Jules and see this chance event as lying "beyond the world of regulated desire and law to remain unpresentable, occupying a hollow within and without the desires and laws they found" (1997:93). They make a connection

between this 'unpresentable' event and Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984:xxiv)[6] and see the misfiring of the gun as undermining 'rationality', one of the 'conventional' systems of meaning.

Bidwell (2001:327), in his study of the conversion discourse of *Pulp Fiction*, points out that an accumulation of literature has explored the interface of religion and film, "not only recognizing the ability of the cinematic arts to place theology into critical dialogue with popular culture (Marsh & Ortiz 1997 in Bidwell 2001), but also suggesting film as a type of popular "religion" in and of itself (Bryant 1982 in Bidwell 2001). Furthermore, Bidwell (2001:327) quotes Nolan (1998) in identifying three ways in which theology has engaged the world of film: "(a) by paying attention to a director's vision and 'cinematic analogue with religious concern'; (b) by providing an analysis through a biblical hermeneutic; and (c) by identifying the religious themes in popular culture." Nolan's identification of the use of religion in cinema is particularly relevant to an examination of the theme of religion as a grand narrative in *Pulp Fiction*, where Jules plays the role of God by executing the weak and shepherding them to salvation, ironically, through death.

Taking Nolan's second theological engagement with film as a reference point, it would be appropriate to analyse Jules's quote through a "biblical hermeneutic" and attempt an understanding and interpretation of the passage. His first line "There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17" signifies his dependence on his memory and that it "seems" appropriate. The use of the conditional verb mediates his understanding as he does not use the more assertive "is" about the appropriacy of the message. The actual quotation from Ezekiel is paraphrased in the last five lines of his speech: the rest is a pastiche of various biblical references. Despite the inaccuracy he does get the gist of the "vengeance" angle of the message across. He paraphrases further and replaces "wrathful chastisements" with "furious anger". In so doing he illustrates the use of retaliation and fury as a means of meting out justice and transmits a message of God on the warpath. This is not an unfamiliar message: however, in his assumption that he is God and the dispenser of

justice and has the right to take away life, he is being blasphemous and undermining the grand narrative of religion, which reserves to God the right to make decisions of life and death.

Despite the implication of the title, the Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife story does not purely centre around Vince and Mia getting together, but encompasses a few narratives, including scenes serving as introductions to Marsellus Wallace, Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) and the purchase of heroin from Lance the drug dealer (Eric Stoltz). Only then does the scene deliver on its title and the viewer becomes party to Vince's night out with the beautiful Mia, Marsellus's wife. These narratives have one common thread, namely: Vince and his distraught mental state over the "date" with Mia. She has been the inadvertent cause of at least one man's death as the result of her husband's obsession with her, and in the opinion of Jules, "(that) Bitch gonna kill more niggers than time" (1993).

The story provides potent evidence of Baudrillardian hyperreality within the context of film as a cultural commodity, as the scene requires viewer knowledge of film, stardom and celebrity. The opening scene of this "story" gives a parodic version of the spy genre, as Vince, high on drugs, arrives at Mia's door. The scene has been set for Vince's fraught state of mind when encountering Mia by his earlier conversation with Jules, where Marsellus's jealousy, which had culminated in the death of an employee, is discussed.

> JULES
> Well, Marsellus fucked his ass up good. And word
> around the campfire, it was on account of
> Marsellus Wallace's wife.
>
> VINCENT
> What'd he do, fuck her?
>
> JULES
> No no no no no no no, nothin' that bad.
>
> VINCENT
> Well what then?
>
> JULES
> He gave her a foot massage. (1993)

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This excessive retributive justice hardly fits the crime and undermines the convention of gangster and crime narratives such as *The Dark Knight*, where "The justification for extralegal justice, or vigilantism, is found rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview, in battles between good and evil, where the meting out of justice transcends the rule of law."[7] The rather spurious adulterous activity of foot massage that causes such violence and emotional upheaval in *Pulp Fiction* cannot be viewed as an issue that requires transcendence of the rule of law. Tarantino consciously flouts the convention of retributive justice by allowing Vince and Jules to debate the issue of foot massages at length, with Jules offering the opinion that they are innocent and Vince believing that they are sexually loaded. The grand narrative of the family as a social institution is being protected here by Marsellus, who uses all the means at this disposal to ensure the sanctity of his marriage and his trophy wife's virtue. That such protection is misplaced and subverts the most basic tenet of marriage, namely trust, raises issues on the state of marriage and the ethics of maintaining it at all costs. The topic is not new, and the story is as old as the Bible with the Seventh Commandment, "Do not commit adultery" (Exodus 20.14 New Living Translation Version)[8] attempting to stigmatise the act.

Vince is well aware of the need to maintain distance between himself and Mia and, with mimicry and innuendo, Tarantino heightens the tension. Syntagm by syntagm, he spells out the language of the spy genre and sexual innuendo visually, beginning with a note, taped to the door: "Hi Vincent, I'm getting dressed. The door's open. Come inside and make yourself a drink. Mia" (1993).

These words are carefully constructed to create a sense of mystery and intimacy. An open door signifies availability, as do the words "I'm getting dressed" with its binary oppositional signified "undressed". The sexual innuendo of "Come inside" is a possible reading as well. The invitation to make himself a drink not only gives Vincent access to Mia's home, but invites him to make himself at home. After Vince's submission to this written

invitation and instruction, Mia remains the mystery woman by staying out of sight and the viewer is given glimpses of her naked back and a full-screen shot of her red, made-up lips as she speaks to Vince through a microphone. These elements of danger, sexual availability and espionage, reminiscent of the James Bond spy genre with its alluring, treacherous women constitute an intertextual reference to the popular culture of the 1960s when James Bond films were "the success formula of the decade" (Moniot 1976:25). Before making her entrance Mia inhales cocaine and as she walks towards Vince the camera focuses on her bare feet, heightening the sense of danger, with the memory fresh in the mind of the viewer of the fate of the foot masseur. As the scene progresses, overtones of drugs, sex and rock 'n roll are established and the slow "unveiling" of the heroine is Tarantino's tongue-in-cheek reference to spying and its associated conventions. All this *bricolage* is a cocktail of postmodern devices that act as a foreshadowing of the events that are about to be played out and reach a climactic culmination when drugs, sex and rock 'n roll reach their almost fatal conclusion.

Tarantino once again blurs the distinction between the viewer's comfort zone of watching fiction, on the one hand, and being drawn into the reality of the filmmaker's world, on the other, as Mia enters the room with a camera. As mentioned previously, Page refers to this as "self-reflexivity, the audience reminded of the fact they are watching a film" (2005:111). As she proceeds to film Vince while "interviewing" him, as she puts it, or interrogating him as a convention of the spy genre, the scene exhibits postmodern devices with its popular culture references to the Beatles, Elvis, The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family and the mixing of real and fictional characters. Her first question is rich with hyperreal connotations:

> MIA (OS)
> Not yet. I'm going to interview you first. Are you any
> relation to Suzanne Vega?
>
> VINCENT
> Yeah, she's my cousin.
>
> MIA (OS)
> Suzanne Vega the folk singer is your cousin?

VINCENT
Suzanne Vega's my cousin. If she's become a folk
singer, I sure as hell don't know nothin' about it. But
then I haven't been to too many Thanksgivings lately.
(1993)

As a popular culture figure, Suzanne Vega is a folksinger whose 1987
international hit song "Luka" was one of the earliest songs to deal with the
topic of child abuse (Vega 2008). Mr. Blonde in *Reservoir Dogs* is also a
Vega, namely, Vic Vega. These intertextual references to actual people within
a fictional setting, and fictional people related to other fictional people from
another film "do not ask us to make the easy constructivist assumption that
there is no difference between illusion and reality. Instead, they problematize
that difference, call it into question, sometimes wittily, sometimes to disturbing
effect" (Belsey 2005:7). Belsey questions whether this should be seen as
"cinema at play, a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, postmodern
metafiction" (2005:7) or whether it is also a cultural symptom, which indicates
a growing uncertainty about "the borderline between fiction and fact, between
the lives we imagine and the simulacra we live, and a corresponding anxiety
about the implications of that uncertainty" (2005:7). This is a question at the
heart of Tarantino's playing with viewer expectations.

Belsey sees culture as consisting of society's range of signifying practices, be
they rituals, stories, forms of entertainment, lifestyles, sports, norms, beliefs,
prohibitions or values. This, in our globalised society, includes art and opera,
fashion, film, television, travel and computer games. The impact of these
cultural practices is naturalised to the extent that we are all players in what
Belsey sees as a 'game': "Culture resides in the meanings of those practices,
the meanings we learn" (2005:9). Culture is all we know, says Belsey, and "In
that sense, we are always in culture – always in the game" (2005:9).

The reflection of such a culture, such a game, in Tarantino's films, revolves
around popular culture where his characters remain situated. Nowhere is "the
borderline between fiction and fact, between the lives we imagine and the
simulacra we live" (Belsey 2005:7) more graphically displayed than in the

scene which takes place in Jack Rabbit Slim's diner, the scene of Vince and Mia's date. Tarantino toys here with culture, reality and the real to great effect. As a prelude to the Jack Rabbit Slim's dining experience, Mia continues with her 'interrogation' of Vince with a barrage of questions which all relate to popular culture:

> MIA (OS)
> There's two kinds of people in this world, Elvis people and Beatles people. Now Beatles people can like Elvis. And Elvis people can like the Beatles. But nobody likes them both equally. Somewhere you have to make a choice. And that choice tells me who you are. (1993)

She then proceeds to ask him whether he prefers the Brady Bunch or Partridge Family. The apparent superficiality of these questions once again relate to questions of reality, the real and simulation, with fictional characters presented within the same contextual framework as The Beatles and Elvis, who, in this instance, represent reality, as opposed to the Brady Bunch and Partridge Family, who represent fictional characters. Yet the Partridge Family simulate a connection with The Beatles and Elvis in that they represent a family of musicians within a fictional situation.

In the end, much as Baudrillard argues that the "Gulf War did not take place" (1995), it could be argued that The Beatles and Elvis did not exist. In fact, their media-created personae far outweighed any perceptions of reality on the part of the audiences and their representations in magazines, on posters, on television and in films, were simulacra:

> Baudrillard observes that it is the spheres of media and mass consumption where individuals seek out some form of identity and social involvement, hoping to "participate" in what has become a completely reconstituted public realm. While this occurs, however, the relentless proliferation of signs and symbols characteristic of postmodern culture works to dissolve the core of social meaning, blurring distinctions between media-driven images and real-life experiences. (Boggs and Pollard 2001:174)

Such real-life experiences within the context of celebrity encounters remain blurred by audience perceptions as any communication that might occur

would be inane. Journalists' obedience to certain ground rules for instance, or fans' 'star-struck' behaviour, would hamper any genuine communication. Rojek[9] refers to this as "unusually high levels of non-reciprocal emotional dependence, in which fans project intensely positive feelings onto the celebrity" (Rojek 2010:389) to make any meaningful dialogue possible. The paraphernalia of a media event help to construct and bestow celebrity status. Within this field of celebrity, Tarantino's rise to the level of director as superstar was phenomenal and Dawson[10] asks the telling question:

> Who the hell is Quentin Tarantino and why has a man whose fare is about as politically incorrect as you could possibly get in the touch-feely Nineties managed to garner such a cult following? Certainly, the Cinderella rise of Tarantino-video-store-clerk-turned-hard-boiled-director has certainly made good copy. The first rock star director? Tarantino, unlike any other whose craft has come from behind the camera, now enjoys that kind of status. (2005:9)

In response to his own question, Dawson sees Tarantino's popularity as a direct result of the "many hundred man-hours he has spent indulging the media" (2005:10).[11] Boorstin's[12] discussion of the phenomenon of fame and the role of the media in its creation takes this point further: "Two centuries ago when a great man [sic] appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him; today we look for his press agent" (in Marshall 2010:73). The production of celebrity is no longer a lengthy process, he says:

> Now, at least in the United States, a man's [sic] name can become a household word overnight. The Graphic Revolution suddenly gave us, among other things the means of fabricating well-knownness. (in Marshall 2010:73)

 Boorstin explains further that once the media publicity has "manufactured" the celebrity, we do not like to believe that our esteem is invested in a basically synthetic product so: "we are tempted to believe that they are not synthetic at all, that they are somehow still God-made heroes who now abound with a marvellous modern prodigality" (in Marshall 2010:73). He explains that, while this hero-worship remains, the heroes themselves dissolve:

> The household names, the famous men [sic], who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial new product – a product of the Graphic Revolution in response to our exaggerated expectation (in Marshall 2010:74).

Marshall[13] (2010:319) agrees with such a role of the media in stories related to the entertainment industry:

> In certain areas of journalistic coverage, the work of press agentry, publicity and promotion became normalized into the structure of stories. Entertainment journalism, like other forms of journalism, has had to adapt to the cycle of news and events of its particular industry and 'beat'.

Such "normalization" means that audiences start to perceive the "events" as having news value. In reality, however, there is no inherent news value at all, if one contrasts such a public relations activity with the 'reality' of the news value of natural disasters and wars. Marshall explains that the importance of studying celebrity journalism is that it frequently demonstrates the dependence journalistic practice has on its sources and what is considered news value:

> Celebrity status simplifies the determination of news value precisely because the level of fame of the person *a priori* establishes its newsworthiness. Whereas other news events may not produce the same effect of attracting readers, celebrity guarantees a certain high level of interest. (2010:319)

With reference to Tarantino's meteoric rise to such celebrity status, I would suggest that his rags to riches story has been a poignant reference point for 'hero-worshippers' (Boorstin in Marshall 2010:74) and a validation of their belief in the American Dream, where hard work and talent are rewarded with success. This is why the media love Tarantino; he is a version of Cinderella. In my opinion, however, Tarantino's fame goes far beyond the media representation and hype that surrounds him, whether he sought such media attention or not. If we look at the projects he embarks upon, he always remains true to his vision for the narrative and has not bought into either the grand narrative of film-making or the allure of Hollywood blockbuster films he has been invited to direct including *Men in Black* and *Speed*.[14] I agree with

Smith's opinion that by offering Tarantino these directorial options, "This is perhaps an indication of how far some industry perceptions of the man and the filmmaker vary from the essential truth" (Smith 2005:121).

Such "truth" is nebulous in the Hollywood system where marketable "human models – modern "heroes" – could be mass-produced, to satisfy the market, and without any hitches. The qualities which now commonly make a man or woman into a "nationally advertised" brand are in fact a new category of human emptiness" (Boorstin in Marshall 2010:73). It is telling that Boorstin uses the term "emptiness" to indicate the signified meaning of the signifier 'hero' within our postmodern world. It has compelling resonance with Baudrillard's simulacra, one of which could be seen in the creation of Mia's hallowed status within the framework of *Pulp Fiction*. Such status is an empty signifier because, as Marsellus Wallace's wife, she has come to be viewed in a particular way by the gangsters who work in Marsellus's organisation. She is viewed as 'out of bounds'. Such signification is appropriate as marriage is an institution and therefore a grand narrative which bestows such a status upon the signifier "wife". Yet, such is the state of the postmodern world, and the promiscuity which reigns supreme in the world of Hollywood gossip magazines,[15] where our "heroes" continuously subvert the hallowed institution of marriage, that it is only when the signified 'husband' is a psychopathic killer that the seventh commandment, "Do not commit adultery",[16] is respected. Yet Vince, doped up as he is, is on the point of succumbing to Mia, in spite of his fear of Marsellus's retribution, when she overdoses, leaving him to deal with a larger crisis and, in the process, conforming to the 'helpless woman' stereotype. So it is, in the end, not respect for the institution of marriage or the fear of retribution that prevents a sexual encounter between the two, but rather the circumstances surrounding the overdose. Tarantino is making a powerful statement on the damaging effects of popular culture's use of recreational drugs by creating the binary opposition moral/immoral and placing drugs within the second part of the binary.

Chris Rojek[17] addresses the issue of celebrity and religion which in some instances resonate with Boorstin's view of 'hero-worship'.[18] Rojek's contention

that: "Celebrity worship is regularly condemned in public as idolatry, which carries connotations of slavery, false consciousness and 'the Devil's work'" (in Marshall 2010:389), confirms the view that religion is a grand narrative, with the 'Devil' viewed as the evil other of the God/Devil binary opposition. Interestingly enough Rojek refers to obsessed fans who reflect:

> high levels of identification ... in the wardrobe, vocabulary and leisure practice of such fans. In rare cases they undergo cosmetic surgery to acquire a simulacrum of the celebrity's public face. (2010:389)

Tarantino creates such simulacra in the scene that takes place in Jack Rabbit Slim's diner, a theme restaurant. This is a scene of pure simulation and corresponds with:

Baudrillard's famous conception of the hyperreal (which) suggests a media-saturated world in which images become spectacles and spectacles (much like the cathedrals of consumption) become so much larger-than-life that they begin to overwhelm and redefine 'reality' itself, as with Disneyland and Las Vegas. (Boggs and Pollard 2001:173)

Images akin to Disneyland, which are a part of most cinema viewers' psyche, come to life within Jack Rabbit Slim's. This is exaggerated to the point where, as Vince observes, "It's like a wax museum with a pulse" (1993).

Tarantino's filmscript describes the *mise en scène*:

> The picture windows don't look out the street, but instead, B & W movies of 50's (sic) street scenes play behind them. The WAITRESSES and WAITERS are made up as replicas of 50's (sic) icons: MARILYN MONROE, ZORRO, JAMES DEAN, DONNA REED, MARTIN and LEWIS, and THE PHILIP MORRIS MIDGET, wait on tables wearing appropriate costumes. (1993)

Vince and Mia are seated in a booth made out of a red 1959 Edsel. Steeped in this alter-reality, Buddy Holly's alter-ego, wearing a button on his chest that reads, "Hi I'm Buddy, pleasing you pleases me", introduces himself: "Hi, I'm Buddy, what can I get'cha?" (1993). This is a pure simulacrum as the copy of the singer Buddy Holly, namely the waiter, makes no distinction between

himself, the waiter, and Buddy Holly, for he has assumed Buddy Holly's persona and is thus a simulated copy. Much as "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra" (Baudrillard 2010:12), so too Jack Rabbit Slim's "is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms" and "This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation" (Baudrillard 2010:12). No signifier in this themed restaurant can be accepted uncritically as the *savoir-faire* of the viewer is required to make sense of many seemingly inane signs. For example, the signifier of Buddy's badge refers to a song by Tommy Roe of the same title, "Pleasing you pleases me" (1966) [tommyroe.com (accessed 26/10/2010)].

In Baudrillard's analysis of Disneyland he sees all America's values "are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip" (2010:12). In these terms, the icons of the 1950s become exalted in the "miniature world" presented in Jack Rabbit Slim's, which serves as a museum for the "comic strip" or popular culture of that era. A particularly playful signifier in this regard is the miniature "Philip Morris Midget" (1993). During the 1940s and 1950s "Johnny Presents" was a title used by Philip Morris Cigarettes to announce its sponsored shows. The "Johnny" of the title referred to the sponsor's:

> unforgettable bellhop, Johnny Roventini, whose highpitched cry, "Callll forrrr Philip Morrraaaiiisss," was one of the great commercial gimmicks of the air. Though the bellhop was used on virtually all PM-sponsored shows, the Johnny Presents title can be tracked through a twelve-year run on two networks, a series of variety shows wellmixed (sic) with drama, big bands, and popular vocalists. (Dunning 1998:374)

After the death of MGM's Leo the Lion, it was said that Roventini was the only remaining living trademark (Dunning 1998:546). However, here in Jack Rabbit Slim's Johnny is no longer a living trademark, but a simulacrum, along with the other icons of his era.

The exaltation of these icons only occurs with the buy-in of the audience, or in this case, the diners:

> The only phantasmagoria in this imaginary world lies in
> the tenderness and warmth of the crowd, and in the
> sufficient and excessive number of gadgets necessary
> to create the multitudinous effect. (Baudrillard 2010:12)

Jack Rabbit Slim's has an abundance of such "gadgets", from the simulated underground train creating a rush of air through the grate that raises Marilyn Monroe's skirt, to the reconstructed 50s cars that serve as seating booths. In addition, the Diner creates a "tender and warm" response from Vince and Mia, who participate unreservedly in the simulated world by referring to the simulations as real people. Vincent, for instance says, "Buddy Holly doesn't seem to be much of a waiter. We shoulda sat in Marilyn Monroe's section" (1993).

When Mia comments, "There's two Marilyn Monroes" and Vince corrects her with "No there's not" (1993) and points out that the one blonde is Mamie Van Doren, the word-play is a verbal manifestation of the hyperreality at work in this scene. In her analysis of fiction and reality, Belsey's observation that "it has become fashionable to see human beings as entirely culturally constructed" (2005:3) has great resonance in the scene. This comment explains both Mia's lack of *savoir-faire* (Lyotard 1986:18) about the culture of the fifties and the creation of Marilyn Monroe as a cultural commodity in the guise of a sex goddess. As a cultural commodity she is well known, yet the Marilyn Monroe who died of a drug overdose alone was a person few could relate to. This creation is now a pure simulacrum in that "it has no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 2010:6). In Baudrillard's view:

> Death is an absolute criterion, but in this case it is
> significant: the era of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and
> the Kennedys, of those who really died simply because
> they had a mythic dimension that implies death (not for
> romantic reasons, but because of the fundamental
> principle of reversal and exchange) – this era is long
> gone. (2010:24)

Prior to this, the film's references to popular culture begin with the ordering of the meal when Vince orders:

> VINCENT
> I'll have the Douglas Sirk steak.

BUDDY
How d'ya want it, burnt to a crisp, or bloody as hell?

VINCENT
Bloody as hell. And to drink, a vanilla coke. (1993)

The reference to Douglas Sirk, director of the film *Imitation of Life* (1959), which starred Lana Turner and Sandra Dee,[19] serves as another of Tarantino's self-reflexive reminders of Jack Rabbit Slim's being an imitation or simulation and that it is situated in the 1950s. The ongoing dialogue about the steak relates directly to the title of the film with its connotation of violence "burnt to a crisp, or bloody as hell". When Mia asks Vincent for his opinion of the diner, his response is a conscious reference to the simulation of the scene, "It's like a wax museum with a pulse rate" (1993). This direct reference to a wax museum is Tarantino's self-reflexive confirmation of simulation, of the entering of Baudrillard's aforementioned fourth successive phase of the image, where "it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 2010:6). The nostalgia that Tarantino creates in Jack Rabbit Slim's diner relates to Baudrillard's view of reality in this phase of the image, "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (2010:6). Boggs and Pollard point out that Baudrillard sees the spheres of media and mass consumption as the arena with which people try to identify and find social involvement, hoping to "participate" in what has become "a completely reconstituted public realm" (Boggs & Pollard 2001:174). While this occurs, however, the proliferation of signs and symbols characteristic of postmodern culture dissolve "the core of social meaning, blurring distinctions between media-driven images and real-life experiences" (Boggs & Pollard 2001:174).

Lyotard refers to nostalgia in his discussion on the pragmatics of narrative knowledge in the story telling of the Cashinahua storyteller (1986:20) who, in the retelling of an old story, becomes the hero of a narrative, in the same way as the Ancestor was. It could be argued that this is in the same order of simulation as Baudrillard's fourth stage of the sign, as the Cashinahua storyteller does not have "real" experience of the tale he recounts, but

assimilated knowledge from having been a "narratee" of the same story. Lyotard goes on:

> (The Cashinahua) example clearly illustrates that a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence – 'know-how,' 'knowing how to speak,' and 'knowing how to hear' [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*] – through which the community's relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond. (1986:21)

The narrative knowledge required by both the Cashinahua narrator and the *Pulp Fiction* scriptwriter is the "know-how" of relating tales of a bygone era. However, the "speech acts relevant to this form of knowledge are performed not only by the speaker, but also by the listener" (Lyotard 2010:21). In this case "the listener" or audience is assumed to be aware of the cultural representations, in the form of popular culture, which are so evident in this scene. The means of delivery is through signifiers of this culture, namely the aforementioned film star look-alikes, posters, vintage car reconstructions and reenactments of iconic scenes in films. The *savoir-faire* of the audience is necessary to make sense of the simulation happening in the scene.

The conversation about Mia's "pilot" requires *savoir-faire* about television serials and Vince, at this stage, has no problem with making this connection as Jules had painstakingly and with much sarcasm explained it to him in an earlier scene,

> VINCENT
> What's a pilot?
>
> JULES
> Well, you know the shows on TV?
>
> VINCENT
> I don't watch TV.
>
> JULES
> Yes, but you're aware that there's an invention called television, and on that invention they show shows?
>
> VINCENT
> Yeah.

> JULES
> Well, the way they pick the shows on TV is they make
> one show, and that show's called a pilot. (1993)

Here again, as he did in the Jack Rabbit Slim's car park where Mia called Vince a "square" but instead of verbalising the word, drew a square which manifested as dots on the windscreen, Tarantino uses self-reflexivity to disrupt the comfort zone of the viewer-as-spectator and blurs the line between reality and fiction by creating an awareness of the television process and its associations with film production. In the process he emphasises the artificiality of television productions, too.

Returning to the scene at Jack Rabbit Slim's, Vince uses his newfound knowledge to question Mia about her pilot, and her response not only delineates the plot and characters but also includes allusions to a then forthcoming project of Tarantino's, which in1994, viewers would not have had the *savoir-faire* to interpret,

> MIA
> "Fox Force Five." Fox, as in we're a bunch of foxy
> chicks. Force, as in we're a force to be reckoned
> with. Five, as in there's one..two three..four..five of us.
> There was a blonde one, Sommerset O'Neal from that
> show "Baton Rouge," she was the leader. A Japanese
> one, a black one, a French one and a brunette one,
> me. We all had special skills. Sommerset had a
> photographic memory, the Japanese fox was a kung fu
> master, the black girl was a demolition expert, the
> French fox' (sic) specialty was sex...
>
> VINCENT
> What was your specialty?
>
> MIA
> Knives. (1993)

Tarantino must either have had this dialogue in mind when writing the script for *Kill Bill II* or, conversely, had the idea of *Kill Bill II* in mind when writing this dialogue. *Kill Bill II* with its group of deadly female assassins, simulates the descriptions of the "Fox Force Five" with Beatrix Kiddo, also known as the Bride, being the knife expert, O-Ren Ishii the "Japanese one", Elle Driver the "blonde one", Vernita Green the "Black One", Sofie Fatale the "French one" or

even the "brunette one". Uma Thurman, who plays Mia, would, in the future of this timeline, play the role of the deadliest viper of them all, Beatrix Kiddo, presaged in Mia's imaginary pilot. The intertextuality between *Pulp Fiction*, an existing film, and *Kill Bill II*, a non-existent film at that time, which would only be made ten years later in 2004, plays with concepts of time and space, the real and the unreal in a way that creates a simulation of the order of sorcery, Baudrillard's third stage of the image, where "it masks the *absence* of a profound reality" (Baudrillard 2010:6). Incidentally, the same level of simulation was mirrored at the time of this researcher's purchase of Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulations*, with the print year on its title page represented as 2010 when it was purchased in 2008.

Lyotard describes the credulity of the people, or audience, as vital in the process of actualisation or making the narratives "real":

> In a sense, the people are only that which actualises the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into "play" in their institutions – thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator. (1986:23)

Within the fictional world created in the Force Fox Five scene, Vince actualises Mia's narrative and puts it into play with his question, "What was your speciality?" not "What was the brunette one's speciality?", thus blurring the lines between diegesis, the fictional world in which the event is narrated, namely the TV pilot, and the "real" world in which he and Mia are having this conversation. Mia similarly is blurring the role of diegesis and narrator. Both, thus, subvert the legitimacy of the grand narrative.

In the unfolding narrative of their evening out together, Vincent creates an irony which requires the *savoir-faire* of the audience to *actualise* it and add to the comedy of the situation when Mia asks him to dance and he responds,

> VINCENT
> I'm not much of a dancer.

MIA
Now I'm the one gettin' gyped. I do believe Marsellus
told you to take me out and do whatever I wanted.
Well, now I want to dance. (1993)

His response is a tongue-in-cheek intertextual reference to John Travolta's role as Tony Manero, a prizewinning disco dancer in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977, Film, Badham, USA, Paramount), for which he received a best actor Academy Award nomination. His persona as a dancer was also reflected in the story line of *Grease* (1978) the following year. The *savoir-faire* of the viewer is therefore required to make sense of the irony of his comment "I'm not much of a dancer".

When they start dancing together the script calls for the actors to play their parts with the following direction,

Mia's version of the twist is that of a sexy cat. Vincent
is pure Mr. Cool as he gets into a hip-swivelling rhythm
that would make Mr. Checker proud. (1993)

Miklitsch describes the dance which is accompanied by the soundtrack *You never can tell* by Chuck Berry as:

not so much Chubby Checker as Godard, the Godard of
Band á part (1964). The delicious irony here … is that
the allusion to Godard's film is also a classically
postmodern gesture since *Band á part* with its
Hollywood allusions and self-reflexive style, destabilizes
the tendentious opposition between Hollywood and
avant-garde cinema that was one of the main pre-
suppositions, of "high" Screen theory. (2006:14)

This binary opposition privileges the hegemony of Hollywood which, within the context of this thesis, could be construed as a grand narrative with its economic and political power. However, within the context of the division of cinema into high/low cultural forms, avant-garde cinema is privileged as a highbrow art form, which *Band á part* destabilised by making it more accessible to populist audiences. Miklitsch makes reference to the name of Tarantino's production company, A Band Apart, as inspired by Godard's film. Both the filmscript's and Miklitsch's Chubby Checker reference is to his hit songs *The Twist* and *Let's Twist Again (1961)* which popularised the dance

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craze which Travolta interprets in an adaptation of *The Twist* "the Swim and the Watusi, the Monkey and the Top Cat Shake" (Miklitsch 2006:14).

Regarding the chosen soundtrack, " "You Never Can Tell," which Tarantino has said doesn't sound French or even for that matter twisty, but the song's use of "Pierre" and "Mademoiselle" gives it a uniquely 1950s "French New Wave dance sequence feel" " (Miklitsch 2006:15). In fact, in Miklitsch's opinion, one of the things that separates Tarantino from his "wannabe peers" is the precedence given to music in the creative process. In this regard, he sees the choice of Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell" as the *coup de grace* of the film. Written while in jail for "having the intention" of committing a sex-related crime, the similarity between his situation and the perilous one that Vince finds himself in is "one of many blackly comic subtexts" (Miklitsch 2006:14) in *Pulp Fiction*. After all, sex with Mia is taboo as she is Big Daddy Marsellus Wallace's prized trophy wife. The viewer is well aware of the danger surrounding their interaction as Tarantino has painstakingly created the sense of danger surrounding dealings with Mia in the 'foot massage' dialogue in the previous scene. Miklitsch's view is in opposition to the interpretation by Dettmar and Richey (mentioned in the previous chapter), who view the soundtracks to Tarantino's films as "an aesthetics of pure cheese" and feel that "the director's fondness for bad music is unmistakable" (1999:319). As discussed in the previous chapter, such "cheesy" aesthetics are analysed by Newitz as a new kind of humour, which is haunting U.S. popular culture, and she sees Tarantino as "the auteur of cheese" (2000:59). She defines cheese as "a parodic practice and a parodic form of textual consumption". Cheese is also "a way of remembering history, a kind of snide nostalgia for serious culture of the past which now seem so alien and bizarre as to be funny" (Newitz 2000:59). Viewed within this parodic structure, her interpretation resonates with that of Miklitsch.

Miklitsch cites Grossberg's work on popular music, where rock is seen as a necessary object of critical engagement, and contends that Bruce Springsteen, as a national popular sign of the body and sexuality, emerges in the 1970s when: "a set of signifiers … receives its most visceral, economic

expression in the figure of dancing" (Miklitsch 2006:30). However, it has been argued that these rhythms, with their sexual overtones, were obvious in the music of Elvis Presley and:

> what Elvis told B. B. King on one occasion could have
> been said just as appropriately to Arthur "Big Boy"
> Crudup or Big Bill Broonzy or Howlin' Wolf or Josh
> White or Chuck Berry or Junior Parker or Ray Charles
> or Nat King Cole or uncountable other black musicians
> who influenced Elvis: "Thanks, man, for the early
> lessons you gave me." (Chadwick 1997:111)

The sexuality of the 1970s dance form could therefore be argued to have had early African-American roots, established in the western milieu by Elvis.

The relationship between sex and dancing is thus consciously established by Tarantino, with its references to the sexy Tony Manero and the lascivious Chuck Berry. In its aftermath, the outcome of the dance competition becomes evident in the scene that follows at Mia Wallace's home when Vince and Mia dance into the house with the trophy they have won. Both are high and there is sexual tension in the air, so much so that Vince takes himself off to the bathroom to give himself a man-to-man talk in the mirror,

> VINCENT
> One drink and leave. Don't be rude, but drink your
> drink quickly, say goodbye, walk out the door, get
> in your car, and go down the road. (1993)

While waiting for him Mia dances to Urge Overkill's "Girl you'll be a woman soon" with its sexually loaded refrain:

> Girl, you'll be a woman soon
> Please come take my hand
> Girl, you'll be a woman soon
> Soon you'll need a man. (1993)

Although there is no mistaking that Mia is already a sexually active woman, the implications of the lyrics are that she is about to relive her first sexual experience. The expectation of both Vince and the viewer is that sex, with all its overtones of danger, is about to follow. However, danger is unfolding in a different guise in the living room as Mia discovers the heroin in Vince's jacket

pocket. Presaged in an earlier scene where Vince shot up on cocaine at his dealer's house, "the sex, drugs, rock 'n roll" scenario is about to veer away from the sex and head towards the drugs with a whole new set of concomitant dangers. Assuming the powder to be cocaine, Mia snorts it and by the time Vince enters the living room her nose is bloodied, she is comatose and frothing from the mouth, epitomising the "Pulp" foreshadowed in the opening credits as "soft, moist, shapeless mass or matter" (1993).

The scene that follows epitomises high melodrama with its characterisation of a panic-stricken Vince, a comatose Mia, the hysterical drug dealer Lance and his wife, Jody (Rosanna Arquette), who displays a ghoulish interest in the proceedings. Singer describes the element of melodrama within the context of Douglas Sirk's films:

> The essential element perhaps most often associated with melodrama is a certain "overwrought" or "exaggerated" quality summed up by the term *excess.* Although the currency of this notion in film criticism stems from several sources, one important one was Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's brief essay "Minnelli and Melodrama" (1977). (Singer 2001:38-39)

Singer refers here to Sirk's 1950s family melodramas where, for example: "the *mise-en-scène* is conspicuously oversaturated with glaring colors, overstuffed with too much furniture and too many mirrors, and overdetermined with props that are often 'too symbolic'". Tarantino's earlier reference to director Douglas Sirk with the "Douglas Sirk steak" at Jack Rabbit Slim's resonates in the *mise-en-scène* in Lance's disheveled house, "overstuffed with furniture" which adds to the sense of chaos pervading the scene.

Another signifier of excess and excessive symbolism takes the form of Jody's 16 body piercings, which are highlighted in her discussion with her friend, Trudi (Bronagh Gallagher) (1993). Seen as a symbol of melodrama the piercings point to a lifestyle of excess, but as a cultural signifier, the piercings associated with the punk movement are often viewed as self-mutilation, a phenomenon discussed by Hewitt:

> On the streets and in underground clubs in the early
> 1970s individuals began to mutilate their bodies and
> flaunt an outrageous subcultural challenge to hegemony
> expressed in a style and music known as punk.
> (1997:161)

The obvious jump in signification from the rock 'n roll cultural paraphernalia of the fifties-styled "unreal" Jack Rabbit Slim's to the seventies punk style exhibited by Jody reflect a return to "reality", in this case the "unreality" of an age of innocence to the "reality" of the effect of hard drugs and the present. One of the realities which Mia appears to be skirting is the way her relationship with the patriarchal Marsellus is restricting her, another central element of melodramas identified by Singer as "the dignity and difficulties of female independence in the face of conventional small-mindedness and patriarchal stricture" (Singer 2001:38). Such oppression of women is also a feature in the conventional gangster film genre, which Yaquinto[20] views as misogynistic in its portrayal of women. It is, therefore, an "unlikely environment in which to map progressive, even oppositional, women" (in Inness 2004:208). Yet Yaquinto's tracking of the opportunistic, promiscuous moll who acts as a foil to the disempowered, submissive, emotional wife in earlier gangster films is compelling in its revelation of "gender constructions, identity formations, and cultural containment" (in Inness 2004:208). She makes an oppositional reading of the mothers, sisters and wives in *Goodfellas*, *The Godfather Part III* and the television series, *The Sopranos*, where the image of these female Mob members is conflated into the "Madonna-whore binary" (in Inness 2004:208), which the molls and their virtuous counterparts once represented. In their more recent versions, these formerly disempowered women now "talk back and demand their share of the spoils" (in Inness 2004:208). She sees this as a result of the liberating influence of the moll. I see Mia's feeble attempts at independence, be it making a failed pilot, holidaying alone in Amsterdam or going out with gangsters in the employ of her husband, as a reflection of Yaquinto's description of the disempowered wives as "doormats of the screen underworld" (in Inness 2004:209) depicted in conventional gangster films. Tarantino has therefore created Mia's character within a framework of

weakness and vulnerability. This vulnerability is displayed in the melodramatic overdose sequence. Tarantino's script sets the tone for this scene:

> From here on in, everything in this scene is frantic, like
> a DOCUMENTARY in an emergency ward, with the big
> difference here being nobody knows what the fuck
> they're doing. (1993)

The "overwrought" qualities of the scene reach culmination when, after much chaotic searching, Lance finds "the black medical book" (1993), for guidance in the administration of the adrenalin shot. Once he has ascertained where Mia's heart is Vince needs to mark the spot, and asks for "a magic marker" (1993). This signifier brings to the scene a signification of both popular culture and the magician's touch that is required to resurrect Mia. The melodrama reaches comedic proportions, heightened by Lance's instructions to Vince: "she's got a breast plate in front of her heart, so you gotta pierce through that. So what you gotta do is bring the needle down in a stabbing motion" (1993) and Vince's assumption that he has to stab her three times with the adrenalin filled syringe. Although this assumption does not appear in the film script, cited throughout this chapter, it appears in the film, possibly as an ad lib. Adding to the comedy is Jody's frenetic behaviour. The script calls for her face to be "alive with anticipation" (1993), superbly achieved by Rosanna Arquette, whose heightened interest in the macabre event adds to the comedic value of the scene. The melodrama culminates in Mia's resurrection, achieved in the vein of a science fiction film, as she awakes from her near-death experience with "the HELLISH cry of the banshee" (1993). Tarantino's choice of this mythical creature as a metaphor in his script relates to the mythical status of the banshee as a harbinger of death (Kubicek 2010:1). It could also be argued that the mythical nature of this beast points to other mythical possibilities, evident in the science fiction genre, which has produced many such resurrections, including vampire films where the bitten victims arise as vampires themselves and the Frankenstein story where a human is created. The hyperreal nature of the scene enters Baudrillard's second successive phase of the image, which he see as inaugurating the era of simulacra and of simulation. In this phase he argues that "there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the

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true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (2010:6). This is the level of maleficence and Mia's resurrection could well be seen as magical and evil, particularly when associated with the "HELLISH" cry and the "magic marker" reference earlier in the scene.

Lyotard speaks of narration as "the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" (1986:19). He then goes on to describe the first way in which the popular stories recount the successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings:

> These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the functions of myths) or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). (Lyotard 1986:20)

Vince has been raised, within this mini-narrative of Mia's near-death, to the status of a hero by saving the heroine and managing to deliver on his promise to himself not to have sexual relations with her, thereby respecting the institution of marriage and the family.

Within functional analysis, as outlined in the previous chapter, Propp's analysis can be applied here. On the level of the drug overdose scene Vince ends as the "hero" having saved the life of the "princess" Mia. The "donor" is Lance, who gave assistance by providing the syringe of adrenalin as well as the requisite knowledge for its administration. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Propp's analysis provides for a change in the status of the characterisation, so for example the "hero" can become a "villain" and *vice versa*. Using Propp's schema, we do see a change in the status of both Lance, the dealer and provider of the harmful substance, and Vince, the unwitting distributor of the harmful substance, who at the beginning of the scene could both be characterised as "villains". This type of analysis is reflected in Lyotard's view that: "Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" and that "popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships"

(1986:19-20). Furthermore, the myth has served to bestow legitimacy upon the social institution of marriage and the family. But Tarantino has infused his representation of the grand narrative of the family (including marital fidelity) with considerable irony here. Mia remains sexually faithful only because she nearly dies, not because she intends to do so.

A subdued Mia and Vince return to Mia's house and the anticlimactic ending culminates in Mia relating the joke she tells in the "Fox Force Five" pilot, a silly joke she was reluctant to share with Vince earlier. The signification of her lack of concern about what he might think of her at this point, contrasted with her coquettish shyness of recounting it earlier, is evidence of the turn their burgeoning relationship has taken from the heightened sexual nuances at the beginning of the scene to her near-death and the death of any sexual possibility at the end.

> MIA
> Three tomatoes are walking down the street, a poppa
> tomato, a momma tomato, and a little baby tomato.
> The baby tomato is lagging behind the poppa and
> momma tomato. The poppa tomato gets mad, goes
> over to the momma tomato and stamps on him --
> (STAMPS on the ground) -- and says: catch up.
>
> They both smile, but neither laugh.
>
> MIA
> See ya 'round, Vince. (1993)

The narrative now switches to "The Gold Watch" story, with a young Butch watching a cartoon on the television. This is "a mini-boxing film with a familiar set-up: a gangster, in this case Marcellus Wallace, tells the fighter to throw a fight" (Berg 2006:25). Tarantino, however, undermines the familiar structure by skipping the actual boxing match, which would be the moment of truth in the boxing genre. The viewer is only given insights via excerpts from a radio commentary on the match, which reveal that the other boxer has died in the ring; the discussion of the fight by a taxi driver who transports Butch post-haste from the scene of his crime; and Butch's subsequent fugitive status. Although this story is not analysed in this dissertation, I mention it for its Tarantino-esque device of scene omission. So, as in *Reservoir Dogs*, the

narrative of a diamond heist in which the heist is not shown, Tarantino once again undermines viewer expectations by telling a story of a thrown fight in which the fight is not shown.

The three scenes analysed in this chapter reflect the intersection of the philosophies of Lyotard and Baudrillard, regarding grand narratives and hyperreality as features of postmodernism, with Tarantino's films. The devices employed by Tarantino lead to a splintering of the grand narrative of film-making, with its formerly predictable structure, into unpredictable mini-narratives consisting of circularity, non-linearity and frequent allusions to popular culture, as well as the omission of pivotal scenes from the narrative. Such postmodern devices reflect the opinion expressed by Sontag as long ago as 1966, that "the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture seems less and less meaningful" (cited in Storey 2006:130).

Notes

[1] Tarantino, Quentin and Avery, Roger, 1993. *Pulp Fiction Script*
[http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/pulp_fiction.html (accessed 20/09/2009)]

[2] All references to the script of *Reservoir Dogs* are to the online version, which is available at
http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/pulp_fiction.html, no page numbers are available for this
source.

[3] Sale Discount Shop [http://www.cigarettesmix.com/chesterfield.html (accessed 22/04/11)]

[4] TopTenz.net [http://www.toptenz.net/top-ten-fictional-brands-from-movies-and-tv.php
(accessed 21/04/11)]

[5] Ibid.

[6] This is the edition of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* cited by Botting and Wilson. I
have referred to the 2005 edition in my discussion.

[7] Phillips, Nickie D. "The Dark Knight: Constructing Images of Good vs. Evil in an Age of
Anxiety" in Deflem, Mathieu 2010. *Popular Culture, Crime and Social Control.* Bingley:
Emerald Group Publishing

[8] Ibid.

[9] Rojek, Chris "Celebrity and Religion" in Marshall, P. David, ed. 2010. *The Celebrity Culture
Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[10] Dawson, Jeff, "revenge of the nerd" in Woods, Paul A., ed. 2005. quentin tarantino: the film
geek files. London: Plexus Publishing.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Boorstin, Daniel J. "From Hero to Celebrity: The human pseudo-event" in Marshall, P.
David, ed. 2006. *The Celebrity Culture Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[13] Marshall, P. David, "Intimately intertwined in the most public way" in Marshall, P. David, ed.
2010. *The Celebrity Culture Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[14] Smith (2005:121) explains that most film directors "including those regarded as deeply
personal filmmakers like Terry Gilliam or Tim Burton and even big names like Steven
Spielberg, generally work-for-hire". However, when offered *Men in Black,* Tarantino did not
even read the script. Smith believes, "Writer Ed Solomon's fast-paced, sharp-talking
screenplay would actually have been a good match for Tarantino, although the suggestion
that Tarantino direct may have been made for other, duller reasons: the Men in Black do, with
their black suits, ties and shades, resemble the Reservoir Dogs more than a little." Smith finds
it 'bizarre' that Tarantino was offered *Speed* given that until he directed *Kill Bill Vol. 1*
Tarantino did not consider himself an action film director.

[15] Hermes (in Marshall 2010:291) distinguishes between three different varieties of gossip in
gossip magazines: "Malicious gossip and scandal, friendly stories about celebrities (usually
with a focus on babies) and stories about royalty." In my opinion, his unsubstantiated, sexist
statement, "Gossip has a bad reputation. It is considered a typical women's pastime and is
often taken to be highly malicious talk about persons who are not present" is academically
unsound.

[16] Exodus 20:14 New Living Translation Bible. 1996. USA: Tyndale House Publishers.

[17] Rojek, Chris "Celebrity and Religion" in Marshall, P. David, ed. 2010. *The Celebrity Culture
Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[18] Boorstin, Daniel J. "From Hero to Celebrity: The human pseudo-event" in Marshall, P.
David, ed. 2006. *The Celebrity Culture Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[18] Marshall, P. David, "Intimately intertwined in the most public way" in Marshall, P. David, ed.
2010. *The Celebrity Culture Reader.* New York: Routledge.

[19] IMDb Imitation of Life [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052918/ (accessed 20/06/10)]

[20] Yaquinto, Marilyn "Mamas, Molls and Mob Wives" in Inness, Sherrie A. 2004. *Action chicks:
New images of tough women in popular culture.* New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the compelling intersections between Baudrillard's simulacra and Lyotard's grand narratives which are evident in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* where Lyotard's 'metanarratives' (2005:37) are often contested, and examples of Baudrillard's 'hyperreality' (2010:1) visually portrayed. These intersections have been identified and analysed in chapters one and two.

The significance of film director Quentin Tarantino's debut film *Reservoir Dogs* and his second film *Pulp Fiction* situates the director as an *auteur,* skilled in the execution of postmodern theory within the realm of film. This dissertation has hypothesised that Tarantino's *oeuvre* has grown to the point where he has created a particular genre of film. Tasker points out:

> … beyond the media phenomenon, Tarantino's films have
> proved sufficiently distinctive to generate the adjective
> 'Tarantino-esque'. (2002:341)

Such Tarantino-esque features were examined and found to include various postmodern devices that were applied in such a way as to lead to a new genre of film which subverted the grand narrative of film-making. Berg (2006) undertook a similar study of the "Tarantino effect" which was analysed in the first chapter.

The theoretical framework for this research was the postmodern theory of Lyotard and Baudrillard, whose analytical methods were applied throughout the readings. To illustrate the intersection of their theories evident in Tarantino's films, the findings will be discussed scene by scene to ensure that each illustrates an intersection of the chosen theorists' views.

To begin with, the postulation was examined that in its extreme Baudrillardian form, the loss of the 'real' seemed to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering in the context of both films. It was argued that the playfulness of the signification in the violent scenes sets Tarantino's films apart from the gratuitous violence of

many mainstream Hollywood films. A narrative, semiotic and syntagmatic analysis of the scenes which illustrated a loss of the real and legitimised indifference to suffering were undertaken in chapters one and two.

The first scene under discussion was then the torture scene, *Reservoir Dogs*, discussed in the first chapter. Through a semiotic analysis of the diegetic music in the Stealers Wheel soundtrack "Stuck in the middle with you" the appropriacy of the lyrics were analysed in terms of the suffering of the cop and the callousness of Mr White. Mr White's comments were analysed in terms of innuendo and double entendre and it was concluded that the torture, with its sado sexual overtones and entertainment value for Mr White, had entered Baudrillardian hyperreality when it became evident that it was no longer being implemented as a means of information extraction and therefore lost the validation given to such endeavours during times of war and threat to homeland security, for example. Baudrillard's concept of 'simulacra' (2010:1) was analysed here to identify the 'hyperreal' elements of the film. It was established that a pure simulacrum was created in the order of the fourth of Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image" (Baudrillard 2010:6) when Mr Blonde spoke into the severed ear of Marvin Nash, the kidnapped police officer. It was concluded that the severed ear could be read as a simulacrum when it lost its significance as a viable body part and merely became a simulation of an ear. Once severed it was unable to assist the auditory canal in the reception of signals, yet Mr Blonde's macabre enquiry, "Hey what's going on?" directed into the severed ear and the next direct question to the cop's lobe-less ear "Hear that?" played with signification and the ear became hyperreal in the process. Therefore, Baudrillard's theory of the "successive phases of the image" (2010:6) was applied in the following four stages within the context of the ear slicing scene: firstly, the ear when attached to the head was the reflection of a profound reality; secondly, the severed ear masked and denatured a profound reality; thirdly, Mr Blonde's enquiry to the cop, who by then was ear-less masked the absence of a profound reality and finally, Mr Blonde's enquiry directed into the ear had no

relation to any reality whatsoever: it was its own pure simulacrum.

Intersecting with this example of Baudrillardian hyperreality, an investigation of Lyotard's "metanarratives", which appeared in the *Reservoir Dogs'* torture scene, revealed that the grand narrative of the family as an institution of society occurred when Mr Blonde removed the gag which enabled the cop to once again introduce the importance of family into the *szughet* by begging for his life in order to play the role of father to his children. This grand narrative had previously been introduced by Mr Orange, also a cop, but it was unbeknown to the audience at that point as he was undercover and the non-linearity of the filmscript hindered such knowledge. This occurred when he expressed his anguish at killing a young woman who had a baby. The role of the family as a grand narrative was thereby reinforced and became powerfully associated with law and order. The grand narrative of the nuclear family was, however, not part of the reality of Mr Blonde's life experience and the cop's plea therefore had no relevance and was lost on him.

In binary opposition to the concept of the family as the strongest single institution in society, the 'honour among thieves' scenario was examined and evidence produced of the powerful alliances that existed among the gang members in *Reservoir Dogs*. As the scene unfolds in the warehouse, where most of *Reservoir Dogs* is situated, the relationship between Mr Orange and Mr White develops and the mini-narrative of 'honour among thieves' is firmly established. This intentional development of their bond culminates in the *denouement* at the end of the film in the Mexican standoff scene, where Mr Orange confesses to Mr White "I'm a cop. Larry... I'm sorry. I'm so -- so sorry. I'm a cop" (1991). This admission was made out of Mr Orange's need to affirm his alliance with Mr White and establish their relationship as 'real'. I concluded that by establishing the 'honour among thieves' mini-narrative throughout the film, Tarantino subverts the grand narrative of the family. In addition to the powerful alliance established between Mr White and Mr Orange, evidence was given in chapter one of the

great affection and solidarity that existed between Mr Blonde and gang boss Joe. Mr Blonde's loyalty to Joe was unequivocal, as revealed in a later, nonlinear scene where it emerges that Mr Blonde has served time in jail for Joe. On the other hand, the price of disloyalty to the 'gang' is high. Unlike the ties of blood relatives, where 'blood is thicker than water', it was shown that gangsters are required to prove their loyalty by adherence to the rules of their alliance. Evidence of this was examined in chapter one in the Mexican standoff at the end of *Reservoir Dogs* where all the aliases, Joe and Good Guy Eddie died as a result of mistrust and deception. The rules so painstakingly spelled out by Joe are central to the strength of this unit, and Mr Pink's use of the word 'professionals' was discussed as key to the relationships that Joe attempts to establish. Joe's insistence on anonymity was seen to be a means of preventing emotional ties from developing, and depersonalising relationships within the gang, which proved to be a sensible approach. For, after all, an analysis of the relationships showed that it was Mr White's emotional entanglement with Mr Orange that destabilises the group when he makes fundamental mistakes, such as revealing his name, failing to read the signs pointing to Mr Orange as the "rat" and choosing to defend him to the death. Unlike blood ties of family, it was established that the rules of simulated families require allegiance that exact a high price and disloyalty results in death, as borne out in the closing scene of the film.

On a Baudrillardian level, I argued that the aliases are simulacra, as they are exact copies of people who never existed, men without names, without distinctive dress styles and with anonymous backgrounds. They were seen to be simulacra of bandits, as the signifiers of all the colour attributions had no signifieds and their survival as a group depends on such anonymity. The resonances and associations of colour, as in the case of Mr Pink, where he voices his objections and is described as a 'faggot' by Joe, were discussed. It was concluded however that such resonances did not disclose any concrete information as to their identities and that this served as further evidence that they were simulacra of

bandits.

In chapter two, the execution scene in *Pulp Fiction* was analysed to establish that Jules's misquote of the Biblical passage and playing the role of God was hyperreal and belongs to Baudrillard's "second of the successive phases of the image" where it "masks and denatures a profound reality" (Baudrillard 2010:6), namely the verse in the Christian Bible which seeks to instill obedience into Christians. Until Jules has his mystical experience, and subsequent conversion, there is no intention of communion with God: there is simply the need to intimidate his victims and have power over them. Jules becomes a simulacrum of a priest, quoting meaningless signifiers and using misquoted prayer as a prelude to murder. Baudrillard suggests that simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994:453). In other words, the signifier has no signified. It was therefore concluded that the signifier "priest", with its signified of a shepherd caring for his flock through guidance, caring and saving of souls becomes hyperreal when it no longer points to such signifieds.

Although Lyotard does not write about religion *per se*, his definition of postmodernity as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" and "the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation" (1986:xxiv) is seen by Storey as referring to:

> the supposed contemporary collapse or widespread
> rejection of all overarching and totalizing frameworks which
> seek to tell universalist stories ('metanarratives'): Marxism,
> liberalism, Christianity, for example. (2006:132)

I find such an example highly relevant to this study: insofar as the religion metanarrative has given great power to the church for two millennia and does indeed tell "a universalist story" it would be appropriate to regard it as a grand narrative and to deconstruct Jules's pre-execution misquote within this context. By fragmenting the biblical reference and using it in a context of murder and

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cruelty, this narrative undermines the grand narrative of religion. This was examined in the framework of Nolan's second theological engagement with film as a reference point and Jules's quote was analysed through a "biblical hermeneutic" to understand and interpret the passage (Nolan cited in Bidwell 2001:327). His first line, "There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17" signifies Jules's dependence on his memory and that it "seems" appropriate. The use of the abstract verb mediates his understanding as he does not use the more assertive "is" about the appropriacy of the message. The actual Ezekiel quote was paraphrased in the last five lines of his speech, and the rest was analysed as being a pastiche of various biblical references. Despite the inaccuracy it was concluded that he did get the gist of the "vengeance" angle of the message across. In his next paraphrase and the replacement of "wrathful chastisements" with "furious anger" Jules illustrates the use of retaliation and fury as a means of meting out justice and transmits a message of God on the warpath. Although now a familiar message in the context of the Old Testament, his assumption that he is God and the dispenser of justice and has the right to take away life, was interpreted as a subversion of the religion grand narrative, where God is seen as the sole purveyor of such justice.

The Jack Rabbit Slim's diner scene provided rich content for this thesis with its popular culture artifacts and creation of simulations in the order of Baudrillard's simulacra. I observed that the images on display were akin to Disneyland, since they are so much part of the cinema viewer's psyche. Vince's observation, "It's like a wax museum with a pulse" (1993) was analysed for its contextualisation of the diner as a simulation. The popular culture of the 1950s was analysed in terms of the décor and the waiters who simulated characters of the fifties. A reading was made of the Buddy Holly waiter, wearing a button on his chest reading: "Hi I'm Buddy, pleasing you pleases me", and introducing himself: "Hi, I'm Buddy, what can I get'cha?" (1993). This was analysed as a pure simulacrum as the copy of the singer Buddy Holly, namely the waiter, made no distinction between himself, the waiter, and Buddy Holly, the musician, for he has assumed Buddy

Holly's persona and in the process has become a simulated copy. I discuss the relevance of Baudrillard's view of Disneyland in this regard and it was concluded that, like Disneyland, Jack Rabbit Slim's "is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms" and "This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation" (Baudrillard 2010:12). In this case the operation was read as referring to the themed diner and all its service personnel. The importance of signification was discussed and the conclusion was drawn that no signifier in Jack Rabbit Slim's could be accepted uncritically as the *savoir faire* of the reader is required to make sense of many seemingly inane signs. A brief textual analysis was made of the signifier on Buddy's badge, for instance, which refers to a song by Tommy Roe of the same title, "Pleasing you pleases me".

Baudrillard's analysis of Disneyland was further discussed in terms of his observation that all America's values were being "exalted by the miniature and the comic strip" (2010:12). The research elucidated examples of such exaltation in the popular culture icons of the 1950s that had become immortalised in the "miniature world" presented in Jack Rabbit Slim's. A particularly playful signifier in this regard was the Morris cigarettes midget, miniature in stature who joins the illustrious icons of his era. It was discussed that such exaltation occurred only with the buy in of the audience, or in this case, the diners:

> The only phantasmagoria in this imaginary world lies in the tenderness and warmth of the crowd, and in the sufficient and excessive number of gadgets necessary to create the multitudinous effect. (Baudrillard 2010:12)

It is at this point that there is an interesting intersection with Lyotard's discussion of *savoir faire* which is discussed in the next section. The research showed that Jack Rabbit Slim's had an abundance of such "gadgets", from the simulated underground train creating a rush of air through the grate that raised the Marilyn Monroe simulacra's skirt, to the reconstructed 50s cars that served as seating booths. In addition, Jack Rabbit Slim's created a "tender and warm" response from Vincent and Mia who participated unreservedly in the simulated world by

referring to the simulations as real people. Their conversation about the "two Marilyn Monroes" was analysed in terms of the word play as a verbal manifestation of the hyperreality at work in this scene and the resonance within Lyotard's language games was discussed. Reference was made to Belsey's analysis of fiction and reality and her observation that "it has become fashionable to see human beings as entirely culturally constructed" (2005:3) which it was felt had great resonance in the scene. This related to both Mia's lack of *savoir faire* (Lyotard 1986:18) about the culture of the fifties and to the creation of Marilyn Monroe as a cultural commodity in the guise of a sex goddess. Reference was made to the contrast between Marilyn's public and private personae and the fact that the media-created Marilyn of the 50s was no more 'real' than the Marilyn in Jack Rabbit Slim's, which were both simulacra in that they had "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 2010:6).

As there was such a plethora of signifiers in this scene, some will just be mentioned in this discussion to identify them. Signifiers such as the "Douglas Sirk steak" with its referent being the director of "Imitation of Life" served as self-reflexive reminders of Jack Rabbit Slim's being an imitation or simulation and that it was situated in the 1950s. The ongoing dialogue about the steak related directly to the title of the film with its connotation of violence "burnt to a crisp, or bloody as hell". Further self-reflexivity was evident in Vincent's comment that the diner was "like a wax museum with a pulse rate" (1993) and was a confirmation of simulation, of the entering of Baudrillard's fourth successive phase of the image, where "it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 2010:6). The nostalgia created by Tarantino in Jack Rabbit Slim's diner related to Baudrillard's view of reality in this phase of the image, "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (2010:6).

Here again there was an intersection with Lyotard's reference to nostalgia in his discussion of the pragmatics of narrative knowledge in the story telling of the

Cashinahua storyteller (1986:20) who, in the retelling of an old story, becomes the hero of a narrative, in the same way as the Ancestor did before him. It was argued that this was in the same order of simulation as Baudrillard's fourth stage of the sign, as the Cashinahua storyteller does not have 'real' experience of the tale he recounts, but assimilated knowledge from having been a 'narratee' of the same story:

> (The Cashinahua) example clearly illustrates that a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence – "know-how," "knowing how to speak," and "knowing how to hear" [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*] – through which the community's relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond. (Lyotard 1986:21)

There is another interesting intersection here between the Cashinahua narrator and Tarantino, the *Pulp Fiction* scriptwriter. The narrative knowledge required by both of them was the "know-how" or *savoir faire* of relating tales of a bygone era. However, the "speech acts relevant to this form of knowledge are performed not only by the speaker, but also by the listener" (Lyotard 2010:21). In this case "the listener" or audience is assumed to be aware of the cultural representations, in the form of popular culture, so evident in this scene. The means of delivery was through artifacts which function as signifiers of this culture, namely the aforementioned film star lookalikes, posters, vintage car reconstructions and reenactments of iconic scenes in films. The *savoir-faire* of the audience is necessary to make sense of the simulation happening in the scene.

I then established more instances of *savoir faire* within *Pulp Fiction*, such as the conversation about Mia's "pilot" which required Vince's *savoir-faire* about television serials. He has no problem in making this connection as Jules had provided him with the requisite information in an earlier scene. The detailed conversation between the characters about the pilot was analysed in terms of self-reflexivity, as was the square, which manifests as dots on the windscreen.

I pose a thought-provoking intertextual question between *Pulp Fiction*, an existing film, and *Kill Bill II*, a non-existent film at that time, which would only be made in 2004, ten years later. This speculation plays with concepts of time and space, the real and the unreal in a way that created a simulation in the order of sorcery, Baudrillard's third stage of the image, where "it masks the *absence* of a profound reality" (Baudrillard 2010:6).

Here the research found another intersection where Lyotard described the credulity of the people, or audience, as vital in the process of actualisation or making the narratives "real":

> In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into "play" in their institutions – thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator. (Lyotard 1986:23)

Within the fictional world created in the Force Fox Five scene, Vince actualises Mia's narrative and brings it into play with his question: "What was your speciality?" not: "What was the brunette one's speciality?", thus blurring the lines between diegesis (the fictional world in which the event is narrated, namely the TV pilot) and the "real" world in which he and Mia are conducting this conversation. Mia similarly blurs the role of diegesis and narrator. Both instances thus subvert the legitimacy of the grand narrative and reveal its fictional status.

In the unfolding narrative of their evening out together, Vincent's irony requires the *savoir-faire* of the audience to actualise it and add to the comedy of the situation when Mia asks him to dance and he responded: "I'm not much of a dancer" (1993). The intertextual link to Travolta's role as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* was discussed, as was the requisite *savoir faire* of the viewer to unveil the irony inherent here.

The discussion of the dance sequence was contextualised within Miklitsch's

analysis of the central role played by Chuck Berry's soundtrack "You never can tell" in creating irony (2006:14). The analysis of this irony relates to Chuck Berry's jail conviction on charges related to sexual intention, which correspond with Vince's fear of succumbing to his desire for Mia. In addition there is Tarantino's own comment that he had chosen the song for its use of "Pierre" and "Mademoiselle" giving it a uniquely 50's "French New Wave dance sequence feel" " (Miklitsch 2006:15). Miklitsch then draws the conclusion that this is an ironical allusion to Godard's film and also a classically postmodern gesture since *Band á part*, with its Hollywood allusions and self-reflexive style, destabilises the tendentious opposition between Hollywood and avant-garde cinema. This binary opposition privileges the hegemony of Hollywood which, within the context of this thesis, was construed as a grand narrative with its economic and political power. However, within the context of the art form of cinema as high/low, avant-garde cinema is privileged as a highbrow art form, which the film *Band á part* destabilises by making it more accessible to populist audiences.

One finding of my detailed reading of the relationship between sex and dancing was that Tarantino consciously established such a link with references to the sexy Tony Manero and the lascivious Chuck Berry. The viewers' awareness of the potential for sexual tension is therefore inevitable on the condition that they have the *savoir faire* to make connections between Tarantino's scene, *Saturday Night Fever* and Chuck Berry. The lyrics of Urge Overkill's "Girl you'll be a woman soon" (2003), with their sexually loaded refrain and accessible signification, were analysed and found to add to the tension.

The analysis of *Pulp Fiction* revealed that the transition from the free and easy "drugs, sex, rock 'n roll" mini-narrative to its more sinister side occurs when Mia discovers Vince's heroin and, assuming it to be cocaine, inhales it. Vince's response to her near-death experience was analysed as heroic, even though the unfolding story gives the viewer enough *savoir faire* to assume that there is a great deal of self interest in his response. After all, his own life is at stake, as

revealed in the earlier "foot massage" dialogue with Jules. Lyotard's view of narration as "the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" (1986:19) provides a useful theoretical framework in that he describes the first way in which the popular stories recount the successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings:

> These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the functions of myths) or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). (Lyotard 1986:20)

Vince has been raised within this mini-narrative of Mia's near death to the status of a hero by saving the heroine and managing to deliver on his promise to himself not to have sexual relations with her, thereby respecting the institution of marriage and the family.

Propp's functional analysis was applied to the analysis and, in the drug overdose scene, Vince is seen as the "hero", having saved the life of the "princess" Mia. The "donor" was analysed as being Lance, who gives assistance by providing the syringe of adrenalin as well as the requisite knowledge for its administration. I discussed how Propp's analysis provides for a change in the status of the characterisation, so, for example, the "hero" can become a "villain" and *vice versa*. Using Propp's schema, the change in the status of both Lance, the dealer and provider of the harmful substance, and Vince, the unwitting distributor of the harmful substance, was analysed as changing from villains to heroes. Lyotard's theory was applied here in terms of his view that "Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" and that "popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships" (1986:19-20). I concluded that the myth underlying the scene is the sacred status of the family institution of marriage and the family and that it has been restored by the time Vince delivers Mia back to her front door.

In analysis of the melodrama culminating in Mia's resurrection, I discussed the

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reason for Tarantino's allusion to "the HELLISH cry of the banshee" (1993) as pointing to other mythical possibilities, evident in the science fiction genre, including vampire films and the *Frankenstein* story. The hyperreal nature of the scene enters Baudrillard's second successive phase of the image (2010:6). This is the level of maleficence and Mia's resurrection, it was argued, could well be seen as magical and evil, particularly when associated with the HELLISH cry and the "magic marker" reference earlier in the scene.

Lyotard's theory was applied to the scene with reference to his view of narration as: "the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" (1986:19) and his description of the first way in which the popular stories recount the successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings:

> These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon
> social institutions (the functions of myths) or represent
> positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful
> hero) of integration into established institutions (legends
> and tales). (Lyotard 1986:20)

Vince is shown in this scene as a successful hero who is fully integrated into "established institutions", especially the grand narrative of marital fidelity.

This discussion cannot end without reference being made to Tarantino's unique approach to film-making, alluded to in the second paragraph of this chapter. The reference to an interview on the Charlie Rose show in the first chapter reveals Tarantino's conscious subversion of linearity in conventional film narratives. The subversion identified by Berg (2006) in his attempt to classify the "Tarantino effect" highlights various idiosyncratic narrative techniques used by the *auteur* which affect the *syuzhets,* or plots, of his films. One of these is the disjointed circularity of his storyline. The omission of key scenes, such as the actual heist in *Reservoir Dogs*, a film which has been identified as a heist film, and the actual boxing match in the boxing scene in *Pulp Fiction* was discussed as one of Tarantino's major modifications of genre formulae. The second Tarantino idiosyncrasy is the filling of the gaps created by the aforementioned omissions

with extended conversations that lengthen scenes well beyond the accepted average length of most recent Hollywood film-making. Tarantino's conversations achieve their authenticity because they are long and enlivened with plenty of allusions to pop culture.

It was argued in this dissertation that the formula used in "conventional" Hollywood film screenwriting constitutes a grand narrative. The views of various theorists regarding the "unconventional" aspects of Tarantino's films were discussed: their signifiers include labelling Tarantino as "unorthodox", "experimental", "non-classical", "narrative pyrotechnics", "alternative", "innovative" and "idiosyncratic", "Tarantino has challenged dominant filmmaking", "(Tarantino) violates the classical paradigm" and "Tarantino's flouting of Hollywood's screenwriting rules" (Berg 2006:25). I argue that these critical opinions indicate that conventional film-making is a grand narrative. This legitimacy bestowed on certain narratives, in this case the classical paradigm of film-making, can be interpreted as what Lyotard refers to as a language game (Lyotard 1986:23). Such legitimacy has kept the "classical paradigm of film making" (cited above) in place as a grand narrative, with film makers "doing what they do" and Tarantino's subversion of the grand narrative of film-making as a linear process is, therefore, the first example of the identification of a metanarrative at play in Tarantino's films.

The combination of the various methods of media research in this dissertation has enabled what Stokes calls "a more textured understanding" (2008:27) of the films under discussion. The close reading required by semiotics enabled a deconstruction of sometimes obscure elements, such as the embedded meaning in lyrics and dialogue or the messages implicit in the *mise en scène*. Such readings, however, require a high level of knowledge about the codes implicit in a study of popular culture and postmodern theory in order to contextualise them appropriately. The methods of analysis derived from film studies are highly dependent on description, a tendency which required constant anchorage by the

hypothesis; therefore the relevance of Baudrillard's and Lyotard's theories had to be a strong framework for my examination of film narratology. This eclectic approach allowed an in-depth analysis, while maintaining the interpretive thread of my research, and enabled me to recognise Tarantino's conscious use of postmodern theory in the telling of his stories. On the other hand, a limitation of this methodology is that it restricts the number of texts that can be studied. The initial aim of this research was to study four films, but the analysis would have been too superficial had this been the case.

Looking ahead, the inspired research done on the reading of the soundtrack in film by Miklitsch (2006) opens up a fascinating field of study, particularly in the light of Tarantino's penchant for embedding songs into the action, using existing music to set the mood, verbalise the thoughts of his characters and pay homage to certain genres of film.

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