

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
The Event	1
Life in Film	
A Survey of What Borders the “Postmodern”	9
Metamorphosis of a Murder	17
<i>My Best Friend’s Birthday; Reservoir Dogs; True Romance; Natural Born Killers; Pulp Fiction; Four Rooms: The man of Hollywood; From Dusk Till Dawn; Jackie Brown; Kill Bill; Kill Bill-Volume I; Kill Bill-Volume II; Grindhouse: Death Proof; Inglourious Basterds; Django Unchained</i>	
The Interrogation: Reality or 35 mm.?	117
The Alibi	
The Most Powerful Weapon: Writing	133
<i>Crazy Clocks; Structures without Places; 7 Notes to Kill; The Lion King</i>	
The Find	155
<i>Women in Bars and Love to Death; Pale Knights; “Dirty” Bathrooms; Hyperrealistic Junk</i>	
Notes	171
Filmography	173
Bibliography	182

The Event

It's 1994 and *Pulp Fiction* is the surprise winner of the Palme d'Or creating a stir among movie critics and audiences, cynics and fans alike. With only two movies to his name, at age 31, Tarantino is being hailed as the cult writer of the Nineties, a title he has earned because of the postmodern originality and the "rawness" of his writing and style, and perhaps also because the American star system needs a new idol. Contrary to all expectations, the Cannes jury led by Clint Eastwood snubs the favorites Krzysztof Kieslowski (*Three Colors: Red*) and Mikita Mikhalkov (*Burnt by the Sun*) and grants the prize to the unconventional independent film. It's a daring gamble on a new talent and it divides critics just like *The Silence of the Lambs* by Jonathan Demme in 1991 — the first thriller to take home the five most important Oscars.

It's a period when movie preferences are being remapped: there are those who linger in the trenches of tradition but just as many who eagerly embrace the new subversive cinema of excess. In the United States, the debate reaches fever pitch at the Academy Awards in March of the next year. With seven nominations and box-office earnings of 120 million just in the US, *Pulp Fiction* loses out to *Forest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis with twice as many nominations and box-office receipts. Tarantino, nevertheless, takes home the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. The success and controversy generated by both films show the two sides of American cinema and contemporary society: the dark side of the "vicious losers" and the sunny side — contentedly dimwitted yet unflinchingly triumphant.

This is where it all begins. Tarantino's popularity grows in tandem with the controversies, criticism and gossip. Rivers of ink flow to celebrate or to attack him. Pages and forums dedicated to the director disclosing his quirks, vices, and virtues spring up all over the internet, while the bands of followers that borrow his revolutionary linguistic codes steadily grow. This rapid success also draws attention to Tarantino's debut film from 1992, *Reservoir Dogs*, and to the narrative excesses of *True Romance*, a film for which he only edited the script. But it is precisely because of his writing for film that Tarantino asserts his creative personality and wins over his audience. Still under the spotlight of Cannes, he ably launches a diatribe against Oliver Stone over the paternity rights to the original script of *Natural Born Killers* and in so doing calls attention to the most undervalued job in the movie business. At this point the assault on his scripts begins — they are translated and published and begin to turn up on bookstore shelves where they are bought and read as novels and not as technical playbooks. Soon afterwards they are downloaded online — in fact, the original script of *Kill Bill* (2003-2004) will circulate freely online a year before the film's release. Along with his scripts, the original soundtracks that Tarantino gleans from his personal music collection and uses in his films are sought out and classified as cult objects and published in dedicated collections. Likewise, the old genre films from which he draws his aesthetics and his inspiration are restored and re-released on DVD.

This hasty idolization of Tarantino creates a surprising level of hype at the release of each film, giving rise to a peculiar sociological phenomenon. The use of "lowbrow" material from B-movies becomes a trademark that guarantees an emotional experience free of intellectualistic obligations, and acts as an enchantment that can seduce both cinephiles and casual moviegoers alike. For this reason, in 1995 he's not forgiven for his episode of *Four Rooms*, considered an insipid flop, which sets off the first true analysis of the director's career in an effort to confirm his talent and authenticity. He isn't forgiven either for his significant change of direction in 1997 with *Jackie Brown* that disappoints his younger fans especially, and draws criticism for its excessive length. The debut of *Grindhouse*, the second film made in collaboration with Robert Rodriguez three years after the success of *Kill Bill*, receives a disappointing response at the box-office though it too is inspired by the low budget films of the Seventies. Tarantino's fame, acquired in record time, begins to undergo what are inevitable market fluctuations.

Tarantino himself precipitates this media process by serving up his own image and allowing it to be greedily consumed on talk shows and in magazines. His face circulates everywhere printed on t-shirts, and this character — not Tarantino the writer — takes center stage creating confusion and even frustration for moviegoers, a confusion that is also due in part to his creative eclecticism. *Pulp Fiction* marks the debut of the independent production company A Band Apart which takes its name from a film by Jean-Luc Godard. Founded by Tarantino and Lawrence Bender, it produces his successive films and specializes in producing unconventional advertising and commercials. Tim Burton and John Woo are the names that stand out among the directors hired to film the ads. Tarantino is at the same time producer, director, scriptwriter, and actor — with somewhat marginal roles and cameos in both TV and film. Over the years he often uses his celebrity status to bring foreign films (mostly Asian) and low budget productions to the Western market, and to sponsor films by new and not-so-new directors whose names are associated with his in trailers and on movie posters. This is the case for *Iron Monkey* by Woo Ping Yuen that comes out on home video in 1993 and that, thanks to him, is released in American movie theaters for the first time in 2001, for *Hero* by Zhang Yimou which is re-released in feature length in 2004, and for the horror splatter film *Hostel* by Eli Roth that becomes a cult movie when associated with his name.

Each of these projects, no matter what his role, is considered “Tarantino’s,” or to underscore the unique brand of the artist, “tarantinian” and “tarantinoized.” The director becomes an adjective.

The Tarantino phenomenon sweeps through Italy as well and leaves its mark. The writer and his films become the focus of college theses and not just those of Film School students and specialists in Cinema Studies. The scriptwriter Luca Aimeri who presented and taught courses on Tarantino’s writing explains: “the power of his writing created a brand, a recognizable and imitated style that in its turn led to the coining of a series of absurd adjectives that indicated any element that suggested the grotesque or black/crime-comedy. Tarantino is probably the first example of a scriptwriter who had himself recognized as the *auteur* of films, he was a good agent for himself... Let’s not forget that his narrative strategy of assaulting his audience, of continuously overturning registers and tones, had been inaugurated a few years earlier by David Lynch in *Wild at heart*. He too won the Palme d’Or and got booed for it.”¹

And so Tarantino is the one who sets the pace for the transformation of film grammar in the Nineties. With *Pulp Fiction* he imposes the techniques of multiple narratives and temporal shifts on the sensibility of his audience, and with *Jackie Brown* he inaugurates and legitimizes the production of feature films that go beyond the standard length.

Pulp Fiction also opens the way to the future for young American directors. This eccentric product of independent design that conquers Cannes and the box-office and turns up among the nominees at the Oscars begins to demolish the boundaries that once separated the sphere of influence and profit of Hollywood productions from the world of independent film.

Ten years after the Palme d'Or, history repeats itself. In 2004, Tarantino heads the Cannes jury and imposes his own informal, independent, provocative, and unique aesthetics and, consistent with his nature, presents the prize to *genre films*. The Grand Prix Jury prize is given to the very violent *Old Boy* from South Korean Park Chan-Wook, while the triumph of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* helps legitimize the documentary in the eyes of the general public and marks the beginning of a new season of American films known as "mockumentaries."

In the same year he eagerly accepts, along with Joe Dante, to serve as "Godfather" to a series of retrospectives at the Venice Film Festival titled "A Secret History of Italian Cinema" that pays homage to Italian film genres, recovering them from obscurity — the very films that helped shape his culture and film aesthetics. But in 2007, in an interview with the weekly magazine "TV Sorrisi e Canzoni," he speaks his mind launching a provocative criticism directly at Italy, a declaration of unconditional love for a vibrant movie industry that instead ends up drawing the angry comments of Italian directors. "Recent Italian films are just depressing. The films I've seen in the last three years are all the same, they just talk about: boy grows up, girl grows up, couple in a crisis, parents, vacations for the mentally impaired. What's happened? I truly loved Italian films from the Sixties and the Seventies and a few from the Eighties, and now I feel like it's all over. It's a real tragedy."

Life in film

Quentin Tarantino's films are a portal to his real life. His mother

named him Quentin in honor of a TV character played by Burt Reynolds in *Gunsmoke*. It's not unlikely, though, that as an avid reader the name was suggested to her by the literary Quentin of *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, an author for whom her son also inherited her passion.

Tarantino was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on March 27, 1963. His mother, Connie, an educated and determined sixteen year old who would influence most of the female characters of his films, separates from her husband almost immediately and moves to Los Angeles. She carefully chooses the neighborhoods where she wants to live and educate her son, favoring the middleclass and ethnically diverse cities of Manhattan Beach and the residential Torrance. But the young Quentin dreams of the ghetto, he is fascinated by the dregs of society and coolly hangs around the dodgiest neighborhoods near his home. During his childhood and adolescence a number of men wander in and out of his life — his mother's companions who alternate over the years, young makeshift father figures and playmates who transform home life into an extension of Disneyland. The childish attitudes of the adults with whom he builds relationships are later inherited by the gangsters and cops of his films. With his mother's second husband, a musician, he fine-tunes his ear for music and builds his music knowledge; whilst with his third stepfather, a film fanatic, he sees countless films of a variety of genres: Westerns, action flicks, B-movies, martial arts films, horror movies — all without the slightest discrimination or prejudice because for him every film has something good.

When his mother leaves him for a while with his grandparents in Tennessee, he feels abandoned, a feeling he later offloads onto the male characters of his films who are often in search of father figures and who are wrestling with issues that have to do with trust, loyalty, camaraderie, and betrayal. He says himself that the fact that he grew up without a father was a spur to seek out a mentor elsewhere. In this sense, the films of Howard Hawks represent a model for him, they propose a certain kind of morality and a type of relationship between men and with women that he decides to adopt: "He did a better job for me than half of the fathers out there."²

Gifted with a vivid imagination from a young age, in elementary school he tells his teacher that his mother is Modesty Blaise, the secret agent from the comics that John Travolta reads in the bathroom in *Pulp Fiction*. He celebrates this passion for the curvy

heroine in 2003 when he assumes the role of executive producer on the film *My name is Modesty* by Scott Spiegel.

He plays with action figures and dolls of all sizes and he enjoys having them fight and act out a various roles. He is a good actor, able to imitate sounds and voices, and he is especially good at memorizing long dialogues which will be the strength of his films. He enjoys brazenly articulating the profanities that will stock his future scripts with vulgarity, and he invents scenes bursting with action and combat. He quickly writes off sports as boring, but his literary inclination, which compensates for his poor mathematical skills, pushes him in the direction of novels, comics and films. At age 9 he has already seen *Carnal Knowledge* from 1971 by Mike Nichols, and *Deliverance* by John Boorman from the following year — a film that affects him so much that he revisits it with the sodomy scene in *Pulp Fiction*. At age 14 he writes outlines for his stories developing intricate plots about men who rob pizzerias, about car chases and murders. It has been reported that he was arrested at age 15 for shoplifting the novel *The Switch* by Elmore Leonard, an author who is essential to his cultural edification. The script for *True Romance* clearly shows the influence of this writer, and Jackie Brown is the adaptation of another one of Leonard's novels.

Tarantino is irascible, bad-mannered, and hyperactive, and because of this he prefers public school to private institutions, but he is allergic to authority and he cuts classes to roam the streets with different gangs, appointing himself their ringleader. In this environment he learns a certain type of coarse and spontaneous language. Leaving his nice life to seek out the world of the streets, through his films he expresses a tension towards a desired urban space that he has frequented. At age 16 he drops out of school and starts to work. Some of the earliest wages that he earns are from a job as an usher in a porn theater near his house, and in 1984 he becomes a cashier at the Video Archives in Manhattan Beach, a famous video store run by cinephiles where he works for six years. His colleagues are Russ Vossler and Jerry Martinez, designers of Jackrabbit Slim's restaurant in *Pulp Fiction*, and Roger Avary, director and scriptwriter of *Killing Zoe* from 1994 that Tarantino executive produces. At the time of their first scripts, the collaboration with Avary is so tight that they begin to question the true paternity of their respective writings. They clash with one another in an effort to claim authorship of certain works. Later, Avary accuses his friend of stealing his ideas.

According to his friends at the video store, the writing that turns him into a famous dialogist is based on snippets of conversations they had with each other while at work. Stevo Polyi claims to be the source of Mr. Orange's Commode Story in *Reservoir Dogs* when he tried to see *The Lost Boys* by Joel Schumacher during a drug deal; Polyi plays the role of one of the cops in the scene.

The only schools that Tarantino attends are schools for the dramatic arts. Despite his passion for the art of acting, it seems that his career as an actor is quite tough— especially if it's true that he tried to enhance his resume by claiming that he had a minor-role in Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* in 1987. His only movie making experience is in his first film, *My Best Friend's Birthday*, left incomplete due to technical difficulties, except for a brief internship at the Sundance Institute where he presents his project *Reservoir Dogs*, in 1991. Besides this, his schooling is almost completely entrusted to the movies.

Among the numerous film references cited by Tarantino there is *Rio Bravo* by Howard Hawks and *One-Eyed Jacks* by Marlon Brand, *Blow Out* by Brian De Palma (for its camera movement,) *Bande à part* by Jean-Luc Godard, Martin Scorsese, and the ironic reworking of the Western by Sergio Leone with films like *For a Few Dollars More* and *The Good and the Bad and the Ugly* topping the list. There are also some Italian productions, mystery films and thrillers of the most excessive and brutal kind from the Sixties and Seventies by directors like Sergio Grieco, Ferdinando Di Leo, Dario Argento, Luci Fulci, Umberto Lenzi, Lamberto and Mario Bava, and Enzo G. Castellari. His schizophrenic obsession with movies brings him to methodically plunder American gangster-noir films from the Forties, exploitation films, and Roger Corman's blood-drenched productions. He is also inspired by the French detective films of Jean-Pierre Melville and by the visual excesses of the most gruesome Asian movies.

With Tarantino the video-store generation is born — kids raised on hamburgers, with computers and video cameras who want to make movies, which directly opposes the previous generation of directors who went through film school. They learn about the big screen by devouring videocassettes at home. Watching a film on tape becomes a private, intimate and ritualistic act, it means having the power to interrupt the fixed timeframe of the film, fast-forwarding or rewinding with the remote control, speeding up or slowing down, even suspending an image — just like in Tarantino's films

where the linearity of time is shattered. The most exciting scenes are selected, analyzed, seen a million times and transformed in the director's mind, forever fixed in his imagination. This is why he claims to "make movies with movies," i.e. with the historical memory of other films. He knows instinctually which shot to use for each specific situation, and he plans certain scenes instantly conjuring in his mind the way they were constructed in the films he has seen.

His penchant for allusion begins here.