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Tarantino:
Struggle, Revenge, and Mercy

Quentin Tarantino was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, raised in the South Bay area of California and then later moved to Los Angeles. In 1987, he was in his 20s and working as a clerk in a Video Archive store while struggling to make his first film, *My Best Friend's Birthday* on a 16mm camera in a rented garage. The film was never finished and is unreleased, but he says it was “essential to his evolution as a filmmaker and a dramatist.” (Smith 11). He penned *True Romance*, intending it to be his directorial debut, but after being unable to raise the \$1.2 million he had budgeted for the film, he began writing *Natural Born Killers*, which he felt could be produced much cheaper. Upon completion, he sold *True Romance* to Samuel Hadida, it was later directed in 1993 by Tony Scott, Ridley Scott’s brother, a year after Tarantino’s own directorial debut. Although *Natural Born Killers* was written with a budget of less than \$1 million in mind, Tarantino was again unable to raise the funds for his film, and sold the rights to Rand Vossler. Finally, in 1991, he wrote the masterpiece which was to become his directorial debut, *Reservoir Dogs*. He “estimated that he could make [the film] in a garage for \$30,000 shooting on super-16mm film if he had to” (Smith 18). Through random connections, Tarantino was introduced to Lawrence Bender who agreed to produce and act *Reservoir Dogs* and has produced every one of Tarantino’s films since. This was the moment that every independent film maker dreams of, meeting the man that loves

your work and will find you the money to share it with the world. *Reservoir Dogs* was shown at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, although he did not win any awards, his film was considered the “hottest” and most controversial. This was the “break through” moment that Tarantino had been patiently waiting for, his crossover from struggling independent artist to a contract with Miramax Films. He often fondly refers to and collaborates with the “class of '92” (other filmmakers from the 1992 Sundance Film Festival) including Allison Anders and Alexandre Rockwell whom he later directed *Four Rooms* with.

Tarantino has a group of actors and collaborators with whom he uses and reuses throughout every film he undertakes. He met several of these such actors through the casting of *Reservoir Dogs*, such as Michael Madsen, who later appears in *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2*, Tim Roth, with *Four Rooms & Pulp Fiction*, and Harvey Kietel with *From Dusk Till & Pulp Fiction*. Sally Menke is his editor in nearly every film Tarantino has ever worked on and received an Academy Award nomination for work in *Pulp Fiction*. Similarly, Johanna Ray usually does his casting, and David Wasco is his usual Production Designer. QT is also notorious for taking actors that have fallen from the grace of Hollywood’s publicity and reviving their careers into a viable entity. His list of career CPR include: John Travolta, Bruce Willis, Pam Grier, Robert Forster, and David Carradine, along with Michael Madsen, Harvey Kietel, Uma Thurman, and Samuel L. Jackson; the latter group of actors continue to reappear in Tarantino’s movies. Thurman has been credited by Tarantino on more than one occasion as “his muse” (Smith 112) and the concept for his later film *Kill Bill* was based upon the character “The Bride” the two of them came up with at dinner and is credited in both films as “created by Q and

U” (Smith 220). Samuel L. Jackson has become one of Tarantino’s close friends and is his number one defendant against critics calling Tarantino a racist due to Tarantino’s characters, regardless of their race, frequently using the N-word.

Common Tarantino camera techniques include very long unbroken takes, these are essential, due to the fact that Tarantino scripts are filled with monologues. Tarantino likes to lure the viewer into a false sense of comfort with these long slow takes and then quickly reversing with a surprising action shot. An example of this is in *Reservoir Dogs* when Mr. Blonde is torturing Nash and is then shot by the off scene Mr. Orange when he attempts to burn Nash alive. Another example is in *Pulp Fiction* when Jules and Vincent are having the famous “metric system McDonald’s” conversation and then they go over a bump and Vincent’s gun misfires and kills one of their friends in the back seat. The most classic of all Tarantino shots, and one that occurs usually within 10-20 minutes into everyone of his films is the point of view shot from the trunk of a car looking up at whomever is opening it, as well as the stories never being told in a completely linear way are both trademarked by Tarantino. Tarantino favors a “Goddard-inspired technique of parody and subverting film conventions in order to draw attention to them” (Smith 114), this is prevalent in *Pulp Fiction* when Mia Wallace draws a square with her fingers and it appears on the screen and he also uses deliberately bad back projection to show the streets behind the characters when they are driving. Tarantino takes a lot of inspiration from Sergio Leone, Alfred Hitchcock, and John Woo. In *Kill Bill* he uses the same epic scenery shots, evasive camera movements, and even the same soundtrack that Leone uses. He gives constant tribute shots to Hitchcock’s work, especially *Psycho*, which can be seen in both *Pulp Fiction* and *From Dusk till Dawn*

when Marsellus Wallace and Seth Gecko both walk in front of the 1964 Chevy who's driver we've been following (Bruce Willis in *Pulp*, Harvey Kietel in *FDTD*). Another *Psycho* tribute shot is the close up of O-Ren's eye in *Kill Bill* Volume 1.

One of the clearest messages throughout all of QT's movies would have to be that "although mercy should be common practice, revenge is justified" (Greene 56). Given the definitions of mercy, the "considerate treatment of others, especially those under one's power", and revenge, a personal form of retribution "fueled by emotion and desire to see the offender suffer- not simply a desire to ensure that the appropriate price is paid" (Greene 57), it is easy to see how this personal philosophy succeeds in creating blockbusters. Examples of revenge are shown in the "roaring rampage" of the Bride in *Kill Bill*; she was shot in the head on her wedding day, thinks she has miscarried her child, and was in a coma for four years. Her revenge on those that did these atrocities are the basis of the film itself, and the audience is sucked into feeling her rage and rengance and agrees that she must in fact, kill Bill. In *Pulp Fiction*, Marsellus Wallace enacts revenge on Zed, the hillbilly, by blowing off Zed's private parts with his gun after the audience has just seen Zed anally rape Marsellus. This seems to be revenge on an almost primal level- steal with that hand and it gets cut off. The most perfect and complicated revenge scheme would be in *Reservoir Dogs* during the Mexican stand-off at the end (another favorite of Tarantino's, also stolen from his love of Leone's Spaghetti westerns and appears in most of his films). Joe wants revenge on Mr. Orange for setting them up, Mr White threatens immediate revenge on Joe if he kills Mr. Orange, Eddie threatens immediate revenge on Mr. White for aiming at his father, Joe. And, bang, bang, Mr. White kills Joe, the Eddie, then Mr. Orange confesses he is a cop and is killed

by Mr. White when the cops rush in, and is then in turn killed by the cops. Perfect. Everyone is morally justified and eradicated. Even “the lioness has been reunited with her cub, and all is right in the jungle” (*Kill Bill*), vengeance in Tarantino films is always justified.

Although mercy is never exercised when there is vengeance to be delivered, it is still a moral theme that Tarantino emphasizes throughout his films. In *Kill Bill*, Bill exercises mercy to Beatrix in both movies. In Volume 1, he does not allow Elle to murder the Bride while she is in a coma, and in Volume 2, he allows Beatrix alone time with their daughter, BB, before the two of them “settle some unfinished business”. After Butch escapes from Zed’s pawn shop, he goes back with weapons to rescue Marsellus. Even the man who was trying to kill him hours before, doesn’t deserve to die at the whims of a hillbilly rapist, and is thus worthy of Butch’s mercy. Marsellus then shows Butch the same mercy, and upon being rescued, removes the price on Butch’s head and allows him to get out of town in safety. In *Kill Bill*, Beatrix when killing Vernita Green shows mercy by allowing Vernita’s daughter to go upstairs while they are fighting, but does not spare Vernita’s life, even though her daughter is upstairs. Clearly in the Tarantino Universe, mercy is “praise-worthy--and even desirable...but it does not trump the right of revenge; when an offender wrongs a victim, the victim’s obligation to show mercy is lifted and revenge is morally justified” (Greene 63), thus when Vernita plays her part in the the El Paso massacre and the injuring of the Bride herself, she forfeits her right to the Bride’s mercy. The cycle of revenge continues because after the Bride kills Vernita, she realizes that her young daughter, Nikki, is watching. She then tells Nikki that when she grows up “if she’s still feels raw about it” that she can come find her.

Although revenge and mercy are the main themes reenacted throughout every movie, another more important one is redemption. In both *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill* the main characters, Jules and Beatrix, undergo a huge change in moral character. Jules starts off the film as hit-man for Marsellus and after witnessing what he feels is an act of God, decides to leave his life of crime and murder to become a shepherd of men against the trials of this evil world. Beatrix goes from an ex-assassin on a bloody revenge rampage to caring and happy mommy. They both turn away from their lives of sin and are redeemed in their own eyes by both following their own prospective calls to higher powers.

Tarantino is a wonderful auteur director, and anyone with a vague knowledge of his films can recognize his style of quick, witty dialogue, coupled with long interesting monologues, that are inter-spliced with unexpected action shots and camera movements that are tailored to each scene. The ever experimental and talented filmmaker, who often appears in his own films, considering acting to be “one of [his many] pallets” is truly an inspiration to anyone who wants t make films of their own, as well as any movie-goer in general.