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"Serious Gourmet Shit": Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*

Eve Bertelsen

Summary

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994a) is a prime instance of postmodern meta-cinema, a highly eclectic anthology of narratives which oscillate between filmic genres. Tarantino sets up his stories within the regime of the crime film, then overwrites this with the codes of comedy, using humorous conventions to defuse the suspense of the crime thriller and register its elements as comic. These two sets of conventions organise narrative materials in different ways, offering radically different forms of viewer identification and different forms of closure. The whole is organised as a comic *mise en abyme* in which the cultural debris of the text mirrors the subjectivity of its characters, and the fictional predicaments of its protagonists mirror the decoding dilemmas of the film's spectators. *Pulp Fiction* operates as a metatext which at once inhabits and dismantles the conventions of the crime movie and "performs" the cooperative principle of filmic narrativity.

Opsomming

Quentin Tarantino se *Pulp Fiction* (1994a) is 'n prima voorbeeld van postmoderne metakinema, 'n besondere eklektiese versameling van narratiewe wat tussen filmiese genres ossileer. Tarantino stel sy stories op binne die regime van die misdaadfilm, dan oorskryf hy dit met die kodes van komedie. Hy gebruik humoristiese konvensies om die spanning van die misdaadriller te ontlont en die elemente as komies te registreer. Hierdie twee stelle konvensies organiseer die narratiewe materiaal in verskillende rigtings wat radikaal uiteenlopende vorms van kykeridentifikasie, asook verskillende vorms van beëindiging meebring. Die geheel word georden as 'n komiese *mise en abyme* waarin die kulturele oorblyfsels van die teks die subjektiwiteit van sy karakters weerspieël, en die fiktiewe penaries van sy protagoniste die dekaderende dilemmas van die film se toeskouers weerspieël. *Pulp Fiction* funksioneer as 'n metateks wat die konvensies van die misdaadfilm enersyds bewoon en dit andersyds terselfdertyd aftakel, en sodoende dié koöperatiewe beginsel van filmiese narratiwiteit verwesenlik.

> Goddam Jimmie, this is some serious gourmet shit. Me an' Vincent woulda been satisfied with freeze-dried Tasters Choice. You spring this gourmet fuckin' shit on us.
>
> (Jules on Jimmie/Tarantino's coffee, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994)

1 Introduction

"Serious" suggests "earnest and thoughtful", though here it is simply a colloquial intensifier. A "gourmet" is a "connoisseur", a "critical judge of good food". "Shit", on the other hand, is harder to pin down. *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1993: 2831) offers dozens of colloquial phrases in which "shit" may signify many things from "nonsense", "not to be believed or trusted", "an awkward predicament", "tease", "attempt to deceive or mislead", "astonishment or disbelief", through to "very good or excellent". In the street argot of African Americans "to talk shit" can also mean "to seduce or play at seducing", and to "back-talk in a sassy or belligerent manner, especially to a figure of authority". Following Jules's lead, I will propose that with *Pulp Fiction* (1994a) Tarantino has sprung on his public some serious gourmet shit: a piece of intoxicating nonsense and a knowing, seductive and "back-talking" text; an exemplary instance of a well-worn filmic genre and a parody which teases its viewers into simultaneously celebrating and mistrusting the freeze-dried conventions of Hollywood. Its self-reflective strategies exploit to the full the film literacy of its viewers to lure them into awkward, if thoroughly enjoyable, decoding predicaments. My discussion explores some of the challenges posed to the spectator of *Pulp Fiction* (1994a) by Tarantino's peculiar brand of popular "metacinema".

Critics have tended to read this film in radically opposed ways: either as an ingenuous recycling of pop-cultural vulgarity which endorses popular prejudices, or as a self-regarding text by a sophisticated postmodernist auteur which employs parody to expose and reject conventional assumptions. In the first category Michael Wood characterises Tarantino as "an innocent ... a pre-moral primitive ... a plagiarist of genius" (1995: 9), and Sharon Willis deplores his fetishising, "hyper-oedipalised play with popular culture artifacts" (1995: 66). In the second, Gavin Smith (1994) and Sarah Kerr (1995) feel that Tarantino gives Hollywood and its consumers a welcome jolt, by taking up the "low" pulp thriller and revitalising it through a full repertoire of postmodernist strategies. Taking warning from these contradictory readings, I do not plan to claim *Pulp Fiction* either for "high" postmodernism with Tarantino as a purveyor of poststructuralist theory, or to dismiss the film as pop-cultural inanity. Clearly a text which is susceptible of such diverse readings is sending out conflicting cues. So while I approach *Pulp Fiction* as metacinema, the main focus of my enquiry will be the film's ambivalence as it embarks on what Linda Hutcheon calls metafiction's wilfully compromised "complicitous critique" (1989: 9).

A prime feature of Tarantino's texts (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* and

screenplays for *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers*) is their creation of a highly eclectic narrative which oscillates between genres. Tarantino typically sets up his stories within the regime of the crime genre, and then overwrites this with the codes of the television situation comedy, using humorous conventions to defuse the suspense of the crime thriller and register its elements as comic. I suggest that this tension is the typical Tarantino "signature", the key to his basically comic style. Since crime film and comedy organise and transform narrative materials in opposed ways, offer very different forms of identification to their viewers and different forms of closure, watching *Pulp Fiction* is like a switchback ride. Tarantino structures the film as a comic *mise en abyme* in which the cultural debris of the text mirrors the subjectivity of its characters, and the fictional predicaments of its protagonists mirror the decoding dilemmas of the film's spectators. It operates as a metatext which at once inhabits and dismantles the conventions of the crime movie and "performs" the cooperative principle of filmic narrativity.

While it is relatively simple to identify the formal devices and mechanisms that produce laughter, it is more difficult to explain what that laughter achieves (its ideological effect), or to account for the phenomenal popularity of Tarantino's films. Genres are neither static nor neutral. They rise and fall, change over time, and increase markedly in popularity at particular historical moments. Post-Marxist debates propose that certain genres become popular because, in different ways, they work upon and attempt to resolve current ideological tensions by ordering potentially oppositional discourses around an articulating principle. Stuart Hall's famous study of the media in seventies Britain identified "law and order" as the principle supervising news discourse at that time (1978). I extend Hall's idea to the terrain of popular fictional forms, and suggest that as a significant articulating principle of the nineties, consumerist ideology plays an important part in supervising the narrative games of *Pulp Fiction*. Consumption appears to be the constitutive principle of Tarantino's filmic universe. His texts consume movies (are generated in and by them), consumption supplies the identity and motivation of his characters, and he imagines his audience as a community of consumers (of film and other commodities) par excellence. In a coda I visit the debate around metatext and "cult", address some problems created by the film's privileging of comic form and consider *Pulp Fiction*'s ambivalent address in the context of nineties consumer culture.

2 Freeze-dried Taster's Choice: *Pulp Fiction* and Genre

The classification of genres is a vexed area of film and TV study (Neale 1980;

Schatz 1981; Eaton 1981; Feuer 1987), but one general insight that emerges from these debates is that the generic specificity of different narratives is less dependent on "generic elements" than the ways each genre negotiates equilibrium, disturbance, process and closure by its exclusive weighting of elements: the particular strategies it employs to reorder its narrative materials, and the specific subject positions it offers to its viewers.

In Stephen Neale's succinct definition, genres are not simply forms of textual codifications, but rather "systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (1980: 19). The popular texts of film and TV have, as commodities, always been closely tied to the entertainment industry's production, distribution and exhibition of its products. At an early stage certain films (most notably westerns and crime stories) proved to be extremely popular and therefore a commercial success. So Hollywood studios set about streamlining production to maximise profits, in the process establishing distinct genres, examples of which were economical to produce (using standardised sets, formulaic scripts and a regular repertory of actors) and together with generic publicity and distribution served to regulate production and offer audiences a recognisable "branded" product. The growth of major TV genres (the police show, the sitcom and the soap) repeats this pattern. Genres are recognised intertextually. While each new text has some autonomy and genres change over time, within its subset each organises its narrative materials in a way which may be immediately recognised by viewers from their experience of similar texts. This is the specific genre knowledge which enables the viewer to infer, hypothesise, make narrative projections and anticipate guaranteed pleasures, and upon which the film depends in order to be understood or read (Neale 1980: 49-51).

While the analysis of genre does not involve a mere checklist, let us briefly consider some of the conventions of Tarantino's favoured genres and the orientations they tend to encourage.

The gangster film which serves as model for *Pulp Fiction* emerged as a popular genre from Warner Brothers Studios in the 1920s and 30s drawing its coordinates and mode of narration from contemporary "hardboiled" or "pulp" crime fiction, marrying themes of poverty, sexual inadequacy, ambition and greed to fast-paced editing and synchronous sound (Roddick 1983). Through its various rewritings as forties *film noir*, the "roughneck" crime film of the fifties' and the sixties' auteured alienation films of the French New Wave, the genre steadily becomes more "knowing", as directors like Hawks, Godard, Coppola and Scorsese remake the classics or increasingly deploy the more violent elements of the genre as fully aestheticised tropes. It is at this point that the "pasticheur and pop-cultural relativist" Tarantino enters, and proceeds with

"cheerful bad taste" to raid and rework the tradition (Dargis 1994a: 8).

Genre conventions not only supervise the work of filmmaking and viewing in a mutually determining way, but also develop a certain autonomy. As Warshow puts it: "[M]ost Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans" (1970: 30). So while it remains related to changing events (and indeed, dogged by threats of censorship and associated with frequent moral panics) the crime film soon creates its own referential field.

Because genre films imitate other films nobody consciously sees a crime film for the first time. As McArthur puts it, the viewer expects (all or some of): a seedy urban setting, stereotyped criminal characters with predictable attributes and dress, hardboiled dialogue, femmes fatales, cars and guns, killings and corpses, the presence of "stars" who inhabit a certain type of film, and a rapid narrative achieved by heavily coded camerawork, editing and sound (1972). In its mode of narration and filmic style the crime movie observes realist norms, aiming at denotative clarity and presenting the fabula with a minimal reordering of time and space. Its narrative chain is linear and causal, driven by a series of goal-oriented tasks, with the criminal typically pitting his obsessive energy against society's remorseless pressures to conform. As the story chronicles the career of the criminal, setting his "deviant" discourse against a normative discourse of law and order, viewers are positioned in suspense, anticipating his inevitable and ultimately fatal downfall. Acts of violent crime will be reliably resolved by answering violence which will restore order (Neale 1981: 18-23).

Specialist studies of the genre read the crime story as a "myth" in which the American Dream is writ large and ugly and its contradictions laid bare. The gangster is seen as an exaggerated variant of a Hollywood staple, the struggling, aggressive male from an inner-city background with considerable energy but minimal options, who pits basic human needs against a world that denies them (Schatz 1981: 88). "He is the 'no' to that great American 'yes' which is stamped so big over our official culture" (Shadoian 1977: 130). This reading is encouraged by the rhetoric of melodrama which the genre employs in its strong but shallow characterisation, capricious plotting and brutal endings, to "infuse the banal and ordinary with the excitement of grandiose conflict" (Brooks 1976: 40). So while the activities of this self-styled profiteer brutally flout the social order and his inevitable death seems to support the status quo, the textual system aligns us with the protagonist in a critique of society's constraints:

> [C]amerawork, editing, dialogue, characterisation, and even the star system work together to engage our sympathy for the criminal. So from a technical (as well as thematic) standpoint, the gangster-hero functions as an organising

> sensibility in these films, serving to offset the other characters' naive moralising and to control our perception of his corrupt, Kafkaesque milieu.
>
> (Schatz 1981: 93)

Pulp Fiction's crime story anthology inscribes salient features of the mainstream crime/gangster film and invites its audience to recognise it as such. As Tarantino says, his stories are

> old chestnuts ... more or less the oldest stories you've ever seen: the guy going out with the boss's wife and he's not supposed to touch her ... the boxer who's supposed to throw the fight and doesn't ..., and two hitmen show up and blow somebody away.
>
> (Smith 1994: 41)

Type-cast stars (Samuel L. Jackson, John Travolta, Harvey Keitel, Ving Rhames) play the leads dressed in regulation black suits, and deal out the expected verbal machismo and brutal action. They conform to the generic profile of the criminal as an urban male with limited options, beyond the pale of society, engaged in acts which will prove to be self-defeating and lead to his elimination. The female ensemble offers a reproachful wife, a compliant moll and a would-be *noir*ish seductress. The plot revolves around male loyalty, revenge, lust and greed, and en route engages drugs, hold-ups, a double-cross, tender moments and gory killings. There is the standard fetishism of material goods, and there are cars and guns aplenty. Its action and dialogue defy moral and political correctness at every turn, roundly "trashing" the American Dream, and we are positioned to identify with the protagonists. For the most part, it is shot and edited in classic style, replete with confirming references to the genre from film and television. In keeping with a genre in which criminal violence is assumed to signify mythic transgression, Tarantino's protagonists, while they may be violent, are characterised as frustrated in their ideals and aspirations, capable of great charm, generosity and humour, and beset by ethical doubts. The film continually signals that it is operating within the bounds and horizon of expectations of a well-worn genre, and this is the understanding that will supervise our reading.

But Tarantino updates iconography, character and plotting and renders them hyperbolic. His characters live in a nineties world, and he makes consumption practices and aspirations determine identity and drive the action. The sharp-suited dress code which served as a genre reinforcer in films like *The Public Enemy* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932) becomes the Tarantino uniform of black suit and tie (accentuated when Jules and Vince don "dorkish" T-shirts later in the film). The guns are all lovingly itemised and branded, and index the

movie's hierarchy of power: Pumpkin and Hunnybunny's 32-calibre pistols; Jules's and Vince's .45 Automatics; Marsellus's Czech M61 submachine gun, and Maynard's pump-action shotgun. The cars are also important signifiers, and the screenplay specifies each by model and year: Jules's white Chevy Nova; Vince's red Chevy Malibu convertible; Fabienne's white Honda Civic, and Mr Wolf's silver Porsche. Drug-dealing replaces bootleg liquor, and business is conducted in diners and Sally LeRoy's topless bar (Marsellus's headquarters). In place of Italian opera the music spans several decades of pop, and (apart from the title sequence) is used homodiegetically throughout, issuing from CD's, tapes, car radios and juke boxes as a substantial part of the fictional world. And the speakeasy mutates into an extraordinary retrorestaurant, Jack Rabbit Slim's, whose over-the-top synthesis of fast food, popular music and film epitomises the world of *Pulp Fiction* and its motivating norms.

The film is suffused with consumer commodities: music, cars, cellphones, foot massages, fast food (Big Macs, Big Kahuna Burgers, Teriyaki Donuts and Pop Tarts), Coke (and coke), pulp novels, comics, TV shows and movies. These also form the staple of conversation, with quizzes on popular culture and disputes about the merits of burgers, foot massages, coffee, and TV shows cast as pivotal occasions for male bonding or rivalry. For Tarantino commodities are never merely props. They make a significant contribution to plot development, often modelising a scene, or by bizarre juxtaposition (hamburgers and homicide are a favoured coupling) generating the film's characteristic violence/humour splicing, a strategy which equates "branded" consumption with the "branded" genre violence coolly quoted by the film.

Tarantino also revises other well-worn topoi. As the film's femme fatale, Mia is satisfyingly menacing, tightly coiled and ready to strike, but her fringe and demeanour owe more to Godard's Anna Karina than Davis, Crawford or Stanwyck, and she will unfold as a vulnerable ingenue. Gangster culture takes a turn with nineties African-American "cool" refiguring white machismo. As Eddie says in *Reservoir Dogs*, for *noir*, read "nigger": in Tarantino "everybody wants to be Mr Black". The gestural repertoire and linguistic idiom of Tarantino's nineties-style criminals evince a popular stereotype of black Ameri-can culture: a volatile combination of cool, hipness, virility and "in-your-face/ fuck-you" attitude. Sharon Willis points out that for Tarantino African-Ameri-can masculinity and popular culture are indistinguishable, a "powerful and curious equation" that plays a large part in structuring his filmic world (1995: 67).

It is through this superabundance of overblown generic cues that *Pulp Fiction* announces its game with its implied viewer. It lovingly sets up stories which, while vigorously updated, are replete with genre reinforcers and seem to promise viewers all the traditional identifications and pleasures of the Hollywood crime

movie.

Both the crime film and the sitcom operate within realism, sharing many features of classical narration and filmic style. They construct a fictional world governed by spatial and temporal verisimilitude, and a cause-and- effect chain driven by character with a high degree of narrative closure. Strictly codified shots and continuity editing link each scene clearly and unequivocally to the next, and place viewers at the most advantageous point from which to link visual material to the progress of the story. In both genres highly communicative narration, self-effacing style and a restricted paradigm of film techniques encourage viewers to read the discourse as an unproblematic "reflection" of the fabula action (Bordwell 1985: 156-166).

But the two systems differ radically in their ordering of narrative material. Where the crime film positions the viewer in suspense as its hero copes through action with the various threats, dangers and tasks which make up its temporal sequence, the situation comedy plays with disturbance, process and closure in a strikingly different way. Sitcom's typical space is the bounded environment of the home or workplace, a claustrophobic setting in which a few characters comprising a family (or pseudo-family) are "stuck with each other" and engage in disputes and mutual bickering. Individuals may threaten to leave, but as a rule they neither decisively break with nor passively submit to the limited situation. Typically, they negotiate a compromise which allows them to reconcile themselves (until the next half-hour slot, at least) to their constraints (Eaton 1981).

As with the gangster genre, the characters constructed by this mode of narration are stereotypes, that is, shorthand forms of characterisation which are simple, memorable, widely recognised and frequently repeated in similar texts. But sitcom's types are less genre-specific; they are recognised from their repetition across various forms of signification, fictional or otherwise, in the culture at large. While stereotyping is obviously not a "neutral" exercise, and is attacked for reinforcing the "deviant" status of particular groups, it is important to observe that the highly compressed narratives of jokes crucially depend on it, and that stereotypes can be both negative and positive. As is the case with the crime movie, this mode of characterisation is strengthened by the performance of parts by "typecast" actors and the shooting and cutting of that performance.

But a bounded situation and much of the sitcom's thematic material may be shared by other genres, so the generic specificity of the sitcom is less a question of exclusive elements than its particular articulation of elements in organising the narrative. While the crime narrative offers viewers a goal-driven linear chain, the narrative of sitcom is circular. Although events occur, the relationships between characters tend to remain the same. While the crime film positions

its viewer in suspense, the pleasure of sitcom is linked to the release of tension through laughter: it inscribes us in humour, in a circular narrative. As with the crime film, the disturbance or basic tension of the narrative revolves around the bringing together in conflict of two or more discourses, but here the opposition is signified as humorous, and the resolution of the disturbance (the contradictions and resistances which issue from this discursive conflict) has to be accomplished with economy and wit: the humorous mechanisms of slapstick, codeplay, puns and jokes (Woollacott 1982: 67). The circularity of the half-hour sitcom plot is an indication of that formally articulated wit which accomplishes a reordering of the discourses. We end with the bounded situation restored, albeit within slightly modified constraints. As with the gangster film, while we watch these stories we already know the likely outcome, only here this will be a return to square one. The pleasurable effects depend on this foreknowledge, with the comedy stemming from the timing and economy with which scenes are treated and tensions predictably resolved (Woollacott 1982: 69). So narrative time in this genre is organised by an economic circularity in which events as such are downplayed and the resolution of disturbance is effected chiefly through witty dialogue and verbal play, while from week to week the basic discursive relationships remain the same.

This approach to comic narrative draws on Freud's famous formulation in *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*, where he identifies the joke as a highly economical, compressed story in which two meaning systems collide, and a phrase or action is replaced by something linked to it in a conceptual connection. While the conflict posed by the joke suggests problems which in "real life" would require extended personal effort and labour to resolve, its economical mechanism (its extraordinary brevity) gives listeners a rapid form of release from anxiety with the smallest possible investment or expenditure of energy. The listener has been "saved psychic expenditure", and his/her pleasure corresponds to this economy (Freud 1976: 200-201). For Freud the tensions (engendered by the structuring of the joke itself and the cultural inhibitions/repressions mobilised by its operations) perform on a small scale the more general policing of libidinous energies by the superego. One might then extrapolate (a point which will be important for the development of my case): the degree and intensity of release/laughter will be in direct proportion to the gravity of the social taboos transgressed. Freud also warns that by nature the comic mode is inimical to intellectual or analytic work, the antithesis of sustained contemplative labour or problem-solving, activities short-circuited by humorous economy.

Any analysis of *Pulp Fiction* that ignores the workings of humour is bound to be offended by its handling of cultural taboos, as may be seen in Willis's (and

other critics') complaints that the film handles social problems like obscenity, racism and violence too lightheartedly, letting its viewers "off the hook". Since humour is precisely designed to "let us off the hook" this seems to be a redundant observation. The point of humour is surely lost if taboos may not be transgressed, and transgressive humour is the lifeblood of Tarantino's comic texts.

Tarantino exploits the narrative system of the sitcom to the hilt. While his primary topoi (the hit, the fight, the date, the hazardous retrieval, the cleanup) and his stereotyped characters are directly drawn from the lexicon of crime, the manner in which these are set up and the dialogue and interactions which drive the narrative are markedly comic. The environment of *Pulp Fiction* is claustrophobic and its characters are frustrated and circumscribed. The film's central narrative thread is Jules's desire to "quit the game", and each embedded story is structured around the negotiation of bounds. Pumpkin and Honeybunny's plan to expand their sphere of operations is foiled by Jules's intervention; Vince and Mia manouevre round each other, surmount hyperbolic obstacles and return to square one; Butch's escape is comically protracted by the mission to retrieve his watch and the bizarre crisis in the pawnshop, and domesticated, suburban Jimmie is in terror of his wife's return to a scene of serious "gangster shit". While the fabula material in all of these episodes belongs to the crime film, its treatment (tempo, register and narrative organisation) is strictly sitcom. But Tarantino is typically disrespectful of all narrative contracts, and (like Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) offers his audience a choice of endings which displays the limited paradigm of options for generic closure. While certain characters are required to return to square one (most notably Mia, Marsellus and Mr Wolf, at the crime film's generic hub) and suburban Jimmie is left derisively trapped in his kitchen, characters with vision are permitted to escape (Pumpkin and Honeybunny, Jules and Butch), while yet others (Vince, the college lads and the monsters of the Mason and Dixon) fall foul of the bastard text and meet a gruesome end.

In addition to its parodic use of sitcom plotting, *Pulp Fiction* also exploits the genre's verbal play. Characters perpetually bicker and complain in hybrid dialogue which is made up of a series of running gags, but flouts decorum gangster-style with its obscenities and profanities and gruesome topics beyond the pale of the sitcom. So while the film may be notorious for its hyperbolic scenes of brutal action, it is basically a comic, dialogue-driven text, whose verbal play and ubiquitous comic business consistently transform its crime film materials, with localised effects mirroring the joke construction of the film as a whole.

Which brings me back to my thesis. Assuming (as its title insists we should)

that *Pulp Fiction*'s "raw material" and explicit theme is popular fiction per se, I propose that the film takes the form of a sustained joke, which brings together, parodies, and plays off against one another, two of Hollywood's most popular genres, the crime film and the TV situation comedy. The film's overarching organisation, its combination and articulation of elements, its circular shape, and the pleasures of release it offers its viewers may all be best understood if we see the mechanism of the joke as providing its modelising kernel.

What precisely happens to fabula material and what are the implications for viewer inscription when two radically opposed narrative systems collide in this way? This is the question which will take up the remainder of my discussion.

3 Serious Gourmet Shit: *Pulp Fiction*'s Comic *Abyme*

While I will not claim Tarantino as a "high" postmodernist or insist that his film offers a crash course in poststructuralist theory and narratology, it seems clear to me that the film operates metatextually. *Pulp Fiction* extravagantly refers to its own filmic provenance and textuality and moves between different genres, playfully parodying and performing them. It goes about its work in an ironic or "double-voiced" way, inscribing conventions and then proceeding to problematise and dismantle them. As his title suggests, Tarantino overtly "thematises" fiction. He also covertly "actualises" or performs the process of filmmaking/viewing as a game, an act of seduction, and a joke (Hutcheon 1980: 28-35). He understands enough about films to know that each of the conventions he employs will cue viewers to perform particular interpretative operations, and will align them in distinctive ways vis-à-vis his text. His stratagems deny viewers the single, settled viewing position and identification with character and plot events afforded by popular genres. The film deliberately seduces viewers into the text and then plays with their filmic knowledge and viewing habits, inscribing them in a contradictory and ambivalent manner. The extent to which this "educates" audiences or simply colludes with consumerism is a moot point which I will take up in my coda. What seems indisputable is that in *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino takes up two "freeze-dried" Hollywood genres and "talks back" to them. He sets the sitcom to collide with and dismantle the crime movie in the manner of a joke, and structures the text as a whole in the form of a comic *mise en abyme*.

We have seen that Tarantino updates the crime film's characters, iconography and stylistic norms and renders them hyperbolic. These are then traversed by a dizzying variety of alternative conventions, creating a thoroughly "mongrelised" text. He raids movie history for both direct citations and stylistic options, all of

which his text will parodically perform. Drawing freely on mainstream Hollywood and art film, he rewrites whole sequences or borrows motifs from (amongst others) Hawks, Aldrich, Hitchcock, Boorman, Peckinpah, Altman, Resnais and Godard. But it is Godard above all whom Tarantino claims as his mentor, acknowledging his influence by the name chosen for his production company, Band of Outsiders, and in his textual experiments. As Dargis puts it, Tarantino's films recall Godard "in style, if not in politics: his are the children of Godard and Coca Cola" (1994a: 8). While Tarantino nowhere approaches the flagrant and peculiar obstacles Godard creates at the most fundamental levels of story-telling and spectator activity, *Pulp Fiction* invokes his idol in a number of ways. Its title cards, shifts in sound volume and deliberate continuity errors (jump cuts, background details changing from shot to shot, the notorious bullet holes in the wall which appear before the shooting, etc.) call attention to editing in the manner of Godard. Tarantino thumbs his nose at classic Hollywood rules, offers too few or too many cues, runs shot lengths beyond approved limits, and checks the forward thrust of the narrative with citations, unwarranted delays and the display of paradigmatic materials. All this apart from directly quoting scenes from *A Bout de souffle, Bande a parte* and *Vivre sa vie*. But *Pulp Fiction* is aimed at a mass audience, so these effects are secondary to its more immediate project of generic play, a global strategy borrowed from Godard, but "domesticated" by Tarantino, as he rings the changes on narrative rules which are second nature to any viewer who has ever watched TV.

The film's intertexts have been widely inventoried (Dargis 1994a; Wood 1995; Barnes & Hearn 1996), so I will only record that Tarantino absorbs into his crime film structure the buddy movie, horror, romance, the musical, and the TV sitcom, playing with their different compositional options and the subject positions they offer. (While critics blithely go fishing for intertexts and citations, it is worth observing that none feels compelled to explain what textual purposes they might serve.). So variegated is the final product that, as Michael Wood puts it, "you feel you are falling through every movie you've ever seen" (1995: 10). This both dazzles and disorients. While it offers many movies for the price of one, its plethora of styles seriously unsettles viewing activity. *Pulp Fiction* is not a movie; it is movies. Every sign comes overloaded, and the diegesis plays fast and loose with narrational norms.

Having isolated within this heady mix what I regard as the two narrative systems chiefly reponsible for the articulation of the text, I will try to map some of the ways that their collision/collusion impacts on the film's characterisation and plotting, and the dilemmas this creates for the viewer.

Tarantino proceeds on the assumption that his viewers "know the ropes": that they are, like himself, avid consumers of movies and well-versed in filmic

representations of crime. He cunningly tunes his cues to the mind and manner of his viewers, anticipating their every move, confident that they will recognise the ambient iconography, respond on cue, align themselves with the characters, and predict the course of events. Then having seduced his viewers into the film, he throws into relief their entire performance, catching them "with their pants down" (*Pulp Fiction, passim*). But his double-voiced text, far from making fun of its audience, welcomes them as co-conspirators in its cinephiliac project. It respects and depends upon the amplitude of their media knowledge, their versatility, and their willingness to adapt and modify their activity. While he knows viewers will normally recognise a particular genre and allow its conventions to supervise a reading, Tarantino also assumes they will be conversant with many story types, and will revise their inferences and predictions in response to new incoming cues. As he puts it in an interview:

> There were always movie buffs who understood film and film convention, but now, with the advent of video, almost everybody has become a film expert even though they don't know it. Intellectually the audience doesn't know that they know as much as they do.... In the first ten minutes ... the movie tells you what kind of movie it's gonna be. It tells you everything that you basically need to know. And after that ... you just know what's gonna happen .... You don't know you know, but you know. There's a lot of fun in playing against that, fucking up the breadcrumb trail that we don't even know we're following, using an audience's own subconscious preconceptions against them so they actually have a viewing experience, they're actually involved in the movie.
>
> (Tarantino quoted by Smith 1994: 42)

Pulp Fiction's primary project is to "fuck up" the breadcrumb trail of the crime movie, and at every turn Tarantino has an eye trained on the versatility of his viewers, whom he treats as experts one and all. Addicts of "pulp" they may be, but they are also competent, as the text changes gear, to abandon one set of decoding procedures and embark upon another.

The film's handling of character is radically layered and intertextual. First actors are conscripted into their roles as avatars of stock genre figures. Then, in a dialogue-driven text, they are constructed in language through their colourful and uncouth debates about consumer goods, ethics, male loyalty and power. In *Pulp Fiction* dialogue is action, a major site of testing and powerplay. From the start its characters emerge as synthetic products, hyperbolically constituted by consumer culture and the codes of their appointed genre. But as a self-confessed "fan boy" (Dargis 1994a: 10), Tarantino is also acutely aware that "star" actors arrive on screen as loaded, already-signifying systems in their own right. So he plays on this aspect of his audience's popular knowledge,

requiring his actors, in addition to their prescribed genre business, to perform their own star history: Jackson as the "bad-ass" or "hip-cat" of his blaxploitation movies, Travolta the disco-king down on his luck, Keitel re-peating his roles in *Mean Streets, Bugsy* and *Point of No Return*, etc.. As they are put through their generic paces and engage in verbal combat, Tarantino mines star history, often scripting against the grain of his audience's expectations (is it Vince or John Travolta who is appalled at the prospect of a dance competition?), and raising a laugh on this basis alone. These games of style see his characters take life in a hall of mirrors: impersonating genre types, metamorphosing as they are rerouted through other systems, and each perform-ing his own prefabricated image. The film constantly signals that its characters are first and foremost filmic tropes, and any attempt to identify with them or take them seriously is immediately ambushed by an excess of subversive cues. So while some of their coordinates seem to be drawn from the streets of Los Angeles, and the suits, mien and hardware signal "gangster", the referent is, finally, the movies.

Tarantino calls *Pulp Fiction* "the story of a genre", in which he will rework three of crime movies' oldest plots and "go to the moon with them" (Smith 1994: 41), which I take to mean that he plans to send them up as high as possible. In various interviews he lays out his tactics: he deliberately scrambles chronology (Corliss 1994: 54), propels his characters through conflicting generic worlds, each of which reinflects all the filmic elements (Dargis 1994b: 16), and uses the film to comment on its own construction and on movie history (Smith 1994: 42). For Smith this stratagem frees the characters from "genre's fatal maze", and reminds the film's spectators that they, too, are entrapped and subjected by the codes of genre.

We have seen that *Pulp Fiction*'s iconography and characters are established in multiple self-reflecting layers which flaunt their filmic status. But to my mind Tarantino's most notable achievement is the way he develops his *mise en abyme* to absorb the activities of his viewers by consistently placing them in the same hermeneutic position as his characters. He does this by ensuring that moments of crisis for his protagonists (where they face a challenge to their authority in a stock situation) perfectly coincide with his own stylistic experiments (switches from one set of story-telling conventions to another), so that the diegetic crises of the film's fictional personae perfectly mirror the dilemmas of its spectators (as they must respond both to startling plot events and flagrant interference in their decoding activity). This deft and complicated mapping is also the source of the film's humour. Almost every comic effect in *Pulp Fiction* is generated by a discursive collision, either a slippage of linguistic register (the promiscuous dialogue which splices together metaphysical issues and blasphemy, colloquial register and horrendous topics) or style (the continuous switching from one set

of narrative rules to another). This ensures that the film's most shocking moments are also its most comic (a matter of concern to certain critics, and which I shall take up in due course).

Tarantino plots against his audience. Playfully performing an anthology of styles, he treats genre plotting as a farcical game. He is fond of quoting Godard who, when asked whether a story shouldn't have a beginning, a middle and an end, is said to have replied, "Of course, but not necessarily in that order". The action of *Pulp Fiction* takes place over two days, with its episodes mischievously rearranged. Taking his cue from Altman (*The Player, Short Cuts*) and Godard's general perversity with plot, Tarantino makes the gangster boss Marsellus the hub, frames his three bridged stories by a linked prologue and epilogue, then deftly sets up each within the last and has his characters migrate between them. While each of the stories observes unities of time and place and (apart from the "gold-watch" monologue) renders its action without backflashes or crosscutting, the novelty of the film's plotting comes from its beginning and ending *in media res*, as may be seen in a breakdown of segments.

The chronological sequence of the film's fabula (story time) moves from the killing of the "preppies" in the apartment (1) and Marvin in the car (2) to the cleanup at Bonnie's (3). This is followed by breakfast in the coffee shop during which Jules intercepts Pumpkin and Honeybunny's abortive hold-up and "retires" (3). That evening Vince dates Mia at Jack Rabbit Slim's, and she overdoses and is rescued (4). At more or less the same time Butch double-crosses Marsellus. The following morning he goes to retrieve his watch, kills Vince, and rescues Marsellus from the pawnshop. Exit Butch and Fabienne on chopper (5).

The film's text time rearranges this material in the series 3, 1, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3. The viewer has to salvage a chronological narrative from a text which begins its story in the middle, swings back to the start, and then hurtles forward, behaving chronologically for a while, only to cut back to complete an earlier event and then end in the middle. Fabula events are rearranged to ensure an optimum mix of melodrama, comedy, vengeance and revelation, and to end each embedded story and the entire film on an upbeat note. But while the text offers a sanitised ending (brute force to sanctity in just two hours), since we have already seen Vince dead, the pleasures of closure come heavily qualified.

Into this material Tarantino weaves his binding motifs. He reworks his three clichéd tales around a series of couples: Pumpkin and Honeybunny, Vince and Jules, Marsellus and Mia, Butch and Fabienne, Maynard and Zed, Jimmie and Bonnie. These are ranked within a complex network of power and violence with the professional gangster boss Marsellus at its apex, working its way through commonplace hitmen, drug dealers, perverts, amateur criminals and a femme fatale, to the innocuous Fabienne. Jules and Vince, characters with "walk-on"

status in the genre, take centre stage. Each episode opens with certain players (Pumpkin and Honeybunny, Jules and Vince, Mia, Butch, or Marsellus) apparently in command of a particular turf or situation. Then, as errors and incompetence pile up, the rules change, and we find ourselves in a radically altered world. Pumpkin and Honeybunny's amateurish hold-up is overtaken by Vince's professional authority. Vince's date with Mia progresses from a will-he or won't-he seduction dilemma to the frantic scene of an overdose. Butch double-crosses Marsellus only for them both to be taken short in the pawnshop by a couple of superior villains. Jules and Vince nonchalantly blow away some young men and then must defer to the Wolf's professional expertise for the cleanup operation. In each case characters who think they are in control, mess up and are forced to submit, in sequences of over-the-top excess, to a superior power that supersedes and displaces their own. In every case the shift in power relations coincides with a switching of narrative rules, and, while the build-up of stylistic jokes which ensues may involve topoi from, say, the musical (the dance competition; on-screen lip-synching to songs), the horror movie (Mia as a zombie, needle in heart; some sinister moments in the pawnshop), or the screen romance (Mia and Jules; Butch and Fabienne), the battle royal is between the codes of the gangster movie and the TV sitcom. The initial setup and plotting of each story is on crime movie rules. As the story progresses its narrative elements are repeatedly transformed as they migrate between genres. And every major crisis (in its acting style, dynamics and timing) is invariably handled as comedy. In each episode, while a form of closure is reached, it is never of the type or scale that was initially signalled or anticipated. And in each story the viewer is taken, with the characters, on a fictional roller-coaster ride.

A rapid précis of the film's mode of proceeding will have to serve to support my argument that *Pulp Fiction* employs comic tropes to dismantle and transform the crime film in the manner of a metafictional joke.

The first thing we see is an epigraph, which defines "Pulp" as "soft and shapeless ... containing lurid subject matter ... and printed on rough, unfinished paper". The glossed title sends a warning that this film knows what it is doing: it announces itself as a self-reflective, punning and playful text which will hyperbolically "perform" itself as an instance of its genre, exposing both its own devices and our viewing habits to comic scrutiny.

Each of the film's segments spans the half-hour of the weekly sitcom slot, and exploits its narrational norms. First the exposition trains us in "what kind of movie it's gonna be". Here a TV-derived pre-credit offers us the coffee-shop debacle and the dispatch in the apartment. We are plunged into Pumpkin and Honeybunny's uncouth discussion of the tactics of armed robbery and assume that it establishes the film's basic genre and register. As they hold up the coffee

shop and the opening credits roll, we also assume that we have our protagonists and expect that the remainder of the film will trace their criminal exploits. While Tarantino permits our projections on genre and register (though he will complicate these), Pumpkin and Honeybunny will be banished from the film for a good two hours, only to resurface in the epilogue.

By the time we reach the epilogue (which completes this scene) we have become attuned to Tarantino's games. We recognise the setting, but now it is Jules and Vince who are having breakfast. Cut to Pumpkin ordering coffee. Jules has decided to quit the life. Suddenly Pumpkin and Honeybunny rise with guns raised. What follows is classic Tarantino along the lines of the five-sided shoot-out which wraps up *True Romance*. The main action mutates into pure farce, and Vince emerges from the john into a changed world. Jules's .45 is under Pumpkin's chin, the professional takes control, and we are in the finale of a sitcom, with Jules announcing his plan to walk the earth in a speech which marries movies ("like Caine in *Kung Fu*") with *Ezekiel* ("I'm tryin' real hard to be a shepherd"). Things come full circle. The amateurs leave with their bag full of wallets:

> Then, to the amazement of the Patrons, the Waitresses, the Cooks, the Busboys, and the Manager, [and, one might add, the audience] these two bad-ass dudes - wearing UC Santa Cruz and "I'm with Stupid" T-shirts, swim-trunks, thongs and packing .45 automatics - walk out of the coffee shop together without saying a word.
>
> (Tarantino 1994b: 187)

The music for the credit sequence throws us off balance. It is an obscure piece of California surf music which mixes Western soundtrack with Mexican motifs, and is played extremely loud. We cut straight to Jules and Vince in their Chevy, and recognise Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta. The dress code signals gangsters, but they are atypical - blaxploitation jheri-curled Jules and seedy, garrulous Vince. Their lethal mission is absurdly delayed, as we loiter in the car, lobby and corridor with debates on TV pilots, foot massages, and the boss's dangerous wife Jules must date tonight. Finally watches are synchronised, and they "get into character" for the hit in a long static close shot from behind straight from Godard's *Vivre sa vie*. Once inside, they terrorise the "preppies" who have double-crossed their boss with a macho quiz on fast food, male loyalty and the Bible. Roger is shot mid-conversation ("Oh, I'm sorry. Did that break your concentration?"), Marvin (their man) is spared, and the scene ends as they insouciantly empty their guns on Brett.

These expository segments "train" the viewer in the general mode of proceeding. Each embedded story is introduced as a stock crime tale, with the

viewer invited to forecast its development. The narrative then traverses several genres, with scenes of bravado and incompetence feeding into a situation of disorder. Here contradictory cues fly thick and fast and viewers are required repeatedly to modify their hypotheses. Next comes the confluence of shocking diegetic events with decoding problems which push the audience's attention and endurance to their limits. Brains spatter a car, a woman is dying: what the hell kind of story are we in? Then at the most intolerable moment the narration flips, and we are in a new ontological universe. A fresh set of rules is invoked, all narrative elements are reinflected, and both diegetic and decoding crises are (for the moment at least) resolved. The agent of resolution/closure will be *the* code, namely, the comic regime of the sitcom, which decisively "fucks up the trail" as it recodes amoral attitudes and violent acts, freeing them from the closed system of the crime film and offering them up to laughter as banal filmic tropes.

"Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife" opens with Vince picking up his supply of heroin and proceeding to his date with Mia. Their meal at Jack Rabbit Slim's cites the dark romance (their pop-cultural foreplay) and the musical (Travolta sending up his star image in a twist competition). Back at the house all cues align us for the statutory seduction. But from the point at which Mia overdoses, the mood turns frantic. As the screenplay puts it: "like a documentary in an emergency ward, with the big difference here being nobody knows what the fuck they're doing" (1994b: 75). The camera zip-pans about Woody Allen-style in an absurdly long take, picking up the frenetic and ineffectual activities of drug-dealer Lance, his wife and the distraught Vince, overwriting horror with slapstick lunacy. There is a moment of hyperbolic suspense as Vince marks the spot and stabs the needle into Mia's heart. Then Mia, chastened femme fatale-cum horror film zombie, leaps back to life, and the tensions are dissolved in laughter.

In Jack Rabbit Slim's retrorestaurant *Pulp Fiction* creates at its centre a miniature replica of itself, a pop-cultural melting-pot which functions aphoristically to epitomise the fictional world of the film and its motivating norms. Decor is out of an Archie comic book, with fifties movie posters on the walls and Golden Oldies on the jukebox. The booths patrons sit in are cut-up fifties cars, and black-and-white street scenes from old movies run in the windows. The waiters impersonate popular stars and serve Douglas Sirk steaks and Fats Domino cheeseburgers. This is an *abyme* in which identity is entirely a matter of performance, and culture has become pure consumption. As Mia and Vince circle each other in this hall of mirrors, performing the *film noir* and the musical, nothing is what it seems. All signifiers are entirely fictional and synthetic and their decoding rests less on common sense than on (both the characters' and our) accumulated knowledge of the movies.

The "Gold Watch" is driven by a homoerotic parody of the buddy movie. This is Roger Avery's script, and it varies the Tarantino rhythm. It opens with the film's only backflash, the Captain Koons monologue which has Christopher Walken brilliantly sending up his *Deerhunter* role as he details the essential anality of partiarchal exchange and prepares us for the sodomy to come. Back in the present, Butch has double-crossed Marsellus but must retrieve his fetish before he can make good his escape. Vince is in the apartment (as ever, reading *Modesty Blaise* on the john) and Butch blows him to bits in a scene of unmediated ugliness, distinctly lacking the Tarantino touch. On leaving he runs into Marsellus (a straight remake of the Marion-and-boss encounter from *Psycho*), and their pursuit ends in the sinister pawnshop. We are rapidly drawn into a porn film (leather, chains, lewdness, signs of sadomasochism) modelled on Boorman's *Deliverance*, with Marsellus as the chosen victim. In a bizarre moment of self-reflexivity here, Butch selects a weapon to rescue his buddy-in-peril and, against the sounds of the hillbilly psychopaths "having their way" with Marsellus, we are treated to a quick display of Hollywood's paradigm of violence as he weighs up a hammer, a chainsaw, a Louisville slugger and a Samurai sword. The brutal and bloody resolution, which predictably lets them both off the hook and effects a reconciliation, is eased by Marsellus's desperate humour as he swears: "I'm gonna call a coupla pipe-hittin' niggers to go to work on these homes here with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch. I'm gonna get Med-i-eval on your ass".

But it is in "The Bonnie Situation" that gangster and comic conventions most effectively collide and transform each other in the manner of a joke. Jules has experienced "divine intervention", and they discuss this with Marvin in the car:

> Vincent: C'mon, Marvin. You gotta have an opinion. Do you think God came down from Heaven and stopped the bullets?
>
> Vince's .45 goes BANG! The car is completely covered in blood. It's all over everything, including Jules and Vincent.
>
> (Tarantino 1994b: 143)

Keeping up some very funny comic patter, they head for Jimmie's to clean up. Jimmie (Tarantino), a retired hood in awe of his wife Bonnie, makes it clear that "Dead Nigger Storage" is no longer his business. Mr Wolf (Keitel, sending up his role as The Cleaner from *Point of No Return*) arrives to "direct" the operations: "Give me the principals' names again? .... Now you got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage. The clock is ticking. Take me to it". There is an explicit sitcom deadline: "mummy" will be back in half-an-hour by which time the status quo must be restored. Gangster material is brilliantly articulated with comic timing ("Now scoop up all those little bits of brain and skull") as the

boys get to work with Jimmie's branded detergents ("Windex and Lava are good"). Their dialogue mixes registers ("I got a threshold for abuse"/"This is some fucked-up repugnant shit!"), pulls in fictional precedents ("Every time I touch brain I'm *Superfly TNT*, I'm the *Guns of Navarone*.") and recodes the aftermath of murder as a domestic chore ("What the fuck am I doin' in the back? You're the motherfucker should be on brain detail. We're tradin'. I'm washin' windows and you're pickin' up this nigger's skull."). Mission accomplished, the boys, still a bloody mess, beam with pride at their achievement. But Wolf ("Let's not start suckin' each other's dicks quite yet") has yet to complete phase two. There is a moment of suspense as Jules and Vince are ordered to strip and face what could be the muzzle of a gun, but the camera pulls back to disclose it as a garden hose. The episode ends with Tarantino in *propria persona* chortling at the redeemed and spotless "dorks" on his suburban lawn.

I have characterised *Pulp Fiction* as a text which establishes its stories within the linear transparency and forward thrust of the crime genre, then checks and overcodes this with the circuitous dynamics of comedy, all the while asking to be read as a metatext which thematises film. I have argued that this strategy "makes strange" normally taken-for-granted narrative procedures and challenges the viewing habits of its audience. We have seen that as the discourse of the sitcom displaces and is substituted for the traditional "law and order" discourse of the crime film, it "frees" topoi, making them available for comic scrutiny and exposing them as arbitrary filmic tropes - "[t]o me, violence is a totally aesthetic subject. Saying you don't like violence in movies is like saying you don't like dance sequences in movies (Tarantino quoted by Wood 1995: 9). In the process not only are the genre's character, dialogue and action recoded as comic, but its serious rupture with ethical behaviour (its violence, obscenity and horror) is re-written as a comic matter of incompetence and bad timing. This short-circuits the tensions of the crime film, and the degree of our pleasure/laughter is proportionate to the gravity of the problems from which we have been granted economical release. Because Tarantino's citations of filmic violence are usually hyperbolic, the humour generated is intense. Of course, in all this, Tarantino privileges the comic mode, and some critics feel that the way his films let viewers off the hook is reprehensible. Which brings me to my coda.

4 Freedom or Fetishism: *Pulp Fiction* and Cult

Here we need to address some of the charges laid against *Pulp Fiction*'s "low" metacinema. While my reading has been guided by proponents of metatext like Waugh (1984), Fiske (1987) and Hutcheon (1989) who celebrate the opposition-

al potential of postmodern irony, in the opposite corner, the likes of Fred Jameson (1985, 1991) and Sharon Willis (1991, 1995) are more sceptical. Jameson (1985, 1991) is concerned about late capitalism's intensive commodification of contemporary life, and sees postmodern discourse in the sphere of popular culture as complicit with this. Postmodern texts, he submits, employ not parody, but "blank pastiche". Lacking any organising metalanguage or coherent position from which to instigate a critique, their recycling of tropes and imagery merely encourages the uncritical consumption of yet more film, television, and other consumer items. Far from creating critical consumers, their borrowing, copying and stylisation are more likely simply to disorient viewers and service consumption.

Willis's critiques (1991, 1995) of films by David Lynch and Tarantino endorse this position. She reads these texts as congratulating viewers and rewarding their complacent knowledge of the medium, so serving the interests of partiarchal and consumerist ideologies. Their mix of psychosexual kicks, film historical references, collective nostalgia and odd stylistic choices, disorient and distract us from the issues raised by the socially disruptive discourses playfully "cited" or "represented" within the texts. While such films do ask us to mobilise our viewing competence and social knowledge in a new way, they fascinate by neutralising ethical issues as ironic. Willis (1991, 1995) takes it as her critical task to restore historical and social referentiality by identifying the vicious subtext of such films which is obscured by their excessive stylisation.

Timothy Corrigan's essay "Film and the Culture of Cult" develops an idea of the contemporary film audience which seems to support this suspicion of metatext (1992: 80-91). He argues that the disregard for textual authority so prized by postmodernists - the willingness to treat the rules and materials of stories as independent material "things" which may be "freed" from their narrative systems and then reconstellated at will - is a fetishism engendered by the sheer narrative overload which conditions the contemporary production and reception of film. He identifies a category of "cult" films which deliberately juxtapose "a chaotic intertextual range of subcultural clichés ... fetishised bits and pieces of genres, ambiguous characters and plot" (1992: 81), and encourage their media-saturated audiences to engage in an analogous viewing activity, as they randomly appropriate images or sequences and re-perform them, putting them to whatever uses they may choose.

Willis applies this description to *Pulp Fiction*, and claims that it invites viewers to use it as a cult text. For her, the film's mixed style, far from raising viewers' awareness, performs an "inoculating" function. Its cool "citing" of transgressive discourses (violence, homophobia, racist speech) as mere filmic topoi, fetishises social problems and renders them palatable and innocuous. The

film's only public space is the community of users of popular culture and an untethered nostalgia: "it aggressively figures cultural legacy and history as refuse, a refuse whose emblem is surely the father's gold watch stashed in his rectum!" (1995: 65). For Willis the world of Tarantino's films is a world without history: "a world where all culture is simultaneous and all artifacts have equal weight, where movies only really watch other movies" (1995: 64).

These are serious charges which cast the film rather contradictorily as a trivialising "mirror" of contemporary consumer culture and a form of escapism which imprisons us in a sentimentalised past. For Jameson such texts are "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (1985: 117). Hutcheon makes no concessions to Jameson, rejecting his historical certainties out of hand, and insisting that postmodern texts are, if anything, obsessed with history, but a past we can only know through its traces and representations: "a contingent and inescapably intertextual history" (1989: 113-114).

Does *Pulp Fiction*'s mode of address fetishise culture and render social problems innocuous? The dynamics that prompt some critics to acclaim the film enthusiastically and others, like Willis, to dismiss it out of hand, are its double coding and humour, with charges of trivialisation issuing from a deep-seated distrust of irony and a refusal to grant the oppositional possibilities of parody. As an ironic text the film is by definition doublevoiced, complicitous and compromised. It knows and never denies that it is implicated in consumer culture. It exploits its insider position (in relation to popular culture and consumerism generally) to subvert unthinking habit by talking to consumers in a way that will meet them "where and how they live" (Hutcheon 1989: 114). Tarantino's popular parody is multiple and obvious, using its complicity to lay bare and challenge the conventions which it inscribes. The stratagems of irony and humour are by design ambivalent and unstable, and susceptible to contrary readings. As Hutcheon points out, if only one side - either - of their contradictory dynamics is read or valued, then their ambivalent encoding can easily be resolved into a single decoding (1989: 117). Thus, Jameson refuses to read postmodern irony as a contradictory whole, one minute deploring its inscription of consumerist attitudes, and the next dismissing the dismantling of these as cynicism or pathology (1985). In the same spirit of refusal Willis (1995) can write thirty pages of commentary on *Pulp Fiction* and never seriously addresss the humour and code-switching which are its most significant principles of narrative organisation. The film does not frivolously "cite" macho behaviour and violence; it detaches them from their safe position in the closed system of genre and exposes them to scrutiny. It does not simply flaunt racist or blasphemous speech; it makes it ridiculous. If its "cool" mode of address

appears at times to equate gangster violence and Big Kahuna Burgers, perhaps this is a fair comment on our unthinking consumption of the "branded" tropes of popular film.

If I have any misgivings about *Pulp Fiction* they have to do with its not being *sufficiently* compromised. Tarantino finally privileges the comic discourse and perhaps sustains it too well, using it to resolve not one, but almost all of his narratives. This tends to "close" the text at the aesthetic level, where post-modernism prefers to leave some tensions unresolved and contradictions more visible. While the mechanism of the joke serves Tarantino brilliantly in his dismantling of the crime film and in constructing what I have called his comic *abyme*, by finally according it privileged status, he limits the metafictional charge of his text. Freud warns that the joke's economy is inimical to sustained contemplation or analysis, being expressly designed to let its hearers "off the hook". While Tarantino's textual games serve to free viewers from being mindlessly hooked on Hollywood's genres, perhaps his predeliction for jokes lets them off the hook too easily. By favouring the joke as his text's main principle of articulation, he limits its critical potential.

While *Pulp Fiction* lays itself open to contradictory readings and may fall short of the highest rigours as metatext, the discourse of the film still manifests itself as a deconstructive logic, a process of radical unravelling, which throws into question what Derrida has called "the metaphor of metaphor" or, for our purposes, the nature and activity of filmic tropes themselves. If a trope is a "turn", a metaphorical or ironic figuring, then *Pulp Fiction* comically tropes the turns and turns the tropes, enthusiastically affirming (and performing) the power of signs in artful combination tirelessly to frame and subvert meaning.

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