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Tarantino unchained!

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TARANTINO UNCHAINED !

Quentin Tarantino is having a good time. Not because his first film as writer/director, *Reservoir Dogs*, was the talk of Hollywood and was internationally hailed as a masterpiece of neo-noir. Not because his second film, *Pulp Fiction*, won the *Palme d'Or* for best film at Cannes this year and was picked as the opening night selection of the New York Film Festival. Not because two of his earlier screenplays, *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers*, have been made into critically acclaimed films by, respectively, Tony Scott and Oliver Stone. Not because he helped produce fellow film junkie and ex-video clerk Roger Avary's *Killing Zoe*. All of this helps, no doubt. But Quentin Tarantino is having a good time because he is probably watching a film right now. And in the unlikely event that he is not screening a film today, he is undoubtedly talking, reading, thinking or dreaming about films. For a natural born obsessive like Tarantino, nothing could be better.

Rewind to September 1992, The International Feature Film Market in New York. Tarantino is in the house, ready to show *Reservoir Dogs* to an eager crowd of filmmakers, critics and cineastes. He is standing in the lobby, answering questions, but not - to the dismay of his publicist - necessarily about *Dogs*. About Jean-Pierre Melville or John Woo or other directors he likes (Howard Hawks, Don Siegel, Martin Scorsese, the list goes on forever) or about 70s junk culture or about favorite action sequences. And despite the casualness of the venue - it is a market, not a selective film festival - you can sense expectancy in the air, and palpable waves of adulation emanating from the audience. It is Mr. T. day in the Big Apple. Which makes this a typical pit stop in Tarantino's amazing year, one of those make-a-celebrated-cult-film-and-see-the-world kind of years. Shepherding *Dogs* through the international festival circuit, picking up accolades from Sundance to Stockholm, giving over 400 interviews, has made Tarantino into an overnight celebrity, a star with the hip media cognoscenti. To them, he is the best thing since sliced bread, the sine qua non of postmodern B-movie realism.

Perhaps because he always anticipated it, success seems to rest easily on Tarantino's shoulders. It has not changed his open manner, his naive expectancy, and certainly has not altered his dress code much. No neo-mogul striving for importance in designer chic, Tarantino still grunges out. At the IFFM, beneath a long black leather coat (less a fashion statement than a response to the brisk, drizzly early autumn weather), he sports a goth-rock, dungeons-and-dragons type t-shirt, plus jeans and sneakers. (This year at Cannes, he could be seen strolling the Croisette in a Mickey

Mouse shirt-or was this a sly dig on his distributor, Miramax Films, which had been purchased by the House of Mouse, Disney ?) Tarantino spies Kirk Baltz, who plays a victimized cop in *Dogs*, and gives him a shout. After the screening, there is a party at the French Embassy. Tarantino is mobbed by glitterati and well wishers, including Harvey Keitel, Tim Roth (the film's two leads) and the legendary Sam Fuller. Nothing could go wrong for Tarantino that night. When he sees Roth, he gleefully yells out "Look ! It's Mr. Orange ! ", a reference to Roth's undercover cop character in *Dogs*. Tarantino is clearly in his element, and enjoying every minute of it.

Not bad for a guy whose main claim to fame, a couple of years before, was a trivia champ within his peer group of LA video store clerks. Tarantino had been raised on a steady diet of movies, TV and pop culture. He evidently learned his lessons well. At Video Archives in Hermosa Beach, where he worked for five years, his encyclopedic knowledge of film was legendary. Some of the self styled film savants there identify a work by director or lead actor. Tarantino would quote them chapter and verse : the director of photography, the supporting cast, a description of shots and camera angles, choice bits of dialogue. Putting these references to use, he had written a couple of scripts, which remained unproduced at the time (only later did they become *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers*). He was pursuing a fledgling acting career with only occasional work (including an unlikely walk-on as an Elvis impersonator on the TV show "Golden Girls"), and had scripted and shot part of a screwball comedy, which unfortunately was not coming together.

Still, Tarantino was a true believer. He persevered. His unquenchable faith in film sustained him, and kept the dream alive. It is the same dream that spurred the *Cahiers* critics (Godard, Truffaut et al.) to become the French New Wave. That turned Peter Bogdanovich and Paul Schrader from academics and aficionados into directors. The dream that, with luck and talent, would see Tarantino rise from fan to player, from obscurity to name above the title, in an astonishingly short time.

The next part of the story, magnified through hundreds of interviews, has become a piece of folklore, a new wrinkle on the old Hollywood saw of rags-to-riches. Tarantino decided to write and direct a crime caper that he would call "Reservoir Dogs". He had the title, but no script. No matter. The film would be done, even if he had to shoot in 16 mm, guerilla style, on the backstreets of LA, using himself and his immediate circle of friends as actors.

At the same time, Tarantino met Lawrence Bender, a dancer and actor who was starting to produce low budget slasher movies. Bender was interested in the idea. Tarantino went home to write. Three and a half weeks later, a script was done. Bender wanted a year to raise the money. Tarantino said no way : two months, with an option for one more month. Bender takes the script to his acting teacher, who is friendly with Harvey Keitel. Soon, there is a message on Bender's answering machine. Keitel loves the script, wants to act in it, and helps with casting and financing. The rest, as they say, is history.

Even before it leaves the editing room, the buzz is out on *Dogs*. By any measure, it is a brilliant debut. Focusing on a jewelry heist gone sour, it features all the tasty stuff that makes *noir* the favorite genre of film students everywhere, while adding unique elements to the mix that unfold and recombine within the genre like cinematic origami, like some masterful feat of *noir* genetic engineering. Tarantino is not interested in confounding genre, in tearing it apart without hope of redemption. Rather, he looks for spaces between existing conventions to insert his own interests and obsessions. Crossbreeding the expected elements of the pulp action thriller with art house dialogue, heavily referencing both film history and pop culture, Tarantino creates a heady amalgam that manages to restore genre's moral imperative and its ability to astonish.

Set in a gangster demimonde of cool dressing, tough talking wise guys, *Dogs* enjoys the existential fillip of life and death situations, of loyalty and betrayal and conversations held at gunpoint. Violence can break out with sudden casualness, but it is explosive, bloody and sometimes too real. So real you don't know whether to laugh hysterically or jump under your seat. Violence is so pervasive in *Dogs*, it sometimes seeps between the cracks, like the gut shot Mr. Orange slowly bleeding to death through the course of the action. But more often it is high impact, scarifying stuff. In the film's most notorious scene, a psychopathic killer slices off a hapless cop's ear while strutting to the strains of 70s bubblegum rock - Stealers Wheel's "Stuck In The Middle With You". Not since David Lynch used Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" in *Blue Velvet* has a film so thoroughly recontextualized the public's notion of a song's subliminal message.

Undoubtedly, too much has been made of the violence in *Dogs* and Tarantino's subsequent *oeuvre*. In fact, many more people are blown away in a Joel Silver actioner like *Lethal Weapon* or in this summer's Schwarzenegger vehicle, *True Lies*. The big difference, of course, is that in the typical actioner, the victims are undifferentiated cannon fodder : terrorists, one dimensional bad guys. We do not feel the impact of their loss because they were never more

than bowling pins, set up so the hero could knock them down. With Tarantino, the violence is much more up close and personal, an expression of character, a means to establish a code of conduct, of honor among thieves. When they bleed - profusely, noisily - we bleed with them. In any case, Tarantino the filmalcoholic would undoubtedly endorse Godard's answer to his critics. When asked why his films were so bloody, Godard drily noted, "It's not blood. It's red."

The camera might linger on these moments, but not particularly for their inherent shock value. Tarantino is a chronic lingerer. He enjoys the extended take, and would no sooner cut away from blood-letting than he would from a choice exchange of dialogue. Lawrence Bender has said, "Where most movies cut is where Quentin's scenes start getting interesting." It is one of the signature of Tarantino's style, perhaps his consummate achievement, to stop the action cold and allow these privileged moments of performance to play out uninterrupted.

For an actor, the value of a privileged moment cannot be overstated. Time stands still and becomes geared to the heartbeat of performance. It can be a watershed experience in an actor's career, one that will be remembered by both the actor and his public as star time. Perhaps because he is an actor himself, and has played small roles in both *Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino understands the importance of the privileged moment. His scripts abound with them. No wonder actors praise his writing and want to work with him.

Consider Christopher Walken's brilliant speech as the Mafia kingpin in *True Romance* ("Think of me as the Antichrist") and Dennis Hopper's brave retort with a lesson in Sicilian history. Or Walken, again, as the returning serviceman in *Pulp Fiction*, and his long, hilarious monologue on the pedigree of the good watch. Tim Roth as the undercover cop in *Dogs*, method acting his way into his cover persona, then coaching himself in the mirror for reassurance. Chris Penn as Nice Guy Eddie in *Dogs*, outlining the parole scam. Samuel L. Jackson as Jules the badass hitman in *Fiction*, laying on the fire and brimstone before pulling the trigger. Woody Harrelson's foreboding prison interview in *Natural Born Killers* (part of Tarantino's original script that survived the Stone rewrites) in which he gallantly takes second place to Charles Manson in the mass murder sweepstakes ("It's hard to beat the king"). Jackson and John Travolta in *Fiction*, discussing the relative sexual intimacies of cunnilingus and foot massage while on their way to blow away some drug yuppies.

This seems to be a central question for Tarantino and the source of much of his quirky humor : What do hit men talk about when they're not blowing someone away ? The all-male ensemble cast of *Dogs* can recall the grimmest aspects of hard boiled pulp, but are leavened by their all too



PHOTO : BENJAMIN HEDSEK

Quentin Tarantino (thumbs up, dude) talking with Steven Kaplan, September 1992.

human concerns and their immersion in pop culture. This juxtaposition of murder and mayhem with coffeehouse banter informs *Dogs* right from the outset. A pre-robbery breakfast roundtable at the local greasy spoon discusses the sexual subtext of Madonna's lyrics in "Like A Virgin", then moves on to the socio-economic implications of tipping the waitress. When the gang are given color coded monikers to protect their anonymity, the unfortunately assigned Mr. Pink naturally whines about his sissy name. Later, after narrowly avoiding a brawl with Mr. White, Mr. Blonde jokingly teases him, "You must be a big Lee Marvin fan."

Throughout the film, the detritus of pop culture consistently dislocates, landing us in a hip, retro time tunnel. Is it real, or is it Memorex? The Dogs wear identical slim jim suits and ties, a cool if anachronistic affectation. They drive through LA in vintage muscle cars from Detroit's last (pre-OPEC) gasp at gas guzzling opulence. But LA they drive through is a throwback to James M. Cain: sleepy, smalltownish streets and lowkey back alleys, consistently eschewing the glitzy, high corporate locales of the 90s entertainment megalopolis. And the music they listen to, a fictional radio show called K-Billy DJ's Super 70s Weekend, is strictly oldies (Joe Tex's "I Gotcha," Blue Swede's "Hooked On A Feeling," Nilsson's "Coconut," and of course "Stuck in the Middle..."), which celebrates the revival of 70s trash culture while providing an ironic counterpoint to the action on screen.

LA is Hollywood, but it is also Tarantino's home town, both producer of pop and the place where he first received the images. They say there's no place like home, and in his treatment of the city on screen, he validates the homily. There is no place like the LA of *Dogs* and *Fiction*, a mythological dumping ground, a cultural theme park where street realism and media residue cohabit in unholy matrimony.

The marriage reaches an apotheosis in the Jackrabbit Slims sequence of *Fiction*. Slims is a trenchant set piece, a restaurant/nightclub where the table staff look and act like dead icons (Buddy Holly, Marilyn Monroe, Ed Sullivan), the fast food menu serves up pieces of film history (Martin & Lewis shakes, Douglas Sirk steaks), and the seating is in classic 50s roadsters. Hit man Vincent Vega (John Travolta) takes his crime boss's wife Mia (Uma Thurman) there on an arranged date. They are not supposed to click - Vince is just

making sure she doesn't get bored while hubby is out of town - but they do. Part of their mating ritual is a barefoot, ultra-cool twist, a veritable catalogue of dancefloor attitude. With its vacant, ritualized gestures and stylized choreography, this dance is a direct homage to the Anna Karina/Claude Brasseur/Sami Frey/Madison scene from Godard's *Bande À Part*, while also accessing Travolta's cinematic past in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Back at Mia's place, Vince has sequestered himself in the bathroom, hoping to talk himself out of putting the make on his boss's wife. Left to her own devices, Mia dances dreamily through the living room, this time recalling Anna Karina - down to the black wig, white blouse and trenchcoat - in a scene from another early Godard film, *Vivre Sa Vie*. (To bring the Godard references around full circle, to a spot behind the camera, Tarantino and Bender have a production company called "Band Apart"). Mia finds what she thinks is cocaine in Vince's coat, and promptly snorts a hefty line. It turns out to be heroin. She promptly ODs. It takes all of Vince's frantic maneuvering, culminating in a massive shot of adrenaline directly into her heart, to prevent her demise.

The sequence starts out slow and romantic (boy meets girl, French film references), then dramatically shifts into nitty gritty overdrive, with Thurman popping up at the end, needle still embedded in her chest, like a grotesque jack-in-the-box. This is pure Tarantino, so real you might have to look away, a fitting companion to the ear slicing in *Dogs*. But with one big difference: nobody dies. By the end of *Dogs*, everyone we know has been killed. In his passage to *Fiction*, Tarantino seems to have learned how to keep at least some of his characters alive.

Tarantino has mentioned in interviews that he does not want to be pegged as "the gun guy". He hopes to explore other genres. Still, all his films to date, including *Romance* and *Killers*, feature lots of gun waving and the requisite bloodshed. *Fiction* finds itself in the same LA criminal cool guy milieu as *Dogs*, but while *Dogs* concentrates on a single caper, *Fiction* broadens its pulp scope. It is an anthology film: as Tarantino notes in a pre-credit title, "three stories... about one story", with a single cast of characters populating all three. The stories are derived from some of the oldest chestnuts in the pulp litany: guy goes out with his boss's wife, boxer refuses to take a mob ordered dive, two hoods are sent out to eliminate the opposition and retrieve the



swag. As in the boss's wife story, each of the other segments is enhanced with roller-coaster plot reversals, engaging banter, extended speeches (Samuel Jackson gets to quote from the Book of Ezekiel not once but twice) and slick pop regurgitations. As each story comes to a close, despite drawn guns and unsheathed samurai swords, despite S&M rednecks, deals gone bad, bloody car interiors and anal rape, the principal characters are allowed to talk over their disagreements, negotiate some compromise, and walk away from it. The Mexican standoffs in *Dogs* and *Romance* touch off the expected deadly conflagrations. In *Fiction*, a new moral center is established, personified by Samuel Jackson's Jules, who has decided to renounce his life of crime and instead roam the earth like Kane from TV's "King Fu",

dispensing truth, justice and popcorn. Coming soon, perhaps, to your local multiplex.

Does this mean that Tarantino is growing up? Let us hope not, if growing up signals a curb to his spontaneity and his free-wheeling, go for broke inventiveness. Still, there is a certain slickness and superficiality in his work that he needs to overcome, before it surrenders to schtick. After four films, a pattern has emerged that can wear thin even as it continues to entertain: The constant barrage of references to film, as opposed to real life. The insatiable mining of pop culture at the expense of any highbrow sources. Meandering chatter that often springs from nowhere and winds up in the same place. Conversations about really good cups of coffee, five dollar milk shakes, and the French name for the Quarter



PHOTO : LINDA R. CHEN

John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Miramax Films.

Pounder (the "Royale" - blame it on the metric system) are lots of fun, and might reveal character. But can Homo Cinematicus live on junk food alone ?

Right now, Tarantino is in an enviable position. As Jimmy Cagney put it in *White Heat*, "Top of the world, ma ! ". Due to his quick rise to fame, his hip cult status, his boundless energy, his straight ahead self confidence, and his sterling reputation with other actors and directors, there are few dampers on his ambition. He has been remarkably adept at avoiding the homogenizing Hollywood machinery of double and triple turnaround, D-girls, rewrites, direction by committee, test marketing, etc. On the downside, this means that there is no one around to moderate his excesses and refocus his petty indulgences. Like Mr. Blonde, the

amputator of police ears in *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino is a bit of a loose cannon. But have no fear : his aim is true and his heart is in the right place. A guy who serves up Douglas Sirk steaks will never betray his one and only magnificent obsession. Tarantino is one smart g. And frankly, I can barely wait to see what he comes up with next.

STEVEN KAPLAN