

The work of Quentin Tarantino

Surfaces with a sting

By Clive Bradley

FOUR ROOMS bombed with the critics, but Quentin Tarantino remains hot property. According to Paul Schrader, writer of such Martin Scorsese movies as *Taxi Driver* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and director of — among others — *American Gigolo*, and *Mishima*, Hollywood is desperately trying to remould its output on Tarantino-esque lines, but can't work out what they are. Schrader sees Tarantino as a watershed in American film, ending the tradition of what he calls 'the existential hero'. Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* is seeking to shape a place for himself in the world, however warped; Tarantino's characters simply exist, with nothing beneath the surface.

Tarantino is responsible for four and a quarter films, aside from productions he has lent his name to. The quarter is his bit of *Four Rooms*; the others are *True Romance*, for which he wrote the script, *Natural Born Killers*, for which he wrote the original script, so altered in Oliver Stone's film that Tarantino took his name



More blood than violence: *Reservoir Dogs*

off the credits; and the two movies he has directed, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. On the strength of this alone he has already had more written about him than most other directors ever have.

There is no doubt that Tarantino's work is radically different from most American movies. For one thing there is a great deal more dialogue, and hardly any of it is the 'functional' dialogue long typical of Hollywood. The opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs*, focused around the hidden meaning of a Madonna song and whether to tip waitresses, is longer than the average action sequence, never mind the average movie conversation, and it has almost nothing to do with the story. Most Hollywood script analysts would have cut it. Indeed, the whole film bears an unusual similarity to a stage play. Commentators have suggested that this has helped the recent revival of Shakespeare in the cinema — audiences have got used to more talking.

Structurally, too, Tarantino's films bear no relationship to the standard 'three act' format of most movies. Rather than the

usual pattern — disruption of equilibrium, development, equilibrium restored — both *Reservoir Dogs* and (especially) *Pulp Fiction* shoot off in all directions. Action does not take place in sequence.

And again, both these films are 'ensemble' pieces, without a single central character, without a single (or clear) antagonist. They are 'character', rather than 'plot' driven. This is less true of his earlier screenplays, *True Romance* or *Natural Born Killers* (which was written before *Reservoir Dogs*), although here too there are departures from convention: consider the scene building up to Dennis Hopper's death at Christopher Walken's hands in *True Romance*, which includes a lengthy dissertation on the ethnic origins of Sicilians unlikely to be found in any standard Hollywood movie.

Yet these features alone do not mark Tarantino out. Dialogue-heavy American films are rare, but not unheard of (*Moonstruck* springs to mind), and it is anything but unusual for European film to be heavily verbal and character-driven; the average scene in a European film is



Quentin Tarantino

from facing page

ing unions and the activists in the labour party will go, I don't know. It's a process. It could happen that the unions say "no further with the politics, or we walk out". Probably the labour party will have a structure like the British Labour Party, with local chapters and union affiliations.

Mazzochi proposed that if unions gave \$25,000 or more to LPA, they would be able to get voting rights at the convention, even if they did not endorse LPA. We argued that this was undemocratic. The Teamsters' Union in Pennsylvania gave LPA \$100,000 to print brochures; the Mineworkers have given \$25,000; but they don't want

to take a public position in favour of LPA. It does show that there is a growing sentiment in the unions for the idea of a labour party.

Part of the thinking of the union leaderships, and maybe of Tony Mazzochi, is to be a lever on the Democrats. What Clinton and the Democrats tell the trade unions is: "we're the only thing you've got." The union leaders want some leverage. At some point, with the formation of a labour party, they are going to have to start running independent labour candidates and make a break with the Democrats. That will be a test of how serious they are.

If the labour party is going to be successful it has got to broaden out and deal with

issues like health care, labour laws, housing, minority rights, and women's rights. Tony Mazzochi says he does not want to get involved in issues like immigration or affirmative action. They're too touchy, too controversial. My view is that a labour party has to have a position on issues like that, particularly with a person like Buchanan appealing to workers.

Unions in particular sectors, and women's and minority groups, should work out platforms for their areas of concern and take them into the labour party. For the labour party to be successful, a debate has to go on in the rank and file about the programme we need. ■

Government shields Nazi scientists' experiments on aliens

Ruah Carlyle reviews *The X-files*

THIS could be a headline in the *Daily Sport* or, quite plausibly, a plot for *The X-files*, the hugely popular imported American sci-fi TV series on BBC1. Slickly made and entertaining, it plays on every paranoid conspiracy theory and on every wildest wet dream. It is total bilge!

For those three people who haven't seen the show, it depicts two FBI agents who investigate paranormal events and invariably discover that they are caused by aliens, government conspiracies, a cult, or all three. Or have some other bizarre cause. Recent plots, for instance, have included vampires, alien bounty hunters and — weirdest of all — Southern US cannibals running a chicken factory.

The show is a success because it taps into a rich seam of paranoia in American (and now it seems British) society. Millions of American people have asserted in surveys that they have been abducted by, or seen, aliens. A large number also believe that the government has know of the existence of aliens for years but keep it secret. (There is never any explanation for why they'd bother to keep this secret).

This paranoia is an indication of how little control people feel in their lives; there must be a conspiracy working behind the scenes. It is the psychology of a small child who really doesn't control his or her life.

The X-Files translate this paranoia into pseudo-factual TV, adding a bit of New Age, Mother-earth, peace, more herbal tea, vicar? bullshit. I suppose this is an attempt to give a purpose to all these conspiracy theories.

As such things do, *The X-Files*, has generated a *Star Trek*-type cult fan club. Why do naff sci-fi shows always have such massive nerdy fan clubs? I suppose it's vaguely more interesting than trainspotting.

To any *X-file* fans out there, I say this: look, you with the *X-file* t-shirt, *X-file* mug of tea, *X-file* video and tin foil wrapped around your head to stop aliens invading your brain, grow up! Get a life! Read a book instead!



The cast of *Pulp Fiction*

twice as long as in an American one. Hollywood may go for visual stimulation above character and dialogue, but American independent film (think of Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* or Stephen Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape*, or John Sayles' magnificent *Matewan*) can often manage both. There are plenty of structurally-innovative films — Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, for example.

What does mark Tarantino out is that he is an independent film-maker who has managed to be vastly more successful; he is therefore 'independent' no longer.

The uniqueness of Tarantino — and what is controversial — is his amoral humour, and in particular his use of violence as a way of getting a laugh. Post-modernists like to speak of reality as merely 'surfaces', and that sums up Tarantino's work very accurately. His films could be taken as satires on the collapse of all life into its media-saturated surfaces. The hero of *True Romance* is a comic-book obsessed ingenue who falls in love on a first date because that's how love is supposed to be, and murders his new wife's pimp because that's how heroes are supposed to act (She agrees: 'That's so... romantic,' she declares, upon hearing of the pimp's dispatch). They embark on an adventure because the only mode of existence they can imagine is one borrowed from trash-culture.

Tarantino's original script of *Natural*

Born Killers is focused much more than the eventual film around the character of the sleazeball TV presenter who runs a show about serial killers. A long sequence concerns a 'documentary' about Micky and Mallory which includes scenes from a movie made about them (departing drastically from 'fact', naturally). Tarantino's script is about the media which makes heroes of psychotic murderers, turning morality on its head. (The inferences, in Stone's film, that people are naturally violent, and the bizarre section with the insightful native Americans, are entirely absent from Tarantino's script).

Pulp Fiction is famous for the obsession of its characters with hamburgers and other commercial trivia as they go about their business of shooting people. When the Samuel L Jackson character decides to give up being a professional killer, there is little suggestion that he has questioned his career morally; even his religion is just another surface.

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Yet in fact, Tarantino's concerns are less satirical, less political, than this interpretation suggests. This is not to say that the interpretation isn't valid — film like any other art form doesn't necessarily work only on its intended level. But Tarantino's concerns are much more 'self-referential' than that. *True Romance* is self-consciously an 'homage' to Terence Mallick's *Badlands*. *Pulp Fiction* is stuffed full of movie references: the sequence in which Harvey Keitel is brought in to clean up the hitmen's brain-spattered car is less about the dehumanisation of violence than a joke about Mafia 'cleaners' in films.

The episode of *ER* he directed for TV even has visual references to *Reservoir Dogs*.

Rather than satires on the superficiality of contemporary culture, the films are tongue-in-cheek celebrations of it. They are not about 'surfaces'; they are designed to be, so to speak, just another surface, one product of popular culture cross-referencing others. They are, in other words, thoroughly post-modern in their whole conception. Tarantino is not criticising trivialisation, moral inversion and the rest: he is saying, this is how reality is, and isn't it funny?

It seems to me that what makes Tarantino's work nevertheless of considerable value is that by highlighting how funny it is, he does, whatever his intentions, indict it. You might watch John Travolta accidentally blow someone's head off and laugh (I did), and you might think, a la Beavis and Butthead, that it's 'cool' to be like John Travolta. There is no doubt that lots of people do think so. But it isn't cool at all, in reality, and by depicting the 'surface' so vividly, Tarantino exposes it to anyone who wants to see the truth. Doubtless, many viewers of *Reservoir Dogs* find the violence merely entertaining (although in truth there is more blood than actual violence). But buried in the story is an old-fashioned Hollywood tale of 'crime doesn't pay', if you want to see it (even if that's just another movie-buff joke).

Quentin Tarantino is a writer and director of outstanding talent: his dialogue alone is breathtakingly virtuosic. (If Hollywood does start churning out movies full of assassins blithely discussing French hamburgers I think this point will be proven.) If he has shaken up the lame formulas of mainstream American film, that can only be good. He is the ultimate post-modernist in film, and suffers from everything that is bad about post-modernism - flippant, soulless, form and style over content. But the end result rises above these limitations, puts the soullessness under scrutiny and exposes it. The joke has a sting in its tail whether it was meant to or not. ■



Renton checks out the worst toilet in Scotland

Endlessly innovative

Edward Ellis reviews

Trainspotting

POSSIBLY the most hyped British movie ever, *Trainspotting* is also one of the best British movies of recent years. From the team who made the unusual thriller *Shallow Grave*, and based on Irving Welsh's cult novel, the film follows a group of Edinburgh skag-heads, and in particular Renton (Ewan McGregor), who wants to kick the habit. After a couple of false starts, he moves to London and is doing okay until two of his mates turn up, one of them on the run following an armed robbery. They drag him back down, until he gets involved in a big heroin sale which, if they get caught, would mean a long jail sentence.

The film has been criticised for glamorising drugs, social irresponsibility, et cetera; I find this is a puzzling judgement. It is certainly not as grim as anti-drugs films like *Christiane F*, but it has hard to see how anyone could conclude from it that drugs (or at least heroin) are great. What it does is explain why people take heroin. *Christiane F* and its kind show how terrible heroin is, but it leave it somewhat mysterious why anyone should take it, except for stupidity. *Trainspotting* con-

trasts the partial joys of being 'out of it' with the grinding misery and pointlessness of 'normal' life. It shows how people take drugs because life is mind-numbingly dull without them, and because the experience itself can be pleasurable.

But it doesn't stop there. One character dies of AIDS — in utter squalor; another loses her baby due to neglect. The life of the addict is hardly portrayed as one of happiness and hope. When Renton gets his lucky break — the chance of really getting clean — it's because of a windfall, and even then his alternative is just as mindnumbingly dull; the difference is that now he can afford a slightly better mindnumbingly dull life.

The film is endlessly innovative, from surreal sequences (such as Renton's celebrated disappearance into the bowl of the worst toilet in Scotland, or his cold turkey hallucinations) to its use of dialogue and its camera angles. It is visually a million miles from the frequent 'British movie' syndrome of looking like an episode of *EastEnders* done on the cheap. It is also very funny.

It cost £1.5 million to make, a tiny fraction of what is spent on most Hollywood blockbusters (*Waterworld* cost \$180 million). An original, compelling movie, showing how vibrant British cinema can be.



Uma Thurman plays "gangster's