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THE SOUTH ACCORDING TO QUENTIN TARANTINO

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture
The University of Mississippi

by

MICHAEL LEE HENLEY

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the filmmaker Quentin Tarantino's portrayal of the South and southerners in his films *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Death Proof* (2007), and *Django Unchained* (2012). In order to do so, it explores and explains Tarantino's mixture of genres, influences, and filmmaking styles in which he places the South and its inhabitants into current trends in southern studies which aim to examine the South as a place that is defined by cultural reproductions, lacking authenticity, and cultural distinctiveness. Like Godard before him, Tarantino's movies are commentaries on film history itself. In short, Tarantino's films actively reimagine the South and southerners in a way that is not nostalgic for a "southern way of life," nor meant to exploit lower class whites. Tarantino's application of southernness in his movies are self-reflexive commentaries on "southernness," assembling them in a postmodern fashion by mixing high and low culture and multiple, even contradictory, genres and images from film history. Tarantino takes traditional southern narratives on their head to reimagine and repurpose generic tropes, making him a pioneer of postsouthern cinema.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to both my mom and sister.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my committee members Drs. Andy Harper, Deborah Barker, and Jodi Skipper. Additionally, I wish to thank the professors at the University of Mississippi and Flagler College who made this possible, specifically, Drs. Butler, Johnson, Horner, Andreu, King, and McFarland. I would also like to thank all of the good people at the Southern Documentary Project as well as those at Archives and Special Collections at the J.D. Williams Library. Finally, thanks to all of my friends, family, and colleagues.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1990s proved to be an exciting time for cinema as new, young filmmakers were bursting onto the scene recapturing the spirit of the New Hollywood generation decades prior. Unlike their predecessors before them, many of the up-and-coming filmmakers did not receive formal training in film school, but got their education from video stores and trips to the theater. The most iconic director of this generation of filmmakers, who Peter Bogdanovich declares as the most influential filmmaker of his time is Quentin Tarantino. In 1992 when his first film, *Reservoir Dogs*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, audiences, critics, and colleagues alike knew that they were witnessing a unique talent who partially defined American cinema of the decade and would continue to influence filmmakers for decades to come. At the start of his career, people were referring to his style as “Tarantino-esque” and were finding it being used in the films of his colleagues throughout the decade.

In 1994, Tarantino released one of the most popular and beloved films of the last twenty years, *Pulp Fiction*. The movie won the Palme d’Or at Cannes and earned Tarantino his first Academy Award for screenwriting with co-writer and video store clerk, Roger Avary. Following the success of *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino became one of the most well known filmmakers, elevating him to rock star status, a position perhaps only Alfred Hitchcock may have known previously. His origin story of the kid dropping out of school, working at a video store in Manhattan Beach, and then in a few short years making an instant American classic, makes Tarantino an icon for film fans. Finally, unlike other directors of his generation, Tarantino’s personality is almost as well known as his movies. Tarantino has used his celebrity as a platform to continue to talk

about, promote, and indulge in his love for cinema in order to reach a wider audience than the video store regulars he once edified. Therefore, understanding Quentin Tarantino means having to understand his personal biography as well as his influences, meaning the context in which he experienced films, the variety of films that have influenced him, and the ones that he incorporates as a cinematic homage in his own work.

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Tarantino was raised by a single mother and grew up in an integrated apartment complex until he moved to Los Angeles with his mother. During that time, he was primarily surrounded by African Americans and the thriving culture following the height of the civil rights era.¹ Young Quentin Tarantino had African American women for baby sitters as well as a number of African American male role models, some of whom were dating his mother.² Consequently, Tarantino spent much of his youth during the 1970s going to movie theaters in African American communities, which were the exclusive venues for blaxploitation films starring Pam Grier and Sid Haig in addition to many African American actors in films created by African Americans who were able to incorporate “blackness within traditional genres” representing a “significant revision,” according to Novotny Lawrence.³ Additionally, Tarantino was raised seeing other exploitation films, b-movies, Spaghetti Westerns and other genre-driven movies essential to the era that utilized violence, sexuality, African American, and female characters that were uncommon to mainstream, Hollywood cinema. However, he was no stranger to the typical blockbusters of white America. Tarantino’s affinity for international cinema led to him further refining of his taste and shaping of his style as an aspiring filmmaker. To be sure, kung-fu films, Italian neo-realism, and especially the French New Wave are essential to

¹ “Django Unchained: meet the press (2013) Quentin Tarantino,” *YouTube* video, 39:40, Jan. 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1QpScB-HJg> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

² Quentin Tarantino, “Writer’s Commentary,” *True Romance*, (Warner Bros.), 2003, DVD.

³ Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre*, (New York: Routledge), 2008:25.

Tarantino's postmodernist pastiche and particular aesthetic. As a result, Tarantino has gained critical praise and success from all around the world. For these reasons, Tarantino does not like to consider himself an American filmmaker, but an international filmmaker.⁴

Tarantino has always put his films in conversation with global cinema, such as, the French New Wave. In fact, he even named his production company, A Band Apart, after Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande a part* (1964). The *Kill Bill* (2003-2004) movies were Tarantino's first attempt to actually make movies on a global scale, shooting in Hong Kong to make his kung-fu, spaghetti western hybrid. His next epic, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), is a World War II film that was shot in France and Germany and truly demonstrates Tarantino's attempts at earning the title of an international filmmaker, especially given that a majority of the movie is subtitled in French, German, and in one comic scene, Italian. Even his most recent film, *Django Unchained* (2012), features a German bounty hunter and a Francophile plantation owner.

Tarantino's international influences, expansion of global settings for his films, and inclusion of European characters in American space and places, each of his movies are also connected to the South. Even *True Romance* (1993) directed by Tony Scott but written by Tarantino features a southern woman by the name of Alabama (Patricia Arquette) from Tallahassee, Florida who runs away with Clarence (Christian Slater). Additionally, Clarence shares two scenes with an apparition of Elvis. Even *Inglourious Basterds* features a southern army lieutenant played by Brad Pitt—though he originally wrote the character for himself—who leads a band of Jewish-American soldiers through Nazi-occupied France. Furthermore, a film he wrote which Robert Rodriguez directed, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), follows two outlaw brothers on the run to Mexico who cross the border with the reluctant help of a Texas minister

⁴ "Django Unchained: meet the press (2013) Quentin Tarantino," *YouTube* video, 39:40, Jan. 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1QpScB-HJg> accessed Nov. 18, 2014

and his family, who wind up at a Mexican bar that is pit stop for bikers that turns out to be run by vampires who feast on the patrons. In his homage to Jack Hill and Pam Grier blaxploitation collaborations (*Foxy Brown*, *Coffy*), *Jackie Brown* (1997), Tarantino inserts a Kentuckian named Beaumont played by comedian Chris Tucker. Simply put, Tarantino cannot seem to help himself from including southern characters into any space or place within his films whether it is because of his geographical roots or fascination with southern characters throughout film history. Despite these examples, the films that will be examined have been narrowed down to his most classic film, *Pulp Fiction*, his biggest box office flop, *Death Proof* (2007), and his most recent and successful, *Django Unchained*.

In his book, *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*, Scott von Doviak explains Redneck Cinema and hixploitation as an “umbrella genre of sorts, encompassing as it does many sub-genres—some of which, in turn, fall under the umbrella of other previously catalogued genres (horror movies, road pictures, musicals, et al).”⁵ Doviak explains further that “the common thread that unites movies about truckers and moonshiners and country singers and bigfoot hunters; together they form a patchwork quilt of rural Americana,” disclaiming that some of these films are great while some are “downright unwatchable.”⁶ Filmmakers from the height of the era of hixploitation include regionalists like Ron Ormond and Charles B. Pierce and many independent filmmakers who are creating movies about the South and depicting southerners as moonshiners, hillbillies, backward sheriffs, and sexy farmer’s daughters to construct the region through filmmaking—accurate or not. However, Tarantino does not aim to create a region or sense of region. Rather, his inclusion of the characters and places that are deemed southern are self-reflexive attempts to represent filmic and generic representations of southernness. Tarantino

⁵ Scott von Doviak, *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), 2005: 9.

⁶ Doviak, *Hick Flicks.*, 9.

knowingly reuses the tropes of the hixploitation era and transplants them into other genres and spaces. This postmodernist pastiche is what separates Tarantino from filmmakers of the 1960s and '70s and lends itself to the idea of postsouthern cinema.

Without a doubt, Tarantino self-reflexively includes these representations of southerners who are recognized from media representations of the past rather than the historical reality of the geographic South. For this reason, he enters into the concept of what is postsouthern. What ties each of these films together is Tarantino's openness to embrace postsouthern attitudes toward the region and his incorporation of those ideas in the film. The filmmaker is likely unfamiliar with the academic discussions of postsouthern studies, yet Tarantino seems to be the prime example of filmmaker who had adopted and displayed this understanding. Michael Kreyling writes in *Inventing Southern Literature*, "'southern' has fallen victim to the inexorable critical-economic process of commodification" and though "history still exists . . . we now acknowledge that we know it through a system of representations rather than an unmediated, direct way."⁷ Furthermore, Jay Watson writes in his essay, "Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema," that a "postsouthern South is thus one that appears to rest on no 'real' or reliable foundation of cultural, social, political, economic or historical distinctiveness, only on an ever-proliferating series of representations and commodifications of 'southernness.'"⁸

Tarantino's South and southerners are all connected to other references in popular culture either for the sake of pastiche, homage, or parody. Basically, Tarantino's purposeful attempt to create "southernness" on the screen is completely rooted in reusing and referencing commercial reproductions. Tarantino has no aims at displaying any sort of authenticity. This is how Pulp

⁷ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 1998: 154

⁸ Jay Watson, "Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema: Three Contemporary Films," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, (Athens, GA: University Press of Georgia), 2011: 219.

Fiction can suddenly become “southern,” as two “hillbilly rapists” who do not even seem to be connected to the hill country in any way can appear and interrupt a movie. It is further demonstrated when Stuntman Mike who does not even have a southern accent can be interpreted as southern by the audience by how the other characters in the film talk about him exclusively in reference to film and television shows that deal primarily with the region. In short, Tarantino is continuing the process of creating the South through narrative through his counter narratives and self-reflexivity. In *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine writes, the “real South” is the “fake South, which . . . becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative . . . the South is increasingly sustained as a virtual, commodified, built, themed, invented, or otherwise artificial.”⁹ Thus, Tarantino’s movies demonstrate how this is possible by making films that are commentaries about other films similar to his idol, Jean-Luc Godard. Tarantino’s films constantly call attention to how southerners and the South are constructed and reconstructed on screen, making his films models for describing and defining postsouthern cinema.

Each film features southern characters in unique, interesting, and even different ways. Though *Pulp Fiction* sets itself up as a cinematic take on pulp crime novels with clear influences to gangster movies of the 1960s and 70s, it still manages to dramatically and spontaneously shift genres and enter into the realm of hixploitation. There are no more explicitly southern scenes before or after the scene making it one of the most jarring and strangest scenes in the movie and of its time. One of the goals of this thesis is to examine the scene with the context of Tarantino’s postmodern assemblage of film genres to understand how the moment is constructed and how it has been constructed previously throughout films of the past.

⁹ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 2008: 9.

Furthermore, the chapter on *Pulp Fiction* will rely heavily on Douglas Powell's book *Critical Regionalism*, in which he pairs the book with the Coen Brothers film, *Fargo* (1996), and critiques them in terms of critical regionalism. While regionalist studies has usually been dedicated to explaining how a place isolated, unique, or distinct from other places, critical regionalism aims to connect spaces and places. Using history, literature, film, and contemporary environmental issues, Powell asserts, "critical regionalism must be, ultimately, a pedagogy, one that teaches students how to draw their own regional maps connecting their experiences to that of others near and far, both like and unlike themselves."¹⁰ In his book, Powell celebrates *Fargo* and criticize *Pulp Fiction* for not being rooted in place, unlike the Coen Brothers' film titled with a regional distinction. This thesis argues against Powell and claim that *Pulp Fiction* is actually better for understanding critical regionalism and postmodern understandings of space and place. Simply put, a postmodern film in which place and region are no solidly defined by a group majority, standard politic, dialect, and so forth, Tarantino's film presents a model of critical regionalist's representation.

The chapter also deals with the southerners in *Pulp Fiction* by understanding how he reuses southern caricatures from hixploitation films and repurposes them for his movie and social context. A postmodernist filmmaker like Tarantino does not bother to strive for an authentic portrayal because it is not his medium to do so. Tarantino regularly calls attention to the movie-ness of his films by referencing other films in the dialogue, with images, or by allowing new characters to enter the film and hijack a scene. Such characters are able to change the genre on a dime, which is only made possible through the reusing of classic genre and character types. The application of pastiche or homage does not necessarily mean that

¹⁰ Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2007: 8.

Tarantino's films are absent of politics or in need of critical analysis. What makes Tarantino's films complicated is that some scenes are overwhelmed empty allusions, while others involve references to films such as *Deliverance* with an African American man being raped by two rednecks in Los Angeles in the wake of Rodney King and the L.A. Riots. In this instance, Tarantino is repurposing the connection between exploitation cinema and its connection to the Vietnam War within the context of problems of race in the contemporary U.S.

Secondly, this thesis examines *Death Proof* by placing it in conversation with postmodern horror films. In order to understand what Tarantino is doing with the film, the concept of the Final Girl is examined in order to contextualize the slasher sub-genre and demonstrate that Tarantino is not only aware of the critiques of the genre but that he incorporates and applies them to his own work. Without a doubt, Tarantino's film plays into the audiences expectations of the genre in order to provide them a false sense of hope or idea of how the story will play out, showing that the filmmaker is playfully leading on his audience only to take them on a drastic turn in each of the film's climaxes. Basically, Tarantino's film is one of a kind in that it does not just have just a Final Girl, but three women who do not compromise their femininity or receive help from the intervention of another male character in order to defeat the killer, Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell).

Stuntman Mike proves to be one of Tarantino's most interesting and complex characters, especially among his southern characters. Not only is Russell not southern himself, he hardly even plays into a southern archetype within the film. Instead, most of the character's southernness comes from how other characters in the film identify him. For example, Tarantino's characters' references to Stuntman Mike are all rooted in southern characters or character types from movies and television. So while Stuntman Mike may not be a full-blown "redneck lunatic bastard" his

characters view him as such, and force the audience to do the same. Stuntman Mike exemplifies the idea of the South or southerners being forged in the mindsets of moviegoers and the public at large. *Death Proof* demonstrates that the idea of the South is a fiction created and enforced by others who attach meaning to signifiers, personalities, and regional identities.

The chapter also responds to an essay by Aaron Anderson who works with the theorist Jean Baudrillard and his ideas of simulation and simulacra. This concept works on multiple levels as the *Grindhouse* (2007) double feature (*Death Proof* and *Planet Terror*), Tarantino's film, and his characters are all simulations or representations of films from other eras. The chapter takes those ideas further and applies them to Tarantino's representations of Stuntman Mike and Austin, Texas and Lebanon, Tennessee, where the film takes place. Similar to the previous claim, Tarantino's film displays a self-consciousness with which he depicts the places as being in reference to other cultural reproductions, creating a simulacra, that is a "a copy without an original," as if to say that his film takes place in the South that popular culture has created and features a southern slash which pop culture continues to reproduce.¹¹

The third and final film, *Django Unchained*, is one of the most interesting cases because it is the only film that Tarantino himself describes as being "southern." The film is complicated and controversial because it is a slave narrative that combines the themes of blaxploitation films such as *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972) and is filmed in the style of a spaghetti Western, most notably, Sergio Corbucci's own *Django* (1966). The chapter breaks down how this assemblage of genres works together in order for Tarantino to tell a postmodern slave narrative through the art of film. Rather than criticizing Tarantino's take on slavery, this chapter aims to

¹¹ Aaron C. Anderson, "Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*," in *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy: How to Philosophize with a Pair of Pliers and a Blowtorch*, Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, (Chicago: Open Court), 2007: 20.

examine and explain how and why these different aspects of them film work together and how the director is able to get away with this approach to filming slavery.

One way in which the film works his through its humor. Tarantino's use of humor works in a couple of different ways. The first, more obvious, is through the use of irony and contradiction in the minds of the southern white supremacists in the film who are out smarted by the Dr. King Shultz (Christoph Waltz), Django (Jamie Fox), and Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). Another way Tarantino uses humor is to comment on film history and other depictions of the antebellum South so that they may be viewed as a joke and as being destroyed by Hollywood's newest southern hero who is the opposite of Scarlett O'Hara. The film itself is certainly a movie about movies, so the chapter looks at *Django Unchained* and its connections to *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to understand how Tarantino gets his audience to laugh at the absurdity of the racist depictions of African Americans, the nonsensical romanticization of the period, and how such films are still regarded as some of the best and most important American films in the eyes of the populace and even critics.

In the conclusion, I will put Tarantino in conversation with other filmmakers who deal heavily with region. I will compare Tarantino's South briefly to Paul Thomas Anderson's California, Alexander Payne's Mid-West, and Richard Linklater's Texas. All of the aforementioned filmmakers are included in lists as some of the most celebrated writers and directors of their generation, and all of them make films about particular places and regions. Anderson's films depict California at the turn of the century with *There Will Be Blood* (2007), the 1970s with *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Inherent Vice* (2014), and into the new millennium with *Magnolia* (1999), telling multiple stories of individuals in a particular place akin to Sherwood Anderson. On the other hand, Payne's films, particularly *About Schmidt* (2002) and

Nebraska (2013), are road movies that are contemporary reimagining of what it means to go westward for aging men in the 21st century. Meanwhile, Linklater's Texas can be viewed as a large change over time narrative as he chronicles different areas of Texas set in the 1970s with *Dazed and Confused* (1993), the 1990s with *Slacker* (1991), and the epic *Boyhood* (2014), literally shot over a twelve year period of time. While these filmmakers, like Tarantino, are among the greatest living today, their concepts of region prove to be outdated in comparison to Tarantino who does not limit himself, his characters, or his settings, to strict regional models. Tarantino's South is much more complex; indeed, his world is more vast and complex. The South according to Quentin Tarantino is connected to a long history of cinematic representation and a larger country or world in which southerners find themselves participating in, showing what postsouthern cinema means for the 21st century.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE “HILLBILLY RAPISTS” OF *PULP FICTION*

In 1994, Quentin Tarantino released his most iconic film and one of the most influential movies of its time, *Pulp Fiction*. Co-written with fellow video store clerk, Roger Avary, Tarantino says “The entire time I was writing *Pulp Fiction* I was thinking, this will be my Get-It-Out-of-Your-System movie,” which certainly explains the levels of pastiche, homage, and various, overall pulp characteristics.¹² Jim Smith breaks down the pulp quality of the film, stating, “The film pulps fiction; it takes as many separate elements as it can and crushes them into one circular mass which begins where it ends and ends where it begins. It also pulps *time*. That’s why the plot is non-linear to the point whereby some ordinary moviegoers have claimed it doesn’t make sense.”¹³ One of the most peculiar instances is when the movie which appears to be primarily and exclusively about the lives of people in southern California, the American South invades the series of crime stories and turns it into something reminiscent of exploitation cinema when Butch (Bruce Willis) and Marsellus (Ving Rhames) wander into a pawn shop run by a stereotypical redneck. Tarantino describes the film as “The story of a genre,” specifically crime novels. Tarantino admits, “The three stories . . . are more or less the oldest stories you’ve

¹² Quentin Tarantino and Gavin Smith, “When You Know You’re In Good Hands,” in *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, ed. Gerald Peary, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 1998: 96.

¹³ Jim Smith, *Tarantino*, (London: Virgin Books), 2005: 115-116.

ever seen”¹⁴ But the inclusion of openly referencing and drawing inspiration from film noir,
French

¹⁴ Tarantino and Smith, “When You Know You’re In Good Hands,” 108-109.

New Wave, and even John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) makes the film more complex than Tarantino sets it up to be.

The majority of this chapter on *Pulp Fiction* examines the southern characters who take over the "Gold Watch" sequence to begin to understand the different representations of southerners in Tarantino's work. This particular instance is significant because it is Tarantino's first use of southern characters which is often parodied in film and television. Like *Death Proof*'s Stuntman Mike, the rednecks at the pawn shop, Maynard and Zed, commit acts of violence that are sexual in nature, but unlike Stuntman Mike, they have thick southern accents, use racial slurs, and their pawn shop and basement feature Tennessee license plates and Confederate iconography. These things link them to South despite their seemingly random and spontaneous presence in an alleyway in Los Angeles. The aim of this chapter is to explain the scene as it pertains to critical regionalism and postmodern representations of place and film. It will respond directly to Douglas Powell's *Critical Regionalism* and demonstrate how the film actually works better for Powell's ideas rather than as a counter argument in his chapter on region and film. But like all of Tarantino's films, the construction and influences of the film must be briefly discussed in order to understand the particular moments, especially in terms of Tarantino's playful use of genre.

Elements of Pastiche and Film History

A number of memorable moments and quotes for fans take place at the fictional 1950s themed restaurant, Jack Rabbit Slim's. When Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) and Vince Vega (John Travolta) walk through large set, the camera follows them as servers dressed like Marilyn

Monroe and James Dean pass by them, causing Vincent to describe as a “Wax museum with a pulse.”¹⁵ The two are seated at a table that is made to replicate sitting in an old ‘50s automobile as they are waited on by Steve Buscemi (Mr. Pink from Tarantino’s previous film) dressed as Buddy Holly. The two eventually enter into a dance contest and do the twist to Chuck Berry’s 1964 hit, “You Never Can Tell.” Furthermore, the movie literally recreates a moment from Billy Wilder’s *Seven-Year Itch* (1955), uses music and images from the 1960s directly inspired by Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande a part* (1964), and calls to mind the 1970s as John Travolta dances as he did in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). This particular moment is the perfect example of Tarantino’s fascination with pastiche and constant references to the past, particularly in regard to cinema. Fredric Jameson defines pastiche as “the cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” that has been “amputated of satiric impulse,” which Douglas McFarland explains as “an artistic and cultural form that has been emptied of any ethical perspective.”¹⁶ The assemblage of references add nothing of particular significance to the story or are empty signifiers, symbolizing nothing, though clearly meant to represent Tarantino’s own pleasure and indulgence in popular culture. Part of the enjoyment of watching the film, as well as the rest of Tarantino’s filmography, is the pleasure of recognizing such references.

Of course, Tarantino’s style of reusing and reimagining images of the past is not entirely original. Tarantino’s style is due in large part to Godard. Tarantino explains that one of the most inspirational directors from his youth made movies which he found “very liberating” in that they were “movies commenting on themselves, movies, and movie history.”¹⁷ Like Godard, Tarantino’s objective is to make movies that are works of fiction but also film criticism. For

¹⁵ *Pulp Fiction*, Directed by Quentin Tarantino, (Miramax, United States), 1994.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1992: 17-18; Douglas McFarland, “Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*,” in *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky), 2008: 47.

¹⁷ Smith and Tarantino, “When You Know You’re In Good Hands,” 109.

Godard, *Bande a part* is the story of ““people who are real and it’s the world that is a breakaway group. It is the world that is making cinema for itself. It is the world out of synch; they are true, they represent life. They live a simple story; it is the world around which is living a bad script.””¹⁸ This sentiment is nearly reflected in Tarantino’s own script as Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) reinterprets a Biblical passage that he recites before following through with a hit. Jules says to Pumpkin (Tim Roth), “it could mean you’re the righteous man and I’m the shepherd, and it’s the world that’s evil and selfish.”¹⁹ While Godard’s statement is commentary the counter cultural nature of the film, Tarantino’s character in the fictitious scene similarly puts his characters in opposition to the world that is “evil and selfish,” according Jules and a “bad script,” in the words of Godard.

Not all of the filmmaker’s references, however, are used simply for showing off his inspirations. Tarantino combines high and low culture into his work in the style of the postmodern era of cinema. For example, Tarantino’s film starts with two hitmen talking about the menu of McDonald’s being different in Amsterdam than in the United States while emulating the style of French New Wave gangster films, such as, Francois Truffaut’s *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960), which also features thugs driving around speaking openly about every day conversations.²⁰ In the same sequence, Tarantino forces the audience to listen to his dialogue as the Jules and Vincent walk into an apartment and are filmed from further down the hall way or while the camera is positioned behind their head, causing the audience to listen more rather than to simply just watch. Furthermore, he calls attention to the movie-ness of the his own film and

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 1989: 171.

¹⁹ *Pulp Fiction*.

²⁰ Furthermore, Jules is friends with Jimmie (Quentin Tarantino), which may very well be a reference to the Truffaut’s French New Wave staple, *Jules et Jim*.

contributes to the age-old discussion of art imitating life and vice versa as Jules waits before knocking on their subject's door so that he can "get into character."²¹

Gilles Deleuze explains how Godard, like Tarantino, "used every method of free indirect vision. Not that he has limited himself to borrowing and renewing; on the contrary, he created the original method which allowed him to make a new synthesis, and in so doing to identify himself with modern cinema."²² In addition, Godard's film may "correspond to a dominant genre, as *Une femme est une femme* does to musical comedy . . . But even in this case the film moves through sub-genres . . . This reflective status of genre has important consequences: instead of genre subsuming images which naturally belong to it but are reflected in it . . . These are the great moments in Godard's work."²³ A case can be made that *Pulp Fiction* in particular embodies this very notion. While the film opens with a definition of "pulp" as "A magazine or book containing lurid subject matter and being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper" in addition to "A soft, moist, shapeless mass or matter."²⁴ While the dominant genre may be akin to crime magazines and novellas, the structure of the film is treated as a shapeless mass that is being toyed around with by its writer and director who allows it to enter in and out of different genres and story lines. Deleuze continues, "Godard's reflexive genres, in this sense, are genuine *categories* through which the film passes . . . According to Godard, categories are not fixed once and for all. They are redistributed, reshaped and reinvented each film . . . The categories must surprise us, and yet not be arbitrary, must be well founded, and must have strong indirect relations between themselves."²⁵ *Pulp Fiction* exemplifies this further as the movie transitions from a movie about hitmen, the mob boss, the big man's wife, and the boxer who's

²¹ *Pulp Fiction*.

²² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 184.

²³ *Ibid*, 184.

²⁴ *Pulp Fiction*.

²⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 185.

supposed to throw the fight, and into a scene in which two hillbillies have their way with Marsellus Wallace.

Hillbilly Rapists and Old Fashioned Racism

In Godard's *Week-end* (1967) Corinne (Mireille Darc) is concerned and yells at Roland (Jean Yanne) after he shoots and kills two people in the middle of the woods after their car has crashed. Roland tries to calm her down by letting her know, "They're only characters," and that "it's not blood, it's red."²⁶ Without being so explicit, Tarantino attempts to do the same thing with his southern hillbilly characters and the rape scene. The intrusion of the characters in the film causes the audience to be self-conscious of the film's relation to other movies, allowing it to pass through other genres no matter how drastic the turn. And the intensity of the scene in the basement of the pawn shop is not meant to fill the audience with an overwhelming sense of drama or fear, but to remind them of other similar moments of cinematic violence, the most famous being *Deliverance*. Therefore, instead of imposing politics or reading too much into these scene, Tarantino invites his audience to accept it as a wild moment during an insane day in the life of the characters who have come across these "*Deliverance*-inspired Southern transplants" who have hijacked the movie.²⁷ At the same time, Tarantino invites audiences, and especially critics, to draw meanings out of such moments, which is certainly warranted for the absurd moment.

The scene slowly becomes more and more southern as Butch and Marsellus enter the store, which is named in the screenplay, "Mason-Dixie Pawn Shop," replacing Dixon with an

²⁶ *Week-end*, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, (Criterion: France), 1967.

²⁷ Andrew B. Leiter, "Introduction," in *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970s*, ed. Andrew B. Leiter, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers), 2011:3.

extra attempt at southernization.²⁸ Upon Butch entering the store, a Confederate flag is seen behind Butch along with license plates for Tennessee, which is where he has planned to run off to once he escapes Los Angeles, so one might even begin to think these are good signs, favoring Butch's fate at the demise of Marsellus. But soon after, a banjo can be also be easily spotted on the same wall of the shop, and "Dueling Banjos" holds a particular spot in the memory of moviegoers as a signifier of the backward hillbillies in *Deliverance*. Sure enough, the man behind the counter pulls out a shotgun and says to Butch, "Take your foot off the nigger."²⁹ It is not the first time that the word has been used in the movie—and not the last by a long shot—but it is the only time that it is said in a southern accent that connotes racism and what Tarantino thinks of as outdated racial mindsets which belong in a different era by using the scene to recreate the feeling of a 1970s exploitation film.

According to Jim Smith, "Tarantino sees himself, and his work, as essentially post-racist (although he's never used the term himself)," claiming that the word "nigger" for Tarantino is a word that has "transcended its original American usage as a term against blacks."³⁰ Smith breaks it down into two ways in which the word is said throughout the movie. Smith notes in one instance, "When Jules or Marsellus uses the N-word it's clearly meant to be in this reclaimed sense . . . When Lance uses it to Vincent to denigrate people who don't know as much about drugs as he does it's clearly he *is* a racist."³¹ However, Smith is mostly concerned with the use of the word in the "Bonnie Situation" sequence, in which Jimmie (Tarantino) goes on about how there is no sign in his garage that says "Dead Nigger Storage" when Jules and Vincent arrive to

²⁸ Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary, *Pulp Fiction*, (Internet Movie Screenplay Database), www.imsdb.com/scripts/Pulp-Fiction.html, accessed March 17, 2014.

²⁹ *Pulp Fiction*.

³⁰ Jim Smith, *Tarantino*, 103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

dispose of Marvin's body after he has been shot in the face.³² As Tarantino's character says the word repeatedly, the camera cuts back and forth between him and Jules, alongside Vincent, and shows that he is not bothered by use of the word. And as Smith points out, the cut of the worst-case-scenario of his wife, Nurse Bonnie, coming home reveals that his wife is in fact an African American.³³ The fact that Samuel L. Jackson has defended Tarantino's use of the word in his films is of little relevance, but the fact in one movie, characters can use it as a term of endearment and reclamation, to perpetuate racist terminology, or by other white characters without resentment from African American characters, demonstrates Tarantino's desire to be accepted, or the assumption that he is accepted by African Americans and black culture. To be sure, it is a culture Tarantino had grown up in as a youth in a "multi-racial" area of Los Angeles in a post-civil rights era.³⁴ However, Smith does not even mention the scene in the pawn shop, in which case, Tarantino uses it a fourth way in order to tie characters to region in addition to white supremacist ideologies or, at the very least, old fashioned racism.

Unlike the overwhelming scene of allusive identification in Jack Rabbit Slim's, the Mason-Dixie pawn shop sequence demands more attention beyond the realm of pastiche even with its own references to John Boorman's film. C. Scott Combs plainly states, "It would be a mistake to depoliticize" the moment in which Tarantino desire to "one-up the audience's generic expectations. Though scantily organized to produce a laugh and the reassuring appearance of absurdity, the vignette is carefully vetted to display a far worse crime than any committed by the gangsters" in beginning or toward the end of the movie.³⁵ Combs continues, "The only

³² *Pulp Fiction*.

³³ Pam Grier's iconic character in the Jack Hill movie with the same name, *Coffy* (1973), was also a black nurse in addition to blaxploitation heroine.

³⁴ Smith, Tarantino, 102.

³⁵ C. Scott Combs, "The Screen Kallikak: White Trash for White Guilt in Post-Vietnam American Film," in *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970s*, ed. Andrew B. Leiter, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers), 2011: 107.

characters who outperform the dueling gangsters in committing horrible acts are men decidedly without honor—one redneck confederate and his partner the sheriff.”³⁶ Combs describes the movie as one of many that feature specifically white filmmakers who attempt to “confront racial and ethnical diversity” by conjuring up “battered clichés of poor or regionally prideful whites” for a “presumed multicultural audience.”³⁷ Butch’s rescue of Marsellus despite the fact that he was trying to kill him was already on his way to freedom—ironically, in Tennessee—plus, Jimmie’s ability to say “nigger” and have it appear as the white character’s assimilation into black culture demonstrate to Combs, “Tarantino’s fantasy to achieve not just acceptance but black status,” using the characters as a sort of “wish fulfillment.”³⁸

Moreover, the movie appears to celebrate inter-racial male bonding. The movie features a total of three duos of male characters. The first of course is Jules and Vincent, and the second being Butch and Marsellus. The third, however, are the alleged hillbillies in the pawn shop who are the only pair who are both white. The only other all-white duos are Pumpkin and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer), a British couple, and Vincent and Mia—Vincent’s partner being Jules and Mia’s husband being none other than Marsellus Wallace himself. Basically, the movie essentially promotes relationships between black and white people, for according to Tarantino, the opposite looks like a pair of hillbilly rapists akin to those from decades passed.

Combs traces the tradition of making the white rural poor a symbol of visualization and replacement of the “foreign enemy” in place of the previous “black and indigenous people as scapegoat” stereotypes at the end of the 1960s in the context of the war in Vietnam.³⁹ These are

³⁶ Combs, “The Screen Kallikak,” 107; It should be noted, however, that the character of Zed is not actually a sheriff. No doubt, he is wearing a uniform with a badge, patches on each shoulder read “Security Official,” marking him as something more akin to a mall security guard perhaps. Regardless, he is poses as an authority figure.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

killers and rapists who come from the southern backwoods or the hill country who rape and murder, exploiting the connection of fear and dissatisfaction with the context of Vietnam. Combs uses the film *Poor White Trash, Part II*, originally titled *Scum of the Earth*, which came out the same year as *Deliverance* to further explore the exploitation aspect. The film features a woman by the name of Norma whose husband is killed by an “unseen assailant—some woods dweller” and is then taken captive by the Pickett.⁴⁰ Papa Pickett, as Combs points out, has sex with his daughter and rapes Norma, has a pregnant and under-age wife, and a mentally retarded son, thus capturing nearly all the classic elements of a traditional hixploitation film. As the movie continues, the Pickett family is killed off one at a time by another unseen killer, which is revealed to be Norma’s first husband and Vietnam veteran, Jim.

Tarantino’s film is not without its own connection to the Vietnam War. The introduction or prologue to the “Golden Watch” sequence features Christopher Walken, Academy Award winner for his role in Michael Cimino’s anti-war epic, *The Deer Hunter* (1978). When explaining the origins of the watch to young Butch in the likely carefully chosen year of 1972—when both aforementioned films were released—Captain Koons (Walken), tells the boy that watch belonged to his father whom he met in Hanoi where they were captured in kept in a prison camp. The scene turns slightly comic, though perhaps foreshadows the upcoming events, when Koons tells the boy that his father hid the watch up his anus to prevent confiscation, “Then when he died of dysentery, he gave me the watch. I hid this uncomfortable hunk of metal up my ass for two years . . . And now, little man, I give the watch to you.”⁴¹ The story of the gold watch is almost its own short film that is essentially a dark comedy about men and their anuses.

⁴⁰ Combs, “The Screen Kallikak,” 110-111.

⁴¹ *Pulp Fiction*.

Indeed, act one of this short story within a rather long film is about two white men being held as prisoners of war as enlisted men in Vietnam having to hide a wristwatch so that it may be passed down as part of a birthright. Act two then is the story of the boxer who is supposed to throw a fight for the mob boss though fails to do so and then must escape the city in order to save his life and start over anew with his French lover, Fabienne, who forgot to grab the watch back at the house. This is when act three begins and Butch is spotted by Marsellus while crossing the street, recreating a similar moment in which Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is spotted by her boss in *Psycho* (1960) as she flees the city with the money she has stolen. The scene remains comically light as even Kathy Griffin makes a cameo appearance before Marsellus chases Butch down the alley and into Mason-Dixie. The story of the watch and its connection to men being held captive comes full circle as the two are bound in S&M gear and Marsellus is chosen by chance to be taken back first to be raped by both Maynard and Zed.

The reimagining of the story within the story takes on a completely different meaning in 1990s Los Angeles with a black and white man held captive by hillbilly transplants. Edward Gallafent describes the story as “one of a long line of American figures defined in part by the absence or death of the father” and the “possibility of being free of the weight of the past and its values, and the loss of identity, the danger of finding yourself in a world in which you have no purpose, no to inherit.”⁴² While this does well to understand the narrative structure, it fails to see the larger themes at work with the connections to displaced southerners and recycling of Vietnam hixploitation narratives and what they mean for new audiences. As Marsellus Wallace is bent over in front of a Confederate flag and violently raped by Zed with his uniform and badge on, one cannot help but to think of the racial and political climate Los Angeles in the early 1990s. In 1991, footage was released of officers from the Los Angeles Police Department

⁴² Edward Gallafent, *Quentin Tarantino*, (Essex: Pearson Education Ltd.), 2006: 27.

violently attacking and beating Rodney King, serving as a precursor to the Los Angeles Riots. From the perspective of a local like Tarantino, L.A. might as well have been the Deep South during the 1960s in which the news constantly showed African Americans being beaten and subdued by white police officers without justice.

With this context in mind, it is difficult to read Zed as strictly being a southern stereotype, given that he is wearing a uniform as a citizen of Los Angeles who is doubly noted as a “Security Official” by the patches on each of his shoulders. The irony is undoubtedly a political one. To be sure, Tarantino is likening law enforcement officers in Los Angeles to the old fashioned racists of the 1960s who were likewise televised beating men, women, and children in Selma, Alabama or hosing down child protestors in Birmingham. Of course, if Tarantino was strictly a political filmmaker, he would have likely written the role for two stereotypical Californians and changed the uniform to a more explicit LAPD uniform, but he prefers to work within genre and to recycle themes and images from the past. The question then becomes one about whether or not anything lost in doing so, or better yet, if anything gained.

For those interested in southern or regional studies, the moment becomes particularly interesting. The most obvious way to approach the film would be to analysis the southerners as just stereotypical depictions and inauthentic caricatures, which likely no one would refute. In fact, that appears to be a self-conscious choice on behalf of the filmmaker. Another way to look at it would mean considering a postsouthern approach in which one looks at how Tarantino may be playing with the idea of southern exceptionalism. To be sure, the South is still looked at today most critically and harshly for its attitudes on race historically and even in contemporary politics, so much so that it is set apart in the minds of Americans as exceptionally bad or distinctively worse than the rest of the country. Some twenty years ago, Tarantino played with this idea by

placing his redneck, hillbilly rapists in Los Angeles in the aftermath of the L.A. Riots and have them perform a crime that is the most horrible throughout the entire feature, including the accidental killing of Marvin, which is regarded as one of the film's funniest and most iconic moments despite the fact that it is a white man killing an unarmed black man. The scene at the climax of the "Gold Watch" portion of the movie is not an attempt to perpetuate southern stereotypes of poor white trash, rather, it is used to recycle the use of the generic trope which previously served as a metaphor for Vietnam and reuse them to symbolize the backwardness of white Los Angeles in the early '90s. As important as it is for the audience to catch the reference to *Deliverance* or more generally, hixploitation films, it is equally important to recognize the Los Angeles authority figure for what he is—a symbol of a larger white power structure that widely targets African American men as a tool of oppression in the age of the new Jim Crow. Therefore, Tarantino's attachment to reason is lucid and uprooted from the idea of regional distinctiveness, moving toward a postsouthern narrative, by taking the hillbillies out of the backwoods of the rural South and closer to the Hollywood hills to form a national statement rather than a narrow regional claim. In doing so, Tarantino replaces the symbols of the Vietnam War for contemporary problems of race in America.

Critical Regionalism

Though few people have written about Tarantino in terms of regional studies, Douglas Powell's *Critical Regionalism* gives a lot of attention to the filmmaker, specifically in the case of *Pulp Fiction*. First and most broadly, Powell defines regionalism as "the study of what regions

are, how they are made, and what they are for.”⁴³ Additionally, Powell writes comments on his own work stating that “the emphasis is not on what regions are but why they are that way, on what they do as much as what has been done to them.”⁴⁴ Powell’s argues that “regionalism, despite traditionally being used to describe, define, and isolate networks of places and spaces, can provide a rhetorical basis for making claims about how spaces and places are connected to spatially and conceptually broader patterns of meaning.”⁴⁵ Rather than defining regions as exceptional places and in terms of change versus continuity or authenticity, Powell aims to understand how regions are spatially connected.

There is perhaps no better medium for connecting the “broader patterns” than through the examination of film, which Powell recognizes as a “media text.” Media texts, along with other forms of rhetoric, are part a rhetorical and textual process that actively create region, according to Powell. He goes so far as to write, “One of my key assertions is that the creation of texts about places—including this text—is actually part of the larger creation of place itself.”⁴⁶ But most importantly for Powell, “critical regionalism must be, ultimately, a pedagogy, one that teaches students how to draw their own regional maps connecting their experiences to that of others near and far, both like and unlike themselves.”⁴⁷ While this chapter has argued that Tarantino’s film does precisely that, Powell criticizes the film and leans toward his reading of the Coen Brothers’ film, *Fargo* (1996) as a prime example of a film for critical regionalists. Powell makes this claim by appealing to realism and avoiding any deeper film criticism or understanding of Tarantino’s application of postmodern and post-regional characteristics in his cinema.

⁴³ Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2007: 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

The first and biggest flaw in Powell's film analysis is that he tries to connect violence in film to real world problems of violence. Moreover, he chooses a particular case of a murder that took place in the early 2000s at Lookout Mountain near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Powell first compares it David Lynch's short lived but beloved television program, *Twin Peaks* due to the graphic nature of the real life crime episodes which featured the gore and disembodiment expected of the most violent of horror films or even a David Fincher thriller. Still, it is Powell's belief that the purpose of critical regionalism must "search for the kinds of texts that can facilitate the most expansive possible thinking" in situations such as homicide "in which circumstances challenge people's ability to make sense of their places' interconnections" especially when connections are counter to "versions of local and regional landscapes."⁴⁸

The first step in critiquing film for the purposes of critical regionalism is to recognize the medium as a "social invention" and "pedagogy" that suggests "formal schooling is not the only site of 'instruction' for the populace and that media pedagogy is no more monolithic in its influence than classroom instruction."⁴⁹ Powell expects that moviegoers will view a movie as a media text and regional representation that transcends "local places as part of broader networks of cause-and-effect, historical change, economic interdependence, and political dynamics."⁵⁰ So like the specific notion of postsouthern narratives, Powell encourages people to view the local or the particular as part of a larger picture in a functioning world. However, Powell still tends to look toward films with a narrower "cognitive map" despite his own attempt at "reading media texts from a local perspective instead of reading local places through media texts."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 104.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

To his credit, Powell does recognize that the both filmmakers appeal to a particular and unique aesthetics setting them apart from typical Hollywood conventions, despite working within the major studio system. Powell notes, “The resistance to convention on the part of both filmmakers suggests that they might be teaching the viewer something different about violence, its social causes, and the larger frameworks of social relations of which those causes are part of.”⁵² Furthermore, Powell adds that by challenging and “complicating the viewing experience through experiments with form and style” seen as challenge though not rejection of major and dominate story structure.⁵³ Finally, Powell argues that the filmmakers’ applications of “hyper-real” filmic violence, no matter how “grotesque,” seem to have shared message about the nature of violence. “The message of these depictions,” Powell writes, “seems to be that violence, in the right hands, a manageable tool . . . it is not meaningless, as some would argue, but stable and conventional in its meanings.”⁵⁴

One lesson generated by *Pulp Fiction*, according to Powell, is the idea that violence can interrupt daily life at any moment. Marvin can be shot in the face, Marsellus can be raped, and Mia can snort heroin and need an immediate adrenaline shot to the chest. The nonlinear story filled with multiples twists of fates and sudden eruptions of violence convince Powell that the film seems to be “governed by no clear sense of destiny” without “tidy resolutions” that simultaneously produces a “reverse dramatic irony” in which the film does gravitate toward a resolution that is “strongly predetermined but known only the to the film maker.”⁵⁵ Moreover, Powell is interested in the fact that the movie seems to “locate violence in imaginary urban subculture outside of history, a self-contained world with its own internally consistent rules and

⁵² Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 124.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

regulations . . . Tarantino portrays a social world that operates with a high degree of self governance.”⁵⁶ While it is true that it “outside of history” as far as it is self-reflexive about its own “fiction,” Powell does not appear to appreciate or recognize the filmic history that is being presented and the significance of the historical context from which each of those arrive in order to inform his reading of the film, namely the influence of French New Wave and the 1960s counter culture or the hixploitation films of the 1970s responding the Vietnam war, which connect the film’s aesthetic to world cinema and world history through its references to other films.

Furthermore, Powell believes that the film tends to also appeal to “supernatural trappings” meant to “mystify the viewer,” as in the case of divine intervention in which Vincent and Jules are shot at, which Jules interprets as an act of God and Vincent ultimately rejects.⁵⁷ Or even in the case of Butch who leaves on Zed’s chopper with the word “Grace” seen easily in the frame, as Butch rides away bringing his story to a close like a reimagining of Flannery O’Connor’s moments of violence and grace in southern California rather than her native South. The consequence of this for Powell is that is that “by making violence a cosmological occurrence rather than the local manifestation of broader cultural crises . . . make violence something that is not subject to human agency or intervention.”⁵⁸ What Powell’s critique highlights is that the movie is largely about redemption, for Mia is brought back to life from the shot, Jules leave the life of crime, Vincent who does not interpret the alleged act of God is killed by Butch who is also free at the will of Marsellus and flees L.A. However, these events, especially the violence, are completely brought on by human agency. To be sure, the bullets not hitting the hitmen is miraculous, but it is the absence of violence which is miraculous and the human agent hiding in

⁵⁶ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 127.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

the bathroom with a “goddamn hand cannon” that further demonstrates the possibility for violence to emerge in the world. And in the case of Butch, to say that the acts of violence in his sequence are not a part of human agency and lacking of spatial connection to a “broader cultural crises” is just a failure to pay attention to the image on the screen and the history from which the violent homage and grotesque redemptive story emerges. For this reason, Powell is off point when claiming, “otherworldly mysticism underlies these violent actions renders individual agency at moot point, but then to undercut even the metaphysical grounding of these character’ actions leaves them bereft of any grounding at all. Or perhaps more accurately, there is a master narrative, but it is just a joke. Banality conquers all.”⁵⁹

Powell critiques *Pulp Fiction* for having a lack of “historical grounding” such as the instance in the beginning of the film when 1960s surf music is interpreted by 1970s funk or during the aforementioned scene at Jack Rabbit Slim’s. Powell refers to restaurant scene as one of “bloodless pastiche of useless cultural forms—nowhere, and, we might say, no—when.”⁶⁰ A more likely problem for the with film would be that it simultaneously represents too many time periods and places, but this is actually the film’s strength. For example, the combination of California surf rock, funk music from black urban areas, and classic rock n roll songs represent many times and many places, which allow the film to connect to broader spatial connections and fulfills Powell’s model for a critical regionalist’s film. Not being rooted in a time or place—though it is without a doubt 1990s Southern California—allows the film to incorporate different audio and visual characteristics of times and places far beyond its own setting, such as the South.

Powell concludes his commentary on the film stating, “the film pedagogically asserts that violence is a phenomenon unto itself, that crime and criminals inhabit insular counter reality, a

⁵⁹ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 128-129.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

closed community in which actions have no consequences or relative value.”⁶¹ To be sure, Tarantino is not an explicitly political director, especially not in his earliest years. And no doubt, the best way to understand a Tarantino film is to have a foundation of knowledge in regards to film history to appreciate the pastiche, homage, and challenges to generic construction. But to eliminate the possibility of the film’s usefulness to critical regionalism on such grounds misrepresents the movie. Tarantino’s film goes beyond California, beyond Californians, and beyond a singular genre in order to construct a story that abandons the local or strict ties to places for the very reason of critical regionalists pedagogy—that is—to present a wider cognitive map. *Pulp Fiction* forces the viewer to consider not just the local presenting on screen or his or her own positionality, but to make connections to art and reality across mediums, across the country, and the world.

Contrary to his take on *Pulp Fiction*, Powell favors the Coen Brothers’ *Fargo* writing, “Though the story is not at all factual in a literal sense, the truth of *Fargo* lies in its commitment to social invention . . . for a specific, historicized interpretation of the legacy of American history by producing in a mass medium the kind of ‘local’ story that can resonate with individuals in their home communities.”⁶² Moreover, Powell writes, “*Fargo* is not just a depiction of region, but a mode of representation that relies on having a strong sense of the interconnections of apparently separate localities.”⁶³ This chapter argues, however, that this only limits the possibilities of critical regionalism. By placing emphasis on the local and appearing to represent a “true” story, the audience cannot help but to see the events as being anything other than particular to that place. The Coen Brothers’ film is complete with the dialect, the snowy landscapes, a large statue of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Such aspects are so rooted in

⁶¹ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 137.

place that is hard to see beyond its time and place. Though certainly more realistic and more conventional than any of Tarantino's films, it is no different than someone watching Italian neo-realism in post-war Rome, which is also so rooted in place that it begs the audience empathize and understand the place more than it does to encourage postmodern spatial understandings of broader cultural interconnectedness.

In conclusion, Powell writes, "The important thing about *Fargo* as an example of a critical regionalist film is that it is not only the content of the film but also its structure and form that point toward a more sophisticated understanding of regional relationships."⁶⁴ However, the fact that *Fargo* deals exclusively with a single region while *Pulp Fiction* allows more voices and representations even with its singular, geographic setting demonstrates the limitations of the Coen Brothers' film. Powell claims that *Fargo* "teaches us not just about the Midwest but about how to think about region in a way that can be revelatory for someone in another place" even though it never goes outside of the region and never allows other voices, images, or forms of cultural representations into the film, leaving the film to appear isolated.⁶⁵ In which case, perhaps Tarantino's work is not "for" critical regionalism. Perhaps it is the Coen Brothers' dedicated to place films like *Fargo*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, or *No Country For Old Men* (2007) that have clear and concise depictions of place necessary for critical regionalism. But Tarantino's work goes even further than Powell's theories and beyond what he believes that Coen Brothers' films can do for audiences in terms of relating interconnectivity. *Pulp Fiction* goes past regionalism, beyond critical regionalism, and enters in postsouthern representations of place by connecting the South and its history of filmic representations to 1990s Los Angeles, French New Wave, among other places and times that blur the line of cultural distinctions by

⁶⁴ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 140.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

forcing them into an assemblage of genres and tropes from numerous places within one cohesive movie. The South's history of civil rights violations and institutional racism is paired with the aftermath of the L.A. riots in a film influenced by pulp literature and the likes of Godard and Truffaut, making it a complimentary to the future of regional and southern studies, viewing the South as something that is not culturally set apart or unique, but that can be appropriated, repurposed, and reimagined in film to self-reflexively demonstrate the vulnerability of the strict definitions of what it means for something to be deemed "southern."

CHAPTER TWO

THE FINAL GIRL, THE “REDNECK LUNATIC BASTARD,” AND *DEATH PROOF*

Following the success of *Kill Bill* (2003-04), Quentin Tarantino teamed up with long-time collaborator Robert Rodriguez to create a unique cinematic experience in the spring of 2007, *Grindhouse*. The objective was for each to direct a feature film to be presented together as a double feature. The purpose for *Grindhouse* is to simulate the experience of seeing the types of motion pictures shown at dilapidated movie houses that show exploitation films, slasher films, road movies, blaxploitation, hixploitation, and prison movies, among other obscure and subversive sub-genres for moviegoers in the 1970s. Such films were typically low budget, ultra-violent, and highly sexual. Furthermore, ten or less copies of a film might be made and distributed and screening using poor equipment, causing damage to the celluloid. Consequently, the films would often burn up, have missing frames, or suffer major edgewave problems. Jay McRoy points out the irony that Rodriguez and Tarantino are two highly respected filmmakers who can work with practically any budget they want in order to make films to be shown at multiplexes all over the country and even the world.⁶⁶

For the most part, McRoy's essay criticizes the double feature as an example “the ways in which digital technology's burgeoning potential intersects with celluloid's waning aesthetic and

⁶⁶ Jay McRoy, ““The Kids of Today Should Defend Themselves Against the '70s': Simulating Auras and Marketing Nostalgia in Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's *Grindhouse*,” in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Steffen Hantke, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 2010: 22.

material possibilities.”⁶⁷ However, he dismisses the fact that Tarantino shot the film using 35mm film, served as his own director of photography. Additionally, Tarantino and his editor, Sally Menke, damaged the film themselves in order to recreate the grindhouse experience more authentically than Rodriguez who embraces digital technology. At any rate, the film still serves as another example of Tarantino borrowing from previous film moments, motion pictures, and genres in order to exploit the audience’s expectations of the genre by turning clichés on their head and forging a new path cinematically, using a multitude of allusions and elements of pastiche as tools to do so. As with the rest of his films, Tarantino includes southern characters. But unlike the films prior to *Death Proof*, this particular movie takes place exclusively in the South. While *Pulp Fiction*’s uses southern hillbillies in an attempt to repurpose the hixploitation trope, *Death Proof* takes his critique of southerners in film further with Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell). This chapter explores the horror genre as a whole and the concept of the Final Girl to contextualize the genre and Tarantino’s attempt to incorporate film criticism into his filmmaking. Next, it applies Jean Baudrillard’s ideas of simulation to explain Tarantino’s influences. Finally, it examines Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra to demonstrate how displaying representations with no origin allow Tarantino to reimagine the genre, the South, and the “redneck lunatic bastards” of exploitation films.

The Final Girl(s)

In the early ‘90s, Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* became a pivotal text for understanding the horror genre, particularly in the case of what she calls the Final Girl.

Summarizing Clover, David Roche explains, “the hero’s, victim’s, and monster’s functions are

⁶⁷ McRoy, “The Kids of Today Should Defend Themselves Against the ‘70s,”” 232.

completely determined by gender and that relations of identification are already determined by the movie's narrative structure" along with a "paradoxical identification between heroine-victim."⁶⁸ Popular aspects concerning the Final Girl are her "boyish manner" represented by her name and clothes. Additionally, she is set apart by her group of friends for her "sexual reluctance."⁶⁹ Consequently, the Final Girl exists for audience members, males included, to identify with her at the cost of the character's femininity, according to Clover and Roche.⁷⁰ And although the Final Girl is the survivor, she is not necessarily the hero, given that she often survives due to the intervention of a stronger and often times male character, according to Jody Keisner.⁷¹ However, Tarantino is well aware of these generic criticisms. In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, Tarantino speaks highly of the critique of the genre, stating, "one of the biggest inspirations for [*Death Proof*] . . . was Carol Clover's book . . . I really truly think that her chapter on the 'final girl', the role that gender plays in the slasher film, pins down the best piece of film criticism I've ever read."⁷²

According to Teresa Rizzo, horror films have a generic and "formulaic nature" which tends to "tell the same story over and over, so the audience is never in any doubt as to how things will end."⁷³ In her essay on the postmodern horror film, Keisner writes that these conventions appear to have no end in sight. However, her definition of postmodern horror does not seem to fit self-reflexive and more expansive films like Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) and Tarantino's own *Death Proof*. Keisner explains that the postmodern films are categorized by four principles, the

⁶⁸ David Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 2014: 102

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷¹ Julie Keisner, "Do You Want To Watch? A Study of the Visual Rhetoric of the Postmodern Horror Film," *Women's Studies*, 37.4 (June 2008): 425-426.

⁷² Nick James and Quentin Tarantino, "Tarantino Bites Back," *Sight and Sound* (Feb. 2008) accessed April 4, 2015, <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49432>.

⁷³ Teresa Rizzo, *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), 2012: 88.

first being that a “man/monster . . . threatens an already violent and untrustworthy social order.” Secondly, postmodern horror “does away with binary logic by blurring the distinctions between good and evil.” Thirdly, survival is determined on one’s ability to “adapt to their ‘supernatural’ surrounds.” Finally, she asserts that postmodern horror films “resist closure, with the man/monster rising from the dead/undead or the protagonists’ systematic deaths.”⁷⁴ Though this may be suitable for her work on *feardotcom* (2003) and other contemporary horror films that may not particularly apply postmodern elements such as self-reflexivity, pastiche, and attempts at reusing and renewing aspects of the genre and film history to reinvent and disrupt the genre’s formulaic nature and filmmakers’ knowledge Clover’s critiques, applying them to their films as commentary on cinema in a Godard-ian fashion.

As one might expect, Tarantino’s women are unlike any seen in popular Hollywood films. And while many of Tarantino’s most popular movies are told in a non-linear fashion, *Death Proof* is precisely the opposite, clearly divided into two parts. The first takes place in Austin, Texas and follows a group of three girls, one of whom is a radio DJ by the name of Jungle Julia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier), an African American woman with billboards all over the Austin area promoting her popular radio show.⁷⁵ The second is Shanna (Jordan Ladd), the only main character with a southern accent apart from Tarantino’s character as the bartender, Warren (Quentin Tarantino). The third, Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito), has a Brooklyn accent which sets her apart right away from the three and everyone they encounter given that she does not seem to belong in the southern metropolitan space based on her dialect. In fact, Arlene is singled out repeatedly as her sexuality is discussed openly among her friends as she is criticized for simply making out with a guy instead of sleeping with him or participating in what she calls “the thing,”

⁷⁴ Keisner, *Do You Want To Watch?*, 412.

⁷⁵ Yes, she is the daughter of actor, Sidney Poitier.

which is “everything but” intercourse.⁷⁶ Consequently, the audience is meant to recognize the generic set up as a familiar one in which the Final Girl is set apart for her virginal behavior.

Furthermore, Arlene is the only one who notices a car following them as they go from bar to bar.

However, neither Arlene nor any of the girls are depicted as masculine or boyish, certainly not in their appearance. Additionally, none of their names feature “gender-ambiguity” in order to suggest masculine attributes—another common theme among Final Girls in slasher films (i.e. *Halloween*, *Scream*).⁷⁷ To allow his characters to further demonstrate their femininity and sexuality, Tarantino’s includes a lap dance sequence that he and Ferlito co-choreographed together. Previously in the film, Jungle Julia says over the radio that anyone who spots Arlene out and recites a section of a Robert Frost poem to her will receive a lap dance, though leaving it up to Arlene to hold out for a “kinda cute, kinda hot, kinda sexy, hysterically funny, but not funny-looking guy who you could fuck.”⁷⁸ Finally, the moment comes when Stuntman Mike recites the poem and she chooses to go through with the lap dance despite the fact she is afraid of both him and his car. The scene becomes comically ironic and as disturbing as it is sexual, given that the audience knows that Stuntman Mike has been stalking the girls.

After the scene ends and everyone leaves the bar. Before driving off, Stuntman Mike looks directly into the camera, thus breaking the fourth wall, letting the audience know that after thirty minutes of absolutely no thrills, violence, or scares, the film is beginning to take a horrific turn. Just as *Jackie Brown* (1997) features a scene in which a money exchange is shown from multiple perspectives, Tarantino does the same with the gore-filled car crash. As the girls cruise down a dark, Texas road listening to loud, ‘60s British rock music, Stuntman Mike passes them, turns around, and charges for them in his “death proof” car that is designed to survive movie stunts.

⁷⁶ *Death Proof*, Directed by Quentin Tarantino, (Dimension Films: United States), 2007: DVD.

⁷⁷ Keisner, *Do You Want To Watch?*, 425.

⁷⁸ *Death Proof*.

Meanwhile, all of the female characters that have been introduced to the audience for the first half hour are killed one at a time. Even Arlene who has been built up for the audience as the Final Girl that viewers assume will overcome the killer is not spared. In fact, her death is arguably the most graphic of them all as her face is mutilated during the crash. The film provides no security for viewers making audiences unable to trust Tarantino to abide by the rules of the genre. When the second half of the film begins, moviegoers can no longer predict with certainty how it will end.

The second half of the film takes place in Lebanon, Tennessee, and suddenly the movie almost essentially resets itself. The audience is immediately introduced to a new set of girls, all of which are part of a Hollywood film crew shooting on location. Despite the twist at the end of the first half, Tarantino still continues to set up generic conventions by creating parallel story lines. Mary Elizabeth Winstead plays an actress named Lee whose gender-ambiguous name could potentially set her apart from the group if it were not for the fact that she is only seen wearing her cheerleading costume from the set while on their day off from shooting. At the same time, however, the fictional team's name is the "Vipers," which Tarantino fans will connect to the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad from *Kill Bill*. More connections are made to the director's previous film, such as the reusing of Bernard Hermann's "Twisted Nerve" as a ringtone, and the fact that the girls' car resembles Buck's "Pussy Wagon" from *Kill Bill v.1*.

Rosario Dawson plays a hair and makeup artist, Abernathy, who is symbolically marked by Stuntman Mike when he touches her feet as they dangle out the window of parked car while she naps in the back seat. And just like Arlene, Abernathy's sexuality becomes a key topic of discussion, for she is in a relationship with the director that is romantic though not sexual. While this generic convention is repeated, the audience is still led to believe that this does not guarantee

her survival as a Final Girl. Furthermore, since most Final Girls are typically white, the audience may not even anticipate a Final Girl who is of Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban heritage. Later in the second half of the film, it becomes clear that her role among the group is maternal, thus she is viewed as more passive, girly, and likely unable to defend herself. The third woman is Kim (Tracy Thoms), another African American who is also an active stunt driver who is comes across as a female Samuel L. Jackson (*Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown*). Interestingly, the last movie Dawson and Thoms appeared in together was the adaptation of the Broadway musical *Rent* (2005). Kim maintains her femininity when discussing sex, though the audience may interpret her as more “masculine” by stereotypical standards, given that she is a strong woman and carries a gun—a classic phallic symbol. However, Kim’s justifications for carrying the gun are all rooted in her gender. Kim says to Abernathy, “Look, I don’t know what futuristic utopia you live in, but the world I love in, a bitch need a gun . . . you can’t get around the fact that if I go down to the laundry room in my building at midnight enough times, I might get my ass raped . . . I wanna do my laundry whenever the fuck I wanna do my laundry.” Additionally, when asked about alternatives like pepper spray, Kim says, “Uh, motherfucker tryna rape me? I don’t wanna give him a skin rash! I wanna shut that nigga down!”⁷⁹ In short, even Kim’s most “masculine” dialogue refers specifically to her gender, sexuality, and femininity.

The fourth woman is New Zealand stuntwoman, Zoe Bell, who plays herself. Before her acting debut in this film, Bell was best known for being Uma Thurman’s stunt double in *Kill Bill*. As if Tarantino’s homage to grindhouse cinema, his allusions to *Vanishing Point* (1971) and *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974), and self-referential elements with lines about Big Kahuna Burger were not enough, the filmmaker casts the stuntwoman from *Kill Bill*. The moment is almost strange and certainly unlike Tarantino, given that the entire movie up until that point has

⁷⁹ *Death Proof*.

continuously called attention to its movie-ness devoid of any kind of realism. Watching Bell on top of a real car that is being hit by a real car as well as the association of her being a real person rather than a completely fictional character adds a heightened level of suspense. The audience begins to ask themselves: if Tarantino is willing to shock audiences with the first half, how far would he possibly go in the film's climax as Bell appears to hold on for her life on the hood of the *Vanishing Point* Challenger?

Conversely to the first half of the film, *Death Proof* ends with all of women surviving. Moreover, the three women catch up to Stuntman Mike and eventually brutally and yet heroically kill him. Once he falls to his death, the girls throw their arms up in triumph in sync with an equally victorious sounding musical cue followed by a freeze frame of the moment and a title card. Unlike typical Hollywood horror films, Tarantino's finale features three prominent Final Girls; moreover, one of which is African American and another being Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban. Most importantly, they are able to do so without any intervention from a male figure or by compromising their femininity.⁸⁰ Similar to Kiesner's essay on postmodern horror films, however, Tarantino's women appear to survive based on their ability to "adapt" to the "surroundings or monster-villain," which in this case is Lebanon, Tennessee and the nefarious Stuntman Mike.⁸¹ Though it should be noted that the female characters are all currently working in the movie industry, which is also Stuntman Mike's professional origin. So really, the ending proves that the women represent their ability to outperform a man at a hyper-masculine job of being a stuntman who crashes muscle cars for movies and television—a thrill that is a masochistic act for Stuntman Mike, who crashes his car into women for sexual pleasure.

⁸⁰ Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, 111.

⁸¹ Kiesner, *Do You Want To Watch?*, 412.

The character Kim in particular, takes on a complete role reversal when the girls finally end up chasing him. Kim yells out, “You don’t like it up the ass do you, redneck lunatic bastard?” as she rear-ends his car repeatedly.⁸² Kim adopts this character ironically and comically as the women chase Stuntman Mike, who for the first time in the film, is being referred to as a “redneck lunatic bastard” archetypical character, common in exploitation films similar to the “hillbilly rapists” in *Pulp Fiction* who are reduced to Southern transplants from another genre and region whose characterizations are self-reflexively called out in Godard-ian fashion. Stuntman Mike is similarly a Baudrillardian simulation or simulacra.

Stuntman Mike as the “Redneck Lunatic Bastard

In the beginning of *Death Proof*, Stuntman Mike is seen only in his car following a group of women around Austin, Texas. The first time Stuntman Mike speaks, he is charming and offers to help a young lady hitch a ride home. In addition, he is eating nachos at the bar and is not drinking any alcohol—the complete opposite of the hillbilly moonshiner character type.⁸³ Most surprisingly, he does not have a southern accent. The only time he has an accent of any kind is when he does a John Wayne impression when trying to earn a lap dance from Arlene as promised virtually on Jungle Julia’s radio show. At the same time, his origins are not entirely credible. Though he claims that he was a stuntman for old television shows like *The Virginian*, no one in the bar is familiar with the program or others that he lists. Therefore, his time spent in Hollywood is possibly fraudulent, leaving his origin and reasons for being in Austin somewhat mysterious—all of which are aspects of classic characteristics of horror monsters-killers.

⁸² *Death Proof*.

⁸³ Scott von Doviak, *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers), 2005: 15-27.

In his essay, “Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*,” Aaron Anderson describes the car crash scene as “sodomasochistic.” According to Anderson, Stuntman Mike’s car becomes an “extension of his murdering body. It also becomes a death chamber and death-proof chamber at the same time . . . This scene enacts a pairing of technology with the sadistic body.”⁸⁴ Additionally, utilizing the writings of Gilles Deleuze, Anderson argues that the “meeting of violence and sexuality” demonstrates Stuntman Mike’s “desires to inflict pain and gain sexual stimulation from actually experiencing pain.”⁸⁵ In this way, Stuntman Mike embodies the archetype horror film characters that are the stalker, the slasher, and the hillbilly rapists, until the second half of the film when the sexual violence is reversed and turns on the Stuntman, and the women have their revenge in the fashion of 1960s and ‘70s exploitation films like Russ Meyer’s cult classic, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) and Jack Hill’s *Switchblade Sisters* (1975). Anderson writes, “These references to 1970s action flicks go on to become more ‘authentic’ than Tarantino’s ‘original’ work . . . Tarantino uses the camera to interpret and moderate reality, but at the same time, he uses it to erase history by reducing it to movie and TV references.”⁸⁶ Whereas Anderson would claim Tarantino is erasing history, this thesis argues that what is actually happening is an expanding of traditional narrative conventions and a reshaping of the South and southerners—in regard to the horror genre—in the minds of moviegoers worldwide.

To better understand Tarantino, Anderson refers to the philosophy of Baudrillard and his concept of hyperreality and simulations. Anderson cites Baudrillard who writes, “‘America is neither dream nor reality.’ Instead, it is hyperreality through and through. The U.S. and

⁸⁴ Aaron C. Anderson, “Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*,” in *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy: How to Philosophize with a Pair of Pliers and a Blowtorch*, Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, (Chicago: Open Court), 2007: 18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

American cultural productions must be understood as ‘fiction.’”⁸⁷ Similarly, Tarantino’s self-reflexive nature demonstrates the filmmaker’s consciousness of what a hyperreality means for cinema and uses his films as exercises in postmodern film by constantly calling attention to the movie-ness of each of his films and characters. This allows Tarantino to reuse images, music, and concepts from the past that will be recognizable to viewers and to reconstruct those narratives by creating a new work that comments on film history and the current state of cinema, in this case, horror films. For this reason, Anderson writes, “Ultimately, the performance of the simulacrum, a negative effect of postmodernity according to Baudrillard, might be Tarantino’s greatest contribution to the cinema.”⁸⁸

The presentation of *Grindhouse* itself is a simulation. It follows that *Death Proof* is also a simulation meant to resemble the era of exploitation cinema and the theatre going experience of the grindhouses of the 1970s and to reference, reuse, and to a degree, recreate, the movies shown at such theatres. Furthermore, the characters themselves are simulations who even participate in simulations. Anderson writes of the female leads in the second half of the film, “they create simulations in their fictional work. They also constantly draw attention to their occupations verbally . . . Meanwhile, when the action shifts from the stuntperson’s game of ‘Ship’s Mast’ to the actual violence on the part of Stuntman Mike, Stuntman Mike still *simulates* violence. The action consists at base of stuntpersons acting out car chases from their favorite movies.”⁸⁹

Furthermore, Anderson writes, “Tarantino’s characters constantly explore images, simulations of cinematic history, and simulations of these simulations. In *Death Proof*, references and images become a form of simulation that somehow makes the ‘real’ more ‘real’ or authentic . . . Tarantino repeatedly emphasizes the fact that simulation is at work in *Death*

⁸⁷ Anderson, “Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*,” 15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Proof.”⁹⁰ The first stage in Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, as Anderson notes is one in which “the image ‘reflects’ a ‘profound reality,’” one might think of the Italian neo-realist films like *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) or Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (1946), films that are fiction though filmed similarly to documentary style. In the second stage, “the image blurs or obscures a profound reality” while in the third, “the image disguises the nonexistence of a profound reality.” The fourth stage “sees the simulation become a simulacrum, a simulation or duplicate without an original. Finally, the real begins to mimic the simulation of real images of the real become more real than the real itself,” according to Anderson’s understanding of Baudrillard. Lastly, Anderson writes, “The challenge for us as viewers of *Death Proof* is to determine where simulation stops and the simulacrum starts. You can dig deeper and deeper but eventually certain images and objects that appear to be references are pure simulacra.”⁹¹

Anderson writes, “Tarantino seems to write his own cinematic history” which allows viewers to watch his film then revisit exploitation films with a new meaning devoid of its original historical context. Moreover, Anderson concludes, “the simulacrum emerges as Tarantino self-consciously references a sort of mythic exploitation film. Here Tarantino simulates a simulation thus producing a simulacrum” in moments like the final car chase which features the same muscle cars from by *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry* and *Vanishing Point*, both of which have been openly referenced multiple times leading up to the scene.⁹² In short, Tarantino’s combination of slasher films, road movies, and exploitation films under the *Grindhouse* name along with his own unique aesthetic, creates an entirely new cinematic experience. Tarantino’s film is not limited or bound to an original image, though it reinterprets and remodels its

⁹⁰ Anderson, “Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*,” 14.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 17.

audience's understanding of the grindhouse era. Likewise, it reimagines representations of southerners and the South given its characters and setting.

It is fitting that Kurt Russell should play Stuntman Mike and be included in *Grindhouse* due to his connections with John Carpenter's classics from the 1980s: *Escape from New York* (1981), *Escape from L.A.* (1996), and *The Thing* (1982). Before any of those films were made, however, Russell starred in a television movie also directed by Carpenter in which he played Elvis Presley in the aptly named, *Elvis* (1979). Additionally, Russell starred in *3000 Miles to Graceland* (2001), a film about a group of thieves who dress as Elvis impersonators. So while Russell himself is not a native of the South, he at least has portrayed its most famous personality, which is validation enough for Tarantino who has a bit of an obsession with the King of Rock n Roll.⁹³ Even if Russell is not a southerner, seeing him in tight jeans, a black t-shirt, listening to a jukebox filled with 45s, and driving an American muscle car may be cause some moviegoers to recall Russell's role as Elvis in the 1970s and a time when Elvis was King.

Concerning Stuntman Mike's name and identity, McRoy writes, "By adopting his profession as a part of his name, Stuntman Mike obliterates the distinction between *who he is* and *what he does*. His identity *is* his social function within the late capitalist marketplace, thus rendering him as fully reified within a culture of consumption and exploitation."⁹⁴ In addition, McRoy points out that other names that people use to mock Stuntman Mike include references to *B.J. and The Bear*, *Stroker Ace*, and even *Icy Hot*, whose product's logo is on the back of his

⁹³ Many of Tarantino's movies include references to Elvis. A deleted scene from *Pulp Fiction* features Mia (Uma Thurman) asking Vince (John Travolta) whether or not he is an Elvis or a Beatles man. In his screenplay for *True Romance* (1993), Clarence (Christian Slater) says that if he "had to fuck a guy" then he would choose Elvis. Moreover, there are two fantastical scenes in which Clarence speaks with an Elvis apparition of sorts. Finally, even Tarantino played an Elvis impersonator on *The Golden Girls*, so it is fitting for the director to pick an actor who famously portrayed Elvis in the 1970s television movie from his youth.

⁹⁴ McRoy, "The Kids of Today Should Defend Themselves Against the '70s," 228.

jacket demonstrate his connection to consumer culture.⁹⁵ But apart from “Icy Hot,” the other references to movies and television programs that display hokey southernness, representing the film’s other characters’ inclination to categorize Stuntman Mike as a southern archetype, but only as it relates to film and television likenesses. In this way, Stuntman Mike serves as a microcosm of other southern representations. Scott Romine, writes, that the “real South” is the “fake South, which . . . becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative . . . the South is increasingly sustained as a virtual, commodified, built, themed, invented, or otherwise artificial.”⁹⁶

For this reason, Stuntman Mike proves to be one of Tarantino’s most complex characters, certainly one of his most complicated southerners. In fact, his “southernness” is completely ambiguous. The only way that the audience can know for sure whether or not he is southern is through the other characters choices to identify him as such using references to southern film and television characters. Stuntman Mike serves as an example about how the South has always been constructed. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson writes, “The South today is as much a fiction, a story we tell and are told, as it is a fixed geographic space below the Mason-Dixon line,” Douglas Powell might add, that “being aware that writing about a region creates and sustains a definition of that region and, in so doing, deliberately defines the region.”⁹⁷ *Death Proof* visualizes this process as the characters interpret Stuntman Mike by including him into a southern narrative, recognizing him as Flannery O’Connor-esque freak and grouping him with *B.J. and The Bear*. Tarantino, aware that he is constructing his own South and southerners by

⁹⁵ McRoy, “The Kids of Today Should Defend Themselves Against the ‘70s,”” 228-229.

⁹⁶ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 2008: 9.

⁹⁷ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2003: 1; Douglas Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 2007: 7.

contributing and joyfully contributing to representations throughout film history, lets his characters in on the process. The fluidity with which these things are constructed as well as the inclination for people to categorize, construct, and thus control the image of Stuntman Mike as southern demonstrates the cultures quickness to label, define, and henceforth experience southernness.

Austin, Texas and Lebanon, Tennessee

The first half of the *Death Proof* takes place in Austin and is actually shot on location. As the girls cruise down the street, large buildings appear out the window, recognizable perhaps to Austin natives. Additionally, the two bar stops are actual locations within Austin, which is not typical for a Tarantino film. Though many of his characters may eat in a diner, like in the famous opening scene in *Reservoir Dogs*, the audience is never aware of the name of either the diner or its location. Tarantino's choice to show actual locations in Austin is likely a conscious decision to exploit the fears of his audience, as is the nature of the genre he seeks to recreate. Rodriguez does something similar with his film, *Planet Terror*, a zombie movie that is caused by a chemical that has entered the United States from the war in Iraq, which is also shot in Austin, this connecting the two films one another level.

Even the "authentic" Austin locations, are filled with references to fake products popular in both Tarantino and Rodriguez's films. Stuntman Mike tells Jungle Julia that he saw her billboard next to Big Kahuna Burger which is a way of referencing *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and even *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996). The juxtaposition between the real Austin and the fake products which are unique to the Tarantino/Rodriguez filmic worlds makes Tarantino's

version of Texas seem just as real as how he depicts the end of the Second World War in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Tarantino's understanding of place in concern to filmmaking creates an opportunity to take known places that have history and rules and disrupt them with his own vision.

The two halves of the film are separated by an exposition scene in a hospital between Mike and James Parkes as two sheriffs in a hospital in the aftermath of the car crash. The audience is meant to recognize the two who played larger roles in the previous film, *Planet Terror*—not to mention *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *Kill Bill*. However, accepting their representations of place means abandoning any realistic world and indulging in the filmic place instead—both of which are fictitious and built upon myths. The exposition scene ends with Mike Parkes' character saying, "If he does it again, he damn sure won't do it in Texas," followed by a black screen and a title card in large letters which read, "Lebanon." The audience then laughs at the idea that Stuntman Mike survives and that the movie gets to continue, then secondly at the idea that he may not only be outside of Texas but outside of the United States. The audience is relieved and laughs again as the title card reads, "Lebanon, Tennessee." The joke then shifts at the idea that the small Tennessee town is just as foreign as the Lebanese Republic. Though it is in the United States, it certainly is not in the news as much as the Middle Eastern border to Israel. Consequently, the audience assumes that they will know nothing about this place and will rely on Tarantino to create it for them.

First, the movie is not filmed in Lebanon, Tennessee, but in Texas and California. So Tarantino's creation of the place is entirely inauthentic from the onset, which he seems to prefer anyway. The beginning of the Lebanon story starts with the women from Hollywood in the parking lot of a convenient store as Lee sings "Baby It's You" by the band Smith, as heard

earlier in the film, connecting the Tennessee location not only to Hollywood but to Austin as well. Essentially, Tarantino references the movie the audience is currently watching followed by three consecutive references to *Kill Bill*. Most interestingly, however, when Abernathy goes into the store, the man at the counter—another actor who was previously in *Planet Terror*—tells the woman that he has a copy of *Vogue Italia* that he is willing to sell to her from his personal collection under the counter. The moment is certainly an odd one and serves no narrative purpose except to demonstrate the girls' femininity but also to connect this small southern town to Italian popular culture. The possession and selling of the magazine copy does well to present the peculiarities of the South, but certainly not in any way that connects it the Old or even New South and ignores any attempts at capturing any cultural distinctiveness. Furthermore, the women from Hollywood are not seen in this horror film as outsiders to this Tennessee town. On the contrary, it is easy for them assimilate.

Likewise, the girls go to check out a Dodge Challenger, the one that is the same make up as the car featured in *Vanishing Point*. Zoe knows the car is available because she has subscribed to the local newspaper in order to check the classifieds to see if anything should come up. And it just so happens that the car appears in the paper, so the New Zealander and her Hollywood friends once again find themselves seamlessly adapting to life in Lebanon. Unlike the instance with the magazine, the car represents a sense of nostalgia for the characters of Zoe and Kim who have grown up watching road movies, which inspired their career choices as stuntwomen. While the story of the South is often connected to nostalgia and romanticizing the past, this one runs the risk of doing the same, except for the fact that it is not rooted in the place but in a particular car, a film, and 1970s Hollywood. The presence of the car being available in Lebanon suggests that a nostalgia exists there that is not rooted in plantation or Jim Crow South, but equally invested in a

more universal history that is cinematic, and not even a southern narrative. Finally, Tarantino attempts to one-up the past by not recreating *Vanishing Point* or *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, but constructing a new narrative that is, as Anderson notes, a simulacra.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Though *Death Proof* and *Grindhouse* as a whole was not the box office sensation that the filmmakers had hoped for, it proves to be one of the most unique, playful, and interesting of Tarantino's films up to that point in his career. And for those interested in South, it is the only one of his films thus far that takes place entirely and exclusively in the South.⁹⁹ At the same time, it is one of the only films to not play into southern stereotypes or even feature a "redneck lunatic bastard" who is not a full-blown redneck and who never literally, but figuratively sexually assaults his victims when he murders them. Regardless, the playfulness with which Tarantino creates the film and presents the South and his main southerner are a treat for southern studies as he begins to redefine what a southern narrative may look like. Tarantino's ability to mix genres and signifiers from other eras allows him to actively participate in the ongoing discussion of postsouthern identity and the South in the age of cultural reproduction in a way that is neither nostalgic for the South's identity passing, nor concerned about creating an authentic representation which could only be exclusive by nature and falsely represent the region. *Death Proof* enjoys the passing of the South, takes pleasure the postmodern, and indulges in the possibilities of the future of postsouthern cinema by eliminating cultural distinctiveness,

⁹⁸ Anderson, "Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*," 17.

⁹⁹ An often forgotten montage exists in *Django Unchained* when Shultz and Django go out West for the winter to collect bounties before making their way to Candie Land.

demonstrating how southernization is defined in reference to previous works of cultural reproductions and media texts, and linking the region to the rest of nation and world.

CHAPTER THREE

DJANGO UNCHAINED: SLAVERY AND POSTMODERN CINEMA

Quentin Tarantino's most recent film, *Django Unchained* (2012), proved to be one of the biggest movies of the experienced filmmaker's career. Not only did Tarantino earn the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay—his second in this category—but the movie was also his most financially successful film to date, earning over \$425 million dollars worldwide. And like every Tarantino movie, it was also heavily criticized. To be sure, many of Tarantino's films have dealt with topics that are controversial, namely, violence, race, and gender. But for the most part, each of those topics has only been themes throughout his filmography rather than an explicit subject matter Tarantino is visiting. Even his previous film, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), a World War II film about a Jewish American platoon and a young Jewish woman hiding in Nazi occupied France and working at a cinema, failed to cover or even mention the topic of the Holocaust. *Django Unchained*, however, does not back away from the touchy subject of American slavery. In fact, Tarantino's goal from the beginning was not to “bow to any 21st century political correctness,” but rather “take the 21st century viewers and physically transport them back to the antebellum South in 1858, in Mississippi, and have them look at America for what it was back then. And I wanted it to be shocking,” claims Tarantino.¹⁰⁰

This insight helps to understand certain aspects of the film, like the gratuitous use of the N-word and the depictions of historical violence in the movie, such as, the whipping of

¹⁰⁰ Kam Williams, “The ‘Django Unchained’ interview with Quentin Tarantino,” *Call & Post, All-Ohio* edition, (Jan. 2013: 5), www.proquest.com accessed Dec. 2013.

Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), the dogs attacking the runaway slave, and the scars that cover the backside of the film's hero, Django (Jamie Foxx). However, Tarantino's film is more complicated than other historical films because he self-consciously avoids "capital 'H' history," meaning he does not want to make a bio-pic like *12 Years a Slave* (2013) or even something similar to the widely popular 1970s mini-series *Roots*.¹⁰¹ As a postmodern filmmaker, Tarantino continues to apply elements of cinematic pastiche and alludes to different movies from multiple genres, making his film about slavery a combination of a Spaghetti Western and Blaxploitation film. *Django Unchained* is a celebration of the b-movie genres of the 1960s and 1970s for their operatic uses of violence, such as Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966), and for their depiction of slaves being resistant in films like Martin Goldman's, *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972) and Richard Fleischer's *Mandingo* (1975). At the same time, he also makes references to early American classics that have been regarded as some of the most important movies in the history of cinema, such as, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as well as David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Rather than celebrating these canonized films, which continue to shape the collective memory for how some Americans remember the South's past—more so in the case of *Gone with the Wind*—Tarantino parodies and turns famous scenes from each of these classics on their head. Tarantino's uses his film as an attempt to use the same medium of cinema as a tool for expressing what he believes to be "much closer to the actual truth" in order to reimagine the South in film. It follows that the South in *Django Unchained* demonstrates the physical brutality of slavery and the agency of enslaved African Americans who believed in marriage, attempted to runaway, learned to read, and even killed white folks while also exposing the absurdity of the influence of films from the first of half of the 20th century. The aim of this

¹⁰¹ Charlie Rose and Quentin Tarantino. "Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose – Django Unchained Part 1." *YouTube* video, 15:01. Dec. 21, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYc> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

chapter is to explain how *Django Unchained* is not only a film about the history of slavery, but a film about the history of slavery in film. To understand the film then requires an understanding of its construction as a postmodern slave narrative which deals with slavery by approaching the subject through an assemblage of references to other movies and aspects of pop culture.

Spaghetti Westerns and Film Violence

For years, Tarantino has been outspoken about his love for Westerns, but the aesthetics of Westerns and Spaghetti Westerns were not largely reflected in his work until the second half of his career in the early 2000s with *Kill Bill*. Like *Django Unchained*, though more explicitly, the *Kill Bill* movies feature The Bride (Uma Thurman) getting her revenge on a group of assassins she was once a part of and their leader, Bill. While the first volume of *Kill Bill* combines kung-fu, anime, Italian horror and other genres, the second volume has a structure and aesthetic that is strongly akin to a typical Western or Spaghetti Western. In his book, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, Patrick McGee considers Westerns to be “one of the principle narratives in the discourse of mass culture.”¹⁰² McGee concludes, “To study the Western is to contemplate violent conflict as both a fact of social history and a figure of social transformation.”¹⁰³

This insight makes it easier to understand why Tarantino would use the genre to frame his most recent movies about women, World War II, and the era of slavery. Specifically, *Kill Bill's* The Bride, serves as a take on The Man With No Name trope popular in Westerns made most famously by Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's *Dollars* trilogy and with *Shane* as the prototype. On the other hand, according to McGee, the Bill character acts as the “patriarchal

¹⁰² Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2007: xvii.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

subject and the subject of capital.”¹⁰⁴ In short, The Bride’s revenge rampage on Bill and the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad is an allegorical expression of taking down the patriarchy in order to forge a new identity separate from the control of Bill. Comparing her to the character, Shane, McGee writes, “Shane always comes back in new forms because he represents the possibility of self-transformation . . . Shane has had many names and no name in any number of films. But perhaps his promising name, the one that captures the essence of a future that escapes our social imagination, is Mommy.”¹⁰⁵

Based on McGee’s reading of *Kill Bill*, it follows that Tarantino takes classic genre tropes like the hero’s journey and turns them on their head to show the character’s personal transformation while simultaneously demonstrating a larger social change. Finally, McGee describes the climax of *Kill Bill v. 1* as a “show of force as unreal as it is brutal.”¹⁰⁶ He adds, “though one can criticize the problematic social effects of such film violence, it nonetheless operates as a hyperbolic representation of the force it takes to withdraw from identification with a dominant social archetype.”¹⁰⁷ For *The Bride*, the dominant social archetype is a patriarchal society personified by Bill. In the case of *Django Unchained*, the dominant social structure becomes the peculiar institution in the Antebellum South.

Once the title for Tarantino’s Western slave narrative was announced, film fans were immediately drawn to the explicit reference to Corbucci’s b-classic, *Django*. Despite the namesake, Corbucci’s film stars Franco Nero as Django who is neither a slave nor an African American, so the story has little to do with Tarantino’s homage to the cult classic. Instead, Tarantino is interested in the fact that the film was considered to be one of the most violent ever

¹⁰⁴ McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill*, 237

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

made up to that point. As a matter of fact, Tarantino claims that he is writing his own book on Sergio Corbucci's depiction of the West and argues that it is the most violent because of his experience with fascism in Italy.¹⁰⁸ If Corbucci uses genre to reflect his experience with Italian fascism through allegorical representations of violence in order to show the effects of Italy's most difficult struggle, then Tarantino does something similar. Tarantino uses genre to make slavery appear like the Wild West to discontinue thoughts of slavery as a benevolent institution. While Italian neo-realist directors like Antonio Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946) or Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) do well to really capture the harshness and brutality of an era in a matter-of-fact way, Tarantino is more drawn to Italian filmmakers who created their own worlds rooted in the reality of the American West and feature an "operatic with surreal quality of the violence."¹⁰⁹

On one hand, the film does aim to capture realistic violence, particularly when showing acts of violence on behalf of white men toward slaves. Even then, Tarantino claims that what he showed the audience was nothing compared to the reality of slavery. Tarantino wants his audience to confront the realistic violence and deal with the past in those scenes but without being traumatized. Tarantino admits that the film could barely touch the surface of the reality of slavery, and argues that any movie covering the topic would struggle to do the same. Aware of the multitude of slave narratives and stories yet to be told on film, Tarantino compensates for the limitations of capturing the voices of millions of enslaved African Americans by using the grandiose Spaghetti Western violence. Consequently, when Django fires his gun in the epic climax following the death of southern aristocrat Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Dr.

¹⁰⁸ Charlie Rose and Quentin Tarantino. "Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose – Django Unchained Part 1," *YouTube* video, 15:01, Dec. 21, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYc> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Quentin Tarantino, "Tarantino 'Unchained': *Django* Trilogy" in *Quentin Tarantino Interviews: Revised and Updated*, ed. Gerald Peary, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 2013: 193.

King Shultz (Christoph Waltz), the violence no longer appeals to realism as it did with the depictions of violence toward slaves in previous scenes. In this moment, Django stands in for all enslaved African Americans who aspire to be free and has the power to remove limbs and splatter blood all over the columns and large staircase inside of the big house with his antebellum pistols. This artistic and even metaphorical moment of violence, though gruesome, serves as a wish fulfillment in this so-called revenge fantasy. While the ahistorical images of Adolf Hitler being killed in *Inglourious Basterds* is filmed to look realistic, *Django Unchained* goes even further to make the violence more surreal and to elevate Django to the likes of a “black superhero” for African American moviegoers.¹¹⁰

The consequence, of course, is that the result is not what Natalie Davis would define as “historical filmmaking,” or a type of movie in which the filmmaker assumes the responsibilities of a historian to produce something that is “both good cinema and good history.”¹¹¹ This is especially problematic for some given that there are so few films about slavery to begin with, particularly in American cinema. Even upon the film’s release, the movie was frequently talked about in reference to *Roots*, which remains a focal point for discussions on depictions of slavery in movies and television as a quintessential media text of the last forty years. What makes depictions of slavery in film so complicated is that the memory of slavery is one that has been a point of contention since emancipation. To be sure, some people today still choose to remember slavery as being a paternalistic institution in which slaves were happy and even benefited from. One reason that many continue to deny or ignore the evils of slavery is due to the long history of

¹¹⁰“Django Unchained: meet the press (2013) Quentin Tarantino,” *YouTube* video, 39:40, Jan. 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1QpScB-HJg> accessed Nov. 18, 2014; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Quentin Tarantino, “Tarantino ‘Unchained’: *Django* Trilogy” in *Quentin Tarantino Interviews: Revised and Updated*, ed. Gerald Peary, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 2013

¹¹¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2000: 12, xi.

filmic representations of slaves as being Uncle Toms, Mammies, Sambos, or song-and-dance men after growing up watching *Gone with the Wind* or even Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). Such films feature African American actors and actresses in the role of slaves whose characters are there to entertain other white characters or provide comedic relief whether it is an African American man struggling to catch a chicken or singing with blue birds on his shoulder to entertain a white child on the plantation with tails of Brer Rabbit and the "Tar Baby." For this reason, it is so important for those who understand the reality of slavery and have had memories of the era passed down by generations through African American families for the factual and truthful telling of the history to be presented in film and television.

While Tarantino's movie is fictional to the point of fantasy, it also aims to express the reality of the brutality of slavery. Even Tarantino would agree with his most vocal critic and fellow filmmaker Spike Lee who posted on Twitter days before the national release, "American Slavery Was Not A Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It Was A Holocaust. My Ancestors Are Slaves. Stolen From Africa. I Will Honor Them."¹¹² However, Tarantino claims that his target audience for *Django Unchained* is African Americans moviegoers.¹¹³ Instead of ignoring the historical past, Tarantino uses it as one of the many elements of his assemblage of allusions, references, and other moments in the film. Tarantino, who frames the movie with a Spaghetti Western aesthetic and in the spirit of blaxploitation cinema, is convinced that he is telling a story that is "more true" than historical films that he deems as "kind of a downer."¹¹⁴ To avoid making a movie about slaves who are powerless against the white power structure or even seem

¹¹² Spike Lee, *Twitter* post, Dec. 22, 2012, 10:18 p.m. <http://twitter.com/SpikeLee>.

¹¹³ Charlie Rose and Quentin Tarantino, "Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose – Django Unchained Part 2," *YouTube* video, 15:00, Dec. 21, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_pEi0zeNPI accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

unmotivated to rise against the institution of slavery, Tarantino creates a world that magnifies the reality of the attitudes of slaves who were resistant, demonstrating their agency during the era.

Blaxploitation and Sexual Liberation

When making *Django Unchained*, Tarantino drew heavily from a blaxploitation classic, *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, which features slaves who escape the South and go westward to live out their freedom. The film stars blaxploitation icon Fred Williamson who also appeared in the Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino collaboration, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), as well as Enzo Castellari's, *The Inglorious Bastards* (1978). The film features three slaves who have escaped from a plantation led by Charley, who earns his freedom in the beginning of the movie though has it continuously denied by the white men throughout the movie. The three are then pursued by the "slave hunter," not unlike Tarantino's "Jew hunter," Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), in *Inglourious Basterds*. The majority of the film involves the three black men encountering white people who question and attempt to limit or undermine their status, which results in violence. Concerning violence and blaxploitation films, Novotny Lawrence writes, "Whether the violence stems from the characters' occupations or emerges as a form of revenge, the motive is always justified by the protagonists' standard of living."¹¹⁵ Such is also the case with *Django Unchained* as Tarantino incorporates the "by any means necessary" ethic. According to Novotny, blaxploitation films feature "excessive violence, necessary and significant to the plot" as a means of overcoming the oppressive establishment, typically embodied by wealthy and malicious white men. Therefore, the white villains who "feel the wrath

¹¹⁵ Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre*, (New York: Routledge), 2008: 19.

of black justice” operate as a symbol of “blacks overcoming racism perpetuated by the machine” in blaxploitation classics and Tarantino’s film.¹¹⁶

Another characteristic typical of blaxploitation is sexuality, featuring heroes and heroines as they “emerge as sexually liberated characters.”¹¹⁷ Lawrence explains that before the rise of blaxploitation cinema, African American men were commonly represented as “sexually savage or sterile, while black female sexuality was either nonexistent or deviant because it resulted in biracial offspring.”¹¹⁸ The presence of blaxploitation cinema allowed for black actors and actresses to play characters who were, “in control of their sexuality” and who “often dictate the circumstances of their erotic encounters.”¹¹⁹ It is with this aspect of blaxploitation cinema that Tarantino becomes a bit more conservative in terms of what to show on screen concerning sexuality. According to Kerry Washington who plays Django’s wife, Broomhilda, at the heart of the movie is the romance of a former slave who will stop at nothing to rescue and free his wife from the plantation, Candie Land, so that the two of them can be free and live out their marriage on their own terms.¹²⁰

Undoubtedly, the general plot of the movie comes down to a newly freed slave fighting for sexual control within a white power structure that does not legally recognize marriage between African Americans. When Django first tells his bounty hunter colleague about his wife, Shultz curiously asks, “Do most slaves believe in marriage?” To which Django responds simply and confidently, “Me and my wife do.”¹²¹ This moment is rooted in a historical truth that slave marriages were not legally recognized by slave holders. As depicted in the film, marriage would

¹¹⁶ Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s*, 19.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁰ “Django Unchained: meet the press (2013) Quentin Tarantino,” *YouTube* video, 39:40, Jan. 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1QpScB-HJg> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

¹²¹ *Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, 2012, (Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay), 2013, DVD.

not be able to prevent a man or woman from being sold or rented out to another plantation. Consequently, this challenged black masculinity as they were also unable to protect their wives from being sold or even subject to sexual abuse on behalf of white men.¹²² While blaxploitation cinema displayed agency through sexuality to demonstrate African American life and art in the 1970s, *Django Unchained* suggests that this struggle, desire, and mindset has existed and is rooted in the era of slavery. The victory for Django is not that he gets to “kill white folks for a living,” but that he is freed himself and his wife from the culture that has limited and controlled his and Broomhilda’s marriage and sexuality.¹²³ It is fitting, therefore, that Django’s wife should be named Broomhilda von Shaft. The name is an obvious homage to one of the most well known blaxploitation films, *Shaft* (1971), which was remade in 2000 with *Django Unchained* co-star Samuel Jackson in the lead role.

One notable and worthy criticism for the film is that it perpetuates the typical trope of the woman in need of being saved from a heroic man. To be sure, Tarantino’s previous films from *Jackie Brown* through *Inglourious Basterds* have all portrayed strong women, whereas *Django Unchained* does not in an explicit way. Yet this chapter takes on an approach similar to feminist historians who have revisited women’s role in history to demonstrate agency and politics in “unlikely spaces.”¹²⁴ It is absolutely true that the movie largely features a black woman having to be saved by a man—in the end. But flashback sequences and other dialogue help queue the audience in to Broomhilda’s history of resistance and even superior intellect.

¹²² Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born In Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2000: 14, 48, 173-179, 187, 192-197; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1979: 151-153; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1618-1877*, (New York: Hill and Wang), 2003: 120-129, 129, 220-221.

¹²³ *Django Unchained*.

¹²⁴ Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, “Introduction,” *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Dailey, Gilmore, & Simon, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2000: 4.

The audience learns that Django and Broomhilda have been separated because the married slaves decided to attempt to run away together—an aspect of slavery not typical of even contemporary films about slavery. Moreover, it is clear that Broomhilda has attempted to escape Candie Land on her own. The first time the viewer sees her in real time, she is being lifted from a hot box where she was being punished for days for attempting to runaway. She speaks German, which admittedly is not a language slaves likely would have known. Most importantly, her being bilingual adds an element of comedic irony since she is slave who can speak German while her owner is a Francophile who cannot even speak a word of French, suggesting an intellectual advantage as she is able to speak secretly with Dr. Shultz about his and Django's plans to rescue her. Furthermore, the film subtly implies that the southern belle Miss Lara may be coming on to Dr. Shultz, who ignores her advances and would rather speak with Broomhilda in German, indicating his preference for conversing with someone more cultured or intellectual, though his pretense of course is to let her know of the plan to rescue her and reunite her with her husband, Django. Although Broomhilda's character is in a typical position of being saved by a man, she is still an African American woman who pushes against the white power structure for her freedom and sexual liberation and succeeds with the help of her husband, Django.

Humor and White Supremacy

Despite the romantic tale and the scenes of brutal violence, some of *Django Unchained's* most memorable moments are its funniest. As if it were not enough to combine a southern slave narrative with a Spaghetti Western, Tarantino reveals his other objective, "The comedy has to

work, the horrific serious scenes have to work, I have to be able to get you to laugh.”¹²⁵ The most comical scenes in the movie take place toward the end of the first act when Django and Shultz arrive at a plantation in Tennessee owned by Big Daddy, played by *Miami Vice*’s Don Johnson, in search of three overseers for whom they have a bounty. Shultz acts under the pretense that he is there to purchase a slave and suggests that Django be shown around the property, but that he must be treated as a free man. Big Daddy calls to a young slave girl, “Bettina, sugar. Django here is a free man. You can’t treat him like all the other niggers around here, ‘cause he ain’t like all the other niggers around. You got that?” Confused, Bettina responds, “So—you want I’s to treat him like white folks, Big Daddy?” Big Daddy emphatically replies, “No! That’s not what I said,” leading Bettina to respond, “Then I don’t know what you want, Big Daddy.”¹²⁶

It is within this dialectic moment that the planter ideology of white supremacy is exposed as Big Daddy, dressed like Kentucky Fried Chicken’s Colonel Sanders, has his world view deconstructed in the form of a question by one young woman who he deems as his property. The scene invites the audience to laugh openly and hysterically at the absurdity of racism as another generic twist to make a slavery movie that is not about victimhood but triumph. By allowing the audience to laugh at the genteel, southern aristocrat and Old South mythology, Tarantino diminishes the reverence for beloved movies like *Gone with the Wind* and the romanticization of a period of intense racism. While white moviegoers may have feared blaxploitation films within the context of the outcomes of the riots in Detroit and Watts, as well as the growing popularity of the Black Panther Party,¹²⁷ moviegoers in December 2012 witnessing President Barack Obama

¹²⁵ Gates and Tarantino, “Tarantino ‘Unchained,’” 197.

¹²⁶ *Django Unchained*.

¹²⁷ Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., “‘Burn, Mandingo, Burn’: The Plantation South in Film, 1958-1978,” in *The South and Film*, ed. Warren French, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 1981: 111

being reelected allows African American and white film viewers to indulge in the film's comedic and even violent scenes that happen at the expense of the white people. Furthermore, *Django Unchained* is also more easily enjoyed by white audiences in addition to black audiences because it is about an exceptional African American who takes on the role of killing on the white people in the movie as opposed to an entire community rising up against the white power structure. So while movies like Herbert Biberman's *Slaves* (1969) were regarded as ones that "imposed a 1960s social consciousness on an 1850s setting in an explicitly liberal moral and political statement," Tarantino's comedic 21st century mindset imposed on the film represents a more popularly held belief that racism is morally wrong which makes the scene as funny as it is political.¹²⁸

Perhaps the most noteworthy comedic moment from the film is when Big Daddy and the "Bag Heads" set out on horseback to start a raid in order to lynch Django and Shultz. Tarantino cares enough about historical accuracy to not have the mob wear Ku Klux Klan attire; instead, they wear simple bags over their heads with holes cut out for the eyes. The first time the audience sees the mob is an epic and operatic moment complete with shrilling music as they come down from a hilltop like a flood with torches and nearly terrifying looking bags on their heads. The moment is akin to the climax of *The Birth of a Nation* when the Klan dressed in knightly regalia rushes toward the camera and black subjugation and the purity of the white race. A hundred years later, this scene is appalling and overtly racist, but the original audiences cheered for the Klansmen as well as "duck and scream" when they thought the image was coming toward them.¹²⁹ After the Bag Heads make their way down the hill, the film cuts to Big Daddy giving a speech about the intentions of the mob—something D.W. Griffith obviously

¹²⁸ Campbell., "Burn, Mandingo, Burn," 111.

¹²⁹ Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time,'* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2007: 25.

could not capture during the silent film era—and Tarantino takes advantage of the moment to comically answer the question: Did they ever have any problems seeing with those ridiculous masks?

The irony is that Griffith's film was an attempt to make an absolute, matter-of-factly historical account with *Birth of a Nation*. President Woodrow Wilson, who is even cited in the movie, remarked, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."¹³⁰ Robert Armour writes that Griffith was actually attempting to tell a "factual" story with "documentary effects" to the point that he even tried to recreate historical moments and famous paintings on the screen in order to create a sense of "realism."¹³¹ In truth, however, *Birth of a Nation* was groundbreaking on many levels for American cinema in the early 20th century. While Europe already has a number of "European 'historical-spectacle' films," American filmmakers were far behind in terms of making movies of that grandeur until *Birth of a Nation*.¹³² Not only was it the first generic type of its kind in America, it also changed the way movies were viewed and regarded by both high and low culture. Melvyn Stokes notes that before *Birth of a Nation*, "films were screened in vaudeville theaters, music halls, opera houses, cafes, storefronts, department stores, local fairs and schools" on single reels commonly referred to as nickelodeons and were typically viewed by immigrants and lower classes.¹³³ Unfortunately, the film is responsible for shaping the modern movie going experience, as Stokes points out, by creating a "large and socially heterogeneous audience" due to its large scale and ability to wildly

¹³⁰ Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 111.

¹³¹ Robert A. Armour, "History Written in Jagged Lightning: Realistic South vs. Romantic South in *The Birth of a Nation*," in *The South and Film*, ed. Warren French, (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press), 1981: 15.

¹³² Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 78.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 113.

entertain viewers, the fact that it introduced Americans to film as a spectacle, its relevance, and even its campaigning and advertisements.¹³⁴

In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Tarantino says, “Yeah, you have to understand, I’m obsessed with *The Birth of a Nation* and its making . . . it gave rebirth to the Klan.”¹³⁵ As a matter of fact, Tarantino is correct. Griffith’s movie had so much influence on the Klan and its new recruits that they incorporated the white knight costumes and burning crosses into their appearances. The adoption of the film’s costumes became notoriously used throughout the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras and remains the quintessential symbols of Klan attire and activity.¹³⁶ So while Griffith was trying to make a historically accurate film, he took artistic liberties in things like the costume designs for the Klan, which though historically unfaithful have ironically been the most iconic aspect of the white supremacist organization. Furthermore, Tarantino, who loosely abandoned historical truth, uses a proto-Klan group in his film while also mocking the valiant knights of Griffith’s film.

Tarantino’s raiders congregate on the hill site and go over their plan for the raid when Big Daddy puts his bag back on and cries out, “Hold on—I’m fuckin’ with my eye holes. Shit, I just made it worse.” Next, a fellow rider takes off his bag revealing famous comedian, Jonah Hill, reassuring the audience the scene as laughable and parodic. Suddenly, the scene becomes less like a Sergio Leone Western and something more akin to Mel Brooks’ satirical take on the Western genre, *Blazing Saddles* (1974). The masked raiders in *Django Unchained* yell “I can’t see fuckin’ shit out of this thing! What about you Robert, can you see?” With the comedic voice of a Don Knotts-like southern, caricature, Robert responds, “Not too good. The comedy climaxes when one rider exclaims, “I watched my wife work all day getting’ thirty bags together for you

¹³⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹³⁵ Gates and Tarantino, “Tarantino ‘Unchained,’” 187.

¹³⁶ Stokes, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 231-235.

ungrateful sons-a-bitches . . . From now on, don't ask me or mine for nothin'." Finally, the allusion to *Birth of a Nation* becomes clear when a Bag Head acts as the voice of reason, "how about no bags this time, but next time—we go full regalia?"¹³⁷ The film thus makes the racist group of raiders out to be a bunch of laughable and impotent simpletons as opposed to the valiant knights depicted in *Birth of a Nation*.

But Tarantino is not the first director to approach a lynching from a comedic angle. In fact, he is not even the first to use classic film allusions in order to construct such a scene. The Coen Brothers' 2001 film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, is another postmodern film that serves as a commentary of Hollywood's past and relies on pastiche and parody to tell its story. In his essay, "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" Douglas McFarland explains how the "scandalous incongruity" of the film's scene is both "ultimately unsettling as it is liberating" using Kierkegaard and Henri Bergson's concepts of the mechanical, the contradictory, and the absurd.¹³⁸ Like *Django Unchained*, McFarland notes that that Coen Brothers' film "immediately confronts its knowledgeable audience with a generic incongruity" with their movie about the Depression era that plays on the films of Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Busby Berkeley's *Gold Diggers of 1935*, and William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) along heavy allusions to *The Odyssey* and other signifiers and symbols of popular culture.¹³⁹ The generic incongruities create what McFarland calls an "indecorous hybrid" that provides the "ongoing dynamic of the film," the result of which is a "self-consciously

¹³⁷ *Django Unchained*.

¹³⁸ Douglas McFarland, "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" in *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Barton Palmer, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky), 2008: 41.

¹³⁹ McFarland, "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," 42.

contradictory artifact.”¹⁴⁰ The incongruity between “comic high jinks and social commentary” is best exemplified for McFarland in the lynching scene of the Coen Brothers’ film.

According to McFarland, the incongruities of the Klan scene in the Coen Brothers’ film challenges the audience to “move beyond the aesthetic pleasure of the film’s postmodern wit” as it moves beyond pastiche into “engaged reinvention of popular mythologies.”¹⁴¹ In *O Brother*, as well as in *Django Unchained*, “The rich array of allusions . . . cannot be separated from a historical context that elicits moral condemnation.”¹⁴² Referring to Jameson, McFarland explains that pastiche uses styles and allusions from the past, creating an “artistic and cultural form that has been emptied of any ethical perspective and ‘amputated of satiric impulse.’”¹⁴³ McFarland concludes that the “postmodern pleasure of pastiche is the pleasure of recognizing references, so that engaging a text becomes a game of identification.”¹⁴⁴ Consequently, McFarland posits that what the Coen Brothers do is “more sophisticated than satire” or pastiche and describes the scene as one that “relies on irreconcilable comic incongruities within that set of allusions.”¹⁴⁵ Finally, by using a treatment of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, in which he discusses the roles of the aesthete and the ethicist, McFarland asserts that the filmmakers’ role is that of the judge who “demands that the young, sophisticated aesthete confront the ironies of the human condition.”¹⁴⁶ A similar case can therefore be made for Tarantino and *Django Unchained*.

The Coen Brothers a wide range of allusions, including *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the king of the Delta blues, Robert Johnson, to create a Busby Berkeley inspired Klan rally and lynching site. The range of allusions and historicity of the scene makes the congruencies more

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴¹ McFarland, “Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*,” 47.

¹⁴² Ibid., 47.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

jarring within the context of the scene of a movie that is regarded almost purely as comedy, but Tarantino's scene is jarring in the context of the movie which has had funny moments within the context of a larger drama at play. But Tarantino's purpose for having the comedy and the violence work together to make a slave narrative that moves beyond the story for victimhood, which as mentioned earlier is a "downer" in Tarantino's mind. When asked by Charlie Rose what the movie is about overall, Tarantino said definitively, "True empowerment for the black male, and true empowerment for the black male at that time."¹⁴⁷ Aware of the history of representations of African American films being as Donald Bogles' pivotal title suggests, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Tarantino's film is attempt to add "Django" to that list of character types. His movie uses violence and other forms of resistance to demonstrate a slave mentality that goes beyond an Uncle Tom or Sambo. He uses comedy to look at the absurdity of racism at its most basic level to show the ironies of a racist institution and look back at it laughing as the film moves forward to the Candie Land plantation.

A "Southern" Film

Despite the film being aesthetically like a Western, Tarantino still considers the film as his "Southern" movie.¹⁴⁸ It follows that Tarantino feels the need to make a regional distinction clear. Title cards affirm this as the movie opens up with "Somewhere in Texas" as slaves in chains wander through the woods led by two older white men. In the beginning of the film, the place is not entirely important, thus the lack of specificity. Likewise, Django himself is seen as virtually unimportant as the viewer witnesses an African American man without freedom

¹⁴⁷ Charlie Rose and Quentin Tarantino. "Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose – Django Unchained Part 1," *YouTube* video, 15:01, Dec. 21, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYc> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Williams, "The 'Django Unchained' interview with Quentin Tarantino."

standing fourth in line of a row of slaves after having been purchased at an auction. Later, when Django has joined Shultz and the two go to Big Daddy's, the dialogue and signs from buildings signify that they are in Tennessee. But when the two journey into the Deep South, the title card becomes more apparent, more dramatic, and more specific as the word "MISSISSIPPI" takes up the entire screen and passes by so that the audience can read it slowly as if they were recalling the classic cadence of the spelling.

Once the duo meets Calvin Candie, the tone of the movie changes and becomes less funny and more brutal. After Candie agrees to have them over to discuss the business of "Mandingo fighting" and purchasing of a fighter, they all journey back to Candie Land, and as the film becomes more violent, the fact that they are in the South becomes more rooted in allusion. For example, when they arrive at the plantation house, Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson) the house slave, greets them and is appalled that Django is on a horse and even gets to sleep inside the big house. He is outraged once again when Candie asks him to "clean up" Broomhilda who is in a hot box as punishment for attempting to run away. Stephen tries to defy Candie because he believes she ought to be punished, yet Candie comes back with, "southern hospitality dictates I make her available" to Shultz. Scenes later, when Django and Shultz's pretenses for being at Candie Land are exposed, Candie wants one last dig at Shultz, forcing him to shake his hand to finish the business transaction—recalling another moment in *Birth of a Nation* when "Little Colonel" refuses to shake hands with Lynch. In Griffith's film, "Little Colonel" is a Confederate hero whose refusal to shake the hands of the "mulatto" character Lynch (George Siegmann in blackface), caused American audiences in 1915 to applaud.¹⁴⁹ The moment in Tarantino's film reverses the role, as the German bounty hunter who is intolerant of the slave owner who had one of his runaway slaves murdered by a pack of dogs. And once again, Candie appeals to his region

¹⁴⁹ Stokes, *D.W. Griffiths The Birth of a Nation*, 24-25.

stating most specifically, “Nevertheless, here in Chickasaw County, a deal ain’t done ‘till the two parties have shook hands” as he taunts the “nigger-loving German” who does not seem to understand or take seriously the customs of Candie’s South that he has created and isolated for himself on his plantation.

Tarantino does not attempt to capture an authentic representation of South. The appeal to genre types is an attempt to use other cultural reproductions like those of Spaghetti Westerns and blaxploitation cinema to create Tarantino’s South. At the same time, however, much of the film was shot on location in New Orleans and at actual plantation sites. But as the film goes deeper into the south and into Candie Land, the dialogue begins to include terms like “southern hospitality” and “southern belle.” Two hours into the epic, the construction of a “South” becomes more significant at the final plantation site that is Candie Land. Ironically named after a children’s board game, Candie Land is run by a “childlike emperor” modeled after Louis XIV who has more power than he knows what to do with due to an inheritance.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, he indulges in his power and grossly abuses his privilege. In short, the southernness of the movie is not so consistently referenced until Candie Land which serves as the ultimate symbol of what is “southern” in the film. Consequently, the South of *Django Unchained* is Calvin Candie’s.

The largest and only landmark of Candie’s South is the big house itself. Its large columns, house hands, and belle, Lara Lee Candie-Fitzwilly serve as all familiar signifiers of the South in film, most notable *Gone with the Wind*. But the plantation also works on an allegorical level. Earlier in the film, Shultz explains to Django his wife’s German name comes from the most famous Germanic folk tale of a woman named Broomhilda trapped in a castle guarded by a dragon. It follows that Candie is the embodiment of dragon from the Germanic tale.

¹⁵⁰ “Charlie Rose and Quentin Tarantino. “Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose – Django Unchained Part 1,” *YouTube* video, 15:01, Dec. 21, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYc> accessed Nov. 18, 2014.

Furthermore, Candie himself is a Francophile who is likens himself to the French aristocracy as if it were to validate his wealth and position himself among the European elite. Tarantino's view of the South works simultaneously with discussions of cultural reproductions of the South as well as the global South and creates a postsouthern narrative.

In his pivotal text *Inventing Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling writes, "the first step of the postmodern critic of southern literature is to question the natural authority of the foundation term: *southern*."¹⁵¹ Kreyling claims that the term "southern" has been "used so much, been invested with so much meaning, that we can no longer distinguish between what if anything is inherent and what other interests have attached over time."¹⁵² Applying Jameson, Kreyling argues, "'southern' has fallen victim to the inexorable critical-economic process of commodification" and that though "history still exists . . . we now acknowledge that we know it through a system of representations rather than in an unmediated, direct way."¹⁵³ In an essay titled "Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema," Jay Watson writes that the "postsouthern South is thus one that appears to rest on no 'real' or reliable foundation of cultural, social, political, economic or historical distinctiveness, only on an ever-proliferating series of representations and commodifications of 'southernness.'"¹⁵⁴ By naming of the plantation after a popular board game, emphasizing the *Gone with the Wind* style staircase, and simultaneously referencing the Germanic folktale, Tarantino demonstrates the commodification of the South and southern culture and eliminates the myth of its historical and cultural distinctiveness.

¹⁵¹ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 1998: 154.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁵⁴ Jay Watson, "Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema: Three Contemporary Films," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, (Athens, GA: University Press of Georgia), 2011: 219.

Tarantino's participation in the continuation of the "ever-proliferating series of representations" is a self-reflexive one that clearly does not aim to celebrate the South. To make this clearer, Tarantino does not only cleverly create a postmodern and postsouthern depiction of the region whose populace still commemorates its mythology and romanticized past. Despising the myth of the Old South and everything that it stands for, Tarantino destroys all of the signifiers that come with it. For example, when Django shoots the southern belle she goes flying out of the frame as the audience laughs and celebrates the passing of the archetype. And at the grand finale, Django blows up the large plantation house as Stephen yells, "There will always be a Candie Land."¹⁵⁵ If nostalgic plantation narratives emerge about the passing of the Old South, audiences will have a hard time separating it from the representation of slavery in Tarantino's box office hit. Because *Django Unchained* is such a pop culture phenomenon, it will likely become one of the most common references for movies about the Antebellum South. Consequently, diminish the reverence for movies like *Gone with the Wind* which have long been considered classic antebellum period films. At best, *Django Unchained* may come to represent the characteristics of a quintessential "postsouthern" film because it confronts the racism of the era, the brutality of slavery, and deconstructs the myth of the Old South and the films that celebrate it.

¹⁵⁵ *Django Unchained*.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to prove that Quentin Tarantino is a filmmaker who represents postsouthern concerns in his work despite the fact that he likely has no knowledge of the scholarship concerning discussions of the South, its authenticity, cultural reproductions, and the concept of the “global South.” In *Pulp Fiction*, *Death Proof*, and *Django Unchained*, Tarantino presents southerners and the South in ways that connect them to representations throughout film history. The self-conscious decision to reference other southern films, genres, and character types illustrates Tarantino’s choice to avoid capturing authentic representations. Instead, Tarantino is primarily concerned with reusing and repurposing images of the South and its people for his films in a way that calls attention to the ways in which southern representation is invented and perpetuated in film. Tarantino uses homage, pastiche, and parody to reimagine and reinvent the region through cinema. His attempts are postsouthern because Tarantino films are not nostalgic for the Old South traditions or even old southern narratives. Furthermore, it is postsouthern because he never attempts to depict the South as a distinct place. Rather, Tarantino connects the South to other regions, other genres, and cultures.

In *Pulp Fiction*, the characters Zed and Maynard hijack the film during the “Gold Watch” sequence turning into a *Deliverance* and hixploitation inspired scene. The experience of watching the scene is jarring for moviegoers because of the suddenness of the change in genre. Prior to the scene, the movie has been clearly inspired by pulp crime novels, French New Wave, and film noir. When Butch is chased by Marsellus down a Los Angeles alley way, the two stumble into the “Mason-Dixie” pawn shop. The entrance of the show is covered with southern

iconography like Tennessee license plates and a Confederate flag. Finally, the man behind the counter says, “Take your foot off the nigger,” allowing the dialect and racial slur to reset the tone of the movie. Next, Zed shows up and the two take Marsellus into a room in the pawn shop’s basement where he is raped with a Confederate flag hanging above him.

The scene is reminiscent of hixploitation films which commonly featured backwoods hillbillies coming from out of the trees and sexually assaulting and murdering outsiders. In the 1970s, this particular sub-genre in the era of exploitation films served as a metaphor for the Vietnam War.¹⁵⁶ Tarantino repurposes them in his 1994 film in order to connect the violence in the movie to contemporary race problems in southern California. Tarantino’s film is released only a couple of years after Rodney King and L.A. Riots. By having Marsellus raped by a southerner in Los Angeles who is wearing a uniform, Tarantino is connected the historical portrayal of violence committed toward African Americans in the civil rights era to the contemporary problem of the Los Angeles Police Department and African Americans in southern California. All of this happens within an homage to the hixploitation era which itself was a metaphor for Vietnam. It follows that the scene in *Pulp Fiction* is a metaphor for contemporary problems of race. Finally, it is postsouthern because it suggests that the South is not distinct because of its treatment of African Americans. By connecting the South’s racial past to contemporary California, Tarantino begins to erase the idea of cultural distinctiveness in the South.

On the other hand, Tarantino’s *Death Proof* is a hybrid of exploitation films, road movies, and slasher films from the era of grindhouse cinema’s prime. The slasher in this instance is Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), who is called a southerner and “redneck lunatic bastard” by

¹⁵⁶ C. Scott Combs, “The Screen Kallikak: White Trash for White Guilt in Post-Vietnam American Film,” in *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970s*, ed. Andrew B. Leiter, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers), 2011: 107.

characters in the movie, though his actual regional origin is virtually unknown. Like the hillbilly rapists *Pulp Fiction*, Stuntman Mike's crimes are sexual in nature. In the movie, Stuntman Mike crashes his car into cars full of women in order to kill them for his sexual pleasure. Unlike the hillbillies in *Pulp Fiction*, however, Stuntman Mike does not embody typical characteristics of a "redneck lunatic bastard" from the exploitation era. First, he does not have an accent.

Additionally, he is not an openly racist character, like those in *Pulp Fiction*. In fact, Stuntman Mike's southern identity is forced upon him by the film's characters who mock Stuntman Mike for resembling the era of *Cannonball Run* and *B.J. and the Bear*.

While the movie does not indulge in southern stereotypes, the film remains the only one of Tarantino's movies that takes place entirely in the South. The film takes place in both Austin, Texas and Lebanon, Tennessee. Each place is depicted as a southern town geographically, but the film does not attempt to emphasize any cultural distinctiveness. The two groups of women are racially and geographically diverse, and the second group in particular is a group of women from the movie industry shooting on location in the small, Tennessee town. But while in Tennessee, they score a copy of *Vogue Italia* at a small convenient store and borrow a guy's *Vanishing Point* Challenger, connecting the South to Hollywood filmmakers, b-movie classics, and the European fashion scene. It follows that the South in *Death Proof* is like no other horror film set in the South. Its slash is not a classic hillbilly but someone who also used to work in Hollywood and fails to exhibit traditional, southern stereotypes. Additionally, Tarantino's homage set in the South does not have a Final Girl. Instead, the film has three Final Girls who survive and kill the slasher without the intervention of a male savior or by compromising their femininity. Finally, unlike most horror films, one African American woman, a woman with Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban heritage, and another from New Zealand make up the three Final

Girls as opposed to the typical, singular, and often white Final Girl. These “outsiders” from Hollywood are able to survive in *Death Proof*'s South because they do not struggle to adapt to the environment due to its lack of backward peculiarities or negative distinctiveness commonly found in other genre films set in the region.

Tarantino's most recent film, *Django Unchained*, is a southern epic filmed in the style of a Spaghetti Western in the spirit of blaxpotation cinema. The film proved to be both Tarantino's most financially successful movie as well as his most controversial because of his depiction of slavery in the style of a buddy-adventure film. While constructing the film with a combination of genres takes away from the historical and the factual aspects of American slavery, the postmodern aesthetic allows Tarantino to break new ground with his contribution to discussion of slavery and cinema. By reintroducing surreal Spaghetti Western violence along with empowering an African American man in the style of blaxpotation, Django becomes a new folkloric superhero who physically destroys and blows up romanticized symbols of the Old South, namely, the plantation owner, the southern belle, the plantation house itself. In doing so, the moments serve as a commentary of film history. Rather than celebrate or mourn the loss of the Antebellum South's way of life, Tarantino aims to depict a more honest film that demonstrates the reality of the racism and brutality of the peculiar institution that is absent from iconic Hollywood films like *Gone with the Wind*, which is made possible through its application of genres.

Additionally, Tarantino uses humor to mock films like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which was such a success that it directly influenced the resurgence of Ku Klux Klan not only in the South but in the United States as a whole.¹⁵⁷ The humorous Bag Head scene featuring

¹⁵⁷ Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time,'* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2007: 231-235.

raiders with bags covering their faces with poorly cut eye holes transforms the movie in the satirical and parodic style of Mel Brooks and the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. The movie reimagines the masked vigilantes of the silent film era sensation, *Birth of a Nation*, and delivers some of his most comedic dialogue to date in an attempt to reinterpret film history. To be sure, modern audiences may no longer be able to see clips of *Birth of a Nation* or other footage of Klansmen in the media without wondering how they could see or imagining their voices as similar to the impotent simpletons in *Django Unchained*.

Furthermore, the film also exhibits postsouthern qualities like the aforementioned movies. According to Jay Watson, the “postsouthern South is thus one that appears to rest on no ‘real’ or reliable foundation of cultural, social, political, economic or historical distinctiveness, only on an ever-proliferating series of representations and commodifications of ‘southernness.’”¹⁵⁸ To be sure, Tarantino’s film exhibits all of these characteristics. The South’s foundation in *Django Unchained* does not rest in a “‘real or reliable foundation” but primarily previous representations of the region, which Tarantino violently disrupts through the character, Django. Additionally, he names the plantation after the popular children’s board game, Candie Land, owned by a Louis XIV character type and Francophile who cannot even speak the language. The reproduction of southernness and other pop culture signifiers inserted into the narrative create a model for postsouthern cinema.

If the aim for *Django Unchained* and the application of postsouthern attitudes is to reinterpret southern history for media consumers, then Tarantino is succeeding. In fact, the movie is already being referenced in pop culture in places such as Chris Rock’s film *Top Five* (2014) and rapper Kendrick Lamar’s album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015), demonstrating the films

¹⁵⁸ Jay Watson, “Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema: Three Contemporary Films,” in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, (Athens, GA: University Press of Georgia), 2011: 219.

influence and significance in American culture. At best, the film will hold its spot as a cultural reference and influence for new ways to explore and discuss race in America through art in the 21st century. At best, the film will begin to serve as a popular reference for depictions of the Antebellum South in film and carry more weight in than movies like *Gone with the Wind* in the eyes of the public for its attempt to confront the racism of the era, brutality of slavery, and agency of African Americans in slave narratives.

Though he was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Tarantino does not consider himself a southern filmmaker. Similarly, he is more than likely unaware of discussions of postsouthern cinema. Regardless, his filmography demonstrates that he has been concerned about the South and southerners throughout his career. *True Romance* (1993) written by Tarantino by directed by Tony Scott features Alabama (Patricia Arquette) from Tallahassee, Florida who finds love in Detroit when she meets Clarence (Christian Slater). Furthermore, Clarence shares scenes with an apparition of Elvis. Like his other films, *Kill Bill* also features a couple of redneck rapists who rape The Bride while she is in a coma, and she has her revenge on both. And *Inglourious Basterds* stars Brad Pitt as the southern lieutenant who leads a platoon of Jewish-American soldiers through Nazi-occupied France. No matter the genre, no matter the setting, Tarantino cannot help but to incorporate the region and its inhabitants. And he is certainly approaching the region in ways that are unique to film history and among other filmmakers of his generation.

Critically acclaimed writer and director Paul Thomas Anderson has made some of the most recent beloved films such as *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and his adaptation of Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2014). Each of his films takes place and are concerned with southern California. In fact, Anderson's body of work serves as a change over time narrative that covers a variety of stories about the region. His characters

range from a turn of the century oil tycoon, a fictive family of porn stars in the Valley, an Altman-eque melodrama featuring multiple characters in a series of interrelated stories.

Anderson's films characterize the West as a site for the pursuit of the American dream and create films that demonstrate the social, political, and cultural consequences of those pursuits throughout his filmography. Anderson's films, like the Coen Brothers', are rooted firmly in their geographical place, which may be of interest to Douglas Powell and other critical regionalists.

In his film *Magnolia* (1999), Anderson creates one large epic about a multitude of characters in different sub plots who are connected by their proximity in the Valley. The film abandons the limits of realism by including a sequence in which all the characters are in separate spaces while simultaneously singing along to Aimee Mann's "Wise Up." The moment displays an emotional interconnectedness among the characters and is meant to affect the audience in a way in which they also feel connected to at least one, if not all, of the characters. Anderson pushes the connectivity even further in the film's climax when it rains frogs through the area. The divine intervention is a shared experience by people who are not sharing scenes together, while in some instances it brings characters into each other's narratives. However, the Anderson's highly stylized dramas fails to go beyond the local in terms of the images presented on the screen, unlike a film like *Pulp Fiction* which is a story about southern California but adopts and reflects an assemblage of places, regions, and cultures in one unified piece in contrast to the multitude of characters and stories in *Magnolia* which aim to reflect a singular place. Conversely, Tarantino is not limited to the representation or interconnection of a particular place but multiple places through his aesthetic, assemblage of genres, and diverse casts.

On the other hand, Alexander Payne's dramatic comedies often take place in his native state, Nebraska, and the Mid-West. One of his earliest hits, *About Schmidt* (2002), features a

widower who travels from Omaha to Colorado through the region with the intention of stopping his daughter's marriage. Along the way, he stops by his childhood home and learns that it has been turned into a tire store, symbolizing movement and constant change. Each of the sites Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) visits as he travels out West trouble the nostalgic, aging man who realizes all that he loves is passing. Meanwhile, however, Schmidt is writing a series of letters to an African child whom he sponsors about the changing landscape and his voyage on the road. Moreover, the movie ends with Schmidt receiving a letter from a nun on behalf of the child stating how much he has appreciated the letters, resolving an existential crisis as he realizes his connection and impact on the life of someone outside of his region and country.

Payne's appeal to realism over Anderson or Tarantino's style makes it easier to see the idea of interconnectedness. And like Tarantino, Payne combines comedy, drama, and road movies in order to tell his story. But unlike Tarantino's depictions of region, the narrative is still one of nostalgia for place and a story change over time, which is an aspect that never comes up in Tarantino's work, especially when dealing with the South. Tarantino's South is unique because it is never mournful and is never nostalgic. While Payne's film features a man overcoming his loss and nostalgia by discovering his connection to people outside of his native Nebraska, Tarantino's characters' concerns are less existential and are larger than a particular person's problems. Furthermore, unlike Tarantino, Payne's films are primarily about white characters, for white people, and starring nearly all white casts.

Lastly, Richard Linklater is another contemporary of Tarantino's who places an emphasis on region, particularly with his native Texas. Linklater's break-out indie sensation, *Slacker* (1991), primarily follows young adults around Austin, Texas in real time as a day-in-the-life narrative without actively attempting to construct southernness. Similarly, *Dazed and Confused*

(1993), features high school kids on the first day of summer of 1976 in a small Texas town, but also refrains from actively constructing an exclusively southern narrative. Unlike these two, *Bernie* (2012) is the true story of a man in Carthage, Texas who murders an older woman with whom he had a peculiar relationship. Linklater combines fiction with documentary filmmaking by including interviews of actual Carthage citizens in the movie in a series of talking heads featured throughout the movie. One talking head features an older man who breaks down the state of Texas into categories, presenting a strict regionalism and sub-regional identifications. Though the three are different, they all represent a clear love and appreciation for his native state. *Slacker* was filmed to capture life as it was in Austin in the early '90s, while *Dazed and Confused* appears to be a nostalgic for Linklater's childhood era, and *Bernie* clarifies once and for all how Texas ought to be broken down and categorized.

Linklater's most recent and ambitious project, *Boyhood* (2014), follows a boy and his family a period of twelve years. Unlike any other film, the movie was also filmed over a twelve year period to capture how the actors age. What Linklater also does is capture how Texas changes over time. Though the film proves to be one of the most interesting experiments in modern filmmaking, it contributes little for regional studies. On one hand, it demonstrates that the new technology like iPhones allow people to be connect at any time and transforming the ideas of space and place on virtual terms. On the other, the technology is only used in the film for people across Texas to communicate with each other, making it rooted in one particular place, and limiting its connections on the screen to exclusively to that state. Furthermore, the movie reinvents nostalgic storytelling by documenting a twelve year period of time, forcing the audience to recall how old they were and where they were as the years shift. Although it is a

unique film and may present some interesting ways of revisiting older ways of studying region, it has limitations foreign to Tarantino's work.

The point of this thesis is not to say that Tarantino is the best American filmmaker working today. This thesis simply argues that the complexity involved in Tarantino's films allow people from multiple disciplines to analyze and critique his work as it concerns the South. While many approach his films in terms of his depiction of women or African Americans, few examine his perpetual use of southerners. In fact, in December 2015, his eighth feature, *The Hateful Eight*, will feature a former Confederate named General Sandy Smithers (Bruce Dern). As Tarantino continues to make films, he also continues his vision of the South. According to Quentin Tarantino's films, the South is an important place not because of its social, cultural, or political distinctions, but the ability to connect it to other places, genres, and film history.

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