

Breaking, Making, and Killing Time in Pulp Fiction

Kevin Howley, DePauw University, USA

In an essay written in 1964 titled "Are Movies Going to Pieces?" Pauline Kael laments what she calls the "creeping Marienbadism" of contemporary cinema. With characteristic wit and pointed prose, Kael laments the death of classical narrative and bemoans the inability of filmmakers and moviegoers alike to fully appreciate the importance of narrative cohesion to cinematic storytelling. Rather, Kael suggests, directors and audiences alike increasingly prefer style to substance and consistently conflate technical innovation with aesthetic invention. "It has become easy," Kael argued, "especially for those who consider time a problem and a great theme, to believe that fast editing, out of normal sequence, is somehow more cinematic than consecutively told story" (Kael, 1966: 348). Nearly forty years after this essay first appeared, these same concerns continue to resonate with filmmakers, audiences, and critics (Buckland, 1998; Cowie, 1998; Gaines, 1992).

The influence of television on film form figures prominently in these debates. For Kael, it is television's disjunctive nature, its endless stream of images and the confused often contradictory juxtaposition of entertainment programming, news reports, sporting events, and commercial messages -- what Raymond Williams succinctly described as "flow" -- that is largely responsible for the ascendancy of fractured storytelling. (Williams, 1975) Kael concludes "The old staples of entertainment -- inoffensive genres like the adventure story or the musical or the ghost story or the detective story -- are no longer commercially safe for moviemakers, and it may be that audiences don't have much more than a television span of attention left." (Kael, 1966: 345) Significantly, Kael's essay appeared almost a quarter century before the remote control device (RCD) gave way to zipping, zapping, grazing and other viewing habits associated with television's expanded multichannel universe (Walker and Bellamy, 1993).

Here, the figure of the "couch potato" -- whose attention deficit is directly attributable to television viewing -- is both cause and effect of the feature film's abandonment of classical narrative. Restless and bored with conventional narrative structure and unable to attend to the logic of temporal causality, audiences seek sensation, not story. As a result, so the argument goes, filmmakers cater to the public's lazy eyes, and equally lazy minds, with films that eschew linear narratives, avoid the complexities of character development, and rely primarily on spectacle. Diverse films such as *Speed*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Lost Highway*, *The English Patient*, *Run Lola Run*, *Armageddon* and *The Matrix* exemplify a filmic style and aesthetic sensibility that has been dubbed "post-classical" filmmaking.

Similarly critics argue that the hand-held camera and staccato-style editing associated with music television played a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic sensibilities of both popular audiences and young filmmakers who came of age watching the likes of Madonna strike a pose and Michael Jackson beat it (Turan, 1984). To be sure, there is an element of truth in such claims. The action adventure film, for instance, makes extensive use of special effects

and quick cuts in ways that are remarkably similar to music video -- a far cry indeed from the orchestrated and operatic violence Francis Ford Coppola used to great effect in the *Godfather* films. Moreover, aspiring young filmmakers cut their teeth in advertising and music videos -- two forms that benefit from the economy of style offered by abstraction, special effects, and rapid montage -- before moving on to feature films. The reverse holds true as well. Established filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and John Landis, representatives of a generation of filmmakers with formal academic training in film production and film history, work in music television from time to time.

From a historical perspective, however, music television is but one source of stylistic innovation associated with post-classical style. The development of light-weight film equipment, for instance, has shaped the "look" of movies and television alike. Embracing the new technologies, members of various "film schools" including the French New Wave, cinema verite, and direct cinema each developed distinctive visual styles. Despite dissimilar aesthetic and political orientations, these independent filmmakers nonetheless shared an affinity for location shooting, hand-held camera, and unconventional editing that are increasingly common in Hollywood films, television dramas, advertisements and, of course, music video. In sum music television, technological innovations, as well as European art cinema and disparate independent filmmaking traditions have and continue to exert considerable influence on the visual grammar and style of contemporary American cinema.

Thus, while claims of television's (detrimental) impact on classical narrative have merit, they are inadequate and ultimately unconvincing. On one hand, television's "effects" on contemporary story telling in general, and filmmaking in particular, are far more complex than these observations suggest. Indeed, this critique obscures film's historical relationship to the nascent television industry; the Hollywood studio system played a decisive role in shaping early television form and content (Anderson, 1994). On the other hand, so-called fractured storytelling is not synonymous with an abandonment of narrative structure. Jean-Luc Godard's pithy rejoinder to Aristotelian poetics -- that every film has a beginning, a middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order -- makes this point quite clear. Furthermore, the perceived "newness" of nonlinear narrative is indicative of a related tendency to misread or misinterpret the development of narrative structure and story telling techniques in contemporary cinema (Altman, 1989). For instance, Tom Gunning's work on early cinema and the "cinema of attractions" provides ample evidence of cultural antecedents to the contemporary emphasis on visual spectacle over narrative structure and coherence (Gunning, 1990).

Like reports of Mark Twain's premature demise, then, news of the death of classical narrative is greatly exaggerated (Thompson, 1999). Rather, like generic conventions -- the Western's climactic showdown, film noir's mysterious femme fatale, or the horror film's monstrous "other" -- story structure itself, including the treatment of narrative and temporal relations is undergoing some (radical, perhaps) reinterpretation. This reworking of story causality and linear narrative does not, however, represent a rejection of the principles of classical filmmaking; indeed flashbacks and narrative ellipses are common storytelling devices in classical filmmaking. Rather than rejecting the principles of Hollywood classicism, the narrative and stylistic innovations prevalent in contemporary American movies constitute what film historian David Bordwell calls "intensified continuity" (Bordwell, 2002). As he argues "In representing space, time, and narrative relations (such as causal connections and parallels) today's films generally adhere to the principles of classical filmmaking." (Bordwell, 2002: 16) These observations are in keeping with recent work in film studies, which

highlights the contingent, dynamic, and evolutionary nature of generic categories and cinematic conventions (Altman, 1999).

Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avery's script for *Pulp Fiction* is an exemplar in this regard. As the screenplay's subtitle, "Three stories... About one story," suggests, Tarantino and Avery are interested in exploring the intersections and interpenetrations between people, places, and actions: precisely those ingredients that Pauline Kael suggests are the "stuff" of movies (Kael, 1966: 351). In this essay, I want to suggest that *Pulp Fiction*'s emphasis on story and story telling indicates a discernable interest in time or, more precisely, different aspects of time in cinema. With its fractured narrative structure, for example, *Pulp Fiction* exploits film's unrivaled facility for temporal construction and (re)ordering. As Ralph Stephenson and J. R. Debrix observe "the cinema can repeat, prolong, abbreviate, or reverse the events on the screen. Past, present, and future time can be mixed in any order. A film breaks up the continuity of time in the real world, and out of the physical time of reality creates an abstract *film time*." (Stephenson and Debrix, 1976: 124) *Pulp Fiction* explores this abstract film time in a provocative, yet accessible and thoroughly enjoyable fashion.

In a related vein, *Pulp Fiction* addresses the relationship between popular culture, especially the cinema, and collective memory. Here, then, *Pulp Fiction*'s pop culture references and filmic allusions -- which, by turn, either enthrall or enrage critics -- are much more than "a sheer cinematic spectacle, a fun-house experience of vibrant sights and sounds" (Polan, 2000: 7). Rather, *Pulp Fiction* taps into the storehouse of collective memory that is popular culture, and in so doing, illuminates the complex and contradictory relationship between movies and memory. As cultural historian George Lipsitz observes, "Popular culture has played an important role in creating this crisis of memory, but it has also been one of the main vehicles for the expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past." (Lipsitz, 1990: 12) Throughout *Pulp Fiction* the artifacts of popular culture figure prominently in marking the passage of time and serve as a touchstone for the individual and collective memory of its lead characters.

With this in mind, I submit that both physical time and cinematic time operate not only as a subtext, but assume a crucial, even decisive thematic role throughout *Pulp Fiction*. What follows, then, is a thematic and analytical evaluation of temporal sequencing and cinematic time in *Pulp Fiction*. The first section challenges analyses which suggest that *Pulp Fiction* subverts traditional linear structure through its use of multiple, interrelated story lines (Smith, 1999). Drawing on Kristen Thompson's work on Hollywood storytelling, I emphasize *Pulp Fiction*'s adherence to, and reliance upon, classical narrative structure and devices. Following this, I turn my attention to the film's thematic concern with the passage of time in the lives and experiences of its main characters. Throughout, I underscore how this central thematic is bound up in classical narrative techniques. The final section considers *Pulp Fiction*'s treatment of cinematic time and, by extension, the unique relationship between movies, popular culture, and collective memory.

Breaking Time

"Any time of the day is a good time for pie" -- Fabienne.

When, in 1994, *Pulp Fiction* was released to widespread critical acclaim -- the film won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival -- audiences and reviewers alike took note of, and in some cases took great pleasure in, the film's skillful manipulation of narrative

structure. For the most part, however, critics favored thematic interpretation over narrative analysis of the film. Not surprisingly, given Quentin Tarantino's keen appreciation for pop culture iconography and his penchant for intertextuality, some critics dismissed *Pulp Fiction* as so much postmodern posturing: a film so hip and self-conscious as to be little more than an exercise in nihilism. (Romney, 1994) Others, likening it to the tough guy films of the late 1940s and 1950s focused on *Pulp Fiction's* violent excess and its obsessive concern with a crisis of masculine identity (Indiana, 1995; Willis, 1995). In this vein, the film's blatant homophobia, its adolescent attitude toward women, and its thinly veiled racism have been, quite rightfully, the subject of ruthless criticism (hooks, 1995; Kimball, 1997). This essay does not take issue with these readings so much as it offers a different interpretation of *Pulp Fiction* informed by narrative analysis.

Although screenwriters often follow the three act narrative structure championed by Syd Fields in his "industry standard" text *Screenplay*, the tripartite formulation does not hold up very well either in practice or under critical scrutiny (Fields, 1984). Employing an inductive method of narrative analysis, Kristin Thompson suggests a four-part invention that offers a more robust model for understanding how Hollywood films are structured and how they operate (Thompson, 1999). This model consists of: 1) the set up; 2) complicating action; 3) development; and 4) a climax, followed by an epilogue (Thompson, 1999: 28). Significantly, this formulation is neither fixed nor rigidly determined; its flexibility invites variation and affords filmmakers an opportunity to create individual and distinctive works within a hierarchical and disciplined regime of production: the hallmark of classical Hollywood cinema (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 1985). Despite its playful, but by no means inconsequential disregard for narrative chronology, *Pulp Fiction* fits Thompson's four-part structure quite well.

The film's prologue, which includes the opening scene in which Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) contemplate holding up the diner and concludes with Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) rubbing out a couple of would-be criminals, provides the set up for *Pulp Fiction*. Typically, the set up establishes an initial situation and provides expository information related to characters and their relationships to one another. In addition, the set up either establishes the main characters' goals or provides the viewer with enough background information to understand the circumstances under which the film's protagonists define these goals. Likewise character traits are established and clearly defined in these opening scenes. Finally, the set up is important inasmuch as it "sets the tone" for the entire film.

The conversation between Pumpkin and Honey Bunny is emblematic of the stance Tarantino is taking toward his story and his audience. At first, the viewer seems privy to a quiet conversation between a young couple whose thoughts, quirks, and mannerisms are well known to each other. They appear to be bickering, albeit in a playful, teasing tone that indicates shared affection. For anyone who has been in a long-term relationship, it is a familiar enough sounding conversation. Indeed, it is a conversation that this young couple has had before:

Honey Bunny: When you go on like this, you know what you sound like?

Pumpkin: I sound like a sensible fucking man, is what I sound like.

Honey Bunny: You sound like a duck. [Imitating a duck] Quack. Quack. Quack.

Pumpkin: Well take heart, 'cause you're never gonna hafta hear it again. Because since I'm never gonna do it again, you're never gonna hafta hear me quack about how I'm never gonna do it again.

Pumpkin is intent on changing his ways, or so it seems. The two are small time crooks: career criminals who stick up liquor stores, dry cleaners, and gas stations. He has come to realize that this particular line of work is far too dangerous. At some point, someone is going to get killed, and Pumpkin has decided he doesn't want to take that risk anymore. Honey Bunny's incredulous response, "Well, what else is there, day jobs?" is vintage Tarantino.

Designed to get a laugh, this line of dialogue underscores the banality of a life of crime that the film sets out to explore. When audiences see a caper film, their expectations consist of witnessing a group of hardened criminals discussing the intricate details of some fabulous scheme for a "big score," not a couple of love birds discussing the benefits of robbing a diner, where they will catch patrons "with their pants down" -- an allusion to Vincent Vega's poorly-timed bowel movements -- let alone a couple of hit men talking about fast food, television sitcoms, or the gender politics of foot massage. Equally important, this conversation foreshadows Jules' decision to quit his job as a hired assassin, a decision that is finalized in the film's epilogue, which takes place in the very same diner and at precisely the same moment when Pumpkin and Honey Bunny are discussing their own futures.

Significantly, *Pulp Fiction* employs various devices like dialogue and visual motifs throughout the set up that provide narrative clarity and unity along the lines associated with classical Hollywood cinema. Moreover, the dialogue in the coffee shop is precisely the sort of conversation that pervades *Pulp Fiction* and indicates that the film has much more to do with the mundane aspects of a life of crime than it does with the "glamour," "danger," and "intrigue" typical of thrillers or film noir (Tarantino, 1994). That is to say, *Pulp Fiction* deals with the unimportant or empty moments that more conventional crime stories, noirs and thrillers omit. And yet, this "small talk" is not inconsequential. Indeed, in keeping with classical narrative structure, this conversation establishes character and character relations early in the film and in a thoroughly entertaining and engaging fashion.

For instance, as they drive to work Vincent and Jules chatter away like any one in a car pool might. Vincent, recently returned from an extended stay in Amsterdam, describes what he calls "the little things": cultural differences that distinguish American culture from a more continental sensibility. This is early morning, drive time chitchat, pure and simple. And yet it is littered with allusions to crime and criminal activities like the legal status of hashish or regulations governing police search and seizure. The quotidian "Royale with Cheese" exchange ends abruptly with a cut to a low angle shot from within the trunk of their car. As the two arm themselves for a hit, Jules expresses his concern over their lack of firepower. The motif of professionalism that pervades the film, and that is first evident in the coffee shop conversation when Pumpkin and Honey Bunny compliment one another for their innovative stick up technique, is picked up and extended throughout this scene.

On their way to the apartment, where they are to collect a briefcase for their boss, Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), we get our first inkling of the line of action that will propel the story forward. Vincent has been asked to take care of Marsellus' wife, Mia, while he is out of town

for the weekend. Consummate professional that he is, Jules asks if by "take care of her," Vincent is supposed to rub her out. Vincent assures his partner that he is merely supposed to take her out for the evening and show her a good time. Jules is wary. (In a line of dialogue from the screenplay that did not make the film's final cut, Jules mutters to himself: "Bitch gonna kill more niggers than time.")

Unbeknown to Vincent, Mia has been the center of some controversy in recent days. Jules relates to Vincent the unfortunate story of one Tony Rocky Horror, who was thrown out of a window because he gave Mia Wallace a foot massage. Vincent's impending rendezvous with Mia is thus established as a new line of action that will be the focus of the film's next section. Crucially, the hit Vincent and Jules carry out in the prologue and the upcoming scenes involving Vincent's "date" with Mia Wallace revolve around an omnipresent, but as yet unseen presence: Marsellus Wallace. Indeed, it is Marsellus who drives the action throughout much of the film: he is, in Kristin Thompson's formulation, a motivating force that lends unity to *Pulp Fiction's* disjointed narrative (Thompson, 1999: 12-13).

Following the four-part structure described above, *Pulp Fiction's* next section, titled "Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife", serves as the film's complicating action. Complicating action provides a shift in action or, more typically, provides an obstacle of some sort that the protagonist must overcome on his/her way to achieving a particular objective. This section achieves both these ends. Whereas the prologue focused on the hit, and the retrieval of Marsellus' enigmatic briefcase, this next section shifts the action to Vincent's interaction with Mia Wallace. Significantly, this section opens with a close up of Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis), who will feature prominently in the film's third section. However, Butch's appearance here, in particular his brief but hostile confrontation with Vincent, foreshadows their fatal meeting in the film's middle passage. Suffice it to say that Marsellus Wallace plays a pivotal role in stitching together the narrative threads between this section and the next. Marsellus is "ground zero" of the relationship between Vincent and Butch and Vincent and Mia.

Blissed out on some recently acquired heroin, Vincent Vega arrives at Mia Wallace's home only to be confronted by the disembodied voice and preying eyes of his dinner companion. In an homage to Anna Karina, Jean Luc Godard's former wife and one-time on-screen muse, Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) spies on Vincent while she powders her nose with a few lines of cocaine. Their respective drugs of choice and general demeanor suggest that this simple dinner date may be a bumpy ride, indeed the perfect recipe for some complicating action.

And yet, by the end of the evening, Mia and Vincent appear to getting along just fine, having won first prize in the dance contest at Jack Rabbit Slim's. But in Tarantino's universe, things change quickly; as we later learn, you can be dead in the time it takes to toast a couple of pop tarts. Just as the surf music that accompanies the film's opening credits is jarringly interrupted by the sounds of Kool and the Gang, so too the tranquility of Vincent and Mia's evening is shattered when Mia mistakes Vincent's heroin stash for cocaine and goes into cardiac arrest. Here, another music cue provides ironic comment on time. As Mia lies dying of an overdose, the soundtrack plays Urge Overkill's rendition of the Neil Diamond hit, "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon."

In a tour de force sequence reminiscent of Hitchcock's finest moments -- excruciating scenes of tension mixed with macabre humor -- Vincent manages to save Mia. For critic Dana Polan, this and other frenetic scenes are "set off from the plot to become stand-alone bits of virtuosity either in the craft of the dialogue, the weirdness of the action -- as in the redneck

pawnshop -- or the show-off quality of the cinematic style." (Polan, 2000: 76) While this interpretation supports reading *Pulp Fiction* as an example of "post-classical" style, I contend that these bravura set pieces are integral to the drama -- after all, Vincent is racing against time to keep Mia from dying. Furthermore, I assert that these sequences are emblematic of "intensified continuity." That is to say, despite the scene's accelerated pace, the shot length, picture composition, camera movement, image and sound editing all adhere to established techniques associated with Hollywood classicism. For instance, as Vincent races toward Lance's (Eric Stolz) suburban home, wide shots of Vincent's car racing down deserted city streets are intercut with point-of-view shots taken from Vincent's perspective of the dying mobster's moll, and close-ups of Vincent on his cell phone. In turn, these shots cut to images of Lance doing his best to ignore Vincent's desperate call, and finally to shot-reversal shots as the two argue over whose "problem" Mia really is.

Likewise, hand-held camera movements following the action as Vincent pulls up on Lance's lawn, point-of-view shots as the drug dealer and his wife (Rosanna Arquette) search for the cardiac kit, and finally, Vincent plunging the hypodermic into Mia's chest all follow the rules associated with traditional continuity editing. As David Bordwell points out, "When shots are so short, when establishing shots are brief or postponed or nonexistent, the eyelines and angles in the dialogue must be even more unambiguous, and the axis of action must be strictly respected." (Bordwell, 2002: 17) Throughout this harrowing sequence, Tarantino adheres to these conventions, albeit in an accelerated and intensified fashion.

The "Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife" section of the film ends with the two agreeing not to tell Marsellus anything about what has happened. This bond between Mia and Vincent is not at all unlike the bond that will develop between Butch and Marsellus in the film's next section. Here again, Tarantino's "fractured" narrative is actually a very tightly woven tale, stitched together by the formal elements and stylistic devices associated with classical Hollywood narrative.

The story of Butch's watch is the centerpiece of *Pulp Fiction*'s overarching narrative. More important, for purposes of this discussion, this tale fits quite neatly into Thompson's four-part structure. "The third large-scale portion of narrative films, the development, often differs distinctly from the complicating action. By now an extensive set of premises, goals, and obstacles has been introduced." (Thompson, 1999: 28) And indeed, by the time we get to *Pulp Fiction*'s next story, "The Gold Watch," a number of crucial plot lines, character traits, and expectations have been firmly established. Like all classical narratives, *Pulp Fiction*'s characters are goal oriented. Vincent and Mia have agreed to keep their little adventure quiet; Marsellus has been clearly established as someone you don't mess with. Butch is determined to beat Marsellus at his own game and is obsessed with retrieving his father's watch. And Marsellus, keen to make a killing on a prizefight, tutors Butch on how best to throw his upcoming bout:

Marsellus: In the fifth, your ass goes down.

Butch nods his head: "yes."

Marsellus: Say it!

Butch: In the fifth, my ass goes down.

Thus, this third section of the film shifts the action from Vincent and Mia to Butch and Marsellus. Having agreed to take a dive, Butch has different plans. He double crosses Marsellus and literally beats his opponent to death. As Marsellus, accompanied by Mia, realizes he has been had he instructs his crew, including Vincent, to "scour the earth" for Butch. Jules is conspicuously absent from this scene, yet another device to keep the audience guessing.

The search for Butch is a crucial turning point in the film's action and leads to an extended sequence of events including Butch's flight from the boxing arena; a phone call to his friend who has helped engineer Butch's plan; a rendezvous with Butch's girlfriend Fabienne (Maria de Medeiros); the search for the missing gold watch; Vincent's murder; and a confrontation between Marsellus and Butch that culminates in the infamous rape sequence in the basement of the Mason-Dixie Pawn Shop. The development section ends with Butch and Fabienne riding away on a chopper.

In terms of narrative chronology, this is the end of the story. Butch has successfully retrieved his father's gold watch, reconciled with Marsellus, and is free to live happily ever after. However, one major plot point remains unresolved. What are the mysterious contents of Marsellus' briefcase? When Vincent examines the contents of the brief case, we have some clues. The combination is 666, the mark of the beast. Moreover, when he first lays eyes upon it, he is quite literally speechless. And for film aficionados, it is difficult to miss the reference to Robert Aldrich's cold war-period thriller, *Kiss Me Deadly*, in which an equally mysterious briefcase contained the "atomic whatsit." Still, the audience is left wondering what exactly is in Marsellus' briefcase. In fact, we never find out. As it turns out, the briefcase and its contents are what Hitchcock would refer to as a McGuffin, a plot device that keeps the audience's attention and provides narrative cohesion, but is ultimately unimportant to the overall story.

Tarantino's Hitchcockian ruse is not an anomaly in this regard. Throughout the film, he employs several classical techniques to unify his plot or signal spatial and temporal changes in the narrative. Indeed, he uses one very old device, the title card, throughout the film. For instance, the temporal shift between the story of the gold watch, which includes the death of Vincent Vega, and what amounts to a flashback to an earlier scene in which Jules and Vincent retrieve Marsellus' briefcase, is signaled by a title card that reads: The Bonnie Situation. Thus, this temporal shift is not nearly as jarring or confusing as it might have been. Like any classical narrative, *Pulp Fiction* cues its audience to these spatial and temporal shifts.

Indeed, Tarantino returns to this scene at a crucial moment, just as Jules begins his recitation of Ezekiel 25:17. As we know from the earlier scene, this distinctive and exceedingly disarming monologue immediately precedes certain death for anyone who hears it. Thus, Jules' quotation of scripture provides a narrative link between the earlier scene and this flashback. Significantly, we will hear this passage again, in the film's epilogue, when Jules explains to Pumpkin and Honey Bunny his reluctance to exact vengeance upon them. Thus Jules' deadly monologue is yet one more device Tarantino uses to give unity and clarity to his narrative, very much in the tradition of classical Hollywood storytelling.

Before proceeding with a thematic analysis of *Pulp Fiction*, it is worth reiterating that the film's visual style is not a rejection of Hollywood classicism, but rather exemplifies David Bordwell's notion of "intensified continuity" (Bordwell, 2002). That is to say, despite its

achronology -- a narrative which is, to borrow Bordwell's phrase, "retrospectively coherent," *Pulp Fiction* makes use of the technical and stylistic devices associated with classical filmmaking (Bordwell, 2002: 16). As Janet Staiger has argued in a different context, "*Pulp Fiction* is a convoluted story with long passages of dialogue between major characters and is shot in a classical Hollywood style." (Staiger, 2000: 11) Nowhere, but in these extended, rather "talky" scenes is this observation more apparent. The dinner conversation between Mia and Vincent at Jack Rabbit Slim's, for example, is shot and edited according to the conventions associated with Hollywood classicism; the scene is composed medium two-shots and single close-ups that are cut utilizing over-the-shoulder shots, shot-reversal shots, and eyeline match.

Likewise, when Butch takes flight from his boxing match, his conversation with the cabbie Esmarelda (Angela Jones) moves from medium two-shots -- complete with rear projection, yet another convention associated with Hollywood classicism -- to singles, as well as point of view shots, as when Butch reads Esmarelda's hack license. All of which is to suggest that despite its fragmented narrative, *Pulp Fiction's* visual style amounts to an intensification of established techniques, not a rejection of Hollywood classicism. Indeed, despite numerous continuity errors -- the most glaring of which are the bullet holes that are visible in the wall behind Jules and Vincent *before* an unseen assailant emerges from the bathroom and empties his "hand canon" at the two hit men in a vain attempt to kill them both -- *Pulp Fiction* adheres to the principles of traditional continuity. As stated earlier, *Pulp Fiction's* relationship to classical narrative structure and technique is but one aspect of the film's attention to time in cinema. Just as the film disrupts narrative chronology, so too does *Pulp Fiction* concern itself with memory, the passage of time, and the recounting of the past.

Making Time

"If I'm curt with you, it's because time is a factor. I think fast, I talk fast, and I need you guys to act fast if you want to get out of this"--Winston Wolf.

Marsellus Wallace speaks with the wisdom, if not the vernacular, of a philosopher king. As he seals his deal with Butch, Marsellus reminds the aging fighter of the ravages of time:

Marsellus: I think you're gonna find -- when all this shit is over and done -- I think you're gonna find yourself one smilin' motherfucker. Thing is Butch, right now you got ability. But painful as it may be, ability don't last. Now that's a hard motherfuckin' fact of life, but it's a fact of life your ass is gonna hafta git realistic about. This business is filled to the brim with unrealistic motherfuckers who thought their ass aged like wine.

Marsellus is not unique in this regard. Throughout *Pulp Fiction*, characters demonstrate a keen awareness of time -- the ephemeral nature of events, the moments that give great pleasure and those that bring excruciating pain. What makes *Pulp Fiction* distinctive is that the film's narrative dexterity is matched by an unusually acute appreciation for cinema's ability to express different aspects of time. "The Gold Watch" episode is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Having thus far eluded Marsellus and his gang, Butch and his girlfriend Fabienne plan to enjoy their breakfast and then skip town and rendezvous with Butch's friend Sean. Butch tells his friend: " Next time we see each other, it'll be on Tennessee time." As the couple playfully

debates the desirability of having pie for breakfast, Butch asks Fabienne for his watch. It quickly becomes apparent that Fabienne forgot to pack the watch and Butch flies into a rage. He barks at the uncomprehending Fabienne, "[T]hat was my father's fuckin' watch. You know what my father went through to git me that watch?...I don't have time to get into it now... but he went through a lot." Against his better judgment, Butch returns to his apartment to reclaim his father's timepiece.

In a flashback/dream sequence that immediately precedes this episode, we learn the storied history of the gold watch. As a young child, Butch Coolidge receives a visit from Captain Koons (Christopher Walken), who was in a POW camp with Butch's father during the Vietnam War. In a bravura performance of patriotic zeal and scatological fetishism worthy of a Kubrickian anti-hero, Walken relates the painful details of the watch's return to the Coolidge family. As it turns out, the watch bears witness to the great geo-political struggles of the twentieth century.

A family heirloom, the gold watch was originally purchased in Knoxville, Tennessee (the same town Butch and Fabienne are to meet Sean) by Butch's great-granddaddy, Ernie Coolidge, during the First World War. When duty called at the outset of the Second World War, Butch's grandfather, Dane Coolidge, took the watch with him as a good luck charm. Dane Coolidge never returned, having been killed in the battle of Wake Island. However, Dane knew his chances for survival were slim. Three days before the decisive battle, the young Marine asked a stranger, an officer named Winocki, to deliver the watch to his infant son, Butch's father.

Butch's dad was wearing the watch when he was shot down over Hanoi. But he was determined not to let the watch fall into the hands of the Viet Cong and he hid the watch the only place he could -- up his ass. When after five long years, Major Coolidge died of dysentery, Captain Koons kept his word to his dying comrade and ensured the safe return of Butch's birthright. "I hid this uncomfortable hunk of metal up my ass for two years," he tells Butch as he hands the young boy his father's gold watch.

No doubt, this history explains Butch's anal-retentive attitude toward the watch. More than this, however, the scene with Captain Koons is a painful reminder of the horrors of war, albeit conveyed as a sort of perverse retelling of a Frank Capra-inspired lesson in American history. And yet, despite its basis in schoolyard humor and Walken's over the top performance, the scene embodies one of the film's central themes -- the passage of time. The entire episode revolves around the importance of keeping time, of honoring the past, of family history, of national history, and finally, of preserving memory in some way. Equally important, the scene anticipates the harrowing experience that Butch and Marsellus' share at the hands of Maynard, Zed, and The Gimp. When he first introduces himself to Butch, Captain Koons foreshadows Butch's own tribulation and underscores his accountability to those who share his misfortune:

Captain Koons: Hello, little man. Boy I sure heard a bunch about you. See, I was a good friend of your Daddy's. We were in that Hanoi pit of hell over five years together. Hopefully, you'll never have to experience this yourself, but when two men are in a situation like me and your Daddy were, for as long as we were, you take on certain responsibilities of the other.

Thus, just as their plight in the POW camp creates a bond between Major Coolidge and Captain Koons, so too does the torture sequence bring Marsellus and Butch together. Having freed himself, Butch nonetheless returns to liberate Marsellus from his captors. In each case, times of crisis, uncertainty, and suffering bind men together and instills in them a sense of camaraderie, understanding, and for Marsellus and Butch, forgiveness.

In the next episode, Tarantino explores yet another facet of time. That is, while tense situations are often perceived as elongated, torturous, and endless, paradoxically, moments of crisis seem to collapse or speed up time. Put another way, in moments of crisis, minutes sometimes feel like hours; then again, when the pressure is on, time flies. Such is the case in the film's climactic scenes. Throughout "The Bonnie Situation" Jules, Vincent, Jimmy (Quentin Tarantino) and The Wolf (Harvey Keitel) try to clean up the bloody mess that is the Marvin's headless corpse before Jimmy's wife Bonnie returns home from work.

This too is very much in keeping with classical Hollywood narrative. Kristin Thompson notes, "One thing that sets art-film narratives apart from classical-style ones is that often the protagonist in the former is under little time pressure to accomplish his or her goal. In many Hollywood films, however, both the forward impetus and temporal clarity are provided by the inclusion of one or more deadlines." (Thompson, 1999: 16) Like the earlier scene in which Vincent races against time to keep Mia from dying of a drug overdose, "The Bonnie Situation" is a textbook example of this storytelling convention.

As Jules excitedly explains to his boss, Marsellus: "You got to appreciate what an explosive element this Bonnie situation is. If she comes home from a hard day's work and finds a bunch of gangsters doin' a bunch of gangsta' shit in her kitchen, ain't no tellin' what she's apt to do." When he learns that "The Wolf" is on the job, Jules relaxes. Indeed, The Wolf is a model of efficiency who is prompt, courteous, and efficient. Promising to make a thirty-minute drive in ten minutes, The Wolf arrives on the scene early. As The Wolf's car races toward the camera, a graphic reads: "Nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds later." Not one to waste time, The Wolf quickly sizes up the situation, eases strained relations between Jimmy and his unwanted guests, and elegantly demonstrates his time management skills. True to his profession, The Wolf solves the problem and successfully diffuses "The Bonnie Situation." While these scenes underscore *Pulp Fiction's* attention to the passage of time, Tarantino's film likewise explores yet another, paradoxical aspect of cinematic time; by preserving the past, film likewise "deadens" time.

Killing Time

"That's an interesting point, but let's get into character." -- Jules Winnfield

Vincent Vega's timing is off. When we first meet Vincent, he has just returned from a three-year hiatus in Amsterdam. It's as if he's got jet lag with an existential twist. Returning Mia home from their dinner date at Jack Rabbit Slims, Vincent excuses himself and adjourns to the bathroom. There, like Hamlet on horse, he soliloquizes on fidelity and the importance of maintaining a professional demeanor.

Clearly, Vincent is troubled by his feelings for his boss's wife, "This a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful." Meanwhile, Mia mistakes Vincent's heroin stash for cocaine, and heartily snorts it up. Within seconds, Mia is convulsing from a heroin overdose. Cutting back to

Vincent, still talking to himself in the bathroom mirror, he decides finally, "So you're gonna go out there, drink your drink, say 'Goodnight, I've had a very lovely evening,' go home, and jack off. And that's all you're gonna do."

The scene is built upon a time-honored technique of classical narrative: parallel editing. As Vincent tries to convince himself not to get romantically involved with Marsellus' wife, she stumbles upon his heroin. The tension is palpable, made all the more excruciating by Vincent's bathroom stalling. If only Vincent would make up his mind, he could prevent Mia from overdosing. Unfortunately, he is too late. When he returns to the living room to bid Mia goodnight, he finds her near death.

Similarly, in the epilogue, Vincent leaves Jules to visit the men's room. He returns to find his partner in the middle of a tense hostage standoff with Honey Bunny and Pumpkin. Rather than ease the situation, Vincent's return only escalates the tension. He tells Jules not to give Pumpkin (a.k.a. Ringo) his money. "Jules, if you give this nimrod fifteen hundred bucks, I'm gonna shoot 'em on general principle." Fortunately, cooler heads prevail. Jules gives Pumpkin and Honey Bunny his money and lets them walk out of the coffee shop unharmed.

As we already know, however, Vincent's visit to the bathroom does not turn out so well in the "Gold Watch" episode. When Butch returns to his apartment, he is pleasantly surprised to find the place empty. Pleased with himself, he tosses a few pop tarts in the toaster. Just then he sees a shotgun on the kitchen counter and hears someone in the bathroom. Catching Vincent completely off guard, Butch blows the hit man away. When Butch examines his handy work, we get a glimpse of Vincent's bathroom reading material: a book titled *Modesty Blaise*, known for its world-weary heroine and its confused narrative chronology.

There are other instances in which *Pulp Fiction* calls our attention to "dead time": moments when there is no action to speak of. Just before they enter the apartment to retrieve Marsellus' briefcase, Jules tells his partner Vincent, "It ain't quite time, let's hang back." While they kill time, Jules and Vincent return to their earlier conversation regarding foot massages. Similarly, in the aforementioned scene in Jack Rabbit Slims, Mia calls our attention to "dead time." "That's when you know you've found someone special," she explains to Vincent, "when you can shut the fuck up and comfortably share a silence." Plainly, this is not the stuff of gangster films. And yet, these absurdist elements are striking, especially for their fatalistic implications. For instance, just as Butch begins to relax, confident that he has outwitted his pursuers, fate steps in. As he waits at a traffic light (significantly he is singing along with the Statler Brother's anthem to the pleasures of idle time, "Flowers on the Wall") Butch quite literally runs into Marsellus, the last person on earth he wants to see. Equally important, these moments illuminate how classical narrative treats time. *Pulp Fiction* does not concern itself with the usual stuff of gangster movies. Unlike conventional mob films, *Pulp Fiction* does not dazzle audiences with innovative depictions of a "hit" instead, we are witness the unpleasant aftermath of an accidental killing -- not the usual stuff of the gangster genre. Indeed, in gangster films, tough guys don't dance. They don't often talk about television pilots either. Nor do they engage in very many theological discussions, let alone discuss the personal charm of Arnold, the pig from *Green Acres*. Throughout *Pulp Fiction*, we are privy to the more mundane aspects of criminal life, the sort of material most film makers would deem unworthy of screen time. This is but one aspect of cinematic time that *Pulp Fiction* asks us to consider. Yet another is cinema's relation to collective memory in a culture dominated by the image.

Surveying the kitsch that crowds Jack Rabbit Slims, Vincent Vega wanders, dreamlike, through a virtual who's who of American popular entertainment. He strolls by waiting-staff resembling James Dean and Marilyn Monroe; a crooning Ricky Nelson look-alike; a walking, talking, life-size replica of the Phillip Morris Midget; and a maitre' d who is a dead ringer for television impresario Ed Sullivan. When Mia asks Vincent what he makes of it, he deadpans, "It's like a wax museum with a pulse."

The entire scene teems with easily recognized and more obscure references to popular culture. A waiter resembling Buddy Holly refers to Mia as Peggy Sue. Vincent orders a steak named after Douglas Sirk; a filmmaker whose last Hollywood feature, *Imitation of Life*, is an apt appraisal of Jack Rabbit Slim's ambience. Mia drinks a five-dollar vanilla (a.k.a. "Martin and Lewis") milkshake. Taking stock of the blonde waitresses working the room, Vincent concludes, "I don't see Jayne Mansfield, so it must be her night off." Clearly, Vincent Vega knows a thing or two about B-movie bombshells. Finally, in a subtle but rewarding cinematic in-joke, Uma Thurman the actress from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, asks John Travolta the actor from *Urban Cowboy* for a smoke.

Mia: Will you roll me one, cowboy?

Vincent: You can have this one, cowgirl.

For some critics, this scene exemplifies Tarantino's predilection for post-modern pastiche. They're right, of course. Like no other filmmaker save Godard, Tarantino loads his films with allusions to the very stuff of contemporary culture: coffee and cigarettes, motorcycle films and 1960s kid shows, French fries with mayonnaise and Big Kahuna Burgers are all within his frame of reference.

While some find Tarantino's cultural bricolage pointless and tiresome -- usually those same critics who enthusiastically play along with Tarantino's cinematic game of trivial pursuit -- I believe this scene underscores *Pulp Fiction's* thematic concern with time, especially the relationship between collective memory and popular culture, especially Hollywood films and iconography. Like Butch's gold watch, the artifacts of popular culture -- musical recordings, fashion, hairstyles, movies and television -- mark the passage of time. And, like family members who invest great meaning in heirlooms and trinkets of past generations, as a culture, we invest tremendous individual and collective meaning in popular cultural forms, like the movies.

In this way, *Pulp Fiction* taps into one of cinema's most alluring, yet enigmatic, qualities: film's ability to manipulate time. When we go to the movies, we often see someone's entire life story unfold in under two hours time. Similarly, film has a unique capacity to capture the sweep of history; cinema vividly, sometimes brilliantly, relates the story of entire peoples and nations with an economy of style unrivaled by other media. In this regard, then, film compresses time and elides history while simultaneously, and paradoxically, preserving it. That is to say, like the photograph, cinema captures a moment in time and keeps it alive long after the subject has turned to dust. Cinema's immediacy, then, its ability to keep people and events alive, what Susan Langer describes as film's production of "a virtual present" (Langer, 1966: 201) or "an endless now" (Langer, 1966: 204) annihilates time in a fashion.

Pulp Fiction revels in cinema's ability to upset, reorder, and erase time. In Jack Rabbit Slim's, and even more dramatically in the film's closing moments, *Pulp Fiction* does nothing less

than raise the dead. Visual culture in general, and film in particular, are particularly adept at creating this timeless present: a temporal order that conflates the past with the present in a few feet of celluloid. It is this peculiar and appealing quality of movie going that permeates the scene in Jack Rabbit Slims, and underlies *Pulp Fiction*'s narrative and thematic logic. No doubt, it also contributes to the film's popularity.

Conclusion

The "creeping Marienbadism" Pauline Kael observed in the New American Cinema of the mid-1960s appears to be gaining speed in a spate of recent critical and popular successes such as *The Usual Suspects*, *Smoke Signals*, *Magnolia*, and *Memento*. In the films of Quentin Tarantino, it practically gallops. The question remains whether or not a film like *Pulp Fiction* is indicative of post-classical cinema.

For Kristin Thompson, the answer is plain; *Pulp Fiction* is definitely non-classical,

Pulp Fiction introduces a startling shift in temporal order without warning or motivation and it brings its two main characters (played by Bruce Willis and John Travolta) together only for one fleeting encounter in a bar before the long-delayed moment when one kills the other. (Thompson, 1999: 340-41).

This evaluation is somewhat surprising, given Thompson's rigorous analysis of several films that clearly challenge conventional storytelling in ways not all that dissimilar to *Pulp Fiction*. Still, Thompson is not alone in this interpretation. J. P. Telotte includes *Pulp Fiction*, among so-called neo-noir films such as *Romeo is Bleeding*, *LA Confidential*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *The Last Seduction*, all of which represent a "radical departure" from classical narratives (Telotte, 1998).

As this discussion demonstrates, however, *Pulp Fiction* operates in accordance to the narrative structure Thompson identifies and in relation to those stylistic conventions associated with classical Hollywood narrative. This position is supported by those critics who find *Pulp Fiction* a rather conservative film, despite its multiple storylines and eccentric characters,

For all its interrupted storylines and O. Henry surprises, *Pulp Fiction* is self-consciously conventional in content, just as Tarantino is a proud partaker of the mass-media fiction world of the pulp magazines, a genre of strict narrative conventions. The boxer whose honor won't permit him to throw the fight, the gangster's moll with a wandering eye, the camaraderie of professional killers - - these are all subjects so hoary as to be clichés. (Dowell, 1995: 5)

From this perspective, then, *Pulp Fiction*'s temporal disorder and character quirks might best be understood in terms of those "stylistic assimilations" Hollywood classicism has made over the years to appropriate innovative techniques that do not conform to the principles of story causality, goal-oriented characters, and narrative unity. I contend that *Pulp Fiction* is best understood in this light. The film's epilogue succinctly encapsulates this notion. Having diffused a potentially lethal situation and successfully retained Marsellus' briefcase, Jules and Vincent exit the coffee shop triumphantly; notwithstanding the fact that Vincent was killed by a fatal shot gun blast in the previous reel. No doubt acknowledging his audience's nostalgic attachment to John Travolta, while simultaneously revealing his own soft spot for

the popular actor, Tarantino resurrects the beloved star of *Welcome Back Kotter*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Grease*. Thus, by rearranging the temporal order of his story/stories, and especially with Vincent's dead man walking routine that closes the film, Tarantino treats his audience to that most time-honored of Hollywood conventions: the happy ending. Viva Vincent Vega!

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