

**Post-Nostalgia in the Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez**

William DeGenaro

Patrons of the motion picture industry in the US have been voicing in recent years a desire for a more stylistic and technically original aesthetics. This movement has manifested itself most noticeably in fans of the action-adventure genre. A pair of hip, young film directors have responded with stark portraits of a society negotiating its collective attitude about the past. Curiously, the films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez present allusions to the popular culture of the past juxtaposed with graphically violent images. Theorists have stated that when dealing with the past, “points of uncertainty and ambiguity will inevitably arise” (Davis 79). Tarantino and Rodriguez go much further. The two directors call into question the very extent to which society can trust in the existence of a stable past. They subvert the notion that nostalgia establishes “reassurance and direction” (Harper 27) in the contemporary individual by replacing an idealized past with a pastiche of stereotype and gore.

Traditional conceptions of the past include an idealization, even a glorification, of that which came before. Nostalgia rarely has as one of its features a critical eye. Before the dawn of postmodernism, society looked at the past as signifying the good old days. Fredric Jameson theorizes that several radical changes took place when postmodernism began. In his groundbreaking article, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson argues that the traditional distinction between high culture and pop culture vanished. Postmodernists ushered in an era in which high modernist artists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound would no longer be revered with religious vigor simply for existing in an idealized past. The highbrow content of modernist art leaves itself wide open for parody, but the postmodernists, not believing in “the linguistic norm,” use pastiche instead:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody. (16)

Heirs to the postmodernists, we live in an age when the past deserves to be questioned with all the energy and vigor with which we formerly revered the past.

Jameson further asserts that originality is no longer possible: “all that is left is to imitate dead styles” (18). As an example, he indicates the nostalgia film, which takes the audience back to a different time, either through blatant subject matter (*American Graffiti*) or by recalling dead genres (*Star Wars*), or sometimes even by doing both (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Each of these examples presents the past in a positive light; indeed, they were each (in different ways) part of the nostalgia boom of the 1970s. Adults enjoying *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* were happily taken back to the time when they enjoyed serial science fiction at the movies. *American Graffiti* prompted the success of the television show “Happy Days,” about a time when everything was apparently happy. These films are pastiche in that they imitate dead styles and/or a dead era, but they do so optimistically.

Twenty years later, the nostalgia film is, above all, less nostalgic. We are living in a post-nostalgic era. The films of Tarantino and Rodriguez conceive of the past in a radically different way than, say, those of George Lucas. They connect the past not with hula-hoops and poodle skirts, nor with jet fighters and lasers, but rather with violence and organized crime.

These films, particularly Tarantino’s, have in fact been attacked for portraying gratuitous violence and sensationalizing the criminal life. Critics of this ilk, including the 1996 Republican presidential nominee Robert Dole, fail to realize the mode of spectacle in which Rodriguez and Tarantino operate. These two choose to work in the crime genre, but their combination of outrageous plot twists and mundane diversions may just as well exist within the framework of a comedy or a horror film. The pair allow what Madan Sarup calls “a figural cinema”; that is, the construction of imagery so striking that “the fixed nature of reality is questioned.” Nostalgia serves as an arena in which to subvert the stable ideas of time in plot structure (176).

In the opening scene of Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), the story of a jewel heist infiltrated by an undercover police officer, eight hoodlums in a diner discuss divergent readings of the Madonna video “Like A Virgin.” Each gangster possesses confidence in the accuracy of his interpretation of the artist. The conversation, however, quickly turns to a discussion of the music of the 1970s, a music for which the hoodlums appear to have a great affinity. Yet one of the gangsters, Nice Guy Eddie, is confused about the subject matter of a song from that era:

Eddie: Any of you guys been listening to K Billy’s Super Sounds of the 70s?

Mr. Pink: Yeah, man, it's fuckin' great, isn't it? You know what I heard the other day? "Heart Beat is a Love Beat," by Little Tony Frankle and the Frankle Family. I haven't heard that since I was in the fifth fucking grade.

Eddie: When I was coming down here, "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia" came on. I ain't heard that song since it was big and back then I heard it a million trillion fucking times. This was the first time I realized the girl singing the song is the one who shot Andy.

Mr. Brown: You didn't know that Vicki Lawrence was the one who shot Andy?

Eddie: I thought the cheatin' wife shot Andy.

Mr. Blond: They sing it at the end of the song.

Eddie: I know, motherfucker, I just heard it.

Nice Guy Eddie's confusion stands in contrast to the mobsters' confident knowledge about Madonna, significantly a contemporary figure. Eddie's initial misunderstanding of "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia," a song from the past, suggests a distorted view of the past, a distortion the film develops further. According to Sarup, "bewilderment" frequently comments on a larger societal trend (174). Nice Guy Eddie is indeed bewildered.

Throughout the film, characters listen to retro pop music on K Billy's Super Sounds of the 1970s, hearing care-free songs such as "Little Green Bag," by George Baker Selection, and "Hooked on a Feeling," by Blue Suede. Tarantino hints at his reasoning for including the music in *Reservoir Dogs*:

I didn't want to go for the serious stuff—Led Zeppelin or Marvin Gaye—I wanted to go for the super sugary '70s bubblegum sound. One, because some people are annoyed by it and, two, because I grew up with it. The sugariness of it, the catchiness of it, really lightens up a rude, rough movie. (qtd. in Woods 41)

Among other references to the past, the gangsters discuss Pam Grier films on their way to the robbery. Freddy Newendyke, the undercover cop, prepares for the job mentally by telling himself that he is the television detective Baretta. Newendyke describes the leader of the criminal family, Joe Cabot, as looking like Thing from The Fantastic Four.

As the audience gets inundated with allusions, the blood flows from Newendyke, who is shot during the heist and taken to an old warehouse by the gangsters who are not aware of his true identity. The present action surrounds the conflict over what to do with the dying Newendyke, but flashbacks to the robbery, Newendyke's plan to infiltrate the job, and Cabot's recruiting of the crooks give further exposition. Newendyke lies on the floor of the factory in a pool of blood while a

fellow officer who had been taken hostage is tied up and beaten brutally. *Reservoir Dogs* viewers, watching the juxtaposition of disturbing violence and 1970s allusions, begin to feel as confused and bewildered as Nice Guy Eddie is about the past. The non-linear narration itself causes in the viewer a lack of awareness about exactly what 'the past' signifies.

Tarantino brings this confusion to a climax when Mr. Blonde, left alone in the factory with Newendyke and the tied-up officer, tortures the latter. "I don't want any information from you ... I think it's fun to torture cops," Blonde says. He turns on the radio, takes a knife out of his boot, and slowly unfolds the blade. "You ever listen to K Billy's Super Sounds of the 70's? It's my personal favorite," he goes on to say. He proceeds to cut off the officer's ear and douse him with gasoline as "Stuck in the Middle With You" plays happily. Sarup would call this scene "a presentation of the unrepresentable" (177). Visually, the viewers observe "unrepresentable" torture. The soundtrack, however, takes them back to another place and time, like viewers watching *American Graffiti* twenty-years ago.

Tarantino gives his audience one further subversion of the past with Newendyke's fake anecdote about going into a men's room with a large container of marijuana only to find the bathroom full of police officers. Newendyke, during a flashback, is coached by a veteran undercover officer, and told that he needs to have a believable but false anecdote to legitimize his undercover identity. The audience watches Newendyke rehearse the story and slowly grow more and more believable, until finally, the film shows Newendyke telling the story to the mobsters. The viewer watches falsehood slowly appear more and more realistic. By the time Newendyke nears the end of his story, the viewer is watching a live-action dramatization of the fake story. As Paul A. Woods puts it:

The way he [Newendyke] talks himself into his 'cops in the commode' story, positioned as the narrator, gives a personalized slant on the lies inherent in the film's narrative. Lies, in this instance, are just another take on reality, and are as good as any other character's truth. Tarantino has acknowledged the influence of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* which tells the same story from four very different standpoints. (38)

This technique produces the affect of the viewer being utterly unsure of what the reality of the film really is. Newendyke, like a citizen of the post-nostalgic world, constructs his own realistic but ultimately false narrative.

Tarantino's 1994 offering, *Pulp Fiction*, also opens with hoodlum characters in a diner revealing that there will be a subversion of the past. A neurotic British couple decides to rob the diner, acknowledging that robbing banks and liquor stores, which they apparently have been doing for a very long time, has become too dangerous. Characters in *Pulp Fiction* appear to understand the invalidity of the past. Thus the viewer sees Pumpkin and Honey Bunny make a conscious decision to break with

their traditions. The film is narrated in a nonlinear order, like *Reservoir Dogs*, further suggesting a confusion of the order of time.

Crime boss Marcellus Wallace verbalizes this recognition of the unstable past as he instructs Butch, the aging boxer, to throw his match in order to collect a large sum of illegal money:

Ability don't last. This business is full of motherfuckers who thought their asses would age like wine. If you mean in terms of vinegar, you're right. But if you mean it gets better, you're wrong. Boxers don't have an old-timers day.

Butch struggles with his identity in the post-nostalgic world. He has a painful—albeit tongue-in-cheek—flashback to being presented the watch his father hid in his rectum while in a prisoner-of-war camp in Vietnam. He learns that the watch had belonged to his grandfather and great-grandfather, both veterans, before his father. Butch understands that tradition has decayed but still feels both responsibility and nostalgia.

He double-crosses Wallace and wins his boxing match. Fleeing the venue to escape from Wallace and his gang, his Columbian taxi driver asks him what his name means. Butch responds with the pointed and biting comment, “I’m American, honey, our names don’t mean shit.” When he discovers his fiancée Fabienne forgot the watch at their apartment, he returns to their home, knowing that he is risking his life, to retrieve it. This cements Butch’s decision to win the fight as an attempt to establish nostalgic order. Predictably, his return to the apartment proves an ill-fated venture. Enemies Butch and Marcellus Wallace find themselves the prisoners of a pair of bumbling rapists and their gimp. Once again Tarantino presents his audience with the unrepresentable. Butch, who appears to be eternally lucky, escapes from this bind as well, only to return to rescue Wallace—who, again, is his enemy. Butch plays the eternally nostalgic hero. Wallace vows revenge on Zed, one of the rapists:

I’m gonna call a couple of hard pipe-hitting niggers to go to work on the holmes here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch. You hear me talkin’ hillbilly boy? I ain’t through with you by a long shot. I’m gonna get medieval on your ass.

In addition to referring to torture as a common practice of the middle ages, his comment places violence in the context of the past, subverting Butch’s trust of and connection to the past.

Wallace’s hit men, Vince Vega and Jules Winfield, provide myriad allusions to the 1970s, reminiscent of the allusions that filled *Reservoir Dogs*. Vega drives a vintage Malibu convertible, Jules a ‘74 Nova. They listen to Kool and The Gang and Al Green, as well as surfer music, on the radio. Jules has gheri curls and, when he decides to quit the criminal life, says he will “walk the Earth like Cain in [the

1970s television show] Kung Fu.” Calming the excitable Yolanda, he tells her to “act like Fonzy” and be “cool.” Also like *Reservoir Dogs* is Tarantino’s striking juxtaposition, in this film, of these allusions with violence, causing in the viewer a similar disillusionment with the past.

Vince Vega, instructed by his boss, takes Marcellus’ wife Mia out for an evening. They go to Jack Rabbit Slim’s, a 1950s nostalgia diner, staffed by Ed Sullivan, Ricky Nelson, Buddy Holly, Marilyn Monroe, and Mamie Van Doren impersonators. The milkshakes are available in two flavors: Amos ‘n Andy or Martin ‘n Lewis. “It’s like a wax museum with a pulse,” Vince says. Mia coquettishly tells Vince, “I tell you what. I’m going to go powder my nose. You think of something to say.” She goes to the bathroom and snorts cocaine. The evening ends with Mia overdosing. Once again, a connection with the past turns sour.

In an early scene of *El Mariachi* (1993), directed by Robert Rodriguez, a man dressed in black and carrying a guitar case, strolls down a dirt road. A voice-over is heard:

That morning was just like any other. No luck, no love, no ride. Nothing changes. When I was walking along the highway I came across a turtle. I realized we were both taking our time getting where we were going. What I didn’t realize was mine was running out.

This nameless mariachi believes at the beginning of the film that life is stagnant. The viewer learns that the men of his family have been mariachis for three generations and the mariachi wishes to continue in that tradition. He possesses a trust in this tradition and a sense of nostalgia; he feels he can continue to live in the same manner as his ancestors.

The viewer shares this sense of trust and nostalgia with the mariachi. After all, Rodriguez presents scenes of a tranquil, idyllic Mexican village. Men get shoe shines and take advantage of the free coconut stands. The streets are quiet, dusty and lined with taverns. Soon, however, the tranquility turns ugly. A crime boss named Moco mistakes the mariachi for Azul, a ruthless criminal who happens to carry his guns in a guitar case and wear black. Azul had double-crossed Moco and Moco now wants him dead. The mariachi spends the remainder of the film dodging the bullets of Moco’s henchmen, who think he is Azul. The peaceful imagery turns violent.

The mariachi realizes that times have changed and mourns the death of nostalgia throughout the film. He can no longer depend on the past he had trusted:

I was beginning to realize this town had no luck. What happened to the days when guitarists were gods? Technology has crushed us, robbed us of our culture, turning us into machines.

*El Mariachi* contains a similar juxtaposition of old and new imagery. The nameless village is dusty and without the conveniences associated with modernity. Yet the criminals all carry cellular telephones.

The clash of old and new is particularly devastating to the nostalgic mariachi, who can not find a tavern to hire him. Rodriguez hyperbolizes his dilemma in a scene in which a tavern owner refuses to hire the mariachi because he, the tavern owner, already has an electronic keyboard player. “Why would I want one mariachi when I have an entire band?” the owner says. “I only pay one guy and I have a whole band. If you want a real job, get a real instrument.” The mariachi’s guitar becomes a symbol of his nostalgia. “I wanted to die with my guitar in my hands,” he says, “I am an innocent mariachi.” The mariachi’s guitar is as gentle as he is; in contrast, Azul’s guns—which are also carried in a guitar case—are as violent as Azul.

The mariachi realizes nostalgia is ineffectual as a means of survival. Moco shoots him in the hand, rendering him unable to play the guitar, and kills the woman he loves.

All I wanted was to be a mariachi like my ancestors. But the city I thought would bring me luck brought me a curse. I lost my guitar, my hand, and her. With this injury I may never play guitar again. Without her, I have no love. But with the dog and the weapons I am prepared for the future.

The mariachi becomes a vigilante, riding into the sunset on a motorcycle—significantly, a symbol of technology—with Azul’s guns and a large bulldog. Nostalgia proved damaging to the mariachi; at the end of the film, he appears prepared to function in the post-nostalgic world.

Robert Rodriguez later directed a big-budget sequel to *El Mariachi*, the 1995 *Desperado*. Pieces of the dialogue of *Desperado* further hint at the death of nostalgia. “There’s not that much work for a mariachi these days, mostly we just watch tv,” a young boy tells the mariachi. Imagery of the clash between old and new also carries over from *El Mariachi*. The gangsters use closed-circuit televisions to monitor action in the old-fashioned taverns. A secret, electronic sliding door is hidden behind a dirty bathroom stall. The mariachi, in his new, violent mode, has an automatic machine gun built into his guitar case.

If *El Mariachi* concerns itself with a character coming to terms with the ineffectuality of nostalgia, then *Desperado* concerns itself with the construction of a narrative of the end of nostalgia. The film opens with an unnamed partner of the mariachi walking into a seedy Mexican bar and telling the bartender about a “mysterious man in black” who carries a guitar case. Viewers who have seen *El Mariachi* know the mysterious man to be the protagonist of that film. This unnamed partner proceeds to tell the bartender about the mariachi moving from tavern to tavern causing violence. The mariachi has apparently changed from the

gentle character the viewer met in Rodriguez' first film. He has accepted the post-nostalgic lifestyle as a means of survival. The sensational story told during the opening scene signifies the formation of a narrative surrounding this new lifestyle.

Significant is Rodriguez's use of storytelling during the beginning of *Desperado*. The movie opens with a narrative telling the viewer that the mariachi has changed. This technique hints that a narrative mythology has been built concerning the post-nostalgic mode. If storytelling is Rodriguez's manner of conveying this idea, then equally significant is his inclusion of a bookstore as the location of much of the action of the film. The mariachi's new love interest is the proprietor of the store, which is filled with very old books. "No one reads, though," she informs the mariachi. The ancient books at the store represent nostalgia; as the proprietor explains, no one reads those books anymore. In the post-nostalgic world, narratives of the past can no longer be trusted.

The films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez are currently all the rage. Their trendiness may prove a passing fad, generated by little more than the hype with which the media has showered these directors. Yet the post-nostalgic longing consumers expressed by their patronage of these films may be as strong as nostalgia itself. Jameson suggests that our society is more concerned with contemporary perceptions of the past than it is with the past itself:

[I]n a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past. (18)

If the past is a construct of our own present perceptions, than our art that is concerned with the past will necessarily signify our own anomalous present behavior. This being the case, the films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez deserve careful attention. Their pronunciation of the death of nostalgia speaks not of the eras they parody, but of the present era. The unrepresentable is before the eyes of the motion picture industry's patrons, to be sure. Yet, that unrepresentable may also exist outside of the movie theater.

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