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FILM NOIR: KILLER STYLE

There's no question that, in today's urban world, Chandler's mean streets have gotten meaner, the mechanisms to strip us of our humanity, of our lives, easier to come by. Chandler's knight wouldn't last long if his case took him to, say, the Fischer Housing Project in New Orleans. This may be why issues of character and morality don't play much of a role in films like *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Killing Zoe*. These films make such notions seem antiquated—we're beyond character, they seem to suggest, beyond morality. Greed and drugs, chance and what wits these characters have left after their ears have been deafened by the gun blasts are what they live by.

In *Killing Zoe* they aren't so much characters as minimalist figures who can't, unlike Bogart, seem to shut up. True, a shred or sliver of moral consciousness lingers in Stolz's character and in Samuel Jackson's Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, but as often as not "moral consciousness" is used more as a plot device than as a theme or issue important to the character's understanding of himself. Jules's "revelation" is more a nod to convention than a true insight. His decision at the end of the film to let Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) escape can hardly be seen as a true change of character since he allows them to escape with what they have stolen, showing he has no understanding or sympathy for the customers who have been terrorized and robbed.

Style over content then, we might say, if the style weren't so often a hit-or-miss amalgam of styles, liftings, references—so many references that one colleague of mine likened *Pulp Fiction* to a game of Trivial Pursuit. Why is Murmau's *Nosferatu* sutured into the love scene between Stolz and Delpy in *Killing Zoe*? Are we to see him as a vampire? Her? Both, since Max Schreck's face dissolves into each of their faces? When the briefcase Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules are supposed to bring back to their boss in *Pulp Fiction* is opened, a bright light radiates from within, but what are we to make of this allusion to *Kiss Me Deadly*? What does Tarantino's film have to do with *Kiss Me Deadly* that it needs to allude to *film noir*'s most disturbing light?

In the films of John Woo, a kind of postmodernist Peckinpah, style can become the content, but the pop figures and cinematic exuberance of Woo's camera in *The Killer* or *Hard Target* belie a *noir* sensibility, as do lesser revved-up crime films such as the recent *Speed*

and *Terminal Velocity*. The films of Tarantino and Avary retain more of the darkness of *film noir*, along with a slew of allusions to films in the first cycle. Their so-called postmodernist world, drained of value and affect, may well mirror our times; I wouldn't entirely dispute this, though I don't believe that this form of mimesis is a necessary function of art; more often it's an excuse than an aesthetic.

But if a *noir* world operates in their films, it's not one in which a hero must enter the labyrinth and either lose himself forever or escape. Everything is frontal, two-dimensional. It's easier to imagine Lee Marvin's Vince in *The Big Heat* having a recognition (that is, for Aristotle, a change from ignorance to knowledge) than one of Tarantino's and Avary's characters. Their films have, in a sense, gone over the top, but what they've left at the bottom of the wall are the flattened corpses of the Aristotelian virtues of complexity, dimensionality, and truth.

Pulp Fiction is, of course, very much aware of the artificiality of its universe and as such plays itself more as comedy than drama. Harvey Keitel's Winston Wolf says, "Because you are a character doesn't mean you have character." It's more a cartoon world, two-dimensional characters in a two-dimensional universe.¹ In a highly self-reflexive film from the second *noir* cycle, Arthur Penn's *Night Moves*, the hero Harry Moseby (Gene Hackman) is, in contrast, a three-dimensional character trapped, at least on one level, in a two-dimensional film universe, which in turn mirrors the character's entrapment in a web of visual and narrative patterns that he cannot see.

Film noir is, to a large extent, a response to or reflection of a deep-laid pessimism in our lives, and it intrigues me how, in the nineties, the *noir* pessimistic sensibility is being played out. And how is that? Coolly, flatly, hiply, self-referentially, minimally, post-modernly—or at least this is the case with the films of Tarantino and Avary. It wasn't always so, of course. Consider again *Night Moves*, a deeply pessimistic *film noir* from 1975.

In the film's second scene, Moseby comes up behind his wife in her office and covers her eyes with his hands while she says on the phone, "It's too late. It's been too late since yesterday. Let's forget the whole thing: past, present, and future." Which, if our characters could, would save them from the nightmare that follows. But they can't, of course, which only deepens the paths of their situations. Later in the film, Moseby receives a phone message from Dellie (Melanie Griffith), the young girl he has tracked down and brought home to her mother, not knowing that his finding her will soon lead to Dellie's death. Her message begins, "Bonjour, private eye. This is your last case speaking." Which it indeed is; but, again, he can't read the message correctly. In the chess game Moseby shows to Paula (Jennifer Warren), a woman who will die at the end of the film because she, too, cannot see what is coming at her, there is a Queen sacrifice and three little Knight moves needed to checkmate the King. "But," Moseby tells her, "[the player] didn't see it. He must have regretted it the rest of his life. I know I would have."

These lines may not be hip or funny, but they are meaningful and resonant and relate to the themes of knowing and seeing and the two-one/knight move/triangle pattern that visually (in the montage, in the *mise en scène*, in the camera angle) and structurally (in the geography, the narrative and character relationships) permeate the film. Enter anywhere this work of seventies *film noir* and you will find an intricate pattern of motifs that connects to its pessimism.

Or consider Robert Culp's *Hickey & Boggs*, another important work from *film noir*'s second cycle willing to exploit aural and visual techniques of cinema to give pattern and meaning to its themes. Culp's film is *noir* in daylight; that is, the *noir* world of deceit and death and desperation are now in the open, more a part of our waking than dreamed lives. Near the beginning we see the wheels of a cab send water into a drain and the cab and the drain dissolve into the sky of an overview of L.A., as the sound of a siren, an air raid siren, comes up over the city. It's 1971 and the whole world is under attack.

Two aural motifs dominate in the film: the sounds of disembodied laughter and a toilet flushing. The first functions often as a form of irony that diminishes our heroes, Hickey (Bill Cosby) and Boggs (Robert Culp). Someone out there is not smiling at them, but laugh-

ing derisively. The abstractness of this disembodied laughter casts a metaphysical chill over the film. The second, the toilet flush, with its vortical and putrefactive associations, is an apt motif for the *noir* world in *Hickey & Boggs*.

It first occurs when Hickey, visiting his estranged wife, playfully flushes the toilet while his wife is taking a shower. We see her behind red-flowered curtains; later Hickey will find her dead in her apartment, covered in blood. The second flush occurs when a prostitute is in Boggs's bathroom. She gorges, flushes the toilet, and on the flush we cut to Boggs's face as he sits at a window overlooking the city. We then cut to Boggs in his car and hear again the sound of air raid sirens. The third flush comes when Boggs, on screen in his office, says, "Nowhere to go, no clues, nothing," and Hickey, off screen, flushes the toilet. The last toilet flush is when Hickey and Boggs and their lawyer are walking down a hallway: Hickey stops and says, "I don't know." Flush. "What?" Boggs asks. Hickey: "It's time to get out." Boggs: "Out of what?" Hickey: "There's nothing left to this profession anymore. It's not about anything."

One visual analogue for this aural motif is the drain that is superimposed over the city. Another occurs in a scene when Boggs visits Mr. Leroy, a black "leader of his people." ("And where is he leading his good people?" Hickey asks. "Up Le Broya, from Watts to Bel Air," Boggs replies.) Mr. Leroy offers Boggs a chair on the veranda and says, "Go ahead. Be at home," and as Boggs sits down, the camera moves down with him to show that the veranda hangs over an abyss, the side of the mountain eaten away. The ultimate visual analogue for the toilet flushing is the L.A. Coliseum, which Culp, placing numerous cameras throughout the stadium, can present to us in a montage shootout scene as an enormous toilet bowl.

The "it" in the film's key refrain, "It's not about anything," refers on the narrative level to 1) the case our two detectives are on and 2) to their profession. On the socio-historical plane it reminds us that the violence in the world at the time (specifically the war in Vietnam, but also the violence and posturing in the protest movements in the United States) was also about nothing, or at best not what the public thought it was about. "It's not about anything" is also an accurate comment on the film industry, whose main task is to produce films with no significance or an exalted, meretricious one.

I'm not sure what *Pulp Fiction* is about except for its own artificiality. Its flashiness masks Tarantino's disinterest in (or ignorance of) how the camera and compositions can be made to mean, unlike most of the films he references. The violence of the film for me isn't found in having a mostly sympathetic character's head blown off (Vince accidentally shoots a boy they've taken in their car after the boy witnessed one of Vince and Jules's hits), but in the director's turning this into a (approximately) twenty-minute comedy routine on how to dispose of the body and clean the blood out of the car.² In the postmodernist world of *Pulp Fiction*, violence takes the place of feeling; its radical juxtapositions (of the artificial to the real, of event to response) have the effect of short-circuiting sense and affect—it flattens us.

Hickey & Boggs, on the other hand, is about something: the world is going to hell, houses hang over cliffs, *film noir* shootouts are conducted in broad daylight, and nobody seems to care. At the end of the film, after the final shootout, Hickey looks down the beach and sees people there who must have witnessed what had gone on. "Nobody came," he says. "Nobody cares," Boggs replies. Hickey: "It's still not about anything." Boggs: "Yeah, I know. You told me."

One thing that saves this film from an ultimate nihilism is the small-voiced moral stance that Boggs takes after his house has been trashed and Hickey's wife killed. "All," he tells Hickey in the bar in an attempt to rouse him out of his despair, "all—only—thing you can do is—goddamn try to even it up—make it right. Now I'm—going to go out there, and I'm gonna—get 'em." What else saves it from succumbing to its own pessimism is its intelligence and craft, its richly layered design (which I've only lightly noted here), and its sympathy for the human condition.

The darker *films noir* have been telling us for a long time that at the heart of the matter is

a blankness—as blank as the forehead of a Melvillean whale; as blank as the ground that Charlie and Uncle Charley gaze down upon as the train picks up speed at the end of *Shadow of a Doubt*; as blank as the door that slams in our faces at the end of the first shot of *The Leopard Man*; as blank as the door in the same film that locks Theresa Delgado out of her house, the door her brother and mother cannot open, but instead can only watch as the blood seeps under onto the floor.

Nihilism often is at the center of *film noir*: the explosion of cruelty in *The Big Heat*, the utter bleakness of *Detour*, the ease with which we can slip our moral (*D.O.A.*) and moral (*Double Indemnity*) coils. There's nothing in film metaphysically bleaker or more at ground top than the ending of *Kiss Me Deadly*, that eerie scream of light and madness at ground zero. All *D.O.A.*'s Frank Bigelow can do is tell his story and die, and at the end of *Night Moves* Harry Moseby, shot in the leg, unable to reach the controls of the boat going in circles out in the Gulf, will never reach home.

It's a killer style, all right. And as I wrote that sentence, I heard the scrape of my neighbor's shoe along the sidewalk. She's a little younger than I, a mother of three, a former social worker, who, a few years ago, was shot in the eye as she was taking groceries out of her car at seven in the evening; her shoe scrapes because she can't lift her right foot anymore. The best *films noir* would be neither indifferent to what happened to her nor see anything comic in it. Instead they would find the cinematic means to make manifest the inexplicability and terror of human existence.³

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Notes

¹ While E. Coyote's situation, however, seems to possess more conflict (and truth and meaning) than the situation of Samuel Jackson's Jules. See, for a good account of the metaphysical dimension of the Road Runner cartoons, Richard Thompson's "Meep Meerp," *Movies and Methods* Vol. 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 126-34.

² In contrast, consider the murder of the mobster's girl who can't act in Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway*, where we laugh (and it is funny in the film) at the death of a comic figure and then are made to pay for our laughter; i.e., we are forced to consider the moral implications of anyone's murder, no matter how sympathetic or unsympathetic he or she is.

³ I would like to thank Chris Jeanson, Mike Stone, Linda Francis, James Welsh, and Susan Bernofsky for sharing their thoughts with me on *Pulp Fiction*, which helped me to form my own.