

## Postmodern "Pulp Fiction"

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In his movie "Pulp Fiction," director Quentin Tarantino presents a character - Butch, a down and out boxer who decides not to throw a fight, never dreaming what that decision will lead to - who represents a subversion of a classic pulp fiction cliché. The character doesn't conform to the established hierarchy of what it means to be "good" or "bad," all black or all white. Rather, he inhabits the grey area in between, where moral absolutes are meaningless and expected behavior patterns are turned inside out; a postmodern individual in a postmodern world.

Butch is introduced to us, as noted, as an over the hill boxer who initially accepts money from "underworld kingpin" Marselis Wallace to "go down in the fifth." He changes his mind, however, and decides to renege on the deal. This is a standard convention of the pulp fiction genre: the washed-up fighter who chooses not to throw the fight and therefore shows himself to be a good person with a good heart. What isn't standard is the behavior he exhibits during and after the fight. Having made his decision, Butch proceeds to beat his adversary to death in the ring, though initially he is unaware of that fact. Knowing Wallace will surely kill him for changing his mind, he flees, taking a cab. When he learns the fate of the other fighter, he is indifferent. Asked by the cabbie how it feels to know he's killed another man "with your bare hands," he replies, "I don't feel anything. I didn't know it when it happened but now that I know I don't feel anything." Later, he says "fuck him, he never should have been in the ring anyway." Hardly the reaction of your typical pulp fiction, washed-up boxer with a heart of gold. More, not only does Butch keep the money Marselis Wallace gave him to take the dive, but twenty minutes after the fight he's on the phone with his bookie, collecting on all the bets they laid down - bets made *knowing* he wasn't about to throw the fight. So, as much as pride is a motivating factor for Butch (something that will become even clearer), greed is a significant

facet of his psychological make-up as well. He even tips the cab driver a hundred dollars to keep her mouth shut. Evidently, a person who's not exactly above moral reproach.

When Butch returns to the motel room where his girlfriend Fabianna waits for him, he demonstrates two more characteristics inconsistent with the lovable loser cliché; the capacity for sudden, explosive violence (already demonstrated by the lethal blows administered to his unfortunate opponent) and a compulsive recklessness, something he showed by risking death in cheating the millionaire drug-dealer Wallace, and again by getting himself so whipped up in a frenzy that he pummeled the other fighter to death. In the hours he spends with his girlfriend at the motel, they talk and laugh and prepare for bed like any couple might. When they make love, Butch is even willing to perform oral sex for Fabianna, which is significant because it shows that he's sensitive enough to be considerate of her desires, able to give pleasure as well as receive it, and thus possesses more depth than the simplistic, one-dimensional macho characteristics often prescribed by pulp fiction convention. Butch never utters the words "come to Papa," or "fuck me, baby," either, further illustrating that the standard pulp fiction theme of heterosexual boxers behaving in the prescribed macho fashion doesn't apply to him. Upon learning that she has neglected to pack his father's watch, his most cherished possession, however, his pleasant demeanor swiftly evaporates. Unable to locate the watch in their travel bags, his irritation escalates into a full-blown rage within the span of perhaps fifteen seconds, his chipper mood suddenly replaced by snarling menace. Turning to his girlfriend and shouting accusations, he hoists a television set into the air and sends it flying across the room; Fabianna scrambles for the safety of the corner by the bed as the TV crashes summarily to the floor. But just when we think he might strike her - an act that would certainly tip the moral scales as to whether he's a "good guy" or a "bad guy" - Butch controls himself with effort and actually calms down.

After collecting himself, he decides to return to the apartment they've abandoned to retrieve the watch - even though he knows that if caught by Marselis Wallace's "associates," he'll be killed.

While the prospect of losing his life is not lost on him, he nonetheless feels compelled to reclaim the watch, motivated by an irrational but quite human sentimentality, and recklessly driven in a way that overthrows hackneyed genre stereotypes; his very irrationality underscores the paradox of what it is to be fully human, lifting the movie out of the province of cheap pulp fiction and into the realm of literature.

Entering his old apartment surreptitiously, Butch does, indeed, obtain the prized wristwatch. Though he could have very easily left it at that, he determines instead to take a look around the place, to see if anyone has been there looking for him. Again, his recklessness reveals itself: Butch not only looks around, he decides to have a pop-tart as well. Once more he cannot seem to resist tempting fate with his actions, a paradoxical, perverse human trait if ever there was one. And sure enough, his eyes spy an automatic rifle - the kind hit-men use - just as he hears the bathroom toilet flush. Yet another shade of grey is added to this formerly black and white pulp cliché as he grabs the gun, calmly waits for the vulnerable hit-man to emerge from the bathroom, looks him dead in the eye, and (as the pop-tarts spring comically from the toaster) shoots the man at near point-blank range without missing a beat. There is no hint of remorse, only satisfaction. Are these the actions of a "washed up fighter with a heart of gold," the "lovable loser" of pulp fiction convention?

Butch then exits the apartment, returns to his car, and gleefully heads for home, congratulating himself on a job well done ("That's how you beat 'em, Butch; they always underestimate ya"), and singing "Flowers On the Wall" along with the car radio. Things are definitely looking *up*. Looking up, that is, until Butch stops at an intersection, still grooving, and looks absently out the window to his left for a long moment, waiting for the light to change. When he returns his gaze front and center, who does he see crossing the street in front of him? It's Marselis Wallace, the drug-dealing millionaire- mobster he's cheated out of a healthy chunk of change (killing the big man's boxer in the process).. A look of shocked recognition and disbelief crosses his face, which lasts precisely as long as

it takes for Mr. Wallace to go through the identical process, and then Butch takes another step away from his one-dimensional, good guy roots by stepping down on the car's accelerator - hard. In a crucial moment where he could have backed the car up and drove away from Marselis Wallace without turning back, instead he does the impulsive, irrational, and very human thing: he attempts to run the man down. This is a split-second decision, the kind we are often forced to make in life. Sometimes, we make the wrong decision, the kind we know will lead to unfortunate results, but we make it anyway. There is no accounting for such behavior; it isn't nice and neat, it's messy. It isn't black and white, it's grey. This is the complicated, ambiguous nature with which director Tarantino invests his character, the stuff not of simplistic pulp fiction, but of real life.

Though he certainly gave it his best, Butch is dismayed to learn - as he sits nursing a broken nose in the car he's crashed - that Marselis Wallace is not dead. Marselis Wallace, in fact, has drawn a shaky gun and is in hot pursuit of *him*. The situation has changed radically, in the blink of an eye. The woman who had come to his aid with ice for his broken nose is shot as she stands next to his car. But there's no time to return the favor; a man is chasing him with a gun, after all. So he leaves her there to fend for herself, as all honorable pulp fiction boxers do, and concerns himself instead with dragging his bruised and battered ass the hell out of there, away from the angry man with the big gun. The fact that as one chases after the other, Butch and Marselis Wallace are *both* bruised and battered - both weakened and vulnerable - also subverts the pulp fiction convention that each, as a powerful masculine presence squaring off against an adversary, should be in complete control of himself. That is not the case here, and the loss of personal power and control foreshadows what is yet to come.

Then, running into a pawn shop where he knows Wallace will follow, Butch lays in wait to surprise him. He actually succeeds at this, wrestling the big man to the floor and punching him repeatedly in the face. In the heat of the moment, and with all that has already happened between them (both

directly and indirectly), it's readily apparent that Butch is quite willing to kill him right there, right then, with his bare hands. One detail mitigates against that scenario, however. There's a red-neck with a shotgun behind the counter. He knocks Butch out and picks up the phone. "The spider just caught a couple of flies," he says... The next thing Butch knows, he and Wallace are bound and gagged in the basement of the little store, the red-neck with the shot-gun now joined by another red-neck with a badge - (!) - named Zed. "Better bring out the Gimp," says Zed to the store-owner. "The Gimp's asleep," he replies. "Well," Zed counters commandingly, "*you'll just have to wake him up.*"

The store-owner goes to the door behind Butch and Wallace. Neither can move an inch to see what he's doing, choking on their own saliva and unable to swallow. As they hear the store-owner open three, perhaps four different locks in a back room, their eyes grow wide with fear and anxiety over what might be behind those locks. Both men are now utterly helpless, their loss of control complete. They have no control over their environment, no control, even, over their own bodies. The pulp fiction convention of powerful, autonomous men who are readily able to defend themselves has been totally, irrevocably subverted (1). Then the store-owner brings out... the Gimp. The Gimp is a man dressed from head to toe in leather and sado-masochistic gear. The store-owner leads him to Zed - who sits opposite Butch and Wallace - on a chain, bringing him to heel like an obedient dog at Zed's feet. It is apparent that the Gimp lives here, a willing slave. Was this always so, or was this repulsive creature once an innocent fly, a normal person who had a particularly unlucky day? Wallace's eyes are practically popping out of his head. Then Zed and the store-owner take Marselis Wallace into the back room, leaving the Gimp to stand guard over Butch. The door slams shut. Butch hears shouting and grunts, the painful cries of a helpless man being humiliated, being raped. After freeing his hands, Butch clouts the Gimp, leaving him unconscious, and beats a hasty retreat. He is almost out the door - in fact through it - when he stops, listening to the sounds of torture emanating from the basement below. Every instinct toward survival urges him to leave, *now*, and

forget about Marselis Wallace. He could keep the money, get out of town, and never have to look over his shoulder again. Wallace would be dead and that would be that. Going back to save the man who wanted to kill him would of course put his own life at risk. But something within him - something beyond reason and quite complex, something far exceeding the usual bounds of pulp fiction convention -- tells him to try. And so he does. Stealthily making his way back down to the chamber of horrors, Butch creeps up on the store-owner (rapt with attention and vicarious thrills as Zed rapes Marselis) and cuts a swath down the middle of his chest as the man turns too late to face him. Zed pulls out and away as the store-owner staggers behind Butch, who takes great pleasure in running him through one last time.

If one requires proof that director Quentin Tarantino is completely deconstructing the genre of pulp fiction and placing it in a thoroughly postmodern context, than here it is. One may scour old fiction magazines and cheap paperbacks for scenes like that depicted above, and it is unlikely in the extreme that a credible match will be found. The "washed- up boxer with a heart of gold" of traditional pulp fiction doesn't have moral dilemmas about rescuing a mortal enemy, *enjoy* killing, or find himself confronted by an S & M version of *Deliverance*. More, Butch saves Marselis Wallace by doing the "right" thing, something that makes him "good." But he finds pleasure in killing the store-owner. Does this make him "bad"? Previously, two others have died at his hands, yet feelings of guilt are noticeably absent. He can be affectionate and giving with his girlfriend one moment, suddenly violent toward her the next. In deciding not to throw the fight, Butch demonstrates pride, but is strongly motivated by greed as well. He is reckless and impulsive as he recovers his watch, when he attempts to run Marselis Wallace down, and finally, when he decides to risk his own life to save Wallace. What, then, are we to make of him? Is Butch a faithful representation of a pulp fiction cliché, the boxer who decides not to throw the fight? In my view, he displays a richness and complexity of character - not solely black or white, instead drawn in subtle shades of grey, not uniformly good or bad, but an ambiguous mixture of both - that *transcends* the genre stereotype.

Tarantino makes him live and breath like a real human being, with idiosyncrasies and foibles, grand flaws and redeeming qualities. Butch is not a predictable pulp fiction cliché, but rather an unpredictable mass of convoluted and often conflicted feelings and impulses, someone trying to get by and do the best he can under increasingly bizarre circumstances. In short - a "postmodern individual in a postmodern world."

1. The watch that Butch inherited from his father has a unique history. While being held in a POW camp during the Vietnam War, Butch's dad (who received the watch from *his* Grandfather) kept the watch in a place he was sure the enemy could not find it - up his ass. The man who eventually brought the watch to the young Butch, a fellow prisoner of war, also kept the watch secreted in the same local after Butch's father was killed. This succession can be viewed in psychological terms.: The anus is often viewed as an instrument of control, i.e. the ability of an individual to excrete or not to excrete through conscious acts of the will. The term "anal-retentive" refers to this ability to control through autonomous will, and more, is linked with the human *compulsion* to control what is unknown and feared. It is held in some quarters that the tendency toward control, toward being "anal-retentive," is exhibited more by men than women. With that general background, one can theorize that the watch, a treasured memento valued by Butch's grandfather and father, symbolizes an accumulated masculinity, an object imbued by its history ( carried as it has been through several wars, passed down by dint of personal courage and sacrifice) with definite prescriptions about "what it means to be a man." Yet, the furtive "mode of transport" - from anus to anus in stressful, anxiety-laden circumstances - suggests an uncontrolled, insecure exchange of masculine values from father to son. The subtext of tension, anxiety and insecurity is therefor present in the history of how the watch came to Butch. Coupled with the loss of his father, was this history then internalized subconsciously, leading him into situations in which there is an inevitable loss of personal control over his own life? How did the history of the watch, with its myriad levels of hidden significance, effect Butch's psycho-emotional development? We cannot know for sure, of course, but the premise is worthy of discussion.