

*[Pulp Fiction is] disgusting, violent, repellent, dangerous to young and unformed minds, childish, irrational, horrible, agonising, and distressingly like something out of a Nazi nightmare where human beings are subjected to every degradation just for the hell of it."* - Mary Kenny, the Daily Mirror

There has been much controversy, debate, and ferocious difference of opinion in the world of modern cinema, in regards to the boundaries, or at certain times lack thereof, in regards to violence, language, racism, and other themes deemed wildly inappropriate and extremely negatively influential on society's youth in films. No director in modern cinema has been simultaneously criticized and applauded so intensely for his work in regards to this difference of opinions and beliefs. The fear within society that Tarantino's work, most significantly "Pulp Fiction" and "Natural Born Killers" in regards to this essay, is a gross and perverted display of, most prominently, violence, leads to the more substantial questioning of human nature, and our highly contrasting reactions in relation to what we see unfold before us on a movie screen, and the corruption that surrounds us in reality.

"Pulp Fiction", when released in 1994, was one of the most controversial films in recent history, receiving intensely adoring critical acclaim for writer-director Quentin Tarantino's distinctively signature dialogue and the highly stylized and surreal world in which his characters were set free to cause chaos, alongside scathing reviews damning the film as utterly grotesque and unacceptable, focusing on the excess of blood and racism among other things. Often this extreme difference of opinions resulted in serious clashes in beliefs and attitudes between lovers and haters of the film. As Tarantino collected the Palme d'Or, for example, the highest prize awarded at the Cannes Film Festival, a woman in the audience relentlessly screamed out "fasciste," meaning fascist, throughout his acceptance speech.

The reason for such condemnation of "Pulp Fiction" is due mainly to the violence within the movie, as well as the multiple other scenes that deal with extremely ugly concepts, such as a drug overdose, a car crash, homosexual rape, and a religious conversion. The two characters who cause the most violence in the movie are hitmen Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield, who firstly shoot several young men who have wronged their boss, Marsullus Wallace, taking the only man to survive with them after Jules experiences an epiphany and somewhat moral awakening, realising the wrong in his profession, only to have Vincent accidentally shoot the survivor in the head while they are driving away. Other violent events are Vincent's death at the hands of boxer Butch Coolidge, who shoots him as he emerges from the bathroom with a submachine gun. Arguments against the film stated that this bloodshed was unnecessary, and most significantly that young viewers of the film would inevitably be affected negatively, causing them to become more violent individuals and potentially take part in acts of this nature. The most compelling argument for this case relates more significantly to another film, "Natural Born Killers", whose screenplay Quentin Tarantino wrote. The plot focuses on a married couple of serial killers, Mickey and Mallory Knox, who embark upon a killing spree, murdering people with no real motive or conscience. The film allegedly influenced a large amount of "copycat killings," murders in which the criminals had watched "Natural Born Killers" multiple times and had expressed its influence upon them. The most famous of these murders is the Columbine High School massacre, in which the two murderers used the initials "NBK" as their code, and one wrote, "When I go NBK and people say things like 'Oh, it was so tragic,' or 'oh he is crazy!'

or 'It was so bloody', just because your mommy and daddy told you blood and violence is bad, you think it's a law of nature?"

However there are several arguments against this negative perception of the violence in Tarantino's films. Firstly, anyone who has the intention, which they act upon, to murder another person undoubtedly has psychological issues deeper than seeing blood on a movie screen. Many of the killers who are associated with Tarantino's work have had various other problems within their lives that have led them to that point of destruction, such as depression, drugs, alcohol, or suffering from abuse at either the hands of their parents, or have been victim to the venomous bullying ever present for many teenagers in their most vulnerable years. Furthermore the violence displayed in "Pulp Fiction" is in no way treated with the same glamour as it is in many modern films. Tarantino in no way seeks to make murder more accessible to his audience, but rather he attempts to display to them the reality of death, often tragically. His characters do not fall to the ground after being shot, silent and accepting, looking impeccable without a hair out of place or a speck of blood on their bodies. Rather they suffer, and suffer, and suffer, almost serving as a wake up call to the audience that death, while a human obsession which is displayed prominently in countless films, is ugly and terrifying, not immaculate and comprehensible. Tarantino has stated, "For some people the violence is a mountain they can't climb [...] But I am affecting them. I wanted that scene to be disturbing."

The nonlinear sequence that the story of "Pulp Fiction" is told in means that even after characters die, they appear again, later in the film but earlier in their lives, completely naive to their impending doom, showing the unpredictability of death and leading to the second potential agenda of Tarantino's realistic approach to violence, which is to display to the audience the fragility of life, and the complete lack of control anyone is capable of having over the knowledge of when theirs might come to an end. As Damien Hirst titled one of his pieces in 1992, the physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living is a concept Tarantino explores, manipulating the audience into emotionally connecting with his characters only to pull them away, then have them reappear hours before their demise, with the audience unable to both awaken them to this inevitability, forcing them to consider the instability of life itself.

Furthermore it can be argued that the real threat felt be people offended by the film is one of the potential within anyone to mutate into a killer, or any other criminal. The humanizing of the characters within the surreal world "Pulp Fiction", displayed, for example, through the now infamous conversation between the two hit-men of the French equivalents of various McDonald's products, means that hit-men are no longer the faceless, nameless men who don't exist if you choose to shield yourself from them. You are constantly reminded that they are real people, and speak about such comparatively normal things in relation to their professions, explaining what a pilot episode of a television show is, or debating who can give a better foot massage. In the mind of the audience any stranger in the theatre amongst them, eating popcorn and discussing the mundane, could simultaneously be guilty of indescribable crimes, and this concept is one of extreme danger to certain people, who are somehow able to consciously make themselves unaware, or intentionally ignorant of so much of the evil that, should you choose to look for it, appears to dominate the world. A character in Martin Scorsese's 2010 film "Shutter Island", adapted from the book of the same name declares at one point "there is no moral order at all. There is only this--can my violence conquer yours?"

In addition Tarantino has said that his movies contain such graphic violence

because "Violence is one of the most cinematic things you can do with film." He has also said that it is present because it never fails to deliver an injection of adrenaline into the audience, to dramatically raise the level of thrill and excitement within a film. If this is true, which when considering any average audience's reaction to film violence seems quite likely, it creates yet another angle to consider the argument, which is that of, essentially, supply and demand. If there was no desire whatsoever to watch violence unfold on a movie screen, undoubtedly Tarantino would be forced, or would more probably willingly abandon his approach. In addition, in reality much of the violence in Tarantino's films is implied as opposed to displayed obviously, showing how the audience creates as much of the blood and gore as Tarantino does, with him essentially setting up situations in which the viewer's imagination is allowed to concoct whatever outcome it wishes, and is often set free by the uninhibiting factor of Tarantino's work to produce a continuation of which ever scene it was without bias or limitations. Tarantino is true in his claim that violence, like no other factor in film, such as a romantic twist or a hilarious joke, has the ability to penetrate the facade of the viewer and, simply due to human nature, create a sense of thrill. This, therefore, says much more about the audience than the artist, proving that we are, as is also stated in "Shutter Island," "men of violence." Regardless of what actions have been made by any person, we are all living in an environment that thrives on, and is defined by violence and corruption.

Therefore the question is essentially why so many people are easily offended and made to feel uneasy and uncomfortable by the violence and other negative themes within cinema, yet are able to live their days in knowing ignorance of the overwhelming tragedy and corruption within the world. Hunter S. Thompson once wrote "Who is the happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived, or he who has stayed securely on the shore and merely existed?" Unfortunately too many people are satisfied with consciously choosing to be the latter, and blind themselves to the terrifying reality of life in the 21st Century. We complain about excessive violence in films and on television, yet treat news stories of murdered teenagers and drug crime with nonchalance due to its overwhelming penetration into the public consciousness to the point of exhaustion, causing people to psychologically transform today's horrors into events which they can approach with an air of normalcy. In some cases people, through exposing themselves to movies, consciously enable themselves to become distanced and desensitized from the danger that they are aware exists. The existence of danger, of people with no other personal intention in life other than to cause chaos to the best of their ability, is one that is terrifying and extreme, yet true. The fact that they are not dressed like, for example, the Joker, hideously altered in appearance so as to appear as a living cartoon significantly heightens the chilling and sinister elements of their existence. They appear more like, for example, the simultaneous protagonist and antagonist, Patrick Bateman, as he is displayed in the first two thirds of Bret Easton Ellis' novel "American Psycho," which was adapted into a film in 2000. The criminals that walk amongst us, while perhaps are the poor, unemployed, lonely and depressed, are also the rich, beautiful, successful and intelligent, as shown by Bateman a wealthy, young Harvard graduate who works as a vice president on Wall Street. The book shows Bateman describe his life and the activities he takes part in, which range from the generic and normal, such as renting movies to the, slightly more extreme, tales of committing brutal violence. As Wes Craven once said, "Movies don't make psychos. They just make psychos more creative."

In conclusion, these threats of danger are present in much more significantly

powerful ways than local murderers, for example the wars currently taking place in the Middle East, and the conspiracy theories that accompany such events, and the commercialism and ever more unclear lines of right and wrong, especially with consideration to for example, the adequacy of the President of the United States, as criticized by vast numbers of people. The existence of racism, which while on the surface appears to have almost been eradicated, but which is still present beneath the surface and behind the facade held up by the close-minded, incapable of abandoning their now ancient ignorance. The prejudice against certain lifestyles, particularly homosexuality, as shown by the support on the surface, but deep disapproval beneath, of gay marriage. All of these things are present in society, yet are overlooked due to the pain and tragedy which haunts each person who is confronted with evil everyday and, even just for a second, allows the reality of the pain and suffering enter their consciousness. The condemnation of Quentin Tarantino's movies is potentially due to this concept: that young people are inexperienced and somewhat blissfully naive to reality, whereas as time passes they are consistently reminded that life is terrifying enough without having to get their thrills vicariously through film. However we must ask confront ourselves once again with the fact that the state of the world is absolutely a reflection of the people that make it up, and as Shakespeare writes in Julius Caesar, "the people get the government they deserve." The fear of the ever-present media and its negative effects is inevitably irrelevant. We are violent in nature, no matter how much we attempt to hide from this fact. Despite the fact that we are complex and with the potential to evolve and adapt to the ever changing and improving sophisticated world we create around us, we are still violent. And in such a society that we live in it seems there is inevitably only this--can my violence conquer yours?