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Pulp Fiction: A Modern Classic

The film *Pulp Fiction* is one of the best films of all time. I consider it to be a “modern classic,” because of its superb cast, unparalleled cinematography, off-beat editing style, and excellent writing. Released in 1994, the film is directed by Quentin Tarantino, written by Tarantino and Roger Avery, and features an all-star cast. Christopher Null, a writer for American Movie Classics' FilmCritic.com, calls the film “a rare masterpiece that is unlikely to be repeated by him, or his imitators.”

The all-star cast, several of whom received Academy Award nominations for Best Actor, really make the film work. Some of the cast, like Bruce Willis and Christopher Walken, were household names before starring in *Pulp Fiction*. Many of the others didn't have much of a career up until starring in the film, including Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman, and Ving Rhames. Many feel that these actors owe their careers to this film. John Travolta, whose career had all but fizzled out, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his role as Vincent Vega. His performance in *Pulp Fiction* single-handedly catapulted him into super-stardom.

Besides the superb acting, the film was shot with many different methods to keep the audience engaged with the story. The “subjective camera” is used many times throughout the film, simulating what the character sees, while giving the viewer a much more powerful

connection to what the other character is saying. This style of filming, also called the point-of-view shot, was introduced in the much-loved *Citizen Kane*, which was nominated for an academy award for cinematography (Dirks 1). Tarantino uses other filming methods that writer/director Orson Welles made popular in *Citizen Kane*, such as low angle shots and long takes (Dirks 1). The low angle shots were used to show multiple characters and ceilings in the scenes, giving them a more dramatic effect. A good example of this is the scene where Vincent is talking with Lance during the heroin deal. The low angle makes the characters look larger than life by “distort[ing] compositional lines and creat[ing] a more forceful perspective” (Mascelli 41). Long takes, where the camera is rolling for long periods of time without cutting, is one of Tarantino's trademarks. It gives the feeling of continuity, as the character is constantly moving, such as the scene where Butch goes back to get his watch from his apartment – this scene was filmed all in one shot.

Another thing that is interesting about *Pulp Fiction* is that it employs a non-linear editing style, originally made popular by *Citizen Kane*, for which it received an Academy Award nomination for Best Film Editing (Dirks 1). This means that instead of telling the story linearly (A, then B, then C), it is told in a different order, such as A, C, then B. Roger Ebert writes that “The movie's circular, self-referential structure is famous... [and] the scenes do not follow in chronological order, but the dialogue always knows exactly where it falls in the movie.” This method of storytelling gets the point across, but leaves the viewer wanting more. If the story were told linearly, it would not have had the same impact, as “we expect the gangster story to proceed according to tradition—crime, rise, fall—this doesn't happen. The crime section is undermined by a debate between the two main characters—Travolta and Jackson” (Dancyger

395). In fact, the editing was so good that it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Film Editing (*Pulp Fiction* (1994) – Awards).

Apart from good editing, *Pulp Fiction*, like most of Tarantino's films, is all about the dialogue. The dialogues between the characters are a huge draw of the film. The characters “pop” out of the screen with their long drawn-out conversations and witty banter. The movie has many memorable lines in just about every scene. Most of these lines are spoken by Jules, played by Samuel L. Jackson, including the biblical executioner’s monologue, the talk with Brett and his “Big Kahuna Burger,” and of course the “Royale with Cheese” discussion between him and Vincent. Laurie Kellogg of Nobodywritesitbetter.com writes “Witty repartee doesn’t just happen. It takes revising and polishing to perfect the thrust and parry of the ping-pong dialogue that makes our characters’ conversations larger than life.” No one plays this “ping-pong” better than Tarantino and Avery in *Pulp Fiction*.

The scene that brings everything together, from the acting by the skillful cast, the excellent filming, and the intense dialogue, is the scene where Mia is overdosing and Vincent takes her to Lance’s house for an adrenaline shot to revive her. The scene is shot with a hand-held camera, which makes the viewers feel like they’re part of the scene. The characters are very believable and the tension runs very high while waiting for Vincent to give the injection. The dialogue between Lance, played by Eric Stoltz, and Judy, played by Rosanna Arquette, in the part where they’re screaming at each other makes the scene very intense. The camera pans quickly back and forth between them delivering the lines, giving the impression that the viewer is standing in the room with the characters, seeing everything that's going on in the room as a bystander would.

Many film buffs consider *Pulp Fiction* to be one of the best movies to be released in recent years. I would argue that it is one of the best movies of all time, and should be considered a “modern classic,” because of its outstanding cast, first-rate cinematography, critically-acclaimed editing, and top-notch writing. If you haven't had the pleasure of viewing the film, you owe it to yourself to watch it (at least twice) and immerse yourself into the icon of pop culture that is *Pulp Fiction*.

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