



How Pulp Fiction Changed Cinema

Sarah Crompton (writing in The Telegraph)

I would have loved to have been at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994 when, two days before the end of the festival, Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction was greeted with a mixture of shock and awe on its way to becoming only the fourth American film to win the Palme d'Or.

But I was in a London cinema, some four months later, at one of the early British screenings, sitting slightly closer to the front than I wanted because of the scrum to get in, excited and nervous about what I was about to see. At that point the British censor was still refusing to give Tarantino's debut Reservoir Dogs a video certificate and, being squeamish about blood, I had resisted seeing it in the cinema.

But Pulp Fiction blew me away. It marked the first time I had even glimpsed male rape on screen, and certainly my first encounter with a man sticking a needle of adrenalin into a girl's heart to save her from a drug overdose. But the sheer cleverness of Tarantino's film, the dialogue that was about nothing and everything, its dislocated narrative structure and its bright beauty were exhilarating.

One of the things that is hardest, looking to the cultural landmarks of the past, is to see them through the eyes of their time. What's striking now about the response to Pulp Fiction then is how unprepared anyone was for its impact. Clever Roger Ebert, legendary film critic for the Chicago Sun-Times, hedged his bets by announcing after the Cannes screening that it was either "one of the year's best films or one of the worst".

It arrived in competition with another American movie that overshadowed it: Alan Rudolph's Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle, much touted and talked about at the time, but little remembered or mourned now.

But once it was screened, it took the headlines, although early reactions concentrated on two things. First, critics asked whether Cannes – with a jury chaired by Clint Eastwood – was dumbing down, allowing this brash new director to triumph over quieter, more established talents such as Krzysztof Kieslowski (who was presenting Rouge, the final film in his Three Colours trilogy), Iran's Abbas Kiarostami and China's Zhang Yimou.

Second, people were agog at the casual violence – the notorious sadomasochistic torture section, the multiple shootings – seen and implied. In his review for the Telegraph, Hugo Davenport argued "it is not that violence in films is wrong per se, nor that it requires knee-jerk censorship. It's that extremes need a justification beyond being gourmet garbage for jaded gluttons." There was a real concern that such violence could corrupt and maim an entire society.

The fact that it looks relatively understated – though still shocking – when you watch it now shows how much Pulp Fiction has changed the film landscape, spawning so many imitators that the oddball became mainstream.

To understand that, you only have to look at that year's awards season where



Tarantino's gory brilliance lost out to Forrest Gump in the Oscars, and was challenged by Robert Redford's Quiz Show – a more measured examination of American mores. In the French Césars, it was Four Weddings and a Funeral that took the top prize.

All of these movies have their merits, but none made girls want to wear deep puce nail varnish in tribute to Uma Thurman, or to dance like John Travolta, or to be as witty and smart as the film's low-life, high-concept dialogue.

Pulp Fiction was, as Janet Maslin wrote in The New York Times, "a thermodynamic miracle, that is both the hottest and coolest film of the year". You can extend that over two decades and not exaggerate its appeal.

Returning to it now, you can see that it has the defining quality of a classic: it looks simultaneously modern and timeless. It is the film, above all others, in which Tarantino staked his claim as what one critic called the "in-your-face" auteur.

It still stands, I think, as his masterpiece because in it he used all of his fascination with movies to fashion an entirely new tale, one weighted with morality and insight. For all its violence, it is a film in which decency is rewarded, and the choices people make have consequences they must live with – or die from.

None of Tarantino's subsequent films, and few of those made by his many imitators, has achieved quite such depth – or such shiny, hard-edged glory.