Shepherding the Weak: The Ethics of Redemption in Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction

Although a number of critics in the popular press\(^1\) laud Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) for its non-linear narrative, quirky performances, and oddly resonant dialogue regarding such issues as hamburgers, television pilot episodes, and foot massages, critics in other circles such as Anthony Lane (*The New Yorker*) and Tom Whalen (*Literature/Film Quarterly*) deride Tarantino's creation for its extreme violence and lack of moral clarity. In "Degrees of Cool," Lane maligns the film for the director's over-arching reliance upon pop-cultural minutiae and its "blank morality and wicked accoutrements" (97), while in "Film Noir: Killer Style," Whalen argues that *Pulp Fiction* functions upon a cinematic tableau devoid of meaning and further suggests that the characters who populate Tarantino's oeuvre live in a world that operates beyond the strictures of morality. Whalen writes, "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" (2). Such critical assessments of the film, however, neglect to account for the remarkably palpable elements of metamorphosis involved in the redemption of the character who functions largely as *Pulp Fiction*’s moral axis, Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson). His dramatic struggle with the notion of divine intervention in the film’s final reel—in addition to the ethical crises that confront Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) as he maneuvers through *Pulp Fiction*’s labyrinthine middle-third—belie any rudimentary evaluation of the film as a morally vacuous vehicle that emphasizes Tarantino’s lust for the flashy entrails of pop culture over the sublime qualities of artistic substance.

By using the interpretive strategies established by the ongoing project of ethical criticism, promulgated by such figures as Wayne Booth, Martha C. Nussbaum, and J. Hillis Miller, we will reveal the manner in which Tarantino utilizes the otherwise mundane moments of conversation and reflection in the lives of gangsters—perennially employed as mere plot devices in the annals of American cinema, but rarely depicted as fully realized characters engaging in workaday human experience—as a means for exploring ethical and
philosophical questions regarding faith, morality, commitment, and the human community. In his prodigious volume, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Booth advocates a form of criticism that examines a work of art in order to discover and make explicit the moral sensibility informing that work. If we are to accept the proposition that narratives reflect human experience while at the same time they affect human experience, that narratives are both a product of the social order and help establish and maintain that social order, it becomes clear that—in its desire to examine the moral and ethical nature of a work of art—ethical criticism establishes an important bond between the life of the narrative and the life of the reader. Patricia Meyer Spacks contends that while fictional narratives offer opportunities for ethical reflection, they are not imperatives for behavior; rather, according to Spacks, “paradigms of fiction provide an opportunity for moral playfulness: cost-free experimentation” (203). While the conditions of the visual experience inherent in film underscore the remarkable power of narratives to impinge upon human experience, or what Spacks calls the “experience of agency or its illusion” (203), those experiences acquired through cinematic representation—although powerful and affecting—may be understood as activities that afford experimentation, the trying on of new possibilities without the finality or consequences of life beyond the comforting walls of the cineplex.

Although *Pulp Fiction*’s detractors might balk at the very notion of “cost-free experimentation” within the nefarious context of the gangster milieu, as Michael Wilmington remarks, *Pulp Fiction* “doesn’t feel like the usual high-tech, nasty blood-and-guts thriller, those mercenary super-trash studio hits pumped out by Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Steven Seagal” (C). In fact, Tarantino’s film produces a mere six on-screen corpses in comparison with the nameless and faceless thousands who perish for the sake of box-office dollars and “money shots” in such films as Stallone’s *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985), Jean-Claude Van Damme’s *Cyborg* (1989), or Seagal’s *Marked for Death* (1990). Instead, surprising images of community built upon individual struggles with faith, loyalty, pride, and—perhaps even most remarkably—love resonate long after the final, accidental report of Vincent Vega’s (John Travolta) .45. As Tobin Siebers notes in *The Ethics of Criticism*, “The heart of ethics is the desire for community” (202); throughout *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino seeks to establish a community not only among his fictional characters but with his viewing audience as well. The witty repartee that many critics praise as the film’s singular strength in fact affords its audience with a pop-cultural inroad into Tarantino’s fictive world—a universe rendered even more tangible through its myriad representations of shared cultural ephemera such as the ethics of five-dollar milkshakes and the French translations of McDonald’s fare that oddly but inevitably lead to larger ontological discussions concerning the existence of God and the veracity of miracles. The uncanny ease with which Vincent and Jules traverse such topics despite their ignoble vocation finds its roots in the heritage of their (and our own) shared experiences; and, as Nussbaum notes, the search for the good human life invariably includes “joke telling, hospitality, friendship, love itself” (50).

These moments in their fictional representation afford Vincent and Jules with the trappings of verisimilitude, rendering them into fully realized human characters, rather than mere gangland caricatures. In short, we discover ourselves laughing with them while viewing Tarantino’s film because—aside from the weapons and drugs that mark their world—many of their thoughts and concerns seem so different from our own. According to Jorge Luis Borges, this cognitive phenomenon—dédoubllement, the process through which we recognize ourselves within the margins of a dramatic presentation—disconcerts us because of its implicit suggestion that we might be characters within someone else’s fiction (193-96). Tarantino’s vision finds its power in the conversations between Jules and Vincent, and with each casual connection we find ourselves caring for the inner lives of those we might ordinarily find reprehensible. For this reason, the conversion from hired killer to man-of-faith that we witness in Jules, contrasted with Vincent’s unwillingness to invest in any relationship or activity that fails to satisfy his own desires, impacts us even more profoundly. At the same time, we empathize with Vincent and his id-driven desires for personal
satisfaction and pleasure. Although we might recoil from the chilling scene in which the smiling, drugged Vincent drives through the darkness on his way to meet Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), his sudden death later in the film still possesses the power to shock and sadden us. As Lane notes, despite his narcissistic behavior, Vincent nevertheless “reminds us of the pleasures of inactivity, the deep need to hang out”—moments evinced by “the rather endearing shots of him sitting on the toilet reading Modesty Blaise” (97).

While Vincent possesses considerable on-screen charm in *Pulp Fiction*, his abiding narcissism in fact precludes his ability to experience sustained human relationships without the benefit and security of emotional distance. In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva contends “that the narcissist . . . is precisely someone incapable of love” (33); and for this reason, in *Pulp Fiction* Vincent must irrevocably reposition the mirror in an effort to reflect his own needs, deflect the desires of others, and gaze fully upon his own image. The emotional distance that Vincent’s narcissism fosters inevitably problematicizes his ability to foment human interconnection, as demonstrated by Tarantino’s depictions of Vincent’s behavior in interpersonal relationships. In short, Vincent lacks the “desire for community” of which Siebers speaks. In the first of the film’s three interwoven, achronological stories, “Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace’s Wife,” Vincent engages in friendly banter with his drug-dealer friend Lance (Eric Stoltz), yet their conversation never truly moves beyond the explicit reason for their meeting—a drug transaction to satisfy the cravings of Vincent’s addiction. The pride that motivates Vincent’s narcissistic behavior permeates the entire scene with Lance, as revealed by the bravado that Vincent evidences in his blustery descriptions of the European drug trade—“Remember, I just got back from Amsterdam” (33)—and in his later, caustic remarks about the revenge that he imagines for the vandal who damaged his prized Chevrolet Malibu: “I just wish I caught em doing it, ya know? Oh man, I’d give anything to catch em doing it. It’s been worth him doing it, if I coulda just caught em, you know what I mean?” (34)

Vincent undertakes a transaction of another sort in his dealings with Mia, the wife of his mob superior, Marsellus Wallace (Vincent Rhames). When the mob boss travels to Florida on business, he orders Vincent to spend an evening with his wife during his absence. Vincent’s principal concerns during his evening with Mia find their roots in his instinctive proclivities for satisfying his personal desires and ensuring his self-preservation. During their visit to the nostalgic 1950s-style restaurant, Jackrabbits Slim’s, Mia and Vincent amuse themselves with the same brand of playful banter that characterizes all of Vincent’s relationships. As the evening unfolds, the “couple” share a contest-winning dance and Mia penultimately invites Vincent in for a nightcap. The deliberately unhurried pace of their “date” allows Tarantino to infuse the scene with the archetypal cinematic expectation—for both the characters and for the audience—of sex. While Mia glides in the living room to the strains of Urge Overkill’s acerbic version of Neil Diamond’s “Girl, You’ll Be A Woman Soon,” Vincent retires to the bathroom for an anxious moment of ethical reflection. Literally staring at his own image in the bathroom mirror, he reminds himself of the inherent dangers awaiting him in the other room:

One drink and leave. Don’t be rude, but drink your drink quickly, say goodbye, walk out the door, get in your car, and go down the road. It’s a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that’s very meaningful. So you’re gonna go out there, drink your drink, say “Goodnight, I’ve had a very lovely evening,” go home, and jack off. And that’s all you’re gonna do. (51-52)

Despite his comments about the “meaningful” nature of fidelity and friendship, Vincent’s loyalty finds its motivation not in his affection and esteem for Marsellus, but in his fears about the mob boss’s possible retaliation for such a personal indiscretion.

As if to over-dramatize Vincent’s narcissism, Tarantino concludes their “date” with Mia’s accidental heroin overdose—an incident that requires Vincent to save her life (and his own) by stabbing Mia in the heart with an injection of adrenaline at the home of his drug dealer—rather than with the anticipated sexual encounter. At no time during this scene are we convinced that Vincent’s manic drive to save Mia’s life represents anything more than his inter-
est in self-preservation. In fact, when he calls Lance on his cellular phone his initial comments concern his own perilous dilemma, rather than Mia’s more immediate, tenuous plight: “Lance, this is Vincent, I’m in big fuckin’ trouble man, I’m on my way to your place” (55). Later, while attempting to convince the drug dealer to assist him in resurrecting Mia from her drug-induced stupor, Vincent appeals to Lance’s own desires for self-preservation: “This fucked-up bitch is Marcellus Wallace’s wife. Now if she fuckin’ croaks on me, I’m a grease spot. But before he turns me into a bar of soap, I’m gonna be forced to tell ‘im about how you coulda saved her life, but instead you let her die on your front lawn” (57).

In contrast to Vincent’s over-arching, ethically fractured drive for self-preservation, Butch’s moral sensibilities emanate from his fidelity and respect for his late father, his genuine affection for his girlfriend, Fabienne (María de Medeiros), and the humanity that he discovers within himself when confronted with the power to decide the fate of his mortal enemy. In *Pulp Fiction*’s second tale, “The Gold Watch,” Tarantino constructs an elaborate flashback—delivered in a protracted monologue by Captain Koons (Christopher Walken)—to reveal both the way that Butch, as a five-year-old, learns about the strange history of his family’s most sacred heirloom, a gold wristwatch, as well as to underscore the roots of Butch’s undying loyalty to his father’s memory. Koons relates to Butch the inordinate difficulties that three generations of Coolidge men, as well as Koons himself, endured in successive wars in order to preserve the watch for their descendants. Played to deadpan comic relief, but essential for Butch’s understanding of his predecessors’ remarkable physical sacrifices in his family’s name, Koons divulges the method of rectal transport necessary to return the watch to Butch from Vietnam.

A professional boxer by trade, Butch’s devotion to his family’s name endures a moral test *sans pareil* after Butch agrees to throw a boxing match at the behest of Marcellus. Although Butch diverges from their agreement and wins the fight—literally killing his opponent in the process—before he and Fabienne can escape from Marcellus’s henchmen and establish a new life together in a remote locale, Butch discovers that Fabienne has mistakenly left his father’s watch in their old apartment. After Butch erupts in a fury of anger at Fabienne’s forgetfulness, he tells his frightened girlfriend, “Fabienne, that was my father’s fuckin’ watch. You know what my father went through to get me that watch? I don’t want to get into to it right now but he went through a lot” (89). Upon discerning her fear, Butch attempts to comfort Fabienne after he determines that such odious behavior—“too crudely unloving and self-absorbed,” in Nussbaum’s words (210)—diverges from the genuine compassion and love that he feels for her. Thus, he assumes responsibility for the incident: “If you did leave it at the apartment, it’s not your fault. I had you bring a bunch of stuff. I reminded you about it, but I didn’t illustrate how personal the watch was to me. If all I gave a fuck about was my watch, I should’ve told you. You’re not a mind reader” (90). Determined to retrieve his father’s watch, Butch—making the ultimate sacrifice that love demands—risks his life in a daring attempt to preserve his family’s legacy. While Butch safely recovers the watch from the apartment—and, in the process of making his escape, kills Vincent with the gangster’s own machine gun—he confronts his most challenging ethical test when he must decide whether or not to spare Marcellus from sodomy and certain death at the hands of two hillbilly sadomasochists. Although he had intended to kill Marcellus himself only moments before, as Tarantino writes in his screenplay for *Pulp Fiction*, “Butch decides for the life of him, he can’t leave anybody in a situation like that” (105). He simply cannot abandon his community.

Like Butch’s, Jules’s metamorphosis leads to spiritual redemption, and, ultimately—after accepting the possibility of miracles in a postmodern world—to his disavowal of “the life.” Remarkably, Whalen describes the landscape of *Pulp Fiction* as “a cartoon world, two-dimensional characters in a two-dimensional universe” (3), while comparing Jules’s metamorphosis unfavorably with the metaphysical dimensions of Wile E. Coyote’s cartoon experience, which, Whalen claims, possesses “more conflict (and truth and meaning)” (5). Yet Whalen neglects to consider the fact that in the film’s final tale, “The Bonnie Situation,” Tarantino devotes particular narrative attention to Jules’s spiritual awakening, his protracted
and difficult struggle to understand the veracity of his own rebirth. Jules’s dramatic conversion occurs while he and Vincent carry out a professional hit for Marsellus; before they complete their errand, however, one of their targets ambushes the gangsters and empties his gun in their direction. Miraculously, they remain unscathed. Although their survival astonishes both men, Vincent refuses to acknowledge the event as anything more than a freak occurrence, while Jules views it as the product of divine intervention: “If you wanna play blind man, then go walk with a Shepherd,” Jules remarks to his sentimental partner. “But me, my eyes are wide fuckin’ open” (114). Because Jules embraces the providential nature of their good fortune, he tells Vincent that he intends to retire from their iniquitous profession. In this manner, he undergoes a “cataleptic impression”—a cognitive, philosophical phenomenon that, according to Nussbaum, “has the power, just through its own felt quality, to drag us to assent, to convince us that things could not be otherwise. It is defined as a mark or impress upon the soul” (265). For Jules, things can simply never be the same again.

After such revelations, according to Nussbaum, ethical figures discover “the feeling that the other life would just not be comprehensible as a life for a human being with human virtues and human heroism” (366). In this way, Jules realizes that he must instead quest for some other life beyond the underworld in order to test and make use of his new, transformed value system. At breakfast later that morning, Jules and Vincent pursue a philosophical debate unusual for a film of this nature, but apropos of the kind of narrative that Tarantino wishes to achieve in order to highlight, through dislocation, Jules’s complex and mysterious conversion. Jules understands the power of the miracle that he witnesses because, unlike the insular, self-motivated Vincent, he possesses the ethical faculties to heed—indeed, to “listen” to—the transformational power of their experience. As Booth notes, in such an instance the “quality of life in the moment of ‘listening’ is not what it would have been if we had not listened” (17). Jules’s recognition of the miracle, then, like the cognitive power that enables him to enjoy his cataleptic impression, affords him a “moment of clarity” virtually unavailable to the ethically vacant and emotionally deaf Vincent. As Jules remarks to Vincent, “It could be God stopped the bullets, he changed Coke into Pepsi, he found my fuckin’ car keys. You don’t judge shit like this based on merit. Whether or not what we experienced was an according-to-Hoyle-miracle is insignificant. What is significant is I felt God’s touch. God got involved” (146). But for all his self-assurance that God indeed became involved, Jules himself remains perplexed about the nature of his calling.

For this reason, Jules engages in the act of what Miller refers to as the “ethics of reading.” “At such moments,” Miller writes, “an author turns back on himself, so to speak, turns back on a text he or she has written, re-reads it” (15). As the de facto author of his own life, Jules reflects upon his past experience as text, attempting to interpret its meaning before his conversion, while seeking to decipher the text that has yet to be written. But the abrasive and unsettling terrain of Pulp Fiction does not allow Jules the opportunity for the ease of quiet, personal reflection. When the restaurant robbery—concocted spontaneously by Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer)—interrupts his contemplation, Jules thwarts their plans by holding Pumpkin at gun point: “Now this is the situation,” he tells the amateur thieves, “Normally both of your asses would be dead as fuckin’ fried chicken. But you happened to pull this shit while I’m in a transitional period” (156). Before releasing the thieves, Jules reflects upon—indeed, “re-reads”—the text of Ezekiel 25:17, a passage that he appropriated during his gangster days as a trademark conclusion to his professional hits:

> The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and goodwill, shepherds the weak through the valley of the darkness. For he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know I am the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you. (157-58)

Previously employing the passage as a means for delivering death, after the advent of his conversion Jules reinterprets the passage and discovers the horrible truth about his past existence. For the first time, Jules realizes the value of human life, and his own ability to
sustain it. "The truth is you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men." he tells the thieves. "But I'm tryin'. I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd" (158).

The redemptive act of re-reading the text of his life, then, allows Jules to glimpse for the first time the prospects of faith, hope, and love—possibilities that the stasis of his past life, in its devotion to death, could never offer. As Jules unveils his intentions to leave "the life," Vincent recoils in horror at the mere notion of existence without the comfort of material possessions: "Jules, you’re gonna be like those pieces of shit out there who beg for change. They walk around like a bunch of fuckin' zombies, they sleep in garbage bins, they eat what I throw away, and dogs piss on 'em. They got a word for 'em, they're called bums. And without a job, residence, or legal tender, that's what you’re gonna be—a fuckin' bum!" Yet Jules finds solemnity in his decision. He will simply walk the earth—"You know, like Cain in Kung Fu. Just walk from town to town, meet people, get in adventures"—and, although he pledges himself to the promise of spiritual redemption, he realizes nevertheless that such a commitment necessitates faith in the intensity of his catalytic impression, and in the unknowable ways of God: "If it takes forever, I'll wait forever," he tells Vincent (147). In this way, Tarantino establishes Jules as the moral center of his film, and, for this reason, *Pulp Fiction* 's achronological narrative takes on greater ethical force when Jules spares Pumpkin and Honey Bunny in the film's final moments. If the thieves confront Jules in the film's opening sequence, before he experiences divine intervention, they would surely meet with his wrathful, original reading of Ezekiel 25:17. Instead, Tarantino offers Jules's act of contrition, his desire to shepherd the weak. By sparing the lives of the thieves, Jules sustains the life of the community. The power of Jules's metamorphosis lies in the risk that faith demands and his discovery of what Nussbaum calls the "various and powerful" forces of love, "forces making for danger, the urgent need for protection and self-sufficiency, the opposite and equal need for joy and communication and connection" (261). Beyond the hazy lens of Tarantino's deliberately dark gangland tableau—beyond the greed, drugs, and gun blasts that Whalen so laments—*Pulp Fiction* proffers a fictional universe where miracles still happen, where love can still make a difference.

Todd F. Davis, Goshen College
Kenneth Womack, Penn State Altoona

Notes

1See, for example, Roger Ebert's rave review of the film, "One-Stop Mayhem Shop"; Janet Maslin's New York film festival review, "Quentin Tarantino's Wild Ride on Life's Dangerous Road"; Gene Siskel's brief essay, "Brilliant Dialogue Makes Violent *Pulp Fiction* Something Special"; and Michael Wilmington's laudatory review, "Bad to the Funny Bone: *Pulp Fiction* Is a Hard-Boiled Mix of Mirth, Murder." An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Twenty-First Annual Conference on Literature and Film at Florida State University in January 1996. We owe a special debt of thanks to Robert T. Self for his encouragement and advice during the production of this article.

2Nussbaum argues that ethical criticism establishes a form of community between authors and their readers, as well as among the characters in a given narrative. "A community is formed by author and readers," she writes. "In this community separateness and qualitative difference are not neglected; the privacy and the imagining of each is nourished and encouraged. But at the same time it is stressed that living together is the object of our ethical interest" (48).

3Although Lane describes Tarantino as "a chronic fetishist" who "has cooked up a world where hamburgers matter, and nothing else" (96), the director frequently employs the machinery of pop culture in his screenplays in an effort to forge a link between his audience and the ontological questions that he poses on-screen. In an earlier draft of *Pulp Fiction*, for example, Mia Wallace and Vincent Vega discuss a host of shared pop-cultural references such as *The Brady Bunch*, *The Partridge Family*, *Bewitched*, and *I Dream of Jeannie*, among others. In Tarantino's first screenplay, *True Romance* (1993), Elvis Presley (Val Kilmer) acts as Clarence Worley's (Christian Slater) spiritual mentor and mystical guide, while in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), mobsters engage in a lengthy, comedic exegesis of Madonna's "Like a Virgin."

4Vincent's sudden death at the hands of Butch in "The Gold Watch" confuses and shocks us because one of the film's principal focalizers abruptly vanishes from the narrative. Vincent's "resurrection" in the film's final tale, "The Bonnie Situation," demonstrates the manner in which *Pulp Fiction* loops back upon itself. In this way, Tarantino
employs pastiche in order to achieve dédoublement, thus creating a sense of dislocation in both the text and the audience. In such moments, Gary Saul Morson argues, "it becomes increasingly difficult to say which fiction encloses which and which reality is the real reality. The world becomes an endless layering of hypotheticals, as it may perhaps 'really' be" (153).

The genre expectations of Pulp Fiction remain problematic for many critics, as well as for its author, who himself envisioned a film written in the tradition of James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett: "I don't know how much I am actually influenced by those guys," he remarks, "but I have read them all and I like them. The idea behind Pulp Fiction was to do a Black Mask movie—like that old detective story magazine. But I just finished the script and it's really not like that at all; it kind of went somewhere else" (Reservoir Dogs xii). Whalen argues convincingly that Tarantino's film likewise fails to satisfy the conventions of film noir, which functions largely upon a sense of nihilism—a quality that Pulp Fiction ultimately transcends with its redemptive conclusion. Similarly, Ed Siegel misinterprets Tarantino's films as action movies that simply "reflect the violence of the day" with no concern for the issues of sin and redemption: "Tarantino's movies are about as smart as the Die Hard series," he concludes (3).

Works Cited


