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As I Lay Dying: Violence and Subjectivity in *Reservoir Dogs*

> They think dying by the gun is noisy enough that it must make sense and they figure it just can't hurt that much, something that noisy.[1]

Uncommonly violent films, as well as the public and critical turbulence they generate, emerge in cycles. The peak of screen mayhem that was part of the New American Cinema – and whose token conclusion arrived with Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* – left in its wake a hiatus in the evolution of violent form. Perhaps the most conspicuous legacy of the Renaissance films in the field of violence was the injection of increasingly graphic depictions into what David Robinson calls "prestige productions" that were distributed by major companies.[2] Prior to Peckinpah's challenging of the norms for rendering violence in the classical cinema, such explicit portrayals had been limited to the domain of the exploitation film. After a decade of hackneyed, comic strip carnage that offered little in the way of aesthetic experimentation or ideational novelty, the 1990s ushered in a new cycle of movie violence that has earned various monikers such as "the new brutalism", "neo-violence", and simply "new violence".[3] These nondescript labels are richly suggestive, in that they underline both the extent to which critics perceived the films in question to be genuinely innovative and the attendant lack of precision in signaling what the changes consisted in. Somehow American screen violence appeared to have re-invented itself, and *Reservoir Dogs*, according to Laurent Bouzereau, was the film that initiated this new era in

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[1] Denis Johnson: *Angels*. New York: 1983, 110.
[2] David Robinson: "Violence". *Sight and Sound*. 46.2 1977: 74–78 (76).
[3] Jim Shelley: "The Boys are Back in Town". *Guardian*. 7 Jan. 1993: 7; B. Ruby Rich: "Art House Killers". *Sight and Sound*. 2.8 1992: 5–6 (6); J. David Slocum: "Violence and American Cinema: Notes For an Investigation". J. David Slocum (ed.): *Violence and American Cinema*. New York: 2001, 1–34 (1).

movies.[4] Critics have been divisive on the question of the new wave's relation to its tradition; whereas Stephen Prince emphasizes the continuity of the 1990s violence with that of the New American Cinema,[5] Sharrett postulates a fundamental discontinuity between the two.[6]

The criticism of the Tarantino aesthetic has been almost uniformly negative, the principal indictment being the charges of shallowness and nihilism both on a formal and a moral level.[7] Lester Friedman, for example, deplores the alleged "amorality" of Tarantino's fictions,[8] whereas Henry Giroux castigates the director's films for "[emptying] violence of any critical social consequences."[9] For Ronald Bogue and Marcel Cornis-Pope, what is new about screen violence in the 1990s is "the cynical self-awareness that accompanies it," a quality they see as the product of "a disintegration of cultural values in an age of expanding communication."[10] Unsurprisingly, some of the pundits who voice the most incendiary opposition tend to use Peckinpah's treatment of violence as an analytical benchmark for an appraisal of the cinema of Tarantino and some of his contemporaries like Joel Coen, Oliver Stone, Roger Avery, and Tony Scott. "One great difference between [Peckinpah] and his imitators," Paul Seydor holds, "lies in how deeply and passionately felt his violence is, and how securely it is tied to character, to milieu, to story – in a word to meaning."[11] For Sharrett, what

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[4] Laurent Bouzereau: *Ultraviolent Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino*. Secaucus, N. J.: 1996, 71.

[5] Stephen Prince: *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*. Austin: 1998, 2.

[6] Christopher Sharrett: "Afterword. Sacrificial Violence and Postmodern Ideology". Christopher Sharrett (ed.): *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*. Detroit: 1999, 413–434 (414).

[7] See for instance Jake Horsley: *The Blood Poets: a Cinema of Savagery 1958–1999: Millennial Blue, from "Apocalypse Now" to "The Matrix"*. Lanham, Maryland: 1999, 229.

[8] Lester D. Friedman: "Introduction. Arthur Penn's Enduring Gangsters". Lester D. Friedman (ed.): *Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde*. Cambridge: 2000, 1–10 (7).

[9] Henry A. Giroux: "Pulp Fiction and the Culture of Violence". *Harvard Educational Review*, 65.2 1995: 299–314 (308). See also Kim Newman: Rev. of *Reservoir Dogs*. *Sight and Sound*, 3.1 1993: 51–52 (51); Anthony Lane: "Degrees of Cool". *New Yorker*. 10 Oct. 1994: 95–97 (95); and Tom Whalen: "Film Noir: Killer Style". *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 23.1 1995: 2–5 (2).

[10] Ronald Bogue, Marcel Cornis-Pope: "Introduction: Paradigms of Conflict and Mediation in Literary and Cultural Imagination". Ronald Bogue, Marcel Cornis-Pope (eds.): *Violence and Mediation in Contemporary Culture*. Albany: 1996, 1–17 (2).

[11] Paul Seydor: "Sam Peckinpah". *Sight and Sound*. 5.10 1995: 18–23 (20).

most of all distinguishes Peckinpah's cinema from that of Tarantino's is the former's bleak but unswerving humanism: "Peckinpah's great compassion for the human condition and for the characters he created is something totally alien to the glacial movie-brat worldview of a Tarantino."[12] The conditions for this disillusionment with the screen violence of the 1990s are ultimately rooted in a theoretical misconception that may be exemplified by Bernard Cook's diagnostic statement regarding the cause of the deteriorating standards of screen violence post-*Taxi Driver*. What increasingly happened throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Cook writes, was that "[t]he sign of film violence became severed from the referent of real violence."[13] But such a shift in the macro-economy of signification has not really occurred, since real violence has never been the referent of the "sign" of fictional violence. In principle, a classical Hollywood picture such as *Scarface* (Howard Hawks 1932) depends no less on artifice, quotation and the conventionalization of a particular choreography of the body than does *Reservoir Dogs*. Tarantino's film may simply contain more citations or exhibit a more pronounced self-referentiality than *Scarface*, but these are differences not of ontology but of degree.

It would be a mistake to preclude the possibility that the pessimistic but dominant analyses of films like *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* in terms of concepts such as depthlessness and pastiche may be an offshoot of deeply entrenched (and largely) poststructuralist practices of reading. What I mean to suggest is that one needs to be aware of the extent to which an aesthetic text might become hostage to the prevailing terms of discourse that dominate any given historical context. Anxious to amplify the perceived newness of the kind of film form found in texts like *Reservoir Dogs* or *Natural Born Killers*, critics tend to brush aside considerations of similarity and continuity. It is disputable whether the Tarantinian approach to violence is predicated upon a notion of filmicity that is fundamentally different from that which underlies the classical and new wave narratives. Strenuous as it may be to go beyond the patina of critical hype which enmeshes a film like *Reservoir Dogs*, a revision of the premises that have governed the reception of the film seems long overdue. My argument, however, involves not so much a refutation of the established readings of Tarantino in terms of an aesthetics of intertextuality and self-referentiality

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[12] Christopher Sharrett: "Peckinpah the Radical: The Politics of The Wild Bunch". Stephen Prince (ed.): *Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch"*. Cambridge: 1999, 79–104 (79).
[13] Bernard Joseph Cook: *Let it Bleed: Production of the Meanings of Violence in American Film, 1962–1976*. Diss. University of California, Los Angeles: 1999, 296.

as the assertion that such an aesthetics does not represent a radical departure from the tradition of American movie violence.

Reservoir Dogs is concerned with the reluctant construction of what could be termed an amimetic body, reluctant because the immutable presence of the body is the only aspect of film fiction which partially resists the overall semiotic movement toward the hermetically transtextual.[14] Regardless of the demands placed upon it by the structures of *a*mimesis, fiction, performativity and acting, an inescapable fact about the filmic body is that it remains within itself, a part or dimension of it oblivious to the narrative context that enwraps it. A mode of being, or ontology, which subjects everything to the regime of the transtextual must necessarily and at least to a certain degree suppress the ambiguous existence of the body. Steven Shaviro's term for this ontology is "simulacral incorporeality",[15] which produces an image "at once intense and impalpable."[16] Vivian Sobchack has suggested that the violence of the 1980s and 1990s may be a reflection of the increased influence and dominance of technology vis-a-vis the human body:

> the excessive violence we see on the screen, the carelessness and devaluation of mere human flesh, is both a recognition of the high-tech, powerful and uncontrollable subjects we (men, mostly) have become through technology – and an expression of the increasing frustration and rage at what seems a lack of agency and effectiveness as we have become increasingly controlled by and subject to technology.[17]

Sobchack's symptomatic reading may be of some relevance for a comprehension of the screen violence of the last two decades, though I would argue that the problem of agency in relation to the cinematized body's intentionality and volition arises not from the tyranny of technology in particular but from the technology of signification in general. The violated body as fictions like *Reservoir Dogs* and *Fight Club* present it is evidence of a resistance toward the process of textuality, a resistance that is impossible yet irrepressible. Violence, to cite screenwriter Larry Gross, has become "a

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[14] By the concept *a*mimetic I mean a poetic process that is not so much concerned with imitation or even representation as with intertextual referentiality.
[15] Steven Shaviro: *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: 1993, 28.
[16] Shaviro: *The Cinematic Body*, 26.
[17] Vivian C. Sobchack: "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies". Stephen Prince (ed.): *Screening Violence*. New Brunswick, N.J.: 2000, 110–124 (122).

secondary symptom of a primary disease, the sheer pollution of representational imagery."[18] Fictional images cannot sustain a relation to the notion of representationality as traditionally conceived, but Gross's statement nevertheless elucidates the hypothesis that particular forms of film violence may be grasped as a response to the nullification of the body by amimetic processes. According to Paul Smith, the body surmounts the repressive empire of textualization and narrativization only in the interstices of what he calls a "residual" male hysteria:

> The hysterical moment I am stressing marks the return of the male body out from under the narrative process that has produced what appears to be its transcendence, but that in fact is its elision and its forgetting. In other words, although there is in these [action] movies a conservatively pleasureable narrative path which finishes by supressing the masculine body and its imaginary, the body nonetheless returns from beneath the weight of the symbolic. What I mean to point to as this hysterical residue, then, is an unresolved or uncontained representation of the body of the male as it exceeds the narrative processes.[19]

Smith's thesis, it appears, is that there is an element of the male body that is "unsymbolizable" and that evades the trappings of signification, narrative, and iconography. Thus problematized, the fascination with fictional violence can be attributed to the need of the modern subject to re-connect with the realm of physicality, a hypothesis already proposed in John Fraser's *Violence in the Arts*.[20]

Reservoir Dogs pivots to a remarkable extent for such a visceral movie on the vagaries of language, its contingencies and gaps. Not only is the film rigidly dialogue-driven – most of the narrative consists of men talking to each other in warehouses, lavatories, offices, restaurants, and cars – the title itself exposes the incompatibility of sign and reference, of perception and its objects. The combination of words in the film's title appears nonsensical, bearing no obvious relation to the text or, apparently, to any idioms or expressions in the language. In the last part of the phrase Tarantino evidently nods to films such as Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) (the latter film is also about a failed heist), but the reference of the first part remains enigmatic. The linguistic conundrum stems from a particular species of what Mikhail Iampolski calls misquota-

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[18] Larry Gross: "Exploding Hollywood". *Sight and Sound*. 5.3 1995: 8–9 (8).
[19] Paul Smith: "Eastwood Bound". Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, Simon Watson (eds.): *Constructing Masculinity*. New York: 1995, 77–97 (92).
[20] John Fraser: *Violence in the Arts*. London: 1974, 63.

tion: "[a]ny kind of quotation that brings further anomalies into the text," and that "smuggles a puzzle into the text that is nigh impossible to solve."[21] In the case of Tarantino's film the puzzle derives from the director's mispronunciation of Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants* (1987),[22] which Tarantino reconstitutes as the first word of his film's title in an extended metathetical enunciation. Allegedly one of Tarantino's favorite films, *Au revoir les enfants* is set in a Catholic boarding school in Nazi-occupied France and examines the politics of male friendship and betrayal, themes which reappear prominently in *Reservoir Dogs*. Malle's film also shares with the later text a preoccupation with fake names and mistaken identities, so there is more than just the linguistic misquotation that connects the two movies. Once the irregular title is introduced, it generates additional layers of connotations that harmonize resourcefully with the film's narrative action. The standard reference of the term reservoir implies a strict delimitation of space, a space that may potentially burst, and by way of associative contiguity the warehouse in *Reservoir Dogs* seems to evoke a similar confinement of spatial energy. Further, reservoir also designates a place in the body where fluids accumulate, and the film's name is thus also suggestive of the pool of blood oozing from Mr Orange's belly throughout the narrative.

The fixation on the instability of the interrelations of language, storytelling and identity permeates *Reservoir Dogs* on other levels as well, and although the body is always present in the frame, the perpetual process of abstraction which the linguistic indulgence promotes tends to deny it its sovereignty. Arbitrariness features significantly in this process, for instance in Joe Cabot's naming of the members of his gang according to a predetermined color scheme of "pure signifiers",[23] and in the fictitious "Commode story" that Mr Orange recounts to Joe and Eddie Cabot and Mr White to bolster his own credibility as a career criminal. More generally, allusions to a poploristic textuality dominate almost every conversation in the film, a method which contributes to making what is absent (the referent) present, or primary, and what is present (the embodied, speaking subject) absent, or secondary. Subjectivity in its fully embodied form only seems to come alive in the most excruciating moments, such as the scene in the beginning

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[21] Mikhail Iampolski: *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*. Trans. Harsha Ram. Berkeley: 1998, 51–52.
[22] Jami Bernard: *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and his Movies*. London: 1995, 171.
[23] Fred Botting, Scott Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*. London: 2001, 52. Cabot's system is itself a reference to Joseph Sargent's crime film *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974).

in which Mr Orange has just been shot and the scene where Mr Blonde torments the policeman. It is in their staging of the violated body that films like *Reservoir Dogs* truly become "pulp fictions", narratives of the flesh (from the Latin *pulpa*) in an ecstatic agony which, to use Elaine Scarry's phrase, "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it."[24] Critics who discredit Tarantino's film on account of its fetishistic quotationism tend to overlook the acutely corporeal dimension which escapes the logic of the sign even as it is suppressed by it.

In Tarantino's films, violence and narration can no longer be kept apart as two separate entities. As Rich puts it, *Reservoir Dogs* is a film whose temporal and dramatic unity is principally determined by "the length of time it takes for a man… to bleed to death in front of our eyes."[25] While violent death is pervasive in the films of someone like Peckinpah, it is nonetheless swift and instantaneous, enfolded in the choreography of what Marsha Kinder terms "performative numbers".[26] The patterns of narrative violence in *The Wild Bunch* are structured rhythmically in a dialectic of explosions and pauses. In *Reservoir Dogs*, on the other hand, the entire narrative (excepting the preface) unravels as Mr Orange lies dying on the warehouse floor. The time it takes to narrate the story equals the time it takes for the protagonist to die from a gunshot wound, and the film's temporality is thus conceived as one extended moment of death. Tarantino's characters, most of whom do not survive the act of narration, seem to occupy what Maurice Blanchot's has called "death's space", a notion that the film in a sense literalizes since the warehouse which provides the primary location is in fact a morgue (there are coffins all around the place and Mr Blonde is sitting on an old hearse, not a crate). In a discussion of Kafka's protagonists, Blanchot propounds the idea that "not just when they die but apparently while they are alive Kafka's heroes carry out their actions in death's space, and […] it is to the indefinite time of 'dying' that they belong."[27] Blanchot's concept is apposite to a reading of *Reservoir Dogs* which proposes that death by violence is not only limited to discrete narrative moments but has come to immerse the totality of the spatio-temporal continuum. In the beginning of the film (after the introductory scene in the

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[24] Elaine Scarry: *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: 1985, 4.
[25] Amy Taubin: "The Men's Room". *Sight and Sound*. 2.8 1992: 2–4 (3).
[26] Marsha Kinder: "Violence American Style: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions". Slocum (ed.): *Violence and American Cinema*, 63–100 (68).
[27] Maurice Blanchot: *The Space of Literature*. 1955. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: 1989, 92.

diner and the slow-motion presentation of the "dogs"), the first utterance following the cut from black screen to the medium shot of the wounded Mr Orange is "I'm gonna die," which is repeated several times. Beneath the tone of desperation there is a hint of an acknowledgement of imminent death, and one may see the remaining part of the narrative as the process toward what Blanchot might have called the achievement of one's own death.[28] Addressed to Mr White, Mr Orange's subsequent lines – "I'm sorry," and "I can't believe she fucking killed me, man" – further underscore his awareness of the temporality of death into which he has entered. Like Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), *Reservoir Dogs* utilizes the principle of *irreversibility* as a conceptual template for narrating mortality.

That Tarantino's movie in effect collapses its own *syuzhet* with the process of death resonates well with the overall signifying practice of a thoroughly transtextualized filmicity. In the era of hyper-modernity, films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Natural Born Killers* represent what could be termed archival cinema, a kind of cinema above all defined by the incessant recycling of particles of older texts[29] – some critics have even hinted that violence is "the principal instrument that holds all the fragmented postmodernist fictions together as coherent narratives."[30] The case of Tarantino amply illustrates the logic of consumption which regulates the proliferation of the archival. Unlike that of directors like Peckinpah (who had an industry background before becoming a filmmaker), or Scorsese (who is a film school graduate), the foundation for Tarantino's film educa-

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[28] Blanchot: *The Space of Literature*, 96.

[29] The wealth of allusions in *Reservoir Dogs* form a veritable catalogue of intertextual shards from films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming 1939), *Dillinger* (Max Nosseck 1945), *The Big Combo* (Joseph H. Lewis 1955), *Du rififi chez les hommes* (Jules Dassin 1955), *The Killing, Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone 1960), *The Great Escape* (John Sturges 1963), *Le petit soldat* (Jean-Luc Godard 1963), *The Professionals* (Richard Brooks 1966), *Point Blank* (John Boorman 1967), *Le samouraï* (Jean-Pierre Melville 1967), *The Wild Bunch, A Clockwork Orange, Straw Dogs, Straight Time* (Ulu Grosbard 1978), *Q* (Larry Cohen 1982), *Vigilante* (William Lustig 1982), *Breathless* (Jim McBride 1983), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch 1986), *Raw Deal* (John Irvin 1986), *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher 1987), *Yinghung Bunsik II* (John Woo 1987), and *City on Fire* (Ringo Lam 1987), television series like *Honey West* (1965–66), *The Fantastic Four* (1967), *The Partridge Family* (1970–74), and *Get Christie Love* (1974–75), and pop songs such as "True Blue" (Madonna 1986) and "Stuck in the Middle With You" (Stealers Wheel 1973).

[30] Ken Morrison: "The Technology of Homicide: Constructions of Evidence and Truth in the American Murder Film". Sharrett (ed.): *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, 301–316 (314).

tion was the years he worked as a clerk in the Video Archives in Manhattan Beach. The omnivorous cumulation of references to the texts of popular culture history – what Pat Dowell has referred to as the director's "pop-culture erudition"[31] – re-constitutes his films as archives in their own right, as a reservoir of quotations which have come to signify a textual morgue.[32] Intrinsic to Tarantino's cinematic sensibility, therefore, is the gravitation toward the forms and modes of mortality both in a literal and a figurative sense. The uninhibited reprocessing of old images suggests textual stagnation, decay, and finally death.

Attractive as it may be, an interpretation of *Reservoir Dogs* by way of analogy with the notion of the textual archive, or morgue, is also indicative of a particular indignation toward the kind of sublimated transtextuality that dominates contemporary cinema. Dowell's comparing of Tarantino's aesthetics of quotation to that of Godard epitomizes this resentment:

> Godard borrowed with a difference – to comment, to satirize, to discredit, to examine, to open up other possibilities. Tarantino borrows to create cultural cul-de-sacs, places of intellectual safety and anesthesia […] he is first and foremost an ingenious curator displaying his collection of cultural trivia.[33]

Botting and Wilson, furthermore, buttress this perception when they write that, in Tarantino, "[c]ultural reference, omnipresent and obvious, offers no depth, no deeper insight or significance."[34] On the basis of similar observations some critics extrapolate what they discern to be an absence of morality in the works of Tarantino,[35] which I believe is an error caused by the conflation of value judgment and the particulars of film form. When such a perceptive critic as Giroux dismisses the director's films for "reordering the audience's sense of trauma through a formalism that denies any vestige of

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[31] Pat Dowell: "Pulp Friction: Two Shots at Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction". *Cineaste*, 21.3 1995: 4–5 (4).

[32] Giuliana Bruno has in like manner defined the poetics of pastiche as "an imitation of dead styles deprived of any satirical impulse." See Giuliana Bruno: "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*". Christopher Sharrett (ed.): *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*. Washington D.C.: 1993, 237–250 (238).

[33] Dowell: "Pulp Friction", 4.

[34] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 10.

[35] See Amanda Lipman: Rev. of *Pulp Fiction*. *Sight and Sound*. 4.11 1994: 50–51 (51), and Drew Todd: "The History of Crime Films". Nicole Rafter (ed.): *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. New York: 2000, 15–45 (42).

politics,"[36] he elides the question of the ethics of both masculinity and spectatorship that is inseparable from the formal fabric of the texts. One may legitimately conjecture that the real though hitherto not fully articulated object of the critics' concern is this: films like *Reservoir Dogs* make explicit the amimeticism that has always been integral to the ontology of the fiction film. In a sense the art of Tarantino reifies the gospel of someone like Jean Baudrillard, who in *The Evil Demon of Images* has this to say regarding the referentiality of the image: "[a]bove all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true."[37] The logic by which the image functions, he continues, is that of "the extermination of its own referent."[38] Baudrillard's postulation is of course tiresomely familiar, exhausted, and would not merit reiteration if it was not for the fact that it serves as a welcome reminder of the mimetic fallacy.

My uneasiness in relation to the criticism that commentators such as Dowell, Lipman and Giroux level against Tarantino's films is twofold. There is not sufficient support for the suggestion that hyper-quotational cinema inaugurates an entirely new kind of film narrative; and there is nothing about the form of the films in question which eliminates any engagement with morality or ethics. As Baudrillard maintains, cinema constantly reproduces and "plagiarises" its own history,[39] and the politics of multi-referentiality is thus not something that has emerged only in the postmodern era. Barry Keith Grant's statement, however, condones precisely this view:

> American cinema has arrived at the postmodern point where it is at once fully aware of its history regarding such contentious issues as representations of violence and at the same time able to mock the treatment of violence in these films, and other media, while employing their very same techniques.[40]

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[36] Giroux: "Pulp Fiction and the Culture of Violence", 308.
[37] Jean Baudrillard: *The Evil Demon of Images*. Sydney: 1987, 13. One may note that Baudrillard's skepticism vis-a-vis the image appears to implicate all forms of visuality, whereas my own emphasis in this context is restricted to the domain of the fiction film.
[38] Baudrillard: *The Evil Demon of Images*, 23.
[39] Baudrillard: *The Evil Demon of Images*, 33.
[40] Barry Keith Grant: "Landmark Films". Ronald Gottesman, Richard Maxwell Brown (eds.): *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*. 3 vols. New York: 1999, 518–525 (524).

The overstating of the increased self-consciousness of Tarantinian cinema is subsidized by a teleological understanding of the evolution of film aesthetics, whereby one conceives formal developments as stages in a process toward some kind of ultimate realization of the medium's essence.[41] For the postmodern millenarianist, the notion of the end of cinema as the attainment of a state of suffusive self-awareness complements the idea of the end of history. As Robert Stam reminds us, "we dwell in the realm of the already said, the already read, the already seen."[42] As much as Stam is correct in pointing this out, it may very well be that we have been occupying this realm for some time, already. This inertia of historical vision, if that is what it is, is neither the cause nor the effect of transtextuality in the cinema, but it does seem to participate in an interrogation of the epistemological conditions that facilitate the mediation of history in terms of images.

More to the point, the phenomenon that filmmakers like Tarantino expose is both the unavoidability and necessity of re-appropriating and reinterpreting cultural texts according to the exigencies of the moment. *Reservoir Dogs*, for instance, is invariably involved in acts of hypothesis-making and theorizing, from the opening exegesis of "Like a Virgin" to the ongoing rationalizations regarding the failed heist. The psychology of pulp hermeneutics does not so much repress history as reassemble its components within textual relations of simultaneity and contingency. If the erosion and extension of the past into the present risks curtailing the sense of historical movement, which among others Sharrett seems to claim,[43] it also contributes to a deconstruction of the myths of historical teleology. On Sharrett's account, the key failure of apocalyptic film violence lies in its inability to provide narrative closure, instead promoting the hegemony of spectacle and historical travesty.

While the trademarks of a hyper-modernist cinema – self-consciousness, playfulness, perspectival multiplicity, identity politics, irreverence, eclecticism and self-reflexivity – for many critics emblematize nothing less than a significational dystopia, there are others who project a more affirmative valorization of this particular aesthetic. Kinder, for instance, praises the reflexiveness of films like *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*,[44] and W. J. T. Mitchell applauds the meta-textual aspect of Stone's movie for

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[41] The logic of this argument finds its precedent in what David Bordwell has identified as "the standard version of stylistic history," now largely discredited. See David Bordwell: *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, Mass.: 1997, 12–45.
[42] Robert Stam: *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Malden, Mass.: 2000, 305.
[43] Sharrett: "Introduction. Crisis Cinema". Sharrett (ed.): *Crisis Cinema*, 1–10 (8).
[44] Kinder: "Violence American Style", 77.

"offer[ing] a place in which critical reflection on this issue [violence] may be carried out."[45] A film's self-awareness of its own fascination with violence betrays what could be conceived as a meta-aesthetic project, or what Valerie Fulton with reference to Tarantino names "meta-violence".[46] The violent imagery in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, Fulton holds, is "a decorative surface – familiar to viewers because similar images have appeared to them in previous films."[47] In Mitchell's and Fulton's view, Tarantino's films are approachable as depictions of depictions of violence, and as such they demand a mode of viewing that is authentically participatory and self-evaluative. The production of a spectator who "is not only seeing differently, but is aware of seeing himself/herself see," to quote Degli-Esposti,[48] is one of the key contributions of a film like *Reservoir Dogs*.

At a certain stage the discussion of the kind of cinema that Tarantino represents will have to gravitate toward the primary conflict that hypermodern film violence animates, namely that between ethics and aesthetics, history and textuality. In contemporary culture, as Joel Black sees it, "the aesthetic realm of the hyperreal" has supplanted "the ethical world of the real."[49] Like Baudrillard, who proclaims that the logic of the image is "immoral […] beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity,"[50] Black posits an insuperable discord between the two domains of text and ethics. Notably, the "immorality" that Baudrillard speaks of has more to do with the conditions for the construction of the image than with any thematic qualities which inhere in it. In short, the most fundamental provocation that the hypertextual image offers crystallizes in Patrick Fuery's insight that "[t]he cinematic sign is more real than anything we find in the world."[51] Fuery's declaration is arguably indebted to Baudrillard's own pronouncement that simulation, or the hyperreal, not only negates reality but – perhaps more

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[45] W. J. Thomas Mitchell: "Representation of Violence". Gottesman, Brown (eds.): *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia.* 39–48 (46).
[46] Valerie Fulton: "The Meaning of Violence in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*: Annotated Version". Will Wright, Steven Kaplan (eds.): *The Image of Violence in Literature, the Media, and Society*. Pueblo, CO.: 1995, 178–182 (178).
[47] Fulton: "The Meaning of Violence", 178.
[48] Cristina Degli-Esposti: "Postmodernism(s)". Cristina Degli-Esposti (ed.): *Postmodernism in the Cinema*. New York: 1998, 3–18 (5).
[49] Joel Black: *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*. Baltimore: 1991, 138.
[50] Baudrillard: *The Evil Demon of Images*, 23.
[51] Patrick Fuery: *New Developments in Film Theory*. Basingstoke: 2000, 128.

importantly – negates illusion itself.[52] If neither the real nor the illusory is possible, the image becomes its own authority.

There may be similarities between Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal and the concept of the amimetic, but, it should be pointed out, they are largely superficial. Unlike the notion of simulation, which by nature complicates the relation between the consciousness of reality and the consciousness of textuality, amimeticism does not imply a negation of extratextual modes of sensation or being. Much less ambitiously, the amimetic position challenges the existence of the real (as a model or extratextual signified) within the fictional text, not the existence of the real altogether. However, the fragmentary repackaging of film and television history that the quotational promiscuity of *Reservoir Dogs* undeniably luxuriates in does seem to abolish historical linearity and to encourage a commodification of cinema's transgressive expressivity. Dowell, for instance, has suggested that the originality of Tarantino's method lies in the way in which his films require a mode of viewing which mimics the experience of being a "consumer".[53] In the celluloid archives of hyper-modern film the viewer can shop around for transtextual capital like a customer in a mall or a surfer on the web. Describing the parameters of such a viewing experience, Botting and Wilson make this concession:

> [c]ultural reference, omnipresent and obvious, offers no depth, no deeper insight or significance […] [i]f the movies invite an enthusiastic filmspotting, their dizzying range of allusion suggests that ultimately the task could be infinite, so constantly overlaid, multiple and unreflecting are the references.[54]

If Dowell is correct when he writes that a film like *Pulp Fiction* "exists only in terms of other movies,"[55] hypermodern cinema does not merely undertake an "ironic rethinking of history," to recall Linda Hutcheon's phrase,[56] but dismantles the belief in the past's authenticity. How, one might ask, would someone like Benjamin have responded to the densely allusive syntax of a film like *Reservoir Dogs*?

It is to some extent in their relation to history that the narrations of violence in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* depart from the approach of ear-

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[52] Baudrillard: *The Evil Demon of Images,* 52.
[53] Dowell: "Pulp Friction", 4.
[54] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 10.
[55] Dowell: "Pulp Friction", 4.
[56] Linda Hutcheon: *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: 1988, 5.

lier filmmakers like Penn and Peckinpah. Tarantino's films, William DeGenaro has pointed out, destabilize the past by "subvert[ing] the notion that nostalgia establishes 'reassurance and direction'."[57] Particularly *The Wild Bunch*, one remembers, renders nostalgia an overwhelming presence in which both melancholy and violence are embroiled, but also the early 1970s cycle of deeply nostalgic movies like *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich 1971) and *American Graffiti* (George Lucas 1973) convey a sense of the past as something temporally continuous, morally coherent and phenomenologically reliable. In hypermodernity, on the other hand, nostalgia survives only in the form of parody or irony; the desire for unbounded quotation seems incompatible with the desire for history. The "catastrophe" of the postmodern, Sharrett says, is "the simultaneous affirmation and denial of historical views of reality, the nostalgia for the past simultaneous with its derision."[58] For some analysts, the order of spectatorship that hypermodern film invites is one hamstrung by what Jameson has called the "waning of affect",[59] or "compassion fatigue", to evoke Sissela Bok's comparable term.[60]

If hypermodernized film violence has surrendered its transgressive impact, can it still be a purveyor of ethical knowledge? Critics like Grant and Prince seem distrustful of the prospect and are adamant that contemporary screen violence lacks the moral framework that in various forms has always been a staple of American storytelling.[61] They find support in Carol Becker's charge that the aesthetics of pastiche, irony and cynicism forfeits the social responsibility of art,[62] and in Tom Whalen's claim that the Tarantinoesque sensibility is all style and no substance.[63] Sobchack is like-

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[57] William DeGenaro: "Post-Nostalgia in the Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez". *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*. 6 1997: 57–63 (57).
[58] Sharrett: "Afterword". Sharett (ed.): *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media,* 421.
[59] Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: 1991, 16.
[60] Sissela Bok: *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*. Reading, Mass.: 1998, 68.
[61] See Grant: "American Psycho/sis: The Pure Products of America Go Crazy". Sharrett (ed.): *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media,* 23–40 (37); and Stephen Prince: "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Affects". Prince (ed.): *Screening Violence*, 1–44 (33).
[62] Carol Becker: "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art". Carol Becker (ed.): *The Subversive Imagination. Artists, Society, and Social Responsibility*. New York: 1994, 113–129 (125).
[63] Tom Whalen: "Film Noir: Killer Style". *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 23.1 1995: 2–5 (2).

wise suspicious of the critical potential of neo-violence: "[the] heightened sense of reflexivity and irony that emerges from quantities of violence, from 'more,' is not necessarily progressive nor does it lead to a 'moral' agenda or a critique of violence."[64] All these reservations, however, seem like a dead end. Fortunately, film violence does not lead to any "agenda" (the idea would presuppose a message-oriented and hence reductive view of film fiction), and there is furthermore no need for a critique of violence since few would object to the claim that violence is an inherently intolerable phenomenon in and of itself. What is needed, instead, is a critique of the formal conventions that configure images of violence and of the modes of consciousness for which violent action serves as a trope. The strategies of hypermodern cinema are not antithetical to processes of ethical semiosis; on the contrary, aesthetic form cannot help signifying ethically. It is not as surprising as it may seem, therefore, that Botting and Wilson choose to call their book on Tarantino's cinema *The Tarantinian Ethics*, thus displaying an awareness of the centrality of an ethics of form for the comprehension of film violence.

Like *The Wild Bunch*, *Reservoir Dogs* invests its violence with a tropological inference which, more specifically, involves masculinity and its relation to questions of identity, trust, and death. Images of violence, as it were, project fictitious constellations of manhood by placing the protagonists in circumstances that are extreme. The narrative of *Reservoir Dogs* comes close to suggesting that violence is constitutive not only of the expression of ethical experience but also of the enactment of masculinity. A key paradox in Tarantino's film is the unmasking, or de(con)struction, of the masculine through acts of playful performativity. Acting or pretending comes to replace being as an existential foundation, thus obliterating the conditions for the achievement of a coherent, homogeneous identity. When Clint Burnham interprets Harvey Keitel's "wondrous, polyvalent, unmated moan" at the film's conclusion as the symbolization of a "lack" in the masculine self,[65] his observation could gainfully be seen in connection with the complexities of manufacturing subjectivity solely from the ephemerality of performance. The incarnation of the film's proclivity for the rhetoric of pretending is British actor Tim Roth, who plays an American detective who plays one of the crooks. His policeman persona's "commode" story, a carefully rehearsed anecdote that he has been instructed by his boss to tell

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[64] Sobchack: "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies", 121.
[65] Clint Burnham: "Scattered Speculations on the Value of Harvey Keitel". Paul Smith (ed.): *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*. Boulder: 1996, 113–129 (116).

Cabot's men to cement his own credibility as a criminal, is the prime example of the significance of performance in the movie. Seamlessly merging storytelling and acting, the syntactically meticulous flashback structure of the sequence shows Roth preparing his story in various surroundings; on a rooftop, in his apartment, in front of a graffiti wall, in a bar with Cabot, Eddie and Mr White, and even in the men's room (in a flashback within a flashback). "You gotta be as naturalistic as hell," Roth's mentor explains as he eggs him on to perfect his act. In a later segment which alludes to Robert de Niro's crazed mirror scene from *Taxi Driver*, Roth speaks to his reflection and compares himself to Baretta.[66] The architecture of performativity is foregrounded in other scenes as well, as for instance when Mr Blonde and Eddie pretend to fight in Cabot's office, and when Mr Blonde tortures the policeman, perhaps the single most cited moment of violence in all of the 1990s American cinema.

The sense of a fractured subjectivity and of the absence of a holistic male identity appears to be essential to the ways in which Tarantino's narration brings together violence and ethics. According to John Fried, violence in *Reservoir Dogs* signifies "the fear associated with the revelation that masculinity is all artifice, sans substance,"[67] an assertion that easily could have provided the epithet for all the films that this study examines. In the moment of confession and death, all that the Roth character is able to reveal about himself is the scope of his charade, the hemorrhage the only substance of his maleness. The transtextual and exceedingly amimetic form of *Reservoir Dogs* is particularly germane to the notion of masculinity as a composite, amorphous, untotalizable, or even blank construct:

> Character, in Tarantino, is not produced as an effect of a representation being judged 'true to life,' as if the life of characters existed outside representation. Rather, character is the effect of a representation being 'true to itself' in relation to other representations. Which is to say that it is true to itself as a representation through the citation, adoption and deployment of other representations in a distinctive or singular way … For Tarantino … character has little to do with cinematic representation of 'novelistic' characters, even if it has everything to do with 'writing' in an expanded sense.[68]

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[66] Baretta was the unconventional cop with a fondness for disguises in the 1975–76 television series of the same name.

[67] John Fried: "Pulp Friction: Two Shots at Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*". *Cineaste*. 21.3 1995: 6–7 (6).

[68] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 13.

Contrary to what its detractors maintain, the hypermodern film aesthetic of unconstrained quotationality does in fact capture a significance beyond itself; the eclecticism of a film poetics based on referentiality is reflective of the idea that masculine identity is all but a construction culled from the multiple fictions that the cultural imagination has narrated. The relative coherence of the identity of the male hero in classical cinema has in the hypermodern era given way to a drastic decentering where character has become a matter of "disjointed signs", to borrow Burnham's description of the Keitel persona.[69]

Masculinity in *Reservoir Dogs* is also interlaced with an ethics of trust reminiscent of that which regulates the relationship between the men in *The Wild Bunch*. Mark Irwin has identified the "criminal code of honor and professionalism" as the most prominent subtext in the film.[70] Similarly, Botting and Wilson stress the ways in which "the ethics of professionalism" provide the bedrock for the film's meditation on masculine morality. Throughout the narrative the characters of Mr White and Mr Pink repeatedly lament what they perceive as an inexplicable betrayal of this ethics: "[w]hat you're supposed to do is act like a fuckin' professional," Mr White intones while looking at himself in a mirror, an imploration Mr Pink reproduces immediately before the final shootout. Keitel's character, however, in fact confuses the principles of professionalism with those of ethics, as Botting and Wilson also appear to do in their argument. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, they maintain that "[e]thics precedes ontology and the moral law which is associated with symbolic regulation and desire."[71] While ethics is defined by individual responsibility and "care for other persons,"[72] morality implies principles and acts of institutional intentionality. Hence, according to this philosophy morality is secondary to ethics. When Mr Pink accuses Mr White of compromising his professionalism by revealing his real name to the dying Mr Orange, this conflict between individual commitment and moral code becomes palpable as one precisely between ethics and professionalism. In Botting and Wilson's view, Mr White "invests personally," as opposed to professionally, in Mr Orange's agony, and what enables him to do this is his recognition of Mr Orange as the other in Levinas' sense; "the

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[69] Burnham: "Scattered Speculations on the Value of Harvey Keitel", 122.
[70] Mark Irwin: "Pulp and the Pulpit: The Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez". *Literature and Theology. An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture*, 12.1 1998: 70–81 (76).
[71] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 48.
[72] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 50.

neighbour and double, that one loves as oneself."[73] For Botting and Wilson, Mr White's decision that the wounded Mr Orange is his personal responsibility occasions an ethical moment in the film, and the inevitable outcome of this act is violence: when at the end of the film Mr White is forced to relinquish his trust in either Mr Orange or his old friends, he chooses to pursue his ethical commitment to the other even if it entails self-destruction. Not unlike the Agua Verde scene in *The Wild Bunch*, the violence which erupts at the conclusion of *Reservoir Dogs* derives directly from the embrace of an irreversibly ethical stance. The scene thus epitomizes the notion of an *ethics of violence*. Aesthetic violence, as Botting and Wilson express it, "becomes ethical if it opens a gap within representation which questions the complicity of desire and law."[74]

On a certain level, then, the main dynamic that energizes the ethical world of the characters in *Reservoir Dogs* is that between suspicion and trust, professionalism and responsibility. When Botting and Wilson submit that it is the omnipotence of pop culture allusionism which permits intersubjectivity in the film,[75] they neglect to take into account the constant re-negotiations of this dialectic. Much of the dialogue in the warehouse scenes centers on issues of betrayal, culpability and distrust as the characters increasingly become involved in forming hypotheses regarding the identity of the informer among them. Tarantino cinematizes the transactions of trust, doubt and fear which take place among the various members of the group according to the logistics of ethical space. I adopt this concept from Roger Poole's *Towards Deep Subjectivity*.[76] Sobchack's interpretation of the term – "the visible representation or sign of the viewer's subjective, lived, and moral relationship with the viewed"[77] – may with a slight alteration prove feasible for a renewed appreciation of the inter-dependence of aesthetic form and ethics in a film like Tarantino's. There is, in addition to the viewer's perspective, a spatio-narrative perspective which establishes a relation with that which is put on view. As Edward Branigan has pointed out, it is the look that is "the activating instance or cause" of the image displayed on the screen.[78] For Sobchack, moreover, the act of looking has

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[73] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarnatinian Ethics*, 64.
[74] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 70.
[75] Botting, Wilson: *The Tarantinian Ethics*, 46.
[76] Roger Poole: *Towards Deep Subjectivity*. London: 1972.
[77] Vivian C. Sobchack: "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary". *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*. 9.4 1984: 283–300 (292).
[78] Edward Branigan: *Point of View in the Cinema*. Berlin: 1984, 57.

ethical ramifications in itself in that "[t]he visible representation of vision inscribes sight as a moral insight."[79] In *Reservoir Dogs*, this process finds its perhaps most explicit expression in the exchanges between Mr Blonde and the policeman and in Mr Orange's witnessing of Mr Blonde's cruelties against his victim. When Mr Orange interrupts the abuse by shooting the perpetrator, one may comprehend his action as the logical extension of his newly gained moral insight; his act of looking at the mistreatment of the cop – his spatial sightline – becomes an ethical way of seeing. In recognizing the suffering of the other Mr Orange, unlike Mr Blonde, also recognizes the subjectivity of the other.

Reservoir Dogs is a film in which the notion of ethical space is more than a mere catchphrase; it materializes in the spatial coordinates of the image itself. First, as Thomas Beltzer has argued, the warehouse setting indicates "an unreal, timeless environment" of "mutual alienation and isolation,"[80] where characters seemingly behave in accordance with Garcin's misanthropic assumption at the end of Sartre's *No Exit*.[81] The space of action is neither literal nor figurative but an embodiment of ethical situationality. In a series of images that have become iconographic – Mr White and Mr Pink pointing their guns at each other; the triangular configuration at the end in which Mr White, Eddie and Joe aim their weapons at each other in a closed circuit; and the dying Mr White heaving himself onto Mr Orange – violent encounters encode a set of ethical values as spatial inscriptions. The way in which the mise-en-scène organizes the space between the characters reveals relational patterns of power, (dis)trust, and intimacy; in the film's last scene the inter-personal space collapses as Mr White crawls on top of Mr Orange, their wounded bodies blending into one corporeal unity. When Mr Orange discloses his true identity, the ethics of allegiance which the recognition of the subjectivity of the other prompts gives way to senseless revenge, the seamless transition of which Sharrett has described as a merging of "eros with thanatos."[82] It may be a temptation to read these images as a flaunting of homoerotic desire, which Jason Jacobs does by rhetorically asking, "Would Mr White [...] tenderly comb Mr Orange's hair [...] in *Reservoir Dogs* if Orange wasn't bleeding to death?"[83] Jacob's implication, evidently, is that violence enables the kind of male intimacy that

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[79] Sobchack: "Inscribing", 291.
[80] Thomas Beltzer: "Dogs in Hell: *No Exit* Revisited". *Senses of Cinema*. 6 2000. par. 3. http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/6/dogs.html (29 Oct. 2002).
[81] Jean-Paul Sartre: No Exit *and Three Other Plays*. New York: 1955, 47.
[82] Sharrett: "Peckinpah", 87.
[83] Jason Jacobs: "Gunfire". *Sight and Sound*. 5.10 1995: 38–41 (39).

this imagery exhibits. Being within death's space legitimates acts of erotically charged contact that would have been unthinkable in virtually any other context. It is a mistake, however, to imply the existence of a sexual subtext in this sequence. Like Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus in their predominantly gay reading of *Fight Club*,[84] Jacobs seems all too prepared to superimpose an aesthetics of homoeroticism whenever images of physical interaction between men are highlighted. Keitel and Roth's embrace is affectionate but not erotic, their bodily exchange a cinematic figuration of a common consciousness of the process of dying. But even in this most private moment in the film, Tarantino cannot refrain from quotation: though the most transparent allusion is to the films of John Woo, the director also invokes the scene in Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (1962) in which Gil Westrum caresses his dying friend Steve Judd's bleeding abdomen, as well as the image in *The Wild Bunch* where Bishop and Engstrom cling to each other before they die.

The second crucial instance in *Reservoir Dogs* that demarcates filmic spatiality as an ethical relation is the one in which Mr Blonde severs the policeman's ear and tries to incinerate him. It may appear inconceivable that this scene has anything to do with ethics, but in spite of its spectacular inhumanity, the situation contains an unfulfilled ethical potentiality. Immobile and helpless, the cop is in a state of absolute vulnerability and dependence and his only hope is that Mr Blonde will eventually discern the nature of the ethical relation between them and identify him as the other of himself. What defines this sequence as an extreme moment in the narrative is the immensity of the demands placed upon both of the protagonists. Marvin, the policeman, has little choice but to trust his tormentor's ability to discontinue the torture; Mr Blonde is in a position which requires that he makes the right ethical decision. But for the gangster Marvin is reduced to being just a part of his self-conscious performance, like a found object around which Mr Blonde's horror show is orchestrated. The arrangement of film space in the scene concretizes the perpetrator's failure to recognize the intersubjective space which connects him ethically to his victim. Chopping off the cop's ear and gagging him, Mr Blonde symbolically conveys his dehumanization of his victim and his own lack of desire to interact. The rejection of Marvin's only request – "just talk to me" – pinpoints the essence of Mr Blonde's dementia, his inability to respond ethically to the ex-

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[84] Robert Alan Brookey, Robert Westerfelhaus: "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The Fight Club DVD as Digital Closet". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 19.1 2002: 21–43 (29).

istence of other subjectivities. Referencing Alex's "Singing in the rain" number in *A Clockwork Orange*, Mr Blonde's iniquitous dance movements as he prepares to pour gasoline on the cop enact a choreography of cruelty and complete ethical indifference.

Reservoir Dogs' ethical space is a fluid entity that easily reconstructs itself according to the fluctuating intentions of the narration. When Mr Blonde amputates Marvin's ear, for instance, the camera pans leftward to linger on an empty section of the warehouse while the victim's wailing continues on the soundtrack. The act of looking away denies the spectator the kind of illicit punctuation which makes the razor blade instant in *Un chien andalou* and the slicing of the nostril in *Chinatown* so disconcerting scenes to watch. Throughout the film Tarantino's narration tends to emphasize the postures of the body in the aftermath of violence rather than the exact moment of violent infliction, as in Peckinpah. Tarantino's interest is in the interplay between wounded and dying men; the glances, silences, and short verbal exchanges – as in Mr Orange's and Marvin's tentative communication – which define the being-within-violence as an intersubjective experience.

In terms of the notion of narrative mortification, *Reservoir Dogs* pushes the limits of the cinematic visualization of dying beyond any previous efforts. The process of death has already begun when the narrative proper is introduced and, centering on the character of Mr Orange, the remainder of the film charts the trajectory along which the animate body slowly turns into a corpse. Death, according to Emmanuel Lévinas, "marks the end of the subject's virility and heroism,"[85] and it is the repercussions of this admission that the film struggles to enunciate. By cutting from the slow-motion montage which establishes the cool and seemingly indestructible masculinity of the villains to the image of the injured Mr Orange imploring Mr White to hold him, Tarantino draws attention to the masculine self's loss of nobility in dying by violence. How the consciousness of violent film death has been altered from the classical to the hyper-modern period may be revealed in this fact alone, that in classical Hollywood Cinema, dying only takes a fraction of a second, in *Reservoir Dogs* it takes almost the entire narrative.

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[85] Emmanuel Lévinas as cited in Seán Hand (ed.): *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford: 1989, 41.