

## Nihilism in Reservoir Dogs

(Alternate title: The Dangers of Dissection)

Charlie: An overweight twenty year old man sitting at his computer desk in his small bedroom.

Jennifer: A slightly younger woman, slender and fit with elegant features and very long black hair; she is laying on the bed.

Jennifer: Let's go out, it's all dusty in here.

Charlie: So it is.

Jennifer: Where do you want to go?

Charlie: Nowhere.

Jennifer: What's wrong Charlie?

Charlie: Nothing.

Jennifer: Charlie...what's wrong?

Charlie: God is dead.

Jennifer: Yeah yeah, three hundred years ago.

Charlie: I wish He weren't though.

Jennifer: What?

Charlie: Then I wouldn't have to think so much for myself.

Jennifer: What the fuck has gotten into you?

Charlie: Nihilism I guess.

Jennifer: Nihilism? Baby, if there's one thing you're not...

Charlie: I'm supposed to do an assignment on Nihilism for Philosophy class, I don't even really know what it means.

Jennifer: It means you don't care about anything.

Charlie: Yeah, but I'm not sure if that's what it means.

Jennifer: No?

Charlie: Well, if that's all there is to it, wouldn't I be a nihilist?

Jennifer: You don't care about me?

Charlie: Human drama, we've been through that.

Jennifer: God damn it you and your Sartrist bullshit.

Charlie: God can't damn it, he's dead.

Jennifer: Well I'm damning it then.

Charlie: You love Sartre.

Jennifer: Yeah but he's not God, you can't replace God with Sartre.

Charlie: But I'm supposed to replace Him with reason, and reason comes from philosophers, and philosophers are all phonies except for Sartre.

Jennifer: You've changed.

Charlie: What?

Jennifer: I said you've fucking changed-what happened when I was away?

Charlie: Nothing happened.

Jennifer: Nothingness and more nothingness eh? Well you've changed.

Charlie: I just stopped caring, I stopped trying.

Jennifer: And if Sartre were here he'd burn you with his cigarette for saying that.

Charlie: Sartre's dead, Nietzsche's dead, Kurt Cobain is dead, Bob Dylan is dead, it's all up to me now to figure everything out and I can't handle the pressure.

Jennifer: Bobby isn't dead.

Charlie: He is to me, it's like the God is dead thing...it doesn't mean God is dead, as in some dude living in outer space, it's the idea of God, the teleological argument has become unreasonable and as a species we can no longer use it as a source for moral code.

.

Jennifer: Well I've read Nietzsche Charlie, but how does it apply to Dylan?

Charlie: His argument for purpose is dead to me, it's no longer conceivable that a young man could ramble down to New York, speak his mind, and have people listen to him-the concept of youthful, uncorrupted, pure honest and sincere wisdom is dead. Now his songs are selling fruit drinks and tampons.

Jennifer: Uncorrupted wisdom is dead? So when you said 'Youth is Paramount'?

Charlie: Dead, lost, never going to say it again Jenny babe.

Jennifer: You know, Dylan just got that idea from Rimbaud.

Charlie: Why do you think Rimbaud stopped writing when he turned twenty? There was nothing left to say, he had seen too much of the world, he was sick of it, he became a nihilist.

Jennifer: Dylan didn't.

Charlie: Yup, he turned to God, he gave up on the topical world and turned to God, he's a nihilist.

Jennifer: You fucking asshole, you're bitter as burnt garlic.

Charlie: I'm-yeah, yeah I know.

Jennifer: You are a nihilist, you believe in nothing.

Charlie: I believe that there is no truth, that there is nothing to believe in.

Jennifer: Love, sex?

Charlie: That's nature, I could believe in nature, but I would have to know where it came from.

Jennifer: You know who's dead? You're fucking dead.

Charlie: Jenny...

Jennifer: The Charlie I knew is dead! The Charlie I knew had the courage to think and battle against the unknown, shit, I might even say you were successful at times.

Charlie: Hardly, tell me one truth that I've discovered since we met.

Jennifer: What about Sartre, you still believe in his shit don't you?

Charlie: Hell is other people.

Jennifer: There you go, that's the truth, ain't it?

Charlie: Yeah...maybe...it might also be a cop out.

Jennifer: Huh?

Charlie: So that guys like him, guys like me, don't feel guilty about hating people and being reclusive-it's an excuse for reclusion, it's an excuse to hide.

Jennifer: Alright, well I'll just let you hide then alright?

Charlie: Where you going?

Jennifer: Somewhere, that's enough for me, there's meaning in somewhere, this room is saturated with nothingness.

Scene 2

[Charlie is knocking on Jennifer's front door; Jennifer opens her bedroom window on the second floor and sticks her out and looks down at Charlie]

Jennifer: What do you want Charlie?

Charlie: I need your help Jenny, I need your help with my assignment!

Jennifer: Yeah right, you remember my experience with philosophy class.

Charlie: Huh? Oh, yeah, but that's irrelevant Jenny, I just want you to watch this movie with me and we'll discuss it.

[Jennifer frowns and looks out over the neighborhood, ignoring Charlie]

Charlie: Come on Jenny, you studied this on the island, just cause you had one dick-head teacher doesn't mean you can't do it.

Jennifer: Oh, so *now* you want to think again, is that it?

Charlie: Won't be much Jen, we just got to get to the bottom of nihilism...come on...look, I'm out of the house! Check out this cheek, clean as baby skin!

Jennifer: You shaved, good for you, you're pure like Mother Theresa.

Charlie: Let me in it's cold!

Jennifer: What movie?

Charlie: Reservoir Dogs!

Jennifer: How romantic...

[Jennifer disappears from the window and in a few moments she opens the front door and lets Charlie into the house]

Charlie: You look beautiful today Jennifer.

Jennifer: Are you ready to take responsibility for your freedom?

Charlie: Who are you, Simone de Beauvoir?

Jennifer: Shit, I don't know if I'd want to be.

Charlie: La Castor!

[Charlie flips her long hair playfully; she grabs his hand defensively; Charlie steps in closer and kisses her on the cheek]

Charlie: I believe in something, I'm sure I do Jenny.

[Jennifer turns away coldly and leads Charlie through the kitchen]

Jennifer: Do we really have to watch Dogs again? We've seen it so many times.

Charlie: No, I suppose we don't.

[They walk upstairs to Jennifer's bedroom and close the door; Jennifer sits at her desk while Charlie lies down on the bed]

Jennifer: Don't mess up my bed.

Charlie: Jenny would you come sit with me for Christ sake?

Jennifer: I just don't think you should become a nihilist because you're studying it in class.

Charlie: What is a nihilist Jenny? Really, I don't even know.

Jennifer: You're the one who has the class.

Charlie: Yeah but I was out of it last week, I couldn't concentrate, it slipped past me.

Jennifer: Well, I know what it meant for Nietzsche.

Charlie: Well let's stick to Nietzsche, I think I can relate to Nietzsche.

Jennifer: First he said it was like, well, a disbelieve of the material world in favor of the imaginary world, or 'God'.

Charlie: But then God died.

Jennifer: Yeah, so nihilism is a disbelieve in all values or morals or rules, that is to say, that life has no purpose, and our existence is meaningless.

Charlie: So when Sartre says we have to make meaning, we have to build or own essence, it would sort of be a counter-argument.

Jennifer: Yes, because nihilism leads to apathy, and apathy is a denial of life.

Charlie: I just discussed apathy for my literature essay on T.S. Eliot.

Jennifer: Exactly, you were telling me this I think...

Charlie: Yeah, apathy is 'living as though you were dead' and they say it's a psychologically related to death fear.

Jennifer: Well I don't know about that, but yeah, apathy is not caring, not trying, it's a denial of self, a denial of existence.

Charlie: So nihilism is just one big fat 'NO'.

Jennifer: It's a practice of negation.

Charlie: I think I get it.

Jennifer: But Sartre, since you can only ever understand things in terms that relate to you, is the opposite of apathetic, when he tells you to take responsibility and build your essence, that's the opposite of apathy.

Charlie: So when I said I didn't care anymore, that I didn't wanna try anymore.

Jennifer: Apathy.

Charlie: Nihilism.

Jennifer: Sartre rolled over.

Charlie: Well thank God for you then Jenny.

Jennifer: You can thank him but it would just be more nihilism.

Charlie: Ha, yeah...so...does Tarantino practice nihilism?

Jennifer: I dunno I never met 'im.

Charlie: In the movie darling, does he show nihilism, I mean, does the film function as philosophy?

Jennifer: In some ways, I suppose.

Charlie: Well I don't think I can write an essay with that.

Jennifer: Well, fine, if I have to do everything for you, let's think about it.

[Jennifer snatches the DVD case from off the bed and looks over the cover in an attempt to refresh her memory of the film]

Jennifer: Yeah, Mr. Blonde is totally nihilistic, he has no morals or values and his only purpose in life is killing, which is the ultimate negation, is it not?

Charlie: Oh baby you're deep, it's true, it's true, murder is the ultimate negation, the ultimate denial of a purposeful existence.

Jennifer: It really is a visual interpretation of apathy.

Charlie: Wouldn't that be suicide? Apathy is inflicted on one's self, but nihilism is more socialized, it speaks to the structure of society, or lack there of, where as apathy is a symptom of the self.

Jennifer: So murder is nihilistic, suicide isn't?

Charlie: Suicide is narcissistic, which is apathetic, which is nihilistic, so I guess if you run through the chain of relevance, than suicide is too.

Jennifer: Mr. Blonde obviously had no remorse about killing, he was enjoying torturing the cop.

Charlie: He disfigured him, the cop himself used that word, 'disfigured'.

Jennifer: Coincidence?

Charlie: No, Mr. Blonde is disfiguring the society's law structure, represented by the cop.

Jennifer: Now who's deep?

Charlie: Don't you agree? Mr. Blonde is a bad-ass nihilist!

Jennifer: Yeah, I totally agree, I don't think you could say he's apathetic, cause he's just enjoying himself so damn much, but still, what you said is good.

Charlie: And he is a strait killer, remember the scene when it shows him meeting Joe in the office, he has just gotten out of jail, he starts wrestling with Fast Eddy?

Jennifer: Yup.

Charlie: He says 'When am I going to get back to doing some *real* work?', or something like that, and the response he gets is, 'Not yet, shit's fucked up right now'.

Jennifer: Ok...

Charlie: But then Joe and Eddy say that they got a job 'in the meantime' - IN THE MEANTIME JENNY! They're down-playing the robbery, presenting it to him as something he normally wouldn't do, but it's just a small job until he gets back on his feet.

Jennifer: So what are you implying?

Charlie: No not me, it's what Tarantino is implying...you see, if the robbery isn't the 'real work' that Mr. Blonde is referring to, than what could be? What could be more dangerous and illegal than armed robbery?

Jennifer: He's a hit man, you're right.

Charlie: And hit men are nihilistic by nature, is that too much to assume?

Jennifer: Probably, yeah, but I think you've proven your point about Mr. Blonde: His only purpose is killing and killing is an act of nihilism.

Charlie: Mr. White does believe in something though, he believes in being 'professional', and he seems to adhere to some kind of criminal code.

Jennifer: That's right, he says he's angry at Mr. Blonde because he didn't stick to procedure, he says 'I can't work with no maniac' or something.

Charlie: That's right, he expects Mr. Blonde to be keen on the criminal code, the unwritten law of unlawfulness.

Jennifer: Could you define that in anyway?

Charlie: Well I think one of the key values is 'don't kill civilians', right? It's ok to hurt cops, but not 'real people'.

Jennifer: That's a value?

Charlie: Well it is for a gangster, and there's other shit too, like how he takes care of Mr. Orange, why does he do that? That's morality isn't it?

Jennifer: It's like a 'Don't leave a man behind' kinda thing.

Charlie: Exactly, it's the criminal code, but, I want you to think darkly for a second, if you were Mr. White, what would be the best way to take care of Mr. Orange?

Jennifer: What do you mean?

Charlie: Ok, if Mr. White were a nihilist, with no care or concern for anything, why doesn't he just kill Mr. Orange and make it easier for himself to get away?

Jennifer: Because he's...moral...in a weird way....

Charlie: He is! Mr. Blonde would have left Mr. Orange to die, but Mr. White actually attempts to differentiate between good and bad, he says 'he's a good kid', that's based on faith, he believes in Mr. Orange enough to help him, but if he knew that Orange was a cop than it wouldn't go down like that would it?

Jennifer: You're right, he is acting on principle.

Charlie: The principles of a gangster, but principle.

Jennifer: But isn't crime and gangsterism in general just nihilism anyways? It's a total rejection of society's laws, so crime, in general, is nihilistic.

Charlie: I suppose, yes, that's Tarantino's thing too, maybe he is doing philosophy.

Jennifer: So in the general sense all the characters are nihilistic because they are all ruthless criminals, but Mr. White shows some traits of morality and order, he values the criminal code of behavior.

Charlie: Yup, and I suppose Joe does too, but Joe shows another sign of nihilism at the end when he says he knows Mr. Orange is a cop because he's the only one that he was unsure about it. What was the line, 'You don't need proof when you got instinct'.

Jennifer: So he believes in his own instinct but disbelieves everything else? I'm not so sure.

Charlie: It's the idea that there are no truths, only reason, he isn't concerned with the truth or outside proof of the truth because his only source of truth is instinct.

Jennifer: Then they all shoot each other.

Charlie: Because, well, I dunno, we'll get back to that maybe.

Jennifer: Alright, what about Mr. Pink, there has to be some good points for him, no?

Charlie: Buscemi? Yeah, totally, he doesn't believe in tipping the waitress, and he rants about society's implied standard of doing so, he doesn't believe in society's standards, although he does sort of believe in being professional.

Jennifer: Well it's not just about what he believes, but also what he does.

Charlie: Well he made the effort to hide the diamonds, nobody else got away with anything.

Jennifer: So his actions were purposeful.

Charlie: Yes and he remained focused on the purpose for the robbery, which was to score diamonds, but I think he isn't so much an individual nihilist, despite the non-conformist attitude.

Jennifer: Well, getting the diamonds doesn't say all that much Charlie.

Charlie: No maybe it doesn't, but it's him that brings up the idea of an absence of truth, when he's arguing with Mr. White. He says he knows they were set-up, but how does he know?

Jennifer: He figures it out through reason.

Charlie: Precisely, and beyond that, he knows nothing, he keeps saying that he isn't sure of anything, that the rat could be anybody and that he can't 'definitely know' that it's not anybody except for himself.

Jennifer: That's true...Tarantino is a philosopher.

Charlie: I dunno if I'd go that far, he does show nihilism in action, but he's said himself he just thinks violence is entertaining.

Jennifer: Well yeah, he's a postmodernist.

Charlie: HEY! I think I'm supposed to speak to pomo in my assignment!

Jennifer: Well there you go: aesthetic violence.

Charlie: It's definitely applicable to Kill Bill.

Jennifer: Well yeah, it's just a joke in Kill Bill, he glorifies and stylizes the violence so much that it becomes ironic.

Charlie: Sarcastic even.

Jennifer: That's what I meant, sarcastic.

Charlie: Let's go for a smoke I'm so sick of this.

Jennifer: We'll just have to come back to it later, lord knows you won't do research for your essay; you'll just take what I say and try to pass it off as legitimate wisdom.

Charlie: It is though Jenny, when it comes to movies, good movies-sorry I'll re-phrase-when it comes to philosophical movies, postmodern movies, whether it's Van Sant or P.T.A. or Tarantino...nobody is more of an expert than us...we were raised on this shit Jenny...we're the ultra-modernists, and God's been dead for so long that they didn't even tell us about him!

### Scene 3

[Jennifer and Charlie are walking along the sidewalk, dodging large puddles of melting snow and smoking cigarettes]

Jennifer: Cigarettes is nihilism too.

Charlie: No, narcissism, it's spitting in the face of mortality, it's taking pleasure from destruction of the self.

Jennifer: That's only narcissism for you sweetheart, because you think you're invincible.

Charlie: I'm just a victim of the mass advertising monster.

Jennifer: M.A.M.? Mam? Mammon?

[Charlie laughs]

Charlie: It's true, they hooked me, keyed into my diffidence, and profiled me as an anti-hero.

Jennifer: You're a Byronic hero, sure, if you were on the screen.

Charlie: Vincent Vega, Jules Winnfield, Butch Coolidge...they were all anti-heroes.

Jennifer: How so?

Charlie: Well, Butch for sure anyways, he's self-reliant, commanding, cunning...he's cynical.

Jennifer: He's arrogant.

Charlie: Most importantly he's flawed, he isn't entirely virtuous...neither are the two hit men, but the audience loves them, they are favorable...but they defy the traditional hero, or protagonist, that's for sure.

Jennifer: They are post-World War II folk as well.

Charlie: Yeah, Butch relates to it with his Grandfather's gold watch...

Jennifer: What about Dogs though?

Charlie: Dogs has anti-heroes, postmodern protagonists, how about Mr. White? Were you not rooting for Keitel? Tell me you weren't rooting for Harvey!

Jennifer: Of course.

Charlie: So we're rooting for him because he's some sort of hero, but it sure as hell isn't the archetypal kind, you know, the virtuous knight in shiny armor.

Jennifer: I get it, he's 'anti'.

Charlie: It almost relates to Eliot again.

Jennifer: Fragmentation of the self? The unconscious hypocrite?

Charlie: I dunno how much I see it in Tarantino actually.

Jennifer: Sure, what about the undercover cop? The whole notion of undercover police reflects on multiple identities.

Charlie: I dunno Jenny, Balzac wrote about masking identity and he's no postmodernist.

Jennifer: Yeah but he was so far ahead of his time...think about it...Mr. Orange lives a dual life, he changes his identity, but what's important is the way Tarantino cuts it up.

Charlie: Shit, you're right, he juxtaposes scenes of Freddy Niuewendyk the cop and scenes of Mr. Orange, the gangster.

Jennifer: He does the same thing with all of them, or at least, most of them, he shows you their gangster personas in the black suits, and then he shows you their real identities after.

Charlie: I think the non-linear juxtaposition technique is entirely post-modern.

Jennifer: Well yeah...the best example in literature is Kurt Vonnegut-Slaughterhouse 5.

Charlie: Yeah...and the embracing of the lower class culture is totally Burroughs.

Jennifer: I'd have to say Reservoir Dogs is entirely relevant to both nihilism and postmodernism through and through.

Charlie: Yeah, and with nearly all the characters being senselessly murdered at the end I think Tarantino is showing how they are all blinded from truth, and as such, they kill each other for no good reason, or else, they think their actions are purposeful but they are not, they are acting 'in vain'.

Jennifer: Where are you getting that from?

Charlie: I dunno, Nietzsche again isn't it? Or maybe just Wikipedia...but somewhere I heard that line, about all actions being in vain, because there is no purpose or meaning.

Jennifer: Maybe just with Mr. White, he saves Mr. Orange, but he does so in vain, and when he realizes it, he freaks out hard.

Charlie: You're probably right babe, it all comes down to Mr. White in the end... but does it extend the argument?

Jennifer: What argument?

Charlie: I dunno, the argument.

Jennifer: I think if I say the world nihilism again somebody is going to hear us and call the cops.

Charlie: Sarcasm, that's another thing.

Jennifer: Another what thing?

Charlie: Postmodern technique, Tarantino is great at it.

Jennifer: Yeah...yeah...remember your English teacher in high school? You told him your greatest influence was Quentin Tarantino.

Charlie: I just wanted to piss him off.

Jennifer: But it backfired, he thought you were brilliant for saying that.

Charlie: Brilliant or perverse.

Jennifer: That's how I would describe Tarantino, he's either brilliant, or he's terribly perverse...one or the other...

Charlie: Either way, he extends on the argument for postmodern nihilism, or at least he makes it more contemporary and relevant, and he bites the big narrative in the ass.

Jennifer: So now you think he's a philosopher?

Charlie: He taught us about it, didn't he?

[Jennifer smiles and sinks into Charlie's side]

Jennifer: You're back.

Charlie: Of course I'm back; did you think you lost me?

Jennifer: Nihilism is dangerous, Charlie.

Charlie: Don't worry, it can't get us anymore.

[Ahead of them on the sidewalk a young man is walking towards them; the man is wearing a light rain coat and fit black slacks; he is holding a clipboard and numerous pamphlets]

[On the other side of the street a young woman is walking; she is wearing the same clothes as the man, and holding the same clipboard and wad of pamphlets]

Charlie: Look Jenny, prisoners from the past.

[The man slows down to confront them]

Man: Hello friends, lovely day isn't it?

Jennifer: Could be worse.

Man: I see that you're young and surely you have no patience for my inquiries, but won't you please answer me this one question- Have you found purpose in life?

[Jennifer laughs outright, Charlie looks mildly offended]

Charlie: Jenny...what should I do here....?

[Jennifer giggling]: Be nice!

Charlie: Look here man, we've got our purpose...we don't know what the hell it is yet, but I seriously doubt you've got it written down in those pamphlets.

Man: How do you know until you've read it?

Charlie: Alright buddy, here's the deal, I read some of that stuff you got there...it had a lot of heart, but it just doesn't dance...you see, what I'm trying to say here, is, we just don't dig on grand narratives.

[The man looks at them shocked and thoroughly confused]

Charlie: Now, if you'll excuse us, I have an essay to write.

## References

- Frederick Nietzsche: *The Gay Science; Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
- Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness; No Exit and other stories*
- The works of Bob Dylan
- The works of Arthur Rimbaud
- T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*
- Gilles Mitchell: "T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land': Death Fear, Apathy and Dehumanization", from *American Imago*, 43, no. 1 (1986:Spring) p.23
- Reservoir Dogs (1992), Pulp Fiction (1994) and Kill Bill (2003) directed by Quentin Tarantino
- Mary Litch: Philosophy Through Film, "Ethics"
- Mark Conrad: "Reservoir Dogs: Redemption in a Postmodern World" (2006); "Pulp Fiction: The Sign of the Empty Symbol" (2003)
- Notes taken from the lectures of Dr. Todd Dufresne
- Wikipedia, articles found under following title or key search words: Frederick Nietzsche; Reservoir Dogs (film); Pulp Fiction (film); Nihilism; Apathy; Anti-Hero; Byronic Hero; Postmodernism; Fragmentation;
- Wikiquote: Reservoir Dogs
- The works of Kurt Vonnegut (used as a basis for knowledge of postmodern literary structure and themes; i.e. non-linear arrangement of plot, post-WWII disillusionment, etc.)
- Honore de Balzac: Le Pere Goriot