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### **Reservoir Dogs: A Postmodern Perspective**

One of the most prominent philosophical questions in contemporary society is whether or not films, even popular Hollywood blockbusters, are capable of *being* or *doing* philosophy.

According to Thomas Wartenberg, if films are capable of illustrating “philosophical ideas in interesting and illuminating ways,” then such works of cinema can and should be perceived as *philosophy-in-action*.<sup>1</sup> Wartenberg discusses the silent film *Modern Times* to demonstrate that, by illustrating a philosophical idea, films are not only capable of arousing deep thought within an individual, but they may also interpret and update a philosophical text in the same way that contemporary philosophers respond to the work of their predecessors.<sup>2</sup> Employing Wartenberg’s theory of what it means for film to *do* philosophy, I shall now proceed to scrutinize Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* in order to determine how much, if at all, this particular motion picture enacts and extends upon the concepts of postmodernism as well as nihilism.

Simplistically defined as a historical movement that has succeeded the era of modernism, postmodernism is actually an intricate and multifaceted philosophy which is essentially impossible to identify within a single sentence. Taking this into account, it is my intention to divide the notion of postmodernism into three distinct aspects of interpretation, namely late capitalism, the combining of genres and the critique of knowledge claims, in order to examine how closely *Reservoir Dogs* corresponds to each one.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wartenberg, “Beyond *Mere* Illustrations: How Films Can Be Philosophy,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (2006): 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

First, postmodernism is intimately connected with late capitalism, an economic structure in which consumerism has overrun virtually every facet of human life. In particular, John Berger maintains that after being exposed to the substantial amount of advertising that the media employs, the average individual is manipulated into purchasing a plethora of material products in order to become “an object of envy for others...which will then justify her loving herself.”<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, *Reservoir Dogs* does a considerably good job of illustrating a world consumed by late capitalism as well as demonstrating the influential effect advertising can have on our everyday lives. As Mark Conrad notes in his article, “*Reservoir Dogs*: Redemption in a Postmodern World,” Tarantino’s film begins with its main characters discussing the significance of popular songs such as ‘Like a Virgin,’ and ‘True Blue,’ apparently more concerned with aspects of consumer culture than with the intricate details of their impending bank heist.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, pictorial as well as verbal references to popular culture such as the *Silver Surfer* comic book and the *Get Christie Love!* TV show are interspersed throughout the film to subtly display how much influence and control the media truly possesses in contemporary society.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that the protagonists of *Reservoir Dogs* themselves, as gangsters, are primarily motivated by a desire to acquire a large amount of diamonds, unquestionably allowing them to purchase a variety of products which, as consumer culture dictates, will give their life meaning. Overall then, while individuals such as Mr. White, as well as the undercover officer, Mr. Orange, seem to revel in their roles as gangsters, it is clear that they, like the masses of society, are entangled in a never-ending cycle of consumerism which *Reservoir Dogs* appears to have successfully illustrated as a philosophical film.

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<sup>3</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Great Britain: The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Conrad, ed., *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

A second feature of postmodernism lies in its ability to break down boundaries and combine genres.<sup>6</sup> Though he himself denies it, the director of *Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino, is widely considered to be a neo-noir filmmaker who engages in aspects of postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> Taking this into account, the majority of his movies can be said to blend specific categories of film together in order to create something entirely unique and innovative. Indeed, one of Tarantino's more recent works, *Kill Bill*, manages to successfully incorporate a variety of film genres, such as anime and westerns, into one nonlinear story.<sup>8</sup> When looking at *Reservoir Dogs* in terms of its cinematic structure, it is clear that this particular film possesses a similar combination of recognizable film genres. For instance, due to its substantial focus on the fall of several criminal figures, one can easily make the deduction that *Reservoir Dogs* is a crime or gangster film. Yet to some extent, Tarantino also appears to utilize the formula of a western movie, breaking down the boundaries between genres and combining two somewhat similar but ultimately contradictory types of film. In particular, rather than having a morally-upright protagonist fight to uphold law and order, as one would expect to find within a traditional western, *Reservoir Dogs* features a variety of immoral gangsters ironically attempting to restore order in their group by uncovering the man who had betrayed them to the police. On a similar note, it is worth mentioning that *Reservoir Dogs*, like any conventional western or gangster film, contains a considerable amount of action and violence, yet it also can be said to employ a number light-hearted and comedic moments, further illustrating the film's ability to stretch across multiple genres. A final method which Tarantino employs in order to break down the boundaries of film is to subtly reference the cinematic history and techniques of the past. For

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 108.

example, by naming the jewelry store in *Reservoir Dogs* after the star of a 1964 French film, Tarantino is cleverly able to reference the French new wave directors whose work he considers to be highly influential to his own.<sup>9</sup> In culmination, through referencing various aspects of filmmaking as well as combining and altering traditional genres, Tarantino has ensured that *Reservoir Dogs* unquestionably shines as a work of postmodern film.

A third aspect of postmodernism is that it thoroughly critiques the idea that there is such a thing as abstract Truth. While philosophy is traditionally dominated by a series of binaries, such as good and evil, in order to make sense of the world, postmodernism adamantly opposes such essentialist ways of thinking and adopts “a radical relativism about knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Coupled with this abandonment of transcendent Truth is the notion that grand narratives, stories which attempt to explain the foundations of history, cannot be trusted as they are guided by power structures “that service the needs of some people above others.”<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, this rejection of overarching Truth is one of the most important aspects of postmodernism, as well as the factor featured most prominently in *Reservoir Dogs*. At first glance, one may not believe that the film truly embraces a postmodern perspective, as it contains a considerable amount of binary oppositions which result in racism, homophobia and sexism. Yet upon closer inspection, it is clear that such themes are not meant to regurgitate the dominant ideology of society, but to demonstrate how mankind has abandoned such stereotypical notions in a postmodern world and that dichotomies are not as constant as we once believed them to be. Such instability is further employed in the opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs*, where the majority of gangsters present their own understanding of well-known songs. While this conversation may not be considered

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<sup>9</sup> Conrad, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>11</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 197.

significant when taken at face value, it is nevertheless useful in symbolizing the postmodern principle that there are no definitive facts, but merely a variety of interpretations. Later on in the movie, each gangster is being assigned an alias based on a particular color. From this, another aspect of postmodernism, namely its rejection of grand narratives, becomes readily apparent. In particular, I believe that by adopting colorful codenames rather than what Joe Cabot refers to as their Christian names, the gangsters symbolically reject Christianity, a grand narrative in which “people find salvation...from sin...when they accept Jesus as their Lord and savior and admit their guilt,” as well as the idea that they can or want to be redeemed from their lives as gangsters.<sup>12</sup> On a related note, Mr. Pink’s refusal to tip waitresses at the beginning of the film can be perceived as another instance in which Tarantino condemns the notion of grand narratives. To be more specific, by acknowledging how people feel the need to tip waitresses rather than individuals working at McDonald’s, Mr. Pink is able to produce a thought-provoking and contemporary argument as to why one should not follow an overarching ideal, namely because they are unfairly controlled by power structures which assist a particular group of individuals at the cost of several others.<sup>13</sup> Overall, by successfully illustrating and expanding upon three aspects of postmodernism, namely late capitalism, the combining of genres and the critique of knowledge claims, *Reservoir Dogs* can be said to *do* philosophy in precisely the way Thomas Wartenberg maintained.

Upon learning that “we can no longer really claim to know anything objectively about the world,” the average individual may be compelled to adopt the pessimistic position of nihilism, which readily asserts that all values and beliefs are ultimately irrelevant.<sup>14</sup> While Friedrich

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<sup>12</sup> Conrad, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

Nietzsche perceived the death of abstract Truth, or God, as a blessing in which one is free to love their fate, other individuals require such objectivity in order to make sense of their world and will possess “no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy” without it.<sup>15</sup> Here it can be argued that, in the same way *Modern Times* updates Karl Marx’s theory of alienation by depicting a modern assembly line, *Reservoir Dogs* can do philosophy by examining the notion of nihilism from a perspective previously unexplored in any philosophical text, namely that of the gangster.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the majority of the gangsters within *Reservoir Dogs* adopt a Nietzschean outlook of loving their fate as they revel in their role as gangsters, while at the same time, reacting to the futility of life by causing a considerable amount of chaos and destruction. One of the film’s main characters, Mr. Blonde, is a prominent example of such acceptance and disorder as he finds great pleasure in nearly burning a bound police officer alive shortly after cutting off his ear. *Reservoir Dogs* can also be said to embrace a nihilistic perspective simply because it fails to provide an alternative type of meaning for existence. As previously mentioned, by removing their Christian names, the gangsters have relinquished their belief in a higher power, abandoning an objective meaning to life which certain individuals utterly depend upon in order to make sense of the world. Furthermore, due to the rampant amount of popular advertising that *Reservoir Dogs* employs, it would appear as though the gangsters are too engaged within the recurrent day-dreams of consumer culture to form their own subjective meaning for existence, habitually initiating a number of thefts in order to purchase a variety of products which will supposedly give their lives meaning.<sup>17</sup> In culmination, *Reservoir Dogs* is an engaging piece of

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Pratt, “Nihilism: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/nihilism.htm> (accessed March 20th, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Wartenberg, “Beyond *Mere* Illustrations,” 28.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 146.

cinema which, in my opinion, effectively enacts as well as expands upon the philosophical ideas of postmodernism and nihilism.

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