

Stylized Violent Aesthetics: Tarantino's Surgical Lens on Three-stages

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Abstract. Acclaimed director Quentin Tarantino is renowned for his masterful depictions of violence. Through his influential filmography, he has meticulously crafted a unique, stylized aesthetic for on-screen brutality, transforming bloodshed into a distinctive and highly recognizable cinematic signature. "Violent aesthetics" in movies often emphasize how to present violent scenes in a suitable and non-repulsive way. Tarantino makes use of this principle and moreover, gives violence a new perspective and presentation through his distinctive cinematic language. This research aims to demonstrate and analyze how Tarantino conducts violence via the usage of diverse cinematic language. More precisely, this essay will employ *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012) as case studies for an in-depth analysis of the connection between cinematic language and violent aesthetics. Furthermore, the paper is built upon a concept of three-stages, referring to the "pre-violence", "violence scene", and "post-violence" within a single scene. Besides, these three films shares the plot of revenge, accompanied a similar three-stages rhythm when violence is going to occur, which is comparable to digging into cinematic language. Therefore, it will be concrete and legible for us to understand reconstruction and beautification of violence.

Keywords: Violence, violent aesthetics, Tarantino, Cinematic language, Three-stages

1. Introduction

Since Quentin Tarantino's first film, *Reservoir Dogs*), this director's own violent aesthetics has gradually taken shape. It was one of the most representative films of the late 20th century, which glorified violence, leading to mixed reviews at that time [1]. Kendrick explains that screen violence has been difficult to define strictly for many decades because it can be understood from multiple dimensions, such as physical or psychological harm, or systemic or structural (such as gender discrimination, racial discrimination), rather than a single causal relationship, which refers to how Tarantino holds his own violence comprehension and develops it. Since then, every film created by him has continued to reflect his understanding of violence, gradually forming his own style of violent aesthetics and then gaining his own followers.

In this paper, Tarantino's violence will be reconstructed to explain why his violent aesthetics can be stylized. He has always adhered to formalism in the field of violence scenes, combining a solid foundation of cinematic language with each different types of film as well as creating many violence

aesthetic highlights with a consistent core but distinct styles [2]. Junaedi et.al. indicate that Tarantino's films have always been characterized by highly stylized cinematic language for showing the story visually, which provides adequate space to divide violence into every frame. Accordingly, three movies directed by Tarantino are chosen to be the example for analysis, which are Kill Bill: Volume 1 (2003), Inglourious Basterds (2009), and Django Unchained (2012). These three movies share the plot of revenge, accompanied by some highly rhythmic violent scenes. Even if they are the director's work from different periods, some commonalities can still be found and summarized some patterns.

Besides, Three-stages violence, which is a concept that will run through the entire section of discussion, all the following scene analysis will be based on it. It is a definition to disassemble one violent scene into three parts according to the timeline, which is "pre-violence", "violence scene", and "post-violence". A detailed and visual illustration can be seen in Figure 1, dividing a violent scene into three parts and interpreting them as anticipation, action, and character release. Anticipation, which means a psychological cue via cinematic language. It happens in "pre-violence", often priming the audience's premonition of violence. Action refers to how Tarantino uses props, environment, and any potential factors to shape a unique aesthetic of violence during the process of "violence scene". Last but not least, "post-violence", where the audience can achieve the release after a fierce fight. The stable scenery and silent environment provide the audience with time and space to see the relationships between characters and "post-violence" scenes clearly.



Figure 1. Three-stages violence: pre-violence, violence, post-violence

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Violent aesthetics

Violence, as an unaccepted event in our real life, why can it become an aesthetic presence in movies and be enjoyed by so many people? [3] Ma et.al. state that, according to Freud said that suppressed desires will always exist in the human brain and cannot be rid of, either entering consciousness or being released through some practical action, and the violent elements in movies provide the audience with wishful thinking, relieving tension by generating pleasure [4]. Gai and Lin demonstrate that the movie, as a form of "affect" art, is a highly appealing art form that attracts the audience's sensory experience compared to other forms of art, giving the audience a more intuitive and intense physical experience. These theories have a certain shaping effect on the contemporary movie tendency, [5] which approaches violent scenes in an aesthetic rather than moral or logical way.

From existing research, the foundation of violent aesthetics is more based on the psychological level of the audience, presented through some inner desire and release. Furthermore, [6] Yuan suggests that "violent aesthetics" is a performance form and interpretation of violence that has gradually formed since its appearance in movies because of the sheer pleasure from gory bodily rituals. We can roughly infer that Tarantino's films are so beloved by many film fans precisely because he is not only able to think from the audience's perspective about what kind of violence can gain audience support, such as righteous revenge and punishment of evil forces, but he can also be

skilled at using diverse cinematic language to beautify violent scenes, such as using slow motion and excessive blood.

1.1.2. Existing research on three films

[7] Tarantino once said, “If I had not loved movies so much and wanted to be an actor, I could have been a criminal. I was very attracted by that way of life” [8]. Maglajilja concludes that Tarantino has shaped three features on dealing with violence scenes, which are dark humor, excess, and the aestheticization of violence. Entertaining cruel or negative things and elevating them to an exaggerated level that reality cannot achieve often weakens their cruel immorality. Furthermore, [9] Kupfer demonstrates that *Kill Bill* extols the bride's successful revenge with ultraviolence; the fusion of violent aesthetics and the concept of female warriors makes the film more tense and dramatic. From a visual and sensory perspective, Tarantino always gives us a feeling of depicting violence but transcending pure violence.

Nevertheless, some critical articles tend to classify Tarantino's excessive violence in certain films as a way to guide the audience to release their inner nature [10]. Jenkins asserts that Tarantino excessively portrayed violence in *Inglourious Basterds* - cutting off the scalp of captured Nazi officers or beating them to death - placing the audience in a special position and encouraging the feasibility of violence in the process of revenge, especially for Jews. In short, whether there are positive or negative evaluations of the violence in movies, they are all caused by the violent scenes created by Tarantino, which is more convincing in demonstrating its value for discussion.

Moreover, [11] Gooch acknowledges that Tarantino once faced ethical issues regarding his violent aesthetics due to the crimes committed by his long-time collaborator. Since then, Tarantino has added the revenge as a reason for the audience to sympathize with the protagonist, allowing them to appreciate violence based on understanding its rationality. Therefore, some heroic cinematic language is used when Tarantino portrays the protagonist committing violence, which can gain more support from the audience in terms of subjective emotions. In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino grounds violence in the intersecting frameworks of gender and race, [11] constructing an integrative aesthetic-ethical framework that serves to rationalize the depicted acts of violence.

Given that existing research is mostly focused on the reasons for the formation and impact of Tarantino's violent aesthetics, there seems to be a lack of in-depth research on the connection between cinematic language and violent aesthetics in Tarantino films. This type of research digs into first-hand materials, namely the scenes of movies, in order to help readers better understand how the aesthetic of violence in Tarantino's lens has sparked widespread discussions at film festivals.

2. Three-stages concept

In this section, violent scenes are divided into three parts, which are “pre-violence”, “violence scene”, and “post-violence”, to better summarize how Tarantino portrays aesthetics at each level as well as creates his own unique aesthetic of violence. Anticipation, action, and character release, the violence deconstruction based on cinematic language, giving readers a more comprehensive item to make sense of every frame made by Tarantino.

2.1. Pre-violence - anticipation

Before violence scenes occur, Tarantino is adept at using cinematic language to stimulate the audience's psychology. The dramatic aspect is often reflected in close-ups and dialogues, which can

create the anticipation of violence as well as incidentally improve the character's personality. The close-up empathizes with the audience by focusing on the emotional changes of the characters, while the dialogue creates a sense of rhythm through a large amount of dialogue, making the audience unaware of when violence will occur. These two elements seem to be regular in film shooting; however, Tarantino bestows proper function and meaning to trigger the following fight.

2.1.1. Close-up



Figure 2. Bride's gaze before violence

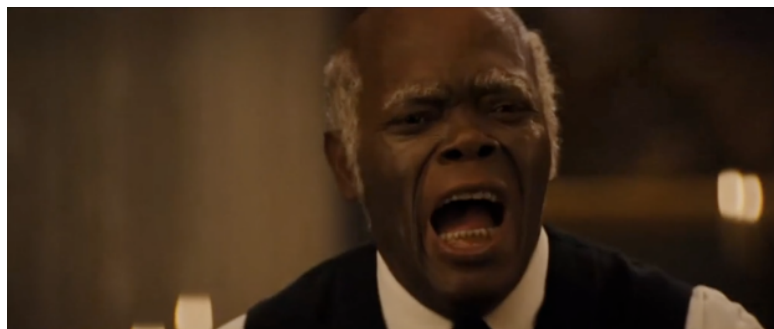


Figure 3. Stephen's hopelessness when seeing his boss dead

Tarantino's use of Close-ups is to lead the audience into the hearts of the characters. It can not only add dramatic tension to the imminent violence, but also imply to the audience that a violent event is about to occur [12]. Balázs and Mast explain that in movie scenes, facial expression close-ups usually function as a medium that conveys a character's emotions and intentions due to their comprehensibility. When shooting at characters' faces, Tarantino uses fast zoom to directly push the character's face, which is different from depicting the environment, space, or time. It simply allows the audience to enter the character's inner world. These close-ups capture the character taken moments before proceeding to violence, highlighting the anticipation. Often, the following scene is closely followed by intense fighting.

At the beginning of Kill Bill, the bride visits a house in a sparsely populated residential area, and her aim is to kill the householder. Tarantino gives her this close-up shot when the householder opens the door, accompanied by heart-stirring music. The bride's gaze in Figure 2 is so aggressive that the audience's violence anticipation will be strengthened instantly. Later, a brief flashback within 10 seconds indicates the relationship between the two in a layered form, as Figure 4 shows, with the background still being a close-up of the bride. The audience's emotions were pushed to a climax from this close-up, perfectly laying the groundwork for the next fight between the two.



Figure 4. Layered flashback based on the close-up of bride

Similarly, in *Django Unchained*, after Django and Dr. Schultz's plan is exposed, negotiations between the two parties break down. Dr. Schultz couldn't bear Candie's insults and killed him. Stephen's exaggerated expression, shown as Figure 3 at that moment reflects his despair and helplessness after her boss was killed. It should be noted that this close-up shot is quickly pushed towards Stephen's face through a Hitchcock zoom from a medium shot (shown in Figure 5) at the beginning. This not only reflects the dramatic moment when Stephen sees his boss killed and falls into despair, but also leads the audience to suddenly enter Stephen's heart, realizing that as a black person, he is about to face a desperate situation after the boss's death in that era. Moreover, this quick twist from a medium shot to a close-up can better eliminate other people in the film and just focus on the most important character instantly. Last but not least, Stephen's facial expression almost pushes the film to the climax, indicating that he will take revenge for his boss, so that a gunfight is inevitable.



Figure 5. A medium shot when Candie is killed by Dr. Schultz

Although these two films develop completely different plots and emotions, they all take advantage of the function of the close-up [13]. Bálint and Rooney mention that some related studies have confirmed that audiences do not analyze the meaning of a close-up shot alone. Instead, they connect the shot with the context and construct meaning. The suitable usage of close-ups proves Tarantino's ingenuity, using the principles of camera sequence and cinematic language to inform the audience that there will be real fight and bloody scenes right after close-ups.

2.1.2. Dialogue

In Tarantino's films, the foreshadowing of violence is often presented through extensive dialogue, which other directors do not use frequently [14]. Finnegan indicates that the plot of Tarantino's movies always gives you a sense of uncertainty, and this uncertainty often makes you more excited while watching movies. In this part, lines will be listed to present the uncertainty.

For instance, in *Django Unchained*, after Schultz signs the contract, Candie asks for a handshake. “Here in Chichasaw County, a deal ain’t done until the two parties have shook hands,” Candie said. The subtext of this line is that Candie wants to show his power again in this relationship, which instantly brings the atmosphere to a freezing point, and the audience's emotions become tense at that moment. The doctor's arrogance makes him insist on not to shake the hand until Candie orders to kill Django’s wife. Dr. Schultz said, “You really want me to shake your hand?”, which implies the anticipation of violence. We can strongly feel that Dr.Schultz is going to do something to release his anger.

Besides, in the first scene in *Inglourious Basterds*, Landa is preparing to search the remaining Jews who are still hiding in French dairy farms. After Landa enters the house, Tarantino uses dialogue within 15 minutes between the two to repeatedly stimulate the audience's psychology. Landa firstly explains why he comes here and asks the farmer if he hides Jews in the house. The farmer denies this question, and Landa chooses to trust temporarily, which releases the audience for a while. Later, Landa mentions his nickname “The Jew Hunter” and makes some metaphors about Jews and Germans, indicating that he does not trust the farmer, and this action stimulates the audiences’ minds again. Eventually, Landa says, “I might add, also, that any information that makes the performance of my duty easier will not be met with punishment. Actually, quite the contrary. It will be met with reward”, and asks the question one more time. This time, the farmer’s as well as the audiences’ psychological defense line has collapsed, as if the prey cannot struggle anymore. In this dialogue, we can clearly feel the up-and-down emotion, but the change of emotion is dominated by Landa, who is going to “play” with us.

Tarantino’s dialogue in pre-violence can actually drive the emotions of audiences, controlling our mood up and down. As we can see, the dominant power in dialogue often lies in the hands of the more powerful party, and the weak at this time tend to gradually quiet down until they surrender or rise up in rebellion in dire straits. Moreover, there are some key turning points that can stimulate audiences to realize that the protagonist will engage some violent behavior, that anticipation exists. Eventually, after a lengthy conversation between the two sides, intense fights often take place with a very fast pace, resolute and high-frequency actor blocking and camera movements are extremely different from the pace of the dialogue, forming a high-octane contrast.

2.2. Violence scene - action

To understand the success behind the use of violence in a typical Tarantino scene, we will explore two main elements: splatter and slow motion. Splatter can be considered a branch of violent aesthetics, referring to the usage of blood plasma, which mainly contributes to creating some bloody scenes. Slow motion is a technique of cinematic language that can better present the actors' actions and movement details. In Tarantino’s films, a large number of slow-motion shots are conducted to present the elegance of protagonist in violence scenes. Being good at creating action (including environments, props, movements in films) is the criterion for Tarantino to shape his violence discription. Audiences often remember a movie because of these high-quality clips.

2.2.1. Splatter

The usage of blood has been a pattern in Tarantino’s films; we can usually see that blood splatters out exaggeratedly. The outrageous blood loss complies with black humor in films, which means that the excessive expression can not only make the audience feel like they can also feel the pain, but also add some exaggeration in order not to make the tone too cruel. He prefers to use props like

gushing plasma, severed limbs, or an exploded head to achieve excessive bloody scenes so that it can, to some extent, prevent the scene from reality because of its falsity.



Figure 6. A woman with severed limbs



Figure 7. Ishii kills her subordinate

As we can see in Figure 6, a medium wide close-up of a woman with the severed body parts sputtering blood, creating a sense of helplessness. It is exaggerated for presenting violence in this way because no one would bleed like this in real life. When the audience sees such a scene, they are shocked and, to some extent, truly feel the helplessness. We share the same angle with the character in frame, struggling painfully on the ground, and this is exactly Tarantino's magic to bring audiences into the frame.

Moreover, in Figure 7, Ishii kills a subordinate who shows a sense of betrayal without hesitation. Tarantino also uses a medium close-up but there is a "blood fountain" as the foreground, which makes it clear that if someone is going to argue with Ishii, the ending will certainly be death. In the frame, Ishii stared at the camera as if he was also looking at us in front of the screen, giving a strong sense of oppression. Tarantino conveyed the villain's ruthlessness to the audience without reservation through this scene, giving a sense of immersion.

At the end of *Inglourious Basterds*, Landa is punished by Aldo Raine, which is shown in Figure 8, engraving a Nazi mark on Landa's head. Tarantino directly focuses on the frame to show the uncomfortable process; a large amount of fresh red blood gushes out of the skin, strongly affecting the audience's perception of pain. This close-up is excessive, cruel, and unsettling, which is close to torture, so that it strongly proves that those who commit crimes will ultimately face severe punishment. Moreover, from the stance of the US military, this process is beneficial and rewarding for them. They represent the side of justice, punishing Fascists with such a humorous approach, thus adding justice and feasibility to the excessive bloodshed in the frame, which confirms Tarantino's efforts to make violence reasonable and acceptable in the later stages of his career due to various

factors mentioned in the literature review. Therefore, this kind of blood aesthetics condenses justice and black humor together, endowing the bloody scene with new meaning.



Figure 8. Landa was engraving the Nazi mark by Raine

2.2.2. Slow motion

Slow motion is one of the principal methods of Tarantino to emphasize the protagonist's emotional state [15]. Wöllner et.al. discuss that slow motion makes it easier for the audience to understand that key events are happening in the movie, and the characteristics of slow motion can also amplify the emotions of the characters. Given that Tarantino escapes from the type of pure genre film but adds more details on character arc, every character's trait in Tarantino's films is complete and vivid, having his/her own personality, belief, and goal. In order to achieve the depiction, Tarantino uses slow motion in violent scene to strengthen the emotional change accompanied by well-suited background music. Some characters' emotions may go from endurance to release, some characters may go from hesitation to decisiveness, and some may be the final decision made when there is no other way out. We can feel that this change always happens in the climax of a film, which leads audiences to better empathize with the character. This is also the biggest feature to shape Tarantino's violence scenes, interplaying extremely slow shots with fast shots.



Figure 9. Shosanna is being shot by Fredrick Zoller



Figure 10. Shosanna's dying expression



Figure 11. Django shoots in slow motion



Figure 12. Slow motion with blood mist spreading out

As we can see in Figure 9 and Figure 10 from *Inglourious Basterds*, Shosanna is shot by Fredrick Zoller, a German sniper who falls in love with Shosanna, and then falls to the ground. Before this, Shosanna had already managed to shoot him, but the momentary softness in her heart made him also kill Shosanna before he died. This incident happens just before Shosanna is about to try to successfully lock all Germans in the cinema and burn them to death, that is to say, she will never experience the feeling of revenge as a Jew. This series of shots is conducted in slow motion. Deliberately prolonging this moment undoubtedly added some beauty to Shosanna's gunshot wound; this treatment can not only captures Shosanna's moment of being shot, with a smile on her face of a victorious avenger about to succeed, but also simulates the time distortion that people may feel during moments of extreme shock and near death. The audience is forced to experience this sudden death from Susanna's perspective, enhancing empathy.

Moreover, in *Django Unchained*, after Django fails to save his wife, he begins to rise in rebellion, fighting alone against everyone in Candie's plantation, as shown in Figure 11 and Figure 12. This usage of slow motion conveys totally different emotion compared with *Inglourious Basterds*

mentioned before. If we connect the massacre at this moment with the context, we must acknowledge that Django, as a rescued black man, has always been suppressed after developing his confidence and shooting skills. To secretly save his wife, he has to pretend to be someone else and exercise unlimited restraint. Until the plan was revealed, Django's almost heroic battle is Tarantino's orgy in the climax of the movie - he portrays Django as a hero, showcasing his almost invincible marksmanship and skills through numerous slow motion shots, such as explosive plasma. This is a scene of the mythical black liberation movement, and slow motion can precisely give it an epic texture and legendary color.

Through the case analysis and comparison of two movies, it is not difficult to find that Tarantino's use of slow motion is aimed at emphasizing the climax as well as highlighting the theme. He is not stingy with spending time and shots to depict the emotions and positioning change of characters, while also using slow-paced visuals to enhance elegance. This is exactly what sets Tarantino apart - he often uses a technique to imply several layers of meaning he wants to convey and makes his violent aesthetics unique.

2.3. Post-violence - character release

This part is the aftermath of the violence, and Tarantino still captures the audience's attention, continuing the feeling of coming out of the bloody and violent situation, as well as giving the sense of release. And here Tarantino often uses two types of lenses - low-angle shots and high-angle full shots.

2.3.1. Low-angle shot

In the study of camera angles, handling power relations and dominant positions is one of the core viewpoints - the difference between high and low angles is due to the asymmetry created in space, [16] which leads to high-angle individuals occupying advantageous positions, while low-angle individuals have the opposite effect. Accordingly, Tarantino often uses low-angle shots to depict the winning-losing relationship and outcome after violence ends, aiming to allow the audience to look up at the other person from the perspective of a loser and truly experience the consequences of violence firsthand, which will be interpreted as character release in the following content.

More noteworthy is that [16] Sarria approves that in the linear relationship between perceived power and camera angle, a specific rule has been repeatedly validated: the lower the camera angle, the stronger or dominant the subject being photographed. With the fastidious usage of the camera by Tarantino, the angle setting strictly follows the developing relationship between characters, thus showcasing the specificity of aesthetics and emotional delivery as well as giving characters the best angle to release.



Figure 13. Landa's low angle shot



Figure 14. Django's low angle shot with a gun

As Figure 13 shows in *Inglourious Basterds*, after Hans Landa ordered his subordinates to shoot at Susanna's hiding place under the floor, Tarantino uses a nearly vertical low-angle camera to portray the Jewish people in a situation like mice - weak, helpless, and powerless in the face of the "Jewish killer". This kind of character relationship is like the prey and the hunter, giving people a feeling of being powerless to fight back.

There is the same power relationship when it comes to Figure 14, a corpse's POV, Django is holding a gun, pointing at one of the Brittel brothers. This character is preparing to abuse a black woman so that we can clearly see Django's angry facial expression. What's more, Django's upper body almost fills the screen, which gives audiences a sense of oppression, nearly cannot breathe. This is the first time Django, as a black, avenges for not only himself but also others as a free man in that era. Tarantino uses a low-angle shot to look up at Django to shape the power that he has gained at that moment. At the same time, this power is being greatly amplified by the resentment and anger accumulated in his heart, which we can obviously feel on his expression.

The two scenes in post-violence typically depict different emotions of character release with low-angle shots. Most of the screen is filled with the upper body of the character, and the oppressive feeling of suffocation will be conveyed to the audience. Tarantino reveals the winning-losing relationship through this shot, while guiding the audience towards a violent ending.

2.3.2. High-angle full shot

In Tarantino's films, a panoramic view can often provide audiences a shocking perspective after something violent has happened. This type of high-angle full shot often lasts for a while, which can offer audiences an opportunity to release and look back. Moreover, he always keeps the coherence from the last shot to the panoramic view, leading audiences fluently from the character to the whole picture.



Figure 15. A high angle full shot in *Kill Bill*



Figure 16. A high angle full shot in Django Unchained

In Kill Bill, there is a high-angle full shot shown in Figure 15; we are sharing the same view as the bride in the film. What comes first is the astonishment, lots of dead people lie on the ground with blood, with some frightened people hurriedly escaping from the scene by crossing over the corpses. This movement is pretty nice for release because while Tarantino is showing the post-violence scene, he still adds some dark humor to avoid the scene becoming too silent. This is also one of the biggest differences between Tarantino and other directors. Otherwise, the audience may feel too bloody to see it. Moreover, the aim of Tarantino in designing someone is to escape from the violent scene and call back the theme of revenge; the bride will not kill innocent people without reason.

However, there is a little bit of a difference in Django Unchained, which is shown in Figure 16. This frame is about to record all the corpses that Django “creates”. However, at the beginning, the scene depicts Django surrendering with a medium shot, and then as the camera moves and the scene is adjusted, gradually rising and beginning to transition to high-angle shots. This shot is so fluent that our perspective gradually separates from Django and turns into a bird's-eye view, which is a process from subjective to objective. This shot lasts about 15 seconds, providing audiences enough time to come out of the fierce violence. It is also a signal that Django has to face the cruel outcome due to his behavior; he is always supervising by some rules.

Therefore, this kind of full shot can actually bring audiences out of the character's mind, which means Tarantino is not stingy in showcasing his violent masterpieces, while also leaving the audience deeply impressed. But the meaning for protagonists in the film is more likely to be a temporary release, reminding them what they have done and what they are going to face. Tarantino is always responsible for each character.

3. Conclusion

Tarantino's successful creation is because of his responsibility on every stage of violence, choosing suitable cinematic language as accurately as he can. “Pre-violence” and “post-violence” are similar in the presentation of aesthetics, where the director successfully captures the audience's psychological activity, leading the audience's emotions to rise and fall with the changes in his cinematic language. Through the analysis of these two stages, Tarantino's planning and presentation of violent scenes seem to have expanded the boundaries of violent aesthetics, which can go beyond violence itself. The psychology of characters before and after violence scenes is equally salient, and empathy often adds points to violent scenes themselves.

Besides, violent scene is addressed with more diverse skills to fit in the style and theme. However, all techniques serve the development of characters and plot. Violence often occurs during plot transition or progression, which is relatively cardinal in the plot. Tarantino's expertise is not

limited to purely displaying violence; instead, he pays more attention to subtle changes in characters while making them acceptable to the audience.

The reason why Tarantino is able to create such a breakthrough and innovative style of violence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries also stems from the deconstructionism of that era. He draws on many methods and styles of predecessors while creating, but modifies and splices them, allowing the audience to see completely different images. In the contemporary world, it seems that we have reduced a lot of surprise and shock towards Tarantino's works, because the imitation and promotion of this style by later generations have led to its popularization, which is invisible and subtle.

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