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**Violence as a Form of Social
Criticism in Transgressive Art:
Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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Contemporary art often aims at criticizing the modern society and its values and in transgressive art this is usually done through the use of violence, which is represented graphically and matter-of-factly. The films of Quentin Tarantino are highly transgressive in that respect, and his debut film *Reservoir Dogs* is even thought to have initiated a whole new era in the American cinema commonly known as 'the new brutality'. *Reservoir Dogs* helped the American filmmaker establish his characteristic 'tarantinoesque' style in which violence – excessive, graphic, and even aestheticized – plays a crucial role. This paper will examine the violence in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* focusing on its nature, its various types and manifestations, the way it is represented and the purpose of such representation. Violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is omnipresent: it lingers throughout the whole film and dictates its narration to reach its peak in the infamous ear-cutting scene, where it is grotesquely juxtaposed with cheerful popular music. By exploring the variety of cinematic techniques used to represent violence, the paper will seek to explain the purpose of Tarantino's use of violence in this film. It will be argued that Tarantino does not aim at eliciting strong emotional reactions in the audience, but rather, in accordance with his affinity to metafictionality and self-referentiality, at presenting violence as a cinematic artifice that is detached from the real life and can therefore serve as a source of aesthetic enjoyment. However, it is precisely this way of representing violence that serves as a social commentary by suggesting that violence is so ubiquitous in the contemporary world that the society as a whole has become completely desensitized to it.

KEYWORDS

Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs*, violence, transgression, film

1 Introduction: the violence of Quentin Tarantino's films and the new brutality

The films of Quentin Tarantino are famous for their unrestrained, over-the-top representations of violence, which has been both praised by critics for its craftsmanship (Maglajlija 3) and stylistic brilliance (Coulthard 1) and criticized for its shallowness or lack of any moral ground (McKinney 20-21). Nonetheless, it is precisely the violence in his films and its representation that has earned Tarantino the reputation of one of the legends of the American film industry. *Reservoir Dogs*, as his debut film released in 1992, may not be Tarantino's most critically appraised film, nor the one which stands out as particularly violent or provocative, at least compared to some of his subsequent films.

However, *Reservoir Dogs* undoubtedly established Tarantino as a director who would become one of the most popular and most controversial filmmakers in the modern American cinema. As critic Roger Ebert said after the film was released, "now that we know Quentin Tarantino can make a movie like *Reservoir Dogs*, it's time for him to move on and make a better one" (qtd. in Maglajlija 17). The popularity of the film indeed served as a confirmation that the audience was ready for the amounts of graphic violence present in Tarantino's films, which was to be even more excessive in his subsequent films, even to the extent and with the purpose of being parodic.

Therefore, it could be said that *Reservoir Dogs* helped Tarantino establish his characteristic style when it comes to the representation of violence; as will be discussed in detail later in the paper, it is graphic, excessive, and even aestheticized. What is more, not only does *Reservoir Dogs* represent the beginning of Tarantino's extremely successful filmmaking career and the birth of his characteristic style, but it is also thought to be the film that initiated a whole new era in the American cinema in regard to the representation of violence (Bouzereau, qtd. in Grønstad 155), an era usually known as "new brutality" (Gormley 7), "Hollywood ultraviolence" (Coulthard 1), "neo-violence" (Rich, qtd. in Grønstad 155) or "new violence" (Slocum, qtd. in Grønstad 155).

New brutality films represent an entirely new direction in the aesthetic of Hollywood films when it comes to the representation of violence: they "renegotiate and reanimate the immediacy and affective qualities of the cinematic experience within commercial Hollywood" (Gormley 8), thus aiming at an entirely different reaction from the audience than 'traditional' violent films, as will be shown later in the paper. Moreover, most of these films possess certain postmodern qualities, being often characterized by "postmodern detachment, lack of affect, and ironic distance" (Coulthard 1). All of these characteristics are present in *Reservoir Dogs* as well, as will be elaborated in more detail below.

2 Slow violence and narration

Disregarding the so-called 'ear-cutting' scene, the most famous scene in the film which will be discussed later, it would be fair to say that violence in *Reservoir Dogs*, though undoubtedly present, is neither that graphic nor that excessive as is the case in some of Tarantino's subsequent films, since the American's debut film does not abound in scenes of gunfire or extreme bloodshed that can be found, for example, in *Pulp Fiction* or *Inglourious Basterds*. However, this is far from saying that *Reservoir Dogs* does not contain extreme violence: it is just that instead of being 'quick' and limited to certain gory scenes with breaks between them, violence in *Reservoir Dogs* lingers throughout the whole film, thus completely dictating its narration.

The connection between violence and narration and the omnipresence of violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is hinted at in the very first utterance of the film after the opening credits: Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), who is bleeding heavily in a car and asking Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) to hold his hand, says "I'm gonna die" (*Reservoir Dogs*, 9:41-9:42), thus foreshadowing the remainder of the film, since the entire one hour and forty minutes of the film can indeed be seen as a process toward a fulfillment of this statement, a process of Mr. Orange dying. In this way, as Taubin argues, in *Reservoir Dogs* "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" (qtd. in Grønstad 159). Although Mr. Orange gets shot in the end of the film as well – which is, of course, a direct cause of his death – the process of him dying nevertheless begins in the very first scene of the film, the temporality of the film thus being "conceived as one extensive moment of death" (Grønstad 159).

Besides the slow death of Mr. Orange, another way in which Tarantino emphasizes the lingering violence in this film concerns the fact that most of the characters do not manage to survive until the end of the film, thus occupying throughout the entire narrative a kind of a "death space" (Blanchot, qtd. in Grønstad 159). Namely, not only does it become apparent rather early in the film that Mr. Orange is going to die, but the viewers are aware of the fact that there is a possibility for the other members of the gang to share his fate. What is more, it could even be said that this 'death space' that most of the characters occupy is even literalized in the film, since most of it takes place in an abandoned warehouse which is not only separated from the outside world, but is actually itself a morgue, with coffins and a hearse in it. Therefore, it once again becomes clear that in *Reservoir Dogs*, as Grønstad argues, "death by violence is not only limited to discrete narrative moments but has come to immerse the spatio-temporal continuum of the movie" (160), which proves that violence and its consequences not only dictate narration, but narration and violence can seemingly "no longer be kept apart as two separate entities" (Grønstad 159).

In connection to the previously discussed death by violence which is omnipresent in *Reservoir Dogs*, one more important thing that needs to be mentioned when discussing the slow, lingering violence in the film is the fact that in *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino seems to pay more attention to the bodies and their postures in the aftermath of violence than to the very moments of violent acts. Namely, the film does not focus on the very heist that has gone wrong or on violence perpetrated during it, but rather on its consequences that linger throughout the entire film, i.e. the injured, dying men – or, more specifically, on the “slow, sticky death of Mr. Orange, belly-shot and bleeding fatally throughout the real time of the film” (Nathan 63).

All in all, considering the fact that Quentin Tarantino generally observes a distinction in terms of the speed of violence – his films possessing instances of both ‘quick’ and ‘slow’ violence – it could be said that violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is the perfect example of the latter. Instead of showing a gunshot which would come as a surprise to the audience and the victim and even the perpetrator, Tarantino presents the viewers with ‘prolonged’ violence whose culmination they are constantly anticipating, as the whole narrative unravels while Mr. Orange lies dying. However, despite the fact that violence stretches throughout the whole film, there is one scene which stands out for its ‘quick’ and over-the-top violence: the infamous ear-cutting scene.

3 Quick violence: the ear-cutting scene

The scene which has attracted most attention in the film and which is undoubtedly one of the most analyzed and quoted scenes of violence not just in Tarantino's films, but in the modern cinema in general is the famous ‘ear-cutting’ scene – the one in which Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) tortures the captive cop (Kirk Baltz) by tying him up and gagging him, cutting off his ear and spilling gasoline all over him in order to burn him alive, all the while dancing to a catchy pop song from the 1970s. The director himself has acknowledged the importance of the scene multiple times in his interviews, claiming it to be “the most cinematic scene in the whole film” (Tarantino, qtd. in Page 26).

One of many reasons why this scene is so important has to do with the fact that it represents a turning point in the film when it comes to the representation of violence in it. Namely, according to Gallafent, the violence in *Reservoir Dogs* before the ear-cutting scene is of two different kinds: it is either mostly playful with human bodies suffering no real harm (as when Mr. Blonde and Eddie (Chris Penn) wrestle in Joe's office) or it is violence whose consequences are shown graphically, but the very moment of the violent action is not shown (as is the case with Mr. Orange bleeding in the car and the warehouse; only later in the film do we actually see the scene of him being shot) (40). Thus, up to the ear-cutting scene the violence and its representation are as ‘benevolent’ and as bearable as

they can be; however, in this infamous scene, the violence becomes much more striking, not only due to the way it is represented (which will be discussed later), but also due to its nature.

Before discussing the nature of violence in this scene, it is important to make a distinction between the reason characters decide to indulge in violent actions – which is a means of their characterization, a manifestation of their personality – and the reason the director, Quentin Tarantino, decided to use violence and represent it the way he does: only the former will be discussed in this part of the paper, while the graphic representation and the purpose of Tarantino's use of violence will be discussed in more detail later. In order to examine the nature of violence in this scene and to account for the effect it has on the viewers it is necessary to explore the reasons characters decide to perpetrate violence. Before this scene, violence is perpetrated with a certain goal in mind: for example, Mr. White and Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) torture the cop in order to extract certain information from him, which suggests that their violence has a purpose to it, however unreasonable or futile it may be.

On the other hand, when Mr. Blonde tortures the same cop in the ear-cutting scene, the purpose of violence is quite different and, what is even more important, almost inexistent. Namely, during the entire torture Mr. Blonde is aware of the fact that he cannot get any information from the cop and that the information he may get would be extracted by force and therefore unreliable. Thus, the only reason Mr. Blonde decides to indulge in such violent behaviour is for the sake of pure sadistic pleasure; his violence has no purpose but is an end in itself, which can be seen from the torturer's own words: "I don't give a good fuck what you know or don't know, but I'm going to torture you anyway" (*Reservoir Dogs*, 54:10-54:23). In that respect, Gallafent argues that for Mr. Blonde the cop – or rather the cop's body – is present only "as the provider of physical sensation", suggesting that the pleasure Mr. Blonde derives from the torture is similar to that which he derives from song and dance and can even be said to possess a kind of an orgasmic quality (43-44). This can indeed be seen from Mr. Blonde's own line following the ear-cutting in which the torturer asks the cop, "Was that as good for you as it was for me?" (*Reservoir Dogs*, 57:04-57:09), which clearly points to the extent to which Mr. Blonde has enjoyed the violent act.

Based on everything discussed above it could be concluded that violence in this scene is not only extreme, but it also has no real, pragmatic, justifiable cause. As Gormley suggests, "the bout of violence has no real narrative logic beyond the fact that we have been told by another member of the gang that Blonde is a 'fucking madman' and this lack of narrative cause and effect leaves the viewer without a clue as to what happens next" (7). Moreover, not only does this lack of narrative logic in violence make it even more unpredictable and difficult to bear, but it also makes the reason Tarantino decides to include it in the film even more puzzling. Even though the director undoubtedly uses violence

in this scene as a means of characterization – aiming to portray Mr. Blonde as a psychopath – there may be other reasons behind this. Thus, the purpose of violence in this film – i.e. the reason the director includes violence and represents it in a particular way – being extremely relevant for the topic of this paper, will be discussed in detail in the final section. Before that, it is necessary to observe the way Tarantino represents violence in *Reservoir Dogs*, as it is precisely the representation of violence that makes it so striking and provocative rather than its nature or narrative logic.

4 The representation of violence

As already mentioned, in Quentin Tarantino's films violence is omnipresent. Nonetheless, perhaps the most important thing about it is precisely the way it is shown: his films are known not only for their excessive violence, but also for the fact that it is often depicted very graphically. Moreover, Tarantino uses a number of cinematic techniques in order to represent violence in a particular way and to make a certain point, as will be discussed below.

4.1 Graphic violence

Graphic violence can be defined as the one that "entails the visual representation of the actual damage done to the subject of physical harm" (Maglajlija 5). Despite being considered "an inescapable and ubiquitous characteristic of contemporary cinema" (Prince, qtd. in Gallafent 38), graphic violence is still considered to be rather transgressive, and as such is one of the most notable characteristics of transgressive art in general. What is more, graphic violence may be the main reason Quentin Tarantino's films are considered to be highly transgressive¹, since they abound in the images of injuries and blood splashing, as well as, even more importantly, the scenes of processes of infliction of these injuries, such as bullets hitting bodies, mutilations, etc.

The purpose of Tarantino's use of graphic violence is often questioned, both by the critics and the viewers. One explanation that is given by the author himself concerns his wish to represent violence as realistically as possible – as Tarantino himself has explained in following words: "If a guy gets shot in the stomach and he's bleeding like a stuck pig then that's what I want to see – not a man with a stomach ache and a little red dot on his belly" ("Quentin Tarantino: violence is the best way to control an audience", par. 5). Such graphic representation of violence and injuries is precisely what can be found in *Reservoir Dogs*, since we get to witness Mr. Blonde 'bleeding like a struck pig' all the time. However, apart from his desire to provide a realistic representation of violence, there are other reasons Quentin Tarantino's films are so gory and 'explicit' in terms of violence representation. However, before looking into this problem, it is

necessary to examine other ways in which the filmmaker represents violence in *Reservoir Dogs*, i.e. to examine the way he juxtaposes violence with some other elements, as well his choice of cinematic techniques for representing violence and the reasons behind such choice.

4.2 Juxtaposition

An important characteristic of Quentin Tarantino's representation of violence concerns the fact that it is often juxtaposed with some other elements. For example, in *Reservoir Dogs*, the first scene before the opening credits is rather light-hearted and humorous, showing the men sitting and discussing, among many other things, the lyrics of *Like a Virgin*. What this scene is followed by (after the opening credits) is the aforementioned scene of Mr. Orange bleeding in the car, a scene which is extremely bloody and violent. Thus, by putting these two scenes adjacent to one another, Tarantino juxtaposes them, making the latter one come as an even bigger shock to the viewers when placed after a 'lighter' scene like the former.

An even more prominent juxtaposition, however, concerns the way the filmmaker combines violence with music and humour, which is again best illustrated in the ear-cutting scene that may be so iconic and memorable precisely due to the extraordinary use of soundtrack in it. Namely, what happens in the scene is that all the time while torturing the cop Mr. Blonde dances, almost psychotically, to an upbeat pop song from the 1970s "*Stuck in the Middle with You*" by *Stealers Wheel*. This seemingly strange combination of violence being scored with catchy popular songs is often found in Tarantino's films, as the filmmaker tends to juxtapose visual elements (in this case extreme violence) with aural elements (music). What is more, the audio tracks are sometimes even provided by the characters themselves, which can be seen as another proof of Tarantino's affinity to postmodernism (Page 11, Gormley 11). Namely, in *Reservoir Dogs* Mr. Blonde is the one who plays the record on the gramophone; i.e. the character from the film is the one who creates this juxtaposition of two incongruous elements – a juxtaposition which creates a certain effect in the audience – which can be seen as an instance of reflexivity and self-consciousness which are characteristic of postmodern cinema.

Besides that, apart from juxtaposing extreme violence with upbeat music, Tarantino also adds an element of humour to the dialogue in this gory scene, thus making another juxtaposition; for example, when Mr. Blonde cuts off the cop's ear, he speaks to it saying "Hey, what's going on?", after which he turns to the cop and asks him "Hear that?" (*Reservoir Dogs*, 57:09-57:11). According to Verstraten, this combination of cheerful music and humour with extreme violence can be seen as an instance of grotesque, which can be defined as "the incongruous co-presence of some laughable and disgusting things", "the intrusion of comic

elements in 'spine-chillingly' uncanny setting" (294). What makes this scene even more grotesque is the fact that violence is presented matter-of-factly, which is often the case in transgressive art in general.

As is the case with cinematic techniques used to represent violence, this juxtaposition of violence and music (as well as violence and humour) serves the same purpose of provoking a certain reaction from the audience. Namely, while the viewers usually feel disgust and abhorrence when watching scenes of extreme violence, when a joyful tune is added to it or when they hear a witty comment they may be tempted to feel amused and bewildered, all the while feeling guilty since 'one is not supposed to enjoy the scenes of extreme violence'. In this way, the director addresses an important cultural taboo: we often, for example, condemn Roman circus games as unreasonably cruel and we abhor the violence inflicted upon the animals in today's Spanish corrida – nevertheless, there are occasions in which we, almost unwillingly and therefore quite guilt-strickenly, enjoy watching violence being perpetrated on someone, even if on screen. This contradictory reaction is precisely what the director is trying to achieve, the reasons for which will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

4.3 Cinematic techniques

Quentin Tarantino, in accordance with his affinity for postmodernism (Page 11, Gormley 11), employs cinematic techniques in his films in a very playful way in order to affect the audience's reactions and sympathies, the most important one being change of perspective. Namely, apart from the juxtaposing violent scenes with the 'normal' ones or with cheerful music and humour, another way in which Tarantino tries to control the viewers' reactions is by playing with perspective. The most illustrative example for this is again the previously discussed ear-cutting scene, which was filmed in ten minutes of real time (Gormley 7) and filmed precisely in such a way to control and manipulate the sympathies and emotions of the viewers. Namely, at the beginning of the scene, the camera follows Mr. Blonde while he arrives at the warehouse and stays behind him while he is watching other men in the warehouse, so his perspective is the same as the perspective of the audience. Later on, while the three men argue, Mr. Blonde sits on top of a hearse observing the argument, thus being aligned with the audience once again. Being constantly provided with Mr. Blonde's point of view, the viewers may easily feel tempted to sympathize and ally themselves with him, despite the fact that he is the perpetrator.

However, what Tarantino does next is play with the audience's sympathies once again: when the torture starts the camera is aligned with the cop, thus providing his perspective and challenging the audience's standpoint, especially when the close-ups of the cop's face are given. What is more, there is even one particular moment in which the audience is completely aligned with the victim.

When Mr. Blonde slaps his captive, his hand moves towards the camera so that it seems as if we, the viewers, are going to get a slap in the face (Gervais 16). Indeed, this intent of complete alignment can even be seen from the very script of the film, where the scene is described in the following way: "A slash across the face. *The cop/camera* moves around wildly. Mr. Blonde just stares into *the cop's/our* face, singing along with the seventies hit. Then he reaches out and cuts off *the cop's/our* ear" (Tarantino, qtd. in Gervais 17, emphasis added). Therefore, what can be concluded is that Tarantino's constant shifting of perspective between the perpetrator and the victim serves the purpose of playing with the audience's sympathies and standpoints.

In the most intense moment of the scene, however – when the cop's ear is being severed – the director refuses to provide any perspective whatsoever, with the camera panning away from the scene of the actual mutilation and showing the upper left corner of the warehouse with the 'Mind Your Head' sign, which is, of course, deliberate and ironic. Nonetheless, the fact that the severing is not explicitly shown does not seem to alleviate the audience's disgust and horror. As Suarez argues, the viewers are given all the elements of the very act of severing; they are given a trigger and all they have to do is finish the scene in their minds, as if they were directors – which, however illogical it may sound, may even make the scene even harder to bear (par. 3). Therefore, what is evident is that Tarantino uses the shift of perspective in order to play with the audience's reactions, this playfulness being just one of many features of postmodern films, as will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

5 The purpose of violence

The most common question concerning Quentin Tarantino's films – asked by the critics, journalists and readers alike – is why the director employs so much violence in his films and especially why it is represented so graphically. At first sight, it may seem logical to assume that such representation of violence is supposed to provoke strong emotional responses from the audience; for example, when it comes to the previously discussed juxtaposition of violence and cheerful music, it could be claimed that it was done with an aim of highlighting the extremity of violence, of making it even stronger and more appalling and thus causing a deeper emotional reaction in the audience. However, if this was the filmmaker's intention, it is not very clear to what extent it was successful. Namely, Tarantino's films, including *Reservoir Dogs*, have often been criticized for their treatment of violence which, as critics have argued, does not intend to evoke a critical response in the audience, and is therefore morally problematic. For example, McKinney criticizes *Reservoir Dogs* for its "hollow treatment of violence" (20), his assumption being based on the fact that in the film, especially in the discussed ear-cutting scene, the audience identifies neither with the victim nor with the perpetrator

and thus only serves as a passive observer. He thus classifies it into a category he terms "weak violence", since "empathies are not engaged, commitments are not brought to bear, ambivalences are not acknowledged, neutrality is the currency" (McKinney 21).

However, what critics like McKinney seem to disregard is the fact that evoking strong emotional reactions in the audience is not at all what Tarantino aspires to by representing violence the way he does – his aim seems to be quite the opposite. First of all, as Gormley argues, the new brutality films in general tend to induce a reaction from the viewers in a much more immediate and intuitive way: namely, by assaulting their bodies and causing an involuntary reaction, since the body of a viewer should act in a way "that it imitates and mimics the actions of the cinematic body, or the bodies that the viewer experiences on the screen" (8). That is precisely what happens in the ear-cutting scene: by aligning the camera with the cop and giving the audience 'a slap in the face' Tarantino, rather than trying to evoke sympathies from the audience through their emotional or cognitive identification with a character, tries to provoke a reaction which is much more immediate and superficial, almost entirely physical and "based on immediacy and bodily affect" (Gormley 8). Therefore, it could be concluded that violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is represented in a way to provide only a physical, instinctive reaction and not to entice any deeper affective involvement. One may wonder why that is the case, why the director does not try to evoke strong emotional reactions in the audience, at least not in an 'obvious' way as some other films do. However, that has never been the aim of Tarantino's films. Instead, what the American filmmaker tries to do – in accordance with his affinity for postmodernism – is attract the viewers' attention to the fictional, cinematic nature of violence on screen, thus enabling the viewers to find aesthetic pleasure in violence, but also serving as a social commentary on the general attitude towards violence, as will be discussed in more detail below.

5.1 Violence as a Cinematic Artifice

Quentin Tarantino's films possess many postmodern elements: they are highly intertextual, they employ non-linear time (as is the case in *Reservoir Dogs*) and they are often metafictional and self-referential, as the audience is constantly being reminded of the fact that they are watching a film and that everything that they see is created and artificial. This can be seen, for instance, from the opening credits which are almost always separated from the world of the film itself – both visually and aurally – and therefore, "rather than focusing on character introduction, affective positioning, or expectation (the way the opening credits in a horror film or melodrama, for example, ready the audience for fear or tears), the opening credits of a Tarantino film foreground aesthetic appreciation, intertextual recognition, and kinetic energy" (Coulthard 2).

Besides that, and even more importantly, Tarantino's aim at pointing to the artificiality of a cinematic work can be seen in his representation of violence. Namely, by representing violence in such a graphic, over-the-top way, Tarantino constantly tries to draw the viewers' attention to the fact that they are only watching a film, a piece of fiction disconnected from the real world, and that violence on screen has therefore nothing to do with violence in real life. Even though there have been many accusations when it comes to the amount of violence in his films in terms of the influence it can have on people watching it, Tarantino dismissed those accusations constantly emphasizing the distinction he sees between real-life violence and the cinematic one: "If you ask me how I feel about violence in real life, well, I have a lot of feelings about it. It's one of the worst aspects of America. In movies, violence is cool. I like it" (Lange, par. 10). One must admit, though, that it may seem slightly unrealistic to expect the audience to make the same subtle distinction between on-screen violence and real-life violence as the filmmaker does, considering the fact that film in general is one of the most 'mimetic' arts and that the audience usually (consciously or subconsciously) correlates what they see on screen with the real life. Nevertheless, Tarantino seems to expect his viewers to make such a distinction and he constantly tries to draw their attention to the artificiality of cinematic violence.

In *Reservoir Dogs*, the director does this, first of all, by hyperbolizing certain aspects of violence: if violence on film reflected the one in real life, the mutilated body of Mr. Orange, for example, would not "magically contain more than the standard 5.5 liters of blood in order to supply dramatic splatters" (Lange, par. 5). Secondly, Tarantino emphasizes the artificiality of cinematic violence by presenting it as being detached from the real world both temporally and spatially. For example, in the ear-cutting scene, the violence lasts just as long as the song is playing (and the song is from the 1970s, so not even contemporaneous with the action and thus serving to frame the violence and distance it from the viewers even further) and it takes place in an abandoned warehouse, which looks as if completely separated from the external reality. When Mr. Blonde leaves the warehouse in order to bring the gasoline, and the song gets quieter and quieter and eventually dies out, it serves as a reminder to the viewers that not only is there a world outside of the violent space of the warehouse, but there is also a world outside of the film they are watching. In this way violence is controlled and limited: the audience is aware of the fact that violence will not last forever, that the gory scene will eventually end and will probably not last for an extremely long time either. Finally, the fact that violence in this scene is (grotesquely) juxtaposed with upbeat popular music is just another way of controlling it. Namely, the fact that the song dominates over the sounds of torture and violence, being louder than the cries of the cop, serves to limit the effect violence has on the audience, point to its artificiality and thus make it as 'enjoyable' as violence can possibly be. Therefore, it is clear that Quentin Tarantino makes a distinction between real-life violence and cinematic one, considering the latter artificial and constantly trying to draw the viewers' attention to this fact.

5.2 Violence as a Source of Aesthetic Enjoyment

As already mentioned, Tarantino's representation of violence has often been a target of criticism: the director was accused of "shallowness and nihilism both on a formal and a moral level" (Grønstad 155), "possessing no compassion or sympathy for his characters or for the humanity in general" (Sharett, qtd. in Grønstad 156), while some critics even argued that violence in his films "lacks the moral framework that in various forms always has been a staple of American storytelling" (Grønstad 166), as well as that "Tarantinian sensibility is all style and no substance" (Whachack, qtd. in Grønstad 166) and that it "aspires to no particular realism or social import" (McKinney 21). What is more, the very fact that in the UK the film did not receive the home video certificate until 1995 tells a lot about certain (mis)perceptions of violence in it.

However, the main reason Quentin Tarantino decides to present violence in such a graphic way, thus pointing to its artificiality, is precisely in order to enable the viewers to find a source of pleasure in it. Understanding that cinematic violence has nothing to do with real-life violence and that it can be as brilliantly crafted, in terms of style and aesthetics, as any other cinematic element, allows the viewers to 'find beauty' in it and enjoy its stylistic craftedness. Indeed, according to Maglajlija (3), aestheticization of violence – along with dark humour and excess – can be seen as one of three main cinematic elements that create Quentin Tarantino's recognizable style, thus referred to as 'tarantinesque'. One way in which Tarantino aestheticizes violence concerns the elements surrounding it – such as the scenery, the setting, the clothing, etc. – since they are all skillfully crafted in order to influence the viewers' perception of the violent act, the victims, and the perpetrators. Moreover, Tarantino's 'villains' are often presented as charming, intelligent, easy-going, and possessing strong ideological beliefs, which also adds to the "glorification of violence" (Maglajlija 21).

However, even though the likeability of perpetrators and the surrounding elements influences the viewers' perception of violence, the most important way in which Tarantino aestheticizes violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is precisely, as already mentioned, by pointing to its artificiality. Characters who indulge in violent acts are almost always indifferent and emotionally detached from the violence they are perpetrating: therefore, what Tarantino suggests is that there is no reason why the audience should not take the same detached stand. The very fact that the characters are perhaps not too 'deep' or developed and that there is no internal conflict in them allows the audience "to enjoy the action and the entertainment of a movie and be aware of its fictional nature, allowing them to go through a fun cinematic experience" (Maglajlija 61). Moreover, even Tarantino's use of popular music in the ear-cutting scene, rather than making it more disturbing, serves not only as an ironic commentary, but it also, perhaps even more, adds to the aesthetic enjoyment of the scene. Besides that, by juxtaposing two incongruous elements and producing the feeling of grotesque, Tarantino may be trying to test

the limits of the aesthetic; it almost seems as if he were trying to establish how far can a filmmaker go in 'manipulating' the audience's responses. Nevertheless, even the fact, for example, that the camera pans away during the very mutilation seems to remind the audience that they do not have to look at the screen if they do not want to: they have a power over it – it is not a 'real' violence being done to their bodies or in their real-life, but in the other, cinematic sphere. Therefore, as Tarantino seems to suggest, we should try to enjoy its 'beauty' as much as we can, since, as Coulthard argues, "recognition of artifice is a fundamental part of the pleasures offered" (2).

Nonetheless, even though violence in *Reservoir Dogs* does not aim at provoking a strong emotional response but only serves to provide aesthetic enjoyment, it is precisely this that may make it serve as an equally strong social commentary as that of any openly 'socially engaged' representation of violence. The way in which, for example, Tarantino seems to test the viewers' aesthetic limits in the grotesque ear-cutting scene may be his way of asking if a person who finds pleasure in watching violence being inflicted upon someone is perhaps as much of a sadist as a person who enjoys inflicting physical pain. However, rather than tackling these issues openly, Tarantino seems to bracket them off by placing them in a highly stylized context. Therefore, what Tarantino may be trying to imply with his postmodernist style is that in today's society – i.e. in the contemporary cultural moment – such an excessive, oblique, stylized (and perhaps even kitschy) representation of violence can prove as more effective in raising questions about the nature and effect of violence than what used to be a socially engaged representation of violence, which perhaps may today seem as rather obsolete and thus ineffective. In other words, even though the audience may be aware of the fact that this film, *Reservoir Dogs*, is "as nonreferential to a reality outside itself as a mimetic work can be" (McKinney 21), the fact that they are able to enjoy the violence in it and not get emotionally involved speaks volumes about their apparent habituation to violence and serves to prove that violence has indeed become an integral part of our reality.

6 Conclusion

Violence is an indispensable element of Quentin Tarantino's films, and *Reservoir Dogs* is the one with which it all started – from the slow violence that lingers throughout the entire film and dictates its narration to the extreme, over-the-top one in the ear-cutting scene, violence in this film is omnipresent. What is even more important, though, than the 'amount' of violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is the way it is represented, as Tarantino pays a lot of attention to the visual representation of violence through the use of cinematic techniques in order to control and manipulate the reactions of the audience. Nonetheless, the aim of the director has never been to provoke strong emotional reactions in the audience but rather – precisely by not provoking such reactions and emphasizing

the artificiality of screen violence – to aestheticize violence and thus point to the society's perception of it. Thus, what Tarantino is trying to do in *Reservoir Dogs* is help his viewers enjoy the stylistic brilliance of cinematic violence by taking a neutral moral stand in its representation. Nevertheless, as has been argued here, this by no means suggests that his attitude towards violence in general is amoral. By pointing to the fact that the viewers are able to feel pleasure when watching brilliantly crafted scenes of violence Tarantino is trying to show that violence is so ubiquitous in contemporary world that people have become almost completely desensitized to it. After all, if violence is so omnipresent in real life, often without being adequately condemned or morally judged, there is no reason why it should not be included in the world of cinematic artifice, especially considering the fact that, unlike real-life violence, cinematic one – when crafted by such masterminds of filmmaking like Quentin Tarantino – is indeed a spectacle to be enjoyed and a satisfying aesthetic experience.

End Notes

- 1 There are, of course, other reasons why Tarantino's films are considered to be highly transgressive, such as their "prolific profanity" (Nama 12).

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