



Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts (Key Concepts) (Routledge Key Guides)

Susan Hayward

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This is the essential guide for anyone interested in film. Now in its second edition, the text has been completely revised and expanded to meet the needs of today's students and film enthusiasts. Some 150 key genres, movements, theories and production terms are explained and analyzed with depth and clarity. Entries include:

- * auteur theory
- * Blaxploitation
- * British New Wave
- * feminist film theory
- * intertextuality
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Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts (Key Concepts) (Routledge Key Guides) Details

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vi macdonald says

3.5

Pretty rudimentary and basic in the concepts it throws around - but it's a solid guide to core elements of film

Traveller says

I've been wanting to talk about films for a long time, which has been rather hard on a book review site. So a book like this presents me with a golden opportunity...

I'm going to try and squish two things into this review space. Firstly I'll give some historical background to auteur theory and then I want to apply it to Quentin Tarantino's oeuvre, because Quentin, even though I kinda hate some aspects of his work, (the violence) seems to me the director with the most pizzazz, the director who, out of all directors I can think of, creates movies that has very specific hallmarks that make them almost immediately recognizable of being "Tarantino" films. But the big thing is that they have so many fun aspects to discuss!

(Another director I have a love-hate relationship with, is Joss Whedon, but I'll use a different book's review space for him.)

Due to limited space, I'm cherry-picking aspects of film theory as explicated in this book, (I'm going to do some direct quotations) but first a tiny bit of history:

Cahiers du Cinéma (Notebooks on Cinema), is an influential French film magazine founded in 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca.

Cahiers was originally the manifesto for 'la politique des Auteurs' which developed into auteur theory as we know it today — resulting, at the origin of the magazine, in the re-evaluation of Hollywood films and directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Ray, and Fritz Lang. Cahiers du Cinema authors also championed the work of directors Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Kenji Mizoguchi, Max Ophüls, and Jean Cocteau, by centering their critical evaluations on a film's *mise en scène*.

And then one term that has bearing on auteur theory: the term **mise en scène** refers to :

"Originally a theatre term meaning 'staging', it crossed over to signify the film production practices involved in the framing of shots. Thus, first it connotes setting, costume and lighting, second, movement within the frame. It became endowed with a more specific meaning by the Cahiers du cinéma group who used it to justify their appellation of certain American film-makers as auteurs .

Given that these directors were working under the aegis of Hollywood they had no control over the script but they could stage their shots and so be deemed to have a discernible style. Mise-en-scène is the expressive tool at the film-maker's disposal which a critic can read to determine the specificity of the cinematographic work. That is, the critic can identify the particular style of a specific film-maker and thereby point to it as an authorial sign." (Hayward p.231)

Auteur theory: Auteur theory has a substantial history and divergent interpretations.

According to authors like Susan Hayward, the idea of "authorship" of films comes from earlier than the 1950's; showing that it was an idea that existed before Cahiers Du Cinéma had popularised the idea:

" Although auteur is a term that dates back to the 1920s in the theoretical writings of French film critics and directors of the silent era, it is worth pointing out that in Germany, as early as 1913, the term 'author's film' (Autorenfilm) had already been coined.

Autorenfilm emerged partly as a response to the French Film d'Art (art cinema) movement which began in 1908 and which proved extremely popular. Film d'Art was particularly successful in attracting middle-class audiences to the cinema theatres because of its cachet of respectability as art cinema. The German term, Autorenfilm, is, however, also associated with a more polemical issue regarding questions of authorship. In this respect, some writers for the screen started campaigning for their rights to these so-called Autorenfilm. That is, they staked their claim not just to the script but to the film itself. In other words, the film was to be judged as the work of the author rather than the person responsible for directing it.

In France the concept of auteur (in the 1920s) comes from the other direction, namely that the filmmaker is the auteur – irrespective of the origin of the script. " (Hayward p. 19-20)

In an exposition of art cinema, Hayward says the following regarding auteurism:

"...the politique des auteurs made the term auteur sacrosanct. This politique or polemic argued that certain film-makers could be identified as auteurs – as generators or creators rather than producers of films. This further widening of its frame of reference has meant that, although art cinema is considered primarily a European cinema, certain Japanese, Indian, Australian, Canadian and Latin-American film-makers are also included in the canon – as well as certain films made by representatives of some minority groups..." (Hayward p.17)

I'm going to cut the history of auteurism short here, due to lack of space. I wanted to give the abovementioned bit of background in this specific review, because although a lot has been said about auteurism, to me Hayward traces it the farthest back, to its origins before the Cahiers du Cinema; so to me that was an aspect that was unique to this specific book.

Modern film buffs probably are pretty much aware of Andrew Sarris and his particular vision of auteurism. Sarris argued that auteurism was a way to show up "good" directors who made "good" films, as opposed to "bad" directors who make "bad" films.

There has been widespread criticism of the cult of auteurism, especially the way that the idea was developed by Sarris - which elevated certain directors to cult status.

The modern attitude to auteurism appears to be that only directors with a very distinctive personal style can be classed as auteurs, especially when it applies to the mise en scène of the film.

Several critics have criticized the entire notion of auteurism on the grounds that such a philosophy tends to grade art and the work of an individual artist, but that art is something that is subjective and an individual expression of the artist.

One could add to this argument the fact that a film is a complex work of art which consists of many factors and the contributions of many artists among the crew and cast, and that at least some of what makes the whole, comes from the other contributors--after all, it would be much more difficult to make an excellent film using abysmal actors or camera crew, for example. (Although casting is of course part of the director's

contribution.)

I personally feel we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater, since there definitely are directors where the films directed by that person are distinctive to that certain director's style and characteristic of that specific director. (So, not necessarily 'good', but 'distinctive'.)

...which brings me to Quentin Tarantino (finally!)

(What follows won't be found in the book under review, but is rather a practical application of the auteur theory, and a good excuse for me to chat about Tarantino's oeuvre.)

Not only does Tarantino's themes and *mise en scène* bear his distinctive style, but Tarantino qualifies for the literal meaning of "authorship" in the sense that he writes his own screenplays, and tends to be involved in the production of his films as well. Therefore, though it is usually a characteristic use of *mise en scène* that gives a director auteur status, in Tarantino's case, these common characteristics extend wider, to the actual script itself as well.

Most of Tarantino's well-known films have features in common which we shall discuss with reference to *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill 1 and 2*, *Death Proof*, *Jackie Brown*, *Inglorious Basterds*, and *Django*.

Reservoir Dogs shows certain exceptions to the distinctive style that Tarantino eventually developed, since although it was Tarantino's first 'big' mainstream film, it was produced on a very small budget, since he was not well-known enough to receive extensive financial backing at that point in time.

A recurring theme in *Kill Bill 1 and 2*, *Inglorious Basterds*, *Deathproof* and *Django*, is the theme of revenge. It is in fact the main theme in all of the lattermentioned films. It is a smaller theme in *Reservoir Dogs*; when a sadistic killer is gunned down by a policeman, and where betrayal is met with pain and rage, and inferred revenge.

Although themes do not usually in themselves establish auteurship, I would like to argue that there is a similarity in how Tarantino's themes, and in particular the revenge theme is presented, that is quite a distinctive feature of Tarantino's style. The most well-known aspect of this style, is the way in which Tarantino makes use of gratuitous violence. Tarantino uses extreme violence in both establishing a 'reason' for revenge to be taken, as well as in the revenge itself. An aspect of Tarantino's revenge themes, is that it is the victims themselves who take revenge, the most direct and personal example being *The Bride* in *Kill Bill*.

Another thing that Tarantino does, is to subvert the realities of social structures; he makes the traditional underdog appear strong, able, and moreover, motivated to take revenge for violence visited upon them as an individual and /or a group: in *Kill Bill* and *Deathproof*, it is women who have been the victims of male violence taking revenge on their oppressors, in *Inglourious Basterds*, it is Jews taking revenge on Nazi's, even blowing up Hitler himself in a visually direct and fantastical moment of gleeful wish-fulfilment playing out on the cinema screen. In *Django*, it is a black man who takes revenge on a bunch of inhuman predominantly white slavers. In *Reservoir Dogs*, the traditional "cop vs robber" tables are turned, and the "mole" policeman who infiltrated the robber's nest begs forgiveness from a robber for his role as betrayer.

Tarantino's films are morally ambiguous. They tend to show raw emotions rather than to take a philosophical or ethical stance as to whether it is indeed morally correct or permissible to take violent vigilante revenge. It is taken for granted that violence will be reciprocated with violence.

Another characteristic of Tarantino films, is that the characters tend to make constant use of foul language and to a lesser extent make racial slurs and racist and sexist remarks. This would seemingly be done in an effort to make the dialogue more realistic; and yet Tarantino's dialogue has a very characteristic, almost stilted style; often contrasting strangely with the situation, and thereby tending to inject (usually black) humour and give it an almost absurd, surreal, folklore-ish feel.

For instance, one of the crooks in *Reservoir Dogs*, while being briefed for an armed robbery, becomes involved in an argument with his boss about his codename being "Mr Pink". In *Pulp Fiction*, the crooks discuss the difference between French and American hamburgers. In the same film, in a noisy café, the crime boss's employee discusses "uncomfortable silences" with the crime boss' wife.

Even more characteristically of Tarantino dialogue, the characters, usually criminals, would in a blackly humorous ironic way become involved in discussions about their code of ethics: In *Reservoir Dogs* a bunch of crooks sit arguing in a diner before attempting an armed robbery heist, about whether one should tip a waitress or not.

In *Pulp Fiction*, the criminals argue about whether giving another man's wife a foot massage is enough justification for having the massager thrown off a fourth story balcony.

Another aspect of Tarantino's films, is that they tend to show many postmodernist hallmarks, such as being referential towards other films.

The following passage from *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* can be applied closely to Tarantino's films:

"... in the postmodern condition, .. a loss of a sense of reality and so the emergence of 'a new kind of flatness, of depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense'.

This effacement of the real through the 'commodification of objects', aesthetic and otherwise, has ramifications across the entire culture: not only in painting, 'architecture and the perceived organization of space but also in film, novels, poetry, and indeed in theory itself.

Loss of historical reality in what has now become 'a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm' leads to the replacement of parody by pastiche. Whereas formerly parody imitated another style with the firm intention of mocking, satirizing or at least making a judgement on it, today pastiche reproduces formal features for the pleasure of citing them..."

Tarantino, a great lover of cinema, tends to pastiche genres to the point of parody. In *Django*, he does a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of the typical Western movie, right down to the folksy theme song and hero-silhouetted-on-a prancing-horse, that almost seems to make it a parody to the point of mockery.

In *Kill Bill*, he also does a skit on Eastern Martial Arts films like *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* to the point of a cartoon-like parody, that would have been humorous if it hadn't been so graphically violent.

Kill Bill

Tarantino also often mixes up the chronology of his narrative, in typical postmodern style. *Reservoir Dogs* and *Kill Bill* especially, tend to jump from the current action, back to flashbacks in the narrative history of

various of the characters lives, and of events leading up to the current action, and back again quite frequently.

Regarding "loss of historical reality" as mentioned in the aforementioned quote from the Companion to Postmodernism, Tarantino applies revisionist techniques to bolster the wish-fulfilment aspect of some of his revenge themes, going as far as revising a huge chunk of Second World War history in *Inglourious Basterds*, and having the protagonists of the film kill Hitler and Goebbels amongst a bunch of other Nazi's in a burning cinema theatre.

Tarantino makes frequent use of the role of "fate" or "accident" in his screenplays, starting as early as *Reservoir Dogs* where the "mole" policeman is shot on a pure off-chance by a civilian.

He makes frequent use of bathroom scenes, where a character is alone in the bathroom, perhaps the most memorable one being where John Travolta is sitting on the toilet with a book and is subsequently "accidentally" shot into smithereens with a shotgun, which also happens to be an example of a Tarantino situation born out of pure chance or "accident", as one of the characters had gone back to his apartment to fetch a treasured watch and then stays a bit longer to eat something while the gangster looking for him just happened to choose that specific time to go to the toilet.

One of the hallmarks of Tarantino's *mise en scène* style is varying camera movements, distances and camera angles. Especially where extreme violence is portrayed, Tarantino tends to vary his camera distance, angle and focus, and the camera often moves while the action is taking place. For instance, in a scene where a man's ear is being cut off, (in *Reservoir Dogs*) the action is not directly shown; the camera moves and the viewer is only shown an oblique shot of the severed ear. Often, the camera blurs and pans away when someone is being shot or tortured--perhaps a necessary manoeuvre to make the films more bearable to watch, since the violence tends to be very gory, often with bits of gore and bodily fluids blowing out of a body that is being shot.

I'd like to argue that this technique makes the violence more, rather than less intimate and immediate, almost as if the viewer was present at the scene, but cannot bear to watch and keeps looking away, and then back again. Tarantino uses montage, for instance, while showing snippets of a man being torn apart by dogs in *Django*. Most Tarantino films have so much violence, that even with some of the scenes only showing implied violence, the sum total of the violence is enough to label his films in total as "very violent".

Other common aspects of Tarantino's *mise en scène* are the point of view shots that are shot from where the viewer would be if he or she were part of the action, also including 'Corpse' Point of View, which is where the viewer would be if they were dead, (or in the case of *Inglourious Basterds*) a victim (when a Nazi cross is carved onto Landa's forehead).

Besides in *Inglourious Basterds*, 'Corpse' shots are also seen in :

Pulp Fiction : When Marsellus wakes up after being hit by Butch's car, and later when Butch hits Maynard.

In Four Rooms : While Chester listens to Ted's monologue.

In Jackie Brown : Jackie and Ray looking at a dead Ordell .

In Kill Bill: Volume 1 : The Deadly Vipers and Sheriff McGraw looking at The 'dead ' Bride.

In Kill Bill: Volume 2 : Budd burying The Bride alive, and also Elle Driver looking at Budd suffering.

In Death Proof : Pam looking at Stuntman Mike, and Stuntman Mike being hit by Abernathy in the final sequence.

In addition to 'Corpse POV', Tarantino is also famous for featuring 'trunk' shots, which is rather similar to the

"corpse" point of view, but with the camera looking out of an enclosed space, most often as viewed from the trunk of a car. These are seen (literally from the trunk of a car) in Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Kill Bill 1 and 2, Death Proof, Jackie Brown, and possibly more.

Tarantino is also fond of using 360 degree tracking shots.

He often focuses on feet, apparently due to him having a foot fetish.

He is also known for his "God's Eye" point of view , where the scene is filmed with the camera directly above the actors.

Other aspects that frequently appear in Tarantino films:

- Mirror shots where actors talk to themselves in the mirror.
 - Extremely discomfiting torture scenes.
 - Car scenes with medium shots and close shots of the characters in the car.
 - Restaurant and bar scenes.
 - Dark suits with ties and white shirts worn by the characters
 - "Elvis" sunglasses, even incongruently for the period, as worn by Django.
-
- Characters watching television.
 - Characters having phone conversations.
 - Anachronistic sets and costuming, for instance the fifties cum eighties style "look" in hairstyles, costuming, lighting and set in Pulp Fiction.
 - Mexican standoffs , which is where more than two opponents aim at each other with guns.

Dance scene from Pulp Fiction. Note the fifties/eighties look.

There's more, but I've run out of space.

Django in one of the costumes he appears in in the titular film.

????? ???????? says

I was about to give it up many times but fortunately I did not. The last entry about World Cinemas was very interesting and helpful. The book is a dictionary form, with entries varied from technical (jump cut, zoom, lighting etc) to philosophical (Oedipal trajectory, subjectivity, etc) and criticism (structuralism, modernism, feminist theory etc).

The problem is that, it deals with most of these entries from a feminist point of view and did not mention that in the title. I mean, Susan Hayward was able to get back to feminist theory, or to talk about women and men even in the lighting or road movie entries. She managed to invoke feminist theory whenever there's something to say about it.

Adrian Jonathan says

A good all-around guide to film study. Some of the entries tend to drag toward ramblings about feminism, body and desire, which is good and annoying at the same time. Good, because it gives the book's explanation an added layer. Annoying, because it simplifies some of the arguments.

Still a good read, though.

Manal says

The three stars go to the comprehensiveness of the book, not to the sometimes draggy information in the entries.

Sepide Fallah says

The best book I've read in cinema realm. a critical dictionary!
