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Intertextuality in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*

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Abstract: Intertextuality has frequently featured in postmodern literature and film. By mixing various genres, intertextuality enables a more flexible crossing of the film's boundaries and allows filmmakers to experiment with artistic form. The film's style or scenes resonate through other movies creating intertextual references. Hence, intertextuality is an approach that analyzes how one text is related to already available texts and discourses. Nonetheless, the successful perception of intertextual references requires a certain degree of comprehension ability from the film's audience. This essay examines the intertextuality of Quentin Tarantino's film *Jackie Brown*. The article has the three-fold aims: first, to analyze the movie as an adaptation of Elmore Leonard's crime novel *Rum Punch*; second, to highlight *Jackie Brown*'s tribute to the blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s; third, to focus on the film's intertextual crossings with other movies and film genres.

Keywords: Quentin Tarantino, film adaptation, intertextuality, blaxploitation genre

Introduction

The term "intertextuality" was coined in 1966 by Julia Kristeva, who defined it as "a mosaic of quotations" in her essay titled "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (85). She based the concept on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion that every utterance is related to what had previously been said (Landwehr 2). Roland Barthes introduced a similar notion in 1968, claiming that a text consists of a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Landwehr 3). Kristeva's interpretation of the term implies that all texts are, to a certain degree, intertextual because they are shaped from already existent meanings. Moreover, intertextuality may be understood as the perspective of the later text to the preceding one. "So no text exists on its own. It is always connected to other texts" (Haberer 57). The early theorists resisted the term "intertextuality," replacing it with, among others, reference, pastiche, allusion; nevertheless, the concept began to gain popularity. Religious scholar Samuel D. Giere discusses the boundaries of text, stating that "In a sense, all texts are intertexts" (4-5). Literature professor Heinrich F. Plett defines "intertext" as "a text *between* other texts" which possesses "a twofold coherence: an *intra*textual one which guarantees the immanent integrity of the text, and an *inter*textual one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts" (5). By relating to previous texts, the text creates new texts; thus, the process of repetition is unavoidable. Literary theorist Mariusz Pisarski calls the intertextuality of the text "its inherent quality and the inseparable part of its 'texture'" (183).

Intertextuality has become a characteristic of postmodern literature and film. By mixing various genres, intertextuality enables a more flexible crossing of the film's boundaries and allows filmmakers to experiment with artistic form. The film's style

or scenes resonate through other movies creating intertextual references. By implying text-to-film analyses, adaptation studies also explore the notion of intertextuality. Film adaptations concern the shift of the text to film and its intertextual reference to previous films. Thus, intertextuality is an approach that analyzes how one text is related to already available texts and discourses. A film examined intertextually demonstrates a series of interpretations that create new imageries. Nonetheless, the successful perception of intertextual references requires a certain degree of comprehension ability from the film's audience.

This essay examines Quentin Tarantino's film *Jackie Brown* through the prism of intertextuality. The article has three-fold aims: first, to analyze the movie as an adaptation of Elmore Leonard's crime novel *Rum Punch*; second, to highlight *Jackie Brown*'s tribute to the blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s; third, to focus on the film's intertextual references to other movies and film genres.

Adapting Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch* into Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*

Quentin Tarantino's semi-noir *Jackie Brown* (1997) is based on Elmore Leonard's crime novel *Rum Punch*, published in 1992. The book's title refers to a criminal intrigue that describes a deal with Colombians in the Bahamas (Leonard 138 and 264). When Tarantino retitled the novel from *Rum Punch* to *Jackie Brown*, the focus of the plot shifted from the unlawful act named "Rum Punch" to the main female protagonist, suggesting that she matters more than the crime itself. All of the films Tarantino had directed before *Jackie Brown* had been based on original scripts he had written himself, so this particular movie was his first adaptation project.

The novel's main character, Jackie Burke, is introduced in chapter 4 as an attractive 44-year-old flight attendant. Leonard describes her in the following way: "Jackie Burke's her name, fine-looking woman, has kinda blond hair" (Leonard 60). As she is returning from the Bahamas to West Palm Beach in Florida, Jackie is approached by two representatives of U.S. law enforcement: Ray Nicolet, an ATF agent (the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms), and Faron Tyler, who represents FDLE (The Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Division of Criminal investigation). In Tarantino's movie, Jackie's surname is changed to Brown, and her role is given to an African American actress, Pam Grier. The role of the ATF agent, Ray Nicolet, is played by Michael Keaton, but the novel's character of the police officer, Faron Tyler, is renamed Mark Dargus in the film, and Michael Bowen takes the role.

The film's setting differs from the book as Jackie is not returning from the Bahamas to Florida but from Mexico to Los Angeles, California. Tarantino's life and background had a significant influence on the choice of the film's cityscape. In an interview conducted by Adrian Wootton, Tarantino explains the reasons behind changing the setting of the book from Miami to LA: "I don't really know anything about Miami. I had never been to Miami before, and Miami is very hot! You don't want to go there to shoot! One thing I have to offer is some kind of knowledge about Los Angeles. The area that we shot in, in the South Bay, I am very familiar with because I grew up in that area" (Wootton).

The main criminal protagonists are Ordell Robbie and Louis Gara. The book describes the former as "a light-skinned black guy," and Samuel L. Jackson plays his role in the movie. The latter is depicted as "a dark-skinned white guy" (Leonard 3) and played by Robert De Niro. The minor role of the criminal Beaumont Livingston is given to Chris Tucker. Leonard provides a detailed description of Ordell when Tyler and Nicolet see him for the first time: "black male, mid to late forties, six foot maybe, about one seventy, sunglasses, patterned tan silk shirt and tan slacks. Stylish and fairly dressed up, compared to the two law enforcement officers in their Sears sport shirts and Levi's this morning" (133).

The novel begins with a white-power demonstration attended by different organizations: skinhead Nazis, the Klan, Bikers for Racism, also known as Dixie Knights, which takes place in Palm Beach, Florida. In this way Elmore Leonard accentuates the racial background of the Florida setting. Organized white supremacist activity has existed in Florida since the founding of the original Ku Klux Klan in the 1860s, and it still poses the most significant extremist-related problem in the state. The major deviation from the book concerns the complete omittance of the neo-Nazi subplot in the film. By shifting the setting from Florida to California, the director avoids the story's connections with the historical past of the American South. Tarantino prefers to begin his movie with the two gangsters, Ordell and Louis, watching a pre-recorded TV presentation of a fictional show titled *Chicks who Love Guns*. The program features beautiful female protagonists wearing only bikinis and holding automatic weapons. Samuel L. Jackson's character instructs Robert de Niro's protagonist about the merits of different types of guns presented by the ladies on the video: "Then there's the AK-47, when you absolutely, positively have to kill every m— in the room." This scene with sexy ladies firing automatic weapons introduces the viewer to Tarantino's world full of fetishization and sexualization of violence (Pagello 146).

The novel manifests its preoccupation with race and ethnicity through the explicit use of the colors white and black. The indications of race allusions begin with Ordell's nickname, "Whitebread" or simply "bread." The gangster overtly demonstrates his ethnic identification while talking to Max Cherry: "I used to be Neegro, I was cullud, I was black, but now I'm African-American" (Leonard 16). Then, his conversation with Louis confirms how much race means to him: "Louis? You only think you're a good guy. You're just like me, only you turned out white" (Leonard 74). Colors also prove vital for the main female protagonist. Leonard created a blue-eyed Caucasian heroine named Jackie Burke, whom Tarantino deliberately turned into an African American character and renamed Brown. Jackie works as a flight attendant and smuggles cash for the gun dealer Ordell Robbie. When Jackie is caught at the airport, Ordell has her bailed out by the bail bondsman, Max Cherry (played by Robert Forster). The contacts between Jackie and Max develop into an unspoken attraction but not an affair, just a partnership in deceit.

The movie emphasizes the protagonists' racial belonging much more strongly than the novel. The film script and visualizations accentuate blackness and frequently contrast it with whiteness. Tarantino uses colors to play with intertextual dialogue, e.g., when Jackie asks Max how he takes his coffee and Max responds, "Black's fine," suggesting she is attractive, rather than simply denoting coffee without milk. When the

viewer sees the African American character of Jackie for the first time, she is presented with dignity, wearing her flight attendant uniform; however, her confidence disappears when two white enforcement agents confront her at the airport. The role of race is confirmed in the scene when Ordell asks Max to arrange Jackie's bail and provides the cause of her arrest: "black woman, falsely accused." Max soon realizes that the woman he meets is not helpless but clever, and she gains his trust (Igrec 25). Interestingly, the black man sees the marginalization of the black woman while the white man elevates her status simply by realizing the virtues of her intellect. Although Jackie agrees to act as an informant against Ordell, she realizes that her life is under threat, so she double-crosses the gangster and the law enforcement agents.

The world of the protagonists is spacious and full of different characters. Robbie Ordell's relations with women have a unique context as he "puts girls up," which means he pays their bills in exchange for sex or participation in his illegal activities. It is not only a woman herself but a woman in his house that presents a trophy for him (Gallafent 35). Both the novel and the film feature three of Ordell's women (Sheronda, Simone, and Melanie) living in different parts of Florida (in the book) or California (in the film). The black character of Sheronda, played by Lisa Gay Hamilton, comes from Georgia. Tarantino promotes a negative stereotype of American Southerners by depicting her as a naïve girl with low mental capacity. Ordell says in the film: "[I] took her to Compton and told her it was Hollywood, and she believed it." (Necaise 14). Hattie Winston plays the African American character of 63-year old Simone. The third woman Ordell "puts up" is the white character of Melanie (Bridget Fonda), Ordell's "surfer gal," who lives in Palm Beach (in the book) and in a beach apartment in Southern California (in the movie). Ordell explicitly demonstrates his privileging of whiteness with his insistence on sponsoring Melanie despite the evidence of her treacherous nature. It seems that her whiteness presents a higher value for him than her young age. According to African American Studies Professor Adilifu Nama, "Melanie is like a trophy wife who elevates Ordell's status among his peers," and this arrangement emphasizes not just the relation between an older man and a younger woman, but rather the status of a black man supporting a white woman (Nama 61). The movie's play with colors is also visible in the scene at Melanie's apartment where the Caucasian character of Luis wears black clothes while Ordell's clothes are white. This deliberate use of contrasts allows the emergence of new perspectives about the social status of the protagonists.

Tarantino's selection of the movie's cast is unexpected because both Pam Grier and Robert Forster in the leading roles seemed rather unlikely to generate box office gains. Nonetheless, as retro stars, they are returning to their previous types of film roles; thus, they enable the viewer to create new intertextual interpretations. On the other hand, bigger stars, such as Bridget Fonda and Robert de Niro, are cast in minor roles. Hence, the supporting cast creates a white background for the main female character's blackness.

The significance of race is emphasized when Tarantino expands the usage of "the n-word" (Holm 118). Amy Archerd, in her article for *Variety*, quotes Samuel L. Jackson, who admits that the "n" word is used 38 times in the movie, and this excessive frequency suggests Quentin's infatuation with that term. Tarantino, when asked about this issue during a press conference on *Jackie Brown* held in 1997, replied: "It has that

much power! Should any word have that much power?…. Any word that has that much power should be depowered." (Peary 130). In fact, the film's Ordell racializes whiteness by calling his white friend Louis "my nigga" (Nama 63). Thus, in Tarantino's world, "the n-word" appears in a context somewhat derogatory for whites when an African American man uses it to address his white friend. Moreover, the white man works for the black man, so the black superior calls his white inferior "my nigga," not vice versa. Sociology Professor Salvador Jimenez Murguía claims, "Despite the racist dialogues, it seems that the film elevates rather than degrades African Americans" (299).

Tarantino gives much empowerment to the character of Jackie and portrays her as a solid African American female who is respected and elegant. Her body is always covered, sometimes by her flight attendant's uniform. It does not mean that Jackie is unaware of her feminine traits; however, due to her intellect, she manages to outsmart the male characters, whether they are black or white. *Jackie Brown* attempts to "modernize the active women from exploitation films of the 1970s, reworking the female characters' mobilization against typical gender roles" (Platz 528). In contrast, the white character, Melanie, is a hypersexual female who constantly displays her body by wearing bikini tops and shorts. The movie shows her performing a kind of fetish by touching a glass with her bare feet. Cinema Studies Professor Jenny Platz suggests that Melanie is killed as a punishment for her lack of loyalty and because she is weak and lacks masculine features (Platz 533).

The significance of colors in the movie is not restricted to white and black. Another color reappearing in the movie is blue. Jackie wears a blue uniform while double-crossing Ordell and the law enforcement agents; Simone shows her seductive nature performing in a blue dress; Ordell wears a blue shirt when he comes to Jackie's apartment to kill her. Other characters do not avoid blue either: Melanie is wearing a blue bikini and shorts in her beach apartment when she betrays Ordell; Louis wears a blue shirt in the money exchange scene. The color blue metaphorically suggests some treacherous plan, evil intentions, generally anything far from innocence.

Legacy of Blaxploitation Films in *Jackie Brown*

Tarantino grew up in Los Angeles during the heyday of the blaxploitation genre, which denotes the film productions from the 1960s and 1970s when American popular culture began to depict African American characters in the context of urban spaces. In the interview with film producer Adrian Wootton, Tarantino explains how black culture affected him: "I kind of grew up surrounded by black culture... It is the culture that I identify with" (Wootton). The blaxploitation genre is connected with the African American civil rights movement and the Black Power philosophy, which influenced the way in which African Americans were represented by popular culture. Film critic Katherine Rife writes, "Blaxploitation is an attitude as much as it is a period in cinema history" (49). The black audience wanted the film protagonists to be African Americans, cared about their images, and criticized their degrading representations.

In response to those expectations, the blaxploitation genre focused on a more complex portrayal of African American characters; nevertheless, the devaluation of blackness continued with the representations of black gangsters and drug dealers

(Guerrero 70). The protagonists of the genre usually included gangsters, junkies consuming cocaine, corrupt white officers, pimps, and prostitutes who operated in the inner city ghetto of specific urban settings, such as Los Angeles' South Central and Watts or New York's Harlem and Brooklyn. The blaxploitation formula presented a higher tolerance for violence, sex, and inappropriate language, which partly resulted from the collapse of Hollywood's Production Code. The plot of the movies concentrated on the motif of revenge that the black characters executed against the corrupt white protagonists. The imagery of the urban ghetto was emphasized by aesthetic visuals and soul music (Guerrero 94).

The blaxploitation films offered the viewer a voyage through the cityscape and exploration of ghetto topography as exterior scenes were shot on location. The inner city became more closely connected with the concept of race when "The term 'ghetto' was redefined to refer specifically to urban, usually slum, areas inhabited by minority populations" (Massood 84). The films featured "black-inflected" speech idioms and slang language. The primary audience of the genre constituted young African American urban males. These movies articulated the main characteristic of the blaxploitation formula, according to which the central black character challenges the oppression of the whites and wins.

The legacy of two blaxploitation movies with Pam Grier can be traced in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*. *Coffy* (1973) and the movie that was primarily supposed to be its sequel *Foxy Brown* (1974) star Pam Grier as female protagonists who carry out vigilante missions against the drug underworld to avenge the people they loved. The main character of *Coffy* is Flower Child Coffin, who takes revenge for her sister's drug addiction by killing people responsible for it. This film established Grier as the "Queen of Blaxploitation." In turn, the title character of *Foxy Brown* turns to vigilante justice to avenge her boyfriend who had been shot by a gang member. Grier's blaxploitation protagonists are outlaw characters who do not accept the legal methods of pursuing justice.

Moreover, they do not hesitate to use their sexuality to accomplish the mission of revenge. Yvonne D. Sims, in her book *Women of Blaxploitation*, notes that the roles of Pam Grier and other female blaxploitation artists "offered a significant departure from the historical representation of African American women and, through the writers, producers, and directors of the genre, brought to the screen a new image of African American femineity" (Sims 26). Although Grier's appearances in blaxploitation films were ground-breaking for her portrayals of powerful African American characters, critics claimed that those roles perpetuated controversial stereotypes of vengeful black females (Sims 69). Grier received tremendous criticism for appearing in both *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* because they involved "sex-violence-action scenarios" (Guerrero 99).

The blaxploitation genre underwent a revival in the 1990s when filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, in a nostalgic way, reintroduced the convention of the genre into their new movies. The intertextuality of *Jackie Brown* derives mainly from Pam Grier herself and her past roles in blaxploitation cinema. By casting Grier in the role of Jackie Brown, Tarantino directly links his movie with the blaxploitation genre. "*Jackie Brown* was received as a nostalgic film that paid homage to a Blaxploitation icon and revived a fallen star's career" (Nama 65). The viewer sees Jackie as the development

of Jackie Burke and through the prism of the actress's previous roles in blaxploitation films. Film critic Roger Ebert calls Pam Grier "the goddess of 1970s tough-girl pictures." It was in homage to Grier's role in *Foxy Brown* that Tarantino changed the character's surname from Burke to Brown. Furthermore, a Caucasian character became an African American one in the film, and this transformation enabled Tarantino to depict racial and gender relations in American society. Murguía (298) claims that the director did not aim to change Jackie's character but casting an African American actress in this role provided a social context to explore her life experiences.

Tarantino attempts to revive the career of Pam Grier, and in numerous instances his movie refers to certain conventions of the blaxploitation genre. In his review in The Austin Chronicle, Marc Savlov writes, "Tarantino is having so much fun playing fast and loose with Seventies genre conventions that the film plays more like one of his beloved retro-board games than a standard QT film." The resemblance starts with the font style used for the poster advertising *Jackie Brown*, which is identical to *Foxy Brown*'s. Tarantino explains how the film's opening sequence with Pam Grier walking through the airport resonates with *Foxy Brown*: "[S]he is walking through the airport, and she just looks like the baddest creature a guy ever created.… She has just got all this power and strength—she is Foxy Brown twenty years later" (Wootton). The list of tenants in Melanie's apartments building includes the name "S. Haig," which is a direct reference to the character of Sid Haig, who accompanied a few of Pam Grier's roles in the blaxploitation films from the 1970s. Another tenant, named "J. Hill," refers to Jack Hill, who directed *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*.

In addition, the title protagonist of the film, Pam Grier, received some recognition in Tarantino's earlier films, e.g., Mr. Pink mentions her in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Grier's role in Coffy inspires Bonnie's character in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The scene in which Ordell orders Melanie to pick up the phone, and she does it but quickly hands it over to him, mirrors an almost identical scene in *Truck Turner* (1974), released as a double feature with *Foxy Brown*. Moreover, both *Jackie Brown* and *Truck Turner* feature bounty hunters who break the law.

Tarantino builds a self-conscious intertextual relation with other 1970s movies representing various film genres. In one scene, Melanie is watching the movie *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974), which belongs to the canon of road films. The background music in the scene when Ordell talks to Jackie on the phone is the song "The Lions and the Cucumber" by The Vampire Sound Corporation, which was also used in erotic horror *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971).

Jackie Brown pays tribute to the 1970s and California's South Bay even by Tarantino's choice of the cityscape. In his article published in *L.A. Taco*, Jared Cowan describes the South Bay locations appearing in *Jackie Brown*. In the film's opening sequence, the viewer sees Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). The movie features other locations in the district that are rarely used in Hollywood productions. Tarantino grew up in this area, and by showing its locations on the screen he establishes his personal connection with the South Bay. The production designer of the film, David Wasco, proves the director's fascination with the 1970s by explaining the choice of the film's setting, "When the film was shot in the late 90s, the South Bay was in some ways stuck in a time warp still reminiscent of the 1970s." The central plot scene of

the money exchange takes place in the shopping mall Del Amo Fashion Center in Torrance, referred to in the movie with a shortened version of the Del Amo Mall. This shopping center acquired its present name in 1971, and then it began to expand (Rivera). Another reference to the South Bay concerns the Hermosa apartment where Melanie lives, which seems to be Ordell's favorite location. The actual setting of this apartment was the Playa Del Rey building in the northern direction of Hermosa Beach.

An additional effect of reality and a fearful atmosphere is created with the selection of the Sybil Brand Institute for the jail scenes. This place operated as a female prison in Monterey Park, and *Jackie Brown* was the first movie filmed there. Since then, the jail has frequently been used for filming. Another location seen in the film is The Cockatoo Inn on Hawthorne Boulevard in California. The place gained a reputation for a celebrity clientele: politicians, actors, and members of the Mafia. Although the business started to decline in the 1970s and the place closed a year before *Jackie Brown* was filmed, Tarantino insisted that the scene of Jackie getting a drink with Max after her release from jail is filmed in the actual location of The Cockatoo Inn (Cowan). By selecting this particular place for the film footage, Tarantino reawakens the times of the hotel's glory and ensures its permanent presence on the screen.

Another intertextual reference concerns the film's soundtrack, which pays homage to blaxploitation cinema. Film scholar Lisa Coulthard analyzes the music in Tarantino's movies and concludes that stylistic details of his use of songs reflect the intertextuality of his films (2). The musical world of the movie is rarely contemporaneous with the depicted action but emphasizes nostalgia and temporal dislocation with songs that were popular in the 1970s. This retro-nostalgic attitude is further emphasized by the visual display of technology: vinyl records, jukeboxes, transistor radios. Nonetheless, film critic Mick LaSalle claims that the film's music "clashes with the modern-day setting".

The opening credits of Jackie Brown are set apart from the rest of the film sonically and visually as they occur within the duration of a song. During Grier's first appearance in the film, she is riding an airport moving sidewalk, and the viewer hears the 1970s song "Long Time Woman." It was composed by Lex Baxter and used in *The Big Doll House* (1971) when a character, also played by Pam Grier, was being locked in a prison cell. The film's background music explicitly accentuates her race in the prison scene when Jackie stands in a procession of nine women, of whom seven are black. Tarantino deliberately uses the postmodern trait of circularity when the viewer hears the lyrics: "ninety-nine years is a long time" from the film's introductory song "Long Time Woman." The viewers have to work out how the characters from both movies ended up in the same place. The song creates a sense of inevitability and destiny for African women who are likely to end up in jail.

The soundtrack features Roy Ayers' score from the film *Coffy*: "Aragon," "Escape," "Brawling Broads," "Exotic Dance"; and Roy Ayers and Harry Whitaker's "Vittroni's Theme-King Is Dead." Roy Ayers' songs are listed during the film's credits but not included in the commercial soundtrack, titled *Jackie Brown: Music from the Miramax Motion Picture*. Hence, the film soundtrack is complementary, not identical, to the commercial music album; the attentive listener needs to become a viewer of the film to hear all of the songs from the movie. Tarantino seems to invite the listeners to

see his film, if not for the plot, at least for the music.

The soul music of the movie soundtrack informs about the protagonists' social background (Murguía 298). It also applies to the theme song, Bobby Womack's classic soul single "Across 110th Street," taken from the movie with the same title, directed by Barry Shear in 1972. The song tells the story of Blacks who improved their life by escaping from the ghetto (Igrec 26). The movie begins with Jackie and the song "Across 110th Street" playing in the background. Tarantino creates a kind of circularity by echoing this shot at the end of the film when she drives away in Ordell's car, and the viewer hears the same song. The close-up of Jackie's face shows her lips moving to its lyrics. The song provides a sense of completeness and closure through a return to the opening sequence. This circularity creates a contrast between what was happening at the beginning and the end of the film. It offers the viewer some space for interpretation of whether the protagonist's situation has changed for the better, or, worse. Although the same song played at the beginning and end suggests the same position, the character undergoes transformation, affected by the story's events.

Another circularity occurs before the money exchange when Jackie is listening to music in the car, "Street Life" (1979) by Randy Crawford. This is the same song that was played as background music in the scenes in the shopping mall. The emotions between Jackie and Max are emphasized by the songs "La-La Means I Love You" and "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)," performed by R&B/soul band The Delfonics, who were popular in the 1970s. Both songs provide examples of diegetic[1] sound in the film. The music of The Delfonics also accompanies an emotional scene when Max is driving his car with Jackie, while the radio plays "I gave my heart and soul to you," and the ride ends with the couple's kiss. Another romantic song, "Why do I keep my mind" from Charles McCormick's "Natural High," is played when Max and Jackie meet outside the jail.

The Intertextual Crossings of *Jackie Brown* with Other Movies and Film Genres

The intertext of *Jackie Brown* concerns the variety of the film genres incorporated and the intertextual handling of the characters. The essential signature of Tarantino's movies is the scripts, including some pop culture references, which the director himself refers to with the word "Tarantinoesque" (Peary 131). In turn, film critics Mick LaSalle and Benjamin Svetkey describe the dialogues of Tarantino's films with the terms "Quentinized," and "Tarantinoism." From the beginning of *Jackie Brown*, the viewer knows precisely that the movie is in the Tarantino universe. It includes typical characteristics such as witty dialogue; unexpected gunfire; or close-ups of bare female feet, known as a "foot fetish."

Jackie Brown has multiple references to previous Tarantino movies, e.g., Samuel L. Jackson's line, "This is some repugnant shit," is a direct quote of the words used by his character in *Pulp Fiction*. When Jackie changes her uniform into a white shirt and black

1 The term "diegetic" refers to any sound originating from the source within the screen environment so the movie characters can hear it, e.g., the sound of an explosion. In contrast, "non-diegetic" means that the sound comes from a source outside the story space, so the film protagonists cannot hear it (Heckmann 2020).

suit, her image also evokes the character of Mia Wallace from *Pulp Fiction*. Another common theme concerns the fictional food chain "Teriyaki Donut," which appears in *Jackie Brown* and *Pulp Fiction*. Film and Media Studies Professor Federico Pagello (145) claims that Tarantino's cinema philia made him develop *Jackie Brown* in such a way that the film initiates reflexivity towards the previous movies he had directed. Another reference to previous films is the use of non-plot-related conversations.

The postmodern traits frequently used by Tarantino include intertitles, chapter titles, and "map shots," like the one tracking Jackie's journey from Mexico to California, or close-ups of a record player, occasionally substituted by a jukebox. The intertitles inform the viewer about the exact location of particular film scenes, e.g., "Del Amo, California," summarize the events happening in the next scene, e.g., "Money Exchange Trial," or provide timing, e.g., "3-days later." During the sequence of the money exchange, the intertitles inform the audience about the times of plane arrivals, which creates additional tension connected with the timeframe of Jackie's deceit. The map used to show the route of Jackie's flight prior to the final money exchange echoes the maps used in *Kill Bill* (2003).

Tarantino's trademark includes "a car trunk shot," with characters viewed from the inside of a trunk. The director used this frame-within-a-frame technique in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill*, and *Inglorious Basterds* (2009). The characters of Beaumont and Louis both experience death in a vehicle, which is unexpected and does not result from a car crash. Relying on the familiar space of a car gives the protagonist an illusory feeling of homeliness which Tarantino at once converts into a place of death (Gallafent 67). Ordell tempts Beaumont to get into the trunk with the means of chicken with rice and beans. The director deliberately uses the dish stereotypically associated with African Americans. Then, Ordell executes Beaumont in a scene shown to the viewer as a shot inside the car trunk. Afterward, he shows Beaumont's body to Louis, saying, "an employee I had to let go."

Tarantino is exceptionally playful with subtle references to other movies and film genres. Nonetheless, the viewer needs to comprehend American cinema to notice the intertextuality of *Jackie Brown*. In the conversation with Louis, Ordell uses the phrase "as serious as a heart attack," which is the same line as the words of Robert de Niro in the psychological thriller *The Fan* (1996). A movie that impacted *Jackie Brown* was the crime neo-noir *Straight Time* (1978), featuring Dustin Hoffman as an ex-thief after his release from jail. Tarantino wanted Hoffman's performance to influence Robert De Niro's character of Louis Gara. Certain plot similarities are noticeable between *Jackie Brown* and *Carlito's Way* (De Palma, 1993). Both movies are crime stories with love plots and characters trying to escape and start new lives with a large amount of money, but only one of them succeeds (Page 162). According to Film Studies Professor Edward Gallafent, Elmore Leonard inserted some archetypes of the western genre into the urban setting of *Rum Punch* (Gallafent 86). Both the literary and cinematic characters of Max Cherry evoke the image of a western lawman. The final scene of Jackie's departure also brings to mind the ending of a western; Jackie, wearing a white suit, says goodbye to Max and drives away in Ordell's car, leaving Max alone.

Jackie Brown does not fit into any single film category, but rather represents a cinematic pastiche, including a caper film, a subgenre of the heist film. It tells a story

from the point of view of criminals planning and executing an elaborate theft, rather than a robbery. American writer and editor Rachelle Ramirez notes, "Suspense is often driven by whether or not all team members will remain loyal to one another." The crime itself is not a mystery, and the viewer follows the lawbreakers who execute the audacious crime without violence. Hence, a caper showcases the ingenuity of the thieves. Film critic Sean Axmaker elaborates on the subgenre of the caper, "Compared to the brute force of a robbery, where guns and violence are so often the primary tools, the caper calls for ingenuity, crack timing, mad skills, play acting and a little sleight of hand." *Jackie Brown* is a caper movie in which Jackie and her partner Max make a plan to steal half a million dollars from Ordell while the federal agent and the local police officer are watching them. The intrigue develops into a story with double-crosses involving the protagonists, the criminal, and law enforcement. Tarantino adds some distinctive comic touches to the story as caper films include elements of humor. Nonetheless, Ordell soon realizes who stole his money. Ebert writes in his review: "whoever is smartest will live."

The film narrative is chronological except for the crucial sequence of money exchange at the Del Amo Mall, when Tarantino uses the plot device of shifting the viewpoint and narrates the act of thievery from three different perspectives. The viewer sees the money switch-off from the perspective of Jackie, Louis and Melanie, and finally Max. In all cases, the chronology of events stays the same, only to be repeated from different angles. The non-linear story structure has been used on multiple occasions in cinematic history, including Stanley Kubrick's heist movie *The Killing* (1956). A similar technique was used in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and Edward Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996). In those films, the purpose of this narration was to illustrate how various characters provide subjective versions of the same story. The British writer Edwin Page believes that the purpose of showing different perspectives of Jackie's double-cross is to give the viewer a clear picture of what really happened (Page 166). In turn, the film critic James Berardinelli claims that Tarantino did not use the trick with three viewpoints for the needs of plot development but rather because he considered it unconventional. In contrary, the American avant-garde poet K. Silem Mohammad (88) suggests that the repetition of the event emphasizes the different experiences of the characters and makes the viewer realize that Jackie is actually play-acting that the money has been stolen, thus the viewer's perception changes.

Conclusion

Quentin Tarantino altered the text of Elmore Leonard's novel and created a film immersed in the tradition of the blaxploitation genre. The movie foregrounds blackness and backgrounds whiteness; thus, it overtly privileges the former. *Jackie Brown*'s constant visual interplay between blackness and whiteness aesthetically accentuates the success of the African American female protagonist. The heroine is trapped in a problematic situation, a vital plot element of the blaxploitation formula; nevertheless, she uses intellect, not violence, to execute her plan. Jackie Burke from Leonard's crime narrative develops through the prism of Pam Grier's previous roles in classic blaxploitation cinema, but Tarantino's movie gives her some 1990s sensibility. She is a dignified middle-aged woman who manages to outwit both the gangsters and the law

enforcement agents threatening her safety and financial security. Her elaborate theft gives *Jackie Brown* an element of the caper film genre.

Despite following the blaxploitation formula, *Jackie Brown* does not feature much violence. Some subplots of the movie include brutal scenes, but only four people are murdered, which is by far "Tarantino's least bloody offering" (Podgorski). Grier and Forster play subtle characters who succeed with their intrigue due to their brilliant skills. Their roles stand in sharp contrast with those of Samuel L. Jackson and Robert de Niro, who do not hesitate to kill. The themes of good and bad blur when the protagonists of Jackie and Max commit theft and become antagonists, the film's villains, who get away with their crime.

The film is fundamentally intertextual, and its different layers intertwine with pre-existing cultural texts. Tarantino builds a self-conscious intertextual relation with his former movies and other popular culture discourses. The features of self-referentiality and "Tarantinoism" regularly appearing in his films also apply to *Jackie Brown*. The intertextual references in the movie are subtle, and the director leaves the audience the delight of discovering pop-cultural allusions which develop into new meanings and imageries. This process may be more engaging if the viewers share Tarantino's cinema philia.

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