

Jackie Brown: The question remains, Something or nothing?

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Film Review: Jackie Brown, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, based on Rum Punch, a novel by Elmore Leonard

A difficulty in writing about Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* is that one could repeat much of what one said about his previous film, *Pulp Fiction*: "The film is above all intended to make an impression on the spectator. One is not meant to know something more about the world by the end of the film—or it's perhaps an accident if one does—but to develop a certain attitude toward the filmmaker. Every grimace and every laugh, especially every knowing laugh, is a personal triumph for Quentin Tarantino. This is fairly childish" (*The International Workers Bulletin*, April 24, 1995).

And the whole business remains fairly childish in *Jackie Brown*.

Tarantino's new film follows the adventures of a middle-aged flight attendant, Jackie Brown, played by Pam Grier, who is smuggling cash to and from Mexico for a gunrunner, Ordell Robbie (Samuel L. Jackson). Brown finds herself caught between law enforcement officials, determined to nab Robbie, and the murderous gunrunner himself. With the help of a sympathetic bail bondsman, she is able to pit the forces threatening her against one another and make off with a half million dollars of Robbie's money.

Jackie Brown is intelligently made, relatively restrained and occasionally amusing, with a number of clever twists and turns. Tarantino has enough sense, or calculation, to treat his veteran performers, Grier and Robert Forster (as the bail bondsman) with respect, and they respond with excellent performances. The two exude an interesting sensuality and world-weariness. (As talented as Jackson is, his one-note character begins to grate.)

Critical responses to Tarantino's films fall into two

very general categories. The more straitlaced are disturbed, even outraged, by the violence, the language, the disorder, the insolence. (The director, of course, delights in this response.) Those more in the know are, to one degree or another, dazzled by his work, finding his brilliance expressed to a lesser or greater degree in any given film.

One is apparently permitted to be either for or against Tarantino, but not to analyze him.

Almost no one, in responding to a *Pulp Fiction* or a *Jackie Brown*, asks certain difficult questions, just as Tarantino apparently never poses genuinely troubling questions to himself in the course of making his films. No one asks, for example: what new thoughts or feelings, if any, does a viewing of these films generate?

Certain assumptions underlie Tarantino's approach and the critical response of those who approve of his work, many of them related to the general problem of popular culture, kitsch, etc.

We are expected to share Tarantino's view that Elmore Leonard—author of the novel *Rum Punch*, upon which *Jackie Brown* is based—is an extraordinary talent, a major modern-day creator of "pulp fiction." In fact, Leonard is a clever writer who has devised a formula, involving the depiction of idiosyncratic lowlifes, that hardly represents a breakthrough in fiction writing. Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain found a responsive chord with critical readers because their best books exposed elements of American life that were not discussed in polite novels—corruption and decay, brutality and death, lust and greed. Leonard is not in that category. His violent and treacherous, but always annoyingly, colorful characters inhabit a world through which the author guides the middle-class reader, always reassuring him or her that this is somewhere

comfortably distant.

Another assumption underlying *Jackie Brown* is that we share the director's predilection for the so-called "black exploitation" films of the 1970s, in a number of which Pam Grier starred (*Coffy*, *Scream Blacula Scream*, *Foxy Brown*, etc.) This too seems an unwarranted assumption.

Apart from a certain liveliness, these were, in general, bad films, which do not stand up to scrutiny from any point of view. The word "exploitation" was not out of place. On the one hand, certain film studio executives, as well as a section of black entrepreneurs, recognized that a new, distinct audience had come into existence and attempted to cash in on the possibilities. From the sociological point of view, on the other, the makers of these films tapped into genuine class hostility and did everything in their power to translate this into racial terms.

A more general presupposition of *Jackie Brown* is that popular culture, in the form of kitsch, is more authentic, meaningful, honest than its opposite, whatever that might be today. Setting aside for the moment the degree to which such an outlook—consciously or not—betrays condescension, even contempt, on the part of Tarantino for the general public, this attitude reveals a profound misunderstanding of the current cultural malaise and his own place within it. Is it really true that *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction* cut to the "heart of things" in a way that, let's say, relatively lifeless cinematic adaptations of Jane Austen or Henry James do not? Or might it not be possible to conclude that these two trends represent opposite, but interconnected, sides of the same artistic stagnation; that both sorts of films lack poetic or psychological depth, social perspective and intellectual urgency?

In the final analysis, it is the dearth of authenticity and spontaneity in Tarantino's films—for all their turmoil—that deadens interest. Nearly everything in *Jackie Brown* is an affectation, a posturing, a choice the spectator is meant to admire (or envy) Tarantino for having made. For example, the violence of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, we were led to infer, represented the filmmaker's commitment to telling the no-holds-barred truth. *Jackie Brown* self-consciously avoids the mayhem of the earlier films. So, it turns out, the spilling of blood was simply an external element,

which Tarantino can turn off and on at will.

It becomes almost impossible to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic. (This, of course, is considered a positive virtue in some circles.) Even the thoughtful direction of Grier and Forster, unfortunately, arouses mistrust. The spectator strongly suspects that Tarantino wants him or her to exclaim, "How sensitive he is! What surprises he continually springs on us! Who would have thought...!" Like the boy who cried wolf, Tarantino has given so many artistic false alarms, it is problematic whether anyone will be listening or interested if and when he does tell us something heartfelt.

The pity is that Tarantino has undeniable talent, a sense of humor, an eye for detail. Whether or not he chooses to do anything serious with these gifts is anybody's guess.



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