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Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy

How to Philosophize with a Pair of Pliers and a Blowtorch

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Stuntman Mike, Simulation, and Sadism in *Death Proof*

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Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007): four female characters, four cruel deaths, four short sequences. Several rapid close-ups of the girls rocking out to a radio song, a quick point-of-view shot from the front seat of the girls's car. Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) pulls his headlights on. Slow motion as the vehicles collide. Slow motion as the bodies of Mike's victims tear apart in repeated collisions of metal, rubber, bone, flesh. In an instant, the human body forcibly joins with technology and pleasure fuses with pain.

Death Proof hinges on its two major car crash sequences. The first crash, repeated four times, marks a distinct shift in genre, setting, and cast. You could easily argue that *Death Proof* fuses two very different films, the first part of the film being largely a horror movie and the last part an action movie. Tarantino frontloads the structure of this film with combinations of horror with action, reality with fiction, pleasure with pain, and references with nonreferences.

The U.S. theatrical cut of *Death Proof* opens with a disclaimer from "The Management": "The following film may contain one or more missing film REELS. Sorry for the inconvenience." From the beginning, with this sort-of-comical warning, Tarantino draws attention to his film's status *as a film*, as a constructed work of fiction, and as a "simulation." Nowhere is this film's status as a fictional piece more obvious than in the countless references to other films that Tarantino plugs into *Death Proof*. Ultimately, however, Tarantino really references himself and his mental film library while constantly

drawing attention to what the French theorist Jean Baudrillard calls "hyperreality."

In *Death Proof*'s case, hyperreality is sometimes an unclear mixture of images with reality and sometimes an unclear mixture of images with each other. For example, Tarantino continually references his influences, such as *Vanishing Point* (1971) and *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974), both in dialogue and in image. These references to 1970s action flicks go on to become more "authentic" than Tarantino's "original" work in *Death Proof*. Tarantino uses the camera to interpret and moderate reality, but at the same time, he uses it erase history by reducing it to movie and TV references.

Rewriting the History of Cinema

From the opening stroll through Jungle Julia (Sydney Poitier)'s apartment (a character whose alliterative name throws back to *Vanishing Point*'s disk jockey Super Soul) to the pursuit of the "fuck-me-swingin'-balls-out" white 1970 Dodge Challenger (also of *Vanishing Point* fame), Tarantino's characters constantly explore images, simulations of cinematic history, and simulations of these simulations. In *Death Proof*, references and images become a form of "simulation" that somehow makes the "real" more "real" or authentic. Through the mixing of human bodies with machines and, by extension, the mixing of pleasure with pain, Tarantino repeatedly emphasizes the fact that simulation is at work in *Death Proof*. By combining human bodies with machines, Tarantino opens the door to the combination of the real with the artificial or simulated.

Death Proof, in many ways, is an attempt to rewrite cinematic history. Tarantino largely does away with the more grand "history" of Baudrillard. For instance, while the posters for *Death Proof* as well as Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* (the other half of *Grindhouse*, the two-in-one "double feature" of which *Death Proof* is the second part) might throw back to the exploitation posters covering the grindhouses of Times Square in the 1960s and 1970s, the contents of *Death Proof* and *Planet Terror* are stripped of all traces of the historic and economic eras that produced the films that they reference. Tarantino seems to be the first to do away with this larger history as he freely mixes cell phones and text messaging,

markers of the present, with pristine muscle cars, markers of the past.

The multi-million dollar collaboration of *Grindhouse* quickly erases the actual economic structure that dictated the tiny budgets of much grindhouse fare (although depending on your understanding of "exploitation cinema," you could still define Tarantino and Rodriguez as "exploiters" of their own niche markets). Similarly, in the contemporary production of *Death Proof* there is no space for the quickly disappearing open-road speed-freak freedom of the early 1970s that you find in *Vanishing Point.* The original historical and cinematic context can't help but be lost.

Death Proof throws away memory in favor of the speed of the muscle car. Moving away from memory like this is actually part of *Death Proof*'s structure: with the movement of the story from Texas to Tennessee, Tarantino practically erases the entire first half of the film, with the exception of a few passing references and the character that links them together, Stuntman Mike.

Hyperreality and Simulation

Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1999) and *America* (1994), argues that the United States, and Hollywood productions in particular, are evidence of an all-pervading "hyperreality."[1] It is in hyperreality that there is "no more fiction or reality," only a blurring of the two.[2] Hyperreality and simulation, in turn, connect directly to the hyper-speed of capital's circulation: everything moves, everything sells, everything disappears.

According to Baudrillard, "America is neither dream nor reality" (1999, p. 3). Instead, it is hyperreality through and through. The U.S. and American cultural productions must be understood "as fiction" (p. 29). And *Death Proof* always seems ready to embrace its position as fiction whether it's through countless references to other films or fictions or the self-imposed cult status of the film.

The characters of the second part of the film are in fact, simulations. As actresses playing stuntpersons (Kim [Tracie

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 28.

[2] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 118.

Thorns] and Zoë [Zoë Bell]), and actresses playing a make-up girl and an actress (Abernathy [Rosario Dawson] and Lee [Mary Elizabeth Winstead]), they create simulations in their fictional work. They also constantly draw attention to their occupations verbally, be it as stuntperson, make-up artist, or actress. Meanwhile, when the action shifts from the stuntperson's game of "Ship's Mast" to the actual violence on the part of Stuntman Mike, Stuntman Mike still *simulates* violence. The action consists at base of stuntpersons acting out car chases from their favorite movies.

What Baudrillard calls "the era of simulation," others more loosely dub "postmodernity." Theorists now, according to Baudrillard, must primarily concern themselves with the "question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" itself (1994, p. 2). Images and markers of reality take the place of what anyone might actually consider "reality." Simulation is essentially a representation. It is a representation, however, that bears no link to what it claims to represent (p. 6). You might think of the filmic references packed into *Death Proof*: to what extent do these references actually throw back to their originals and to what extent do they simply exist as references (that reference nothing)?

Baudrillard outlines four distinct stages of simulation. In the first stage, the image "reflects" a "profound reality." In the second, the image blurs or obscures a profound reality. In the third, the image disguises the nonexistence of a profound reality, and in the fourth, the image bears absolutely no relation to any reality at all. The fourth stage sees the simulation become a *simulacrum*, a simulation or duplicate without an original. Finally, the real begins to mimic the simulation of real images of the real become more real than the real itself (p. 6).

Baudrillard writes that simulation is a repetition of an original object or image. However, this repetition is somehow more authentic, more "real" than the real (1999, p. 41). Tarantino's car chases, in many ways, are perfect simulations, as they appear more genuine to the viewer than the car chases in, say, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, *Vanishing Point*, or *Gone in 60 Seconds* (1974). The challenge for us as viewers of *Death Proof* is to determine where simulation stops and the simulacrum starts. You can dig deeper and deeper but eventually certain images and objects that appear to be references are pure simulacra.

Could you simply call this originality? Perhaps. But there's something else. It's originality with a façade of references and referentiality. In this way, Tarantino seems to write his own cinematic history from his own cinematic library. After seeing *Death Proof*, you can't help but look differently at the female characters in Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965). Tarantino replaces that film's original historical context and meaning with his own.

Similarly, the car chase that closes *Death Proof* is a hip-hop style sampling of *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*'s and *Vanishing Point*'s chase scenes. It even includes similar automobile makes. Tarantino's car chase ultimately holds this referential significance and so might be characteristic of the third stage of simulation. However, the simulacrum emerges as Tarantino begins to self-consciously reference a sort of mythic exploitation film. Here Tarantino simulates a simulation thus producing a simulacrum.

Freedom, Horror, and the Road

The road in Baudrillard functions in many of the same ways as Tarantino's road, specifically in the closing car chase and crash in *Death Proof*. The road is a way to move quickly, as quickly as possible, and to forget. It is a way to traverse the referential desert of simulated and anonymous Tennessee (a bucolic landscape harking back to the car chases of *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*), or the semi-rural road networks surrounding Austin, Texas (p. 5).

Similarly, in *Death Proof*, Tarantino's stuntpersons Kim and Zoë find America in the road, in the uninhibited circulation of driving, in the unqualified *free*dom of the *free*ways. This is a freedom to traverse as much space as one wishes at the moment of one's choosing. Baudrillard observes the ability and willingness to move quickly and a parallel willingness to forget in the U.S. According to Baudrillard, Americans shake themselves free of "historical centrality" (p. 81). As postmodern Americans embark on their daily commutes, they think about only the present *now*.

Baudrillard argues that "the only truly profound pleasure" these days is "that of keeping on the move" (p. 53). Tarantino takes this pleasure one step further as he presents the audience with the mythology of the all-powerful Detroit muscle car. With

these powerful machines, Tarantino gives Kim and Zoë the practically *unlimited* speed and power of the 1970 *Vanishing Point* Challenger and gives Stuntman Mike the parallel power of the souped-up Nova and Charger. Here the apparatus of movement and speed, the automobile, becomes both a means to pleasure and a means to pain as the drivers of cars repeatedly collide, bang each other up, scrape stock paint jobs, and spin out. This is one of several moments in which pleasure and pain seem to coincide in *Death Proof.*

Bound up in the endless circulation of goods and peoples, Baudrillard also spots a bizarre interrelatedness and impersonality in American culture. In the U.S., "everything connects, without any two pairs of eyes ever meeting" (p. 60). Perhaps this is where the thrill and horror comes from in the interaction between Mike and his would-be victims: Mike's first victims, speeding along a deserted country road, are literally in the dark up until the moments of their deaths. The eyes of the victims (Jungle Julia, Butterfly [Vanessa Ferlito], Lanna-Frank [Monica Staggs], and Shanna [Jordan Ladd]) and the victimizer (Stuntman Mike) can't meet until Mike pulls on his headlights. Even then, it is unclear if their eyes meet Mike's eyes or meet the technological extensions of his eyes, his headlights. Their deaths, along with the repeated event of headlights flashing on, replay multiple times, from multiple angles, and in slow motion. Only in the most sadistic (or perhaps sadomasochistic) act can eyes meet, can the impersonality of the road become personal. That is, with the exception of Butterfly, whose eyes, immediately before impact, deliberately close rather than open.

Getting Off on Car Crashes

While *Death Proof* fuses simulation with reality and technology with the body, it also fuses sadism with a peculiar form of masochism through the character of Stuntman Mike. Mike's first car crash is a deliberate act of violence (in which he drives his car head-on into his victims' car); the machine becomes an extension of his murdering body. It also becomes a death chamber and death-proof chamber at same time as the crash kills one victim in Mike's car while he remains largely unharmed. This scene enacts a pairing of technology with the sadistic body. However, there is also some sort of risk to Mike and it may

therefore be a genuine sadomasochistic scene.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in *Masochism* (1989), argues that a "meeting of violence and sexuality" is characteristic of both sadism, a condition characterized by a desire to inflict pain, and masochism, a condition characterized by a desire to be humiliated and to have pain inflicted.[3] Stuntman Mike might possess both of these conditions as he desires to inflict pain and gains sexual stimulation from actually experiencing pain.

According to Deleuze, sadism does not necessarily imply masochism nor does masochism necessarily imply sadism (p. 43). Stuntman Mike, however, confuses these separate entities and becomes a true sadomasochist: as Mike obtains a certain pleasure in doing, a pleasure in inflicting pain, when he collides with the car carrying Jungle Julia, Butterfly, Lanna-Frank, and Shanna, he obtains another sort of pleasure from his own injuries (a broken nose, a broken collarbone, and a shattered left index finger). Mike arrives at this pain willingly, even seeking it out as part of his sexual pleasure, and it is therefore a fusion of sadistic and masochistic pleasure (p. 38). Additionally, Mike seems almost completely to confuse technology and body as his car becomes the only way for him to gain sexual pleasure and inflict pain.

However, at the end of the second part of *Death Proof*, the sadisms of Kim, Zoë, and Abernathy turn Mike's sadomasochism on its head. Tarantino, in *Death Proof*'s somewhat abrupt climax, invites the audience to participate in these female characters' sadisms. After Kim shoots Mike in the arm he hurriedly speeds away. Down the road he screeches to a halt, wails in pain, pours alcohol on his wound, then wails in pain again, weeping "Oh why!?" Tarantino encourages the audience to laugh, to become sadists themselves.

Immediately before the final confrontation, as the girls chase Mike, Kim quite clearly becomes a sadist, and a masculine sadist at that. She also mixes technology with the body in her approach to Stuntman Mike as the rear-end of Mike's car metaphorically becomes his "ass" and Kim promises to "bust a

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[3] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," In *Masochism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zone, 1989), p. 17.

nut up in this bitch right now," being as she is "the horniest motherfucker on the road." This sexualized dialogue meanwhile simulates the hypersexual car and body dialogue toward the end of *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry.*

Freeze-Frame Ending

Looking back, the repeated images of car crashes are absolutely central to the structure of *Death Proof* as well as to the structures of the films that *Death Proof* pays homage to, especially *Vanishing Point.* Stuntman Mike's violent and sadistic body forces a collision between the nonviolent bodies of Jungle Julia, Butterfly, Lanna-Frank, and Shanna, and the disinterested metal of their car and Mike's death-proof car in the first car crash. Later, the final car crash finds Mike's car, an extension of his murdering body, beaten and half-destroyed by his would-be victims. Here Kim, Zoë, and Abernathy prove themselves bigger sadists than the professional sadist, Stuntman Mike. Ultimately, Mike's sadism itself might be a sort of simulation of the violence in the films he claims to have acted in.

With its postmodern sampling of 1960s and 1970s exploitation cinema, Tarantino's *Death Proof* journeys through terrain mapped by Baudrillard as it veers from simulation to simulacrum and from pleasure to pain, combining all elements in a decidedly postmodern way. Ultimately, the performance of the simulacrum, a negative effect of postmodernity according to Baudrillard, might be Tarantino's greatest contribution to the cinema. In the end such simulacra, through Tarantino, emerge as new forms of cinematic innovation.[4]

[4] Many thanks to K. Silem Mohammad and Justine Lopez for their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter and to Alain J.-J. Cohen for his guidance through Baudrillard and Deleuze. All mistakes, however, are my own.