

## DJANGO UNCHAINED

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What we are about to witness is Quentin Tarantino's foray into the world of 'shoot-em-up' spaghetti westerns. *Django Unchained* is a blitz of outrageous intensity. Powerful, colourful, and slick, we find ourselves transported to Texas 1858, amidst the slave trade and a stew of murderous vehemence. Two men are brought together to form an unlikely partnership as they help one another along the trail towards payday and vengeance.

Nowadays, the outcry that precedes the release of one of Tarantino's films does little more than add to the caricatured circus of controversy that has become all too common across media outlets looking for cheap headlines. "VIOLENCE!" They scream – "What about the kids?". Good question, what about the kids? As did many my age, I first came across Tarantino's films in the mid nineties. As a twelve year old, I was blown away by his work. I was completely in awe of his storytelling. The way Tarantino presented his characters, the way those characters spoke and above all, the way he was able to exquisitely combine images with music. I had never seen anything so captivating in all my life. I discovered my love for film through those experiences and to this day Tarantino's early efforts still stand out in my memory.

At that point, the former *Video Archives* rental store employee had already sent shockwaves through Hollywood, with the screenplay for *True Romance*, the script to *Natural Born Killers*, his classy first feature *Reservoir Dogs* and his game changing, infamously non-linear, 1994 release *Pulp Fiction*. After dropping out of acting school, Tarantino whiled away the days pouring over pictures and discussing cinematic techniques with fellow movie enthusiasts. When asked if he went to film school Tarantino replied, "No, I went to films".

As a director his unique ability to blend a wide range of styles from soul train blaxploitation to candid criminal gangster and sultry samurai slasher, allows his work to attract widespread appreciation and create a range of opinion. Each film is jam packed with 'Quentin cornerstones' such as stories centred on strong women, sadistic sarcasm, brutal retribution, a plethora of trademark camera angles and reoccurring fictional brand names. These elements are the fabric of any Tarantino film; his work is distinctive, razor-sharp and over the years has cultivated an immense cult status.

Throughout his career, Tarantino has faced staunch criticism, with a number of voices accusing him of glorifying gun crime, trivialising sensitive subject matter, and using hellish ordeals as vehicles for black humour. His films nearly always contain a criminal element and present the audience with the full force of unsavoury acts. Tarantino has always maintained that the issue relates more to "gun control and mental health" rather than the question of whether or not violence in film inspires violence in real life.

Tarantino's third feature *Jackie Brown* went largely unnoticed even though its cast featured the likes of Pam Grier and Robert De Niro. This was followed by the frenzied, comic strip shaped, two-part thriller, *Kill Bill* with both instalments causing a stir for the bounty of blood and lopped off limbs. After the *Grindhouse* project with long time friend Robert Rodriguez, came the war-based film *Inglorious Basterds*. This is where Tarantino first started to implement his now renowned shooting

style into settings and subject matter of a far more sensitive nature. Some people questioned the tastefulness of his Nazi scalping headhunters, but the reaction to *Inglorious Basterds* was nothing compared to that of *Django Unchained*. This latest film is probably his most controversial to date and although it generally received a positive reaction from critics, it left many divided. Some felt Tarantino had overstepped the mark, that the story did not do enough to justify the long running time and that the brazenly deplorable glorification of violence and racism was irresponsible. In particular, the constant use of disparaging language came under attack. Filmmaker Spike Lee questioned the repetitive nature in which derogatory terms are used in the film, saying he personally felt it was “disrespectful to my ancestors” and that “American slavery was not a Sergio Leone spaghetti western, it was a holocaust”. Other commentators agreed, saying it is wrong for a white director to use the savagery of slavery to sell cinema tickets. However, Tarantino defended his rights as a writer to depict characters how he deemed fit and to have those characters use a language that is genuine and appropriate to the context. When interviewed by Charlie Rose, Tarantino said, “I’m telling the truth, it would not be questioned if I was black and I resent the question because I am white.” Samuel L. Jackson, who plays Stephen in the film, defended his colleague, as did Jamie Foxx, who plays the lead role. On the opposing side, other critics felt the film was a wonderful satire, highlighting the sick reality of America’s history and that for far too long the film industry had shied away from the taboo subject of slavery.

One thing is certain, Tarantino’s work never fails to garner reaction. He knows how to entertain, how to shock, how find humour in horror and how to make visually stunning films. *Django Unchained* received several nominations, winning two Academy Awards, a Golden Globe and grossed over \$425 million worldwide; making it Tarantino’s highest grossing film to date.

*Django Unchained* excellently contrasts beauty and abomination. The stunning production design, by the late J. Michael Riva, perfectly supplements quality performances from household names such as Leonardo Di Caprio as the spine chilling Calvin J. Candie. To the annoyance of history buffs, the film does contain some factual errors and at times, the lines between fact and fiction do become slightly blurred. There is no historical evidence to suggest that slave owners staged gladiatorial style fights to the death, as seen in the film, or that certain architectural aspects appear as they would have at the time. As they say, don’t let the truth get in the way of a good story.

As with all of Tarantino’s flicks, you find yourself enthralled by the soundtrack and hanging on every word in the script. Most of us here work with language professionally and Tarantino delivers dialogue to savour. Christoph Waltz, who collected his second Oscar for his performance as Dr. King Schultz, personifies enunciation. He oozes each syllable, crafting wonderful consonance and slamming down assured assonance. However, for all the wonderful word play, the grim rampaging cruelty is what shines through and as the poet William Wantling once said, “What can consonance and assonance tell you about something like that”. So with all of Tarantino’s delightful detail, there is plenty to just sit back and watch. Explosions of gunfire, swift blades trailing scarlet ribbons across skin, hectic heart-in-mouth sequences, and edge of the seat suspense. As a lover of film it is easy to admire *Django*, as an average punter it is easy to just enjoy *Django* and as a curious observer there is plenty to ponder.