As its title makes clear, this book focuses on three, interrelated subjects: Quentin Tarantino’s cinema, film theory and the concept of postmodernity. All three came to prominence and saw their heyday during the last decades of the twentieth century: a cultural moment that, while very recent, already seems to be far from us in many ways. In this sense, perhaps, this book may appear more as a commentary on our past than as a study fully immersed in our present and looking towards our future.

The idea of postmodernity, for instance, explicitly refers to a specific phase in our cultural history, one which many commenters seem to regard as concluded (Toth 2010; van der Akker et al. 2017; Malavasi 2017). As proven by the publication of a few monographs devoted to postmodern cinema in recent years (Constable 2015; Torres Cruz 2014; Duncan 2016; Flisfeder 2017; Wright 2017), film scholars have shown a renewed interest in this topic; their work, however, seems to be linked to the acknowledgement that new scholarly analyses of postmodern culture are now possible because the phenomenon can finally be observed with some historical distance. Even some of the main figures in the debates of the 1980s and 1990s—including Linda Hutcheon (2002) and, with some reservations, Fredric Jameson (Baumbach et al. 2016)—have clearly stated that postmodernism has run its course.

Film theory, of course, is more difficult to pronounce ‘dead,’ at least as long as cinema is still around. And yet, during these last few decades,
many theorists have entertained the idea that cinema might have actually come to an end, starting to ponder the ‘end of cinema’ (Gaudréault and Marion 2015) and concepts such as ‘post-cinema’ and ‘post-media’ (Shaviro 2010; Pethő 2012; Denson and Leyda 2016; Hagener et al. 2016). In this sense, would it be perhaps more accurate to talk of ‘post-film’ theory? Whatever the case, it is certain that every aspect of the notion and practice of film theory as we have known it has been thoroughly questioned for several decades by now. As is well known, since the mid-1990s scholars have debated whether a new phase in the history of Film Studies has started, as the kind of theory that led to the birth of the field as an academic discipline between the 1960s and the 1980s has gone through a severe crisis because of a series of radical objections to its basic epistemological framework (Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Rodowick 2015). Such change in direction has now undoubtedly taken place, and much of what constituted the basis of film theory in those years is currently questioned, disregarded or simply ignored.

As concerns the work of Tarantino’s cinema, things are again different. Not only is the American writer-director is very much alive, but his ‘ninth film’ was released just last year, scoring one of his biggest box office results, collecting awards and critical acclaim, as well as the usual amount of controversy, for what immediately appeared as Tarantino’s most personal movie and, according to many, one of his finest. And yet, despite all their enduring commercial and critical success, Tarantino’s works and even his public persona feel somehow more and more out of place in the context of contemporary cinema and its endless dispersal into other forms and practices of digital media. So clearly and vocally opposed to the direction taken by the industry as concerns the use of new technologies in the production, distribution and consumption of cinema, Tarantino is trying to consolidate his filmography as a quintessentially cinematic oeuvre in the traditional sense. His much-publicised plan of quitting film direction after the release of his tenth feature looks like a rather unique testament to his loyalty to an older way of making cinema, not in spite but also because of the determination to continue his creative life by writing novels and directing for stage and television, while also releasing the results of many years of writing critical texts about films, film directors and film history. Tarantino’s projected withdrawal from directing feature films, therefore, could be seen as a way to present his oeuvre as more linked to cinema’s past, rather than to its present or future.
Leaving aside such uncertain verdicts about their current ‘health,’ the three objects of study of this book certainly have something else in common: their close relationship to cinema. If this is obvious for Tarantino and film theory, the case of postmodernity would appear less clear, as the term refers to a broad range of social and cultural phenomena. One of the premises of this work, however, is that cinema is one of the cultural areas to which postmodern theorists have often looked to develop some of their most influential concepts, as proven by the close attention paid to the medium by authors such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.¹ That the (New) New Hollywood represented one of the most significant and influential manifestations of postmodern culture, for instance, is apparent. The number of mainstream American films that achieved enormous cultural impact and came to embody the ‘cultural logic’ that dominated the period between the 1970s and the late 1990s period is impressive: from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) to *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977), from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) to *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), from *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) to *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999). This centrality of cinema in the theoretical debate about postmodernism was the result of the ability of the modern medium par excellence to offer a profound diagnosis of the rise of a new cultural and artistic phase. Postmodern films, as well as postmodern film theory, were capable of developing convincing (or at least very attractive) reflections on the dramatic changes that were happening to the cultural and aesthetic hierarchies that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. In the process, they both changed in very significant ways, not only adapting to a context dominated by electronic media but actively helping to shape it.

As mentioned before, however, since the late 1990s the situation has dramatically changed, as the status of both postmodernism and cinema has been thoroughly questioned, leaving scholars to ask what has remained of them in the new century. Is the concept of postmodernity still able to provide insights into the nature of contemporary culture and society? Is twentieth-century film theory still useful for understanding contemporary cinema? This work stems from the desire to address these questions, revisiting the way in which Film Studies has engaged with the notion of postmodernity and postmodernism, and investigating the uncertain nature of contemporary cinema through the examination of the films written and directed by Tarantino.²
Since the very beginnings of his career, Tarantino has been regarded as a quintessentially postmodern filmmaker, his films being considered as some of the clearest examples of what has been defined as postmodern cinema\(^3\) and, possibly, postmodernism more broadly. Each chapter of the book engages with a series of critical questions that have been debated by film scholars and cultural theorists during the last few decades, while looking at the aesthetic and thematic aspects of Tarantino’s cinema in relation to such issues. In particular, I will examine the various, contradictory ways in which the critical reception of Tarantino’s films has been shaped by a certain reading of postmodernism and postmodern theory, arguing that they can be now reassessed from a different perspective.

Equally important for the conception of this book is the idea that Tarantino’s films possess their own theoretical weight. By connecting them to debates about postmodernism and the nature of contemporary cinema, I posit that Tarantino’s individual films, as well as his filmography as a whole, can be approached not just as passive objects, to which one should ‘apply’ a set of theories developed elsewhere. Quite to the contrary, I suggest the work of the writer-director can take up an active role in shaping our understanding of a series of conceptual problems addressed by ‘professional’ film theorists: by looking at them more closely, I try to show how many critics and scholars who ‘applied’ postmodern theory to complex works such as Tarantino’s films did not do justice either to those theories or to the objects analysed. By offering new readings of Tarantino’s work and postmodernism, this book thus tries to explore how certain approaches to film theory can still contribute to our understanding of the role of cinema in contemporary culture.

In this introduction, I will first present in detail my approach to this set of questions, describing how they guided the composition of this work. Next, I will present the content and the approach of the first three chapters, in which the other two key words in the book’s title—aesthetics and dialectics—are examined in order to frame my approach to postmodern cinema. Finally, I will anticipate how this theoretical framework is deployed in the fourth and final chapter, which addresses more directly the controversial issue of the representation of gender, History and violence in Tarantino’s films.
1 ‘Late Postmodernity,’ Film Theory and Tarantino’s Cinema

The use of the expression ‘late postmodernity’ in the title of this book intends to signal immediately that this work approaches its objects of study by placing them in a specific historical period—from the mid-1990s to the present years—that could be regarded as a different phase from what could be called ‘high’ postmodernity—from the 1960s to mid-1990s. Crucially, this expression is meant to highlight a contradictory situation. On the one hand, following Fredric Jameson (Baumbach et al. 2016), I want to stress that even though postmodernism (the ‘cultural logic’ that dominated the period that could be labelled ‘high’ postmodernity) is definitely over, the fundamental socio-economic structures that supported Western capitalism in the second half of the last century are still very much in place. If it is necessary to question the suitability of the postmodern theory developed in the 1970 and 1980s for examining contemporary culture, the broader concept of postmodernity might still be useful to talk about our present times.

On the other hand, to think of these last decades as ‘late’ postmodernity also means to stress that the cultural and political context has changed in such dramatic ways that it is necessary to look at these recent years as a distinct phase within the history of postmodernity. The contextual differences between the period from the mid-1990s to the present and that from the 1960s to the 1980s are indeed quite obvious. The 1990s immediately followed the fall of the Wall of Berlin and were marked by a radical acceleration in the process of globalisation, the economic and political expansion of neoliberalism, and the start of the digital ‘revolution.’ The 2000s represented a significant turn in what had appeared to many as the triumph of US-led liberal democracy, with the attacks on 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally the disastrous financial crash of 2008. The 2010s continued this challenging period for the Western block, offering a slow economic recovery, ongoing wars in the Middle East, the crisis of the European Union and revamped tensions between the United States, Russia and China, all of which led to Brexit, the election of Trump and the spread of right-wing populism across Europe.

These three decades ran parallel to the trajectory taken by debates about postmodern culture. The concept reached its maximum popularity in the early 1990s, when it was widely adopted in American mass media and popular culture, that is, well beyond the (largely French) academic circles from which it had initially emerged. Crucially for this work, Pulp...
Fiction was released in 1994 and was immediately ‘widely regarded as the epitome of popular postmodern cinema’ (Booker 2007: 47). The fortune of postmodern theory, however, went through a sudden and sharp decline in the span of a few years. With the new decade, a series of dramatic events marked an obvious change of direction. Amid 11 September 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the crash of Wall Street in September 2008, many of the most provocative claims laid out by postmodern thinkers seemed to be proven false or at least outdated. Just after the destruction of the Twin Towers, Jean Baudrillard himself famously declared that the ‘strike of events’ that would have been one of the (alleged) signs of the victory of postmodern culture during the 1990s had come to an end (Baudrillard 2002). The last decade was even more ‘eventful,’ as the economic struggle continued in many parts of the world, leading to the political changes already recalled, which can only be seen as a radical discrediting of many, if certainly not all, theoretical and political perspectives supported by postmodern thinkers. In fact, statements about any alleged ‘end of History’ as a result of the (relatively) peaceful spread of Western liberal democracy and neoliberal economics have been finally made ridiculous by the series of events briefly listed above.

In this context, the book highlights in particular two tendencies in contemporary cultural and art theory: the apparent decline of modern aesthetics and the widespread refusal of dialectical thinking. The fate of Baudrillard’s theory is again the most emblematic. During the 1980s and the 1990s, Baudrillard’s analyses of the rise of media and consumer society appeared to many as a convincing description of the sudden eclipse of the sharp (modernist) opposition between high and low culture as a result of the surprisingly quick and deep penetration of market logic into all aspects of society and culture. As a consequence, Baudrillard’s claims about the end of the dialectical tension at the core of modern art seemed to many media and film scholars entirely confirmed, leading to a search for a ‘post-critical’ approach to cinema and popular culture, and often to the abandonment of aesthetics altogether (Baudrillard 1983, 1994). Since the beginning of the new century, however, most critics and scholars have started to grow tired of such an approach. The political nature of aesthetics, the ideological struggle over popular culture, and the necessity of finding again an articulation of dispersed social and cultural movements are still very urgent problems, whose dramatic consequences do not seem at all to be entirely addressed by postmodern theory. Very
‘modern’ phenomena, such as religious fundamentalism, political propaganda and nationalisms are firmly back with us in an age that mass media contribute to describe as characterised by Islamic terrorism, so-called fake news, and right-wing populism. This book thus engages with the cinema and film theory of these recent years, supposing these dramatic changes led not only to a turn in political terms but to one in cultural history, characterised by the exhaustion of postmodernism’s hegemony in the latter years of the 1990s.6

As mentioned above, during this period the very notion of film theory became much more uncertain than in the previous decades. In 1996, just at the culminating phase of postmodernism’s cultural influence, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll published their highly influential collection *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. The book intended to provide, in rather polemical terms, the basis for a new theoretical perspective that was presented as incompatible with the various forms of ‘Grand Theory’ (subject-position theory and culturalism) that had dominated the field since the mid-1970s. In fact, Bordwell and Carroll were attacking the fundamental premises as well as the latest consequences of the broader theoretical framework that resulted in the variety of post-structuralist and postmodern readings of late twentieth-century cinema. In the field of film theory, therefore, the decline of postmodernism’s cultural hegemony was clearly apparent as early as in the mid-1990s.

As Bordwell remarked in his introductory chapter to *Post-Theory*, post-structuralist and postmodernist (together with Marxist, psychoanalytic and culturalist) theories offered the dominant perspectives adopted in Film Studies at its inception as an academic discipline during the 1960s and 1970s (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 6–12). The book harshly criticised such tendencies and quite successfully advocated for the abandonment of their highly speculative approach, claiming that empirically sound research was urgently required to give the field more solid ground. Bordwell and the other contributors to this influential collection reproached ‘Grand Theory’ for its reliance on an eclectic mixture of methods whose epistemological foundations were considered unable to meet the scientific standards required by the academic community in, and outside, the field of Film Studies by the mid-1990s. By championing a less ‘generalising’ and more ‘modest’ approach (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 26–30), these scholars were thus signalling a crisis of those cultural background that, in the previous decades, had led to the rise of postmodernism.
While stressing the symptomatic value of *Post-Theory* in marking the decline of postmodernism, this book takes an entirely different direction. Each of the first three chapters of this work engages with a theorist—Jacques Rancière, Fredric Jameson, and Slavoj Žižek—who was or could have been attacked by Bordwell and Carroll on the ground of the arguments laid out in that book. For scholars such as Bordwell and Carroll, the kind of film theory proposed by Rancière, Jameson and Žižek represents the unnecessary ‘resistance’ of the aesthetic, Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches which they wanted to abandon. Following their reasoning, in fact, all of these thinkers should be placed in the same field of ‘Grand Theory’ and dismissed on the basis of the same arguments. Quite to the contrary, this book emphasises something different that these three theorists have in common: their critical approach to, and sometimes the sheer refusal of, some of the underlying philosophical, political and ideological perspectives of postmodern theory—in particular, as it was received by many scholars in Film Studies.

Here, I will look at the theories of Rancière, Jameson and Žižek stressing how they are either explicitly opposed to that of prominent postmodernist thinkers such as Baudrillard or Lyotard or, as in the case of Jameson, should not be simply interpreted through the lenses of these thinkers, as has too often seemed to be the case in Film Studies (see *infra*, pp. 76–81). As I will explain, I build on the work of these theorists with the precise goal of offering alternative readings of contemporary (‘late postmodern’) cinema, critically engaging with the reception of Tarantino’s cinema as a very symptomatic example of many misunderstandings that can be found in the existing critical literature.

As mentioned above, several of Tarantino’s films—starting with *Pulp Fiction*—have become synonymous with postmodern cinema and are often referred to as one of the clearest examples of postmodernism more broadly. This is confirmed by three monographs that will be referenced throughout this work: Dana Polan’s *Pulp Fiction* (2000), M. Keith Booker’s *Postmodern Hollywood* (2007) and Catherine Constable’s *Postmodernism and Film* (2015). Dana Polan’s study is the first and still one of the very few English-language academic monographs entirely devoted to Tarantino’s cinema. Polan’s approach to the film was extremely important for the shaping of this work (see *infra*, pp. 9–10, 102), as *Quentin Tarantino and Film Theory* is also a commentary...
on, and critical response to, this and other scholarly publications that consolidated reading of Tarantino’s work as a perfect embodiment of postmodernism as conceived by Baudrillard, that is, as the product of a phase that I suggest could perhaps be now historicised. Such identification is confirmed quite explicitly by M. Keith Booker. In his *Postmodern Hollywood: What’s New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange*, he aims at popularizing his understanding of Fredric Jameson’s conception of postmodernism in general and postmodern cinema in particular. While Booker’s text admittedly simplifies Jameson’s theory, his work is symptomatic of a broad reception of Jameson’s theory as more or less entirely in line with Baudrillard’s work (see *infra*, pp. 77–79). This is proven by an entirely different, and very critical, reading of Jameson’s work developed by Constable in her *Postmodernism and Film*. Throughout the book I will examine how a similar approach led many critics and scholars to see in films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino 1992), *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino 2003–2004) a euphoric—and/or nihilistic—embracing of the most ‘superficial’ (in the sense of shallow) citationist culture, whose only *raison d’être* would lie in the reflexive play with film language and film history. From a larger cultural-political perspective, this reading led commenters to identify Tarantino’s films and/or postmodern cinema more broadly with a process of ‘Disneyfication’ of cinema, with explicit reference to Baudrillard’s formulation of his concept of ‘hyperreality’ as the centre of postmodern culture (Polan 2000: 71; Booker 2007: X–XIV, 111–112, and *infra*, pp. 72, 87).

The consequences of this perspective are evident. Tarantino’s films are regarded as clear examples of postmodernism’s dismissal of the aesthetics and dialectical thinking central to modern culture, as their images and narratives are seen as belonging to a regime in which representation has ceased to refer to any ‘external’ (or, at least, historical) reality or any shared cultural and artistic hierarchies. From this perspective, both the style and the themes of his work do not really have any substance: their visual look and the ‘coolness’ would be the most significant factors, explaining both their success and their cultural significance. The narrative and the characters are regarded as *pure* metalinguistic elements, deprived of any actual meaning. For Polan—as he also argues in his other book on a quintessential (late?) postmodern work, *The Sopranos* (2009)—it is a mistake to try to *interpret* postmodern works such as a *Pulp Fiction*, attributing to them any ‘deep’ meaning. Building on Susan
Sontag’s *Against Interpretation* (1966), Polan affirms that the very act of extracting any sort of meaning from such works is misguided:

In post-modernism (…) the universe is not to be seen as meaningful but is, to put it bluntly, simply *to be seen* – to be experienced in its sheer dazzle, to be lived in the superficiality of its affective sights and sounds. Hence, we witness another important reason for the bits and set pieces in *Pulp Fiction*: beyond their function as allusions to a history of cinema and American popular culture, they float up from the film as so ‘many’ cool moments, hip instances to be appreciated, ingested, obsessed about, but rarely to be interpreted, rarely to be made meaningful. (Polan 2000: 79)

Baudrillard’s influence, either implicitly or explicitly, is obvious here. Scholars such as Polan and Booker share with the French theorist the conception of postmodernism as an absolute rejection of modern aesthetics and a belief that the art produced in the 1960s and the subsequent decades is impermeable to dialectical thinking. Art has ceased to be able to ‘signify’ as a result of these more fundamental issues. The evacuation of meaning results from postmodernism’s rejection of the idea of autonomy of aesthetics and thus the possibility of approaching aesthetics from a dialectical perspective. In late capitalism, Baudrillard argued, all cultural activities have been subsumed by the logic of capital, which obliterates any difference between the artistic work and the commodity. Postmodernism, and Tarantino’s films, *should* thus not be analysed through the (still modernist) perspective of interpretation, looking for their aesthetic qualities and the dialectical tension with—or resistance to—consumer culture. Aesthetics has been cannibalised by the aestheticisation that rules the complete commodification of culture, so that art is no longer something external to the latter. The tension between art and non-art, which is necessary to establish a dialectical movement, is thus also inevitably lost.

It is important to stress that an apparently opposite approach to Tarantino, and postmodern cinema more broadly, has been often proposed by other film scholars, such as Peter and Will Brooker (1996), the aforementioned Catherine Constable (2015), and David Roche (2018). These critics have taken their cue not from the overall pessimistic approach of Baudrillard, but from the ‘affirmative’ postmodernism proposed by scholars such as Linda Hutcheon (1988, 1989), who was inspired instead by the rather different approach developed
by another French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 1992). From this perspective, films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill* are regarded as perfect examples of (postmodern) ‘metafiction,’ but this does not reduce their ability to produce extremely complex signification and generate serious cultural debates. As argued most clearly by Hutcheon in *Politics of Postmodernism* (1988), which provides a model for Constable’s and Roche’s reading of Tarantino’s films and postmodern cinema more broadly, Lyotard’s transhistorical concept of postmodernism emphasises the critical value of such cultural production, in explicit polemic with Fredric Jameson’s (apparently) Baudrillardian argument. A well-known example is found in the entirely opposed ways in which Hutcheon and Jameson evaluate the role of parody. For Jameson, parody has become impossible in postmodernism, because it relies on establishing that critical distance between cultural works and the society’s economic, political structure that he deems unattainable for contemporary arts. For Hutcheon, on the contrary, parody is the quintessential postmodern form, as it is based on the assumption that culture cannot achieve a true distance from that structure but, **nevertheless**, is able to convey a critical message (Hutcheon 1988: 22–36; 124–140; 1989: 89–113).

In the case of Tarantino, this approach led to fruitful studies, whose most conspicuous product so far is arguably David Roche’s recent book, *Quentin Tarantino: Poetics and Politics of Cinematic Metafiction* (2018). The fourth, comprehensive academic monograph addressing the filmography of the writer-director, Roche’s work is also surprisingly the first scholarly book in English firmly grounded in contemporary film theory to fully engage with Tarantino’s *oeuvre* as a whole, adopting a perspective that is both aesthetic and cultural. The author presents his work as adopting the methods of both cultural studies and neo-formalism, building on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of metafiction, on the one hand, and David Bordwell’s (post-)film theory, on the other. Roche’s book offers extremely detailed and very insightful close readings of the form and the themes in Tarantino’s films, completely different from the theses of scholars like Polan and Booker. For Roche, Tarantino’s films are replete with significance. They are a mine of signification strategies, an example of metafiction which is able to contribute to a critical intervention in the field of cultural history. Tarantino’s approach to representation, in particular, is read through the lenses of cultural studies’ identity politics. The narrative
and the characters at the centre of the films are seen as commentaries on stereotypical images of gendered and racialised subjects, whose struggle for emancipation is, for Roche, depicted in a politically progressive way.

While also building on Roche’s convincing study, this book takes another perspective, attempting to fill a gap in the scholarship about Tarantino and the concept of postmodern cinema. First of all, I intend to look at the work of the American writer-director from a theoretical perspective that is neither Baudrillard’s nor Lyotard’s (and, therefore, Hutcheon’s). Both perspectives are deeply linked to the cultural and political context of the 1970s and 1980s. Tarantino’s cinema, in my view, can be better analysed by taking into consideration the various criticisms that these accounts of postmodernity have received in those in the following decades. As stated above, in fact, Tarantino can and must be seen as the product of a later phase, in which an awareness of some contradictions in postmodern culture has spread. From this angle, despite their (radical) differences, the two perspectives on Tarantino and postmodern cinema sketched out above share in fact some deeper commonalities. While opposed in their evaluation of the political significance of postmodernism, they agree on something more fundamental: the clear distinction between modern aesthetics and postmodern anti-aesthetics and, crucially, the conviction that this opposition is based on a fundamental theoretical assumption: postmodernism’s refusal of dialectical thinking. What Baudrillard and Lyotard share is indeed their affirmation that the end of modern(ist) aesthetics is linked to the exhaustion of dialectical thinking. Their reading of postmodernism as the abolition of aesthetic distance and the ‘overcoming’ of the dialectical tensions between art and politics, art and history, representation and aestheticisation are expressions of this fundamental assumption.

In my view, however, such an anti-dialectical approach neglects some relevant aspects of both postmodernism and Tarantino’s cinema. To adopt a more dialectical perspective towards contemporary culture is to highlight that postmodernism has been a contradictory phenomenon, one that cannot be reduced to a simple negation and/or reversal of the cultural assumptions and hierarchies of modernism. In particular, this book adopts a conception of aesthetics that differs from both Baudrillard’s and Lyotard’s, one that comes into focus by analysing Tarantino’s films through the conceptual lenses of Rancière, Jameson and Žižek.
2 Aesthetics

The first chapter engages with Rancière’s aesthetic theory, which explicitly refuses the premise shared by Baudrillard and Lyotard by arguing that the entire discourse of postmodernism can simply be dismissed.

Interestingly enough, Rancière’s direct interventions in the field of cinema are admittedly influenced by the tradition launched by Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s. More than the controversial auteurism associated with this school, the fundamental theoretical move proposed by the future directors of the Nouvelle Vague is that the relationship (and the hierarchy) between commercial and artistic films had to be conceived in a dialectical way. In the field of film theory, this meant that classical (Hollywood) cinema should not be approached as the opposite of art cinema, that is, as a manifestation of a capitalistic logic that would erase any aesthetic significance from this production. Even more radically, these critics preferred films that belonged to genres stemming from popular fiction (e.g. Hitchcock’s thrillers, Hawks’s Westerns and comedies) over many auteur films explicitly based on high-brow sources such as ‘literary’ novels and classical plays. Their point was not to deny the tension between ‘artistic’ and ‘commercial’ aspects of culture: quite to the contrary, they stressed that the coexistence of these two poles within a single work characterises all of the artistic production since the rise of modern, capitalist society.

Taking up this perspective, Rancière refuses the very idea that postmodernism represents an actual break from the situation in which the arts have found themselves since the eighteenth century. For the French philosopher, the whole of modern and contemporary art inhabits the same problematic status between aesthetics and aestheticisation that the postmodernists see as the unique purview of postmodernism. According to this view, the tension between art and non-art, that is, the question of whether the work is significant in the sense of traditional art—particularly dramatic, narrative art—should therefore be replaced with the different question of the political value of aesthetics after the end of modern(ist) utopias. This point of view is, for Rancière, highly problematic. First, postmodernism seemed to lead to the melancholic conclusion that art had lost all of its political value, and now it could only provide an ethical response to social conflicts. Such is the very critical reading that Rancière offers of both Baudrillard’s and Lyotard’s theories of postmodernism, with the clear goal of reaffirming that art has its own political value that postmodernism fails to appreciate because it is still
too tied to the history of modernism. Secondly, Rancière argues that since the Eighteenth century—in the context of what he calls ‘the aesthetic regime’—the very core of the aesthetic coincides with the experience of being confronted with works that challenge any traditional definitions, hierarchies and sets of prescriptions deciding what is to be included in the realm of art.

Both of these ideas focus on the tension within the work of art and that between art and its public. In particular, when writing about cinema, Rancière emphasises the contradictory relation between narrative and sensory perception. On the one hand, cinema would seem to confirm a general characteristic of art in the aesthetic regime, that is, the decline of traditional narrative—as defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*—as a prescription for art. On the other hand, however, cinema is the field of modern art in which narrative has come back with a vengeance. For Rancière this is not a coincidence, but rather the ultimate proof that any work of art necessarily presents contradictory elements in order to allow the audience to confront a constant oscillation between pure sensory experience and conventional structures of signification.

The reception of Tarantino’s films, as I try to demonstrate throughout this book, seems to me to offer a perfect case in point. The opposing reading of Tarantino’s films as completely ‘meaningless’ or, on the contrary, as some of the most significant examples of postmodern cinema are, in my view, much less the consequence of their alignment with a Baudrillardian or Lyotardian framework than with the tension between these two tendencies: the emergence of a non-narrative, sensory artwork and the presence of a compelling story. In my view, this ambivalence is intrinsic to Tarantino’s body of work and can only be fully understood as the commitment of the writer-director to affirm the ongoing possibility of adopting a proper aesthetic perspective in contemporary cinema.

In the first chapter, I use this perspective to discuss films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. By examining a few scenes in these two movies, I insist that while it is impossible to dismiss the impression that they first and foremost confront the viewer as pure sensory experiences, at the same time it would be a serious mistake to neglect the importance of their characters, narratives and themes. The much-discussed ‘coolness’ of the writer-director’s style, for example, can be very easily recognised as also a theme of these films, which Tarantino treats from an obviously critical angle. In my view, it is thus possible to dismiss the argument that his cinema simply indulges in glamourous, or cynical, representations of
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postmodern society, while it is necessary to acknowledge that its form and content are consciously designed to make the audience experience such aestheticised imagery.

3 Dialectics

Unlike Rancière, who entirely rejects postmodern discourse and proposes a radical alternative view to it, Fredric Jameson offers one of the most in-depth, critical discussions of postmodernism, accepting some of its premises but also profoundly questioning other thinkers’ reading of this phenomenon. It is for this reason that the second chapter, the longest in the book, offers an extended discussion of some key aspects of Jameson’s work: his dialectical approach, the crucial concept of the spatialisation of time, and the roles of narrative and utopian thinking. The chapter then provides a sustained discussion of these issues in relation to three films by Tarantino: Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction and The Hateful Eight (2015).

On the one hand, the goal is to prove that the reception of Jameson’s work in Film Studies—both positive and negative—has led to one-sided (that is, non-dialectical) readings of his interpretation of postmodern theory and culture. On the other hand, this chapter aims to show that the first two feature films directed by Tarantino are better understood by seriously applying Jameson’s dialectical approach to space, time and history in postmodern culture rather than the postmodern and Nietzschean lenses which have frequently been used to analyse them. This argument is further developed through a discussion of The Hateful Eight, which Tarantino himself has presented as a rewriting of, and commentary on, Reservoir Dogs. In particular, my focus will be on the film’s treatment of time and space, as well as its representation of race and gender, to show the writer-director’s lucid awareness of the time that has passed, both within and outside of film history.

The chapter starts by revisiting Jameson’s theory to suggest that film scholars have often underplayed the crucial role of dialectical thinking in this work, which has allowed for the misleading conflation of his and Baudrillard’s perspectives in books such as Booker’s Postmodern Hollywood and Constable’s Postmodernism and Film. The opening lines of Jameson’s most influential work, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, already suggest why such superimposition is deceiving: ‘It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the
first place’ (Jameson 1991: IX). This statement immediately marks the
distance between Baudrillard and Jameson. For Jameson, the analysis of
postmodern culture requires a symptomatic approach to highlight how
postmodernism’s *self*-description masks some internal contradictions. In
my view, rather than taking them as entirely reliable diagnoses of that
cultural climate of the 1970s and 1980s, Jameson addresses Baudrillard’s
writings as symptomatic, that is, to be used in a critical way.

The declared aim of Jameson’s theorisation is indeed to defend dialec-
tical Marxism from the attacks led by authors such as Baudrillard and
Lyotard. For these anti-dialectical thinkers, the *raison d’être* of post-
modernism rests precisely in the realisation that the Hegelian dialectical
perspective adopted by Marxist theory has to be abandoned, as they see
it as yet another metaphysical and ideological worldview. For Jameson,
however, any philosophy necessarily relies on a metaphysical, i.e. ideo-
logical, framework (Baumbach et al. 2016: 147), and a claim such as
Lyotard’s affirmation of the ‘end of modern metanarratives’—including
Marxism—is nothing but another metanarrative, that is, another ideology
(Jameson 1984). As the statement cited above makes perfectly clear,
Jameson’s approach to postmodernism is therefore different from most
thinkers that have worked on this concept, as he thinks of postmodernism
through a dialectical perspective in spite of postmodernism’s crucial belief
in the necessity of rejecting dialectical thinking.

In the field of Film Studies, Jameson’s writings have often been mobi-
lized to argue that contemporary cinema is defined by a primacy of
surface, the spatialisation of time and a questioning of the very possi-
bility of representation—all of which have been seen as the domination
of purely self-referential culture based on the endless and empty repe-
tition of the clichés (Booker 2007: IX–XX). For instance, film scholars
have eagerly embraced, or strongly rejected Jameson’s analysis of what he
labelled the ‘nostalgia film’ because of its (alleged) exclusive emphasis on
the negative aspect of such phenomenon. Immediately associated with
Baudrillard’s notions of simulacrum and hyperreality, the category of
nostalgia film has been seen only in its regressive function, leading scholars
such as Constable to criticise Jameson’s work as a simplistic and purely
backward-looking nostalgia for modernism.

In my view, this is a very partial reading of Jameson’s reflections on
postmodern theory, as well as on modernism, cinema and popular culture.
Even before his engagement with postmodernism, in fact, Jameson’s
foundational 1979 article ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’
stressed how modernism’s own relationship to the cultural industries in general, and the film industry in particular, has to be reassessed in a different way. Mass culture was not to be seen as a pure vehicle for the complete subsumption of culture under pro-capitalist ideology but also—necessarily—as the place where the utopian tendencies lying at the core of such an ideology were to be revealed. Later on, Jameson developed this argument by showing how such a dialectical approach could be applied to postmodern cinema, which should thus be seen as a contradictory phenomenon, in which the coexistence of ideological and utopian tensions is always clearly visible.

The second chapter engages with these issues to show how Jameson’s writings can help us better address the complexity of Tarantino’s films as examples of cinematic postmodernism that is more than the expression of a society dominated by hyperreality. As Jameson argues in relation to the work of directors such Coppola, Lynch and Cronenberg (see Jameson 1991, 1992), postmodern films ought to be approached critically, through symptomatic readings of their inclination towards pastiche, their apparent elision of history or their melancholic take on utopia. In fact, Tarantino’s films were directly inspired by the New Hollywood filmmakers discussed by Jameson, and they offer similar opportunities to confront postmodernism in a critical, that is, dialectical way.

Tarantino grew up on and emerged from that cinema, as well as the exploitation films of the 1960s, and 1970s and 1980s, starting to make his own in the 1990s. *Pulp Fiction* is better understood as a response to the corrosive films of Scorsese and De Palma than a continuation of the kind of cinema proposed by *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Raiders of the Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1980) or *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), the films that were the primary examples supporting Jameson’s notion of nostalgia film. Tarantino’s cinema is to be seen in this critical line of the earlier, independent American cinema (heavily influenced by European art films), which actively helped to demythologise mainstream Hollywood productions between the late 1960s and mid-1970s. It is no coincidence that, in his interviews, Tarantino constantly mentions films such as *Sisters* (Brian De Palma, 1973), *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) or *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) as some of his favourite films as well as among the models for his own work. I believe that these films, as well as Tarantino’s, are best analysed not from a Baudrillardian perspective—which would insist on the end of modernist aesthetics and the dominance of the simulacra—but from a dialectical one—which would emphasise instead their ability to engage critically with the classic Hollywood genres and reflect
on their own historical context. The main difference between Tarantino and his precursors, of course, is that the New Hollywood directors started to work in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, that is, at the height of what I have called ‘high’ postmodernity. Rather than looking directly to classical Hollywood cinema—as De Palma did by rewriting Hitchcock’s films—Tarantino reworked the exploitation films of his youth, thus appropriating what was already a quintessential expression of postmodern culture.

4 Subjectivity

As is to be expected, postmodern critics have insisted that the characters at the centre of Tarantino’s films should be regarded as fundamentally irrelevant, as the films’ salient features (or lack thereof) lie exclusively in their flamboyant style, ‘cool’ imagery, popular culture references and so on. Following other commentators (Gallafent 2006; Barlow 2010; Constable 2015; Roche 2018), I argue, by contrast, that the importance of Tarantino’s films is immediately made visible by their complex processes of characterisation and by the richness of their narrative arcs. If the first two chapters highlight how Rancière’s and Jameson’s writings help us think differently about the role of narrative in postmodern cinema, the third focuses on Slavoj Žižek’s concept of subjectivity in order to offer an alternative interpretation of the characters and conflicts at the centre of Tarantino’s films and, perhaps, of late postmodern cinema more broadly.

Žižek’s intervention in the field of Film Studies has largely focused on the question of the subject, stressing the philosophical, psychoanalytical and political importance of approaching cinema from this perspective. Interestingly, Žižek harshly criticised Bordwell and Carroll’s dismissal of ‘Grand Theory’ (Žižek 2001), contending that his Hegelian–Marxist–Lacanian approach refutes several crucial tenets of both postmodernism and ‘post-theory.’ Žižek’s explicit goal is to challenge what he sees as one of the fundamental assumptions common to these two approaches: the refusal of the dialectical concept of the subject on the basis of its alleged association with a teleological and totalising logic, which is regarded as the vehicle for conservative, if not totalitarian, politics.

For Žižek such a critical stance is based on an incorrect understanding of the concept of dialectics and, particularly, on the assumption that it should be interpreted as a process of reconciliation of the two poles of the contradiction (Žižek 1999). On the contrary, like Jameson (2009),
Žižek insists that Hegelian dialectics must be conceptualised as the understanding of the negative as the ultimate force that defines—and constantly redefines—the nature of the subject (Žižek 2012). The ‘end’ of the dialectical process consists not in a ‘synthesis’ of the two poles of the contradiction but in a ‘negation of the negation’ in which that antagonism is not solved but preserved and, indeed, constantly revamped in new and unpredictable ways. In fact, no ‘end’ of the dialectical process can be actually identified. For Žižek, as for Jameson, the radical antagonism that moves the dialectical process cannot be eliminated, so that dialectics can never be thought as the path towards a ‘solution’ of the contradiction. The very process of subjectivation is associated with negativity itself, and its dialectical development leads to an equally endless splitting of the subject into a series of self-negations.¹³

Even when not directly concerned with debates about postmodern film, Žižek’s writings offer countless discussions of themes, plots and characters taken from classic and contemporary cinema. In analysing these films, the Slovenian philosopher adopts a dialectical approach to offer critical and symptomatic readings of the dominant conception of subjectivity in postmodern culture and society.¹⁴ The large influence of anti-dialectical postmodernism (and, more broadly, poststructuralism) in Film Studies has led many scholars to consider contemporary cinema as characterised by the adoption of non-linear narrative structures and the depiction of characters embodying the crisis, if not the outright dissolution, of the modern subject. Predictably, Tarantino’s films have been seen as the perfect example of these tendencies, from the use of achronological narratives to the staging of stylised and (allegedly) ‘cartoonish’ characters in Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Kill Bill or Death Proof (Quentin Tarantino, 2007). As a result, the Hegelian conception of subjectivity has been seen as completely unsuited for the analysis of these films, which were considered a perfect representation of the ‘fluid’ status of the postmodern subject. The third chapter engages with such debates about Žižek’s theoretical approach as well as with the analysis of these issues in Tarantino’s work through its discussion of Jackie Brown (Quentin Tarantino, 1997) and Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino 2012). The two films have in common the adoption of an almost entirely linear narrative structure, which is a rather significant aspect of both films and their place in the director’s body of work. Moreover, in both, the
narrative structure and focus allow for the portrayal of a series of dialectical reversals through which subjectivity emerges via a set of relationships and conflicts between the protagonist and other characters. Building on Žižek, I suggest that Tarantino’s films represent accurately the contradictory nature of subjectivity instead of the alleged collapse of the subject in postmodern culture.

5 Spectatorship, Genre and Violence

The fourth and final chapter aims to bring together the topics addressed in the rest of the book, using its theoretical framework to consider the representation of gender, History and violence in Tarantino’s films. Drawing on Carol Clover’s psychoanalytic theory, I argue that to address these crucial issues it is necessary to start from the viewer’s subjective perspective, taking into consideration Tarantino’s explicit reflection on cinema’s ability to manipulate the aesthetic experience of the audience.

The chapter begins by engaging with the key theoretical assumptions of Clover’s influential book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, illustrating their relevance for the analysis of Tarantino’s films. Not coincidentally, Clover’s book deals with the same type of cinema that the writer-director has constantly used as narrative and stylistic inspiration, offering this film genre as an object of study that invites and sustains questions about the experience of film viewership. The films that interest both Clover and Tarantino are 1970s and 1980s horrors, particularly the slasher and the rape-revenge movie. As mentioned above, Tarantino grew up watching this kind of exploitation cinema, and in his own films aims to recreate for his audiences the same cinematic experience. At the time of their release, these movies were heavily criticised for their graphic representation of violence, as happened to Tarantino’s own films throughout his career.

Building on feminist film theory and Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), critics and scholars claimed that these genres placed the audience in the position of the sadistic, male persecutors. *Men, Women and Chain Saws* offers a rather original and convincing argument which completely reverses this judgment. Following more consistently Lacanian psychoanalysis, Clover maintains that the sadistic, male gaze theorised by Mulvey and others is in fact fundamentally unstable, and she emphasises how horror films often elicit the male viewer’s participation in the dread and suffering of the female character. As a
result, she thinks of the enjoyment experienced by the audience of these movies through the notion of ‘female masochism.’ For Clover, this interpretative framework can be applied to the analysis of cinematic aesthetics more broadly, as the pleasure sought by the spectators of cinema most often coincides with that of being manipulated by the film, experiencing a temporary, voluntary loss of mastery over their individual gender identity, their bodies and feelings.

To flesh out this argument, in Chapter 5 I discuss a group of films that overtly responds to Clover’s psychoanalytic take on the aesthetics of 1970s and 1980s exploitation horror cinema. In different ways, *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof*, *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) and *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* (Quentin Tarantino, 2019) can be put in conversation with Clover’s work, to which they implicitly and occasionally explicitly make reference. In fact, Tarantino himself stated he read the book and was deeply impressed by it (Peary 2013: 142). Tarantino’s acknowledgement is so clear that the very first lines in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* might be read as a sort of summary of the main thesis of *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, presenting the story of the Bride as a way to make the viewers reflect on their own ‘sadistic’ as well as ‘masochistic’ enjoyment of the violence they are about to experience. My discussion of the two parts of *Kill Bill*, and the equally bipartite *Death Proof*, will insist that they not only illustrate Clover’s theories but also consciously present Tarantino’s dialectical approach to film aesthetics.

This line of argument is further developed in a discussion of the thematic and formal features of two recent works by the writer-director. *Inglourious Basterds* and *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* carry on Tarantino’s reflection on the aesthetics of cinematic violence, further exploring the ability of film to manipulate the audience’s reaction. The direct and indirect influence of other theoretical filmmakers, such as Hitchcock and De Palma, is also taken into consideration to highlight these films’ discourse on the role of voyeurism, sadism and masochism in the experience of watching (a certain type of) cinema. Finally, the dialectical aspect of Tarantino’s films is also evident in his recent work from another perspective: the explicit engagement with the relationship between cinema and History in these films poses questions about how it is possible to represent the violence that accompanies any true historical event.
6 Conclusion

The conclusions to Chapter 5 also serve as a closure to the entire book. After engaging with his films and what others have written about them, I will bring my argument to a close by paying attention to what Tarantino himself has said about his experience as a film viewer, focusing, as a lens of interpretation, on his declarations about the role of violence in cinema.

What emerges from Tarantino’s interviews is a lucid theoretical approach, an explicit goal to express his thinking with the same ambition and even the same tools one would expect from a ‘professional’ film scholar. In many of his interviews, Tarantino has discussed how his education as an artist was rooted in his engagement with film criticism, his study of film history and his attentive analysis of the style and the poetics of filmmakers from a variety of genres, movements and industries. Moreover, he has repeatedly stressed the importance he attaches to his experiences as a ‘film critic’ (when he was working as video-store clerk, but also as a commenter on contemporary cinema), a film producer and distributor, a programmer and the owner of a historic movie theatre in Los Angeles. Tarantino even ‘confessed’ that he thinks of himself as pursuing a ‘Professorship in cinema,’ a ‘career’ that he regards as an endless path of study.

What this book tries to suggest, however, is something more specific: that Tarantino thinks about his work as a film theorist and, particularly, as a dialectical thinker. This thesis is developed throughout the book from different angles. First of all, I suggest that Tarantino’s dialectical approach is visible not only in the way he presents himself in his interviews, in which he states his commitment to his own critical and theoretical writing, but also in the way this reflexive posture is reflected in his cinematic production. His films show a conscious engagement with what scholars and critics have written about his work. Secondly, my discussions of specific films are intended to highlight their particular connections to ideas laid out by scholars and philosophers such as Rancière, Jameson or Žižek, who argue for the necessity of adopting a dialectical approach to film aesthetics. Such an approach helps me to elucidate the meaningful relationship in each film between style and narrative elements, including themes and characterization. Finally, I will try to show how Tarantino’s engagement with, and intervention in, debates about film theory has given his filmography a peculiar dialectical ‘shape.’
The internal structure of each individual film and the succession of his films as a set seems to follow a peculiar logic, emphasising contradictions, self-negations and internal rhymes. As I will argue through the analysis of specific connections between different sequences or films, Tarantino’s work highlights a constant interest in linking disparate and contradictory elements within the same work as well as across separate texts to stimulate a series of conflicting feelings and thoughts in the audience. While this is apparent in the form of individual films divided in segments that appear to move narratively and thematically in opposing directions, I want to briefly outline some of the more subtle connections that are discussed in the chapters of this book.

In Chapters 3 and 4, for instance, I argue that Tarantino’s attention to a critical discussion about the representation of gender in *Reservoir Dog* and *Pulp Fiction* helps us understand why a series of empowering female characters became the protagonists of his next three films (*Jackie Brown, Kill Bill, Death Proof*). Equally useful is noticing that this ‘trilogy’ was followed by, and partially overlapped with, another one that developed the same themes from a new perspective: *Kill Bill, Death Proof* and *Inglourious Basterds*. These three films, in fact, explicitly built on Clover’s psychoanalytical interpretation of the horror film and the cinematic experience more broadly, engaging with the analysis of the revenge narrative at the centre of *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. Tarantino’s entire filmography, perhaps, could be divided into two parts, which would dialectically relate to each other. The first—including *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Jackie Brown, Kill Bill,* and *Death Proof*—apparently ignored ‘real’ historical events to focus on purely cinematic worlds. The second—including *Inglourious Basterds, Django Unchained, The Hateful Eight* and *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*—directly dealt with History, addressing major political conflicts such as World War II, the Civil War and the legacy of slavery in the United States.

My point, here, is to suggest that to appreciate the cultural and historical significance of Tarantino’s films, and of other examples of ‘late’ postmodern cinema, it is necessary to take a *detour through theory*. Tarantino’s films require their viewers to experience, on a sensory as well as intellectual level, the tension between cinema’s ability to elicit their visceral reaction and its power to provoke, at the same time, uncertainty about the nature of such enjoyment. These films, therefore, make the spectators *think* about the juxtaposition of highly aestheticised sounds and images with the multiple thematic layers created by their complex
style, narratives and characters. The attempt to articulate such a discourse guided the writing of the four chapters of this book, weaving together the ideas of scholars and theorists about postmodern cinema, the critical reception of Tarantino’s films, and my own discussion of what the films make us see, hear and think. Whether this work has succeeded in its intention is entirely for the reader to decide, and it might depend on her willingness to take a little dialectical detour into film theory and aesthetics.

Notes

1. See Baudrillard (1983, 1994, 2002) and Jameson (1979, 1982, 1990, 1992).

2. Because of my focus on the relationship between Tarantino’s writing and direction, in this book I won’t deal with the films for which he only contributed through his screenplays (Tony Scott’s True Romance, 1993; Oliver Stone’ Natural Born Killers, 1994; and Robert Rodriguez’s From Dusk till Dawn, 1996).

3. It is also for this focus on cinema that I won’t make any reference in this work to the three TV episodes written and/or directed by Tarantino (‘Motherhood,’ ER, s01e24, 1995; ‘Grave Danger’, CSI: Crime Scene Investigations, s05e24-25, 2006).

4. It is interesting to notice here how in the last few years many observers have looked at the present technological transformation as the sign of the beginnings of a Forth Industrial Revolution. As Jameson’s theory of realism, modernism and postmodernism closely followed Mandel’s linking of the stages of capitalism to the impact of the three previous industrial revolutions, it is possible that the analysis of these developments might lead scholars to better identify the characteristics of a new, emerging ‘cultural logic.’

5. The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic in Spring 2020 (when this book had already been completed) cannot but reinforce this feeling that a historical phase is finally coming to an end, and a new one will soon emerge.

6. What Matthew Flisfeder wrote about Mark Fisher’s concept of ‘capitalist realism’ in his book Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner might be useful in this respect: ‘Though I find much value in the way that Fisher theorizes the present as ‘Capitalist realism,’ the concept itself seems to signal something of the centrality of the postmodern. It is postmodernism to the extreme. The feeling that there is no alternative to the global culture of capitalism is brought forth by postmodernism. Just as critics of the postmodern saw it as a new extension of late modern culture, I see ‘capitalist realism’ as the final stage of the postmodern: late postmodernism,
1 INTRODUCTION

perhaps’ (Flisfeder 2017: 18). This perspective, while going in a different, almost opposed, direction, is actually linked to my own, as they highlight two sides of the same phenomenon: a new (terminal?) phase in the development of postmodern culture and society.

7. In Post-Theory Jameson is mentioned as one of the main representatives of the culturalist field, insofar he is placed in the area of postmodern theory, one of the main three trends in culturalist Film Studies according to Bordwell and Carroll (1996: XIV, 9, 19.). In the same collection, a chapter written by Michael Walsh (‘Jameson and Global Aesthetics’) offers a rather critical evaluation of Jameson’s work.

8. The fact that only a few scholarly monographs about Tarantino’s cinema have been published in English is quite a surprising fact, which can possibly only be explained by the (exaggerated) suspicions of contemporary Film Studies towards any work that could be ‘accused’ of auteurism. Before the present work, only four book-length, scholarly studied had been published (Gallafent 2006; Barlow 2010; Nama 2015; Roche 2018). In this context, Dassanowsky’s and Speck’s edited collections on Inglourious Basterds and Django Unchained provided some welcome contributions. However, the fact that these works mostly involved scholars working in Communication, History or German Studies, rather than in Film Studies, seem to confirm what said above.

9. It is interesting to notice that Roche never refers of Tarantino’s cinema as ‘postmodern.’ This is a rather curious fact, not only because the centrality of this notion in the scholarly reception of Tarantino and, indeed, in the very critical debates about postmodern cinema as such. Even more crucial is that Roche builds extensively on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of metafiction, which became the main competitor of Jameson’s work in the definition of postmodern culture in film, literary and cultural studies. This remarkable silence clearly indicates the decline of postmodernism as a theoretical framework.

10. Ed Gallafent’s 2006 and Aaron Barlow’s 2010 books dealt respectively with the first four and the first six films by Tarantino. In addition, it interesting to mention here Fred Botting and Scott Wilson’s The Tarantino Ethics (2001), which offers an unusual and in-depth analysis of Tarantino’s early screenplays through a rather sophisticate Lacanian framework, as well as Simona Brancati’s (2014), which, however, mostly relied on (Italian) critical literature that do not always sustain its discourse with a solid theoretical background.

11. Tarantino’s much-discussed experience as a clerk for a video-store in Los Angeles has always been linked to the—crucial—issue of his cinephilia and, specifically, his supposedly unconditional love for any kinds of films, which would neglect to elaborate any historical, cultural or aesthetic discrimination among them. In this sense, the video-store has become for many
critics the perfect embodiment for Tarantino’s allegedly playful as much as nihilistic approach. And, yet, Tarantino’s own self-description as video-store clerk and cinephile reveals a much more sophisticate form of film criticism, based on a careful—even if admittedly subjective—process of selection and evaluation (see for instance Sauvage 2013: 30–38).

12. In his 1975 article about *Dog Day Afternoon*, Jameson had already started to develop his approach to mass culture in general, and genre cinema in particular.

13. As noticed in Chapter 4, it is important to stress that this emphasis of this conception of subjectivity is applied by Žižek not only to the films that he analyses, but to film theory itself. The consequences of this approach are of course controversial, as they are precisely those that Bordwell and Carroll criticised in their attack on (post)modernist theory: in Bordwell’s and Carroll’s view, an approach such as Žižek’s leads to the impossibility for film theory to follow the standards required by contemporary scientific research (see infra, pp. 131–135).

14. From this perspective, Žižek’s work has inspired scholars such as Todd McGowan (McGowan and Kunkle 2004; McGowan 2007a, b, 2012), Fabio Vighi (2014), and Matthew Flisfeder (2012), which expanded on his work on filmmakers such as Hitchcock, Lynch or Nolan.

15. The numerous biographies devoted to Tarantino often emphasised on this aspect. See, for example Clarkson (1995, pp. 63–66).

16. See, for instance, Célia Sauvage’s interesting discussion of these aspects of Tarantino’s activity, commenting in particular on his participation in the curation of the DVD series entitled ‘Rolling Thunder Pictures’ and ‘Dragon Dynastys’, created by Miramax between 1995 and the late 2000s (Sauvage 2013: 21–25).

17. See the interview given to the *Pure Cinema Podcast*, also available on the website of Tarantino-owned film theatre New Beverly Cinema in Los Angeles, of which he curates the programming. Also interesting in this context are Tarantino’s frequent mentions to the experience acquired through the organisation of the ‘QT festival,’ which he held in Austin between 1997 and 2007. Interview available at: http://thenewbev.com/blog/2019/07/pure-cinema-podcast-july-2019-with-quentin-tarantino/. Last accessed on July 6, 2020.

18. ‘Even though I quit school when I was in junior high, I’m an academic at heart, and my study is cinema. I’ve been writing a movie review book over the years, and I’m not in any hurry to finish it. I started writing the book because it wasn’t enough that I was just seeing movies – they were being lost to the atmosphere. It’s like my whole life I’m studying for a professorship in cinema, and the day I die is the day I
graduate’ (Peary 2013: 160). Along the same lines, see also an interview published by Filmmaker’s Magazine in February 2010: ‘Right now I’m on a Dorothy Arzner thing, reading a book about her life and her movies. I watched Dance, Girl, Dance, which I really liked. I’m making notes, and maybe I’ll write a piece about her. And maybe I’ll publish it sometime, or maybe I’ll do it just for myself. That’s kind of what I do in my life — this director, this actor, this movement, this genre, this subgenre, this style, this period of time, this country’s cinema, will just grab me for some reason all of a sudden. And then I explore it, take it in and absorb it, make notes about it so it stays. It’s just like being a student. A lifelong student.’ The interview is available at the following address: https://filmmakermagazine.com/4712-a-night-at-the-movies-quentin-tarantinos-inglourious-basterds-by-scott-macaulay/. Last accessed on July 6, 2020.

19. As is well known, ‘detour through theory’ is an expression used by Stuart Hall (2016). The Althusserian (i.e. anti-Hegelian) matrix of Hall’s conceptual framework is also well known and led to the rather contradictory relationship between Cultural Studies and the dialectical theory proposed by authors such as Jameson and Žižek. It is important to remember, however, that Hall’s approach was shaped by the theory of ideology of Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams, two of the main Marxist thinkers to focus on the connections between culture and politics by adopting a thoroughly dialectical perspective. It is no coincidence that Hall’s original quote from his 1983 lectures reads as a precise summary of a Marxist’s approach to Hegel’s dialectics: ‘historical understanding always involves a detour through theory; it involves moving from the empirical to the abstraction and then returning to the concrete’ (Hall 1983: 89). It seems to me that this can be taken as a solid basis to highlight, rather than a simple opposition, the (once again, dialectical) relationships among authors as diverse as Hall, Jameson and Žižek.

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