20 Years on, it's time to admit that Pulp Fiction is a bad film

By Sam Moore (writing in The New Statesman)

Twenty years on and it's still hard to separate *Pulp Fiction* the film and "Pulp Fiction" the pop culture phenomenon. 1994 was the year when *Pulp Fiction* stormed its way to the Palme d'Or at Cannes and sent the American public into raptures. Everybody wanted to see the film that saw John Travolta and Uma Thurman boogie and made a man faint during its North American premiere at the New York Film Festival.

Nobody seemed to have ever seen anything like it. It received extravagant rave reviews unlike anything in immediate memory. No film arrived with more hype and no film lived up to it the way *Pulp Fiction* did. The critics fawned over Quentin Tarantino, their new favourite auteur, and the masses had been given a European arthouse film they could quote until the end of time. But 20 years later, just what is *Pulp Fiction*?

It's undeniably one of the most popular and influential films of all time. It's still being shamelessly imitated to this very day, yet *Pulp Fiction* the film is about nothing, it says nothing and it makes you feel nothing. It has an adolescent aesthetic and some of the dialogue could be from an early draft of *Clerks*, yet it is just so irresistibly "cool". Travolta and Samuel L Jackson in matching black suits; Harvey Keitel as Mr Wolf (now ruined thanks to Direct Line); the dance in the diner; Ving Rhames being mean – all so hip, all so enchanting, but none of it adds up to anything. And that is Tarantino's biggest flaw as a filmmaker. With the exception of the glorious *Jackie Brown*, all of his movies amount to nothing more than a few good scenes, while the overall narrative gets lost in his indulgence. *Pulp Fiction* is not a good film, though I may have believed it was in my younger, more impressionable days, when you *had* to like the film. On each re-watch, it lost a little more of the magic I thought was there the first time I saw it.

Of course, the biggest issue with *Pulp Fiction* is its racism and homophobia. Tarantino's flippant and excessive use of the n-word and fetishisation of black people is well-documented. There are nasty jokes and unnecessary prejudices in this film, but *Pulp Fiction* has never really been taken to task for it, mainly because the racism and homophobia gets laughed off with a joke or obscure pop culture reference. Hiding nastiness behind perverse laughter is a disconcerting trait of Tarantino's cinema and has only worsened over the 20 years since this film was made.

The critical and commercial success of *Pulp Fiction*, virtually unprecedented for an independent film at the time, cannot be undersold, particularly in terms of how it changed the movie industry. Tarantino became a household name overnight. He would never have to fight to get a movie made again and he was afforded the most golden of privileges by long-time backer Harvey Weinstein – complete creative control and final cut. For better or worse, it's a pop culture landmark, ripped off and parodied by everyone from *The Simpsons* to *Community*. Its dialogue is known by even the few who haven't seen it. It has become inescapable. An entire generation of movies wouldn't have happened without Tarantino and the remarkable success of his second feature. Studios now wanted a piece of the cool indie pie and without *Pulp Fiction* turning into a phenomenon, maybe we wouldn't have seen the likes of Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson and Spike Jonze getting a chance. If *Pulp Fiction* had never happened, American independent cinema wouldn't be the great, big thing it is now.

At my kindest, I could describe *Pulp Fiction* as an adrenaline shot, an endlessly exciting sugar rush that combines Jean-Luc Godard with American postmodernism, but after 20 years, I'm just tired of it, and I'm tired of Tarantino and how he still acts, writes and directs like a 15 year-old boy yet to get a girlfriend. *Pulp Fiction*'s impact on cinema has been good, really it has – so many young American directors found a home on the independent circuit as the big studios veered more and more towards superhero films. Yet it's exhausting to think you can still walk into HMV and buy a poster of the film or stumble across an episode of *Family Guy* and see the millionth homage or parody. *Pulp Fiction* isn't a victim of its reputation, it's a victim of being a bad film.