Quentin Tarantino's playful violence and high body count

Kill Bill: Volume 1, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

By Marty Jonas
11 November 2003

Quentin Tarantino's latest film, *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, is cynical and self-involved. It is also, of course, ultra-violent and juvenile, as were his earlier hits *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*.

This is, famously, Tarantino's first film in six years. It is, above all, about himself. Always conscious of his developing body of work, he hits us with "The fourth film by Quentin Tarantino" at the beginning of the titles. And to introduce us to his many obsessions, the film starts even before that with the tacky title card "Shaw Scope," lifted from the pre-credits of the Hong Kong martial arts movies by the Shaw Brothers to which Tarantino has from childhood been devoted.

The plot is rudimentary and borrows from Cornell Woolrich's novel *The Bride Wore Black* (which served as the basis for one of François Truffaut's better films). "The Bride," a retired assassin, played by Uma Thurman, seeks revenge on her ex-colleagues, who murdered the entire entourage (including minister and organist) at her wedding and left her for dead. She awakens from her coma four years later, filled with hatred.

The ultimate target of her vengeance is Bill, the leader of the group and her former lover. You never see Bill's face in *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, but you often see his hand stroking a Samurai sword as he speaks elegantly and enigmatically, like a James Bond villain. The publicity for *Volume 2* promises not only a full view of Bill's face, but an all-out showdown between Bill and The Bride. (Bill, by the way, is played by David Carradine, star of early-1970s TV series "Kung Fu." Everything has a pop-cultural resonance here.)

This first volume devotes itself to The Bride's pursuit of two of her five attackers. Her first encounter, with ex-assassin Vernita Green, who has retired to a yuppie life in suburban California, is relentlessly cruel—to the characters and to the viewer. After a sword and knife fight that leaves the neat little house a shambles and the combatants bloody and bruised, the ex-assassin's pre-adolescent daughter walks in, home from school. They hustle the child off to her room, have coffee and resume fighting. In one of the nastiest pieces of filmmaking I have seen in a long time, The Bride kills Vernita Green in front of her wide-eyed, undoubtedly traumatized daughter, who has come back to investigate all the noise. Before leaving, The Bride invites the child to seek her out when she gets older, if she wants to settle the score.

In the interlude before The Bride goes off to do in her next target in Tokyo, she stops off to obtain a sword and training from a master in Okinawa. He is played by Sonny Chiba, a veteran of many Japanese martial arts movies and another favorite of Tarantino's. This provides a long stretch of mystical nonsense about sword combat, much of it lifted from or inspired by countless Asian fighting films.

The sequence in Japan allows Tarantino to pull out all the stops. Before we meet this second adversary, O-Ren, we see her biography in *anime*—the popular style of Japanese animation. After seeing O-Ren's development as an assassin in violent animated images, we are shown graphically in live action how she controls the large section of the Japanese underworld that she has taken over—by leaping on the conference table and summarily beheading any colleagues who question her leadership.

The rest of this episode (and the director has separated his film into discrete episodes with title cards) increases the body count considerably. The Bride encounters O-Ren's cohort, the Crazy 88, and single-handedly kills and maims all 88 of them. Hacked-off limbs lay twitching about the nightclub floor, and the respective bodies, some still alive, are spurting fountains of blood.

Each sword or knife fight, with its resultant beheading or dismembering, has its own clever resolution. If characters in Hollywood romantic comedies "meet cute," in Tarantino's gory comedies henchmen and henchwomen "die cute." The battle in the nightclub is a blood orgy beyond human reasoning or feeling. It exists in the same universe as *anime* and *manga* (Japanese book-sized comic books), where

posturing and gratuitous violence prevail and any sense of humanity is absent.

With *Kill Bill*, Tarantino returns to the type of misanthropic film he began his career with more than 10 years ago, in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. I was hopeful that this obviously talented director would continue on the path he had taken with his third movie, *Jackie Brown*, in 1997. This crime genre film had not only a coherent plot, but also characters that were credible as human beings, enmeshed in believable situations. It starred 1970s black action film star Pam Grier in the title role, and that most human of actors, Robert Forster, as a conflicted bail bondsman. (Tarantino, to his credit, rescued both of these underrated actors from Hollywood limbo, as he did John Travolta for *Pulp Fiction*.) Tarantino, uncharacteristically, even soft-pedaled the violence and put it outside the focus of the film—the few killings happen in the distance or off-screen, or are obscured. *Jackie Brown*—in my opinion, one of the best films of the 1990s—seemed to signal that he was heading in a new, healthy artistic direction.

Unfortunately, though, Quentin Tarantino is back to mining his obsessions—kung fu films, graphic novels, slasher films, spaghetti westerns, comic books, *manga*, horror films, B- and C-movies, Hong Kong and Japanese action films, Bruce Lee, crime novels, war films and so on. There is little that he hasn't mixed into this latest hodge-podge of a film. Nothing in it bears any resemblance to human physical, emotional or intellectual intercourse.

But I cannot simply dismiss Tarantino as just another vulgar, self-involved, cynical filmmaker. He is all that, but he is talented, and as he showed in *Jackie Brown*, capable of something artistically valid and valuable.

Tarantino's strength is also his weakness. He is an extreme example of a sizable group of film writers and directors whose life experience comes solely from watching films. Unlike most of these, he neither came up through the Hollywood ranks, nor did he go to film school, nor was he a film critic. Fulfilling every film buff's dream, Tarantino was discovered after spending five years working in a video rental store in California, writing scripts and studying acting after hours when he wasn't going to the movies or watching videos. He knows little else than film, and about that he is encyclopedic.

According to interviewers, Tarantino is charming and animated. In interviews, he goes on at length about films both famous and obscure, and can recount in detail stretches of dialogue and shot breakdowns. He is truly knowledgeable about all kinds of cinema, and all his films bear witness to a keen cinematic mind. He has a highly developed feel for film, and that is his strength.

However, all he knows is film, and that is his weakness. Aside from his affection for the Glass family books of J.D. Salinger and pulpish crime novels by authors such as Jim Thompson, Charles Willeford and Elmore Leonard, Tarantino seems not to read or to have any interest in literature, history, politics or science. His films thereby exist in a closed system, comprising all the thousands of films he has seen in his 40-year lifetime, recycled and in various permutations.

Into this closed system, little of reality can intrude. Neither *Kill Bill* nor its director shows any interest in or consciousness of what motivates human beings, how they live and (especially) how they really die.

The violence in *Kill Bill* is playful and taken for granted; it is Tarantino's equivalent of—in other directors' films—conversation, music, sex, child-rearing, politics, history, wit and story. It provides most of his film vocabulary. In one interview, he likened violence in his films to singing and dancing in movie musicals. He said that one day, moviegoers would not be ashamed to say they like violence in films in the same way present-day moviegoers say they like musicals.

Violence can have its artistic uses. Peter Greenaway's excellent *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), through a disturbing series of scenes of violence, torture and cannibalism, effectively provided an allegory of Thatcherite England. But *Kill Bill* originates from a director who sees a high body count as entertainment and violence as valid as any other human activity. Intentionally or not, such a film serves the purposes of this government's war as the body count grows higher by the day, militarism tries to make youth see violence as just another form of human endeavor and the secretary of defense shrugs off a record number of deaths as a "bad day."