

Spotlight on—Gender Performativity in Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*

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"Did you see that Dad? Vick got me down on the floor, and he tried to fuck me."

*There are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitely breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them.—B. Ruby Rich in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader**

***Reservoir Dogs* = Freud’s reaction to New Queer Cinema**

In 1992—the year of *Reservoir Dogs*’s release—[B. Ruby Rich](#) wrote an article for *Sight & Sound* magazine coining the phrase “new queer cinema” in response to a

wave of like-minded films that were on the festival circuit that year. In many ways, her description of their postmodern style could apply to Tarantino's highly revered first feature. *Reservoir Dogs* is certainly "irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive...[and] full of pleasure." In fact, these were the primary qualities invoked by critics initially reacting to his cut-to-the-bone screenplay and wild allusions to past cinema. However, where "new queer cinema" featured LGBT protagonists and stories that directly addressed Queer themes, *Reservoir Dogs* is a decidedly straight/white/male project in neurotic narcissism, but of course, this obsessive maleness is the surface the film uses to fool its characters, its audience, and itself. The raw, violent men of *Reservoir Dogs* reveal their vulnerable, emotionally unstable shadows at every turn. Unable to express any behavior that deviates from the hetero-norm without incurring the wrath of their peers, their masculinity overcompensates and manifests itself as racism, misogyny, and selfishness. *Reservoir Dogs* is the repressed face of "new queer cinema," and this repression has monstrous consequences.

Reservoir Dogs's screenplay Queers its gangsters into narrative corners where outbursts of self-parodic rage leave their bodies vulnerable to penetration. Outside of any specific scene-by-scene representations of male-male romantic longing is an ever-present atmosphere of over-expressed testosterone and locker-room homoeroticism. From its own Queer reading of Madonna's seminal pop hit *Like a Virgin* to Mr. Orange's gut-wrenching decision to reveal his true identity in the film's last moments, Tarantino's all-male film evokes man's inescapable anima and the tragedy that results when two men form a bond that society can't accept.



“Larry, I’m so scared. Would you please hold me?”—Mr. Orange

In the war film, a soldier can hold his buddy—as long as his buddy is dying on the battlefield. In the western, Butch Cassidy can wash the Sundance Kid’s naked flesh—as long as it is wounded. In the boxing film, a trainer can rub the well-developed torso and sinewy back of his protege—as long as it is bruised. In the crime film, a mob lieutenant can embrace his boss like a lover—as long as he is riddled with bullets. Violence makes the homoeroticism of many “male” genres invisible; it is a structural mechanism of plausible deniability.—Kent

[Brintnall’s Tarantino’s Incarnational Theology: Reservoir Dogs, Crucifixions and Spectacular Violence](#)

The most commonly recognized expression of unstable sexuality in the film is in the scene between Mr. White and Mr. Orange when they’re first arriving at the warehouse. There’s an unmistakable intimacy that borders on the erotic. Kent Brintnall notes

The camera stays tight on the two men's faces, increasing the viewer's sense that there is a violation of traditional rules of appropriate physical distance. There are moments where it almost looks like the two men will kiss. In a move that would be absolutely verboten in any other context, the presumably heterosexual Mr. White unbuckles the presumably heterosexual Mr. Orange's belt and opens his trousers. All of this—the emotionality, the physical intimacy, the violation of traditional gender codes—is justified, deflected and explained by the fact of Mr. Orange's brutalization.

Mr. Orange's penetrated, bleeding, *no-longer-virginal* body is not only receptive to Mr. White's tenderness, they provoke them. His wound is enough to bring out tears and pleas, but not enough to make him reveal his policehood and all that it implies. His position as "cop" is a secret that's fundamental to his personality, but it's one that he can never expose. Mr. White also has a secret that violates the code established by his hyper-male associates—a permanently unsatisfied need for emotional closeness. Neither Mr. White, nor Mr. Orange seem explicitly *homosexual*—there isn't a physical attraction or sex-urge behind their intense intimacy. However, this is the true spirit of Queer Theory.

"Queer" is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence."—[*David Halperin*](#)

Mr. White and Mr. Orange's non-hetero/non-homo relationship is the very essence of Queer Theory's obsession with destabilizing gender roles and ruthlessly refusing to define identity with preexisting sociological categories. Beyond *any* gendered binary, their relationship is based purely on the highest levels of mutual understanding and trust. This is why Mr. Orange reveals his identity to Mr. White in the film's final moments—to be closer to him, for there to be absolutely nothing between them, and to validate the past week's intense emotional journey.



“You push that woman-man thing very long and it gets to you after a while.”—Mr. White

He’s a fool for love / what he wouldn’t do for love...

Born a fool, you’ve got to follow the rules / always a fool, for love—Sandy Rogers

Reservoir Dogs’s script makes a point of mentioning that Mr. White has been fooled by an undercover cop before, but it’s left ambiguous as to the reasons behind his apparent gullibility. All we have is what’s obliquely implied by his words and deeds. In Mr. White’s personal chapter, he’s introduced by an exchange concerning a former female partner-in-crime—“Alabama.” Why does the “woman-man thing” get to Mr. White? This is left unanswered, and in the absence of an explanation, we’re free to speculate. When he talks about being “jinxed” we’re given a prolonged shot of him gazing at his reflection, and when he bemoans that you “can’t work with a

psychopath” we’re given a well-placed edit that seems to imply he may in fact mean himself.

In the original shooting script—and in the [deleted scenes](#)—there’s a sequence in which a female officer (which would have been the only speaking part for a female in the film) relates the story of the job Mr. White had previously worked with an undercover cop. She says that after the cop was discovered, someone—more than likely Mr. White—showed up at his birthday party and emptied two .45s into the crowd of wives and girlfriends. Certainly this is just as psychotic as Mr. Blonde’s summary execution of jewelry store employees, and this scene would have called into question not only all of Mr. White’s bellyaching about professionalism vs. psychopathy—but everything else he says in the film as well.

In the end, there’s really no satisfactory answer for Mr. White’s insatiable emotional need, but I suggest that it’s an expression of his repressed femininity. Bushido and Samurai culture are foundational mythologies for Tarantino, and the [Samurai were some of the most famous ancient homosexuals](#). They’re warrior class indulged in male-male love because they thought “women were for breeding, not pleasure, and men who spent too long in their company risked becoming soft and effeminate.” Something in Mr. White drove him from ‘Bama, something drove him *to* the last undercover cop, and *something* drives him to Mr. Orange. In the opening Diner scene Mr. White is the only character to actively defend the waitresses, he’s most distraught over Mr. Blonde’s homicidal outburst, and unlike Nice Guy Eddie he actually sympathizes with Mr. Orange’s compassionate justification for killing Mr. Blonde. Something in Mr. White calls out for identification with the “Other”, for empathy, and for intimacy: all traditionally coded as feminine. When talking to Mr. Pink about Blonde’s kill-crazy-rampage he looks heartbroken over the death of a young black girl. Mr. White is hard and male on the outside, but juicy and female on the inside. Like Mr. Orange’s criminality, the supposedly tough “maleness” of Mr. White’s day-to-day activity is merely a performance, and the intense Realness of Mr. Orange’s wound—which is reminiscent the stigmata, menstruation, and a broken hymen—bring out all the parts of his personality he normally keeps under control. In the end he’s willing to kill his boss and mentor, “Papa” Joe to defend Mr. Orange—the trust between them now at a level exceeding even the intense, life-long father/son bond between Joe and Mr. White.



"Larry, I'm so sorry..."

“An undercover cop has got to be Marlon Brando.”

Before a New Queer Cinema was the theory that inspired it. Queer Theory was first bringing together disparate bands of critical thought to radically confront the hetero-normative hegemony in the late 80s; feminism, a Foucauldian perspective on history, and deconstructionism all played major roles in the original Queer Theorists’ work, and Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble*—a giant in the Queer Theory’s canon—was released in 1990, just two years before *Reservoir Dogs*. In it she deconstructs gender from a socio-historical and linguistic perspective. Butler came to the conclusion that gender was all a performance. In other words, there is no “original” gender/sexuality that our actions refer to, only the actions themselves and the way they’re perceived.

This concept of Gender Performativity provides the perfect framework for exploring the presentation of gender in *Reservoir Dogs*, because while the characters are

definitely Queer, they aren't necessarily homosexual. Butler dubbed her solution to society's rigid, false binary of male/female, Gender Trouble—a radical critique of gender roles through parody, pastiche, and drag. Butler thought these aesthetics could bring attention to the fabricated nature of gender by exaggerating the performative aspect inherent in all sexual identities. Tarantino's film indulges in Gender Trouble in a variety of ways

- The all-male cast (two women have line-less roles as victims of violent crime)
- The intense homoerotic dialogue (“I think it's all that black semen been pumped up your ass so long it's backed up to your brain and it's coming out your mouth.”)
- The schoolyard antics; the gangsters aren't “men” so they're “boys” (Mr. Blonde pretend shooting Mr. White, the way Mr. White kicks Mr. Pink in the warehouse, the odd parental dynamic between Joe and the gang)
- The movie references; the gangsters learned how to be (see: act) “tough” (see: male) from the movies (“I bet you're a big Lee Marvin fan...”, “He's Charles Bronson in *The Great Escape*, he's diggin' tunnels.”)

Queer Overtones

In the movie, the gangsters are constantly reiterating their masculinity in the face of unacknowledged emotions and unstable personal identities. While on the one hand they're hyper-masculine—simple suits, extreme violence, flippant morality, and foul mouths—on the other they're hyper-feminine—stylish, verbose, emotionally volatile, and more passive-aggressive than actually aggressive—hence no heist. They embody seemingly contradictory, but still historically *gendered* character attributes, and what's more their highly stereotyped surface personalities are expressed in an extreme style where straight-faced Expressionism and finger-pulling parody clash in a Brechtian explosion of testosterone and tears.

[Eisenstein's theory of Overtonal Montage](#) becomes crucial to understanding the Gender Trouble in *Reservoir Dogs* because the criminals' Queerness is largely suggested by interesting juxtapositions of word and image. With the possible exception of Mr. Blonde and Nice Guy Eddie, I don't think any of the characters are homosexual even though the screenplay's obsession with homosexuality far exceeds most movies of its kind. The sticky mise-en-scene and Gay dialogue isn't in service of subtextual romance between textually hetero males. Instead they create Overtones that may be *described* as homoerotic—but really without the physical

sensuality that accompanies genuine on-screen eroticism. The Overtones are meant to complicate the simple, superficially *straight* relationships between all of the men. In other words, and according to Judith Butler, we're all drifting between poles of gender/sexuality in constant response to the way our social group perceives us; Tarantino's Overtones are there to remind you that, to some extent, all of these characters are both penetrators and penetrated, and that none of their relationships are simple in any way.

An example of Overtonal Montage in *Reservoir Dogs*

The scene with Freddy (Mr. Orange) telling his superior officer about being accepted into the gang is a perfect example. It features a full frame close up on Mr. Orange,



I'm in there; I'm up his ass.

That hard cuts to a long shot from outside the restaurant, of them hugging.



Holdaway and Mr. Orange aren't Gay, and there isn't any implication—textual or otherwise—that they're hot-to-trot. However, the cut—from “I'm up his ass” to the affectionate-embrace long shot—is undeniably charged with some sort of energy. He may simply be expressing a power dynamic between him and his quarry, but he does so in an explicitly sexual way that calls a lot of attention to itself. “I'm up his ass,” isn't really a phrase we're used to hearing our noble action heroes say. These are what I'm calling, “Overtones.” They aren't there to place judgment on the character's living-breathing sexuality; they're there to highlight the fluidity of *all* the characters sexualities. Since we have no word for the brotherly love that transcends—love that surpasses that of friendship but doesn't actualize itself passionately—cuts like this seem somehow *wrong*. It's okay—that's just hetero-normativity tapping you on the shoulder.

“I got Madonna's big dick comin' outta my left ear, and Toby Jap I-don't-know-what comin' outta my right.”

With her constant image changes, parodies of blonde bombshells such as Marilyn Monroe, her assertion of female power and sexuality, and her appropriation from gay/queer culture, the popular music icon Madonna can be seen as the virtual embodiment of Judith Butler's arguments in Gender Trouble—[Reena Mistry's Madonna and Gender Trouble](#)

The movie opens with a shocking monologue. As Mr. Brown explains his take on the subtext to Madonna's 1984 hit *Like A Virgin*—"It's about a girl, who meets a guy with a big dick,"—Papa Joe tries to remember a girl named Toby's surname. This sequence sheds light on Tarantino's preoccupation with Gender Performativity in a number of ways—not the least of which being the focus on Madonna herself, a prominent example of Butler's theories.

I wasn't just trying to get that racy word virgin in a lyric. I was saying...that I may not really be a virgin—I've been battered romantically and emotionally like many people—but I'm starting a new relationship and it just feels so good, it's healing all the wounds and making me feel like I've never done this before, because it's so much deeper and more profound than anything I've ever felt.—[Billy Steinberg, author of Like A Virgin](#)

The fascinating thing about Mr. Brown's analysis of *Like A Virgin* is that he's just plain full of shit. As the camera dizzyingly pans around the table Mr. Blonde rebuts; the song is about "a girl who is very vulnerable and she's been fucked over a few times. Then she meets some guy who's really sensitive..." This incurs a strong rebuke from Mr. Brown, who tells him that he's totally wrong, that in fact the song is "a metaphor for big dicks." This is hilarious, and revealing, for two reasons.

One, because the song was actually written by two men, and two because Mr. Blonde was right!

I made it through the wilderness / Somehow I made it through / Didn't know how lost I was / Until I found you.

I was beat, incomplete / I'd been had, I was sad and blue / But you made me feel / Yeah you made me feel, shiny and new.

*Like a virgin / touched for the very first time / Like a virgin / **when your heart beats next to mine***

—*Like A Virgin*, Madonna/Steinberg/Kelly

misinterpreting her lyrical intentions in a song that showcases vulnerability, and Joe by “forgetting” (see: repression) Toby’s last name—and thus his ability to locate (see: recognize) her personhood.

“So you guys like to tell jokes and giggle and kid around, huh? Gigglin’ like a bunch of young broads in the schoolyard.”—Papa Joe

While it may be rather obvious that *Reservoir Dogs* is *about* gender, its minimal style and bare-bones plot leave much room for interpretation. This is part of what makes it such a powerfully Queer text. While the answer as to whether or not the gangsters are Gay may not be crucial, even to an analysis of the film’s gender politics, it should still be a curiosity—let’s take nothing for granted. A major part of Judith Butler’s project was to try to destroy our jump-to-conclusions mentality in the realm of gender/sexuality. A person doesn’t have to fall distinctly into any one group, because all current groupings are false in their specificity. What evidence is there that the gangsters are straight? They talk a little about heterosexual urges, but honestly a lot more of their mental faculties are spent on men than women.

Like its consistent visual motif—the 360-degree pan—the film revolves around gender without ever penetrating its essential mystery. What it does, instead of providing a false understanding of some “authentic” masculinity, is to complicate maleness simply by acknowledging all of its inherent contradictions. In *Reservoir Dogs* the tender, emotional connection between Mr. Orange and White is what defines them as men. Mr. Orange’s declaration, “I’m a cop” is a direct expression of both an open emotional exchange and a tough guy doing the right thing.

This breakdown of socially constructed binaries is one of Tarantino’s central projects too. *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill*, and *Death Proof* all have questions about the nature and function of gender at their core, and *Pulp Fiction* and *Inglourious Basterds* both feature Queer narrative elements. Never again, though, would he approach the subject with such focus, force, and passion as in his first film—*Reservoir Dogs*.