

LEONARD NIMOY on Star Trek today: "I don't see any vision. I don't see any excitement happening."

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*george clooney & quentin tarantino are*

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# QUENTIN on QUENTIN

The kinetic, eclectic auteur speaks  
about life in the fifteen-minute lane

by  
Andrew O. Thompson

interview conducted by  
Mark A. Altman & Andrew Thompson

**T**he unprecedented popularity of writer-director Quentin Tarantino could well be one of the most peculiar cultural phenomena of the '90s. In less than three years, the self-professed film geek has soared from first-time independent filmmaker to international pop icon. Thanks to his fascination with Sam Peckinpah's ballet-like brutality, Sam Fuller's noir aesthetic and Martin Scorsese's criminal obsessions, Tarantino has given the MTV Generation a cinema of cool to call their own.

The 32-year-old Tarantino began his rapid ascent with 1992's *Reservoir Dogs*. This post-heist heist flick studies a pack of crayola-christened white-trash hoods in a frenzy over whose trigger-happy treachery botched their gig. Through a deft interweaving of flashbacks reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashoman*, the hardboiled protagonists share vivid anecdotes riddled with racist and misogynistic lingo. As unforgivingly raw as the severed ear of a tortured cop, *Reservoir Dogs* left an indelible imprint on audiences at the Sundance, Toronto and Cannes film festivals.

Even so, all weren't quick to champion this directorial debut. Squeamish critics and political opportunists in particular lambasted Tarantino's sporadic displays of savagery. The homicidal kineticism of the Tarantino-

penned *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* also fed the controversy about filmmakers' graphic portrayal of violence.

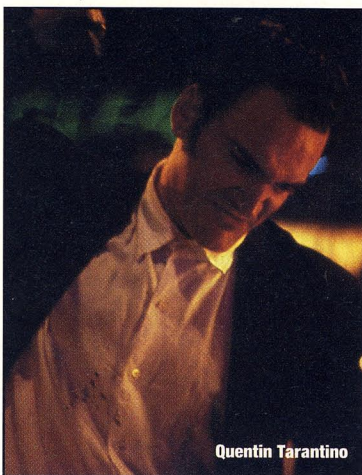
With his 1994 follow-up *Pulp Fiction*

redemption and honor among thieves. Routine scenarios (the boxer primed to take a fall but doesn't; the gangster faced with temptation during a sanctioned date with his boss's girlfriend) played with—and surpassed—viewers' expectations. Showered with even more accolades than its predecessor, *Pulp Fiction* earned Best Picture honors from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and the National Society of Film Critics, an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, and Cannes' prestigious Palme d'Or.

Like many of the new wave of indie filmmakers, Tarantino never attended film school. In fact this Tennessee native, reared in L.A.'s South Bay, dropped out of high school. His pop culture regurgitations come from a lifetime diet of B-movies, film noir and the vast inventory of Video Archives, the Manhattan Beach video store Tarantino clerked at for six years.

After finishing "Thrill of the Bet," his segment of the Miramax anthology film of *Four Rooms*, Tarantino opted to take a short recess from filmmaking.

In addition to using the time off to stretch his acting chops, he's about to launch the distribution company Rolling Thunder through Miramax Films. Four times a year, Tarantino plans to present a film from across the globe he believes worthy of domestic exposure. Whether the movie in question is a



Quentin Tarantino

(named in homage to the dime-store magazines of the '30s), Tarantino once again put cineastes on the edge of their seats. Orbiting the exploits of a verbose salt-and-pepper hit man duo, *Pulp Fiction* tweaks one's expectations of the dramatic clichés of loyalty,



**HELPING HANDS:** Actor George Clooney as Seth Gecko gives Richie (Quentin Tarantino) a hand after he's injured.

classic of the blaxploitation era or the latest effort from an Asian auteur, Rolling Thunder will no doubt cement Tarantino's reputation as a cinema connoisseur with eclectic, but inspired taste. It debuts this month with *Chung King Express* by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai.

SCI-FI UNIVERSE chatted with Tarantino over lunch during part of his three-week hiatus from portraying *From Dusk Till Dawn's* skit-tish killer Richie Gecko. Armed with a half-drunk gallon jug of water, Tarantino cut a swank figure in knee-length blue and white-striped athletic shorts and a matching oversized T-shirt complete with V-necked butterfly collar. In his distinctly gushing manner, Tarantino commented on everything from the mobs which greeted him at a recent Q & A session at London's National Film Theater's to the origins of Rolling Thunder.

*Do you see the From Dusk Till Dawn's Gecko Brothers as franchise characters who we could see in further adventures?*

Ever since *Pulp*, I've owned all my characters. I'd never do *Pulp Fiction II* but I could follow any one of those characters for their own adventure and might just have them show up in another movie, but not in a 'cool, groovy, wink-wink' way but the way Larry McMurtry writes novels. He'll have characters

come in and out. He'll have the character that Debra Winger played in *Terms of Endearment* as a smaller character in his book *All of My Friends are Strangers*. He just decided that she's a great character and he wanted to go back and investigate her a little bit. I like the fact that my movies start taking place in this universe where the characters can move in and out and I now have the freedom to do that because I own them. It's not like if I do a movie that follows Vince or I do a movie following Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, it has to be tied to *Pulp Fiction II*. No, I can follow them anywhere that I want and there's a totally a wealth of material, in particular for a prequel for the Gecko brothers as to how the Gecko brothers got where they are. There's a whole movie that's only half-way referred to and hinted at that takes place before this one.

*How do you react to the criticism from people like Siskel and Ebert that says 'here is this brilliant writer/director, why is he acting, producing, distributing movies etc. Shouldn't he just be writing and directing?'*

It's funny when they said 'Quentin, why are you doing this and that?' because they were doing a very interesting take on my career. They kept talking about Quentin Tarantino but it was like 'Who was he?' He ain't me,

**"When I looked at myself in DESTINY TURNS ON THE RADIO, I said 'Okay, I can't do that ever again.' If I'm going to act, I've got to commit one hundred percent. This isn't the celebrity show. I'm not Charro."**

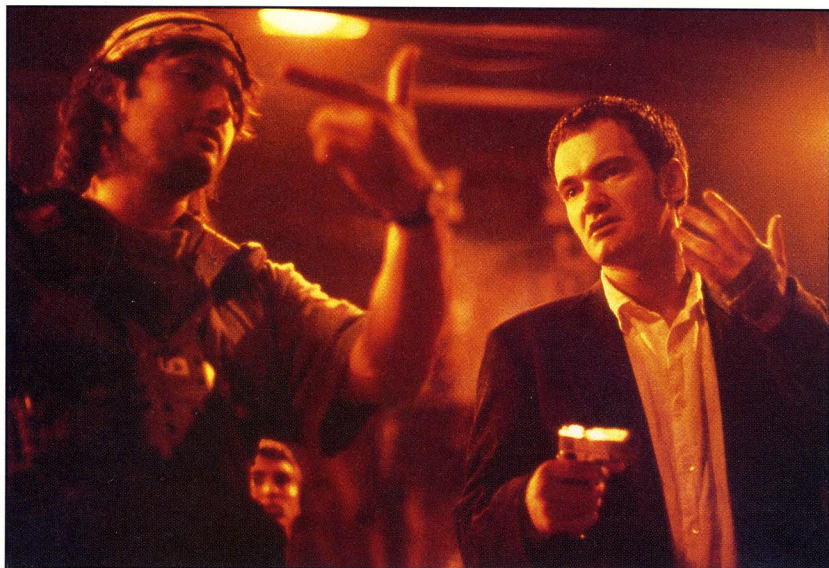
the guy sitting on the couch watching the show. My feeling is I understand where they are coming from but I don't agree with it. I'm an artist. If I want to go and do an episode of a situation comedy [*All American Girl* with Margaret Cho] because I've never done that style of acting before, I don't see that I'm robbing anything from myself. As a matter of fact, I see myself stretching as an artist doing that. I'd never directed a TV show so I directed *ER* because I love and adore that show. I was in a position where I was famous enough that I can plug myself into it and be part of that show. I don't see anything wrong with that.

By playing in a couple different movies as an actor, I get to stretch myself this way or that way and I get to work with other directors. Spike Lee [*Girl 6*] directs very differently from the way I do so it was very interesting to see what the energy on his set is like.

*What's was unique about your acting experience on Dusk compared to your previous thespian forays?*

On this movie I'm having an acting experience that I've never had in the other movies. I did small parts which were a day or two days at the most. My biggest part before this last year was *Pulp Fiction* where I had three days' worth of work and that's fun. I like doing that—all of sudden I became Mr. Guest Star Guy. It was fun but it was also very similar to what I was doing in acting class. You get a scene, rehearse the scene and you do it and, hopefully, you rise to the occasion on that day. But when I did *Four Rooms*, I was the star of my story and that was the fullest character I've played. But even though Jimmy's a pretty good character, that pales in comparison to this. Richie's through the movie and he's built, you build him, you don't just do it all in one scene and then walk away. And the fact that I'm not directing it is terrific. I trust Robert [Rodriguez], so it's given me a freedom as an actor that I've never had before.

I'm Quentin now because I haven't been doing stuff for the past couple of weeks because they've been doing stuff without my character. But if you were to come here when I was playing Richie, I wouldn't even be doing this interview. If I was Richie, I could only talk to you as Richie. I'm not talking about some psycho-weird method actor thing, it's just I'm in that place. I see things from Richie's perspective. It's funny because on the drive home, I start, little by little, becoming Quentin again. And by the time I



**DIRECTING DUO:** Dusk director Robert Rodriguez with Dusk double threat, writer/actor Quentin Tarantino.

copyright 1995 Miramax/Dimension

get home I'm Quentin. I've never had that situation before.

This is the first movie where I've never second guessed myself as far as an actor on what I'm doing inside of the scenes even though I may be wrong. I'm not false. I'm doing what Richie would do at that particular moment. One of the things that I noticed, particularly when I'm looking at some of the footage again between me and George [Clooney]—which is really neat and organic—is even though we're doing a scene with a bunch of takes I play whatever emotion creeps into that take. If he says something that's horrifying and strikes me funny, I laugh because that's the reality of the take—of that moment. That might be completely f—king wrong wrong for the scene, but that's why we do other takes.

*How different is it acting, and therefore interpreting your own script [e.g. From Dusk Till Dawn], as opposed to say something like Destiny Turns on the Radio where you'd be interpreting somebody else's script?*

It's really hard for me to make the comparison because during *Destiny Turns on the Radio* I couldn't have been more distracted and I think it shows. I don't think I was as bad as some critics said I was but I was mediocre. Some critics wrote that I was shit—and then you could make the analogy that mediocre is shit—but I was the worst form of shit as far as I was concerned because I was distracted. I started shooting that movie the week before *Pulp Fiction* opened. I was there and I was doing my best but only part of me was there. I'd just come off of the press junket and flew in from Europe. When I looked

at myself in the movie, I said 'Okay I can't do that ever again.' If I'm going to act, I've got to commit one hundred percent. This isn't the celebrity show. I'm not Charro, I'm an actor all right. I've got to commit. The lessons I learned from that movie are going to hopefully bare fruit.

*You were rumored to be attached to The Man From U.N.C.L.E feature for awhile. Was that just a weird rumor and what's next for you?*

It was more of a rumor. I have a plan and usually stick to it unless something takes me off the course—but now there's nothing to take me off the course. After I finished *Pulp* I was going to take six months to a year off, regenerate and then just start writing whatever the next thing I'm going to do is. It's like I have 16 ideas and any one of them could go. You could say I'm dating them right now but I'm not in love with any one of them. I haven't given any one of them enough time.

*How does it feel, to steal a phrase, to be "bigger than Jesus" in England. There are more posters for sale of you than there are of the cast of the film. This has really never happened with a director before.*

It's pretty cool. You hear old Vaudevillians say "I kill them in Omaha." [And I'm that way in England] which I love, it's great. How could you not love it? It's funny because *Dogs* made me a star in England, *Dogs* made me a cult star in America whereas *Pulp* made me a star in America and made me even bigger than a star in England—and it's great. Admittedly, if fame had and on and off but-

ton, it'd be the greatest thing in the world. The only bummer is that I'm one of the few people in Los Angeles that likes to walk and when I'm with my girlfriend and we're out having dinner or something and we're just trying to have an evening by ourselves, people just keep coming up. I never lose it, but that's the only time where I'm like, 'You know, you have eyes and if I were you I would see that I'm with my lady and respect that.' The only other big problem is the fact that a lot of the places that I like to go and hang out happen to be places where people who like my stuff will congregate. Right now, the days of me going into a used record store or video store and zoning out looking through the stacks for the next three hours are gone. I still do that but not like the way I used to. I've got to deal with people—and either I'm signing or I'll say 'it's my day off' and they'll respect that. I'll shake somebody's hand because I don't want to make anybody feel bad about anything but I still want to live my life too. I'm not going to give up my life and I'm not going to give up my courtesy either so, you know, it's just trying to find that balance.

*Nobody would say to John Ford, 'Oh God, he's doing another western' but in your case it's like 'He's doing another crime drama, that's all he knows how to do...'*

I don't know if I necessarily want to be known as 'the gun guy' or 'the gangster guy.' I've only done two movies. I've got a long career ahead of me and that career will go wherever my instincts will go. I'm somewhat strategic in my career. You say that and it sounds ugly, but I've watched other filmmakers' careers. As a student of film and directors' careers, I know in theory how to keep from falling into the traps that I've seen a lot of other people fall into.

*Can you tell us what your motivation was in creating Rolling Thunder?*

More than anything else, I started Rolling Thunder because for the last four or five years now I've been going around to different festivals and seeing this movie and that movie and I'd see these groovy movies from Hong Kong, Japan and Spain. I would call up Harvey Weinstein [at Miramax] and recommend them and say, 'Oh, you've got to see this one movie.' I was always pretty responsible about it, since I'd always have an idea of how to sell it and I recommend it to him and they'd have the people that buy their films for them just all give them the thumbs down and I started getting pissed off about it. And so at one point, fairly recently, I was talking with Harvey and I was saying, 'You should just give me my own label and I would design the campaigns and everything and supervise whatever needs to be done with

them as far as getting them ready and just give me enough money to buy four films a year. Just let me be your buyer because I think I'll be the best one you got' and he agreed to it. He was happy about it.

We're not talking about paying a lot for these movies because basically every one that I'm doing has been passed over by everyone else—there's been no bites. If a distributor can release your movie—let them do it because you'll probably get more money from them. We're just doing it as a philanthropic thing. Harvey said the great thing about this [setup] is that Miramax used to

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release movies back in 1979 and '80, back when at the end of the day if the film made \$10,000, that was great. If after everything was all said and done and you pay everything back and you make a \$10,000 profit, that was great, they were happy, they were jazzed, the locks stayed off the doors...and that was the successful one. Well now they're so big that, you know, what's the point in \$10,000? It's a lot of hard work. Well no, that's cool, that's great, that's all it has to make because we're not trying to keep the doors open any more. You've got your other things and they'll hit and expand with them or they won't but they deserve the screens—they deserve to be shown in America.

The only other thing about it, though, is the company has a bit of a personality, it has a bit of a visceral rougher personality than the majority of the art films coming out

because there's this softness and a pastoral quality in foreign films today. They're going for the female sophisticated audience, I guess. There's nothing wrong with that but one of the things that people used to go to foreign films for was to see something they just couldn't see here. When *Belle de Jour* is the most 'out there' foreign film that's been released in the last two years, that says something. Foreign films used to be risky and daring and whatever. I saw a terrific Hong Kong film by Stanley Kwan called *Red Rose, White Rose* that's wonderful, but it's not right for Rolling Thunder because I'm trying to create a personality with our first four releases. I want Rolling Thunder to stand for a certain type of film and, basically, make no bones about it, it's more like an exploitation kind of thing. What I want to do is release new stuff that I find quirky and cool and is worth releasing, along with some older foreign stuff or American exploitation and give them new prints and go with them.

*No doubt film scholars and college students are going to dissect your work in dissertations for years. Do you perceive a hidden subtext in your work?*

There's subtext in all my work and there's definitely big subtext underneath the drama of the scenes in the movie. That's what makes it special. I'm not going to say what it is because then it's not about that. It's there for me, it's there for the actors and it's there for you if you want it. If you don't want it and you just want to see a movie about a couple of gangsters that take hold of a family and then end up fighting for their lives to get out of a bar full of vampires, that's there if that's all you need to get. But if you want to get into discussions about the loss of faith and everything, that there too. And it's treated seriously.

I'm not making message movies. Some people make movies where if nine million people see their movie, they want nine million people walking out with the same thought. I like the idea of nine million people walking out with the same thought and different ideas of what that meant and arguing about it and everything. I get people asking me all the time "What did this mean and what did that mean?" Well, if I wanted you to know exactly what that meant, I would've shown you. It would've been easy enough. But part of the fun is the fact that everyone is making their own movie—you know, when you don't explain everything and it's kind of there so it can be looked at as something a little deeper than that or it can be looked at as a good hoot depending on who you are as a viewer.

*Here, have a Sci-Fi Universe T-shirt...*

Okay, thanks. 