

What Jordan Peterson and Quentin Tarantino Understand About Chaos and Moral Responsibility

In the popular imagination, Quentin Tarantino has become something of a poster boy for style over substance. His films appear to be “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” perfectly embodying—with their senseless violence, unrealistic dialogue, postmodern style, and recent turn toward social justice themes—the forces of what Canadian psychologist and conservative public intellectual [Jordan Peterson calls “chaos.”](#)

After watching Uma Thurman carve up an army of Yakuza or Jamie Foxx massacre every white inhabitant of a Southern plantation, it’s tempting to conclude that Tarantino deals purely in spectacles intended to single-handedly keep the fake blood industry afloat on an ocean of their own product. But although he certainly enjoys depicting violence, that’s not all there is to him. Even in his most stylized genre films, Tarantino takes stock characters and imbues them with new depth, just as Shakespeare did in his early plays. If we allow ourselves to get lost in the gore and the ludicrously stylized dialogue (what Roger Ebert called “[geekspeak](#)”), we risk missing Tarantino’s true genius.

Perhaps the best example of substance hidden in style comes in Tarantino’s second film, *Pulp Fiction*. In an early scene, two hit men named Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta) enter an apartment to recover a briefcase stolen from their boss and kill those responsible for taking it. Before executing his victim, Jules famously [recites what he claims is Ezekiel 25:17](#), although in reality Tarantino [borrowed the dialogue](#) from a Sonny Chiba Kung-Fu movie:

“The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of the darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the LORD when I lay my vengeance upon thee.”

It’s pretty badass and totally worth memorizing, but otherwise doesn’t require much analysis. It’s in the movie because it sounds *cool*.

Later, though, Jules repeats his Scripture, cueing the audience to take it seriously this time: “I been sayin’ that shit for years. And if you ever heard it, it meant your ass. I never gave much thought what it meant. I just thought it was some cold-blooded sh*t to say to a mother*cker before I popped a cap in his ass.”

Even with that hint, though, I had to see the movie five or six times before I realized that I was actually supposed to be paying attention to the meaning of Jules’ words.

[Paying attention is a major theme in the work of Jordan Peterson](#), who identifies that capacity with the Egyptian god Horus, often represented as a sharp-eyed falcon. Those who fail to pay attention, like Horus’ father Osiris, leave themselves vulnerable to the forces of chaos.

Pulp Fiction is, if nothing else, a study in chaos. A gunman bursts from the bathroom, surprising Jules and Vincent. Vincent accidentally blows Marvin’s brains all over the inside of a car because he apparently momentarily forgets he’s fleeing a murder scene and holding a loading handgun. Mia (Uma Thurman), the wife of crime lord Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), overdoses on drugs she found in Vincent’s pocket because she assumes it’s something it’s not. Boxer Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) attempts to flee Los Angeles and

coincidentally encounters Marcellus, the very man he's running from, in the middle of the road. Marcellus pursues Butch into a pawn shop that just happens to be run by a pair of sadomasochistic rapists. Tarantino uses these freak occurrences to test the validity of his characters' approaches to life.

In [one of his many videos](#), Peterson explains the dichotomy between order and chaos by analogy to surfing. Chaos, symbolized by the churning waves, is omnipresent, but by confronting chaos and constantly maintaining the poise and vigilance necessary to master it, we can keep our heads above the water. If not, we drown, sucked down into the underworld. Some approaches to life enable us to achieve this delicate balance and are therefore valid. Others do not.

In Vincent, Tarantino provides a perfect example of a character who fails to pay attention and is consumed by chaos. Vincent spends much of his time escaping from the world through heroin. Even when he isn't high, Vincent spends much of his time in the bathroom, constipation being a well-known side effect of heroin, and every time he goes to the bathroom, something goes horribly wrong, and when it does, he invariably blames his problems on other people. He is petulant, reactive, and immature.

Jules, on the other hand, is able to pay attention. "You wanna play blind man, go walk with the shepherd, but me, my eyes are wide f*ckin' open," he tells Vincent after an apparent miracle saves them from a hail of bullets. Because Jules is willing to adapt to new information, he acknowledges the miracle and leaves his life of crime. Vincent remains willfully blind and dies on the toilet.

Jules' new philosophy of life is then immediately put to its ultimate test when two criminals attempt to rob the diner where he sits at breakfast. He handles it masterfully. He refuses to give up the briefcase he retrieved for Marcellus, but he defends himself with "minimum necessary force," a legal

concept Peterson highlights in his book [*12 Rules for Life*](#). When Vincent's reappearance from the commode threatens to re-escalate the resulting Mexican standoff, Jules holds violence at bay through sheer force of will, repeatedly screaming, "Bitch be cool!"

In Tarantino's previous film, *Reservoir Dogs*, the climactic standoff ends very differently. Nice Guy Eddie's filial piety, Mr. Orange's deception, Mr. White's pity, and Joe Cabot's rage collide in an exchange of fire that kills all four of them. By giving two consecutive films such contrasting endings, Tarantino shows the impact that an attentive, awake individual can have on an otherwise chaotic situation.

While holding one of the would-be robbers (Tim Roth) at gunpoint, Jules offers several conflicting interpretations of Ezekiel 25:17 before finally settling on one: "Or it could mean... it's the world that's evil and selfish. Now I'd like that, but that sh*t ain't the truth. The truth is you're the weak, and I'm the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin', Ringo. I'm tryin' real hard to be a shepherd."

Jules refuses to be like Vincent and blame his problems on outside forces or bad luck. Instead, he acknowledges the awful burden of moral responsibility. In one [interview](#), Peterson says that our actions "determine the direction of the world, whether it's toward heaven or hell," and Jules willingly admits that his actions so far have moved the world closer to hell. He takes "the sins of the world unto [himself]," and resolves to do everything he can to fight against chaos and to protect those around him who have not achieved his level of consciousness.

Even the structure of *Pulp Fiction* is an instance of chaos, a disordered jumble of scenes that forces the audience to pay close attention in order to discern the film's plot and message. That message, so often lost in catchy one-liners and bizarre touches like The Gimp—a denizen of the chaotic

underworld if there ever was one—is this: “Pay attention. Confront chaos. Accept responsibility. Make the world a better place.”

Jordan Peterson would be proud of Jules.

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