

'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood': Remembering a Culture War That Never Happened

(WARNING: Spoiler alert)

The phrase "Once Upon a Time" generally opens fairy tales, but Quentin Tarantino's film masterpiece, "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood," is not the stuff of sweet stories. The phrase refers here to time, not as mythical memory, but as a turning point in the human condition. "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" is about a moment when something big happened, and historical trajectory shifted.

Except, in the film, the moment is stopped from happening.

Every era has a turning point, and for the generation born immediately post-World War II that turning point was exactly 50 years ago, in August of 1969, when members of Charles Manson's cult went on a killing spree, murdering a married couple named LaBianca and, more famously, four people in a Hollywood Hills mansion, including actress Sharon Tate. Tate's husband, director Roman Polanski, was in London when she, celebrity hair stylist Jay Sebring, coffee heiress Abigail Folger, and Polanski's friend, Wojciech Frykowski, were murdered at Manson's orders by three of his followers. The trio also killed Steve Parent, an 18-year-old student who was just leaving the mansion after visiting the groundskeeper, a school friend, as the murderers arrived.

The horrifying deaths of the beautiful Tate – who was eight months pregnant – and the others that night cast a pall over the end of the '60s, a decade supposedly devoted to love and peace and the end of all the old, violent values symbolized by the Vietnam War. When investigation into the murders revealed the perpetrators to be the very hippies whose love-and-peace

proclamations were expected to supplant the old hate-and-war morality of the previous generation, cognitive dissonance could be heard throughout the country. No transforming values were on the horizon after all. Not from a culture that could produce Tex Watson, who ignored Tate's pleas to save her baby and stabbed her 16 times while she cried, "Mother...mother." Not from a culture that could produce Susan Atkins, who dipped a cloth in Tate's blood and used it to scrawl "PIG" on the front door. And not from Manson, who ordered his followers to kill whoever happened to be in that house "as gruesomely as possible," because it had previously been occupied by a record producer who rejected his songs.

In Tarantino's film, a middle-aged actor (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) and his stunt-double buddy (Brad Pitt) face fading careers and ebbing manhood, not always with grace. But they know who they are. They stand up for who they are, whether it's by recommitting to their professions or using their fists.

When Pitt's character gives a ride to a sexy hitchhiker, he discovers the Spahn Ranch, home to Manson and his brood. He recalls Spahn as a place where he once shot films, and is shocked to find the owner in thrall to Manson's hippies. (It may be that the character is based on Donald Shea, an actual stuntman who uncovered what was going on at Spahn Ranch and paid for it with his life. Manson had him killed.)

In reality, the one man and two women who broke into Tate's home that night, armed with a single pistol and some knives, found almost no resistance from their victims. The gentle Sebring allowed himself to be tied up, then became the first fatality in the house after protesting the rough treatment being given Tate. Frykowski did struggle, but was unarmed and apparently didn't think to run to the kitchen for a knife. The women simply succumbed to their killers.

In Tarantino's movie, however, the Manson thugs make the mistake of thinking they can kill the DiCaprio and Pitt characters, who "deserve" it since together they had promulgated violence on TV and in movies. But the old-timey

pair, armed with both weapons and fighting know-how, won't go down easy. Let's just say that there is a flame-thrower in "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood," and leave it at that. Tarantino is not known for subtlety.

In the end, the old-timers with their "violent" tendency to self-preservation save the innocents from their historical, factual deaths. Which means that "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" is, after all, a fairy tale.

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