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Reservoir Dogs and the Noir Male

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of the *noir* male – the protagonist from the body of films known as *film noir*. The purpose of the study is to show that a composite of the *noir* male character can be found constructed in Quentin Tarantino's 1992 directorial debut, *Reservoir Dogs*. This is achieved through a comparative study of *film noir* theory, especially as it relates to the *noir* male character, and *Reservoir Dogs* and its characters.

There are three parts. First is the establishment of the theoretical approach of neoformalism, predominantly as defined by Kristin Thompson in her 1988 text, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*.

The second part is an examination of the theory of *film noir*, in order to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the *noir* male and his supporting environment. This includes the origins of *film noir* and the *noir* male; visual style; the urban setting; chronology of *noir*; common themes; the femme fatale; the *noir* protagonist himself; and *neo noir*. It is a premise of the thesis that the nature of the *noir* male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of *film noir* films. This premise is supported in the discussion.

The third part is a reading of *Reservoir Dogs*, with a focus on the characters and their interaction with the film, and each other. This includes discussion of the social influences which mark the environment of *noir*; the popular culture influence; the way *Reservoir Dogs* and *noir* challenge the spectator; discussion of the chronological structure of *Reservoir Dogs*; the relationship of transgression, which characterizes the *noir* male's interaction with the femme fatale role; the urban setting; and the theme and mood of *film noir*.

Drawing together these parts it is possible to conclude that the characters of *Reservoir Dogs*, supported by the environment and relationships created in the film, form a composite representation of the *noir* male.

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I.

Introduction

I always know the structure I am going to employ in advance, and all the whys and the wherefores of the story when I start writing, but there's always some unanswered questions, ideas I want to explore. I don't know how effective they're going to be, but I want to try them out.

Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* xii)

The primary focus of this thesis, will be the protagonist of *film noir* – the *noir* male. The primary purpose of this thesis will be to show that this character is constructed in the Quentin Tarantino film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). This aim will be achieved through a comparative study of *film noir* theory, especially as it relates to the *noir* male character, and *Reservoir Dogs* and its characters.

Putting aside the literature review which follows this introduction, the thesis has a three-part structure. The first part is an examination of neoformalism, the theoretical approach with which the thesis will tackle the examination of *Reservoir Dogs* in conjunction with *film noir*. The discussion of neoformalism will focus predominantly on the work of Kristin Thompson in her book *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Thompson's 1988 book is the most definitive work on defining neoformalism. It will be discussed further as a text in the literature review. This chapter should give the reader both an appreciation of the theory and an understanding of the concepts which will be applied in a practical context later in the thesis.

The second part of the thesis is an examination of the theory of *film noir*. The examination is predominantly text-based, but it will include discussion of, and reference to, a number of well recognized classical *film noirs*. The intent of the discussion is to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the *noir* male and his supporting environment. As part of this discussion it is necessary to look at *film noir* as a whole. It is one premise of this thesis that the nature of the *noir* male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of *film noir* films. This premise will be supported in the discussion, and will be important to the recognition of the *noir* male in *Reservoir Dogs*. The *film noir* chapter will discuss the origins of *film noir*; the visual style of *noir* and what it represents; the significance of *film noir*'s urban setting; the

importance of its chronological structure; the common recurring themes that can be found; the influence of the femme fatale role on the *noir* male; and the *noir* male protagonist himself. The discussion of *film noir* will also recognize the debate over the classification of *film noir* as either a genre, a style, or a historical cycle of films. However the thesis is not concerned with adding to the debate, and rather will focus on the well defined common characteristics of *film noir*, regardless of how they might be labelled. Finally, this chapter will consider the place of *neo noir*, and what this contemporary form of the *noir* film adds to the theory on *film noir* generally.

The third part of the thesis is predominantly a reading of *Reservoir Dogs*. In this third part the thesis will apply neoformalism and the theory of *film noir* as they were presented in the preceding chapters. The focus will be the *noir* male, however the discussion will also include more general reference to *film noir* in order to underline the existence of the conditions and the environment which supports the *noir* male characterization. This will include a comparative discussion of the social influences which mark the environment in which *film noir* flourishes, and an examination of the influence of popular or 'low' culture on *noir*, and which, as it will be noted, Quentin Tarantino appropriates for his films. The chapter will also discuss the way *Reservoir Dogs* challenges the spectator, comparing this to the reception of classical *noir*. With a basis which is consistent with *film noir* and the *noir* male environment having been established, the chapter will deal more specifically with the characters in *Reservoir Dogs*, noting how they, along with other complementing characteristics, present a composite of the *noir* male. This will include discussion of the chronological structure of *Reservoir Dogs*, and the influence on the characters; a discussion of the relationship of transgression which is played out by the *noir* male with the femme fatale role; the influence of the urban setting on the character of the *noir* male; and the theme and mood of *film noir* as it relates to the *noir* male as recognized in *Reservoir Dogs*.

This chapter on *Reservoir Dogs* will also include reference to one other film specifically, Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). The film has been selected for two particular reasons; first, it is a recognized *film noir* from what is considered to be the end period of the cycle of classical *noir* films from the forties and fifties; and second, it has often been cited as a particular influence on the production of *Reservoir Dogs*.

By drawing together the discussion as it has been outlined above, it will be possible to form the conclusion that the characteristics of the *noir* male are the defining character traits of the male characters of *Reservoir Dogs*. The establishment of this conclusion will complete the following thesis.