

Welcome to Earth Two, Will Brooker's regular column for *Intensities*, where everything is the same and yet everything is different. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, Brooker steps through a warped mirror into a parallel universe and brings back its stories, exploring the world as it isn't in order that we may better understand the world as it is.

The year is 2004.

Brothers in Arms: Re-evaluating Tarantino's Vega Trilogy

You used to know where you were with Tarantino. You used to know immediately what "Tarantino" meant. In the mid-1990s the name had become a shorthand for a specific cinema aesthetic: snappy, pop-referential dialogue, a retro soundtrack and above all, graphic violence. White shirts sodden with fresh crimson blood. A hammer passed up first for a baseball bat, then a samurai sword. "I will strike down, with great vengeance..." Mexican stand-off, three guns in three men's faces. The sound of screaming only partly drowned out by Stealer's Wheel.

Tarantino was a useful word, back then. You could make instant references, easy jokes. People would know what you meant when you said "Mortal Kombat is Street Fighter II meets Tarantino"; they'd laugh if you showed them a cartoon of Tintin Tarantino, with the boy reporter holding a shotgun. On the basis of two films – and the two scripts for *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) – Tarantino almost became a genre in his own right, with attendant subgenres: the Tarantinoesque, for imitative thrillers like *Killing Zoe* (1994) and the post-Tarantino, for British gangster flicks like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1999).

And yet even by the end of the 1990s, the term had been problematised. *Jackie Brown* (1997) was a Quentin Tarantino film, but not exactly a "Tarantino" film. More sedately paced, less overtly violent – what shootings there are take place at the back of the scene, or just off-frame – *Jackie Brown* was at heart the story of a man and a woman past their prime who found a way to get by and finally get out together. There were familiar traits like narrative switcheroos, a bad-ass Samuel L. Jackson, some looping back in time and the usual flair with obscenity; enough elements from Tarantino's previous two films to satisfy the average *Reservoir Dogs* fan. Yet there was a slightly different tone – arguably more humane, lower-key, with none of the frenetic last man standing, shoot-em-up mentality of the earlier movies – and, fundamentally, an entirely different universe.

Pulp Fiction (1994) and *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) had referred not just to the surrounding culture of "Like A Virgin" and Royales with Cheese, but to each other's diegesis and, beyond that, to Tarantino's scripts for Oliver Stone and Tony Scott. Vic Vega of *Reservoir Dogs* was surely related to Vincent Vega of *Pulp*

Fiction. Mr White, we learn, has hung out with Alabama from *True Romance*. Vic's parole officer, Scagnetti, crops up again in *Natural Born Killers*. In a cut scene from *Reservoir Dogs*, Nice Guy Eddie is going to fetch a nurse called Bonnie for the mortally-wounded Mr Orange; in *Pulp Fiction*, we discover that Bonnie is Jimmie's wife. Tarantino's two films and four scripts sketch out a coherent world and central cast who cross over from one episode to the next, much like the characters in his favourite Marvel Comics – this month, Spidey's swinging across town when he runs into The Thing from *Fantastic Four*; they duke it out for five pages, then team up when Doctor Doom shows from the pages of his own comic. On a small scale, Tarantino had created his own stable of antiheroes with an interlinked history, a form of gangster soap.

Jackie Brown, though, was part of the Elmore Leonard universe; if anything, it formed part two of the quartet which began with *Get Shorty* (1995), continued into 1998's *Out of Sight* and concluded with the *Get Shorty* sequel *Be Cool* (2000). Michael Keaton's character, Ray Nicolette, cropped up uncredited in the third film, confirming the internal logic and shared world just as the names Scagnetti and Vega had drawn links between Tarantino's stories; but this time the continuity was based around the author of the source novels, not the scriptwriter or director. This was Leonard's playground. Tarantino was just one of four directors taking it in turns for a shot at the hoop, much as he had on the quartet of stories which made up *Four Rooms* (1995) or, on a different scale, with the episode of *ER* he helmed in 1994. Something of the trademark style, elements of the "Tarantino" brand, came through in whatever he touched – key tropes and traits for fans to check off their list in an auteurist game of I-Spy. But this was Tarantino as joint author, team player; just as the Tarantino of *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* had been diluted or compromised by Scott and Stone respectively, so the Tarantino of *Jackie Brown* was working within Leonard's framework.

Which brings us to *The Vega Brothers* (2002). Not just a return to the one-man scripting and direction of *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, but a revisiting of the Tarantino universe with its familiar characters – and, of course, a confirmation of both the films' and the characters' interlinked relationships, from the title onwards. *The Vega Brothers* was anticipated by many reviewers as a return to the blood and glories of early-1990s Tarantino, and was duly received as vaguely disappointing when it, like *Jackie Brown*, provided something similar but slightly different. Once again, it said Tarantino on the label but it wasn't quite "Tarantino" inside; not exactly Lite, but not Classic either.

Not surprising, then, that the release of *The Vega Brothers* as a box-set with *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* is being greeted by magazines such as *Empire* and *Total Film* with the same faint sense of wry scepticism that *Star Wars* fans reserve for *Return of the Jedi* (1983) – two good hits, but a strike out on the third. "At forty years old, QT's edges are less sharp than they were," suggests a profile in *Multiplex*. "No longer the young pup who yapped at the industry's heels in the early Nineties, but not an old

dog yet, he's trying new tricks with the old...and getting it right, most of the time." (Mark Tate, "QT at Forty", *Multiplex* vol. 2 no. 3, March 2003) [Cinematic.com](http://www.cinematic.com) was even more grudging in its praise of the final installment: "Like a remake of *Dogs* for those with weak stomachs, *The Vega Brothers* is a Tarantino film you could almost take your mother to." (Jason Hollie, "Brother Beyond", www.cinematic.com, 23 Nov 2002). Lou Mellor's review in *Reel* decides that

You can't put your finger on what's wrong. The old Tarantino guard are back, with Harvey Keitel (Bender), John Travolta (Vincent) and Michael Madsen (Vic) looking admirably slim and believably youthful. Eddie Cochran's "Twenty Flight Rock" sits next to Public Enemy's "911 Is A Joke" on a groovily eclectic soundtrack. Once again, Tarantino has pulled a coup by casting Julia Roberts in a dowdy reprise of her *Pretty Woman* hooker role, and rescued the careers of Corey Haim and Corey Feldman, last seen as comic fans in *The Lost Boys* (in a wry joke, they now play brothers who run a comic store). But there seems to be no punch to it, no pizzazz. When Travolta's hitman finally pulls the trigger on his girlfriend's pimp in the penultimate scene, we get screwed-up eyes and clenched-jaw angst instead of quotable payoff lines. I found myself wishing for the bloodbaths of *Reservoir Dogs* instead of this soap fiction. ("Ready, Aim, Miss", *Reel* vol.13 no.11, Nov 2002)

So *The Vega Brothers* disappoints because it diverts from, or tones down, the authentic "Tarantino". Yet Tarantino has to date directed four full-length movies. Two of those established the shorthand aesthetic referred to above, the fast patter and brutal carnage combo. Two of them tried something slightly different. The fact is that there is now no baseline, no grounds for holding up *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* as authentic, or dominant; the score is two-all. *Jackie Brown* and *The Vega Brothers* are *echt* Tarantino, and as such they oblige us to redefine our received ideas of the director's authorial style. More pointedly, *The Vega Brothers*, through its direct comment on the earlier two films, forces a re-evaluation of *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*. Watching what we are now going to have to call *The Vega Trilogy* in order – *Brothers*, *Dogs*, *Pulp* – sets Tarantino's early-90s work in an entirely new light. By performing a card-sharp's shuffle with the movies' sequential order – the last shall be first – Tarantino pulls off a flashback on a grand scale. Just as *Reservoir Dogs* began with Orange near death, then returned him to life, and *Pulp Fiction* brought Vince back from the dead for his final scene, so *The Vega Brothers* rolls time mercifully back a full couple of years, giving its protagonists a second chance at grace before they meet their fates in the later films; and as with *The Phantom Menace* (1999), there is an underlying dramatic irony born from our knowledge of the future awaiting them. Anakin Skywalker, annoying moppet, will witness his mother's death in *The Clone Wars* (2004) and torture his own

daughter in *A New Hope* (1977); Vic Vega will be shot by an undercover cop in the *Reservoir Dogs* warehouse, while his brother survives only another year before he emerges from a toilet to face Butch's shotgun in *Pulp Fiction*.

For now, at the start of the most recent film, the Vega boys are heedlessly, vibrantly alive; alive and young. The pre-credit flashback which opens *The Vega Brothers* is not just a clever exercise in recreating the slightly artificial colour palette and studio-based exteriors of 1960s television; it sets up the film's theme of origin and backstory. Vincent and Vic, aged 8 and 9, are Beaver Cleaver from the wrong side of the tracks – not juvenile delinquents, but street kids with a fine line in cursing and a good aim with the Daisy BB. The 60s sequence shows their shared history, and bond of fraternal loyalty – Vincent going back for the winged Vic, against the orders of their gang leader – but it also establishes the theme of ethical choice and self-determination which will become central to the entire trilogy. Vince and Vic begin with a clean slate and relative innocence – even at the start of the film proper they are petty crooks rather than hitmen – and the remainder of the three-part narrative charts their progressive involvement in the gangster lifestyle that will eventually kill them both.

“Live by the sword, Vince”, Vic tells his brother in the final diner scene of *The Vega Brothers*; the maxim prefigures both Jules' “the path of the righteous man” speech as he chooses to renounce violence, and the moment – also in *Pulp Fiction* – where Butch, taking up the samurai blade, decides to go back and rescue his enemy Marcellus. Jules and Butch “choose life” and are saved, staying alive to the end of the trilogy, while the Vega brothers stick to their guns and fail to make it through. Just as the boy Vincent avoids the cops by doubling back to help his brother, so the rest of the narrative is dotted with ethical signposts – like a “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel – where Vic and Vincent can opt out of Bender's scheme and settle for a mundane but non-violent life, either through a romance in Vincent's case or a 9-5 job in Vic's. These potential forks in the narrative are marked by self-reflection: Vincent studying himself in the glass outside Janey's room before he enters, Vic combing his hair in the wing mirror of Bender's car just before the boss returns. Both are offered another route, a parallel universe where the Vega brothers slip back out of Bender's schemes; by opting not to take it, they effectively sign their own death warrants. This ethical framework – surprisingly old-fashioned given the accusations of vacuous, amoral and ultra-violent postmodernism levelled at both *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* at the time of their release – is at the heart of the entire trilogy; *The Vega Brothers*, through its echoes and narrative prefiguring, simply makes it far more visible.

The origin story is another favourite trope of the superhero comic – “Next Issue – The Crossbow Hunter: Who He Is And How He Came To Be!” Of course, the MacGuffin at the heart of *The Vega Brothers* is the 1938 vintage comic book stolen from Bender's safe. But the notion of the superhero origin crops up repeatedly throughout the movie, reminding us that the narrative is essentially an exploration of “How The Vega Brothers Came To

Be”, or perhaps, more grimly, “Came To Die”. Most notably, it comes to play in the scene where Bender and the Vega boys turn the Gnarly Comix Store upside down, quietly terrorising the fanboy brothers who own it – themselves, it hardly needs to be added, a sign of what the Vegas could have been and could, at this point, still become.

BENDER:

[picking up a comic and flicking through it]

What’s this. “The Wolf.” *[to TAD]* Tell me, please. Is this a good guy, or a bad guy.

TAD:

[terrified]

What, I...I don’t get you, man.

BENDER:

You don’t get me. This gentleman doesn’t get me. No, that’s alright, you stay there, Vincent. You see, all I was asking is this. I see this character, “The Wolf”. Now, in this comic book...is this a good man, or a bad man?

TAD:

[stammering]

I, uh, it depends, it depends how you look at it.

VIC steps towards TAD, ready to pistol-whip him.

JIM:

Don’t hurt him! Please. Please, don’t hurt him. It’s, ah, it’s a bad guy. Okay? He’s a villain, a super-villain.

BENDER:

You hear that, boys? He’s a super-villain. “The Wolf”. How do ya like that.

The scene prompts slightly nervous laughter in most audiences; here is a knowing moment where Bender/Keitel is revealed as The Wolf/Keitel of *Pulp Fiction*. The “code names” dialogue in the laundromat has already established that Bender uses the name Winston White when dealing with Joe Cabot, and the subsequent exchange is another nod to superhero comic convention.

VIC:

You all got names like that, colors of the rainbow? That’s cute. You wanna pity the guy who ends up Mr Pink, right?

VINCENT:

So what happens if you run out of colors?

BENDER:

[losing his patience]

What happens if you run out of colors, he asks me. You don’t, you don’t run out of colors. There’s as many colors as you like.

VINCENT:

What, do you, like, start on pastels, like Mr Raspberry Ripple, Mr fucking, I don't know, Mr Lemon-n-Lime?

BENDER:

You just use normal fucking colors. Mr Gray, Mr Blonde.

VIC:

[chuckles]

Mr Blonde. You wanna pity the poor fag ends up with that name.

VINCENT:

So what kinda name you want, Vic? Like one of those crazy-ass superhero names or something?

VIC:

No way, man. You don't want that, like, Panty Man shit. You wanna keep it simple, like Harry the Hand. Remember Harry the Hand?

VINCENT:

Sure.

VIC:

[takes the toothpick out of his mouth]

There ya go. Toothpick Vic. ToothpickVic Vega.

Many reviews, echoing Lou Mellor's opinion above, attributed the feeling that something was not quite right with *The Vega Brothers* to the film's depiction of violence. The criticism is ironic – Tarantino was lambasted for too much meaningless carnage in his early movies, and now faces complaints that the killings in his latest films are too loaded in meaning. For this, whether they realise it or not, is what the reviewers are uncomfortable with. The distinction is not merely formal. Much of the ear-slicing in *Reservoir Dogs* happened out of frame, while Melanie's death in *Jackie Brown* was curt, clean and unbloody. That we do not see the moment when Vincent's bullet enters Tyrone is nothing new in a Tarantino film. What makes *The Vega Brothers* different even from *Jackie Brown* is that the two murders are treated as significant and emotionally resonant. In Tarantino's earlier films, most of the killings were carried out offhand, for convenience, by seasoned gunmen. Jules kills Brett as part of a day's work; Louis shoots Melanie because she's hassling him. Vincent's killing of Marvin in *Pulp Fiction* is shockingly funny partly because it's pure accident, the fault of an itchy trigger and a speed bump; Vic's torture of the cop in *Reservoir Dogs* is absolutely devoid of meaning or purpose: "I don't really give a good fuck what you know or don't know. But I'm going to torture you anyway... regardless."

In *The Vega Brothers*, there are two murders, both in the final twenty minutes of the movie. Both mark a turning point in Vic and Vincent's lives – "I never saw that look in a man's eye before, Vic. I never felt that I was holding him in my hand, right

under this finger” – the first blood which transforms them, in an instant, into hitmen rather than petty crooks. The focus on Vincent’s face as he points the gun at Tyrone was a device which Tarantino freely admits he lifted from Ridley Scott, paying tribute to the source in *Blade Runner* by naming his character after Eldon Tyrell. As in *Blade Runner*, we are forced to watch the killer grimace and flinch, to hear the moment of death rather than see it. The critics who dismiss this scene, and Travolta’s performance, as melodramatic or overblown are perhaps attempting to push away their own discomfort; Tyrone’s death is less visually graphic than anything in *Pulp Fiction*, but it portrays murder as something weighty, difficult and consequential rather than as an arcade-style affair of bang-bang-you’re-dead.

Both killings are anything but careless or businesslike. Both are carried out for love, rather than out of annoyance or quotidian duty – Vincent’s love for Janey, and, though none of the reviews mention it, Vic’s love for Vincent. Just as Vincent could have turned away from his reflection outside Janey’s door instead of stepping in and firing six bullets into her pimp, so Vic could have abandoned the hit in the comic store. He’s paid his dues to Bender. Vincent will take the fall if the job isn’t done, but Vincent, of course, is across town waiting outside Janey’s room. Thus Vic carries out his first murder for the sole purpose of saving his brother’s skin, just as Vincent saved his when they were kids. Casual as he seems when he walks back out of the store, his loping walk and shades are just a façade of cool; he knows he’s going to have to call on Bender to cover his ass. He’s sold himself to Bender and by extension to Joe Cabot, just as Vincent’s killing of Tyrone will be the calling card he needs to get the job with Marcellus Wallace.

This sense of a momentous turning point – and the audience’s awareness of the brothers’ future – gives the final diner scene its underlying poignancy. On one level a light, playful riff between the two brothers, and indeed the two actors, who are clearly enjoying themselves immensely, the film’s close also carries a genuine sense of sadness. We know this return to childhood kidding is just a short-lived moment; it shows us how they were and what they could have been.

VINCENT:

[*taking a seat in the booth*]

Look at that, they got the jukebox on your table. I love that. [*He inserts a quarter and taps out three numbers on the jukebox with his index finger. Elvis Presley’s “Blue Suede Shoes” kicks in*]

Hey, you, you remember this? You remember what you used to call this, man?

VIC:

[*knows what’s coming*]

Fuck you, Vince.

VINCENT:

You remember what you used to call this, man? Maybe you’ve forgotten, in which case let me refresh your memory.

VIC:

[enjoying this despite himself]

Maybe you should save your breath before I kick your ass.

VINCENT:

Well, it's funny you should say that, Victor. Because I remember you used to think this here song was about the old "Batman" TV show.

VIC:

Is that right.

VINCENT:

That's right, Vic. And you used to shimmy your little ass around the family room singing "Bruce Wayne Shoes".

VIC:

[still laughing as his hand flashes across the table and tips the salt pot into VINCENT's lap.]

You fucking little piss ant. You know you're lying, man.

VINCENT:

[brushing himself down]

Ah, you got a temper on you, huh? Go on, Vic, give us a song. Give us a dance, man.

VIC flips him the bird.

VINCENT:

Give us a dance, c'mon.

VINCENT begins to dance to the Presley song, from his seat.

VINCENT:

Give me a dance, right here.

He keeps up the dance until we FREEZE FRAME and roll

END CREDITS

The final freeze on Travolta's beautiful sit-down dancing allows us to imagine an alternative future for the Vega brothers, but just as the still images which end *Les Quatre Cent Coups* (1959) and *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (1969) only postpone the inevitable, so we know exactly what will happen once the story rolls again: the brothers will be separated, each working for a different master, and we'll never see them together again.

George Lucas has claimed that the intention of his prequel trilogy was to make viewers feel sorry for Darth Vader when he first appears in *A New Hope*. Tarantino has achieved that for his Vega brothers; when they swagger into *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, already wearing the black suits for their own funerals, it feels like a tragedy.

Will Brooker is Assistant Professor in Communication at Richmond, the American International University in London. He is the author of *Batman Unmasked* (Continuum, 2000) and *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans* (Continuum, forthcoming Spring 2002) among others, and co-editor of the forthcoming *Audience Studies Reader* for Routledge. His current projects include a new book on Lewis Carroll's Alice.