Similarities and Difference Between the Films Psycho and Pulp Fiction

Jason T. Johnson

University of Houston Clear Lake

Abstract

The movies Psycho (1960) and Pulp Fiction (1994), have numerous differences and similarities. Some of the shared properties are: the strong acting, interesting cinematography, ambiguity of the protagonist, and shocking visuals. The differences include: the narrative structure, score, and use of dialog.

Keywords: Psycho, Pulp Fiction, Movie, Compare, Contrast, Cinematography, Narrative Structure, Score.

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The Films Psycho and Pulp Fiction are completely different films, however, they do share some very important traits.

# Common Ground

Many commonalties exist in these two films. The acting is superb, everyone involved from the sheriff in Psycho to Mia Wallace did an outstanding job. On a technical level the techniques used to shoot the film were both captivating and visually stimulating. One of the most interesting facets of the films is that neither used a standard formula for the protagonist. Finally, each made good use of shock, to captivate their respective audiences.

## Acting.

There can be little argument that these two movies had incredibly talented actors. For their work in Pulp Fiction, John Travolta, Uma Thurman, and Samuel L. Jackson were all nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor/Actress, as well as Best Actor/Actress by the Golden Globes in 1995. (“Pulp Fiction”, 2018). My personal favorite is Jackson’s portrayal of Jules. He brings some of the most memorable lines in cinema history to life.

Psycho did not produce as many accolades as Pulp Fiction, however, Janet Leigh was nominated by the Academy Awards for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her depiction of Marion Crane. (“Psycho”, 2018). Her quite intensity during the drive to the Bates Motel makes you feel her nervousness. Anthony Perkins did not receive much critical attention for his work in Psycho but there is no doubt that he produced one of the most memorable characterizations in cinema history. I enjoy the way he starts off as the ‘Aww shucks nice guy’, and then his façade slowly cracks and eventually is replaced by Mother.

The actors in these films drew you in, they made you believe in their characters, you could feel their highs, lows, and horror.

## Cinematography.

Both films made interesting use of camera angles and videography techniques. In Psycho the shot of Marion’s eye that transforms into the drain, was a great concept. One thing that I kept noticing during Psycho was how good the film quality looked. Using black and white film was a great choice for the story. It added in a vintage/found footage feel that Hitchcock was looking for. Everything was nicely lit and all the shots looked “smooth”.

Pulp Fiction did many things that were interesting as it relates to how shots were set up and the angels that were used. One of the more famous shots was the over the shoulder of Butch as he talks with Marsellus. It is not that an over the shoulder shot would be strange or striking, just that the Cinematographer Andrzej Sekula decided to have the camera focus on the back of Marsellus head and have Butch out of focus. Not only was this an interesting set up but it was also held for a good amount of time. It added mystery to Marsellus, and has caused fan boys to debate for decades what the Band-Aid was for. (“Refractions”, 2014). Also, of note is the many low angle shots, such as the one from the trunk when Vincent and Jules are retrieving their weapons. All these shots give power to the characters and makes them more threatening.

## Protagonist.

Both movies have a bit of ambiguity when it comes to who the main Protagonist is. In Psycho you really don’t meet Norman Bates, the true Protagonist, until a third of the way into the movie. The character who you think is the lead, Marion, is killed shortly after Norman is introduced. Hitchcock used this to show the audience that anything could happen next. “Imagine the unthinkable, killing off a major star in the first portion of the film. No one had ever done that; few have done it since.” (Siegel, 2000).

In Pulp Fiction, the lead actor is cited as John Travolta. His character Vincent Vega has more screen time than the rest of the cast, but not by much. Add this to the fact that the story is presented in a non-linier fashion and it quite confusing as to who the focal point of the movie is.

## Shock.

In the landscape of media today, we can find shocking imaging by the thousands. Just run a search on Worldstar.com or YouTube.com and you can find examples of violence in any form. Main stream film has also become more outrageous, with R rated movies like Deadpool making millions at the box office. However, it was not always like this. In the 1960s having something as mundane as a toilet was considered taboo.

Psycho goes all in with the shock value from the opening scene. The first shot of the actors is a bedroom scene, that has both Marion and John shirtless. It is also quite apparent that both had just completed making love. This must have been scandalous, for the time period. Psycho is credited as being the first American film to show a toilet. The bathroom was considered to risqué for film, Hitchcock thought that was ridiculous and “screenwriter Joseph Stefano was equally keen to unsettle audiences in preparation for the next shocking scene: ‘we’re going to start by showing you the toilet and it’s only going to get worse.’ Cue screaming violins.” (Shields, 2017). Not only did Psycho give us insinuated sex scenes, toilets, graphic violence, and women in the shower, it concludes with talk of transvestites amongst other psychological disorders. It cannot be doubted that for the average moviegoer in 1960 they were in for something they had never experienced before.

While not on the same level as Psycho, Pulp Fiction was also quite shocking for its time. The movie takes you on a wild ride of murder, crime, drug use, and rape. The first time I watched Pulp Fiction I was around 15. I can remember seeing it at home on VHS and thinking I have never watched something so cool. With loads of violence, adrenalin shots to the heart and homosexual rapists being killed with samurai sword I was wide eyed and enraptured. However, many of those of the more conservative nature felt it was over the top and bloody.

# Opposition

These movies have many similarities; however, they contain many elements that set them apart from one another. The score is substantially unlike, along with the use of the dialog. The greatest difference as a whole is the narrative progression.

## Score.

As it relates to the music used in both films, they could not be more dissimilar. Psycho uses a symphonic score, while Pulp Fiction uses funky eclectic songs from several genres.

Psycho is well known for its string only score, it gives the move an agitated feel. It makes the hair on your neck tingle. At times it can make the most mundane task intense. Take for example the scene of Marion drive on the highway. Without the music it would just be a stroll on a nice day, but add in the strings and the audience is forced into feeling her desperation. Without the music much of the movie would lack punch and passion. Other than the shower scene and the final scene in the basement, the move drags a bit. However just when you are comfortable the strings come screeching in. Alerting you to the quite danger that dwells at the periphery.

In stark contrast to this you have the score of Pulp Fiction which “is largely built around 60s surf tunes” (Mike, & Pizzo, 2014). When I was a teenager, I not only used my hard-earned money to buy a VHS copy of Pulp Fiction, but I also owned a copy of the soundtrack. It included well known songs like Let’s Stay Together, and Jungle Boogie, along with unknown songs like Son of a Preacher Man and Lonesome Town. It featured a list of songs that any hipster would be proud of. Tarantino used the music in the film to make viewer feel at ease. When watching Pulp Fiction, the music is funky and noticeable, but not overwhelming like it can be in Psycho at time. The mix of songs included in the film help set the tone, they do not force you into feeling something like the string in Psycho, they merely easy you into the setting, then gently fade into obscurity.

## Dialog.

I find that both movies make different use of the dialog. On one hand Pulp Fiction uses it to expand the personalities of the characters and to add interest to what would be the mundane. On the other hand, Psycho primarily uses it to drive the story forward. In fact, the only scene with any real depth in Psycho is the scene in the bordello. While eating Marion and Norman talk about his taxidermy hobby. It not only foreshadows the ending, but it also gives insight into the inner thoughts of both actors. When Norman says “we’re all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out.”, he is giving the audience a glimpse of the conflict within (Hitchcock, 1960). Other than this scene I find most of the conversations very shallow and only there to keep the story moving forward.

By contrast, Pulp Fiction uses the dialog to compliment the story. Many of the conversations on the surface are idle blather, but they are really used to give the view a deeper understanding of the characters. The discussions in the film are part of what make the movie so great, it draws the viewer into the movie and makes them feel familiar. The conversations in the film remind us of how we interact with our friends and acquittances. Not only is the dialog important to the fabric of the film it added that extra layer of cool. Most people can recall many of the lines from the film after just one viewing. Think about how many lines we can quote just from the scene in Brett’s apartment, “Check out the Big brain on Brett.” “Say 'what' again. Say 'what' again, I dare you, I double dare you motherfucker, say what one more Goddamn time!”, “And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy My brothers.”. Or other memorable lines like: “Zed's dead, baby. Zed's dead.”, “The night of the fight, you may feel a slight sting. That's pride fucking with you. Fuck pride. Pride only hurts, it never helps.” “Five long years, he wore this watch up his ass” (Tarantino, 1995). Even as I write these, I can hear the actors’ voices in my mind. Tarantino crafted some of the most memorable lines in movie history. His ability to make the mundane interesting is what sets this movie apart from other films that have copied Pulp Fictions formula.

## Narrative.

Out of all the elements in each of these films the narrative structure is the most dissimilar. Pulp Fiction is non-linier, while Psycho has a very straight forward story.

The scene sequence in Pulp Fiction is non-liner, meaning that the story has no true beginning and end. It is closer to a loop than a line. In his interview with Charly Rose, Tarantino makes the point that there is no reason that this form of storytelling should be shocking or considered odd, just that movies did not regularly have a non-linier structure He illustrates this point by saying, “If I had ever written Pulp Fiction as a novel and I was on your show you would never even remotely bring it up. The structure.” (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). The first time I watched the movie I was a bit confused and a little off balance. I had never really seen a move that was edited in that way. I had seen flashbacks in movies or possibly a movie that used *in medias res*, but nothing like this. The films style spawned many copycat works, as other filmmakers saw that it was viable to make a move that did not go from point A to Z. (Staff, 2014). While it was not the first or last film to use a non-linier style of storytelling it can be crowned as the most influential.

If Pulp Fiction is a winding road full of roundabouts and turns, then Psycho is the fast lane of a freeway. It has a very tradition linear narrative structure. It takes you through several states of conflict and resolution to a thermal end. At no time watching Psycho does a viewer feel lost or confused. Each character that is introduced as some purpose and almost all dialog spoke builds the story or expands a character. There is nothing wrong with these aspects of narrative in general, but when compared to Pulp Fiction it seems a little cut and dry.

# Conclusion

Both Pulp Fiction and Psycho are some of the greatest film in history and were influential in shaping the way moves were made during their respective periods. Both have many similarities such as the outstanding acting, the significant cinematography techniques, and were able to shock their respective audiences. However, they differ greatly in narrative, dialog, and score. Both filmmakers are Hollywood legends and deserve their due respect. Hitchcock’s focus was on the shock of the film. On crafting a movie that left people rattled. On the other hand, Tarantino felt that sequencing was a key aspect in making a film interesting. He combined hip dialog with eclectic music, chopped it all up and presented the viewer with one of the best films in history.

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