

Martin Rossouw

Loyalty, women and ‘business’: ideological hyper-values in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp fiction*

First submission: 8 January 2013

Acceptance: Date: 20 August 2013

This article challenges claims of nihilism and moral relativism in the narrative world of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp fiction* (1994) by identifying three sets of recurring values which, in addition to being markers of the film’s version of ‘gangster morality’, appears to inspire the film narrative on a variety of levels. The film’s presentation of ‘gangster values’ (professionalism, respect and loyalty), values related to ‘care of women’ and ‘economicism’ – including ‘buying’ (consumerism) and ‘doing business’ (commercialism) – are shown to be continually at work in its three interweaving storylines. This article seeks to show how the film mobilises these values as ideological ‘hyper-values’ which, by being excessively privileged ideals, dominate and distort other legitimate values and goals. It concludes by considering hegemonic relations between these ‘hyper-values’ and illustrates the distinct dominance of economicism within this triad of ideological sets of values.

Mr. M P Rossouw, Research Associate, Department of Philosophy, University of the Free State, PO Box 392, Bloemfontein 9301; Email: platolanie@gmail.com



Acta Academica
2013 45(4): 84-118
ISSN 0587-2405
© UV/UFS
<<http://www.ufs.ac.za/ActaAcademica>>

SUN M^oDIA
BLOEMFONTEIN

In the twenty years since the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp fiction* (1994), the film has time and again been celebrated as an iconic postmodern film. It certainly boasts the full 'postmodern' package: from its adventurously blurred genre boundaries and fragmented, non-linear narrative to its indulgence in spectacle and surface which yields a near infinity of intertextual references (or 'Tarantinian homage'). Yet, while I gladly acknowledge all of the above, I find it difficult to agree with those who assume that its postmodern features also extend to ethical-moral aspects of the film. Olivier (2002: 160-72), for example, notes that "... a certain amorality or moral indifference pervades the film ..." (Olivier 2002: 160), adding that the moral issues that are raised - such as whether giving the boss's wife a foot massage is permissible - are at best "pseudo-morality" (Olivier 2002: 160, 169). In the characters' "... curiously amoral universe ..." (Olivier 2002: 163), distinctions between the normal and the abnormal, the lawful and the criminal, as well as the moral and the immoral disappear.¹ Whalen (1995: 2-3) claims that the little moral consciousness that may exist in the artificial, "two-dimensional universe" of *Pulp fiction*, "... is used more as a plot device than as a theme or issue important to the character's understanding of himself". Likewise Conard (2006: 125, 127) finds that *Pulp fiction* is about "American nihilism". The existential vacuum in which the characters find themselves results from the "... absence of any kind of foundation for making value judgements ..." and the fact that, apart from power structures, there are "... no other criteria available to them by which to order their lives ..." (Conard 2006: 128).

A host of commentators have, however, challenged such conclusions and, in various ways, released Tarantino from the label of moral nihilism.² The analysis that follows will be yet another voice

- 1 Olivier (2002:161, 171) maintains that the moral 'grey areas' that pervade the narrative world of *Pulp Fiction* is an extension of the more general inclination of postmodernist artefacts towards the destruction of boundaries and distinctions (such as those between traditional fictional genres).
- 2 Davis & Womack (1998), for example, argues that the film's 'ethics of redemption' belies superficial evaluations of the film as "*morally vacuous*" (1998:60); while Nanay & Schnee (2007:2907) manages to find Nietzschean reasons for denouncing the view that *Pulp Fiction* is an amoral film that simply celebrates violence for its own sake. Spence's (2007:853, 902) findings on the same issue in Tarantino's directorial debut, *Reservoir Dogs*, are just as applicable. He argues

in support of some ethical-moral dimension at play in *Pulp fiction* specifically, by elucidating the fundamental reality of the values that inspire manifestations of morality in the film. I will argue that the characters constantly resort to three distinct sets (or kinds) of values. The first is a related set of ‘gangster values’: professionalism, respect and, in particular, loyalty; the second is a set of values that can best be summed up as ‘care of women’, and the third is a set of values that I will broadly characterise as ‘economicism’. Instead of attempting to prove that *Pulp fiction* espouses a certain ‘morality’, or even moral theory, my intention is rather to clarify the implicit values that motivate the moral rules and judgements which the characters appear to have in common. Yet the sets of values that I will identify go beyond representing three major ethical-moral reference points in the film – they will also be shown to, fundamentally, inform a variety of the actions, views and arguments that make up this particular narrative world.³

1. Hyper-values and ideology

This article contributes to considerations of the moral status of *Pulp fiction* (and perhaps Tarantino’s work, in general) by seeking to illustrate that the film’s leading values are not at all as inconsistent and relative as amoralist-prone exegetes of Tarantino’s would expect them to be. Indeed, the likes of Vincent (John Travolta), Jules (Samuel L Jackson),

that, while Tarantino’s protagonists in *Reservoir Dogs* appear to be amoral, making up their own rules as they go along, he in fact fails to successfully depict an amoral universe as the film is unavoidably pervaded by morality: “*They feel moral impulses and pressures, they think morally, they debate moral points, and they have a moral code... The Dogs pass judgment on one another’s character, they explain actions that need explaining, and justify actions when we expect someone to justify an action* (Spence 2007: 904-1004). Regarding Tarantino’s career as a whole, Russell (2007: 250) maintains that Tarantino’s films consistently present glimpses of morality (and even compassion) among the characters that fill them. And Greene & Silem Mohammad (2007:198) identifies the *irony of ethical standards* within criminal circles as a recurring theme throughout his work.

- 3 By using ‘ethics’ or ‘morality’ interchangeably, or speaking of an ‘ethico-moral’ aspect, I will not concern myself with the well-known distinction between ethics as dealing with ‘the good’ and morality as dealing with ‘the right’. Since guiding values are at work in both ethics and morality, in these accepted senses, this distinction is unimportant in the current context.

Butch (Bruce Willis) and Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) may exhibit a strange, muddled prioritisation of values. However, this is no reason to conclude that their actions and aspirations are born from pure contingency. Quite contrarily, I hope to account for what I find to be a consistent prioritisation of (certain) values by approaching the latter as being ideological in nature. I will, more specifically, make use of Visagie's (1996, 1998) notion of dominating 'hyper-values' to characterise how these values act as recurring ideological role players in the narrative world of *Pulp fiction*. According to this critical perspective, ideological culture results from the discursive promotion of certain autonomised values relating to different spheres and levels of society, such as science, technology, capitalism, statehood, nationalism, ethnicity, and so on above other legitimate ideals and norms. The 'subjected' values in this relation are invalidated, losing their own relative autonomy and authority (Visagie 1998: 132). Values, norms, goals or actions thus become ideological ('hyper-values') when they dominate other equally legitimate values to such an extent that a certain 'colonisation', 'infiltration' and distortion of the latter occurs (see Visagie & Pretorius 1993: 54, Viljoen & Visagie 2010: 3-4).

A perspective that essentially qualifies ideology as the unwarranted, criticisable absolutisation of a value or ideal puts us in a position to appreciate how the leading values in *Pulp fiction* are specifically staged as ideological hyper-values. The narrative repeatedly relates how certain values subordinate various other values and norms to themselves, while they remain privileged viewpoints from which the subjected values are interrogated and ultimately determined.⁴ Morality – to take an especially relevant example in light of my discussion up to this point – turns out to be a frequent target of such ideological domination in the film. Moral conduct has to constantly answer to the demands of dominating values such as gang loyalty or the logic of economic transaction. The ideological infiltration of morality is such that being moral, *per se*, is often construed as simply ascribing

4 Note that such relations of domination also emerge between different ideological hyper-values themselves (see Section 5.3). This approach thus allows for complex hierarchies and orders of absolutisation among different dominance-seeking hyper-values. As a result a hyper-value is, technically, only 'absolute' in relation to subordinate values, while its 'absolutised' ideological status remains relative to other competing hyper-values.

to such hyper-values. Similarly, the film's hyper-values will also be shown to penetrate and dictate the nature of meaningfulness, identity, interpersonal interaction and even the taken-for-granted ordinariness of certain behaviours.

This analysis is not intended to be a critical account of ideology in the film. It is first and foremost an attempt at explaining the peculiar narrative world of *Pulp fiction* by specifically addressing the functioning of values in the film. As a result, my article will also have a strong diegetic- or 'narrative-internal' focus. I do not in any way consider this to be an exhaustive account of the film, nor of the values that underpin it. One obvious reason for this is that my analysis brings a very specific concern with the role of ideological values to the table: in what ways do hyper-values contribute to, not only its particular ethical-moral profile, but also how this film narrative plays out as a whole? The notion of ideological hyper-values, as an analytical 'tool', therefore reveals a certain interpretative path along which a much analysed film can be further explored.

Although it will not feature formally in my *modus operandi*, my interpretation of hyper-values will involve the investigation of different narrative 'levels' of *Pulp fiction*. What I take to be significant hyper-values are, first, inferred from the characters' basic actions, or motivations; secondly, they manifest in distinctive characteristics and qualities of both the characters and the narrative locations within which they operate; thirdly, they are apparent in the opinions and views that the characters voice, and, lastly, they can also be derived from the discursive features that the narrator (of the screenplay, on which I will focus) employs. Following Auxier (2007: 2234), discussions of each value theme will circulate through 'Vince's story', 'Butch's story' and 'Jules' story', respectively. These 'stories' do not necessarily correspond to the film's demarcation of its three main vignettes.⁵ In the spirit of the film's own temporal play, my identification of hyper-values in *Pulp fiction* will, therefore, not be according to the chronological or the narrated order of events. For this reason, I have to assume the reader to be familiar with the narrative at hand.

5 Auxier (2007:2221-2235) makes this practical distinction on the grounds of the narrative playing out on three different days, with each of the characters' stories being mainly set in one of the three respective days.

2. Gangster values

While *Pulp fiction* undoubtedly represents an adventurous mix of cinematic genres, one would not be unjustified in calling it a 'gangster film'. We are given an often humorous look at a criminal underworld populated by drug dealers, black-suited hit men, a powerful 'Godfather-meets-the-ghetto'-like crime boss, his mistress and some 'associates'. We are also presented with a unique version of 'gangster morality' or 'codes' that hinge on three ideological values: professionalism, respect and loyalty. It should be noted that we are not dealing with the likes of professionalism and loyalty in the ordinary sense, but as they manifest uniquely within the film's implied lifeworld of gangsterism. The representation of these values, although sometimes comically exaggerated, bears a close resemblance to real gang life. For example, the general code that governs members of organised Sicilian-American criminal groups – a code often called *omerta* or 'manliness' – first and foremost requires obedience to superiors and a pledge of secrecy. The code also typically includes a commitment to loyalty, respect and honour: "do not interfere in others' interests", "be loyal to fellow members", "do not sell others out" (Schmallegger 1996: 359-61). Since organised crime has certain universal demands, one can, in fact, expect values along these lines to feature among career criminals anywhere in the world (see Schmallegger 1996: 361).

2.1 Professionalism

The most playfully 'Tarantinian' of the three gangster values is that of professionalism – a theme which *Pulp fiction* appears to inherit from its predecessor, *Reservoir dogs* (1992). The latter – Tarantino's directorial debut – portrays a group of gangsters who repeatedly appeal to professionalism in trying to evaluate and influence each other's actions (Spence 2007: 956-8). Yet, as Weinberger (2004: 47) points out, *Reservoir dogs* does not so much hone in on the aspects of employment or expertise that being 'professional' implies, but more specifically on one's ability to strictly subordinate emotional involvements, personal preferences as well as the views of family friends and colleagues to the demands of your work.⁶ This vision of 'the professional' – as

6 Weinberger (2004:49-50) analyses *Reservoir Dogs* in terms of the characters' struggle to maintain the professionalism that their botched heist demands and

someone who is not merely capable and meticulous, but one who can especially maintain a Stoic kind of detachment from ‘getting personal’ – spills over into *Pulp fiction*. Professionalism’s requirement to not get emotionally involved is clearly under fire, to name but one thing, when Vincent Vega has to withhold himself from overstepping the line with his boss’ alluring wife, Mia (Uma Thurman). Having just killed his boxing opponent, Butch Coolidge apathetically appeals to professionalism in a passing excuse, saying “... if he was a better fighter, he’d be alive ...” (Tarantino 1999: 95). In addition, before their breakfast ‘hit’ on Brett (Frank Whaley) and his friends, Jules calmly tells Vince to “get into character”, allowing for the necessary ‘distance’ that professionalism demands from the executioners.⁷ In these instances, sober professionalism, as a hyper-value, defines the moral and even overrules the legal. In ‘the Bonnie situation’, viewers are introduced to the tuxedo-clad Winston Wolf (‘The Wolf’) who seems to be Marsellus Wallace’s go-to-guy for ‘special situations’. He is the arch-professional, displaying detailed note-taking, strict time-keeping and a cut-the-nonsense-business-only demeanour, for which Vincent and Jules have the highest respect.

2.2 Respect

In the case of Vincent and Jules’ dealings with The Wolf, their appreciation for professionalism invokes respect as a second discernable gangster value in *Pulp fiction*. Initially, in ‘the Bonnie situation’, Vincent fosters a short-lived expectation of reciprocal respect: when The Wolf takes control and starts dishing out orders, Vince tells him that, “A ‘please’ would be nice” (Tarantino 1999: 156). When The Wolf replies that he is not there to say ‘please’, but to resolve their situation, Vince concedes: “I don’t mean any disrespect. I just don’t like people barkin’ orders at me” (Tarantino 1999: 156). However, it does not take long for the greater professional to command the greater respect.

finds that Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi), while arguably being the most unlikeable of the group of gangsters, is the only character whose professionalism endures to the very end.

7 The film drops a portion of the original script’s dialogue at this point. Here Jules orders Vincent for a second time to “*get into character*” and when Vincent refuses to let the issue under discussion go, he dismissively tells him to “... *get yourself together like a qualified pro*” (Tarantino 1999:24).”

When parting their way with The Wolf, Jules tells him that, "It was a pleasure watchin' you work" (Tarantino 1999: 169). By way of a reply, The Wolf banter with his girlfriend, Raquel: "You hear that young lady? Respect. You could learn a lot from those two fine specimens. Respect for one's elders shows character" (Tarantino 1999: 169). We note that, much more than his seniority, it is The Wolf's ability, even power, that commands the characters' respect.⁸

The boxer, Butch Coolidge, on the other hand, suffers a lack of precisely this respect from people such as Marsellus Wallace. When buying Butch over to lose his title fight, Marsellus Wallace gives him a mouthful about his boxing career being over and how, on that night, Butch should fight his own pride. Shortly thereafter, Vincent rejects him as a 'palooka', straight to his face. But Butch, apparently motivated by this lack of respect, gets to turn the tables (see Ager 2009). At a point, he tells himself: "That's how you're gonna beat 'em, Butch. They keep underestimatin' ya" (Tarantino 1999: 118). Not only does he outwit Wallace, 'key' (scratch with a key) Vincent's car (see Nanay & Schnee 2007: 3024),⁹ kill Vincent¹⁰ and ultimately get away with it all, but by turning back to save Wallace from some sadistic redneck rapists, Butch ultimately wins some real respect from his enemy.

- 8 Just before The Wolf enters 'the Bonnie situation', Jules and Vince's argument in Jimmy's bathroom also highlights the value of respect. Jules pleads that they should respect Jimmy's predicament ("Jimmy's my friend and you don't bust into your friend's house and tell tellin' 'im what's what."), while Vince, who experiences Jimmy as "abusive", would arguably like some more respect (Tarantino 1999:145). Jules then again pleads with Vince not to put him in a difficult situation with his friend Jimmy, adding he is not threatening, because he respects Vincent (Tarantino 1999:146). Here we thus see a high regard for *friendship* (instead of ability or power) which motivates respect.
- 9 "The fact is hard to catch in the final cut of the film, but in both the script and a scene filmed but eventually deleted we see Vincent parking his car next to Butch's while Butch is at Marsellus' bar. Butch, then, is getting back at Vincent for calling him a 'palooka' (Nanay & Schnee 2007:3024-3028)."
- 10 The screenplay narrator tells us that, after killing Vincent Vega, Butch places the M61 back on the kitchen counter with "the respect it deserves" (Tarantino 1999:118). This phrase inadvertently reminds of the lack of respect Vega had for Butch earlier on, also suggesting that he underestimated the dangerous 'palooka' to his own demise.

2.3 Loyalty

Probably the strongest gangster value at work in *Pulp fiction* is that of loyalty. As with professionalism, this value reaches far beyond the film as but one world in Tarantino's entire narrative universe. Once again, *Reservoir dogs* beats the path, as the film builds to a climactic 'Mexican stand-off' that revolves around the question of loyalty (see Auxier 2007: 2276-84, Spence 2007: 989-90, Johnson 2007: 1100). When it comes to loyalty in *Pulp fiction*, commentators tend to single out the character Vincent Vega (see Russell 2007: 318, Auxier 2007: 2348-57, 2361-2). Auxier (2007: 2248-57) goes as far as arguing that Vincent is the film's main character, and that loyalty is the key to understanding his story (Auxier 2007: 2350-66). He is admittedly the only character that explicitly voices the importance of loyalty. When he takes Mia Wallace out, as a duty to Marsellus Wallace, tension builds as he is clearly attracted to this *femme fatale* of sorts. But the true crisis is not to have dangerous, illicit sex. Nor is his primary aspiration to uphold professionalism or respect for his boss. In terms of gangster morals, the right course of action in this situation is first and foremost determined by *loyalty*. Back at the Wallace residence after their dinner date, Vince excuses himself to the bathroom, where he engages in self-dialogue: "... it's a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful" (Tarantino 1999: 69). It is also conceivable that Marsellus, fully cognisant of the factors involved in this instance, is intentionally using all of this as a test of Vincent's loyalty (see Auxier 2007: 2339). Ironically, it is only Mia's accidental overdose that saves Vince from failing his test. Why this concern with loyalty? We may say that a certain legacy is at stake in Vince's desire to maintain loyalty. Auxier (2007: 2258-9) points out that it is well known in Tarantinian 'folklore' that the intimidating gangster Vic Vega (Michael Madsen), in *Reservoir dogs*, is Vincent Vega's older brother. In *Reservoir dogs*, Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney) and Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn) are certain of Vic Vega's loyalty, because he previously spent years in prison to protect them. For this reason, they are convinced that Orange, Vic's killer, is the undercover detective and would rather die than let Orange get away with it. Already in *Reservoir dogs*, loyalty, as the Vega family honour, takes up its place in Tarantino's movie universe (Auxier 2007: 2277-81). But, Auxier adds,

while loyalty comes easy for Vic Vega, it is more difficult for the weak-willed Vincent (Auxier 2007: 2282).

There are signs pointing to how loyalty adopts a similar place in Jules' conduct. While we are offered only a glimpse into Jules and Jimmy's friendship, there is evidence of a mutual loyalty between them. If the 'Bonnie situation' is indeed as serious a risk as the characters make it out to be, then Jimmy shows the world's loyalty to Jules by offering temporary storage for a corpse in a blood-splattered car. Likewise, Jules not wanting to "fuck Jimmy's shit up" is indicative of loyal friendship (see Tarantino 1999: 144, 149). But Jules' loyalty also surfaces in his work. When held up in the coffee shop by Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) and Pumpkin (Tim Roth) he refuses to surrender the mysterious briefcase that is to be delivered to his boss, risking his life to do so. He is loyally committed to finishing the job, and this even after he has decided to quit the gangster life (Auxier 2007: 2351).¹¹

In turning to the theme of loyalty in Butch's story, it must be said that the boxer (despite obvious links with the underworld) is not altogether a gangster. While he generally buys into the same values as his gangster 'associates', his individual history brings a different kind of loyalty to the fore. Or, put differently, we are now presented with ironising comparisons of the same value in a different sphere.¹² For Butch, loyalty is inextricably tied to his family history, which, unlike the Vegas, involves a proud lineage of American war heroes. In 'The gold watch', we first see Butch as a five-year-old boy, being visited by Captain Koons, who was with his father when he passed away in a Vietnamese POW camp. The reason for Captain Koons's visit is to give Butch his father's gold watch. The watch - which has been passed down among four generations of war heroes - is a symbol of the strength, courage and honour that characterises Butch's family history. By being a boxer, 'Battling Butch Coolidge' (as printed on the back of his boxing robe) can, at least, in a way, continue the proud legacy of his warring predecessors (Ager 2009).

11 Even references to *brotherhood* in Jules' recitation of 'Ezekiel 25:17' can be reflective of a gangster loyalty-ethic (see Tarantino 1999:32, 186-187).

12 My identification of loyalty in Butch's story draws heavily on an insightful analysis by Ager (2009), although he does not mention the value of loyalty as such.

It is only when his girlfriend, Fabienne (Maria de Medeiros), forgets to bring the gold watch along to their hide-out (from Marsellus Wallace) that Butch has the opportunity to truly affirm the ideals of his heroic ancestry. He throws all caution to the wind and goes back to his apartment to fetch the family watch; by going back, he displays a certain courage and honour similar to that of his forefathers (Ager 2009).¹³ Yet his refusal to lose the watch (much like Jules and his boss' briefcase) is also a display of loyalty – loyalty to the proud, heroic Coolidges before him. As Butch tells himself, in a portion of self-dialogue that was cut from the completed film, "... there are certain things in this world that are worth going back for" (Tarantino 1999: 115).

It is ironic that Marsellus Wallace turns out to be something worth turning back for. As Captain Koons explained to the young Butch earlier on, "... when two men are in a situation like me and your Daddy were, for as long as we were, you take on certain responsibilities for the other" (Tarantino 1999: 85). Similarly, Butch develops a certain loyalty towards Marsellus because, once he manages to escape from their prison of sado-masochist rape, "Butch decides for the life of him, he can't leave anybody in a situation like that" (Tarantino 1999: 128). Having to choose a weapon whereby to save Marsellus, Butch decides on a samurai sword which, the screenplay narrator tells us, hangs next to a neon sign "DAD'S OLD FASHIONED ROOT BEER" (Tarantino 1999: 128). The visual narration at this juncture makes the symbolism even more obvious: on the wall farthest from the camera there is a big yellow clock with the word 'DAD' on it, one of at least six wall clocks that are significantly shown at this point (Ager 2009). In showing a certain loyalty or commitment to Marsellus, by going back and saving him, Butch is ultimately remaining loyal to the memory of his father.

13 Ager (2009) craftily illustrates how the events that follow also parallel actual war experiences of his father. Diegetic sound during Butch's retrieval of the gold watch, for instance, connotes how Butch is moving into a 'war zone', as is made apparent by his ensuing street war with Wallace. Also, like Captain Koons and Butch's father were together in the 'Hanoi pit of hell' (the Vietnamese POW camp), Butch and Marsellus experience their own 'pit of hell' in the form of the dubious Pawn shop basement where they are held captive. Even the anal rape portrayed there reminds us of how Butch's father managed to keep the gold watch out of sight.

In loyalty we thus perceive, as with professionalism and respect, a certain hyper-value at work in the narrative world of *Pulp fiction*. It is a legitimate norm, transformed into an overriding, even unquestionable, ideal that determines the characters' actions and, by doing so, automatically qualifies those actions as being right. However, in order to further appreciate the ideological dimensions of the film's gangster values, more insight will be provided later into the broader value context staged in the film.

3. Care of women

The somewhat elusive group of values that I tentatively label as 'care of women' is never explicitly voiced, but can be reconstructed from a few recurring rules on which all the characters seem to be particularly clear: 'look after a woman', 'keep a woman happy' and 'keep your hands off someone else's woman' – in particular if the name, Marsellus Wallace, is involved. The core value that is arguably at work in this instance is simply that women are of value, which manifests in a variety of corresponding measures to take care of/with women. For a film in which women are called "bitches" (see Tarantino 1999: 74, 181), this commitment to the care of women is not as out of place as it may initially seem. The general code of Sicilian Mafia families, mentioned earlier, typically includes respect for both your elders and women (see Schmalleger 1996: 360). It appears that this respect is demanded especially by a woman's status as someone's woman. An inductee to Philadelphia's Sicilian-American Scarfo gang described this aspect of the family's rules in the strictest of terms: "No fooling with a member's wife. You can't even look at another guy's wife. That's automatic death" (Schmalleger 1996: 360). While this value may thus be perceived as an extension of gangster values, its pertinent presence in the film warrants my treating it as a hyper-value in its own right.

3.1 Care of women in Vince's story

Vincent's story, to begin with, more or less revolves around him carrying out Marsellus Wallace's order "... to take care of Mia" (Tarantino 1999: 22). Since Marsellus is leaving for Florida, Vincent explains to Jules that he has to take her out, show her a good time and make sure that she does not get lonely. "It ain't a date", he maintains – it is about

offering good company (Tarantino 1999: 22). This scenario abounds with the moral imperatives set by the value of taking care of women: Marsellus, like any good underworld-boss husband, wants to look after his woman, and does so by getting Vincent to keep her happy; Vincent, in turn, has to literally fight for his own life in showing the necessary respect that the attractive Mia is “the big man’s wife” (Tarantino 1999: 22).

Prior to sharing this news with Jules, the two had a debate as to whether Marsellus was justified in throwing a certain Antwan Rockamora over a four-storey balcony into a glass greenhouse – just for giving the boss’ wife a foot massage (Tarantino 1999: 18-22). The humorous disagreement centres on what constitutes overstepping the line. Jules feels that Wallace overreacted, whereas Vince is of the opinion that Rockamora “... had to expect a reaction ...”, even if it was only a foot massage (Tarantino 1999: 22). Yet we should not overlook the *a priori* agreement upon which the dispute proceeds. It appears to be a pure and simple given, in both men’s minds, that when you do, in fact, overstep the line (in some agreed upon way), hard-handed retribution (of whatever debatable extent) is fully deserved. While both men may concede that Marsellus’s action was not right (see Johnson 2007: 1319-32), the higher value infringed nonetheless permits revenge: “That’s his fucking wife, man. He ain’t gonna have a sense of humor about that shit. You know what I’m saying?” (Tarantino 1999: 22)¹⁴ Later, when Mia confronts Vincent over the reasonableness of the Tony Rockamora foot-massage myth, Vincent clearly withdraws his position when he grants that the tale seemed excessive. He most probably does this to avoid making the (boss’s) woman upset and thereby, like all of the other main characters, tries to keep the woman happy. Yet little does he realise that his pursuit to keep Mia happy will, later that evening, become a matter of keeping her alive.

3.2 Care of women in Butch’s story

The rough and tough Butch also goes to baffling lengths to please his petite yet demanding French girlfriend, Fabienne. As soon as he enters the motel room hideout where she waits, he turns soft and gentle,

14 In this debate Jules also shows something of a reverence for women by referring to a vagina as the “*holiest of holies*” (Tarantino 1999:20).

set only on making Fabienne comfortable. He immediately switches the light off and climbs into bed when she wants to 'make spoons'. Auxier (2007: 2311) points out how Butch, "... dangerous though he is [...] puts up with whining from Fabienne that none of us would begin to tolerate". The script dictates that when he speaks to her, they speak in "baby talk" (Tarantino 1999: 97). In addition, Butch seems to give everything in his power to maintain this gentleness towards Fabienne: when, of all the things she could have forgotten, she forgets his father's watch, Butch bursts out in anger. He punches the air and throws the motel TV against the wall, leaving Fabienne shrieking in horror, backing up into a corner. But then Butch suddenly calms down, forgives her, and kisses her hand (Tarantino 1999: 110-1). We are, of course, well aware that he is purposefully suppressing his rage. He shouts and curses in frustration as soon as he is alone (Tarantino 1999: 113). Later, when Butch returns (from his morning ordeal with Marsellus) to fetch Fabienne, he impatiently yells at the deliberate girl, prompting her to start crying. Again the brawny boxer overcompensates in his commitment to look after his woman: he softens up, goes into "baby talk" mode and even makes small talk about how her breakfast turned out (Tarantino 1999: 134).

3.3 Care of women in Jules' story

The commitment to a woman's happiness and well-being is, however, never as apparent as in the 'Bonnie situation', in the middle of Jules' story. The 'Bonnie situation' arises when Jules and Vince are forced to take cover in Jimmy's home with a bloody corpse in their car. The cold-blooded gangsters, ironically, go to the greatest of lengths to avoid a situation that will upset Jimmy's wife. She will be home from work within an hour and will not look kindly on a corpse in her and Jimmy's garage (Tarantino 1999: 144). In a state of panic, Jules calls Marsellus Wallace. Much to our surprise, his boss, sitting in a comfortable bathrobe (like Jimmy) having breakfast with his wife, has sympathy for the 'explosiveness' of the situation and even sends for the highly professional services of The Wolf (Tarantino 1999: 149-50). Likewise, The Wolf never questions the apparent severity of the 'Bonnie situation'. Prior to the 'Bonnie situation', we are given a hint that Jules himself is no stranger to making sacrifices for the sake of a satisfied woman: he mentions that, although he loves the taste of a

good burger, he is ‘more or less’ a vegetarian, because his girlfriend is a vegetarian (Tarantino 1999: 26).¹⁵ In his loyal friend Jimmy, we see evidence of this value being of overriding importance. “Now I wanna help ya out Julie, I really do – but I ain’t gonna lose my wife doin’ it”, he says in a panicky outburst, adding that there is nothing that Jules can say that is going to make him forget that he loves his wife (Tarantino 1999:148). Although Jimmy clearly values loyalty to his friend in need, seeing to it that his wife stays happy (and that she, in fact, remains his wife) is ultimately of a higher priority. The resultant ‘Bonnie situation’ thus demands from Jules to also adopt this order of priority: his loyalty to Jimmy must stand in service of helping Jimmy not to lose his wife.

The unconditional care of women, as additional hyper-value in the film, not only cuts a potentially ‘macho’ male gangsterism down to size, but also presents the first glimpse of prioritisation among the film’s hyper-values – as the last mentioned example suggests. However, a much stricter hierarchy emerges in the case of economicism which will, in turn, also shed more light on the place of both gangster values and ‘care of women’ in the narrative.

4. Economicism

The most dominant of the three ideological sets of values espoused by *Pulp fiction* is a group of values belonging to the sphere of economics. I will broadly divide the ‘economicism’ governing the world of *Pulp fiction* into two kinds of hyper-values: an ideological consumerism, which involves ideals of consumption acting as a dominating end in itself, and an ideological commercialism, which results in things that are not of an essential or exclusive economic nature being infiltrated and distorted by a commercialised ‘logic’. I will make use of the metonymical labels of ‘buying’ (consumerism) and ‘doing business’ (commercialism) to refer to these two manifestations of economicism.

I refer to the likes of ‘buying’ and ‘doing business’ as ‘economicistic’ (and not merely ‘economic’) because, even more than the values

15 Even Jules’ constant efforts to calm down and reassure Honey Bunny (to “*be cool*”, “*chill*” and “*hang in there*”) during the Mexican stand-off in the coffee shop – let alone not killing her – can be seen as springing from his commitment to care of women (Tarantino 1999:181-182, 185).

identified until now, they exhibit an absolutised, ideological character. As is often said of gangsters, these values, in particular, present themselves as 'untouchable', allowing them to force subordinate ideals, rules and practices to conform to their demands. This is already apparent in the opening scene of the film where we are privy to Pumpkin and Honey Bunny's conversation about the pros and cons of various kinds of robbery. Pumpkin's reasoning straightforwardly accepts making money as an unquestioned, unrestricted good. He explains to Honey Bunny, in a very matter-of-fact way, that armed robbery is basically another way of making a living (Olivier 2002: 163). Measured purely by gain and loss, they are also absolved of any blame, since the places being robbed are insured in any case (Tarantino 1999: 9, 11).¹⁶ When economic practices become ideological, even the rather obvious legal infringement of robbery can become strictly 'business'. It is for this same reason that the riches that Butch has schemed himself into, reduce the fact that he has just killed his boxing opponent to a non-issue: "Enough about the poor, unfortunate Mr. Floyd. Let's talk about the rich and prosperous Mr. Butch" (Tarantino 1999: 95). When Vince says, "Jules, if you give this nimrod fifteen hundred bucks, I'm gonna shoot 'em on general principle" (Tarantino 1999: 186) – he thereby nearly upsets Jules' diplomatic attempt at resolving their standoff in the coffee shop – it is evident how uncomplicatedly money also sets Vince's moral agenda.

We encounter in the film's economicism, as opposed to gangster morals and taking care of women, a set of values that are not as strictly bound to criminal lifeworlds as the latter two. The social sphere of organised commercial crime itself is, of course, based on the ideal of optimal income which has turned ideological to the extent that it even opposes the law. Yet economicistic ideology has a much wider societal presence (as much in our world as, presumably, in that of the film), of which the lifeworld of the gangster is but one particular manifestation. For this reason, the ideological economic values in *Pulp fiction* are more than mere indications of a gangster morality. These values permeate the story itself. The representation

16 In *Reservoir Dogs*, incidentally, Mr. White offers exactly the same rationalisation, not only for robbing, but also for torturing uncooperative store-managers: "When you're dealing with a store like this, they're insured up the ass. They're not supposed to give you any resistance whatsoever (Spence 2007: 970-974)."

of the film's narrative world – whether through the characters' intentions and actions, narrative locations or seemingly unrelated or superfluous dialogue – consistently emphasises and affirms a concern with economic enterprise, profit-making and consumer goods. If you, for instance, consider the settings in which the story plays out, it is striking that these are, more often than not, 'places of business' (as the pawnshop hillbilly, Maynard, refers to it). The film opens and closes in a coffee shop. The 1950s themed restaurant, 'Jack Rabbit Slim's' stands central to Vincent's story, while Butch, in particular, is repeatedly presented in commercial spaces: the boxing venue, the cab, the motel room hideout and the fateful 'Mason-Dixon pawnshop'.

Another telling reflection of a narrative commitment to economicism lies in the film's abundant dialogues. Most conversations between the characters, often appearing as entertainingly irrelevant small talk, time and again disclose some economic or consumerist concern: the first conversation in the film is about the profitability of robbing different kinds of businesses (Tarantino 1999: 7-13); Vincent educates Jules on the differences between Europe and the US in terms of fast food (Tarantino 1999: 13-6); Fabienne tells Butch in unnecessarily elaborate detail about the blueberry pancakes with maple syrup, eggs over easy, five sausages, tall glass of orange juice, black cup of coffee and a slice of pie that she intends to have for breakfast (Tarantino 1999: 108). Even Mia Wallace's joke about a tomato family has wordplay on 'ketchup' as its punch line (Tarantino 1999: 83). Far from merely being postmodernist Tarantinian chit-chat, the film's dialogue more significantly references a decided ideological principle at work in the world of *Pulp fiction*. This holds, in particular, for the representation of the characters as consumers, a theme to which we will now turn our attention.

4.1 Economicism as 'buying'

The first main manifestation of *Pulp fiction*'s economicism can be broadly characterised as an ideological consumerism. The modern cultural phenomenon of consumerism, when defined in terms of ideological hyper-values, entails that the likes of buying, consumption and the ownership of things have become dominating, self-justifying ideals. These activities or goals, which I metonymically

label as 'buying', thus exhibit an overriding, distorted character. Its infiltration of other values means that 'buying' makes its appeal on the individual as an ethical imperative, needing no justification other than itself. In addition, consumerism endows what you buy and own with an inherent preciousness. As a result, consumer goods, rather than simply having a functional value, become a matter of devotion. As an ideological hyper-value, 'buying' makes spending time and effort on these goods normal, even ideal, and warrants a distinctly consumerist sense of identity, status and self-worth to be gained from it. These hyper-values also create the (often satisfied) temptation of ideologically redefining normally non-economic phenomena in consumerist terms – thus turning them into 'commodities'.

It is noticeable that *Pulp fiction* constantly presents its characters in some state of consumption. This holds especially for 'supplementary events' in the story – that is, events which are not essential to the forward movement of the narrative and without which its overall structure would remain in place (see Porter Abbott 2002: 21). In between the conflicts, mishaps and freak coincidences that mark the film's different storylines, we repeatedly witness consumers who simply eat, watch movies, listen to music, take drugs and read *Modesty Blaise* in the toilet.¹⁷ Barring Vince's dinner with Mia, having breakfast, in particular, emerges as a prominent consumerist motif: The Wolf takes his girlfriend out for breakfast; Vincent invites Jules for breakfast at a coffee shop where they run into Honey Bunny and Pumpkin who has decided, over coffee, to rob the place; Jules helps himself to Brett and his associates' fast food breakfast during their early morning hit; Jules compliments Jimmy on his coffee in the 'Bonnie situation' which also briefly shows Marsellus Wallace enjoying breakfast with his wife, and Wallace appears to have a Teriyaki Donuts breakfast-on-the-go when he runs into Butch at a traffic light. It appears that the characters value consumer goods highly and become quite upset when these get damaged. These range from the everyday, such as Jimmy's ruined towels, to the special, such as Vincent's 'keyed' Chevy Malibu. Even the screenplay narrator comes across as exercising great care,

17 While Brooker and Brooker (1996:239) identifies Vincent's visits to the bathroom as a significant narrative motif, it should be added that an opportunity to read his *Modesty Blaise* novel might be more of a motivation than the contingent call of Nature (see Tarantino 1999:117, 176).

and emphasising knowing specificity, when telling of the characters' consumptions.¹⁸

4.1.1 'Buying' in Vince's story

We witness from the outset of Vince's story how lifestyles are overrun by a dedication to consumerism. The viewer drops in on Vince telling Jules about the differences between Europe and the US. Yet it is perfectly natural, even important, to the characters that the common denominator, upon the basis of which these differences are appreciated, is fast food: you can buy a beer at a movie theatre; you can buy a beer at McDonald's in Paris; a French 'Quarter-Pounder' with cheese is a 'Royale with Cheese', and a 'Big Mac' is 'Le Big Mac'. In Holland, they put mayonnaise on French fries (Tarantino 1999: 15). Nanay & Schnee (2007: 2971) argue that, in being so concerned with the French names of McDonald's burgers, Vincent articulates a form of cultural relativism. But they overlook what the cultural differences are relative to: McDonalds. This is by far not the last time in *Pulp fiction* that the subject of food is deemed worthy of considerable attention.

A brief conversation between Vincent and Lance (Eric Stoltz), the drug dealer, furthermore illustrates how ideological consumerism sets what comes across as highly 'self-evident' moral codes in respect of the ownership of consumer goods. When Vincent tells Lance that someone keyed his Malibu, their reactions reveal the shared understanding that tampering with such a possession simply exceeds all boundaries of acceptability. Vincent calls the offender a "dickless piece of shit"; Lance remarks that he should be killed, "... no trial, no jury, straight to execution" (Tarantino 1999: 42); Vincent remarks that the act is "chicken shit" and that you "... don't fuck [with] another man's vehicle", with which Lance enthusiastically agrees (Tarantino 1999: 43), and, to round it all off, Vincent adds that "... it's just against the rules" (Tarantino 1999: 43), thereby highlighting the *a priori* acceptance of the ideology that supports these rules.

18 For example, it is not just that Lance the drug dealer is having a snack in front of the TV. No, he is having *Cap'n Crunch with Crunch Berries*, watching the *Three Stooges*, and they're getting married (Tarantino 1999:71). Vincent emerges from the toilet with Peter O'Donnell's *Modesty Blaise* in his hand (Tarantino 1999:117). And Fabienne watches how "... William Smith and a bunch of Hell's Angels are taking on the entire Vietnamese army in the film *The Losers* (Tarantino 1999:104)."

4.1.2 'Buying' in Butch's story

The central figure around which Butch's story revolves is the gold watch which he inherited from his great-grandfather. As noted earlier, the watch symbolises values such as pride or honour based on the different war experiences of his forefathers who wore it. While these are values that the watch has acquired through an extraordinary history, a gold watch, in itself, is nevertheless a precious consumer product – or, at least, used to be when his great-grandfather first purchased it. The original motivation that introduced the watch into the Coolidge family tree was, as Captain Koons explains to the young Butch, to own a watch "... made by the first company ever to make wristwatches ...", since "... up until then, people just carried pocket watches" (Tarantino 1999: 85). The history of the Coolidge watch is inescapably rooted in certain consumerist ideals. It is, therefore, also no coincidence that – in a series of events that recalls Butch's heritage in a number of ways¹⁹ – the quest to retrieve his watch also takes Butch back to a general store, in the form of the Mason-Dixon pawn shop, because we are told that the gold watch "... was bought in a little general store in Knoxville, Tennessee" (Tarantino 1999: 85). This symbolic connection is confirmed by a Tennessee license plate displayed on the pawn shop wall behind Butch when he turns back to save Marsellus (Ager 2009).

As in Vince's story, the ideology of 'buying' also finds expression in various peripheral features of this storyline. There is a continued concern with consumption. As mentioned earlier, Fabienne describes in painstaking detail what exactly she intends to have for breakfast (see Tarantino 1999: 108). Despite being in grave danger when he is back at his apartment, Butch still finds the time to have some milk and toasted Pop Tarts (the toasting of which turns out to save his life) (Tarantino 1999: 116-7). When Butch wants to illustrate to Fabienne that Mexican is easy, the first example sentence that he offers, of all possibilities, is, "Donde esta el zapataria?" (Where is the shoe store?) (Tarantino 1999: 103).²⁰ Butch and Marsellus' appointment with fate

¹⁹ See Footnote 13.

²⁰ The next example-sentence is, "Que hora es?" (What is the time?), which is intended to anticipate the fact the Butch still has to find out that Fabienne left his watch behind.

is set in motion by a *Teriyaki Donut* breakfast takeaway (Tarantino 1999: 119), and when Butch finally returns for his girlfriend at the motel, he orders, “Honey, grab your radio and your purse and let’s go!” (Tarantino 1999: 132). Media and money – bare essentials for the consumer.

4.1.3 ‘Buying’ in Jules’ story

Similar expressions of ideological consumerism come to the fore in this instance. Jules puts the early morning hit on hold by first helping himself to Brett’s *Big Kahuna* Burger and *Sprite*, leaving the viewer unsure as to whether this is for the sake of intimidation, having a free breakfast or (probably) both (Tarantino 1999: 25-7). This is followed by the unfortunate blowing off of Marvin’s head in the back of their car: while Jules is obviously concerned that they might attract the police’s attention, we can easily imagine that he is equally distraught by his car having to suffer this incredible mess (see Olivier 2002: 162).

Finally, Jimmy’s place also sees clear displays of sensitivity in respect of certain holy cows of ‘buying’. Jules reprimands Vince for messing up Jimmy’s bathroom towel, claiming that precisely “shit like this” is going to be the final straw that brings the ‘Bonnie situation’ to a boil (Tarantino 1999: 146). We then see Jules trying to ‘butter up’ the visibly upset Jimmy by dishing up complimenting small talk about the “serious gourmet shit” that Jimmy offered them for their morning cup of coffee. Despite the extent of his anger, Jimmy does not immediately blow the shallow compliments off, but first affirms the quality consumer that he indeed is (Tarantino 1999: 146). Later, The Wolf asks Jimmy for bedlinen to camouflage the interior of the blood-splattered car. Jimmy is, however, reluctant to let go of what he considers to be his best linen (Tarantino 1999: 157). The Wolf remains calmly sympathetic and explains to Jimmy that Marsellus Wallace can furnish him with a whole new bedroom set – which quickly settles the matter for Jimmy (Tarantino 1999: 157-8).

4.2 Economicism as ‘doing business’

The second half of *Pulp fiction*’s economicism, ‘doing business’, is complementary to ‘buying’ and can be roughly identified as an ideological commercialism. As with consumerism, one must acknowledge that this ideology exerts itself on the largest of scales

in which society can be conceived. Yet our encounters with these forces in the film are mostly by way of micro-scale manifestations of a personal or lifestyle economicism. We simply perceive, in the characters' interactions with others, a certain attitude or logic or manner of doing. As modern commercialism is often understood, it generally, in this instance, involves a reductive, exploitative stance towards people and things for the sake of making money. The notion of ideological hyper-values, however, enables us to appreciate how specific things are targeted by dominating economic values in the film. One example is the characters' interactions with one another which are often modelled on market exchange. An overall 'commodifying' outlook on reality entails that personal relationships are not immune to 'infiltration' by the dominating norms of trade and transaction.²¹ As a result, the parties in a relationship are reduced to 'suppliers', 'clients' or 'associates', and their relationship is construed as a 'deal'. A related example of commercialist hyper-normalisation is, once again, the vulnerable target of morality. Where things are reduced to their commercial value, and people are dealt with in transactional terms, morality answers only to the ideological authority of profit-making. In its crudest form, Vincent Vega leads us to believe that making a good living - no matter how - is, in itself, a simple moral imperative above any reproach (Tarantino 1999: 173-4).

Discourse employed in the film can also be read as relating to the underlying influence of ideological commercialism. True to the codes of the gangster film - and arguably commercial gangsterism in general - the characters constantly resort to the notion of 'business' in talking about their endeavours. Spence (2007: 975-9) argues that gangsters' - presumably fictional and real ones - perceive themselves as 'businessmen' doing 'business' and that this offers them a sort of moral identity:

It minimizes the moral distance between their work and other occupations, and gives them a moral frame of reference [...] We often find real criminals invoking ethical codes, referring to themselves as

21 The 'patron-client' relationship is incidentally widely recognised as a possible model for the nature of organised crime. See, for example, Lyman and Potter (2004:46-48) and Conklin (2001:379).

soldiers, and trying to excuse their behaviour for the same reasons (Spence 2007: 977-99).

Gangster 'business talk' does not, however, simply spring from a convenient, rationalising frame of reference. It reflects a commitment to a much deeper ideological rationale. One should, of course, not overlook the fact that, when, for example, English Dave refers to Marsellus meeting with Butch as "business" (Tarantino 1999: 36); when Jules mentions that he would prefer a shotgun for the assassination "deal" (Tarantino 1999: 16); when Vince and Jules introduce themselves as "associates" of Brett's "business partner", Marsellus Wallace (Tarantino 1999: 25), and when Jimmy exclaims that dealing with corpses is not his "business" (Tarantino 1999: 148), the characters are referring to real profit-making ventures. They involve real services, transactions and money. The 'business enterprise' paradigm in criminological theory affirms this aspect of organised crime in general (see Albanese 2007: 112-7).²² Yet this does not change the fact that commercial organised crime is still deeply constituted by ideological values. In this instance, economicism reaches the extreme of motivating the pursuit of profit by criminal means. The film shows how this ideological framework expands beyond the sphere of criminal activity and can turn nearly anything into a matter of 'business'.²³

4.2.1 'Doing business' in Vince's story

Vince's story presents notable examples of how the ideology of 'doing business' manifests in dialogue – specifically when drugs is under

22 The 'business enterprise' model, according to Albanese (2007:112), identifies economic interests as the primary impulse behind organised criminal activities. The focus is thus primarily on the economic considerations – not hierarchical power structures or ethnic commitments – that lie at the base of the formation and success of organised crime.

23 The film dialogue offers quite a few examples of how things, with no direct relation to profit-making activities, are still framed in economicistic terms: Butch tells the hillbilly pawnshop keeper, Maynard (who interrupts Butch and Wallace's brawl with a loaded shotgun), that "... this ain't any of your business..." to which Maynard replies, "I'm makin' it my business! (Tarantino 1999:122)"; Jules yells at the coffee shop owner that negotiating in the hold-up of his coffee shop is none of his "goddamn business" (Tarantino 1999:179); and even the script-narrator tells us that Butch looks like he's ready to go into the "manners-teaching business" (Tarantino 1999:38).

discussion. As argued earlier, this is not to deny that there is a concrete business aspect to illegal substances. However, a conversation between Vince and Lance, the drug dealer, nevertheless shows how commercial hyper-values can present the drug market as valid business, rendering its goods into something as common as a pair of jeans. Ideological commercialism inspires a legitimising way of talking about drugs. Lance, who "... has been selling drugs his entire adult life", exhibits the kind of overblown sales talk that you would expect from a used-car salesman, using phrases such as "friend prices" and "you'll know where the extra money went" (Tarantino 1999: 40). Further persuasion suggests that drug consumption is simply an expression of larger consumerist habits and trends: "This is a seller's market. Coke is fuckin' dead as disco. Heroin's comin' back in a big fuckin' way. It's this whole seventies retro. Bell bottoms, heroin, they're as hot as hell" (Tarantino 1999: 40).

4.2.2 'Doing business' in Butch's story

In Butch's story, the ideology of 'doing business' is rampant from its outset. Butch's love for money makes his honour a conflicted one. He not only fights for money, but has also reached a point where he accepts match-fixing bribes. Wallace knows exactly which buttons to push, telling Butch that the boxing "... business is filled to the brim with unrealistic motherfuckers who thought their ass would age like wine". Wallace adds that he cannot even get a credit card based on a World Featherweight Champion title, thereby holding the potential pride of an honest career captive to an exclusive appeal to economic status (Tarantino 1999: 34). Yet, as discussed earlier, little stands in the way of Butch's pursuit of profit, as he not only agrees to illegal match-fixing, but also remorselessly breaks the 'higher' gangster code of not honouring a settled deal with Wallace.

In Butch, we also find the best example of how the ideological pressures of economicism subject interpersonal interaction to the norms of market exchange. Clearly, his money-making tendencies seep into his relationships, as they repeatedly proceed on the basis of making 'deals': when Esmarelda, the taxi driver, asks the fleeing Butch what it is like to a kill man, he replies, "Tell ya what, you give me one of them cigarettes, I'll give you an answer" (Tarantino 1999: 93); afterwards Butch gives Esmarelda a hundred dollar bill to

stay quiet about him escaping in her taxi (Tarantino 1999: 96); when his girlfriend Fabienne asks him to give her 'oral pleasure', he only proceeds after asking her to reciprocate (Tarantino 1999: 101), and, the following morning, when she tells him to get up so that they can get some breakfast, he still barter with the smallest of affections: "One more kiss and I'll get up" (Tarantino 1999: 107). This motif is, of course, established as soon as we set eyes on Butch, since he is in the process of making a match-fixing deal with Marsellus Wallace (Tarantino 1999: 34). Even Butch's eventual rescue of Marsellus Wallace from the pawnshop rapists can be read as Butch partaking in one last transaction. As explained earlier, Butch's life-saving gesture can be said to uphold the value of loyalty – towards Marsellus, in a sense, as well as to the memory of his forefathers. However, saving Marsellus is just as much a matter of 'buying' his freedom back. When Butch asks, "What now?", Marsellus releases him on two conditions. First, that Butch never tells anybody about this, since "It ain't anyone else's business" (Tarantino 1999: 131) and, secondly, that he leaves town, giving up all his Los Angeles 'privileges'. Butch, appropriately, replies with what sums him up best: "Deal" (Tarantino 1999: 131).

4.2.3 'Doing business' in Jules' story

In Jules' story, the ideology of 'doing business' is most apparent during breakfast in the coffee shop, which sees Vincent's unbridled commitment to economicism in conflict with Jules' 'conversion experience' earlier that day. When Jules tells of his plans to quit "the life" and to just "walk the earth" like "Caine in 'Kung Fu'" (until God puts him where He wants him to be), his views are subjected to the unsympathetic scrutiny of a dominating hyper-value. Vincent denounces his 'walking the earth' as being "a bum", adding that Jules will end up like "... those pieces of shit who beg for change. They walk around like a bunch of fuckin' zombies, they sleep in garbage bins, they eat what I throw away, and dogs piss on 'em. They got a word for 'em, they're called bums. And without a job, residence or legal tender, that's what you're gonna be – a fuckin bum!" (Tarantino 1999: 174). In Vince's opinion, the value of making money functions from an ideological high ground from which other values are ruthlessly interrogated, but which itself is not open to any judgement. The distorted logic of 'doing business' leads Vincent to conclude that

the greatest of sins is not earning money, not having a profitable career. This dominates to such an extent that the immoral or criminal means of making a living is reduced to insignificance. For Vincent, economic institutions, even in the illegitimate form of organised crime, offer identity and security.

At this point, there is the temptation to view Jules as the exception. Perhaps he is not sold out to 'doing business', as his friend Vincent is. Jules tells Vincent that "... this is just where me and you differ" (Tarantino 1999: 174). Nanay & Schnee (2007: 3033), for instance, claim that, while Vincent passively assumes the values of his gangster context, Jules "breaks free from the hyper-cool and might-makes-right gangster values of the underworld" (Nanay & Schnee 2007: 3015). But, the newly-converted Jules, despite his greatest efforts – 'trying to be the shepherd' – shows that he too cannot escape the relentless 'calling' of economicism. Honey Bunny and Pumpkin's ensuing robbery of the coffee shop forces Jules to negotiate his way through a second sticky situation for the day. He empties his wallet for the sake of a resolution – much to Vincent's dismay. "I ain't givin' it to him", Jules explains calmly. He turns to the robber: "I'm buyin' somethin' for my money ... Your life. I'm giving you that money so I don't hafta kill your ass" (Tarantino 1999: 187). The new Jules' apparent turn to God and ethics, therefore, offers a new territory over which economicism can exert its influence. For, his aspirations to 'be the shepherd' manage to only find expression in one last deal, thus even granting a redemptive authority to the values of 'doing business'.

4.3 Dominant economicism

Our survey of how gangster values, care of women and economicism function as ideological hyper-values in the narrative world of *Pulp fiction* requires us to consider the internal relations between these values. Ideology, understood in terms of hyper-values, presupposes that certain hierarchical relations will also emerge between dominance-seeking hyper-values themselves.²⁴ *Pulp fiction* offers many indications that economicism enjoys a distinct primacy within the triad ideological sets of values that it puts forward. It is, of course, to be

24 These insights are indebted to Visagie's (1994:89-100) account of the kinds of relations that may exist between different ideological values.

expected that larger scale ideological forces such as consumerism and commercialism will exert a 'top-down' influence over more localised ideologies associated with gangster life. The implication of this on my reading up to this point is that 'doing business' and 'buying', as hyper-values, also act upon the already ideological values of gangsterism and taking care of women – thus demoting the latter to being 'secondary' hyper-values. Economicism exerts this dominance by often using gang loyalty and taking care of women to give expression to its own ideological nature. The 'lower' value spheres, while making their own ideological demands, simultaneously serve the 'higher' ideals of economicism. One might go as far as suggesting that, in some instances, the ideological logic of 'business' not only dominates and infiltrates the other values, but also inspires them.

4.3.1 Economicism and gangster values

Pulp fiction gives us some indications of how ideological economicism governs the values of gangsterism that it portrays. However, they need to be appreciated against a broader background: on the whole, ideological economicism offers the context within which gangster values such as professionalism and loyalty are 'activated'. The lifeworld of commercial gangsterism is unified by a collective goal of unlawful optimal income and is, therefore, a specific (criminal) expression of economicism. Values such as gang loyalty are logically entailed by this goal and only make sense in the context of the gangster commitment to making an unlawful profit. This economicism can thus be viewed as the 'initiating' hyper-value that generates subservient hyper-values as necessary behaviour in order to support the commercial aspirations of gangsterism. Briefly, gangster values serve 'business'.

The kind of professionalism shown in the film is, therefore, obviously motivated by criminal profit-making endeavours. Jules' insistence that he and Vince act like 'professionals' is a natural extension of the 'business' of assassinating Bret over breakfast. The same holds for respect, which has strong ties with professionalism. Vince and Jules' respect for The Wolf springs from the apparently authoritative position that he holds in their criminal organisation, and even more so the absolute competence and efficiency with which he handles 'business'. Likewise, loyalty struggles to be a self-sufficient value, as it presupposes something to which one is loyal. We can expect that

some higher ideological principle will usually offer the inspiration behind someone's loyalties. In *Pulp fiction*, loyalty to one's 'fellow gangster' appears to be governed by an ideological commercialism. 'Business' – its nature, its importance – tends to inspire instances of loyalty we encounter in the film. We might be justified in saying that Jules displays loyalty by first delivering the briefcase before he retires from gangsterhood. However, is this not rather a commitment to the deal than a personal loyalty to his boss Marsellus? If anything, Jules owes loyalty to his employer. In this instance, loyalty thus stems from 'business': you are required to keep up your end of the deal.²⁵ This is also the reason why instances of betrayal evoke such ruthless reactions. The case of Butch backstabbing Marsellus is ultimately a desecration of the ethos of 'doing business'. By stealing the cash offered for a fixed match, Butch violates a certain loyalty demanded by a finalised 'business' deal. Note that a 'looser' loyalty based on 'business affiliation' can be contrasted with, for instance, the kind of gang loyalty that springs from a shared membership to a minority culture.²⁶

4.3.2 Economicism and care of women

A clearer case for economicism's ideological governance of other hyper-values emerges in considering the values related to 'care of women'. Dominating consumerist values, in particular, offer a reason behind the unspoken importance that is often ascribed to women in the narrative: since women belong to men, they – like any other goods that they acquire and own – are to be held in high esteem. We thus find that, on the one hand, the film establishes a variety of allusive relations between women and consumer products. And, consistent with the recurring concern with eating breakfast, women are especially related to consumable goods.²⁷ An undeniably commodificationist

25 Even if one concedes that Jules' supposed 'loyalty' is merely a fear of Marsellus Wallace's absolute power (See. Conard 2006:128), it is easy to see how this power is, in turn, still derived from the *economic* aspects of gangsterism.

26 See Viljoen & Visagie (2010:11-12) for a description of the latter in *West Side Story*.

27 Although to a lesser extent, women are also commercially 'packaged' for consumption by way of *mass media* products. Examples include a 'Marilyn Monroe' waitress (among many other icons) in the 1950's themed restaurant, the 'Fox Force Five' pilot that Mia tells Vincent about, and the *Modesty Blaise* novel that Vince apparently likes to read in the toilet (see Tarantino 1999:117, 176).

vision of women thus reduces them to objects of men's possession and consumption. Dominating economic values can thus be said to facilitate a certain social domination of women – a manifestation of economicism which presumably occurs far beyond the gangster context. The position of women in this narrative world is comparable to that of Vince's Malibu, Jules' tasty *Big Kabuna Burger* and even Butch's watch. Yet, at the same time, the ideology of 'buying' evokes an overblown reverence for consumer products. For this reason, the characters go to great lengths to take care of the valuable women in their possession. Their commodification in *Pulp fiction*, therefore, has a somewhat contradictory effect: the well-being of women is of the utmost importance, but a severely distorted ideological motivation lies behind the exercising of this care.

An implicit equation between consumer products and women is subtly at work from the beginning of Vince's story. Vince and Jules' apparently trivial discussion about drugs and the foreign names of fast foods is immediately followed by talk about the boss' wife, Mia. It is also significant – seeing that the characters have just been so concerned with the French names of fast food products – that the first hint we obtain of this conversation is Vincent asking Jules what her name is (Tarantino 1999: 17). The inherent importance that the characters ascribe to consumer products thus gets duplicated into a consumerist outlook on women. Mia is undoubtedly precious, but the source of her worth – the reason why Vincent must take care of her and especially with her – lies in her belonging to Marsellus Wallace. This is the reason why Vincent tells his mocking friends, "Look, I'm not an idiot. She's the big man's fucking wife" (Tarantino 1999: 37). This is also the reason why Vincent lectures Jules on how Wallace is justified in taking revenge on whoever fools around with his wife. If Wallace is indeed testing Vincent's loyalty by leaving Mia in his care, the test is essentially a matter of how Vincent treats Marsellus' property. A connection between women and consumer products is also suggested when Vincent and Lance agree that the kind of person that keyed his Malibu should be executed without a trial, that you "... don't fuck another man's vehicle", and that this type of behaviour is "... just against the rules" (Tarantino 1999: 43), because, a few scenes earlier, Vince mentions something similar about laying one's hands on another man's woman. One, therefore, cannot help but feel that,

in Vincent's mind, the same 'rules' apply to both cars and women. They are prized possessions and they should not be interfered with if they are not your property.

In Jules' story, it is noteworthy that Jimmy's evaluation of how his wife will react to a corpse in their house bears a strong resemblance to Lance's judgement of people who fool around with another man's car. Lance remarks that such a person should be killed, "... no trial, no jury, straight to execution" (Tarantino 1999: 42); Jimmy concludes similarly that, if Bonnie comes home and finds a dead body, he will get divorced: "No marriage counsellor, no trial separation - fuckin' divorced" (Tarantino 1999: 148). By replicating the form of Lance's earlier statement, a link is established between the sin of damaging Vincent's car and the potential damage that the precious Bonnie may suffer. In addition, Jimmy initiates his rant by rejecting Jules' placating compliments of his coffee: "I'm the one who buys it, I know how fuckin' good it is. When Bonnie goes shoppin', she buys shit. I buy the gourmet expensive stuff 'cause when I drink it, I wanna taste it" (Tarantino 1999: 146). Assuming that the film's presentation of consumerist ideology also prevails in this marriage, Jimmy's inclination to buy good things may apply equally to the acquisition of his wife. Since Bonnie "buys shit", she might not have obtained the best of 'deals' in Jimmy (a domesticated gangster sitting at home in a bathrobe). Jimmy, on the other hand, prefers the "gourmet expensive stuff" and is, therefore, acutely aware of the quality that he has in her. Hence the excessive concern from all parties concerned to see to it that he does not lose his Bonnie.

The infusion of women with a consumerist appeal is reflected in Butch's story by explicit references to Butch's girlfriend in terms of commodities - particularly consumables. Having, ironically, told the Spanish cab driver that Americans' names are meaningless, Butch repeatedly refers to Fabienne with a variety of affectionate 'sweet food' terms such as "honey", "sweetie", "sugar pop", "lemon pie" and "jelly bean" (Tarantino 1999: 96, 99, 102, 103, 112, 113, 132, 134).²⁸ The

28 The two coffee shop robbers also affectionately refer to one another in food terms: "Pumpkin" and "Honey Bunny" (Tarantino 1999:13). And Lance the drug dealer, in the midst of frantic attempts to resuscitate Mia, when telling Jody that he is going to kill her if she does not shut up, still manages to address his wife as 'honey' (Tarantino 1999:77).

French name, 'Fabienne', incidentally also means 'bean grower' or can simply be taken as 'a bean'. And, of course, a French women with 'food names' recalls Vincent and Jules' concern with the French names for different McDonalds burgers earlier in the film. These discursive manifestations of consumerist ideology are consistent with the general disproportion of food metaphors that apply exclusively to women, and reinforce the patriarchal view that the objectified woman exists solely for male consumption (Goatly 2007: 89-90).

Yet, as explained earlier, *Pulp fiction's* ideological consumerism also fosters a devotion to what you own. This, in turn, accounts for the macho Butch's unexpectedly soft and gentle manner of consistently 'procuring' his emotionally demanding girlfriend. Allusions to Fabienne as a consumable product are also reinforced by remarks that relate her to other kinds of goods: "I wish I had a pot", she says lying on the bed, and explains to Butch her desire for a 'potbelly' (Tarantino 1999: 97-8), and later she notes that she likes being called "tulip" (Tarantino 1999: 102). In light of these equations, instances of the inverse, where commodities are construed as 'women', should also come as no surprise: the big chrome chopper that Butch uses as his getaway from the pawnshop has a women's name, 'Grace', and the screenplay narrator cannot resist the temptation of referring to the bike in the feminine form, when, "Butch starts her up" (Tarantino 1999: 134).

4. Conclusion

As Auxier (2007: 2246) notes, the title page of the *Pulp fiction* screenplay presents readers with something of a riddle: "Three stories ... About one story ...". One can safely assume that the 'three stories' refer to the film's three vignettes or, roughly speaking, its three main storylines which I have respectively addressed, namely 'Vince's story', 'Butch's story' and 'Jules' story'. What is the 'single story'? The teasing suggestion is that, underlying these three stories, there is a unifying 'meta-narrative' (if I may borrow from postmodernist parlance) to which each of the three supposedly gives form. Auxier (2007: 2364) concludes that the moral of each of the three stories amount to this: be loyal. A somewhat more complex picture has, however, emerged. I have found that the underlying 'one story' is in fact three-pronged,

as there are three sets of ideological values recurrently at work in each of the film's three stories – of which loyalty, at best, represents one third. They tell the longer 'stories' of, first, how gangster life demands things such as loyalty; secondly, the way women should be taken care of and, thirdly, an unbridled commitment to making money and being a consumer. I have shown that, when considered in a critical-ideological light, these values are mobilised by the film as hegemonic axioms that not only serve as moral reference points to the characters, but, more generally, also inspire many of the actions, statements and even locations that make up the narrative. While clearly criticisable as dominating hyper-values, they nevertheless offer an insightful perspective on the possible 'glue' that may hold this narrative world together.

My evaluation of the relationships between these sets of values has, however, made it clear that, as themes of *Pulp fiction*, these hyper-values can be read as "Three stories ... About one story ...". I have suggested that the stories of gang loyalty and care of women are ultimately dependent: deep down they too give expression to the tales of 'doing business' and 'buying'. The deeper 'one story' that emerges in this article is the story of economicism, staged as the truly absolutised, even inviolable, ideological perspective at work in the film. It acts as a legitimising 'meta-narrative' in the fullest sense: this economicism qualifies the good, justifies the bad, and turns (what should be) strange obsessions into ordinary, everyday phenomena. As with the film's 'gangster ideology', we encounter in its economicism a slice of 'real-world' ideological culture adopted into an exaggerated, fictional ideological profile. There is no doubt that the narrative reflects the influence of a globalised capitalism overrun by neo-liberalist ideals; albeit that it isolates its vision of a hegemonic economics from the other dominating (bureaucratic, political and technological) institutions with which it is normally 'in alliance'. It specifically picks out and amplifies the radically consumerist orientation that, for many, centrally characterises the culture of late (or 'post-') modernity.

The film's thematisation of these powers should not be taken merely as a passive, 'symptomatic' reflection of ideology. *Pulp fiction*, after all, self-reflectively sells itself as 'pulp fiction'. It is clearly embedded within, and actively takes part in, the very ideological discourses that

it thematises. This, I believe, holds especially for its economicism. By contrasting its prominent economicism with certain values, or even making it run amuck in a comical world featuring the near absence of other significant ones (such as the value of human life), the film's ironising humour, for instance, may harbour the potential to simultaneously undermine the same hegemonic economicism that the film enacts. Ironising devices present but one of a range of such possibilities. I am, therefore, acutely aware of the fact that the film's – and film, in general – active involvement in the ideological culture that it represents requires further and ongoing reflection. In future work I hope to also give this 'business' the critical attention that it deserves.

Bibliography

AGER R

2009. Carrying the torch: a thematic analysis of 'The gold watch story' in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp fiction*. <<http://www.collativelearning.com/pulp%20fiction%20%20gold%20watch%20story%20analysis.html>>

AUXIER R E

2007. Vinnie's very bad day: twisting the tale of time in *Pulp fiction*. Greene & Silem Mohammad (eds) 2007: 123-140.

BROOKER P & W BROOKER

1996. Pulpmodernism: Tarantino's affirmative action. Simpson et al. (eds) 1996: 229-241.

CONRAD M T

2006. Symbolism, meaning, and nihilism in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp fiction*. Conrad (ed) 2006: 125-138.

CONRAD M T (ed)

2006. *The philosophy of film noir*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

CONKLIN J E

2001. *Criminology*. 7th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

DAVIS T F & K WOMACK

1998. Shepherding the weak: the ethics of redemption in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp fiction*. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26(1): 60-6.

GOATLY A

2007. *Washing the brain. Metaphor and hidden ideology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

GREENE R & K SILEM MOHAMMAD

2007. *Quentin Tarantino and philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court [Kindle version].

JOHNSON D K

2007. Revenge and mercy in Tarantino: the lesson of Ezekiel 25:17. Greene & Silem Mohammad (eds) 2007: 55-74.

LYMAN M D & G W POTTER

2004. *Organized crime*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

NANAY B & I SCHNEE

2007. Travolta's Elvis man and the Nietzschean Superman. Greene & Silem Mohammad (eds) 2007: 177-188.

OLIVIER B

2002. *Projections: philosophical themes on film*. 2nd ed. Port Elizabeth: University of Port Elizabeth.

RUSSELL B

2007. Tarantino's films: what are they about and what can we learn from them? Greene & Silem Mohammad (eds) 2007: 3-12.

SCHMALLEGER F

1996. *Criminology today*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

- SIMPSON P, A UTTERSON & K J SHEPHERDSON (eds)
1996. *Film theory: critical concepts in media and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- SPENCE J H
2007. The moral lives of *Reservoir Dogs*. Greene & Silem Mohammad (eds) 2007.
- TARANTINO Q
1999. *Pulp fiction*. London: Faber and Faber.
- VISAGIE P J
1994. The name of the game in ideology theory: John Thompson's depth hermeneutics against the topography of ideological culture. Unpubl manuscript. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.
1996. Power, meaning and culture: John Thompson's depth hermeneutics and the ideological topography of modernity. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 15(2): 73-83.
1998. The games theorists play: ideology between discourse and domination. *Society in Transition* 29(3-4): 130-40.
- VISAGIE P J & J L PRETORIUS
1993. The ideological structure of the minority rights discourse in South Africa. *SA Public Law* 8(1): 53-67.
- VILJOEN N & J VISAGIE
2010. The raised fourth in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. *Acta Academica* 42(2): 1-26.
- WEINBERGER S
2004. It's not easy being Pink: Tarantino's ultimate professional. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 32(1): 46-50.
- WHALEN T
1995. Film noir: killer style. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23(1): 2-5.