

Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood: Quentin Tarantino's non-conformist conformism

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Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* reimagines late 1960s Los Angeles and the disintegration of the traditional studio system. The director's ninth movie culminates in a counterfactual version of the infamous August 1969 murder of Sharon Tate and four of her guests at the house she shared with husband filmmaker Roman Polanski. The killings were carried out by members of the so-called Manson Family, a commune and cult living on a deserted movie ranch and heavily involved in drugs led by Charles Manson (1934-2017).

As opposed to a number of Tarantino's previous works that deliberately play fast and loose with immediate facts and conditions, including recent "period pieces" *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015), the director's new movie luxuriates in the everyday tawdry detail of the Southern California of the period. Paying particular attention to popular music, it also self-consciously reproduces commercials, drive-in theaters, bars and restaurants, cars and home interiors. But this carefully built-up surface notwithstanding, *Once Upon a Time* exhibits Tarantino's trademark strains of subjectivism and unseriousness, and has little meaningful to say about American life in the 1960s.

In the film, Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a Western television star whose career is on the downward slope. A heavy drinker, he relies a great deal on his pal and stunt double Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) as a driver and general factotum. Rick's neighbors, living above him on Cielo Drive in Benedict Canyon—an area west of Hollywood in the Santa Monica Mountains—are the Polanskis (Rafa? Zawierucha and Margot Robbie), epitomizing the success and celebrity that Rick envies.

Dalton is a generally unremarkable if amiable individual, whose home and lifestyle reflect the fact he is a small-timer in the entertainment industry. His side-kick Cliff, who occupies a derelict trailer behind a drive-in movie theater, is described as a "hero" in an unspecified war, and the possible murderer of his wife. Aside from Rick, Cliff's main relationship is with a sturdy, loyal female pit-bull.

After Rick appears as a guest star on an episode of *The F.B.I.*, casting agent Marvin Schwarzs (Al Pacino) offers him the opportunity to shoot a "Spaghetti Western"—a Western film generally produced and directed by Italians—in Rome. Rick now considers his career has hit rock bottom. (In fact, by 1969 Clint Eastwood had already achieved international fame through

appearing in several films directed by Sergio Leone and scored by Ennio Morricone.)

Meanwhile, Cliff picks up a hitchhiker named Pussycat (Margaret Qualley), driving her to the Spahn Ranch, a former filming site now taken over by the Manson Family. Later, after a six-month shoot in Italy, Cliff and the newly married Rick arrive back in Los Angeles and soon confront a home invasion. Together, they dispatch the intruders with extreme violence and brutality.

The liveliest sequences in *Once Upon a Time* tend to be the short clips of Rick's past television and film performances. The stretches of dialogue and drama that occur between the action sequences are dull. The actors perform with a lack of intensity because their roles and relationships are truncated and undeveloped, except on the level of inessential or arbitrary detail. In fact, until the final scenes, "action" is largely reserved for Cliff's high-speed rides through the city, while blaring highly recognizable tunes.

Unfortunately, Tarantino brings his characteristic cynicism and pointlessness to the new film. *Once Upon a Time* is very pleased with itself when it mocks singer Robert Goulet mangling Jimmy Webb's "MacArthur Park" or runs the opening credits of the *Mannix* television series. Tarantino attempts to compensate for the limited, bare-bones storyline through tasteless cultural references. What is merely a possible (though not that promising) physical *framework* for a drama is treated by the director and the critics as a completed, accomplished work of art.

Overall, *Once Upon a Time* is an extremely confused film in a tremendously confused body of work. It remains the job of the critic to try and sort through the disorder.

One of the major conceits of Tarantino's new film—perhaps triggered in particular by the election of Donald Trump, but a feature of Tarantino's filmography as a whole—is that the director represents some sort of plebeian, populist opposition to the intellectual and political elite.

DiCaprio, obviously having derived his idea from the filmmaker, refers in several interviews to himself and Pitt as mere "working class actors in a transitional time." Various elements are built around this theme: DiCaprio's character being reduced to bit parts as a Western villain; Pitt's Cliff subsisting in a dilapidated trailer with his dog; and the general tackiness, seediness and decay of the leads' lives.

This instantly strikes a false note. The notion that a second-rate actor down on his luck and his stuntman pal stand in for the

“working class” cannot lead in any healthy direction. Without idealizing anyone, the individualism and provincialism one encounters behind the scenes in the Hollywood film industry are not representative of the population as a whole.

The unwholesomeness of this conception is confirmed by *Once Upon a Time*'s quasi-nativist streak. For whatever reason, Tarantino decides to pick on Hong Kong-American actor and martial arts celebrity Bruce Lee (played by Mike Moh). The film presents Lee as an obnoxious, inflated egotist who gets his comeuppance from Cliff—something out of a Sylvester Stallone fantasy. (Sharon Lee has objected to the portrayal of her father: “I can understand all the reasoning behind what is portrayed in the movie. I understand that the two characters are antiheroes and this is sort of like a rage fantasy of what would happen.” She added: “I understand they want to make the Brad Pitt character this super bad-ass who could beat up Bruce Lee. But they didn’t need to treat him in the way that white Hollywood did when he was alive.”)

Slighting references to “the Mexicans” and to Polanski as “that Polish prick” add to the unsavory tenor of the film.

Essentially, the director is offering himself as the defender of solid “American working class values.” Rick and Cliff are likable schmoes. DiCaprio and Pitt in particular are appealing performers. But, as Tarantino generally does in his unconscious or unthought-out manner, he tends to celebrate in *Once Upon a Time* what’s backward and passive, and most national-oriented—the meager Westerns, the trashy lifestyle, the banal pop songs.

It is important to say: kitsch is not art but the *opposite* of art. And the attraction to or glorification of kitsch is not artistic, it is an intellectual *dereliction* of duty. It is the worst sort of worship of the accomplished cultural fact.

In 1969 there were also young people and workers who were attuned to the historic general strike in France, to the big industrial battles in the US, to the massive anti-Vietnam War protests, to the inner-city riots. Many were drawing oppositional conclusions as well from the political convulsions and wave of assassinations. Of course, the summer of 1969, as the WSWS recently noted, also witnessed the first landing on the Moon by human beings, an event watched by some 650 million people.

With all their limitations, films of the period reflected some of the rebelliousness, social criticism and popular aspiration: *Easy Rider*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Wild Bunch*, *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, *Z*, *Kes*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Teorema*, *If...*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Hombre*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *In Cold Blood* and others.

One gets no sense of any of this from *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*. The unseriousness with which Tarantino treats the Tate murders is also telling. This was a horrific event, both in the lives of those affected, including Roman Polanski, already a survivor of the Holocaust who lost his pregnant wife, and as an episode in American life. The slayings were allegedly intended to help incite a “race war” that Manson, who later tattooed a swastika on his forehead, was hoping to see unfold. For Tarantino, this is the pretext for an unreal bloodbath that deepens the theme of “ordinary Americans” acting out their resentment and

vengefulness.

Equally misguided is the writer-director’s decision to place the Manson hangers-on at the epicenter of his film, as the moral and social opposite of his “average Joes,” presenting the former as representatives of the hippie counterculture. Tarantino explained to an interviewer that “I knew even as a little boy that this hippie youth culture thing was a new thing and shaking the fabric of society a little bit. ... It kind of scared me, frankly.” The Woodstock music festival, which also took place in the summer of 1969, “seemed ominous. Everyone hanging out in the mud, kids running around naked. It seemed like debauchery.”

This is an odd reaction. As we noted in the *International Workers Bulletin* in regard to another conformist work, of a different type, *Forrest Gump* (1994), “Marxists were hardly sympathetic to the so-called counterculture, but that is a far cry from identifying anyone who engaged in behavior that fell outside of the accepted norm as a deviant misfit.”

After all, this was the period during which the US military was in the process of slaughtering several million Vietnamese, a truly “ominous” event that has not so far aroused Tarantino’s interest.

Backhandedly or not, *Once Upon a Time* seems by implication to endorse or resign itself to the deeply false argument that Trump was placed in the White House by the “white working class,” gun-crazed, xenophobic, culturally debased.

Tarantino’s obsessive immersion in the cultural debris of his times and the pretense that it represents something it doesn’t is one of his greatest weaknesses. It serves as a kind of ongoing justification and apology for the mediocrity and lack of insight in his films.

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