

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *PULP FICTION*

 **ERNESTO TABORDA-
HERNÁNDEZ**

King Juan Carlos University
ernesto.taborda@urjc.es

ABSTRACT

In this audiovisual essay, the narrative structure of the film *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) has been analyzed, locating the essential structural vicissitudes of the film in its original montage and linear story, seeking to investigate the reasons that prompted the director to choose such a particular narrative proposal. This audiovisual essay places the two narrative proposals in the same image. The linear story appears on a large screen and the original story is presented on a panel on the right side of the image. The chronological order of the stories has been listed and arranged as counted. The proposed essay shows us that the two stories work, but that perhaps the original story is a more dynamic and innovative exercise in style than the linear story, and that in some moments the vicissitudes and structures of the two narrative proposals coincide. Also that the original story is the story of Jules and his redemption, and the linear one is the story of Butch.

Keywords: Narrative; Dramatic structure; Audiovisual essay; Pulp Fiction; Quentin Tarantino.

Re-watching this modern classic raises the question of why Tarantino chose to tell it the way it was told in the end and what aspects of the linear story bothered him. It is clear that the way it is told requires extra effort in terms of narrative, structure and the fit of plot twists and turns to make the story flow as deftly as it does.

It has also been proven that both ways the story works. It is probably a question of style, but what is certain is that the two, both the linear structure and the final one, are two different stories where the same thing happens. That is a great virtue.

Pulp Fiction is a fusion of three stories that play in time and space (Velázquez, 2016). The first is that of Vincent Vega and the wife of Marsellus Wallace. The second is the story of the gold watch and the boxer Butch Coolidge. The third is the story of Jules, Vincent, Jimmy and Mr. Wolf. The temporal order of each story is recomposed in the montage, by the hand of Sally Menke, under the director's premise. Told in a fragmented manner under Tarantino's apparent stylistic whimsy (Howley, 2004).

The film has been analyzed, locating its essential structural vicissitudes: the detonate, the two turning points, the midpoint, the anticlimax and the climax, of the original story that we will call the film, as well as of the chronological story that we will call the story. We have compared the location in time and space by superimposing the images. The story appears on the big screen and the film is presented in a vignette on the right side of the image. The chronological order has been listed and arranged as it is told and the episodic organization of the film has been recomposed as an harmonizing element. Although in the story these episodes are not important, in fact they seem to be created to frame the fragmentation of the film and achieve some narrative eloquence. The linear story follows the adventures of two hitmen employed by Marsellus Wallaces, who during a seemingly easy job make a small mistake and end up accidentally killing an informant they were carrying in their car. From this moment on, a story unfolds that takes place over two days and revolves around Mr. Wallaces, his employees (two assassins and a boxer) and his wife.

THE BONNIE SITUATION

1. Jules and Vincent recover a stolen briefcase. Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin.

2. They go to Jules' friend Jimmy's house. They call a problem-solving expert called Mr. Lobo who meets them at Jimmy's house. When they solve the problem they go to have breakfast in a coffee shop where they meet some inexperienced robbers, Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, they confront Jules' experience with the good luck that he is in a reflective attitude that day and lets them go without giving them a life lecture.

3. Jules lets them go. Flashback: the golden watch.

THE GOLDEN WATCH

4. Butch negotiates with Marsellus for his last fight. Flashback: Captain Koons gives young Butch a golden watch that he and his father kept in their respective asses so the Vietnamese wouldn't take it. Butch wins the fight. Marsellus sends Vincent after him.

5. Vincent and Mia. The overdose. Vincent goes to his dealer to buy drugs. He takes Mia, his boss's wife, out to dinner. They go to a 50s/60s diner and win a twist contest. They return home and Mia inadvertently snorts heroin thinking it's cocaine. She overdoses. Vincent takes her to his dealer and injects her with adrenaline to revive her. After the scare they both agree not to say nothing.

6. Butch and Marsellus. Butch realises that Fabienne has forgotten her father's watch in his old flat. He must go and look for it. At home he finds the watch and realises that Vincent is in the bathroom thanks to the machine gun resting on the counter. He kills Vincent when he comes out of the bathroom. On his way out he meets Marsellus in the street and tries to run him over. In an escape they take refuge in a pawn shop where they are caught and sodomised. Butch manages to untie himself but on the run he regrets it and returns to help Marsellus armed with a catana. Marsellus forgives him for the fight and thanks him for saving his life.

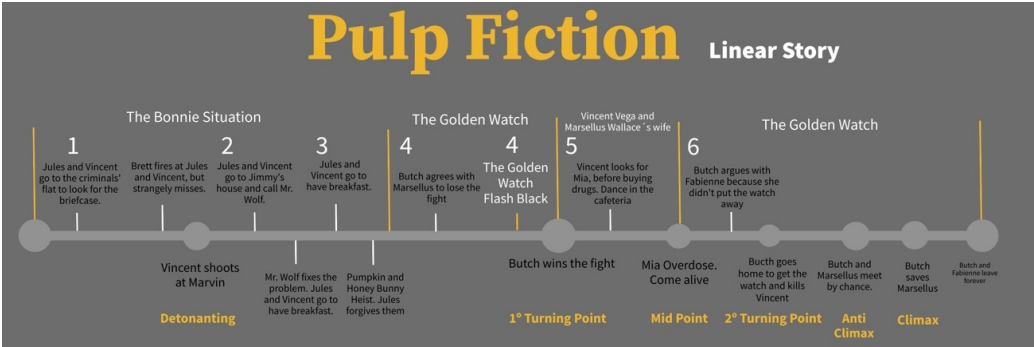


Figure 1. *Pulp Fiction's* linear story. © Author

The story is slower between the detonating and the first turning point, but from the midpoint to the end everything happens very fast in terms of actions.

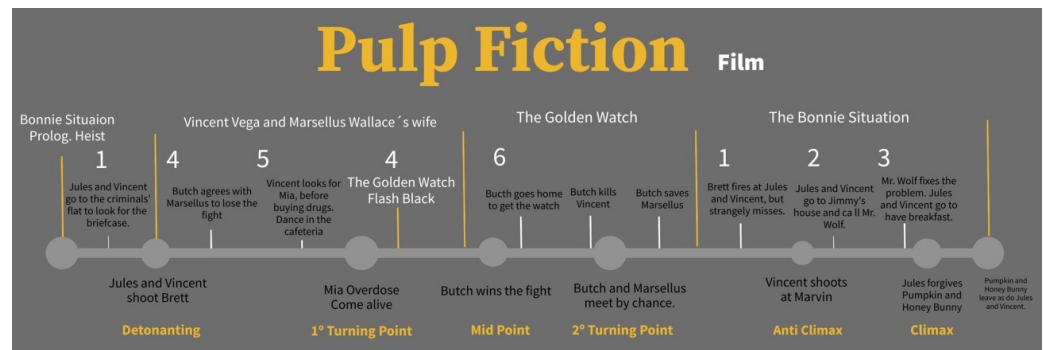


Figure 2. *Pulp Fiction's* film. © Author

The film seems to have more balance and dynamism between actions if we look at the two illustrations in their graphical representation. We will see that there are six major action nodes plus the structural vicissitudes and a flashback. The episodes are necessary (or not) in the film as they function as guiding labels.

The Bonnie Situation occupies nodes 1, 2 and 3. *The Golden Watch* has 4 and 6. Finally, Vincent Vega and the wife of Marsellus Wallaces represent 5. When we look at the film we see that in order to make the structure fit together, some nodes have been partially modified, dividing them to improve the narrative coherence.

In the film *The Bonnie Situation* 1 is a prologue where Pumpkin and Honey Bonnie are encouraged to start the heist followed by the credits. Much more effective than starting with Jules and Vincent's conversation about burgers in Amsterdam. Although it is part of the same episodic block. *The Bonnie Situation* (1, 2 and 3) is the end of the film. Then, the episode of *Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallaces' Wife* is not only 5 but also part of 4 and the flashback of *the Golden Watch*. In the film, node 4 functions as a small prologue which is the negotiation of the fight rigging. This continues with what is really the content of the episode which is Vincent and Mia's dinner outing, that ends with the overdose and his recovery as the 1st turning point. But that sets it up to end the episode with the flashback to the Golden Watch when Captain Koons tells a Butch boy about the provenance of the watch and the sentimental value it acquires. This will move the story forward in the next episode. Actually, the episode of *The Golden Watch* is the one that takes up the most footage, being 4 and especially where the most relevant action nodes occur.

In the film, *The Bonnie Situation* prologue and *Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife* are the first act and the beginning of the second act (1,4,5,4). Almost reaching the midpoint begins *The Golden Watch* which ends with the departure of Butch and the accounts settled with Marsellus at the beginning of the third act (6). Finally, *The Bonnie Situation* which covers almost the whole of the third act (1,2,3).

In the story the first act is very long (1,2,3,4). The second (5 and 6) and third act (6) are shorter and almost of the same dimensions, where everything happens very fast.

The structural events change between the story and the film, which reflects the dramatic intensity of almost all the actions that can be interspersed and supplanted without affecting too much the progress of the story and its dramatic intensity. The drama of the script requires the construction of four structural events that coincide with the four action nodes of the plot (Sanchez-Escalonilla, 2014, p. 191).

The following are six events in the two structures proposed in this essay.

DETONATING

Story: Vincent shoots Marvin by mistake.

Film: Jules and Vincent shoot Brett and retrieve the briefcase.

The events coincide in time and space in a very curious way. The shots occur at the same instant in both settings.

1ST TURNING POINT

Story: Butch wins the fight he had agreed to lose.

Film: Mia overdoses and is revived.

This event in the film is more intense than in the story, but does not interfere with the intensity of both settings.

MIDPOINT

Story: Mia overdoses and resuscitation.

Film: Butch wins the fight he had agreed to lose.

2ND TURNING POINT

Story: Butch returns home to get his watch and accidentally kills Vincent.

Film: Butch and Marsellus meet by chance in the street.

In the audiovisual essay, in the action at the midpoint of the story - when Vincent sticks him with the syringe and Mia revives, coincides with the end of the second act when Butch kills Vincent - both actions are synchronized. This denotes a lot of coincidental timing or millimetric calculation.

ANTICLIMAX

Story: Butch and Marsellus meet by chance in the street.

Film: Vincent shoots Marvin by mistake.

CLIMAX

Story: Butch saves Marsellus from the sadomasochists and they make up.

Film: Jules forgives Pumpkin and Honey Bonnie and lets them go.

We can see that the stories go in reverse mode, except for the prologue at the beginning which serves as an introductory frame to the film the director wants to tell.

What is most noticeable about the setting of the story and the film is that the first is the story of Butch and his golden watch with parodic touches of the characters who were supposed to be his captors, and the second is the story of Jules and his reflection on his profession and life. The structure of the film seems more in keeping with Tarantino's stylistic intentions, but it seems that both worked equally well.

REFERENCES

Howley, K. (2004). Breaking, Making, and Killing Time in Pulp Fiction. *Scope. An Online Journal of Film & TV Studies* 6(2).
<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2004/may-2004/howley.pdf>

Sánchez-Escalonilla, A. (2014). *Estrategias de guion cinematográfico: el proceso de creación de una historia*. Grupo Planeta (GBS).

Velásquez, M. (2016). Analysis of the literary screenplay of *Pulp Fiction*: an exercise of the interpreted. *Fuera de Campo Vol. 1*(1), pp. 76-93.

Audiovisual essay received on 24/10/2023 and accepted on 27/11/2023.

Creative Commons Attribution License | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.







