The Cool Aesthetic in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*

This chapter will focus on a film sequence from *Pulp Fiction* (1994)¹ in order to reveal the intricacies of how aesthetic pleasure cannot only move us, but also make us aware of what effects it may have on our contemporary “postmodern” life-experience. The analysis undertaken here will be an attempt to spark an interest in assessing the drift of an artwork that has recently attained a far-ranging resonance in popular culture: namely, the newfangled independent Hollywood film. There are popular cultural artefacts that have had a tremendous impact on the public. What this involves tends to centre round the general interest it elicits: box-office success, multiple reviews, DVD rentals and sales, Internet sites, scholarly monographs, etc. This means that there are popular cultural artefacts that have been acclaimed as outstanding centrepieces of entertainment alluring the public’s attention. These creations have turned out to be important cultural signs documenting a particular era – the ’90s in our case-study. They have also acquired a cult status by a large segment of the public. One basic aim here will be to describe the social ‘resonance’ of a cinematic production generating pleasure defined under the rubric of the Cool Aesthetic. Hence, our objective will be to undertake an experiment conducive to discovering a meaningful approach to evaluating an influential ‘centrepiece’ of post-modern style. In doing this, the following discussion will also concentrate on applying a semiotic and rhetorical analysis. Moreover, this type of analysis should hopefully provide an insight into the workings of any given sign-system, but specifically when experienced in such a popular form as a highly awarded film.

In an age where consumerism appears to have the upper hand in guiding our daily actions, there is an indication that our basic needs and desires are being formed by the ever-present sense of following a particular style. As our subsequent analysis unfolds, we will try to come to terms with the “post-modern” style of the cool attitude.² Modern manifestations of cool were generated by the black American jazz musicians and the hard-boiled crime writers and Hollywood script writers in the ’30s and ’40s. In the ’50s the cool attitude became prominent with the white youth through

¹ *Pulp Fiction*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival.
Elvis Presley, rock ’n’ roll and the Hollywood “misfit” stars, Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift. What was the basic attitude of this social trait? Resistance to subjugation and humiliation (Cool Rules, 12). This was a stance that appealed to youth in their effort to distinguish themselves from mainstream conservative restrictions and/or taboos. In other words there was an inclination for adherents to the cool attitude to retain an anti-social stance so as to upset the established order by “dabbling with the ostentatious love of sharp clothes and haircuts, cigarettes, booze and drugs.” Pountain and Robbins define cool in the following way:

“Cool is an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance to authority – whether that of the parent, the teacher, the police, the boss or the prison warden. […] Cool is a rebellious attitude, an expression of a belief that the mainstream mores of your society have no legitimacy and do not apply to you. […] Cool is profoundly hedonistic but often to such a self-destructive degree that it flirts with death. […] Cool was once an attitude fostered by rebels and underdogs – slaves, prisoners, political dissidents – for whom open rebellion invited punishment, so it hid its defiance behind a wall of ironic detachment, distancing itself from the source of authority rather than directly confronting it.” (Cool Rules 19, 23)

Despite the fact that cool as defined above remains unequivocal, it has eventually been appropriated by those who have had a hand in consumer competitiveness. Companies use the trend-setting styles usually created by sub-cultural individuals and groups as iconic markers of cool that will endow their product with what they think is a unique and appealing indexical image. By using the cool image, their advertisers are aware of the competitive spirit of a contemporary lifestyle trend: “Everyone is a rebel now, no-one is ordinary, no-one wants to be a face in the crowd, everyone wants intense experiences,” and this sets their agenda for advancing “new, adventurous and more discriminating modes of consumption” (Cool Rules 166). Consumer society is also under the thrall of the culture industry, especially the Hollywood movie industry. With Pulp Fiction one can experience an intense potpourri of iconic “prototypes” that invigorates one’s imagination by indulging in the aesthetic thrill of this post-modern filmic narrative of cool.
The Cool Couple

A specially contrived date between a man and a woman has been arranged. He’s in his late 30s, handsome with cleft chin, longish black hair half-clasped in a ponytail, and seemingly carefree. She’s in her early 20s, tall and slim with pitch black hair in a Cleopatra-cut, impish eyes, and bewitchingly beautiful. From the start they seem to be going through all the customary rituals of a modern day courtship. There is an effort on their part to forge both a sense of geniality and to eventually pursue a sense of intimacy. As things turn out, an unpredictable string of events will unfold during this bizarre night that catches one’s breath. Even so, what is involved when we happen to observe this date as a cinematic sequence? In other words, what is our ultimate reaction to Vincent Vega’s (John Travolta) and Mia Wallace’s (Uma Thurman) “unconventional date” in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*?

It is a commonplace event that such sequences are a staple in the world of cinema when it comes to depicting human relationships, especially when the amorous designs of couples are revealed; something we’ve seen over and over again on countless occasions (e.g. the stock formula of ‘boy meets girl’; ‘boy wants girl’; ‘boy gets girl’; ‘boy loses girl’, etc.). However, each sequence will exhibit a unique experience, since we are observing a representation of two agents in a particular

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3 This hair style is reminiscent of the one the infamous ’50s pinup girl Bettie Page wore.
4 Of course, this formula has been reversed in recent productions such as *Sex and the City* and others.
dramatistic act as part of the plot development.\footnote{See definition of \textit{dramatism} in Chapter Two.} If we are attentive, we’ll get involved with this depiction on a scale that could consist in either just simply taking it in, or brushing it aside as something hackneyed, or perhaps even contemplating its singular impact on our sensibility. Yet, in our case-study of the \textit{Pulp Fiction} segment, the ‘date’ happens to be an odd and peculiarly ambiguous affair. This suggests that we’ll have to exercise our mental faculties in interpreting the meaning of this cinematic event. Therefore, in taking this outcome into consideration as our main objective, we shall endeavour to explore the intricacies of \textit{cool meaning-production} found in such a film segment.

When experiencing an artefact of popular culture – such as a film – what elements emanating from it are revealed that influence our particular reception? How does the process of \textit{influence} function when we are induced to come to terms with understanding the communicative action that is triggered by the artefact’s manifestation? How aware are we when it comes to understanding what we experience? During the stage of understanding ‘something,’ is it acquired intuitively or through a cognitive process of knowledge-accumulation or both? In our everyday life we are exposed to an innumerable array of popular cultural artefacts that range from what we view on television; what we hear on the radio; what we gaze at in the cinema; what we read and see on billboards, in newspapers, magazines, and books; or what we interact with on the Internet, etc. We have become literally saturated with these artefacts. But saturated with what? Well, quite simply with what are called \textit{signs}.

Accordingly, in this chapter we will briefly investigate two important processes of understanding \textit{meaning}: 1) How the process of understanding meaning through \textit{semiotics} works; and 2) How to interpret the process of understanding the meaning of \textit{influence} through \textit{rhetoric}. Semiotics and rhetoric will be used as fundamental tools for \textit{critical analysis}. Both tools will be considered as highly relevant for helping us to cope with the \textit{management of meaning} in our complex societies. After going through the basics of semiotics, we will attempt, on the one hand, to incorporate its major conceptual elements (i.e. theory) in an analysis (i.e. praxis) of the aforementioned ‘date’ segment from \textit{Pulp Fiction}. On the other hand, rhetoric will consist in a running commentary during the analysis of this particular
film segment using Kenneth Burke’s *pentad*.\textsuperscript{6} It is important to keep in mind that the main purpose here is not to exclusively differentiate semiotics from rhetoric, but to initially use semiotic concepts in order to disclose the *motives* of communicative action as a rhetorical objective – rhetoric being the *act* of comprising and consequently revealing human motives. Furthermore, semiotic terms will be used as the building blocks of meaning-making as a vehicle for establishing the force of the rhetorical act, which ultimately aims to *influence* our ‘sense of (socio-political) being.’

**Semiotics and Rhetoric**

When we gesture, talk, write, read, watch a film, listen to music, look at a painting, we are engaged in primarily unconscious sign-based behaviours of various kinds. Human life is characterized above all else by a ‘perfusion of signs.’ As Danesi aptly remarks:

“Without them (i.e. signs) we would have to resort to a purely instinctual form of existence. Perhaps the most important function of signs is that they make knowledge practicable by giving it a physical and thus retrievable and usable form. Although we process information about the world through our sensory apparatus, the cognitive uses of such information would quickly vanish without signs to encode and preserve it in some reusable way. Knowledge is ‘signed information.’” (28)\textsuperscript{7}

Danesi’s statement brings us closer to answering the question raised earlier concerning intuition and cognition. In other words, semiotics provides an insight into unpacking such intricate questions concerning meaning-production and eventual reception. Notice here that the instinctual faculty (let’s call this the gateway towards ‘intuition’) is intertwined with the intellectual faculty (let’s call this ‘cognition’). Now, if we were to tie this into Aristotle’s rhetorical theory, this dichotomy would be characterized on his epistemological scale as a perfect example of representing the ‘instinctual/intuitive’ as *pathos* and the ‘cognitive’ as *logos*. The interplay of *pathos*

\textsuperscript{6} See definition of Burke’s *pentad* in Chapter Two.

and *logos* in conjunction with the notion of *semiosis* should provide us with a more holistic framework when grappling with the niceties of interpreting the aesthetic impact of the *Pulp Fiction* sequence we’re interested in.

Semiotics is often used for the analysis of texts. In this particular study, the *text* is a medium that consists not only of a verbal enunciation, but also of non-verbal (image and sound) elements. Based on Saussure’s theory concerning the notions of meaning structure, the *sign* consists of a ‘sound’ (and/or ‘written’) image: the *signifier* and a ‘mental’ concept/image: the *signified*. This distinction constitutes a clear representation of the sign’s formation when dealing with ‘concrete nouns.’ What happens, though, when we confront abstract nouns such as ‘love’ or, in our case, ‘cool’? With a situation like this things get fuzzy and complicated. For this reason it is imperative to further clarify the processes of defining a highly marked lexeme. This entails refining the meaning-production of the signifier and signified. At this point we can say that **denotation** and **connotation** appear as useful terms to help the process.

Roland Barthes’s notion of the *first order of signification* can be useful in framing meaning-production. Barthes points out that denotation at the first order level of signification is a sign that consists of a signifier and a signified that can be defined as ‘literal,’ ‘obvious,’ or having ‘commonsense’. For example, at this level we will see Vincent’s ‘Zippo’ lighter being used as an index of meaning. The ‘Zippo’ is an ‘obvious’ sign representing a well-known brand of lighter compared to other lighters that are ‘commonsense’ accessories used in lighting up cigarettes, etc. For Barthes **connotation** is a *second order of signification* that uses the denotative sign (signifier/signified) as its own signifier and attaches to it an added signified. In this framework connotation is a sign that emanates from the signifier of a denotative sign so that denotation will lead to a series of connotations. This entails that denotation has a fundamental and primary meaning. This is the mechanism that allows a sign to signify one thing but also allows it to have multiple meanings (i.e. *polysemy*). Hence, connotation becomes the mechanism that stimulates our conceptual competence in making associations that include multiple meanings that are being formed. According to Barthes, signs and codes are produced by what he calls *myths* and in turn sustain the so-called myths. The use of the term ‘myth’ should not be confused as something

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8 The following short section is partially paraphrased from Chandler’s *Semiotics for Beginners*.
that refers to beliefs that are demonstratively false. For Barthes myth should be understood as an extended metaphor. Myths are expressive and conducive in organizing shared ways of experiencing a culture. Semioticians who follow Saussure’s theory consider the relationship between nature and culture as being arbitrary. However, according to Barthes myths serve the ideological function of naturalization (45-6). Their function is to naturalize the cultural – in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs seem entirely ‘natural,’ ‘normal,’ ‘commonsense’ – and thus objective and ‘true’ reflections of ‘the way things are’ (see Barthes). An intended ‘naturalized meaning’ in the text of the movie is that Vincent’s ‘Zippo’ at this level of signification embodies an ‘image’ that associates the lighter with a ‘mythical’ sense of cool. This image is revealed in the iconic gesture of handling the Zippo, its imposing silver shaped gravity, and its characteristic flicking sound. In other words, it acquires the status of being an object of a ritualized form of cool “savoir faire.”

The differences among the three orders of signification are not quite clear, but for purposes of description and analysis what follows appears relevant: The first (denotative) order (or level) of signification is seen as primarily representational and relatively self-contained. The second (connotative) order of signification reflects ‘expressive’ values which are attached to a sign. In the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major culturally-variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview – such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism,Americanness and so on. One can clearly discern, then, that the combination of the three orders facilitates meaning-production and meaning-reception. To be sure, it’s the third order that projects the iconic sign of coolness that is vividly framed in the film segment.

Before embarking on our core analysis of meaning-production, let’s put into perspective the notion of rhetoric as it has evolved over the centuries from a traditional insight concerning ‘persuasiveness’ to an example of how popular culture ‘influences’ our state of mind in a post-modern environment. Briefly, rhetoric, as many scholars have come to acknowledge, is an art (τέχνη) that emanates from a text (usually spoken or written or even represented visually) aiming primarily to convince someone of a particular stance. To be sure, this stance can consist in a wide spectrum of ideas, claims, proposals, opinions and generally well-disposed (or even ill-
disposed!) attempts to deal with issues that are relevant to the workings of any social group – whether at the personal, local, national or global level. However, in this chapter we are going to critique popular culture as a principle that underlies what texts do when they wield rhetorical influence based on the meanings they support. In other words, people make texts so as to influence others. We will learn that because texts can mean different things, they are often sites of struggle over meaning (and thus, over how and what or whom they will influence). For example, one major site of struggle over meaning in our segment from *Pulp Fiction* is, on the one hand, to critically confront the post-modern sense of hyper-spatiality\(^\text{11}\) as a form of spectacle represented in Mia’s home and especially in the Jack Rabbit Slim’s restaurant scene. On the other hand, we will elucidate the signifying practices of the two subjects (agents) interacting within these two spaces.\(^\text{12}\) This entails another site of struggle over meaning, which lies in the way the audience is challenged to encounter the extraordinary repartee (i.e. the enacted filmic enunciation) of these characters; thus propelling us to ponder over its importance from a semiotic and rhetorical point of view.

As we noted above, our ultimate goal will be to present an overall reading of this scene dramatically, unraveling the director’s attempt to impose an affected and hyper-real style on the audience by incorporating it within the notion of a cool-aesthetic. After this ‘site of struggle over meaning’ has been established, we’ll finally try to determine what the outcome (i.e. purpose) of this may have on the audience member(s). Consequently, we will point out how influence has transpired from such traditional rhetorical notions as ethos, logos, pathos to sites of struggle that explain how it is that people are empowered or disempowered by the meanings of various texts, but also how people are subject to these meanings that signify cool in a text like *Pulp Fiction*.

First and foremost, rhetoric is discourse which is composed on the assumption that people tend to struggle over power; therefore, people eventually struggle over the words that express any type of power. In a traditional sense the manner of discourse which became prevalent was that of political and forensic (and occasionally eulogistic) communication. This was the distinctive feature of ancient Athens in

\(^{11}\) Scott Kirsch (38) uses the term ‘hypergeography’ to depict a similar aspect.

\(^{12}\) Of course, there’s one important final space/scene in the film-segment that takes place in the home of Vincent’s personal dealer; but this is beyond the pale of ‘hyper-spatiality.’
which democracy required that the people govern themselves. The Athenians believed that citizens are self-governing, they must talk about common problems and devise procedures for shared decision-making. In a fertile context of open discussion, there evolved an arena in which citizens vied for positions that entailed a struggle over the power to persuade and impose their views and ultimately their particular interests. (Of course, this was circumscribed within a unique set of circumstances: only a small homogeneous population of privileged/propertied citizens, e.g. roughly 30,000 males out of over 150,000 women, children, metics and slaves/chattel, had access to the public forum). The roots of ‘participatory democracy’ which originated in ancient Athens have had a significant impact on modern constitutional (representative) democracies; although – it should be underlined – in an obviously diminished form. Nevertheless, we find many similarities today in which discourse is conducted on the same turf (i.e. the arena of “open discussion” designated as The Public Sphere) that allows the ‘views’ and ‘interests’ of individuals to play an agonistic role in advanced capitalist societies. The play of power-struggles still takes its cue on how effective/persuasive the particular discourse it wields has repercussions on the social imaginary. In any case, we cannot overlook the fact that political power is overwhelmingly in the hands of elites who exercise it within the sociopolitical framework of our highly class-differentiated societies.

Of course, what has been previously mentioned is an observation of how rhetoric is viewed as the fulcrum of a type of discourse that primarily highlights the give-and-take of decision and policy-making. However that may be, a glaring factor in our contemporary situation is that we, as citizens, have been either immune or even indifferent to the daily procedures of ‘decision and policy-making’ carried out by the power elites. What seems paramount in our age of alienation and apathy can be described as a kind of “sleepwalking-effect” through a maze of consumer enticements and lifestyle codes. The so-called ‘texts’ of rhetorical persuasiveness today can be characterized as discursive stimuli animating the personal enhancement of a contingent “pseudo-euphoria” (cf. Roland Barthes’ notions of plaisir or jouissance) that gives the appearance of reflecting any chosen aura of style imposed on the public by a myriad of productive and/or cultural industry ‘designers’ (e.g. through films, TV series, talk shows, advertisements, etc.). In other words, rhetoric today implies that

someone (i.e. the capitalist/producer “wizard”) has designs over others in order to induce either conspicuous or vicarious consumption that zeros in on a fabricated matrix producing a desirably intended and desired influence.

This is where the notion of the cool-aesthetic comes into our picture. First of all, Tarantino as director-“wizard” refrains from delving into anything resembling either explicit or even implicit political issues (e.g. racial conflicts, class struggle, economic injustice, human rights, etc). These are off-limits for his worldview. Indeed, the narrative structure de-centralizes itself from such thought-provoking insights. What is obvious for those who are cognizant of the post-modern drift of works representing the diffuse signs of a fragmented state of affairs can be captured as follows: There seems to be a marked tendency on the part of the director to depict, on the surface, the “personal as political” in the film as a whole, but with a whimsical vengeance! According to Pountain and Robins, “cool is not a collective political response but a stance of individual defiance, which does not announce itself in strident slogans but conceals its rebellion behind a mask of ironic impassivity” (19; my emphasis). His worldview of the personal as political is essentially a stance enhancing the cool attitude. In fact, the issue of the “personal” is bracketed within the obsessive/neurotic complex of how ‘masculinity’ is presented in extreme formulations of projecting its sense of absolute ‘coolness’ along with its violent reactions towards the other. For Tarantino, “the hallmark of coolness is steely self-control, its payoff control over others” (Fraiman, 2). But ‘coolness’ in the context of this film consists in the way the male is framed within a generically coded semiosis that engages the direct appeal of the spectator’s gaze. As Gleason mentions, “Unlike the common masculine, feminine, or any other gaze, Tarantino offers us the gaze of cool […] He creates the cinema of cool, or more accurately, the cinema of appropriation through coolness, of sanitizing through style. The ‘cool gaze’ is Tarantino’s way of shocking and undermining social conventions, of making his audiences reassess their personal values.” Image, gestural quirks and a hip sociolect come off in flying colors as a package for the ‘cool ethos effect.’ In other words, the

14 Double-entendre intended!
15 Consumption, as a term used here, doesn’t necessarily focus only on commodities per se, but also on images, ideas, lifestyle trends, etc.
16 This is an issue of gender that has been primarily discussed by feminist scholars.
18 This sociolect resembles the African-American English Vernacular (AAEV).
The filmic male is framed within the stereotype of the mythic gangster, thus allowing the prospect of a putative spectator-identification; but mainly, it should be added, as a prospect for *stylistic* identification. (And if the spectator is a middle-class male there is the prospect of having to come to terms with facing and trying to overcome the angst of contemporary masculinity in a helter-skelter post-industrial society. A film like this triggers middle-class male anxiety dreams in which class is nothing more than a metaphor for conflicting masculine possibilities and subject positioning. Violence and machismo, along with male bonding and obsessive determination, are allocated to these lumpen gangster-types. The middle-class male, who is entrapped in his other-directed, capitalist-organizational values, trades this off for vicarious indulgence.) Moreover, this “prospect” banks its success on a representation that verges on a grotesquely comical *parody*. These small-time gangsters are caricatures of previous characters found in other films, but are redeemed as ‘cool’ types based on their excessively flashy talk; hence prompting a rewarding chuckle for those “in the know.” Second, Fraiman claims that women in this film are relegated to doing harmless and innocuous things, whereas the men are embroiled in violence that counts as action. However, it is evident that Mia holds her ground in a highly self-composed and witty manner. Finally, in this “smart” film there is the recycling of pop icons as an overt exercise in (*‘cool’*) *intertextuality*. Above all, we have the ‘star’ John Travolta encapsulating the epiphany of the male hunk he characterized in the blockbuster film of the mid-’70s, *Saturday Night Fever*, despite his aging and gathering flesh. Without a doubt, his faultless and nonchalant (i.e. *cool*) charm captured in his portrayal of Vincent carries the day in this scene with Uma Thurman.

**Analysis**

Our first encounter with the ‘date’ sequence triggers a process in which the encoding of *signs* – unfolding in a typically rapid succession of multiple meaning-frames – reflect a potpourri of popular cultural icons. As I mentioned earlier, the ‘date’ in this segment has actually been arranged by Vincent’s mafia boss, Marcellus (Ving Rhames). Being out of town, he has asked Vincent to entertain his wife, Mia.

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19 We will point out other ‘pop icons’ as signs enacting intertextuality below.
20 Critics have extolled Tarantino for resurrecting Travolta’s stardom after a lengthy period of obscurity in the film business.
21 Travolta was nominated for an Oscar for this portrayal.
by giving her the green light to decide on what she would like to do for an evening out on the town. As a matter of fact, this reference to the ‘date’ takes place in the early part of the film, when Vincent and his partner Jules (Samuel Jackson) are casually conversing on their way to bump off a small group of young, clean-cut dealers who have double-crossed Marcellus. Unbeknown to Vincent, Mia has been the centre of some controversy in recent days. Jules relates to Vincent the unfortunate story of one Tony Rocky Horror (named Antwan below), who was thrown out of a window because he gave Mia Wallace a foot massage. This cocky exchange of gossip taking place between the two hit men preordains the uneasy apprehensions that will begin to torment Vincent’s mind about Mia. The following dialogue puts this into graphic perspective:

JULES: “Look, just because I wouldn't give no man a foot massage, don't make it right for Marsellus to throw Antwan off a building into a glassmotherfuckin-house, fuckin' up the way the nigger talks. That ain't right, man. Motherfucker do that to me, he better paralyze my ass, 'cause I'd kill'a motherfucker.”

VINCENT: “I'm not sayin' he was right, but you're sayin' a foot massage don't mean nothing, and I'm sayin' it does. I've given a million ladies a million foot massages and they all meant somethin'. We act like they don't, but they do. That's what's so fuckin' cool about 'em. This sensual thing's goin' on that nobody's talkin about, but you know it and she knows it, fuckin' Marsellus knew it, and Antwan shoulda known fuckin' better. That's his fuckin' wife, man. He ain't gonna have a sense of humor about that shit.”

JULES: “That's an interesting point, but let's get into character.”

VINCENT: “What's her name again?”

JULES: “Mia. Why you so interested in big man's wife?”
VINCENT: “Well, Marsellus is leavin' for Florida and when he's gone, he wants me to take care of Mia.”

JULES: “Take care of her?”

VINCENT: “Not that! Take her out. Show her a good time. Don't let her get lonely.”

JULES: “You're gonna be takin' Mia Wallace out on a date?”

VINCENT: “It ain't a date. It's like when you and your buddy's wife go to a movie or somethin'. It's just...you know...good company. I'm not gonna be a bad boy.”

Vincent’s impending rendezvous with Mia is thus established as a new line of action that will be the focus of the film’s next section (i.e. the section that we’ll be discussing in detail). Crucially, the “hit” Vincent and Jules carry out in the prologue and the upcoming scenes involving Vincent’s ‘date’ with Mia Wallace revolve around an omnipresent, but as yet unseen presence: Marcellus Wallace. In other words, the ‘unseen presence’ of the boss invokes the power-structure of hierarchy in the submissively marked existential status and consciousness of Vincent. This will encode the value system of ‘loyalty’ and ‘subservience’ that tends to be a standard feature in gangster-like forms of behaviour. Actually, what we have here is one of the oldest chestnuts in gangster film narratives: “a member of the gang taking out the mobster’s wife whom he must not touch” (Hayward, 279).

Let’s pause for a moment and put the film into perspective. The segment we’re going to focus on begins to unfold approximately 40 minutes into the main body of the film. I’m going to refrain from giving a full synopsis of the events leading up to this segment, and I’m not going to discuss Tarantino’s (and Roger Avary’s) cleverly convoluted narrative technique throughout this highly crafted film. What is important, though, is placing the film, and especially this dramatistic scene, in a popular cultural context. As Gleason points out “Quentin Tarantino is fascinated with pop culture icons and images of coolness. His work aims to explore the origins of the

22 Check Filmsite.org for a detailed analysis of the film’s plot, etc.
23 Tarantino and Avary won the Oscar award for best screenplay.
cool and the way in which images (or reputations) are echoed in the realm of popular culture.”

From the point of view of genre (i.e. of narrative context), this film describes the underworld life of minor gangster-types. The film makes references to familiar noir films of the ’40s and ’50s and other innumerable gangster films produced in the Hollywood B-film tradition. The major sign-systems of this genre are familiar stock-in-trade for the public at large. “Vincent is a laid-back, get-along kind of guy who is living a depraved and drug-addicted life as a paid killer. Like other low-life characters in the film, he has an astonishingly innocent soul.”24 Indeed, he is in such good-standing with his boss’s local Los Angeles gangster organization that he’s “trusted” to take his wife out on an evening spree.

It should be mentioned that before this scene evolves, Vincent has purchased a little bag of high-powered, quality heroin from his pal dealer, Lance (Eric Stoltz). After shooting up, he places the bag in his coat pocket (which, by the way, obliquely foreshadows the unexpected event towards the end of the segment), while driving on his way to the Wallace residence. Tripping out on the heroin, Vincent arrives at Mia's home only to be confronted by the disembodied voice and preying eyes of his dinner companion. Mia spies on Vincent while she powders her nose with a few lines of cocaine. “Their respective drugs of choice and general demeanour suggest that this simple dinner date may be a bumpy ride, indeed the perfect recipe for some complicating action” (ibid.).

First of all, within the genre’s surface representation, we immediately notice the attire of the protagonists that willy-nilly foregrounds a well-worn binary system: gangster-type/ordinary-type; coolness/vapidty; virility/impotence, etc. As Pountain and Robins point out, “distinctive clothes and haircuts have always been key signifiers of Cool” (22). An iconic signifier that depicts the gangster-type as a stylistic “workday” presence – in this case as represented by Vincent (and also his partner Jules) – is the dress code of black suit, white shirt and thin black tie.25 Black color26 is a commonplace, popular cultural mythic motif of clothes that tends to signify either “badness” or “anti-authority” inclinations (disregarding, of course, the black dress of

25 Recall the same dress code in Tarantino’s first film, Reservoir Dogs.
26 I’m dismissing it here as an indicator of an elegant evening dress-code.
mourning). During the ‘date’ sequence, Vincent will be in his usual syntagmatic black apparel; although for the occasion wearing a black suit jacket that resembles a pseudo-tuxedo (cf. the satin collar). However, his overcoat, wrapped over his arm, is of a designer-cut suede in light brown. More importantly, tonight he’s wearing a fancy buckled cowboy string tie (instead of the usual “workday” one), which is noticeably a paradigmatic change. The iconic signifier of the ‘cowboy string tie’ will also mesh into a verbal signifier later in the dialogue (e.g. Mia: “will you roll me one, cowboy?”). At first, it seems paradoxical that the signifier ‘cowboy’ ties into the gangster role depicted by Vincent. However, in popular cultural mythic motifs the signifiers of ‘cowboy’ and ‘gangster’ both imply ‘virility,’ ‘coolness,’ ‘defiance,’ ‘bravado,’ etc. Moreover, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that even Mia appears in a similar type of apparel. She’s also presented in a simple white shirt/blouse and black slacks! This implies that she belongs, in part, to the gangster-world of the main protagonists of the film, based on the fact that she is the wife of the top-dog of the organization Hence, her dress-code unconventionally dove-tails into the pattern set up by the popular cultural motifs of ‘coolness,’ ‘defiance,’ etc. As a matter of fact, on the iconic-surface-level we notice an overt emphasis on the stylistic illustration of the cool-aesthetic. To be sure, this iconic-surface-level will hinge on the ‘cool’ dialogue enunciated by Vincent and Mia; thus reflecting the dramatistic signifying practices of the two agents.

Our initial reaction to the ‘iconic-surface-level’ – in conjunction with the ‘verbal-level’ – is occasioned by the agency that emerges from the cinematic flow of frames that runs its course through this scene. Agency, from Burke’s dramatistic perspective (i.e. the means, tools, or techniques with which something is done), embodies not only language but also iconic representations. This produces signifiers that are either enunciated lexemes and/or icons imparting distinct signifieds on the first level of denotation; and on the second level of connotation becoming, in their own right, the binding myth that will inscribe the meaning of ‘coolness’ as the third order of signification in this film. Indeed, the connecting link of signification that agency provides for a multi-perspective sense of understanding ‘coolness’ can be

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27 Isn’t it ironic that gangster hit-men usually bring about ‘mourning’ in others?
28 Rolled cigarettes are a classic cliché icon for cowboys.
29 It’s clear that she isn’t the typically depicted gangster’s bimbo-consort dressed in the tawdry frills that we see in other genre films of this sort.
30 Of course, it should be mentioned that the ‘cool-like dialogue’ conducted by the various characters has been the major trademark of this film from the beginning scenes.
determined by the following cluster of means/techniques: 1) the dress-code; 2) the phatic, kinetic/gestural expressions of the characters (i.e. the actors); 3) the dialogue between the characters; 4) the setting (including the fabricated sets); 5) the photography, camera movement and film editing; and 6) the musical accompaniment. If we lay aside for the moment the agency of 3) and 6) above, then we are in the midst of a flow of iconic signs (as indexes) that propel the dynamics of meaning-production encapsulating the intended effect of the notion of scenic ‘cool’ (cf. Mia’s house and the restaurant). In other words, these particular iconic signs instantaneously evoke the ‘cool’ gaze. Yet, it should be pointed out that the aural signs of language and music (i.e. 3 and 6 above) in this film are also, if not more so, an overt driving force impacting the notion of ‘cool’ on our sensibility.

We are now in a position to elaborate on the designs Tarantino has in projecting a post-modern style to the audience. This elaboration will essentially incorporate the use of Burke’s model of the pentad as the mainstay for our rhetorical interpretation. Why this is so essential will become evident in our subsequent analysis. We have just referred to an element of his pentad by defining agency above. This six-point agency cluster will guide us in describing the flow of the cinematic events crucial to our analysis. Having already presented the agency of the dress-code, let’s move on to the phatic/kinetic representation in this sequence. But before we do this, an attempt to interrelate the other elements in the pentad to agency seems appropriate at this juncture.

It’s imperative to take consideration of the fact that agency must be set in sharp relief vis-à-vis the other elements of the pentad, which otherwise function as a catalyst for representing the signifying practices in this sequence. Actually, what takes place is a fundamental overlapping of the elements, whereby they enact the semiosis of the total picture. One could, though, prioritize one of the five elements and let the others slide into being mere reinforcements. However, the most pragmatic procedure would be to use them all as equivalent tools in a multi-perspective interpretation. As mentioned earlier, we highlighted the concept of scene by underscoring its post-modern representation of hyper-spatiality as a springboard for spectacle. Indeed, this representation can be considered as being interlocked with the filmic agency of ‘the setting’ (cluster 4) used as the backdrop for the action – what we designated above as ‘iconic representation.’ As far as the pentad is concerned, we are now left with the
concepts of agent and act. (Purpose will be left for the last interpretative reflection as a means of recapitulation).

The agents (Vincent and Mia) are there in front of us acting out their fictional personas in medias res. As a concept of the pentad, act is Burke’s central element, since it represents the Aristotelian core of human praxis. This is based on mimesis, which is, according to Aristotle, the hub of universal human activity – especially when it is illustrated in literary texts or other artworks in general. In other words, the agents (i.e. the fictionalized characters) are acting in concert with what we, as members of the human community, experience and share inter-subjectively as aspects of behaviour that can be easily decoded; based, of course, on what is viewed as behaviour reflecting ‘realistic events’ – and also viewed as producing ‘verisimilitude’ in a fictionalized universe. Consequently, the agent’s phatic and verbal acts constitute the major sign-system of mimesis.

Turning now to the phatic and kinetic/gestural manifestations that grasp our attention, we notice that they centre round the codification of two people who are initially drug-dazed and who are thereafter immersed in an effort to find a common denominator for communicative leverage – both verbally and bodily. Without going into great detail concerning the intricacies of the phatic/gestural, let’s first focus on the ‘cool’ repercussions of their ‘body-language.’ When Vincent approaches Mia’s door we know from the previous scene that he is in a heroin-bliss. Is his shooting up a pretext for shielding himself from an anticipation of wooing and eventually seducing Mia, or the opposite? This, of course, is the overwhelming chestnut. And we’ll have to watch and wait for the outcome of the entire scene before we can corroborate this intimation.

A striking feature of ‘bodily’ signification is when Vincent languorously enters the house and Mia hails him over the intercom, simultaneously observing him over the camera system (CCTV). Mia’s camera system reminds us of a Panopticon (i.e. the notion of surveillance).31 We can now view, through Mia’s gaze, Vincent’s awkward efforts to get his bearings straight as he strives to discover where the enchanting voice flows from, while sauntering to and fro on the ground floor of the house. Mia has just finished her beautification upstairs and is preparing to sniff her cocaine. What is the purpose of her getting high on cocaine? Again, we’ll have to wait

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31 See Bentham’s idea-project of the Panopticon and Foucault’s use of this idea in his theory of bio-power.
and see. She continues to address Vincent through an elongated silver microphone that is a connoted iconic signified of the phallus – her lush lips nearly touching it! Ironically, she is in control of this encoded, though evanescent sexual connotation, due to the fact that she is commanding Vincent’s movements both through the mike and camera system (e.g. speaking through the symbolic ‘phallus’ = controlling “it”). So, is the phatic at the outset phallic? (Let’s not overburden ourselves with this question, since it will take us on a cumbersome journey through the shadowy hallways of Lacanian psychological analysis). This Panopticon motif immediately imparts to us her position of dominance at this point. After telling Vincent to pour himself a drink, he begins looking around the posh living room. He notices Mia’s large portrait on the wall. But owing to a paradoxical camera shift (agency cluster 5), we are now observing Vincent perusing it from the point of view of the portrait itself! This signifying shift cleverly meshes into the Panopticon effect. Hence, Mia is not only symbolically “on top” spatially (i.e. upstairs watching every move Vincent makes), but also symbolically controlling his gaze through her portrait!

Memorable highlights of the phatic/gestural in the film segment are – amongst many others – the ritualistic cool mannerisms of flauntingly smoking; of flicking on the Zippo lighter; of playfully making winsome eye contact and grimaces while chatting; of sipping a vanilla milk-shake in a flippant manner; of vivaciously performing the twist on the dance floor; and of the swooning tango – that is sexually enhanced – as they return to the Wallace residence victorious after winning the dance prize at Jack Rabbit Slim’s. All these encoded features are overtly materialized as iconic signs of the cool style. ‘Coolness,’ as a form of body language – a kind of “syntax” of visibly marked gestures and quirks – is heightened by the perpetually roguish and at times incredulous look on Vincent’s face and by Mia’s breezy, slick and quite feline airs and graces.

Let’s now quickly review this sequence step-by-step, incorporating and merging the elements of the pentad along with the semiotic building blocks. This procedure will focus on the core feature of mimesis – that of the act. Indeed, this element transmutes the agency of ‘cool’ dialogue (cluster 3) into the ongoing

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32 This happens through a split second, symbolically fore-grounded close up.
33 This is a question that may tease one throughout this sequence, if one is on the lookout for a Lacanian analysis! This is an analysis that I’ll try to avoid for the time being.
34 I’m concerned with the symbolic presentation of sexuality as a simple vehicle influencing the cool style in general and not its unconscious drives.
narrative *mythic* flow of the sequence – dialogue being the key to experiencing and eventually understanding the communicative and ritualistic motif of the ‘date’ and what its impact entails.

As the scene unfolds, we are witnesses to a communicative game of trial and error. This is an experiential phenomenon that seems quite normal when two people, who slightly know the existence of each other, come together for the first time. Even though Vincent will give the appearance of being nonchalant, he is, nevertheless, under more anxious pressure owing to the rumours and gossip that have preceded this encounter (see the dialogue above with Jules). Mia, on the other hand, exudes a sense of casualness from the beginning, though induced perhaps by the sniff of cocaine. She seems to be ingenuously anticipating a good time for an amusing outing/‘date,’ while her husband is out of town on business. As Mia is directing Vincent to the intercom, we hear the renowned single ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ (1968) sung by Dusty Springfield. The lyrics impel the clear-cut romantic/date motif:

*How well I remember*  
*The look that was in his eyes*  
*Stealin kisses from me on the sly*  
*Takin time to make time*  
*Tellin me that he’s all mine*  
*Learnin from each other’s knowing*  
*Lookin to see how much we’ve grown*

The slow bouncy music with its lyrics could possibly imply an erotic escapade in the making. However, it could also reinforce Mia’s feelings for her husband. It’s this kind of ambiguity that incites us to dig deeper for other associations. No matter how we decide upon this (at this point), the song itself creates a highly evocative atmosphere of romance that the *agency* (cluster 6) of musical accompaniment provides. One important factor in a post-modernist work of art is the quasi-nostalgic referencing to other works of the not-too-distant past. The most striking pop cultural artefacts that emerge in Tarantino’s films are the mood-inspiring songs he uses from the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s as signifying tokens for purposes of pastiche. These song-references tend to underscore the *pathos* of emotionally charged memories. And for those in the know, ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ essentially does that with panache!

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35 Quentin Tarantino has been quoted on the “Collectors Edition” DVD of *Pulp Fiction* as saying that he probably would not have done this scene had he not been able to use “Son of a Preacher Man” (see Wikipedia.org).
The first phatic *signifiers* are found on a note attached to the door: “Hi Vincent, I’m getting dressed. The door’s open. Come inside and make yourself a drink. Mia.” The following *signifiers* are vocally channelled through the intercom. As Mia is directing Vincent towards the speaker on the wall, she produces the first ‘cool-like’ *signifier*: “…warm. Warmer. Disco.” This lexeme (‘disco’) makes a subtle reference to an intertextual *signified*: namely, Tarantino’s personified fame as a Disco dancer in *Saturday Night Fever!* (The most vernacular lexeme for finding a spot under another person’s guidance would be ‘bingo’). After coming down, we then see a low shot focused on Mia’s legs as she begins to walk across the living room floor. Mia takes the needle off the record, wistfully raises her right foot (which is the classic cliché *sign* of a woman being kissed) and flatly says: “Let’s go,” abruptly ending the song along with this section.

The next major *scene* takes place at Jack Rabbit Slim’s. Tarantino describes the (then) recent trend of launching ’50s type diners in L.A. in his script: “Décor out of an ‘Archie’ comic book, Golden Oldies constantly emanating from a bubbly Wurlitzer, saucy waitresses in bobby socks, menus with items like the Fats Domino Cheeseburger, or the Wolman Jack Omelette, and overprices that pay for all this bullshit.” As they pull up to the restaurant, we view the huge neon sign with a “figure of a cartoon surly cool cat jackrabbit towering over the establishment.” Underneath the neon sign is the slogan: “Next best thing to a time machine.” Vincent is nonplussed:

“What the fuck is this place?”
Mia: “This is Jackrabbit Slim’s. An Elvis man should love it.”
Vincent: “Come on, Mia, let’s go get a steak.”
Mia: “You can get a steak here, daddy-o. Don’t be a …”

Mia draws a square with her hands. Dotted lines appear on the screen, forming a square. The lines disperse. At a first glance, the *signifier* “time machine” captures the essence of nostalgic references – a deliberate post-modern sleight of hand. Mia’s invoking “Elvis man” and using the expression “daddy-o” takes us back to major cultural *signs* of ’50s and early ’60s cool. This is Mia’s ‘trial and error’ tactic in assuming that Vincent could be on the same culturally-marked wavelength. The

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36 *Pulp Fiction* script description.
drawing of the iconic signifier in dotted lines on the screen, instead of verbally enunciating it, points to “Tarantino’s relationship to post-modern style” made manifest “with the use of such a self-conscious artifice” (Tasker, 42).

To hesitate in going into such a cool restaurant, Mia implies, would be a flagrant transgression that only ‘square’ or ‘un-cool’ people would perform. So, Vincent decides to enter and is obviously bemused while taking in the hyped-up simulacra of the restaurant setting. This is deftly captured for us on the screen through the meandering panning-movement of the camera positioned behind him (i.e. invoking the ‘subjective’ point of view in film theory; see cluster 5 above) as he rambles around this alluring space. What we observe is the panoramic take of the walls covered in ’50s B-movie posters and the centre of the dining area where the booths are made out of the cut-up bodies of ’50s cars. Wandering to and fro are waiters and waitresses who are lookalikes of ’50s icons: Marilyn Monroe, Zorro, Buddy Holly, James Dean, Donna Reed, and the Philip Morris midget. Ricky Nelson is strumming his guitar and singing.

According to Tarantino’s script, the booth envisioned for Mia and Vincent to sit in was to be made out of a “red ’59 Edsel.” Unfortunately, in the final cut we see them sit in a green convertible of an unrecognized make. I say ‘unfortunately’ because if the “red ’59 Edsel” had been used, we would have been exposed to an extravaganza of semiotic associations relevant to the narrative implications intended. First of all, the Ford ‘Edsel’ was the greatest commercial flop in the history of the American automobile industry.37 (This, of course, would imply the foregrounding of a “flopped romance” in the making – which, as we will see, eventually ends up being). Second, its idiosyncratic design provoked snide remarks from many, because of the infamous grille (on the front of the car) that seemed to resemble female genitalia! To be sure, we shouldn’t overburden ourselves with the subtle symbolic references implied here as far as the Edsel is concerned. Nevertheless, I should mention in passing that convertible automobiles have generally connoted a cool flair of sexuality that has been associated with motoring, especially in warm climates such as California.

The couple is waited on by the lookalike of Buddy Holly (the famous rock ‘n’ roll star who was tragically killed in a plane crash in 1959 at the age of 22). This particular encounter produces a series of allusions for trivia buffs, which happens to

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37 See this described in Wikipedia.org.
be an overwrought preoccupation of those who play – as Tarantino does in his films – with post-modernist pastiche effects. For example, Vincent orders a “Douglas Sirk steak, bloody as hell.” Sirk is the renowned auteur director of ’50s Hollywood melodramas. Then Buddy the waiter asks Mia, “How ’bout you, Peggy Sue?” (Peggy Sue was the name of Holly’s big hit – number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1957. Even Francis Ford Coppola used this name for his 1986 comedy/drama *Peggy Sue Got Married* – using the Holly song accompanying the opening credits of the film. An interesting bit of trivia is that ‘time travelling’ Peggy Sue, played by Kathleen Turner, laughs at her father’s newly bought Edsel!). Mia then responds to the replica-Buddy by ordering the “Durwood Kirby burger, bloody and a five-dollar shake.” (Kirby was a television host, announcer and comic side-kick in the famous *Candid Camera* show in the ’50s. He was also satirized in the cult cartoon show *Rocky and Bullwinkle*). The milk shakes are called “Martin and Lewis” (for vanilla, since they were a white comedy team of the famous singer Dean Martin and comic Jerry Lewis) and “Amos and Andy” (for chocolate, since they were a black comedy team first on radio and then shortly on TV in the early ’50s). This quick-paced cavalcade of ’50s trivia signs represents the stylistically enhanced features that encapsulate the cool aesthetic Tarantino aspires to formalize. This subtle allusion-game has become the hallmark in popular cultural productions (see, for example, how this is cleverly practiced in *The Simpsons, South Park* and *Family Guy*). This involves the tapping of the audience’s cultural repertoire so as to invoke their putative competence in being able to “get the picture” and then acknowledge that they can easily wield such trivia-allusions when presented. In other words, you’re “cool” if you can quickly grasp and decode the cultural signs flashed on the screen! This is based on narcissistic self-gratification that puts one in the position of thinking of oneself as a bona fide member in sharing this cool cultural milieu.

The fact of the matter is that this place evokes all the signifying retro associations that may be quite overwhelming at one’s first glance. Vincent flippantly exclaims “It’s like a wax museum with a pulse rate.” This line substantiates the signifying practice that is induced by the film’s aesthetic intentions. It lies in provoking the audience to test their cultural knowledge as if they were visiting a ‘wax museum,’ a place that happens to be a repository of retro popular culture. As they are both now smoking while waiting for their order, we see an arresting shot of the bar
where ‘Marilyn Monroe’ runs to a square vent in the floor. An imaginary subway\textsuperscript{38} blows the skirt of her white dress around her ears as she lets out a squeal. The entire restaurant applauds. Once again we are drawn to participate in spotting the association of this visually simulated sign that happens to be one of the most iconic images of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The following verbal \textit{acts} refer to the world of TV drama series – again a reminder that Tarantino is still dispensing \textit{signs} that point to popular culture templates. Mia mentions that she had her “fifteen minutes” during a pilot (\textit{Fox Force Five}) that failed to get produced when she was cast as a member of a dynamic force of women investigators – reminding the audience of the similar popular series \textit{Charlie’s Angels}.

There is an interesting underlying implication made here by having Mia involved with the world of entertainment that depicts \textit{cool violence}. In this particular case, the contemporary depictions in which women are now inducted into this world of violence and prowess (which has been the exclusive domain of men in patriarchy) is conveyed. Since we happen to be watching a film glorifying \textit{cool violence}, this referencing of the motif of female action heroes acts as a humorous foil. Mia refuses to tell a joke used in the pilot because she feels it’s too embarrassing to tell someone like Vincent. This short exchange creates some minor tension, apparently due to Mia’s concern with the gossip of Marcellus’s henchmen. Nevertheless, the subtle banter continues with Vincent asking if he can take a sip of Mia’s five-dollar shake. When she slides the shake over to him she says: “You can use my straw, I don’t have cooties.” “Yeah, but maybe I do,” answers Vincent. “Cooties I can handle,” Mia responds with aplomb indicating that she doesn’t worry about silly “infections” that point to the opposite sex as having a social stigma. This \textit{signifier} (‘cooties’) is embedded within the banter that usually takes place in the playground among children, but now becomes another site of subtle play between the two of them. However, Mia shrugs off the threat of ‘contamination’ and her subtle response connotes that she may be game as far as moving towards the risky terrain of amorous escapades. This leads us to a very important moment in this scene. The script reads: “Then the first of an uncomfortable silence begins.”

Mia: “Don’t you hate that?”

\textsuperscript{38} See the famous scene in Billy Wilder’s film \textit{The Seven Year Itch} starring Marilyn Monroe.
Vincent: “What?”
Mia: “Uncomfortable silences. Why do we feel it’s necessary to yak about bullshit in order to be comfortable?”
Vincent: “I don’t know.”
Mia: “That’s when you know you found somebody special. When you can just shut the fuck up for a minute, and comfortably share silence.”
Vincent: “I don’t think we’re there yet. But don’t feel bad, we just met each other.”

The verbal acts here underscore the ‘romance’ theme. We notice the initial coy gambit in sending out a signal for amorous advances. Mia’s: “when you know you found somebody special” and Vincent’s: “I don’t think we’re there yet. But don’t feel bad, we just met each other,” seem to entertain the notion that the two agents are checking to see how the wind blows on their road to unforeseeable anticipations.

When Mia returns from the bathroom (she snorts some more cocaine there) she’s eager to engage in some interesting discussion: “Did ya think of something to say?” As Vincent is digging into his Douglas Sirk steak, he complains about “Buddy Holly” not being “much of a waiter” and adds that they “shoulda sat in Marilyn Monroe’s section.” We are once again lured to take part in Tarantino’s popular cultural trivial pursuit. While Mia mentions that there are two “Marilyn Monroes,” Vincent sets her right by pointing out that the other blonde waitress is “Mamie Van Doren” and that he can’t “see Jane Mansfield, so it must be her night off.” Of course, this pop culture knowledge impresses Mia, thus enhancing the notion of the cool attitude.

The next sequence of verbal repartee intensifies the interactivity Mia has been pursuing throughout their ‘date.’ Vincent seems to be itching to get Mia to set things straight as far as the rumours he has heard from Jules are concerned (cf. above dialogue). This verbal act generates Mia’s ironic spin on how authentic interactive dialogue should take place: “Oooooohhh, this doesn’t sound like mindless, boring, getting-to-know-you chit chat. It sounds like you actually have something to say.” The drift of this verbal exchange hinges on the ethical valuation one may place on the keeping of face without provoking any potential resentment, but especially when the burden of this valuation is placed on the male interlocutor. “Only if you promise not to get offended,” Vincent meekly responds. Vincent is trying to preclude any possible undermining of the interpersonal equilibrium of mutual understanding and rapport. Of
course this conversational tack piques Mia’s sense of equanimity by having to jump to a foregone conclusion about reacting to a coerced keeping of a promise! She nonplusses Vincent, who wants to shrug off his plea for making promises by saying: “Then let’s just forget it.” However, Mia is going to take him to task for his gambit of trying to pin her down. “That is an impossibility,” she declares. Moreover, she gets quite philosophical having to face such challenges and decides to provoke him by throwing the gauntlet: “Trying to forget anything as intriguing as this would be an exercise in futility.” By questioning his conscientious integrity, this statement challenges him to assess the relevance of having to cope with the conventional “moral” uptake of being in a position to face the consequences of dealing with this. But Vincent recoils with a typically macho impertinence: “Is that a fact?” whereas Mia immediately nods her head by undermining this quip with a curt “Yes.”

The discussion now veers towards a touchy matter that was presaged during Vincent and Jules’s conversation about the hair-raising rumours (see above) concerning Marcellus’s violent overprotection of Mia. Vincent asks Mia about Tony Rocky Horror (Antwan’s nickname) who was thrown out of a window. Mia, of course, knows about the incident and gets quite resentful when she is told that Marcellus did it because of her. Apparently Marcellus, in a blind rage, threw Antwan out of a four-story window because he had the gall to give his wife a foot massage! This particular saucy repartee is marked by its quirky humour conveying an attempt to show how Mia reproaches gossip, especially carried out by men who should know better.39 This verbal exchange is heightened by the innuendos (e.g. in this case, “did it involve the F-word?”) that are bandied about in casual conversations and usually account for the misunderstandings that may accrue amongst interlocutors. When Mia hears the rumour about the foot massage, she puts the record straight by telling Vincent: “The only thing Antwan ever touched of mine was my hand, when he shook it … at my wedding.” The uptake of this rumour centres round the fear Vincent, as a henchman/subaltern, has of his boss’s overbearing power; hence the paranoia gradually devouring him as he escorts Mia on this precarious ‘date.’ This sense of fear is reinforced by what Mia had asked of whether throwing someone out a window because of a foot massage “seemed reasonable.” Vincent’s answer: “No, it seemed excessive” captures the angst gnawing at his heart and is also implicitly tied to the

39 This obviously undercuts the masculinity of the gangster type. See how she compares them to a “sewing circle” below.
chestnut motif of “don’t mess with the boss’s wife” found in the gangster genre. Mia denigrates Vincent and the boys (“scamps”) for being “worse than a sewing circle.”

Next is a cut to ‘Ed Sullivan’ and ‘Marilyn Monroe’ who are standing on the stage in the middle of the restaurant. They’re announcing a dance contest, and the prize is a “handsome trophy that Marilyn here is holding.” Mia is eager to participate, while Vincent reacts negatively. However, Mia imposes on him and implicitly threatens him by emphasizing: “I do believe Marcellus, my husband, your boss, told you to take me out and do whatever I wanted,” which emphasizes once again that she is “on top.” Vincent gives in and as they begin to dance, we are exposed to the playful intertextual sign of seeing ‘Vincent’/Travolta as an aged metamorphosis of ‘Tony’/Travolta from Saturday Night Fever. Vincent and Mia dance to Chuck Berry’s “You never can tell.” This song was composed while Berry was in prison for intent to commit a sex crime. (Is Vincent going to be involved in another type of “sex crime?”). Once again we notice another example in which the indexical acts between the two agents become a subtle referential sign reflecting the ‘romance theme’ found in the contents of a song. They dance the popular twist by making the customary hand movements. An interesting hand movement made by Mia – an indexical sign foreshadowing the unexpected incident with the heroin – is when she pinches her nose and stoops down to the floor as if she were holding her breath underwater (see how she pinches her nose in a different context during scene below!).

The next scene shows Mia and Vincent dancing tango-style into the house, singing a cappella the song from the previous dance-scene. As they remain standing

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40 The song describes a fictional wedding between a young couple and the events afterwards. The refrain offers a witty maxim: “‘C’ est la vie,’ say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell.”
face to face looking wistfully at each other, Vincent says: “Was that an uncomfortable silence?” thus reciprocating Mia’s reference to silence earlier. Mia diffidently responds: “I don’t know what that was.” – pause – “Music and drinks!” This brief interlude with the visible evidence of amorous revelation (e.g. tango dancing, looking at each other with restrained passion, the invitation for music and drinks) steers us towards anticipating the possible consummation of a perpetually sublimated erotic impulse. However, Tarantino manages to undercut this scintillating moment by having Vincent unabashedly indicate his need to “take a piss.” This apparently gross manner of putting it in this way upsets Mia’s sense of euphoria: “That was a little bit more information than I needed to know.” As Vincent shuffles off to the WC, Mia selects from the opulent tape recorder system the Neil Diamond piece: “Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon,” sung by the group Urge Overkill.

Mia, who has been wearing Vincent’s overcoat since they arrived, begins to play air-guitar while dancing to-and-fro in the living room. There is a cut to the bathroom where we find Vincent talking to himself looking in the mirror. Here is a classic shot of the protagonist with his reflection in the mirror signifying the illusion of the quasi ‘double’ motif in which an intimate conversation takes place: “One drink and leave. Don’t be rude, but drink your drink quickly, say goodbye, walk out the door, get in your car, and go down the road.” This is the advice of one’s apprehensive ‘conscience’ to avoid transgressing the taboo of messing around with the boss’s wife. After the short alternate cut, we are back again to Mia swerving around in a more excitable state, feeling the music saturate her till she finally plops down on the sofa. Now we are back to Vincent who is wagging his finger at his image in the mirror: “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.” Moral compunction seems to override Vincent’s desire to consummate the erotic impulse. Mia rolls a cigarette, pulls out the Zippo lighter from Vincent’s coat pocket and lights it with cool panache. She flicks it on and off in fancy-style and puts it in the pocket. But, alas! She finds the plastic bag with the white powder inside – the heroin that Vincent bought earlier from Lance. “Disco! Vince, you little cola nut, you’ve been holding out on me.” Notice that the slang signifier “cola nut” refers to one who is keen on cocaine snorting (“coke” = ‘coca-cola’). This ominous mistake, of course, leads to disaster! This is an indeterminate paradigmatic slip-up – a good example of what in semiotics and linguistics is called polysemy. What we have here is the iconic signifier ‘white
powder’ that can encode various signifieds: ‘sugar,’ ‘salt,’ ‘cocaine,’ ‘heroin.’ Only licking/tasting the ‘powder’ will determine its real content. This, unfortunately, is what Mia doesn’t attempt to ascertain. Vincent continues to reprimand himself: “So you’re gonna go out there, drink your drink, say ‘Goodnight, I’ve had a very lovely evening,’ go home, and jerk off.” And that’s all you’re gonna do.” Meanwhile, Mia is quickly snorting a fat line of powder. The script notes enter the following: “Her head jerks back, her hands go to her nose which feels like it’s on fire, then the rush hits…” Blood and snot drip from her nose. Vincent finds her and frantically begins to see what has happened to her. He realizes that she has mistakenly snorted his powder.

The next scene is in Vincent’s car as he is speeding down the street with the practically unconscious Mia at his side. Vincent is on his cellular phone ringing up Lance to inform him that he has “a chick O.D.ing” on him and that he’s on his way to his place for help. Of course, Lance is jumping out of his skin telling Vincent to take her to a hospital and to forget about coming over. He’s also paranoid of the police eavesdropping on his cell phone. But Vincent is already driving up on his front lawn and crashing into his house. Lance is still adamant in refusing Vincent to “not bringin’ that fucked up bitch” in his house. However, Vincent threatens Lance by telling him “this fucked up bitch is Marcellus Wallace’s wife. Now if she fuckin’ croaks on me, I’m a grease spot. But before he turns me into a bar of soap, I’m gonna be forced to tell him about how you coulda saved her life, but instead you let her die on your front lawn.”

What unfolds is sheer pandemonium in trying to get Mia into the house and apply an adrenalin shot to her heart. The hysterical antics of the characters in Lance’s house punctuate this scene with sparks of tragicomedy. No one seems to have an idea about injecting adrenalin to someone who is on the verge of dying of overdose. As stated in the script notes, this scene is frantic like someone being in “an emergency ward, with the big difference here being nobody knows what the fuck they’re doing.” Lance needs to get a “medical book” stashed somewhere in a pile of junk, since he’s never had to use the shot before. He’s in such a panic that he can’t find the book and time is running out before Mia gives up the ghost. So he’s going to improvise by asking Vincent to be exact in finding Mia’s heart. Vincent asks for a felt pen so as to mark the spot where the injection will be jabbed, because it will have to penetrate the

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41 The reference to masturbation here becomes the surrogate erotic consummation of an unfortunately failed coitus.
breastplate straight into the heart. At first Vincent had expected Lance to perform the injection, but the savvy drug dealer backs down, unwillingly to go through with it. Vincent then makes a big red dot on Mia’s body where her heart is. Vincent asks: “Okay, what do I do?” Lance replies by saying: “Well, you’re giving her an injection of adrenalin straight to her heart. But she’s got a breastplate in front of her heart, so you gotta pierce through that. So what you gotta do is bring the needle down in a stabbing motion.” “What happens after that?” Vincent nervously asks. “I’m curious about that myself,” Lance replies, and adds: “She’s supposed to come out of it like – (snaps his fingers) – that.” As poignantly seen on the screen and stated in the script notes: “Vincent brings the needle down hard, stabbing Mia in the chest. Mia’s eyes pop wide open and she lets out a hellish cry of the banshee. She bolts up in a sitting position, needle stuck in her chest – screaming.”

This vividly filmed sequence is symbolically enhanced with subtle erotic relevance. First of all, it seemed preordained that romantic consummation was foreshadowed to fail not only through the motif of Vincent’s ambivalent fear of transgressing the taboo of “don’t fool around with the boss’s wife,” but also through Mia’s unfortunately mistaking the powder discovered in Vincent’s coat pocket. However, there are dramatistic elements of this bizarre date that are quite evocative. We can pinpoint the following salient features: First of all, we can focus on Burke’s theoretical notion of the negative injunction. If Vincent – who is in the (subaltern) position of having to face the hierarchical principle of not defying his boss – had overstepped the bounds of the aforementioned taboo, he would then be disobeying the negative (i.e. “Thou shall not,” etc.). This would, in turn, have inevitably induced the excruciating guilt that would have provoked his fall. These elements have been codified, as we have seen, in Vincent’s acts as experienced by us in the scene we have just discussed. But there is an interesting twist in this unfolding drama: Mia’s mistake becomes a kind of mortification; and she is also potentially victimized as one who is in imminent danger of overdosing! This freak accident practically crushes Vincent as he is in mortal fear of the consequences of Mia’s possible demise, thus signalling a kind of surrogate “fall.” Finally, catharsis will be her “coming back to life” after Vincent injects the adrenalin. However, one could find a subtle Freudian association in which the oversized needle resembles an erect penis penetrating Mia’s (red dot) “cherry,” while her jumping up and screaming clearly implying an orgasmic spasm! Perhaps this imaginative interpretation of a highly sexually charged association could
conceivably have its *redemptive* merits. One could claim that it had captured, over the course of this film segment, the suspenseful sense of whether or not the *romantic consummation* would perchance finally materialize. What we finally see is the materialization on screen of a *symbolic* and vicarious, though sublimated, representation of the ambiguously *encoded* sexual act!

The final scene of this segment shows Vincent and Mia pulling up to the Wallace residence. Mia, still in a daze, walks down the walkway towards her front door, while Vincent gets out of the car and addresses her from a distance. They make a pact of not having Marcellus ever hear about the incident. “If you can keep a secret, so can I,” says Mia and Vincent responds: “Let’s shake on it.” They proceed to shake hands in the common fashion of a business transaction – a far cry from an erotic gesture! Vincent smiles in relief but humorously adds: “If you’ll excuse me, I gotta go home and have a heart attack.” As Vincent turns to leave, Mia demurely asks him if he would like to hear the so-called “corny” joke from the “Fox Force Five” pilot she previously refused to tell at Jack Rabbit Slim’s. Vincent claims that he is too petrified to laugh, but Mia reassures him that the joke isn’t funny. After she tells the joke, they both coyly smile. “See ya ’round, Vince,” Mia, in an almost regretful tone, says. Notice here that she uses the diminutive form of his name for the first time! As she turns and walks inside her house, Vincent raises his hand to his lips and blows her a kiss!

**Conclusion**

Mia was never in a position to grasp Vincent’s ‘blown kiss.’ This fleeting gesture *encodes* the unfulfilled expectation in which an erotic escapade could have been consummated. Indeed, this final gesture encapsulates the familiar twinge of an unrequited erotic desire that falls by the wayside. The various visual *signifiers* we have seen capture the ambivalence of the preordained *purpose* of the film segment’s essence: namely, Tarantino’s cinematic caprice of trying to lead the audience to anticipate the possible reversal of the conventional chestnut: Will the gangster-subaltern who timidly attempts to subvert the taboo of seducing the boss’s wife succeed in the end? To be sure, one could claim that the ‘attempt’ was predestined to fail perhaps due to the *agency* of misprehension (i.e. failing to *decode* properly *polysemy*) regarding the ‘powder’ of the drugs involved that the *agents* themselves
habitually abuse. Mia’s mishap of taking the wrong ‘powder’ adds to the precariously of life in general that Tarantino underscores in the movie. Vincent’s moral tribulations over loyalty are deliberated in the bathroom the moment Mia heedlessly snorts the powder. Later in the movie, during another precarious situation which will prove fatal, Vincent, who is on a stakeout to bump off Butch (Bruce Willis) at his flat, is seen foolishly reading a magazine on the toilet and will get killed by him right after as he finishes his business! These particular twists in the plot highlight the black humour Tarantino has subtly designed for the audience.

In fact, Tarantino combines the notion we have of the cool attitude with a grand design that aims at consolidating it as a cool aesthetic boldly captured in his film. The cool aesthetic is primarily depicted, as mentioned above, by the signifiers (e.g. dress, hairstyle, gestures, smoking, drug taking, dancing, etc.) visually parading in front of us. We are drawn to the cool style of Vincent and Mia that emanates from their somewhat defiant attitude engraved in their flashy repartee. This becomes the springboard revealing their unconventional ethos. We are lured into overlooking their anti-social, criminal background and come to marvel at their way of winning us over to the fact that people of this anti-social stripe can be charming even though they tend to be essentially the most vulnerable to the elusive contingencies of life. It is this verisimilitude of the violent contingencies of life that Tarantino amply provides by creating an entourage of social misfits who grope for some solid meaning in their lives. No matter how lurid the representation may be, the unfolding of events in the movie accentuates the semblance of cool meanings. For Vincent, it is the ‘meaning’ of coping with the quandary of remaining steadfast as far as loyalty is concerned. But, as Auxier writes, “[w]e never quite learn whether Vincent is capable of genuine loyalty or not. We know he wants to be loyal. We know he is trying to be loyal. We know he values loyalty. We also know that he is weak-willed, careless, and incontinent; he knows that too, and he doesn’t like it” (139-140). For Mia, it is the ‘meaning’ of indulging in fun for a night out on the town free from her husband’s sway along with giving herself leeway as to what could possibly happen. Mia’s cool attitude presents the ambivalence of her possibly succumbing to an erotic escapade

with Vincent. Indeed, her position of hierarchy allows such a decision to transpire (i.e. she holds the ‘reins’). However, the likelihood of this happening is capsized due to the outcome of snorting the wrong powder that determines the bizarre contingency at this crucial moment!

As iconic prototypes, Vincent and Mia exude a highly convincing and, I might add, inimitable aura of coolness. This can be instrumental as an impact on one’s emotions (cf. the notion of pathos) and thus become an enticing influence. It’s this influence that may shape one’s stance within the framework of a highly stylish era that can be seen as representing the post-modern rhetorical event. We have used semiotic terms to establish a more penetrating assessment of the symbolic devices that Tarantino presents to propel his cinematic narrative. These devices feature the third order of signification that Barthes has formalized that creates the mythic template that frames the cool aesthetic employed in this segment of Pulp Fiction. It all boils down to a virtualised semblance of a ‘date’ that goes awry but nevertheless lays bare the director’s motive to mesmerize us in his entertaining world of the cool attitude.