

Culture Slut: Quentin Tarantino's Action Women

Words: [Misha MN](#)

As I was watching the Oscars the other night, enjoying the stars and their dresses, something happened that really made me sit up, spill my white wine, and shriek. No, it wasn't Demi Moore losing Best Actress, OR that bizarre Bond tribute – it was the totally unexpected appearance of 80s blonde bombshell Daryl Hannah.

Swaggering on to the stage to present the award for Best Film Editing, she made one of the rare political statements of this broadcast, holding up the peace sign and saying “Slava Ukraine” into the mic.

I love Daryl Hannah. I first saw her as Madison in *Splash*, a 1984 fantasy romance with Tom Hanks where she plays a mermaid washed ashore in New York (and can I say, as a mermaid obsessed gay child at the time, I was head over heels). I loved her in *Blade Runner* as Pris, the new wave punk gymnastic robot woman trying to kill Indiana Jones, or whatever was happening in that film. I loved her as Annelle in *Steel Magnolias*, the frumpy gal-on-the-run who makes friends with Dolly Parton. But most of all, I love her in *Kill Bill*.

There are not many kind things that I would say about Quentin Tarantino: he's a little freak and I can understand why Fiona Apple [would swear off cocaine](#) after spending a night chatting with him. But I will concede that he has created some incredibly dynamic female characters.

I recently caught about half of *Kill Bill* on television when I came home drunk from the club, and it moved me so much that I knew I had to rewatch the whole thing when I was in a more *compos mentis* state. Honestly, it still slaps. I was emotional, I was jubilant, I was inspired, it reminded me why I fell in love with cinema. I think this was the first film I saw that made me think about cinema as an art form, not just as narrative theatre. Tarantino's use of timeline and story structure was interesting, but so was the collage of styles, the cinematic references, the celebration of visual tropes. It introduced me to a visual language that changed my understanding of media.

I remember the very first time I saw *Kill Bill*. It came out when I was in secondary school and was infamous for having used the most fake blood ever shown in a film. People boasted about having snuck into the cinema to see it, or, later, being shown it on video (yes, VHS was still a thing) by an older sibling, and those of us who hadn't listened eagerly to stories about throats being slit, limbs being cut off, and eyes being plucked out. Finally, my time came. It was being shown on some cable TV channel after midnight, which meant I had to watch it in my family sitting room.

My mother, in a fit of righteous censorship, declared that she would watch it with me and if she thought it too violent she would turn it off. By the time it started, she was fast asleep on the sofa, and so as not to wake her, I turned the volume to its lowest setting and sat as close as I could to the screen, so none of it would wake her. This was just as well, because the very first shot was

an extreme close up of a beaten and bloody Uma Thurman telling her attacker she's pregnant as she gets shot in the head. My mother slept on, and I managed to watch the whole thing, and it was incredible. A few years later, maybe when I was 16, my sister gave me both films on DVD, so I could finally watch it at my leisure in my own room, but I will never forget the tension of that first viewing.

It is, of course, not just Daryl Hannah in *Kill Bill* who makes it so special. The [image](#) most associate with the film is that of Uma Thurman in her yellow motorcycle leathers – it looms large over 00s cinema. I remember this on billboards: she seemed giant, titanic, both beautiful and monstrous at the same time, the bright yellow background reminiscent of the famous poster for *Attack Of The 50ft Woman*.

Thurman's character The Bride slashes and somersaults through the air with ease, delivering bloody justice to all those who have wronged her. Inspired by Japanese cinema, specifically female revenge films like 1973's *Lady Snowblood*, and television shows like *Kage No Gundan*, The Bride is a complex character, a woman who had her friends and family were slaughtered in front of her, and who loses her unborn daughter, who then becomes hell bent of getting revenge on the titular Bill, played by David Carradine. Uma is perfect in this role, both hardened and vulnerable, able to show her immense strength and the depths of despair, loss and even hope as she embarks on her journey. Her emotional intelligence grounds her character even in the most absurd situations, and her image has become iconic.

Another stand out woman from *Kill Bill* is Lucy Liu's O-ren Ishii. She is one of the few characters we get a full backstory for, from the battles with the Yakuza in her childhood to her becoming a top assassin in adulthood – it's more backstory, in fact, than any male character in the film.

O-ren's appearances are brief, her speech controlled and minimal, but very impactful. In one scene she beheads a fellow Yakuza boss who disrespects her, and then, of course there is her beautiful final battle scene, the climax of the first film. In another reference to *Lady Snowblood*, the final sword fight happens in a snowy ornamental garden. Her regal movements and styling are in contrast to that of her main henchman, Gogo Yubari, played by *Battle Royale* alum Chiaki Kuriyama, clad in a schoolgirl uniform, with colourful charms attached to her weapons.

These two women represent the main feminine tropes the West imagines about the East: the giggling schoolgirl and the silent geisha type. I think Tarantino's approach to his use of eastern imagery (both the Japanese samurai narratives, female vengeance films, and Chinese martial arts movies which he references more in the second film) is interestingly superficial. In mimicking the narrative and visual tropes of the eastern media he loved in his youth, he creates a new thing, neither accurate nor authentic.

It's similar to the themes of Andrew Bolton's famous exhibition for the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art, *China: Through The Looking Glass*, which looked at the impact of Chinese design on the Western imagination, and the conversation that happens in art as a result of that. Chinoiserie was hugely popular in the early 20th century, designs made to look ambiguously

oriental because it was new and exciting to western audiences. Now we would call it cultural appropriation, which is a very valid argument, but often, these artists were appropriating things that were never real to begin with, just a false idea of what might look esoterically eastern. Tarantino's work doesn't strive for eastern authenticity: it works more as an homage, or on some level of pastiche.

In the 1997 film *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino again plays with form and cultural identity signifiers. *Jackie Brown* is not a Blaxploitation film, but it is in conversation with its form and tropes, not least in the casting of 1970s icon Pam Grier. Famous for films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, Grier is one of the greatest genre film stars of all time, and it's an absolute crime that she has never been nominated for an Oscar herself. Her career is intertwined with Blaxploitation, a subgenre of action, mixing exploitation-gore and Black power politics in a way that still divides critics both white and black to this day. Tarantino, as a fan of this genre, was able to take one of its most recognisable stars, Pam Grier, and place her within his own cinematic universe, whilst still respecting her own star persona.

Tarantino Women are powerful, physically dynamic, and visually iconic. Whilst he as a director may have some shortcomings in terms of politics, adequate care on set (Uma's neck injury in a car stunt, for example), and in his personal relationships, Tarantino has created some of the most memorable female action stars of the last century. His power lies in his wide reference base, and the way in which he is able to craft visual identities around his actresses' previously established star personas – the same way Golden Age Hollywood studio directors were able to create stories using certain types. We can all identify the Hitchcock Blonde, a noir femme fatale, or a von Sternberg goddess, because we can read their cinematic language.

Tarantino Women are a 90s (and beyond) breed of female hero, forever identifiable because of the singular world created for them to inhabit. In 2023, it was [reported](#) that Tarantino's next film would be about a female film critic, probably based on the infamous Pauline Kael, and one can only imagine how he would fare creating a new female persona so intrinsically linked with the idea of cinema itself. I'm not holding my breath though – reports on the film have been mixed as to whether it's still even going ahead – so instead, I'm just going to keep praying for a *Kill Bill 3*.