

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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A Review of *Once Upon a Time in ... Hollywood* (2019)

Reviewed by Trae Toler

Vol 5 Issue 1

<https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-5-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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"I'M THE DEVIL, AND I'M HERE TO [RE] DO THE DEVIL'S BUSINESS": ALTERNATIVE HISTORY AS POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Review by Trae Toler

Tarantino, Quentin, director. *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood*, performance by Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Sony Pictures Releasing. 2019. Film.

With his film *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood* (2019), Quentin Tarantino thrust moviegoers fifty years into the past. Being the suggested penultimate film in Tarantino's filmography, fans were curious to see how he would tackle the transformative year, 1969. Ultimately, this year was the outcome of tensions boiling to a head as traditionalists clashed with the anti-authoritarian counterculture defined by peace, love, and acceptance. While portraying his film as an in-depth take on this specific cultural moment, Tarantino's driving force throughout the film is his superb utilisation of dramatic irony as the audience is aware of the looming, omnipresent threat of the Manson Family. However, as the film hits April 8, 1969, and the audience bears witness to Charles 'Tex' Watson (Austin Butler) deliver his infamous line, "I'm the Devil, and I'm here to do the Devil's Business," Tarantino subverts his audiences' expectations by pitching his film into the realm of the fantastical. By utilising alternative history to nostalgise a fictionalised lost time, Tarantino ultimately offers a damning critique on current divisive American politics defined by walls, borders, fear, and cultural differences.

Before delving into a review of this deviation in the film, it is essential to discuss the significance of the three main characters. Ultimately, Tarantino's film is, as he claimed in an interview with Sony Pictures Entertainment, largely about time. By looking extensively at a particular temporal moment – 1969 Hollywood – Tarantino is able to magnify the social and class differences functioning together during this transformative moment in American culture. In fact, Tarantino specifically states that he is "looking at Hollywood through a social strata" ("ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD - Cast Q&A" 00:01:15 – 00:01:25). In exploring this strata through representations of each characters' lifestyle and social class, Tarantino meticulously moulds an authentic representation of 1969 Hollywood. With each character also a caricature of their own social class, they then serve to both ground Tarantino's critique of 1969 Hollywood while also magnifying these social and class differences. The distinct caricatural differences in the relationship shared between Sharon Tate, Rick Dalton, Cliff Booth, and the Manson Family allows Tarantino to ultimately ask members of his audience to evaluate their own views in conjunction with this not-so-distant past. By constructing a fictionalised nostalgia of 1969 Hollywood that is still grounded in historical reality, Tarantino creates characters who ultimately transcend time and prove to be reflective of current social and political discourse. Thus, through a deviation from mimetic history, Tarantino is able to pose the question: *can history change, or are we doomed to repeat it.*

Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) is symbolic of an upper class defined by exuberant success, and, ultimately, an embracement of the future – a future defined by the love, acceptance, and peace displayed by the counterculture movement. Her representative ideals are what Hollywood aim to embrace – indicated by her status as a rising star in the industry. Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a once successful actor who finds himself at the crossroads of the counterculture movement so readily related to Hollywood in the '60s. Hollywood is changing, and it is clear to Dalton that the past has no place in new Hollywood. Dalton struggles in positioning himself in relation to the counterculture and future as his Hollywoodian heyday was specifically grounded in the past – acting in many western films, defined by their outward expression of toxic masculine machismo and violence. In other words, the films that Dalton found success in were aligned moreso with traditionalist ideals which were directly rejected by the counterculture movement. Ultimately, in contrast to Tate, Dalton represents the past; however, Tarantino demonstrates a shift in Dalton's character when he chooses to embrace cultural change instead of fighting against it and remaining displaced.

The last of the three main characters is Dalton's stunt double, Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt). Booth is symbolic of the lower end of the 'social strata.' Although Booth is of a lower class, he embraces his socio-economic shortcomings and exhibits peace with his place in the rising counterculture. Regarding the relationship between Dalton and Booth, Tarantino, in the same interview mentioned above, states, "Rick is definitely the angsty Kerouac of the group where Cliff is definitely the Neal Cassady Holy Goof of the group, being very comfortable in his trailer full of garbage" (00:09:50 – 00:09:53). If Booth is symbolic of a tranquil lower class, then the Manson Family is symbolic of a vengeful hate-filled lower class.

Tarantino positions the Manson Family as a hybrid between Dalton and Booth. The Manson Family, similar to Dalton, must situate themselves in relation to the future of Hollywood through a perversion of counterculture ideals; yet the Manson Family never truly embraces cultural progression and instead aims to regress culture to a panicked state in which they can rise as leaders. Moreover, Tarantino associates the Manson Family with Dalton when he shows that Dalton and Booth previously filmed Western films on Spahn Ranch – the location where Manson and his followers reside. With that being said, the Manson Family physically live in the past and ultimately fail to negotiate their views and beliefs in relation to progressive Hollywood. Furthermore, the fact that they occupy an abandoned movie ranch further reinforces their similarity to Booth. Having already shown Booth's "trailer full of garbage," it is clear that both Booth and the Manson Family have living situations defined by their decrepit state. They both embrace bohemian ideals, yet the Manson Family toxifies the movement so readily associated with the counterculture.

Having charted the social strata of Hollywood, and crafted a representation of 1969 Hollywood cloaked in nostalgia, Tarantino teases his audience in the transition to the final act as Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, and Patricia Krenwinkel make their way to 10050 Cielo Drive, where filmgoers have been anticipating the culmination of the Manson Family versus Tate. However, Tarantino subverts expectations as the infamous *witchy* cult stops short of Tate's home and instead attack Tate's neighbors, Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth. As a result of this subversion, Manson's gang of toxic

bohemians never complete their notorious crimes because Dalton and Booth brutally, viciously, and unapologetically murder every member of the family. In a film designed to explore the transitional year 1969, Tarantino's deviation from reality ultimately thrusts his film into the genre of alternative history.

April 8, 1969 has often been referred to as the night the '60s died. News of the Tate-LaBianca murders spread through Hollywood like a plague, killing any preconceived, hippie, flower-child notion of '60s' California. Because of these events, when coupled with multiple race riots and the impeachment of President Richard Nixon, it is clear that this era was a tumultuous, defining era for American culture. The Tate-LaBianca murders, and the Manson trial, were ultimately the violent culmination of traditional ideology versus liberal ideology. Tarantino could have easily followed the historical path and succumbed to his audience's expectations in having his film end with the Manson Family's successful murder of Tate. However, by deviating from history, Tarantino privileges the speculative as opposed to reality to ultimately portray his film in a fairytale-esque manner – thus solidifying the "Once Upon a Time" of the title. In doing so, he creates a narrative in which acceptance and change emerge victorious. Therefore, Tarantino suggests that the American cultural and political climate would be different today had Tate, a symbol of hope, prosperity, and success, not been massacred; however, although this implication ends his Hollywoodian fairy tale with a 'happily ever after,' this is a problematic deviation.

While it is accepted that 1969 was a metamorphic year for America, it is quite negligent on Tarrantino's part to conclude that this sole moment would have propelled America into a tunnel-view of acceptance. This depiction of America asks the audience to look past the Satanic Panic of the '80s, the 1992 Los Angeles Race Riots, and 9/11, among many other significant moments that ultimately directed the course of American culture. Though *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood* is an entertaining film, we must be wary of the implications of a Western-centric nostalgised fictionalised past that almost appears to be in the same vein as the phrase "Make America Great Again."

In the final act, Tarantino alters history with the swift decision to visit the neighbors of 10050 Cielo Drive. Because the Manson family never reached the home of Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate, progressive Hollywood never died, the '60s' counterculture never ended, and future ideals of acceptance and openness, according to Tarantino, are victorious. The era in which 'doors remained unlocked' flourishes. Though he constructs a problematic fictionalised nostalgia, Tarrantino essentially uses alternative history to mirror current divisive American political discourse in a way that a mimetic depiction of 1969 Hollywood would have been unable. A mimetic approach would have grounded his film solely in the past, thereby creating a disconnect between his audience and his current social critiques. Ultimately, Tarantino successfully calls upon the fantastical to force his audience to negotiate their own position within contemporary divisive socio-political discourse, beyond the fairytale-esque guise of Speculative Fiction.

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BIONOTE

Trae Toler teaches at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and at Brunswick Community College, US. Toler's key area of research is grounded in analysing identity – primarily gender and sexuality – in Horror cinema through a psychoanalytic lens. He presented his research, "Kill Her Mommy, Kill Her!": Maternal Influences and Final Girls in 70s and 80s Slasher Cinema" and "Cults, and Clowns, and Kai, Oh My!": Coulrophic Horror as Political Commentary in American Horror Story: Cult" at various academic conferences in the United States. Additionally, Toler spent extensive time researching Charles Manson and the sensationalism surrounding the infamous 1969 Tate - LaBianca murders.