

Chekhov's Gun that Never Goes Off

Femininity and Castration in *Jackie Brown* (1997)

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ABSTRACT

Feminist readings of Tarantino's films generally investigate the placement of women within his hypermasculine storyworlds. Deriving from Schlipphacke's reading of *Inglorious Basterds*, specifically her notion of feminine revenge, this essay will evaluate the gendered power dynamics in *Jackie Brown* (1997). While feminine revenge is obtained by Tarantino's protagonists, the women become victims of their own desires, creating a vacuum of power in which the patriarchy unknowingly reinforces its own power. Examining the visual pattern created by Tarantino during the quickdraw sequence in *Jackie Brown* as a case study, this essay will investigate the lack of true feminine power within Tarantino's storyworlds.

Seeking to dissect the political and gender undertones of Quentin Tarantino's films, film scholars have long evaluated the extent of feminine agency in Tarantino's hypermasculine storyworlds. This agency has rooted itself in oppositional terms, namely the feminine's desire for revenge against her male counterparts. In her analysis of Shoshana (Mélanie Laurent) from Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), film scholar Heidi Schlipphacke determines feminine revenge to be "mythic and self-destructive" (Schlipphacke 114). In order to obtain revenge against the patriarchy, she must, as a result, destroy herself, and by extension, her feminine influence. The political ramifications of this are clear in *Inglorious Basterds*. The power and politics of revenge are stripped from the feminine figure of Shoshana, who seeks to infiltrate and destroy the patriarchal power of the Nazis, and are instead extended to the male crew of the Basterds, who successfully eliminate the Nazis and their patriarchal control. The woman becomes a victim of her own desires, unable to destroy the patriarchy on her own accords. It is, instead, the men who enjoy the benefits of revenge. As

iterated by Willis, "Tarantino's films display a masculinity whose worst enemy" is not femininity, but rather "itself" (Willis 290). In their appropriation of the feminine's revengeful desire to destroy the patriarchy, the men (unknowingly) reinforce their own patriarchal influence.

This same reading can be applied to Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), primarily as seen in Jackie's (Pam Grier) tumultuous relationship with Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson), and her desire to kill him in the film's climax (02:22:05–02:24:28). While much scholarship and debate surrounding the film has sought to answer the ambiguous actions of Jackie in said climactic moment, I believe Schlipphacke's notion of feminine, self-destructive revenge can serve as a proper lens to evaluate Jackie's actions and underlying motivations.

Prior to the climax of *Jackie Brown*, Jackie prepares for conflict against Ordell, the masculine antagonist who seeks to harm Jackie, by practicing her quickdraw in Max Cherry's (Robert Forster) office. This sequence of Jackie's preparation is constructed in a visual pattern that is

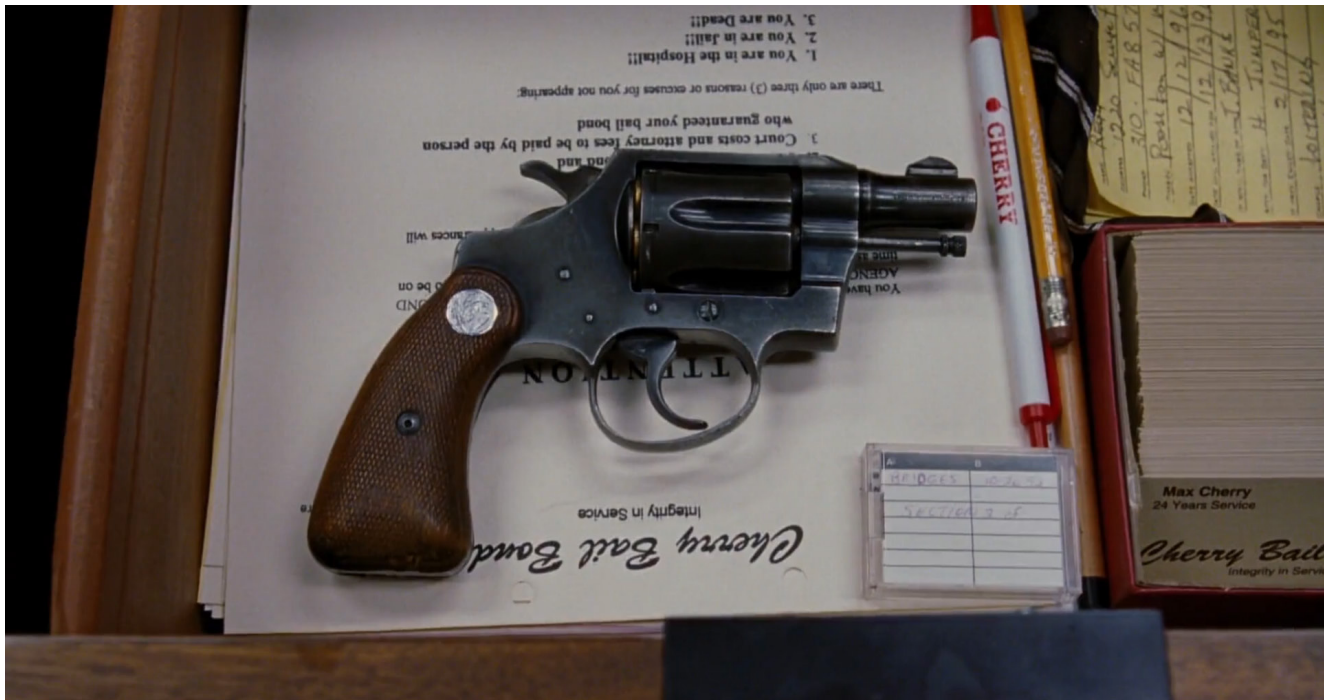


Fig. 1 | A revolver residing in the drawer of Max Cherry's desk in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:28. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 2a | Jackie examines and loads the revolver in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:31. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 2b | Jackie stoically gauges her hypothetical target in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:39. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 2c | Jackie draws the revolver from the drawer in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:40. Miramax, 1997.

embedded with suggestions about gender/power dynamics and the politics of revenge. This essay examines the visual pattern created by Tarantino during the quickdraw sequence

in *Jackie Brown*, and how the eventual delineation from said pattern demarcates the lack of true feminine power within Tarantino's storyworld.

The power dynamics within *Jackie Brown* must be adequately contextualized prior to a visual analysis of the sequence. Like Shoshana, Jackie seeks revenge over Ordell and, by extension, seeks to topple his patriarchal oversight. The root of Jackie's power lies in what theorist Sigmund Freud labels castration, which he defines as the lack of a possession of a penis (or the destruction of phallic power), which the woman embodies (Freud 152-157). Within *Jackie Brown* (like *Inglorious Basterds*), castration results from the ability of the feminine to infiltrate said overarching patriarchal structures, either threatening to destroy it outright, or rendering it incompatible by promoting feminine power. Thus, in her desire to kill (and thus symbolically castrate) Ordell, Jackie's revenge serves as a means to liberate herself from his patriarchal oversight.



Fig. 3 | A POV reverse shot from Jackie's perspective, showing the area where her target is expected to enter in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:41. Miramax, 1997.

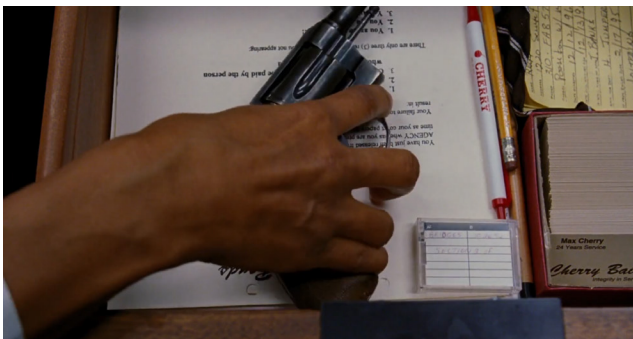


Fig. 4 | Jackie places the revolver back into the drawer, restarting the visual pattern in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:44. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 5 | Jackie redraws the revolver in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:50. Miramax, 1997.

As Ordell and Max drive back to Max's office for the film's climactic moment, Jackie draws a gun three times in a sequence that establishes a pattern embedded with notions of revenge and power (2:18:27–2:19:04). The sequence begins with a close-up of the gun as it is pulled out of a drawer by Jackie (Fig. 1).

The next shot shows Jackie in a medium close-up checking the barrel before placing the gun back in the drawer and practicing her quickdraw (Figs. 2a-2c).

As Jackie points the gun off-screen, the film cuts to a reverse shot of what she is aiming at: the door she expects Ordell to walk through (Fig. 3).

Regarding the notion of liberation, the foundational three shots can be thus differentiated as such: the object of liberation (gun), the perpetrator or agent of liberation (Jackie), and the expected victim of liberative violence (Ordell).

Jackie practices her quickdraw routine again, and she adheres to the same pattern as before: close-up of the gun as

she places it back in the drawer (Fig. 4), then the medium shot of Jackie practicing her aim (Fig. 5), then a reverse shot of the door Ordell is expected to enter (Fig. 6).

The sequential placement of the close-ups of the gun (Figs. 1 & 4) and Jackie (Figs. 2a-2c and 5a) suggests an intrinsic bond between Jackie and the gun. The gun serves as the means of her liberation, and it is by her pull of the trigger that she achieves liberation and by extension, castrative power over Ordell. As she practices her quickdraw, she maintains a sense of collectiveness and bravado. She appears at this moment "bold...and methodical" (Wager 144). Jackie stoically looks off-camera towards the door, her jawline accentuated, which is culturally associated with masculine power and dominance. Jackie is also dressed in a black suit, a traditionally masculine outfit and symbol of masculine strength and confidence. Her performance and dress are coded in masculine projections of control, thus painting her entire character in



Fig. 6 | Returning to Jackie's POV of the door in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:53. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 7 | Jackie's masculine bravado starts to crack in *Jackie Brown*, 02:19:03. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 8 | Ordell, the source of Jackie's woes, driving with Max in *Jackie Brown*, 02:19:05. Miramax, 1997.



Fig. 9 | Ordell enters the darkened office through the door, shown over Jackie's shoulder, 02:22:56. Miramax, 1997.

masculinity. As a result, this notion of liberation is intertwined with masculine forms.

However, as quickly as Tarantino creates the pattern, he deviates from it as Jackie draws the gun for a third time. The close-up of the revolver is omitted, and the third pattern begins with a medium shot of Jackie preparing and pulling the gun (Fig. 7). The object of liberation is no longer visually associated with or connected to Jackie in terms of the cinematography.

Jackie attempts to maintain the same degree of bravado as she points the gun for a third time, but she starts to crack. She struggles to grasp the gun from the drawer, and forcefully sets it back down, visibly uncomfortable and even "fearful" (144). Rather than returning to the reverse shot of the door, the film cuts to a shot of Ordell in the car with Max (Fig. 8), reinforcing his placement as the source of Jackie's discomfort.

The same degree of masculinity that Jackie employs in the first two segments of her quickdraw practice is slowly stripped during the third attempt. Not only is the revolver omitted, thus disrupting the intrinsic link between the gun and Jackie (as well as the politics of liberation that the gun signifies), but so, too, are the layers of her masculine bravado as exemplified by her discomfort.

As Ordell enters Max's office (Fig. 9), Tarantino frames him in a way that emulates the reverse shot of the door from the quickdraw sequence (Figs. 3 and 6).

Ordell also notes the darkness of the space, which calls back to his first encounter with Jackie in her apartment,

when Ordell kept turning the lights off in preparation to kill Jackie. Thus, all signs in the climactic moment, from the cinematography to the mise-en-scène, suggest that Jackie will be the one to pull the trigger and free herself from Ordell's patriarchal control.

However, as soon as the audience expects Jackie to shoot, federal agent Ray Nicolette (Michael Keaton) steps out of a back room (Fig. 10). Immediately, Jackie yells, "Ray, he's got a gun," calling for help (which is culturally perceived as a feminine trait), to which Ray responds by killing Ordell. Jackie is framed in a dimly-lit close-up, which obscures most of her face and masculine-coded suit. The only definable characteristic of Jackie's head is her long brown hair highlighted via backlight (Fig. 11). Thus, Jackie is visually defined solely by markers of her femininity, opposed to the masculine-coded bravado of the quickdraw sequence.

The climactic sequence also reverses the pattern of the quickdraw sequence. Ordell enters Max's office (Fig. 9) in a similar medium long-shot to the reverse shot of the door. As Ray emerges from the other room (Fig. 10), he is framed in a medium shot similarly to Jackie at the desk. As Jackie calls for Ray's help, she is shot in a close-up akin to the revolver (Fig. 11). Given the similarities in framing, Tarantino depicts Ray as the agent of liberation and Jackie as the means/object. The gun that she practiced with, the expected object of liberation, never appears. It is the Chekhov's gun that never goes off. She does not reach for the gun, much less pull the trigger. Jackie

denies herself the climactic, liberative moment of killing Ordell, instead transferring the castrative abilities to the masculine figure of Ray, who performs the liberative act. Wager understands this moment to be a result of her manipulation of Ray (52), and thus an extension of her feminine power. However, given her eventual discomfort during the quickdraw sequence noted previously, her willingness to give Ray the agency to pull the trigger against Ordell seems to be less out of a state of power. The reason for Jackie's transference of her castrative power is notably left ambiguous, but given Schlipphacke's notion of feminine self-destruction, I suggest that Jackie did so as a means to save herself from harm. Whereas Shoshana dies because she is unwilling to diverge from her revengeful desires, Jackie survives primarily in that she is willing to expel them. She does not fall to her own self-destructive tendencies, and seemingly acknowledges the self-destructive nature of feminine revenge by granting Ray the climactic castration of Ordell, and thus, maintenance of patriarchal control. Yet, like Shoshana, in transferring her castrative power and granting agency to Ray, she reduces her own feminine influence. The threat of castration no longer resides with the woman, but comes from within the patriarchy itself. In diluting the power and influence of the feminine, the patriarchy continues to "reign unchecked," (154) all the while it "reinvent[s]/reinforces itself (hooks 50). The feminine is thus reduced to a state of inferiority. The visual pattern created during the quickdraw sequence visualizes a moment where femininity *can* and does have liberative power, but the fact that the castrative climax of Brown's revenge arc ultimately does not occur by her own hands suggests the lack of resonant and lasting feminine power within Tarantino's hypermasculine storyworld. ■



Fig. 10 | Ray enters the office through a back room in *Jackie Brown*, 02:23:03. Miramax, 1997.

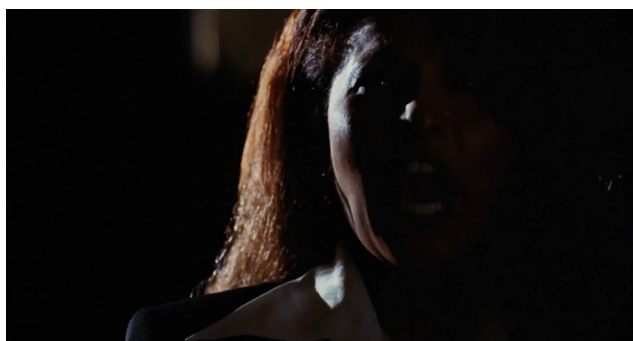


Fig. 11 | Jackie, cast in shadow, calls Ray for help in *Jackie Brown*, 02:23:04. Miramax, 1997.

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