

## Rewriting Sharon Tate's History in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*

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### ABSTRACT

An examination of how director Quentin Tarantino rewrites the history of the Tate-Labianca murders in the film *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood*. By revising history and creating an alternate timeline where actress Sharon Tate is not murdered by Manson Family cultists, Tarantino is, in effect, also offering up a commentary on Hollywood itself. My essay will look at the artistic ramifications of these changes and how it affects viewer interpretations.

**Bio:** For my Master of Arts degree I wrote a thesis on the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* called "Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence and Greed in *Breaking Bad*," which generated two journal articles and a book chapter. I have a number of articles and book chapters in various stages of publication. I have also contributed to a number of online blogs and websites. My main interest is in the field of Film and Television Studies, but I have expanded to other areas of popular culture as well. I wish to continue my research on popular films and discuss how popular media can contribute to a social and political allegory on contemporary issues.

**Keywords:** Sharon Tate, *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood*, alternate history, the male gaze, biopics

## Reescribiendo la historia de Sharon Tate en *Érase una vez en... Hollywood*

### RESUMEN

Un examen de cómo el director Quentin Tarantino reescribe la historia de los asesinatos de Tate-Labianca en la película *Érase una vez en... Hollywood*. Al revisar la historia y crear una línea de tiempo alternativa donde la actriz Sharon Tate no es asesinada por los cultistas de la Familia Manson, Tarantino, de hecho, también ofrece un comentario sobre el propio Hollywood. Mi ensayo analizará las ramificaciones artísticas de estos cambios y cómo afectan las interpretaciones de los espectadores.

**Bio:** Para mi Maestría escribí una tesis sobre la serie de televisión de AMC *Breaking Bad* llamada “Representaciones intertextuales de drogas, violencia y codicia en *Breaking Bad*”, que generó dos artículos de revista y un capítulo de libro. Cuento con una serie de artículos y capítulos de libros en diversas etapas de publicación. También he contribuido a varios blogs y sitios web en línea. Mi principal interés está en el campo de los Estudios de Cine y Televisión, pero también me he expandido a otras áreas de la cultura popular. Deseo continuar mi investigación sobre películas populares y discutir cómo los medios populares pueden contribuir a una alegoría social y política sobre temas contemporáneos.

**Palabras clave:** Sharon Tate, *Érase una vez en... Hollywood*, historia alternativa, la mirada masculina, biopics

## 标题：重写莎朗·塔特在《好莱坞往事》中的历史

摘要：本文研究了导演昆汀·塔伦蒂诺如何在电影《好莱坞往事》中改写泰特-拉比安卡谋杀案的历史。通过修改历史并创造一个替代时间线（其中女演员莎朗·塔特没有被曼森家族邪教徒谋杀），塔伦蒂诺实际上也在对好莱坞本身进行评论。我的文章将探讨这些变化的艺术影响以及它如何影响观众的解读。

简介：我在攻读文学硕士学位期间撰写了一篇关于AMC电视剧《绝命毒师》的论文，题为《〈绝命毒师〉中毒品、暴力和贪婪的互文表述》(Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence and Greed in *Breaking Bad*)，这篇论文产生了两篇期刊文章和一篇书籍章节。我的几篇文章和书籍章节正处于不同的出版阶段。我还为一系列网络博客和网站作贡献。我的主要研究兴趣是电影和电视研究，但我也扩展研究了大众文化的其他领域。我希望继续对大众电影进行研究，并探讨大众媒体如何能为关于当代问题的社会及政治寓言作贡献。

关键词：莎朗·塔特，《好莱坞往事》，替代性历史，男性凝视，传记片

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○nce Upon A Time in ... Hollywood (2019) is the ninth film by Quentin Tarantino and the first to be distributed by a company other than Miramax.

Since his debut in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which was a festival darling that won many awards—including the Independent Spirit Awards—to the *Hateful Eight* (2018), Tarantino's films have almost always had a significant critical and commercial impact. In fact, Tarantino's follow-up to *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), would make nine million in its first weekend and would go on to make over two-hundred million during its initial theatrical run and would end up on many critics best-of-the-year lists. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* would go on to become one of Tarantino's most financially successful films, making approximately three-hundred and seventy million dollars at the box office and receiving an 85% on Rotten Tomatoes. The film marks a transition in Tarantino's career as it shifts into its later stages. Or, rather, the final stages as Tarantino announced he will retire after ten films, making *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as his penultimate ninth film.

The format Tarantino decided upon for *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is an alternate history wherein actress Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) is not murdered by the Manson Family under orders of cult leader Charles Manson. In Tarantino's fantastical re-imagining, the Manson Family are diverted from their original course of action to murder Tate by a random encounter with Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio). The end result is that Tate survives, the Manson Family cultists are violently dispensed with by stuntman/tough guy Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt), and Rick even gets a career reprieve as he is now invited into the inner circle of Tate and her A list director husband Roman Polanski (Rafal Zaiwerucha).

Tarantino's shift in history raises questions about why he decided to opt for an alternate history instead of a straight-forward biopic. What advantages does this format provide? Are

there are aesthetic, historical, or cinematic reasons for choosing to present Tate in such a manner? And, perhaps most significantly, what does this decision mean for the purposes of the Hollywood biopic as a genre? These issues and how they reflect on biopics, and in particular women's roles in biopics, is one of the issues present in the film and affects an analysis of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*.

### **BIOPICS AND THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN FILM**

For comparison it is necessary to look at biopics as a genre to determine Tarantino's decision to avoid that format to explore his vision of Sharon Tate and 1969 Los Angeles. The term biopic itself stems from the words "biographical" and "picture," the latter being an outdated term for film. In fact, the use of the word picture in this neologism denotes just how far back the genre dates in Hollywood history. The biopic's history in Hollywood might, indeed, be part of the problem. Robert Burgoyne describes in the biopic in his book *The Hollywood Historical Film* as a "lesser cultural form, a mainstream entertainment that creates mythic figures out of complex human beings. Its style of historiography is also regarded as suspect, a dubious attempt to encapsulate or exemplify a major historical period in the life of an individual protagonist" (Burgoyne 2008; 40). The genre, then, is associated with a type of filmmaking that promotes stereotypical material with formulaic plots and predictable patterns of narrative.

This predictability is most apparent in the rise-and-fall narrative structure that afflicts the majority of biopics being made. Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo, in the essay "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century," describe biopics as depending "heavily on sentimentality. An ironic approach to the biographical enterprise or the bi-

ographical subject was rare, and even then, incomplete” (Anderson & Lupo 2002, 92). The genre itself seems resistant to aesthetic innovation, instead preferring the stale and standard format that is recognizable to audiences as a standard Hollywood biopic.

In part, this would explain Tarantino’s decision to avoid the biopic format to tell the story of Tate. Tarantino is not a director prone to repeating formulas and making predictable and recognizable films that conform to audience expectations. The typical biopic, which tends to be a mediocre narrative tracing the rise, success, and pitfalls of notable white men in history, is not well-suited for Tarantino’s cinematic styling. Biopics, especially celebrity biopics, have to strike a balance between drama and appealing to a particular fanbase. There is an inherent risk in a biopic of alienating the fanbase of a particular singer and actor, so often a truncated depiction is presented without any of the complexities and flaws that made them who they are as celebrities. The end effect tends to follow a predictable structure depicting their early rise to fame, a middle section which depicts marital troubles, squabbles with fellow band members or film crews, marital difficulties, and then either a tragic end or a redemptive story arc.

The other potential reason is supplied by Dennis Bingham in his essay “The Lives and Times of the Biopic,” where he observes that “[t]he downward spiral is the basic narrative structure of the female biopic” (Bingham 2013, 238). The female biopic subject is far less explored in film than the male subject, as biopics tend to favor the great white male figure in history. Not only do male subjects outnumber female subjects by a significant margin—there is a discrepancy in the type of material presented. Biopics on male subjects depicts heroic deeds of notable white men with an eye towards re-

lating their importance to history. By contrast women are depicted as victims, with biopics focusing on their tragic circumstances and downfall far more readily than with male subjects.

Often with biopics, especially those dealing with celebrities rather than historical figures (actors, musicians, and so forth), the studio and the director are in the precarious position of having to sell the film to a fan base, so the risk is to not alienate the audience with a warts-and-all approach. More often than not, when biopics feature male celebrity figures they are presented in a more favorable light, often with a redemptive story arc to finish the film. The female as a subject of a biopic is more often than not a tragic victim caught in a downward spiral. So men become hagiographic subjects in a biopic while women are seemingly punished for approaching greatness. A biopic on Tate would necessarily have to focus on her status as a victim, likely with scenes depicting her troubled marriage to controversial film director Roman Polanski, and then end with her brutal and violent death at the hands of the Manson Family. The inevitable result would be to further victimize Tate, as well highlighting the mythology of Charles Manson even more. If *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* was filmed as a biopic, there would likely be scenes of gratuitous violence against Tate, further reinforcing the iconography of women-as-victims, as well scenes of domestic struggles with Polanski.

### RE-IMAGINING THE ICON OF SHARON TATE

To this effect Quentin Tarantino is rewriting Tate's history in order to alter the narrative of Tate as a victim. The iconography of Tate as a murder victim has become so prevalent that it requires a revisionist approach to imagine Tate as a bright,

young actress with a career ahead. When reading biographies or documentaries this facet of Tate is silent. Tarantino is instead sacrificing fidelity to these past events to provide the viewer with an emotive capturing of Tate as an individual without adherence to the painful, and seemingly meaningless, circumstances of her demise. In an interview with *Sight & Sound* magazine, Tarantino outlined his intentions for *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*:

I'm using the history of what happened and I'm using ... *you* may have more knowledge, more than other people, others may have a lack of knowledge—but most people buying a ticket are going to know that Sharon Tate was killed. I had two reasons I could, without using a story, make a day-in-the-life. One, I thought that the three characters were compelling enough. The other thing, and this was the tricky part because some people could say it's in really bad taste, and I risked that—I don't think I made a movie in bad taste, but it's very much open to the observer—is the fact that because you know Sharon is going to get murdered, that adds drama to the piece that wouldn't be there without that knowledge. And it's interesting watching it with audiences because the movie has three acts. It's interesting how you watch it, because I think everyone watches it pretty easy in the first act—when we see Sharon at the airport, when we see Sharon at the Playboy Mansion, we're just enjoying her. We don't have this sense of dread, I don't think.



But the next day is different. Once that day gets going, every scene with Sharon is getting closer to that murder. Almost like that ticking clock in *Dunkirk*. It's like a ticking tragedy. And the more we like her, the more that means something to us. And it adds weight to the piece. When I get to my ending, I have to earn it. The whole movie I have to earn that ending. (Morgan 2019, 20-21)

In essence, Tarantino wants to capture a version of Tate that is true to her character, but not necessarily true to the events of the past. For however long she is on screen, the viewer sees a happy, joyous version of Tate as a glimpse to what she would have been like if the tragic events of August 9, 1969, did not occur.

Tate was an emerging star in Hollywood who had left her home of Texas for dreams of acting stardom in California. After a few guest spots on a few shows, Tate did secure a recurring role on *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971, appearing in fifteen episodes from 1963–1965). From there Tate would do a few more acting jobs before landing a part in Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). This was the movie on which she would meet and then marry Polanski, in what can only be described as a tumultuous marriage. Tate would do a few more roles, such as *Valley of the Dolls* (1967) and *The Wrecking Crew* (1967), both referenced in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, before her unfortunate murder, and on the cup of stardom and perhaps roles that would benefit her position in Hollywood much more than the variations of the “blonde ditz” roles she usually performed in movies.

Because Tate's life was cut short by her senseless murder, audiences never got to enjoy the film career of a newly emerging actor. In the world of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, however, that scenario is given its full potential with Tarantino's alternate history of 1960s America. In this timeline Tate is not murdered, and as a consequence the whole industry is also dramatically altered. In this timeline does the burgeoning New Hollywood movement arrive in the same manner? Would Tate have been a part of the New Hollywood movement? Would she have divorced husband Roman Polanski if she had lived? How does Rick Dalton's presence in her life affect his career and the development of New Hollywood? These are all questions that resonate in the viewer's mind after the final frame of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* has gone by. Tarantino's re-imagining of the Tate story brings with it considerations of genre and purpose. As has been established, the film not only dispenses with the notion of biopics, it also subversively comments on the limitations of the biopic formula. Tarantino's interpretation of Tate is, in part, a work of speculative fiction that not only rewrites history but uses that alternate history to project a potential career for Tate as an actress who might have gone on to greater success. A biopic would be required to end Tate's career at its historical end point, whereas Tarantino is subverting the expectations of the genre by giving the viewer the opportunity to imagine a prolonged and lengthy career for this fictionalized version of Tate.

Film has always had a contentious relationship with history in terms of categorization and representation. As Johnathan Stubbs observes in the book *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*: "Any film that dramatizes or restages the past from the perspective of the present necessarily strikes a balance between fact and fiction, regardless of whether or not it pur-

ports to be depicting events that actually occurred" (Stubbs 2013, 17). Tarantino, then, is already facing an uphill struggle in his depiction of the past, as an abbreviated film cannot truly represent the past. Film editing, practical considerations like filming locations, set design, costuming, and so forth, also affect the historical veracity of the visual depiction of the past. In effect the nature of film means that essentially all film is an "alternate history" in that it embodies the director's contemporary interpretation of the past through his ideological lens, and even with great care and attention to detail, film can be nothing more than an approximation of past events.

In this way Tarantino's alternate history is no different than any other historical film. Robert A Rosenstone notes in his essay "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in A Postliterate Age" that "[h]istorians tend to use written works of history to critique visual history as if that written history were itself solid and unproblematic" (Rosenstone 2001, 52). Just as historians edit and curate historical material when writing a book, Tarantino is editing and rewriting the past for a visual medium. Bias afflicts all historical material to an extent, Tarantino just takes it one step further by using an alternate history that illustrates his bias more clearly, primarily by adopting a distinct fairy tale aspect to his depiction of 1960s Los Angeles.

### THE FAIRY TALE IMAGE OF SHARON TATE

*Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* deals with the legacy of Tate by rewriting history in order for the actress to continue, at least in the imagination of the viewer, on with her career and her life. Real world intrusions, such as a likely inevitable divorce from the film director Polanski, are largely ignored so as to preserve the fairy tale aspect of the film. This fairy

tale aspect to the film is central to its approach to history, as Tarantino is using a plausible realism to convey the narrative of what-could-be in his alternative vision of 1960s Los Angeles. In essence Tarantino is refuting the idea that film has to be beholden to concepts of classical realism, especially in regard to social commentaries.

While Polanski is referenced in the film, Tarantino ignores the more problematic aspects of Tate and Polanski's marriage in order to better serve the fairy tale aspect of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. Polanski is a problematic figure who cheated on Tate with numerous women, and generally mistreated the woman in his life. Polanski once said, "I have a very firm theory about male and female intelligence. It causes an absolute outrage if you say that women on the average are less intelligent than men, but it happens to be true!" (Polanski quoted in King, 2000, 57). Polanski was notoriously chauvinistic, and later in life would become embroiled in sexual assault charges against underage girls. Polanski is a troubling figure in Hollywood history with a terrible history of abuse and sexual assaults, which is alluded to in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, but not directly referenced. The alternate history presented by Tarantino side steps these grim and bleak aspects of Tate's real-life story, instead focusing on the mood of the times and Tate as a figure in history to be celebrated, not discussed in such grim and horrific details.

A traditional biopic that unfolds in accordance with the conventions of the genre would necessarily have to depict scenes of domestic violence and infidelity in order to represent Tate's story. The formula of the biopic demands the middle section of a film depicts a struggle where the protagonist sees their lives begin to fall apart. Following Bingham's assertion about the troubled roles women occupy in biop-

ics, this would be especially problematic. The viewer would be witness to a film depicting a young and idealistic starlet, her rise to fame, and then in a truncated narrative would see scenes of marital difficulties and abuse by both her husband Polanski and corrupt studio executives who only want to exploit her, and then immediately followed by a brutal scene of her murder at the hands of the Manson Family cultists. The psychological effect of this would reinforce images of women as victims so prevalent in the biopic genre. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* instead chooses to portray Tate's life through the veil of historical fantasy.

Reinforcing this idea of history as a fairy tale, the film fades out the score to the 1972 Western *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*. *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* is a Western starring Paul Newman whose promotional tagline was "Maybe this isn't the way it was ... It's the way it should have been!" The intertextual reference alludes to Tarantino's desire to rewrite history that essentially allows the viewer to get a glimpse of Tate if she had not had her life tragically taken from her. The image of Tate is now so inextricably linked to the cultist leader Manson that it overshadows the public memory of her. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a cinematic corrective to that history that aims to reclaim the image of Tate as young, happy, and optimistic about her future. For the nearly three hour run time viewers can imagine a world where it is possible Tate did have a long and illustrious movie career and was a mother. Cinema is, at its core, a fantastical medium where entirely different worlds can be imagined, so why cannot history be tweaked to show us a different path? Tarantino is taking advantage of cinema's capabilities by presenting this alternate version that nevertheless aims to show the viewer an honest portrayal of who Tate was as a person rather than defining her according to the horrific crimes that would take her life.

### ROBBIE AND SCREEN TIME

Despite Tarantino's intentions, there has been significant criticism levied against *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* for its under-representation of Tate and how little screen time or dialogue she receives during the course of the film. This concern came up during a press conference, to which Tarantino bluntly responded "Well, I just reject your hypothesis" (Cannes 2019). Margot Robbie more tactfully answered by saying, "I think the tragedy ultimately was the loss of innocence and to really show those wonderful sides of her I think could be adequately done without speaking. I did like I got a lot of time to explore even without dialogue specifically" (Cannes 2019). Robbie's response does raise the question of whether representation can be effective without dialogue (or much of it anyways) and very little screen time.

Objectively speaking, in terms of screen time, Robbie only takes up approximately thirty minutes of the film's nearly three hour run time. Statistical analysis of screen time and word counts, however, do not inform us as to exactly how Tate is being represented in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. We have to look at the context to which she depicted, how her relationship to her male counterparts is played out in the film, what is the direction of the gaze, and even whether the film is intended to be her starring vehicle or is she a supporting character in the film? If it was anyone else other than Robbie being cast, would the viewer have the same expectations?

In part the issue of screen time could also be attributed to genre expectations. Having a known name like Robbie being cast in a role as a well-known public figure brings with it expectations that it will follow a traditional biopic structure. As a genre, biopics tend to follow conventional structure

with predictable and formulaic tropes. There is a rise-and-fall pattern to the narrative, with early scenes of overcoming adversity, the pressures of fame, and either a tragic end or a heroic end (in the case of celebrity biographies the heroic end usually culminates in the actor/musician achieving some form of resolution, often followed by text on the screen that valorizes the celebrity and their struggles), usually followed by an end credits scene where actual footage of the public figure's life is played over blurbs about what happened after the events, whether it is about people responding to their death, or perhaps a triumphant note about getting sober. George F. Custen, in *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, notes that this one of the problems with biopics as a genre—they “routinely integrate disparate historical episodes into a nearly monochromatic ‘Hollywood view of history.’ One way this integration occurs is through the construction of a highly conventionalized view of fame” (Custen 1992, 3). In part, biographies of famous lives get rewritten to accommodate the demands of the medium, but also to form a coherent narrative framework around the decades of an individual's life and disconnected episodes within life.

Tarantino subverts this by switching the storytelling mode from a rise-and-fall structure attempting to capture the entirety of Tate's life to an alternate history that details one inconsequential day of errands, a movie, and a party at night. In effect Tarantino is deconstructing the biopic as a genre and thereby deconstructing how the audience interprets history. As Custen observes, “In telling history through the individual life, Hollywood has had an enormous impact upon the viewer's conception of history” (Custen 1992, 12). The limited screen time affects the viewer's expectations of a traditional biopic structure and instead of using Tate's story to make some grandiose commentary on history or Hollywood, Tate

is relegated to a supporting role in her own “supposed” biopic, or, rather, what viewers assume will be her biopic.

In part the confusion can be attributed to the promotional material, which heavily featured Robbie, thereby raising expectations about the size of her role in the film. Using Robbie as a main selling point and placing her so prominently on the posters and trailers created expectations of a traditional biopic, which would necessarily feature Tate as the main narrative focal point of the film. Tate, who spends a significant portion of the film alone, thereby making dialogue unnecessary, is instead given a few scenes which highlight her happy and carefree nature instead of a dramatic rise to fame and then tragic death scenario that would constitute a traditional biopic's structure. Tate's sister Debra Tate expressed concerns over the initial project, fearing that it would be a more traditional biopic, complete with brutal, gory depictions of the death of Tate and her friends: “I had concerns over what it was going to be. Was he going to be true to the characters? Was he going to glorify the Manson Family members, as a lot of other film directors have done?” (Miller 2019). In response Tarantino met with Debra, showed her the script, and assured her that his portrayal was going to avoid the Tate-as-victim route so many other cinematic and television depictions have done before.

Because of Robbie's name and the infamy of the Tate-LaBianca murders, there is an expectation that she will feature prominently in the film and that this event will form the primary focus of the film. Tarantino is effectively subverting audience expectations to remind the audience of just how brief Tate's life was, as we are left with only a faded memory of her. Robbie, however, is not the main star of the film, and her brevity in the film signals that in an alternate world where Tate is not murdered, that this day in August would be another



er inconsequential day among many others. The unfortunate events of August 9, 1969, have cemented Tate's image in the public's mind. The tragic circumstances of Tate's murder have become the centralized point in which the public knows and understands Tate as a well-known figure, eclipsing her film and television career. A biopic, then, would have led up to that day with sufficient drama and suspense that the audience would feel the tension building, whereas in the version Tarantino has filmed, August 9, 1969, is just another average day for Tate. The looseness and seemingly meandering nature of the film perfectly encapsulates the feeling of just another day, refusing to build up the suspense with a distinctive narrative arc.

In concordance with Robbie's limited screen time is also the visual depiction of Tate via her fashion and appearance. The criticism is that not only is Robbie denied a significant role in a film ostensibly about Tate's life (or at least that what many critics assumed), when Robbie does appear she has very little dialogue and is adorned in mini-skirts and various revealing outfits. However, the historical relevance of the mini-skirt and Tate's own fashion choices, how she chose to represent herself, also figure into the historicity of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*.

The 1960s, and the mini skirt, were a conflicting time in regard to fashion. The mini skirt, developed by British fashion designer Mary Quant, was in part a response to the stifling aesthetics of the 1950's pencil dress. With birth control coming into the picture there was now a recognition that women could, indeed, have sex for pleasure, and not just procreation. The housewife-mother archetype was unraveling at the seams, and fashion was changing to reflect the times. The dominant media image of the beautiful (but not overtly

seductive) housewife doing house chores in high heels and pearls was superseded by more overtly sexualized images of seductresses like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, who contradicted the media narrative that preferred pretty and thin, but not curvaceous and fleshy.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and the rising popularity of rock 'n' roll and Hollywood created a paradoxical relationship between the mini skirt, sexual liberation, and the objectification of women in mass media. The mini skirt, of the type favored by Tate, was a response to the repressive norms of 1950s suburbia that disrupted conventional sexual mores of the submissive housewife, but its increasing popularity also signaled the emergence of the female celebrity as an object of desire.

Tate was certainly one of those women who would become an object of desire for male viewers. It was an expectation that weighed heavily on Tate. Tate would lament the direction of her career—an unfortunately brief career that spanned only five theatrical films and a number of television appearances—and how she was treated by film executives:

They said they had a plan for me. They would train and prepare me. I was immediately put in training, like a racehorse. I had a job to stay the way I was. They told me, 'Cream your face, Sharon ... Put on more eyeliner, Sharon, Stick out your boobs, Sharon.' (Debra Tate 2014, 65)

Tate is clearly exasperated by the treatment of her as being a one-dimensional sexpot, a blonde ditz for the audience to enjoy, who does not have much to do in the film. Film producers only viewed Tate through a narrow perspective; a perspective

rooted in the sexist nature of the 1960's Hollywood film industry that disregarded women and their potential for more than just as housewives or sexpots for male gratification.

In evaluating the erotic impact of the female stars, notably Robbie as Tate, we have to discern between how much is a representation of the fashion of the times and how much is catered towards the gratification of the viewer. While undoubtedly some of Robbie's performance is coded for gratification, it is also indicative of how women, especially younger women, dressed in the sixties. Tate specifically did adorn herself in the latest fashions of the sixties, which were geared more towards sex appeal. The erotic impact, then, is a feature of the era as much as it is of the director's vision. Estella Tincknell, in her article "Tragic Blondes, Hollywood and the 'Radical Sixties' Myth: *Seberg* and *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as Revisionist and Reparative Biopic," focuses on the party at the Playboy Mansion as the basis of her criticism. Tincknell argues that the presence of the Playboy Mansion in the film is problematic and that "by figuring the house as a recreational space for women as well as men, the film offers a dubious gloss on the Playboy ethos, grounded as it is in the objectification of women. The Mansion here is denuded of such problematic associations, becoming the locus merely for sexual playfulness" (Tincknell 2022, 7). In terms of its symbolic relevance in the film, the film does glamorize the Playboy ethos without commenting too much on Hugh Hefner's objectification of women. To do so, however, would shatter the illusion presented by *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, just as depicting Polanski's infidelities and sexual assault of young girls would shatter the fairy tale aspect of the film.

At the party at the Playboy mansion Steve McQueen (Damien Lewis) tells Connie Stevens (Dreama Walker)

about the love triangle with Sharon Tate, Polanski, and Jay Sebring (Emile Hirsch): “Jay loves Sharon. That’s what’s up. And he knows, as sure as God made little green apples, that one of these days that Polish prick’s gonna’ fuck things up, and when he does, Jay’s gonna’ be there” (Tarantino 2019). There is acknowledgment in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* of the marital difficulties and unpleasant characteristics of Polanski, however minimal and sparse, but not overtly enough so as to affect the storytelling and fairy tale aspect of the film. This scene in particular also reveals a fundamental flaw in Tate’s story, namely that the viewer’s information about Tate is given to us through the exposition of a male character, not by her own devices.

The consideration here is whether Tarantino’s fairy tale lens exonerates Polanski and his difficulties. In terms of Polanski, he is a director with a complicated and problematic history of a history of sexually assaulting underage girls. After fleeing the United States to Paris to avoid a prison sentence, Polanski has remained a celebrated director—his 2002 film *The Pianist* won Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture—whose disturbing history has been glossed over by some figures in Hollywood. Whoopi Goldberg went on record as saying Polanski’s sexual assault of a 13-year-old girl was not “rape-rape” (Kennedy 2009). Goldberg’s distinction between levels of rape is demeaning and attempts to justify sexual assault. Tarantino himself once defended Polanski on the Howard Stern Show, having since expressed his deep regrets and has apologized for misspeaking (Desta 2018). It could be argued that Tarantino is reflecting on his past and uses the fairy tale aspect not to gloss over and ignore Polanski’s troubled history, but to attempt to rectify his own past history by making Tate an aspirational figure.

In determining the possible eroticism of Robbie as Tate it is necessary to look at how she is being framed by the camera. For instance, when Robbie as Tate enters the Bruin to watch her movie, the camera lingers for a lengthy period of time on Robbie's posterior in a white miniskirt as she walks in to find her seat. In another scene, taking place after Tate partied at the Playboy Mansion, we see Robbie in a state of undress, covered only slightly by a bit of white linen. The camera follows the length of her body, from her feet (this is a Tarantino film, after all) to legs and back. With these depictions the question is raised about the functionality or symbolic importance of this scene. Is Tarantino affirming Tate as a sex symbol iconography that dominated her media coverage early in her career? Certainly the film could be interpreted as Tarantino replicating the patterns of the past, eroticizing the image of Tate in a similar fashion as the past. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a complicated film that intends well, and generally succeeds, but it is not an unproblematic representation of the past and is not devoid of ethical or cinematic complications.

*Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* succeeds because it is a diversion from the brutal facts of true history. What screen time the viewer does get with Robbie as Tate is instead a pleasant and leisurely paced series of mostly unremarkable events, with the notable exception of the party at the Playboy mansion where she dances with Michelle Philips (Rebecca Rittenhouse). In the Playboy party scene, most of the attention is on her as she is the only person in that scene who is bathed in a spotlight. Other than the off-handed comment by Steve McQueen the turmoil of her personal life is avoided. The viewer is supposed just to bathe in the wonder and beauty of Sharon Tate and not as a historical figure who tends to be overwhelmed by the iconography of her death,

but as a symbol of lightness and hope. Tarantino has said, “When Sharon’s on screen we need to slow everything the fuck down. Just slow the whole damn thing down and just hang out with her” (Morgan 2019, 21). Tate is a symbol rather than a more fleshed out character in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, allowing the viewer to simply absorb the image of a happy Tate without much reference to her troubled marriage or tragic death.

### SHARON TATE AND PUBLIC MEMORY

To the later point, there is also the idea that in real life the public barely got to know Tate before her untimely death at the hands of the Manson Family. Robbie’s limited screen time could be attributed to the fact that Tate was murdered at age twenty-six, meaning that Tate exists only as a trace memory by those who lived in that era or as a brief moment in popular culture history. This ephemerality is made apparent in a scene which features Robbie’s only significant amount of dialogue in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. As the scene plays out, we see Sharon Tate running errands, buying a first edition of a Thomas Hardy novel for her husband, and generally being leisurely with her time. Upon seeing a marquee with the film *The Wrecking Crew* (1968), a Matt Helm spy thriller starring Dean Martin, Tate then proceeds to ask if she can see the movie free of charge on the basis that she is in the actual movie itself:

**Bruin box office girl:** You’re in this?

**Sharon Tate:** I play Mrs. Carlson. That’s me [bobs head to indicate who she is on the movie poster)

**Bruin box office girl:** But, that’s the girl

from *Valley of the Dolls*.

**Sharon Tate:** Well, that's me. The girl from *Valley of the Dolls*.

**Bruin box office girl:** Really?

**Sharon Tate:** Really!

**Bruin box office girl:** Hey Ruben. Come out here. This is the girl from *Valley of the Dolls*.

**Ruben (movie theater manager):** Patty Duke?

**Bruin box office girl:** No, the other one.

**Ruben:** The girl from *Peyton Place*?

**Bruin box office girl:** No, the other one.

**Sharon Tate:** [interjecting] The one who ends up doing dirty movies.

**Ruben:** Oh.

**Bruin box office girl:** She's in this movie.

**Sharon Tate:** [introducing herself by her name] Sharon Tate. (Tarantino 2019)

At this point in her career Sharon Tate is a rising star with enough celebrity capital that people who watch movies might know who she is but was not immediately recognizable or a major figure in the industry. We are given a snapshot of Tate to reflect her potential and to provide a glimpse into the normality of Tate's existence before the historical iconog-

raphy of her death, or even as a major celebrity figure if her career had the opportunity to progress into larger stardom, consumed our interpretation of Sharon Tate. The next scene, which shows Robbie acting as Tate watch the real Tate on the screen further emphasizes that this is a fictionalized interpretation and a very brief glimpse of Tate, and also that the viewer, especially since most viewers will likely not be personally familiar with the socio-historical setting of 1960's Los Angeles, only knows a mediated version of Tate.

Tate watching her own movie at the Bruin contrasts the sweet, optimistic nature of Tate as a young actress when compared to the constantly stressed and neurotic Rick, who seems more concerned with celebrity status at this point. We, the viewer, also get to see the real Tate on screen, as Robbie watches a scene from the actual film *The Wrecking Crew*. Tarantino has said that one of the aspects he enjoyed about watching the film with an audience is when they laugh at the pratfall being performed by the real Tate via actual footage from *The Wrecking Crew*: "I love that Sharon's getting a laugh. The real Sharon Tate gets a laugh" (Tarantino quoted in Morgan, 2019). In effect we get to participate in the joy Tate must have felt by seeing the real person on screen in a contemporary film, reminding us of the symbol that she has become and what she represents in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*.

The scene in the theater is important because it provides the viewer with a glimpse of Tate through her own eyes rather than as the object of a male gaze. This scene depicts Tate as a young and idealistic person who is hopeful about her career ahead, much in contrast to the actor Rick Dalton, who is depicted as a broken down, cynical, and depressed actor who is not aging gracefully. This contrast between the aging male star who expects to maintain his hierarchy in Hollywood and



the exuberance of Tate as someone who just enjoys the process of making films gives the viewer a sense of her as an individual with a strong sense of self and a clear direction about where she wants her career to proceed.

In this scene the viewer is supposed to just relish in the pure joy Tate has in watching herself on screen. When Tate looks back to see the other patrons it is not out of a narcissistic impulse, but the simple pleasure of knowing she is having an impact on other people through her movies. That we, as the viewers of Robbie as Tate watching the real Tate on screen, get to participate in that indulgence, resonates with the symbolism of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as an elegiac ode to the film industry and to Tate as an actor, not as a victim.

As with all of Tarantino's characters, Tate exists as a broad archetype in a stylized world. Tarantino's characters exist as broad archetypes that exist to provide unique dialogue that establishes the hyper-stylized reality in which Tarantino is operating in for each particular film. In this case Tate is a deliberately idealized version parting in an idealized Playboy Mansion grotto, intentionally representing an almost hagiographic interpretation of Tate in order to counterbalance the tragic history. Tate, then, represents the ideal, and Rick's walk up her driveway in the film's final frames is his ascension into the upper echelon of Hollywood, thereby finally achieving his dreams of being one of the inner circle of Hollywood. It is apparent that Rick's aversion to the counterculture movement and their influence on New Hollywood is largely one of jealousy and frustration.

## CONCLUSION

The penultimate film in Quentin Tarantino's self-proposed ten film career, *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is one of the

more intriguing entries in his filmography. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a historical revisionist film—as his last four films have all been—that uses the backdrop of late 1960's Los Angeles to tell a story of Old Hollywood transitioning into New Hollywood. Using this framework Tarantino finds parallels to his own career, from his early days as an emerging young director in the independent scene of the 1990s, to becoming a vanguard of cinema with a three-decade career.

For his second-to-last film, Tarantino frames all this dialogue on the film industry through a reimagining of Sharon Tate's story. In Tarantino's hyper-stylized cinematic universe rules of objective realism were abandoned long ago, and *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* stretches this historical revisionism even further by erasing one of the most infamous crimes in the twentieth century. Tarantino wants us just to enjoy a cinematic reality where we can enjoy Tate's smile, enjoy just the inconsequential mundanity of her doing errands, watching her own movie, and other such activities, even if it is vicariously experienced through Margot Robbie's performance as Tate.

As for Robbie's screen time, there has been criticism regarding its brevity. Yet in part that could be attributed to the public perception of biopics, which often place a heavy emphasis on a rise-and-fall story arc. As such biopics feature the represented celebrity quite extensively, whereas Tate is a supporting character in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. Instead, Tarantino resists the formulaic approach of most biopics, which would surely involve a recreation of Tate's gruesome murder (at least to some degree), thereby reinforcing the iconography of Tate-as-victim. Instead, Tarantino rewrites history so as to subvert this formula and present a brief glimpse into a day of Tate where her supporting role de-emphasizes the biopic nature of the film.

Tarantino is attempting to rectify the public image of Tate as just a victim of a crime, finding it necessary to remove the Tate-Labianca murders from history altogether. As a by-product, overt references to Tate's tumultuous marriage to Roman Polanski, her struggles as an actor dealing with stereotyping that wants to place her in sexpot or blonde ditz roles for the entirety of her career, are also not in the forefront of the film, as they would be in a standard biopic.

This aspect of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* has brought up challenges by various writers and critics that Robbie is merely emblematic of the male gaze. Robbie's limited screen time, her apparel (regardless of how historically accurate her outfits might be), are sources of contention that Tarantino is doing a disservice to the memory of Tate and merely mimics the sexist nature of the industry still prevalent. To bring those other conflicts into the film, however, is beyond the scope of *Once Upon A Time In ... Hollywood* and would negatively affect Tate as a figure of joy, hope, and optimism that, at least in this allohistory, has very little connection to the Manson Family.

Robbie's brief screen time has an impact on the viewer. The film itself is primarily Rick Dalton's story, because in a world where the Manson Family did not kill Tate, it is just a day like any other and Tate would not feature so prominently. The viewer has cultural expectations that because it is Robbie and it is such a notorious crime that the film will necessarily focus on her, but that is not the case. We are here to watch Rick's journey unfold as he travels through the various environs of Hollywood, watching him go from desperation and frustration to finally being accepted into the inner circle of Hollywood.

*Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* plays with the interpretative nature of history and cinema's capacity to bend the rules

of reality to give the viewer an alternative version of the past where Tate did not die. In the standard biopic there would be an attempt to decipher the actions of Manson ordering his acolytes to kill innocent people so as to establish a narrative framework from which the movie would be focused on. Tarantino subverts this and the idea that these crimes can, in fact, be understood and deciphered by any logical or rational person, and instead uses cinema's propensity for fantasy and illusion that, at least for the nearly three hour run time, attempts to correct history rather than explain history. However little time Robbie is given on the screen, at least she is not the subject of an entire film that tries to recreate the brutal and tragic murder of Tate, as most biopic would indeed do.

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