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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#denvir)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0105236/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:40984)  [Readers comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |       Pink's idea of justice seems a bit hard-hearted, but we must admit that in the end, it's Pink who escapes alive with the diamonds so maybe his self-interested approach has more advantages than his more passionate colleagues realize. | **Just Us**  by John Denvir  We too often remember Quentin Tarantino's films for their images of violence. The image of a thug slicing off a policeman's ear in *Reservoir Dogs* is a hard one to forget-even though it never appears in the movie. The actual mutilation takes place off screen, a fact that indicates Tarantino is interested in more than violence for violence's sake. I find *Reservoir Dogs* more interesting as a movie about justice than one about violence. Tarantino's idea of justice has little to do the "legal justice system" with its juries and prisons and such, but with justice as the hope that everyone gets what they deserve, their just deserts. Each of the film's main characters is motivated by a sense of justice, but what justice demands varies dramatically from individual to individual and these differing perceptions lead inevitably to violence.  Since most readers have not seen the film recently, I would like to start with a short plot summary to refresh our memories. *Reservoir Dogs* is a "heist" film, or more accurately, a "heist gone bad" film. A group of crooks plans a robbery of a jewelry warehouse. Tipped off by an undercover policeman (Tim Roth as Mr. Orange) who has infiltrated the gang, the police show up to interrupt the robbery. Two of the gang are killed and another (the same Mr. Orange) is seriously wounded.  We pick up the action when Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) is bringing the "gut-shot" Mr. Orange to a deserted warehouse where the gang had agreed to meet after the heist. They are met there first by Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) and a little later by Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) who has brought with him a tied-up policeman the gang members hope can identify the snitch. They are soon joined by Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn), the gang leader's son and deputy, who assigns Blonde to guard the prisoner while he, White, and Pink retrieve the jewels.  When Blonde is alone, he proceeds to torture his captive. He candidly explains that he doesn't care whether the policeman tells him the truth or not; it just amuses him to torture a cop. This is where the ear slicing takes place. He also intends to burn his victim alive. Just before Blonde is able to set the policeman aflame, he is shot dead by Orange who he had mistakenly believed was unconscious. Nice Guy Eddie, White, and Pink return, soon joined by the gang's leader Joe (Lawrence Tierney). Joe has no doubt about the identity of the informer; he "knows" it is Orange because Orange is the only one he had not worked with for years. He pulls out his gun to execute Orange, only to be confronted by Mr. White who claims that Orange is innocent. He asks Joe what his proof is, but Joe responds. "You don't need proof when you have instinct." White draws his gun and tells Joe that if he shoots Orange, he will shoot Joe. At which point Nice guy Eddie draws his gun and tells White that if he shoots his dad, he will shoot him. A triple shoot-out ensues, leaving both Joe and Nice Guy Eddie dead.  At this point Mr. Pink decides to leave with the jewels, feeling risking capture by the cops is safer than remaining with his homicidal colleagues. That leaves Mr. White and Mr. Orange. Orange knows that the police are about to arrive to rescue him and arrest White, but still he tells White " I'm a cop. I'm sorry, terribly sorry." At this point the police enter the building and shoot White dead, but not before he kills Orange.  We can see five different conceptions of justice operating here, each motivating a different character. Mr. Blonde represents the first conception of justice. White is a psychopath who has already killed a whole slew of warehouse employees during the robbery. He clearly enjoys mutilating the cop for no better reason than the enjoyment he experiences torturing a cop. This seems more like sadism than justice. But in Blonde's defense, we must admit he would not complain if the policeman held the knife and acted the same way towards him. Justice to White is no more or less than inflicting pain on your enemy as circumstances allow.  Joe represents another idea of justice, the charismatic leader's justice. Joe is the gang's boss, the man who gives the orders. It's Joe who insisted that all the participants in the actual robbery take the names of colors to keep their true identities secret. He's an affectionate, generous man towards his workers, but insists on total obedience. He takes responsibility for the group's success and claims the right to decide questions of guilt and punishment. He figures Orange must be the snitch since Orange is the only new man on the job. No more need of proof than that. Once he makes that decision, permitting opposition would be perceived as a sign of weakness, undermining his authority. Orange is a dead man.  Consider the difference between Joe's idea of justice and that of Mr. Pink. Mr. Pink is the individualist in the group, always thinking about what will profit him personally. But he too is bound by an idea of proper conduct toward his fellows, an idea that appears to be driven by the idea of contract. He is willing to perform any obligations he has voluntarily undertaken, but nothing beyond the terms of the contract. Tarantino allows Pink to explain his ideas in a very funny monologue about why Pink doesn't tip waitresses. They are paid to serve the food; he has agreed to pay the bill. He hasn't agreed to add a tip and chooses not to. The fact that "society" wishes to place this nonconsensual burden on him does not move him in the least. He's also supremely indifferent to his colleagues' arguments that waitresses need the money. If they don't like the pay, they should find a new job.  Yet Pink believes himself a professional and acts like one. For instance, he rescues the diamonds and rather than abscond with them brings them to the rendez-vous as agreed. He is also the first to realize someone must have tipped off the cops and insists they discuss rationally what to do next to identify the snitch. Pink's idea of justice seems a bit hard-hearted, but we must admit that in the end, it's Pink who escapes alive with the diamonds so maybe his self-interested approach has more advantages than his more passionate colleagues realize.  Mr. White and Mr. Orange both exhibit morally more ambitious conceptions of justice than the others. White feels that his relationship with his fellow crooks gives them a claim on his sympathy. Not willing to be bound by the letter of their agreement, White reacts spontaneously to Orange's injury and feels something should be done to relieve his pain. This empathy with suffering should not surprise us; it was White who was enraged by Pink's hard-heartedness towards waitresses. He takes responsibility for Orange because Orange is his colleague and (he thinks) friend. Unfortunately, this need for human connection makes White less "professional" than Pink by giving Orange information that the cop plans to use against him. Also Tarantino cleverly undercuts White's stance by showing how easily he has been fooled by the undercover cop. It turns out that White has killed his friend Joe to save a man who knows that the police are coming in a few minutes to arrest them all, including White. Empathy that is not mediated by prudence can be dangerous.  That leaves Mr. Orange who goes beyond even White to embrace what I will call a "redemptive" concept of justice. When we meet Orange he is quite a cocky young undercover detective who likes his "super-cool" job playing cops and robbers. It's only when the blood, including his own, starts to flow that he realizes that law enforcement impacts heavily on human lives. In order to stop a burglary that only involved the theft of insured diamonds, he has set in motion a series of events that will result in several deaths, including his own. After the shootout when his protector White crawls to his side, he has a decision to make. Should he remain silent and wait for the police or confess his perfidy. Remaining silent is clearly the smart move, but he can't do it. White's caring for him has created a personal bond he can't ignore. He feels responsible for the pain he has caused. Forgiveness-, self-forgiveness- requires action. "I'm a cop. I'm sorry, terribly sorry." This is a call for his own death, but one he feels compelled to give.  I think there are some lessons we can take away from this film. First, the need to act according to some idea of justice seems hard-wired into the human brain. Crooks are just as justice-obsessed as the police who pursue them. Secondly, this need for justice does not break down neatly into procedural and substantive components the way law school teaches us. It concerns what we owe our fellows. Thirdly, individual and group disputes, like Joe and White's, often stem, not from an opposition of justice to injustice, but differing ideas of what justice requires. Maybe this realization could make us more understanding of our enemies' motivations. We should recognize that none of us operate from a pure concept of justice, but rather an amalgam of these five conceptions and probably many more. For instance, Pink thinks himself a rationalist, but enters into kicking the defenseless cop with abandon just like Blonde. Do we not, like Blonde, enjoy our enemies' pain? Or like Joe, prefer submission to our authority to the rigors of proof? Pink's attempt to determine what obligations he has voluntarily assumed is also an everyday experience. So too we are inspired by White's taking responsibility for his fellow's welfare and admire, if not wholly understand, Orange's need to atone for his misdeeds. In the end, we may find that "justice" turns out to be "just us."  Posted August 1, 2006  **Would you like to comment on this article? 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