

A BANNED APART: RESERVOIR DOGS' UK WILDERNESS YEARS

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Despite what you may have read, *RESERVOIR DOGS* was never banned in the UK, on video or otherwise. It was never illegal to watch Tarantino's bloody debut in Britain and nobody was ever prosecuted for selling a copy. But it is true that, for a while, you couldn't watch *RESERVOIR DOGS* at home, caught up as it was in a wider public conversation over screen violence. It wasn't deliberately suppressed. It was a casualty of bigger-picture events.

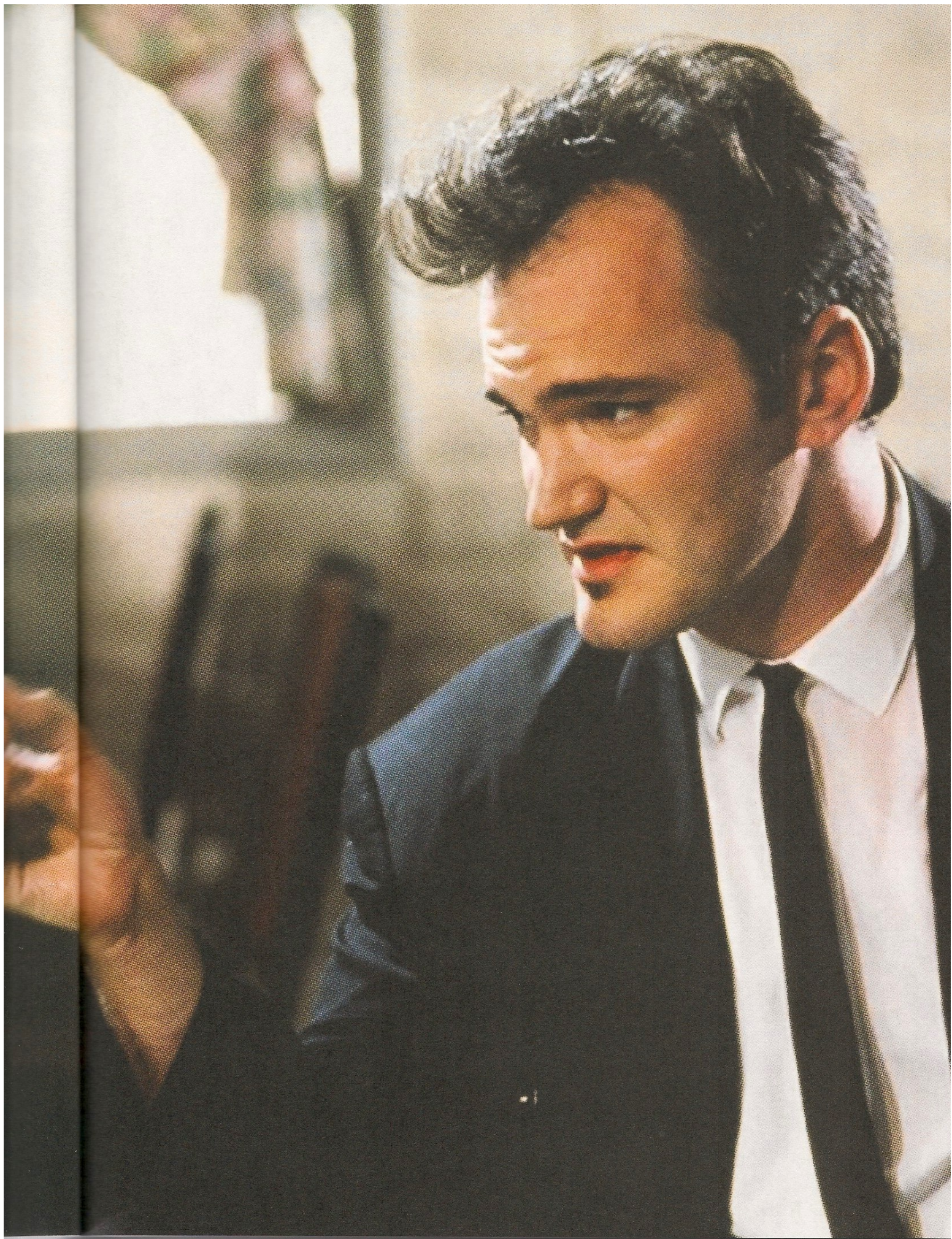
A decade earlier, when home video first arrived in the UK, it was the Wild West: an unregulated free-for-all. Films in the cinema were subject to classification, but home videos were not. That situation lasted until a moral panic blew up, tabloid newspapers and moral pressure groups whipping up concern over so-called "video nasties" like *THE DRILLER KILLER*, *THE NEW YORK RIPPER*, and *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*. The Video Recordings Act of 1984 eventually brought home media under the remit of the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification), requiring videos to be submitted for certification in the same way as cinema releases, albeit with more intense scrutiny. Throughout the rest of 1980s,

conservatives tutted about sex and violence, while horror and action fans got annoyed by censorship, but there was some sort of de facto status quo.

RESERVOIR DOGS didn't single-handedly reopen the controversy, but the timing of its arrival placed it at the epicenter of two separate but connected new debates.

The first was centered on what some corners of the press tried to dub "The New Brutality." *RESERVOIR DOGS*, released theatrically in the UK in January 1993, was at the vanguard of what appeared to some to be a troubling new movement. "The inventive obscenities, the rat-tat-tat of taboo words... the [drugs]... their sadistic, almost baroque creative bloodletting along with their apparent absence of redeeming social value, and the insouciantly indulgent attitude... towards deadbeat characters – all combined to give them a dangerous charge." So says Peter Biskind in 2004's *DOWN AND DIRTY PICTURES* of Tarantino's canon as a whole, but it's a litany of all the issues that concerned British moral arbiters as first *RESERVOIR DOGS*, then







Abel Ferrara's *BAD LIEUTENANT* and Carl Franklin's *ONE FALSE MOVE* arrived in short order. These visceral movies were hip and indie-credible: arguably mainstream in their content, but distributed as cool arthouse, underground sensations, covered by music and pop culture magazines as well as by the film press. *RESERVOIR DOGS* might have been a scrapbook of influences from Martin Scorsese to Ringo Lam, but to a generation it felt like something entirely new, and raked in a very respectable (for the UK) \$6 million at the box office.

Then, in the middle of this cultural moment, James Bulger was killed. Without getting into the truly upsetting details of that case, Bulger was a toddler who was abducted and murdered by two older children in February 1993. In the aftermath, as people looked for reasons, a VHS copy of *CHILD'S PLAY 3* became implicated, the suggestion being that one of the young killers might have watched his father's rented copy some months earlier. It was tenuous, and later largely disproved, but the mere suggestion that the Chucky movie might have had a corrupting influence contributed to the noise around the wide-ranging Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill as it made its way slowly through the British Parliament. In the wake of Bulger, the bill included amendments to the Video Recordings Act, specifically adding a "harm test" in which the BBFC would be required to pay "special regard (among the other relevant factors) to any harm that may be caused to potential viewers or, through their behavior, to society by the manner in which the work deals with [such issues as] criminal behavior [and] violent behavior and incidents."

The New Brutality and the new bill were a perfect storm, and *RESERVOIR DOGS* was right in its eye. Under the new guidelines, *RESERVOIR DOGS* now needed to be reassessed in terms of its potential to "harm" impressionable viewers, especially where the ear-slicing torture scene was concerned. This proved problematic in that it wasn't an easy film to cut. The threat of violence is always present, and the film is awash with blood, but its actual onscreen mayhem is sparse: the film is, almost literally, all talk. Ironically, the BBFC itself never considered the film especially contentious. "Although strong, much of the generalized violence in the film... happens off-screen... and the strength of such 'gangster'-related violence had been preceded in films such as *GOODFELLAS*," read its first report. Its attitude never substantially changed.

But the bill took almost two years to make its way into law, only getting officially ratified as an act in November 1994. And in that interim as it awaited its VHS fate, *RESERVOIR DOGS*, almost uniquely for the UK, continued to play in cinemas. For the most part Britain doesn't do second-run; outside of London it doesn't have many small local theaters playing only classics and older cult films. And yet *RESERVOIR DOGS* kept going, sporadically, regionally. Theaters found it could always fill seats. You couldn't watch it over and over at home, so people turned out for repeat theatrical viewings. When *PULP FICTION* arrived in 1994, *RESERVOIR DOGS* received an unprecedented wide rerelease alongside it. In the 1960s *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST* had played in Parisian cinemas for six years. For Leone fan Tarantino, the UK's accidentally mirroring that situation was actually thoroughly pleasing.

Those 28 months in the UK wilderness only added to the film's reputation. The letters pages of the movie magazine *EMPIRE*, while not quite going so far as to endorse piracy, did allow a certain amount of nudge-wink debate about the best way to source a bootleg copy. Tarantino loved that too, gleefully enthusing it was "so much cooler than just having it come out on video." The UK finally got an uncut, 18-rated *RESERVOIR DOGS* on VHS in May 1995, years after most countries. That uncontroversial official release felt like the end of an era: the moment *RESERVOIR DOGS* stopped being dangerous.



