



STOLEN SHOT? Harvey Keitel in "Reservoir Dogs" (1992)

Charges of 'Theft' Still 'Dog' Tarantino

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A GROUP OF ROBBERS plans a heist that goes bad. As the police close in, the gang discovers they've been infiltrated by a police informant. A Mexican stand-off ensues.

Sounds like the basic plot of "Reservoir Dogs," director Quentin Tarantino's 1992 breakthrough film, right?

Yes, but it's the same plot as a 1987 Hong Kong flick. Coincidence? Not according to "Who Do You Think You're Fooling?," a short film that will be shown next week at the New York Underground Film Festival. "Who" makes it abundantly clear that the storyline and some key scenes from Tarantino's movie are almost direct lifts from "City on Fire," a Hong Kong action flick directed by Ringo Lam and featuring Chinese superstar Chow Yun-Fat ("The Killers").

"I thought 'Reservoir Dogs' was a total flash of brilliance," says Mike White, the 22-year-old Ferndale, Mich., resident and University of Michigan film school graduate who directed the 10-minute short. "To see it had been taken from something else, I felt kind of cheated."

White first heard about the similarities between Tarantino's and Lam's movies after reading about them in a British film magazine in late 1993. He expected the revelations to break wide in American publications, but when they didn't, he decided to make a film exploring the similarities. "I expected that as soon as I was done editing, I would hear about someone else who had done it," he says.

He hasn't, which is why the short has become something of a cause célèbre. "Who Do You Think You're Fooling?" is a clever edit job, intercutting startlingly similar sequences from the two films:

■ When Harvey Keitel in "Dogs" talks about what went wrong with the robbery, the incidents seen are from Lam's film. The fit between the two films is almost exact.

■ The Mexican stand-off among the robbers that closes "Dogs" is intercut with the same sequence from "City." And so on.

Marcy Granata of Miramax Films, distributor of "Pulp Fiction," points out that Tarantino, a former video-store clerk and noted film buff, has acknowledged the influence of a variety of movies, including "City on Fire."

"Quentin is a fan of movies, and in 'Reservoir Dogs' also paid homage to other films like 'The Taking of Pelham One Two Three,' as well as 'The Killing,'" says Granata. As to speculation that Miramax has pressured the New York Underground Film Festival to drop White's film from its schedule, Granata says that's all "a lot of sound and fury." Festival organizer Todd Phillips has denied any pressure on Miramax' part.

Tarantino, currently editing his latest movie, "Four Rooms," was not available for comment. But a spokesperson says that Tarantino "would love to see White's film. He thinks the whole thing is very funny."

White says he hasn't heard from Tarantino, and adds that "If it was me, I would probably be mad." But the fledgling film maker also wants to set the record straight.

"I don't hate [Tarantino]," says White. "I have a lot of respect for his work. I'm not trying to make him look bad, I'm just trying to point something out. I just wanted people to know. It's almost the people's right to know."