

The episode of *ER* he directed for TV even has visual references to *Reservoir Dogs*.

Rather than satires on the superficiality of contemporary culture, the films are tongue-in-cheek celebrations of it. They are not about 'surfaces'; they are designed to be, so to speak, just another surface, one product of popular culture cross-referencing others. They are, in other words, thoroughly post-modern in their whole conception. Tarantino is not criticising trivialisation, moral inversion and the rest: he is saying, this is how reality is, and isn't it funny?

It seems to me that what makes Tarantino's work nevertheless of considerable value is that by highlighting how funny it is, he does, whatever his intentions, indict it. You might watch John Travolta accidentally blow someone's head off and laugh (I did), and you might think, a la *Beavis and Butt-head*, that it's 'cool' to be like John Travolta. There is no doubt that lots of people do think so. But it isn't cool at all, in reality, and by depicting the 'surface' so vividly, Tarantino exposes it to anyone who wants to see the truth. Doubtless, many viewers of *Reservoir Dogs* find the violence merely entertaining (although in truth there is more blood than actual violence). But buried in the story is an old-fashioned Hollywood tale of 'crime doesn't pay', if you want to see it (even if that's just another movie-buff joke).

Quentin Tarantino is a writer and director of outstanding talent: his dialogue alone is breathtakingly virtuosic. (If Hollywood does start churning out movies full of assassins blithely discussing French hamburgers I think this point will be proven). If he has shaken up the lame formulas of mainstream American film, that can only be good. He is the ultimate post-modernist in film, and suffers from everything that is bad about post-modernism - flippant, soulless, form and style over content. But the end result rises above these limitations, puts the soullessness under scrutiny and exposes it. The joke has a sting in its tail whether it was meant to or not. ■



Renton checks out the worst toilet in Scotland

Endlessly innovative

Edward Ellis reviews

Trainspotting

POSSIBLY the most hyped British movie ever, *Trainspotting* is also one of the best British movies of recent years. From the team who made the unusual thriller *Shallow Grave*, and based on Irving Welsh's cult novel, the film follows a group of Edinburgh skag-heads, and in particular Renton (Ewan McGregor), who wants to kick the habit. After a couple of false starts, he moves to London and is doing okay until two of his mates turn up, one of them on the run following an armed robbery. They drag him back down, until he gets involved in a big heroin sale which, if they get caught, would mean a long jail sentence.

The film has been criticised for glamorising drugs, social irresponsibility, et cetera; I find this is a puzzling judgement. It is certainly not as grim as anti-drugs films like *Christiane F*, but it has hard to see how anyone could conclude from it that drugs (or at least heroin) are great. What it does is explain why people take heroin. *Christiane F* and its kind show how terrible heroin is, but it leave it somewhat mysterious why anyone should take it, except for stupidity. *Trainspotting* con-

trasts the partial joys of being 'out of it' with the grinding misery and pointlessness of 'normal' life. It shows how people take drugs because life is mind-numbingly dull without them, and because the experience itself can be pleasurable.

But it doesn't stop there. One character dies of AIDS — in utter squalor; another loses her baby due to neglect. The life of the addict is hardly portrayed as one of happiness and hope. When Renton gets his lucky break — the chance of really getting clean — it's because of a windfall, and even then his alternative is just as mindnumbingly dull; the difference is that now he can afford a slightly better mindnumbingly dull life.

The film is endlessly innovative, from surreal sequences (such as Renton's celebrated disappearance into the bowl of the worst toilet in Scotland, or his cold turkey hallucinations) to its use of dialogue and its camera angles. It is visually a million miles from the frequent 'British movie' syndrome of looking like an episode of *EastEnders* done on the cheap. It is also very funny.

It cost £1.5 million to make, a tiny fraction of what is spent on most Hollywood blockbusters (*Waterworld* cost \$180 million). An original, compelling movie, showing how vibrant British cinema can be.



Urma Thurman plays "gangster's