

# A heroic attempt: Post Modernism and Modernism?

Anti heroes have been defined as:

“A main character in a dramatic or narrative work who is characterized by a lack of traditional heroic qualities, such as idealism or courage”, but I think a more appropriate way of defining them may be a little subtler.

There are shades of gray to the character, which when done well, make them more real than the stylized heroes of the ‘superman’ variety. The post-modern<sup>1</sup> essayist might say that since universal ideals remain relative to the context and culture of the narrator in any story then ‘heroic’ deeds cannot be so clearly defined as to determine the ‘goodness’ or ‘rightness’ of a feat.

In the small video that is posted on line, which we also saw in class, you see examples of non-traditional heroes which illustrate their varied nature. The next movie in the series that we will see, illustrates a different point of view, and investigates the nature of the term “hero” in film in terms of context of time and place and culture.

## Postmodernism: Why is it so messed up, and how does it relate to Film Appreciation?

Many people are uncomfortable with the likes post modernist theory and the relativism it represents in a society’s social mores. It bandies about ideas which make us nervous, because of the appearance of subjectivity. There is no such thing as truth? No such thing as reality? Like the former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neil used to say all politics is local. It appears he was a political mouthpiece for Postmodernist theorists line of reasoning.

Even Einstein’s Theory of Relativity superficially slides comfortably into that postmodernist cubby hole. Science and mathematics are relative and that makes everything else by association even more relative. (Just like the word ‘relativer’ that I just made up.)

Let’s look closer at how all of this developed with a thumbnail view of history, and the process which brought us to this confusing state. This is admittedly a western focus of history, which eventually evolved into the tenets of postmodernism .

### ***Eurocentric outlook:***

*The Ancient World:*

*Rulers/Royalty ends with the fall of the Roman Empire, and the rise of the Church { in Western Societies anyway}.*

### ***circa 10th-14th Century.***

*The Middle Ages (underrated)*

*(British historians consider it beginning with the fall of Hastings in 1066 AD)*

Lasts until the Renaissance. As information once available only to the church spreads through conquest and cultural cross pollination the quest for knowledge increases.

### ***late 14th-15th C.***

***Renaissance and Humanism:*** Man becomes the measure of all things/nascent stage of scientific observations

### ***16th-18th C.***

*The Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment:* Humanity questions the church.

Reason: the ability to critically analyze information which is democratically available to an audience which is becoming broader by way of its economical availability. This gives rise to a mercantile class who question ‘authority’.

### ***19th C. to mid 20thC.***

#### ***Modernism:***

With ever increasing knowledge, humans began to believe that we live in an ordered predictable universe that acted like a well oiled machine. Action and reaction could be analyzed using scientific processes which would be able to define the essence of life at its most basic level.

With an optimistic approach to social, economic, and scientific problems, as science, technology and industry evolved, it was posited, produced and put forth by leading thinkers that since humans are all the same, they should respond to the same stimuli, and forces in a predictable and ordered way.

*late 20th C.-to present*

## ***Postmodernism:***

Shortly after WWII, responding to social and cultural breakdowns that he believes he sees developing in American society, *C. Wright Mills* begins to look into the causes of this breakdown. He sees the rapid changes in art, science and technology, as driving forces behind a rising sense of paranoia in Americans. He questions if America's collective neuroses is due to their inability to keep up with the changes around them.

Jacques Derrida, Susan Sontag, (and others) write lengthy essays developing the basis for a new perspective in social discourse. They see that *universality of mores and values* are less prominent than previously thought. They see that *mores and social interaction* are local in perspective. This theory tears at the fabric of truth and replaces it with a shifting cloud whose shape is defined by *culture and context*. Truth becomes relative to your individual perception based on socioeconomic factors, genetics, environment and a host of other elements making it impossible to pin down in a definitive and predictable way.

They, along with others, see that society's reliance on a grand narrative to tie everyone together into a cohesive collective of universal love is beginning to deteriorate.

## ***Realism***

### ***Constantin Stanislavski***

Create an inner dialogue to tap the subconscious to create conscious action.

re-living past stimuli to create an immediate response to the moment to fit the given circumstances of the play.

Stanislavski said that a play (or film) in our case should be broken into smaller and smaller units. This the creative process becomes more manageable. The units are controlled by the objectives associated with them; and processed until the essence of what caused you the reaction remains. Causation to stimuli in memory.

Stanislavski uses the metaphor of eating turkey to describe units and objectives;

"Can you do away with it in a mouthful? No; you cannot make a single mouthful of either a whole turkey or a five-act play. Therefore you must carve it, first, into large pieces... But you cannot swallow even such chunks. Therefore you must cut them into smaller pieces... That's what you must do with the bits of your part, soak them more and more in the sauce of "given circumstances."

***Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams all were literary advocates of the realist form of acting.***

## **Qualities which define Post Modernism in film.**

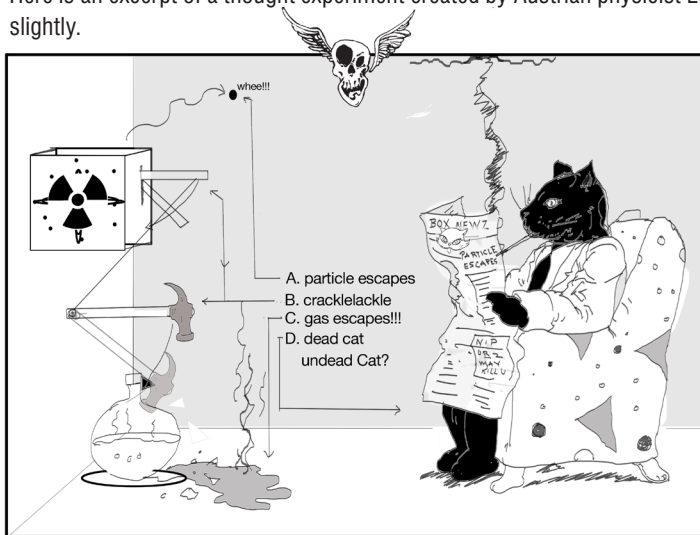
Some of us equate reality with stability. It is comfortable, if nothing else, to hope that there are some things in the universe that are immovable, inert and irrevocably changeless, but the universe does not act as we would hope. It never has been stable. Nothing is truly inert. What postmodernism explains in film as it does in other art forms, is that the stability of a system rests within the understanding of the individual that the system in which we live is always in flux. Change is inevitable and eternal.

What films do well is question our belief systems, by cutting open the belly of the grand narrative and exposing its entrails to view. What becomes apparent more often than not is that those things that you believe are true are never quite as simple as they seem.

## **Schrödinger's cat and it's possible relationship with reality shows.**

Does the act of watching change the outcomes of experiments and reality.

Here is an excerpt of a thought experiment created by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger relating to Quantum Mechanics that I modified slightly.



A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following diabolical device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): a tiny bit of radioactive material, so small that perhaps in the course of one hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none decays; if it happens, a tube discharges which is enabled through a relay, which releases a hammer which then shatters a small flask of cyanide gas.

We think we know what will happen eventually. The probable outcome is the cat will die, but scientifically speaking the cat is in a state of death and undeath. We cannot really know if it is dead without observing what has actually occurred. So we open the box to look. In the world of quantum mechanics, the very act of looking will change the outcome.

What this problem poses is in response to an article written by Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen who explained the observational repercussions of quantum physics theory. We may deduce intuitively that in the real world the cat is most probably dead, but without observation we can never know for sure. So does the act of observation kill the cat, or is the cat already dead? It is a paradox.

How this relates to reality shows has a possible parallel track, but one could validly question the result. We have an arrangement of humans in a box...a tv show... We set up an artificial construct and watch as they struggle to "survive" their situation, which usually means removal (tv death) from the program. Does the act of viewers watching the program alter the behavior of the human involved in the "experiment" or would the participants in the experiment act the same with or without an audience? Since the situation is manufactured by the producers of the show can it be classified as reality?

# **Crash (A study in Postmodernism)**

***Technical things to focus on:***

## ***Aims of Lighting***

To enhance mood, atmosphere, and drama; to illuminate the story; to separate planes; to suggest depth; to direct attention; to reveal character; to convey time of day; to enrich and, occasionally, bedazzle. **Lighting** is also used to alter and enhance mood and create an emotional 'reality'

**Jump cuts**-used as an editing device to create a transition from one **SCENE** to the next utilized by Italian Neo Realists and French New Wave directors, so they didn't burn expensive film. This requires precise, creative editing and staging techniques.

**Juxtaposition** is used within a scene to enhance meaning, create irony or develop and reinforce characters by using secondary background objects in close proximity to them during the course of a "significant" dialogue.

## ***Make up***

-alters the age, face, personality of even "reality" figures.

Visual transitions between Acts

## ***Reality?***

-life happens at a speed that is more than at 24 fps but we think of it as being more 'real' in film when we see it shot in this fashion. is this a form of indoctrination by the movie entertainment industry or is this a chemical reaction to stimuli?

## ***Another Take on Reality:***

*Paraphrasing Sergei Eisenstein Russian Film Director:*

"Photography is a system of reproduction to fix real events and elements of actuality. These reproductions, or photo-reflections, may be combined in various ways. Both as reflections and in the manner of their combination, they permit any degree of distortion—either technically unavoidable or *deliberately calculated*. The results fluctuate from exact naturalistic combinations of visual, interrelated experiences to complete alterations, arrangements unforeseen by nature, and even to abstract **formalism**, with **remnants of reality**."

Scenes are:

The place where an incident in real life or fiction occurs or occurred. according to Merriam Webster dictionary.

Acts may be

Made up of many scenes which are divided into sections, or themes which convey ideas which are integrated into the whole to make up the final proposition.

Most movies follow a three act scenario.

The Set Up (act 1) the who, what, where of the story

The Confrontation (act 2) the details of the action, The main theme and proposition that is trying to be conveyed.

The Resolution (act 3) what follows the action, a return to normalcy.

Look for devices used by the author to divide the movie into three acts.

### ***Study Questions:***

1. In the opening scene we see that it has begun to snow in LA, a part of the US where it rarely snows (at this point in history anyway...) What exactly do you think the Director is trying to say by doing this?
2. What does the director of Crash and Professor May point out as a device to move the picture from one act to another?
3. What juxtaposition was noted as a possible sign of emasculation of Brendan Fraser's character, Rick Cabot the District Attorney, when speaking to his wife Jean (Sandra Bullock)?
4. What lighting effect was used on Nola Gay's Character (playing the aid to District Attorney Rick Cabot) which symbolized the change in their 'implied' relationship and what did it mean?
5. What lighting effect was used to symbolize the relationship of the Director Cameron Thayer played by Terence Howard to the Executive Producer (Fred) played by Tony Danza, and what did it mean?
6. There were two Father Daughter relationships which paralleled each other. What were they and what were their significance to the story in terms of juxtaposition?
7. Quick/jump cuts were utilized throughout the film...point out an scene where this technique is used and how does it creatively assist the movie 'better' than a cross fade or fade to black might have?
8. Do you see any evidence of Sergei Eisenstein's approach to distort reality through lighting techniques other than those mentioned above?
9. What is the difference between judgement and opinion?
10. Is there any technique, or design motif that was used to separate one act from another?