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Short Cuts: A Postmodern Analysis

In this article, I am not going to spend any time trying to prove that I am right and that the others are wrong when assigning meaning to the word postmodernism. Having an argument about right and wrong definitions would represent a completely non-postmodern pursuit. What am I going to concentrate on instead, is to explain how and why I look at postmodernism or better to say postmodernisms. Why plural, because postmodernism cannot be really pinned down to a single definition, different people interpret it differently and they are all correct. I hope that you would find my explanation to be amusing, and possibly beneficial for your comprehension of the cinematic arts.

Let me present some basic concepts defining these three philosophical worldviews—premodern, modern, and postmodern—I primarily look at their relationship toward the truth and redemption.

The premodern view is rooted in sacred redemption; which is a philosophical belief that all epistemological questions are in the hands of some divine power. The deity or deities know the truth and therefore they control the universe and the fate of the humankind. The premodern film may, more than often, present a sacred redemptionsitic narrative within the form of one or more synergetic, linear patterns of acts. Humankind (at least in the normative, western, Judeo-Christian context) will be born fallible and mortal and, within the film, will be redeemed or not redeemed from this lot via some sort of divine grace.

Films such as: *Ten Commandments* (divine powers of Jewish God), *The Exorcist* (showcase - Satan vs. God), *Star Wars saga* (metaphor for divine powers of Christianity - father Dart Vader, son Luke Skywalker, holy spirit The Force), etc. all paradigmatically exemplify premodern philosophical worldview.

On the other hand, the modern view is rooted in secular redemption; which is a philosophical belief that humanity is the most significant thing in the anthropocentric universe. Progressive civilization will be able to find the perfection and the truth through its own advances in science and technology, without any help from divine powers. The modern film, therefore, presents a secular redemptionistic narrative that will more than likely take the form of one of more synergetic, linear patterns of acts. The vulnerable and mortal condition of humankind in an amoral universe is considered tragic and unacceptable—meriting both mega and micro redemptive pursuits. Within the modern film, humankind is more or less redeemed or left not redeemed. That is either because of its own actions or because of the existential change. Even though, much at the moment may appear to be beyond humanity's reach, and humankind in spite of its best efforts often gets overwhelmed by its lot—the modern film, anthropocentric in its essence, insists that; still, all these problems are mere temporary appearance of downfall that will be transcended and defeated in the long run. Films such as: *War Games* (humans and computer save the world from the thermo-nuclear war), *Star Trek films* (humans act as a space police), *James Bond films* (007 saves the planet repeatedly), etc, all paradigmatically exemplify modern philosophical worldview.

Postmodern view is rooted in a-redemption (agnostic) or anti-redemption (atheist) philosophical beliefs. These beliefs replace the truth with contextual truthfulness that represents the most pragmatic way of dealing with reality and the absurdness of human condition in the vast and dynamic universe. The humankind's attempts to gain control and make meaning of such complexity and contradiction are horrendously limited to a bricolage of temporarily available information (the truthfulness). Therefore, the most important signs for the premodern and modern views, such as God, perfection, and truth; are regarded by postmodernists as ever changing from existential situation to existential situation.

Within a postmodern world-view, the importance of humankind is considered cosmically insignificant. However, this situation is not regarded tragic by any means. Knowing full well the absurdness of human condition, postmodern philosophical stance uses the pragmatic approach to overcome, what would premodern and modern positions consider a BIG tragedy. Since the absolute truth is of no importance, the focus is put on small local neighborhoods within which there is a possibility of a bricolage-limited making meaning, grasping the reality inside the contextual truthfulness—not the absolute truth. Through this postmodern approach, mega-narratives for redemption, such as premodern religious narratives, and modern anthropocentric technological pursuits, are replaced with mini-narratives that allow only small redemption and consequently small tragedy. Thus, the human condition is considered comedic rather than tragic. Films such as: *Jesus of Montreal, Don Juan De Marco, To Die For, Mighty Aphrodite, Pret A Porter, All That Jazz, Galaxy Quest, etc.* all paradigmatically exemplify postmodern philosophical worldview.

These proposed categories are to serve a descriptive and quantitative function and are not intended as being either prescriptive or qualitative. There are aesthetically good and bad experiences to be found in all three categories, although it would be foolish not to acknowledge the fact that each person is most likely to embrace films that are most compatible with their own philosophic stance. The categories are synchronic and trans-historical in this case—not referring in any way to chronological history. All three forms may, or may not be, found in a give historical period, if, of course, the technology that makes them possible is available in the period of which we are speaking.

Now, let me concentrate to the paradigmatic structure of postmodern configurations—the core of confusion when in comes to defining what is and is not postmodern film. I would like to elaborate more on what those structural elements are, and how are they related to the postmodern philosophical viewpoint using a landmark of postmodern cinema—*Short Cuts* by Robert Altman.

Short Cuts is a synchronic presentation of eight short stories by Raymond Carver. This ironic mosaic of the contemporary life in Los Angeles at the end of the film gets interrupted with an earthquake that has a possibility of sending the entire southern California straight down to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. When it turns out that the earthquake is not the Big One, everybody continues on, like nothing has ever happened: "It's another great day in L.A., and all's right with the world!" cheerfully announces the gyro pilot Stormy Weathers to the early morning TV audience.

To demonstrate the paradigmatic postmodern aspect of *Short Cuts* I would like to brush its content against the characteristics most often found in postmodern aesthetic configurations. These characteristics are: discontinuity, reflexivity, collage, eclecticism, double coding, parody, pastiche, irony, contradiction and complexification, and the most important ones—big C - comedy, small t –tragedy, big A – Aredemptionism, and small r – redemption.

Let me start out by considering *Short Cuts* as it relates to discontinuity, reflexivity, and collage. For the purposes of my *Short Cuts* explication I found it expedient to combine the first three aesthetic postmodern characteristics into a single discussion.

The structure of *Short Cuts* is constructed around eight short stories that are presented in a discontinuous and fragmented narrative style. Discontinuities in postmodern configurations call to the perceiver's attention that infinitude is constructed of mega-complexity and contradiction, and the best of all rational realities constructed by humankind is only pragmatic, truthful bricolage awaiting dismantlement and deconstruction. In *Short Cuts*, like the torn pieces of a dynamic collage, you get a scrap of one story, then a scrap of another, and then a scrap of the third story, and then, perhaps, you go back and pick up the continuity of the first story and continue its narrative, just before of the introduction of the fourth narrative. The discontinuous bits are not thrown at you in a haphazard way but are ordered in carefully edited and extremely intelligent sequences that are tributes to Altman's wit and talent as a filmmaker. A perfect example of this disjunct, collage-like style is evident in the opening credits of *Short Cuts* when Altman cleverly uses the sight and the sound of a fleet of medfly spraying helicopters to

inter-cut introductory bits of all eight of his synchronic narratives about hypermodern Los Angeles.

The collage technique, that Altman uses in *Short Cuts*, is one of the most used forms in both linear and spatial acts in postmodernism. Collage permits the complexities and contradictions of our day to be juxtaposed in a form that is at the same time pluralistically open yet holistically closed.

Altman gives the viewer credit for truthful aesthetic intellect—intellect that must be active and never passive, for it is only through concentrated reflexivity hat the viewer can assemble the scraps into the meaningful and dynamic collage that Altman has created and attain full enjoyment of his films. Because postmodern configurations may be implicit and discontinuous they often require reflexive interpretations from the perceiver. No reflexivity—no connections and no realizations of a configurations' potential meaning.

In Short Cuts the viewer must be able to reflexively assemble what has gone on in a particular narrative with what is going on at the moment, then carry it al forward into the development of new pattern of acts. For example, the viewer must fit Clara the clown into her own narrative as wife of the salesman while interfacing her with the cop's narrative and that of the artist and the doctor, not to mention the moment when three Short Cuts narratives trisect at the baker shop as characters simultaneously get birthday cakes. Clara for one of her professional parties; the newscaster's wife for her son's birthday celebration; and Stormy, the helicopter pilot, to placate his disaffected wife. If the viewer fails to understand this reflexive responsibility and is expecting a smooth pattern of acts

narrative requiring less active perception, then much of the charm, wit, and genius of an Altman film will be lost.

Postmodernists often take aesthetic styles and canons from the past and having them filtered through their matrices, mix and mingle and semiotically transform them into appropriate "disharmonious harmonies" and "dissonant beauty". Postmodernism has no absolute canon related to proportion and beauty; it regards all historical styles and formal strategies as fair, imaginative game for possible solutions to contextual aesthetic problems. The foremost exemplification of eclecticism in Short Cuts in Altman's juxtaposition in a single film of almost every time type of drama one can imagine. For example: The cop and the irritable family pet story—comedy. The fishing expedition and the unwanted corpse in the creek—black comedy. Stormy, the helicopter pilot, and his use of a chain saw to even things up with his wife—farce. The death of the newscaster's son—tragedy. The suicide of the young cello player underscored by her own classical making, and highlighted by the music and the lyrics of her jazz-singing mother—melodrama. The saga of the pool cleaner couple and the make up artist couple—tragicomedy. The story of the waitress and the limousine driver (the trailer trash couple) and their environment, looked like clichés borrowed from cartoons and "B" movies of the past—pastiche.

Not only that Altman juxtaposed a pluralism of dramatic styles in *Short Cuts*, he has, also, eclectically assembled an amiable jambalaya of high, middle, and low cultures. Here is the cultural continuum for your consideration:

High Culture: The artist and the doctor

The newscaster and his wife

The young cello player

Clara the clown and her husband

The cop and his wife

The jazz singer (cellist's mother)

The chopper pilot and his wandering wife

The make up artist couple

The pool cleaner and his phone sex wife

Low Culture: The trailer trash couple

Note if you will, the realization of both the pluralism of form and pluralism of content that Altman has pre selected for his synchronic collage depicting contemporary Los Angeles.

Postmodern configurations are hybrid, mixed, and ambiguous—filled with the admixture of two and more points of view in tension. There are several examples of double coding throughout the Short Cuts. The baker/newsman's communication dilemma is such an example. The baker thinks the newsman and his wife are insensitive and irrational about his need to get information about their son's birthday cake, and they think he's not only insensitive but also positively maniacal in face of their son's recent death.

The constant double coded messages in the lyrics of the jazz singer's songs: they have meanings in the context of the song itself, but they also have meaning related to the

depressed context of her daughter's life—a context the jazz singer ironically understands in the virtuality of her music but not in the reality of her daughter's life. For example: the daughter is devastated by the death of her friend, the newscaster's son; goes to her mother for some comforting words of solace, but receives a cold uncaring response. Her mother is more interested in rehearsing her songs about compassion and sadness than living it with her daughter. As the daughter walks out to her suicide, we hear the mother crooning:

> Each day just about sunset,
> Watch you passing my door,
> It's all I can do
> Not to run to you,
> But I don't want to cry no more.

Another brilliantly acted and double coded scene is the less than successful reunion between the newscaster and his father in the hospital. The quality acting of Jack Lemon and Bruce Davidson heavily depends on their vocal intonation and physical gesture, for it is the nonverbal subtext wherein the scene's double coding and power exists.

In the verbal, overt text of the scene Jack Lemmon purportedly explains why he has been absent from his son's life for so many years, and Bruce Davidson responds to this coded text with his supposed verbal acceptance, but it is upon the double coding of the nonverbal subtext that the scene's truthful meaning rests—therein is revealed to the audience that

both persons realize the ultimate futility of any explanation for the father's absence, and both persons realize how weak and pathetic the father is and was in the past. The perceptive audience member can only wince with embarrassment for both the abandoned son and for his equally abandoned father.

In addition to being double coded interpretations of postmodern configurations are often multiple in nature, and they may synchronize high, middle, and low culture (as I explained earlier) in a collage of colliding complexities and contradictions.

In Short Cuts, there are several examples of parody and irony – that point out ridiculousness and absurdity of the human condition in the face of complexities and contradictions of contemporary life.

The opening of the Short Cuts with rainbow-colored helicopter attack on L.A.'s medfly is a direct parody of the olive-drab helicopter attack on the Viet Cong in Coppola's Apocalypse Now.

The housewife's virtual sex-talk on the phone, and her bored attitude toward real sex with her husband in and example of irony.

Stormy, the helicopter pilot's ironic celebration of his wife's birthday. All he wants the birthday cake to remind her of is "A single, big candle."

Irony of the mix-up of the fishermen's and the makeup couple's photos.

The cop's pickup scene with Clara the clown in her makeup; not the mention cop's huge birthday celebration for Stormy's wife at a restaurant that is obviously one cut beneath Denny's are the examples of parody. He talks love with the toothpick in is mouth; and he gives her an alarm clock for a gift so he won't be late for work on the nights he sneaks up with her. Now there is a romantic.

Short Cuts is filled with examples of contradiction and complexification. This point out the postmodern world view that we live in a dynamic world of pluralistic truthfulnesses and are always operating with only a bricolage of information, then in our limitation it stands to reason that our postmodern aesthetic configurations intent on presenting reality as it is—both contradictory and complex. How complex is the infinitude we live in? At almost every instant we face a universe (or if you wish the human brain that is far more complex than the universe) a the very edge of chaos over which we have only a limited, logical control, that often goes beyond our understanding.

Let me list just a few favorite examples of contradiction and complexification that appear in *Short Cuts*. The classical cello player and her jazz singing mother. The doctor looks at dozens of naked bodies daily; yet is inordinately shocked at the nudity of is wife's paintings and he "nakedness" of her models. The makeup artist, who would not dream of being a real sadist, yet loves to play at it with his made up girlfriend; and his pool cleaning friend, who is so frustrated by his wife's sex play on the phone that when confronted by real sex he attacks a girl and when rejected he sadistically kills her. These are examples of contradiction. The climatic earthquake that piles a natural catastrophe and its effects upon

the already tortured relationships of the film's characters. The discontinuous, non-linear way the eight stories move through film time and space. These are examples of complexification.

And finally let me consider the most important element of postmodern aesthetic configurations, the philosophical core of the postmodern worldview that has to be present in a film in order to be considered truly postmodern. The big C – Comedic, small t – tragic, big A -Aredemption and small r – redemption. Here it is as exemplified in *Short Cuts*.

As the camera pans skyward to catch a panoramic view of Los Angeles, the jazz singer croons the last "loaded" lines of *Short Cuts*:

> If you're lookin' for a rainbow
> You know there's gonna be rain;
> One minute you're filled with happiness,
> The next minute you're filled with pain.
>
> I'm just a prisoner of life;
> I'm just a prisoner of life.

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