

Good essay about modernity and post modernity

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Abstract

Modernity and Post modernity are the two social, political, economic and cultural phases in respectively 20th and 21st centuries. The initial phase of cinema was much influenced by phase of modernity and the later was influenced by the aspects of post modernity. The paper tries to analyse these modernity and post-modernity in cinematic context. For this comparative analysis the researcher has taken two cinematic works. The initial focus of the paper is the study of the term modernity with its elements. These elements have been analyzed in the context of Charlie Chaplin's cinematic work. The paper then discusses the term post-modernity with its elements and further these elements are discussed in the context of David Lynch's film Blue Velvet. The paper then finds some similarities in the elements of modernity and post-modernity in the film. These similar factors have handled with different approaches.

Keywords: Modernity, post modernity, Charlie Chaplin, Blue Velvet

Modernity

A radical consciousness of modernity emerged out of the romantic era. It separated itself from the specific historic ties. Modernity refers to the transition that took place in the end of nineteenth century. The period further continued till the end of the Second World War. Modernity was the revolt against tradition, which was rejected by the contemporary modern society. The democratization and consumerization of the world also took place in the phase of modernity. The invention of new technologies such as automobile, airplane, telephone, radio, telegraph assured physical comforts

to the life of human beings. It was the period of new knowledge and knowledge brings enlightenment. The knowledge developed in modern era was empirical. The modernists strongly believed that the real knowledge is that, which can be proved and which has some scientific concrete proofs. The knowledge according to them must be based on cause and effect theory. 'Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major – perhaps the major – stake in the worldwide competition for power.' 'It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labour. A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other.'

Modernity in Cinema

The major elements of modernity are industrialization, capitalism, Mass Production and social inequality. The contemporary art, literature, cinema exhibit the modernity. For example the film series of Charlie Chaplin are based on the elements of modernity. Charlie Chaplin was an auteur as he always tackled various aspects of modernity in his films. He attacked on these social issues as they were the obstacles in the establishment of the healthy society. The social issues handled by Chaplin are the social discrimination, the miserable working conditions of the workers, negative commercialization in every aspect of human life and Nazism. He also attacked the American political acts which were shown as patriotic but in reality, they were manipulated.

Charlie Chaplin's Tramp film series and the film like Modern Time are called as the parody to the contemporary modern society with all its changed values and concepts of morality. Charlie Chaplin was the icon of modernity. While commenting on the contemporary modernist ideas Charlie Chaplin says, 'It [the picture] started from an abstract idea, an impulse to say something about the way life is being standardized and channelized, men turned into machines—and the way I felt about it.' Charlie Chaplin was so effective in conveying his message that he even developed his body language and posture exactly like a machine. Through machine like body language he tried to show his audience the machine like attitude of modern man. Gunning (2004) calls his body as a machine body. ' This new machine body attuned to the rhythms of work, efficiency and speed would sweep away centuries of stultifying bodily propriety, the studied achievement in ballet of a grace that had absolutely no relevance to the everyday life of modern people.' While commenting on the body language of Chaplin, Balazs says, 'Chaplin is impractical, to be sure but he is by no means awkward. On the contrary; he is a phenomenally skilled acrobat. And for that reason his encounters with trappings of civilization unfamiliar to him become exciting, heroic duels in which he ultimately merges victorious. In this there is a certain grotesque and ironic rebellion against our machine-driven culture.'

One of the characteristics of Charlie's films was the attack on artificial societal ideologies, which made the life of the people more miserable. The miseries were presented by Charlie in a very humorous ways. In his films he tackled the issues like extra marital affair and the condition of the children born out of wedlock. In the film The Kid he has shown that the lady, who

gives birth to a child out of wedlock, is like an outcast, and it was a crime in the contemporary society. The new relationship is established between Charlie and the kid. It is the presentation of the newly defined relationships that are not blood relationships. They are established out of necessity of survival in the material world.

Chaplin's film *Modern Time* is a perfect representation of modernist ideas. The film is rather a social commentary on the contemporary modern society as a culmination of industrialization and the adverse effect of Great Depression. The film *Modern Time* is the apt portrayal of dehumanization and an anguish of the working class. Due to the capitalism, it was the labour class, who had to suffer a lot. The value of human being was crushed in the grind of mass production. The contemporary society was facing the tyranny of technology. The entire humanity is centred on machines. The contemporary society was under the influence of industrial revolution, which increases the labour in numbers and efficiency. The efficient labour further helped to mass production. The American society was impressed by the idea of “ American Dream” and the “ Pursuit of Happiness.” So many obsessions towards technology are reflected in the first scene of the film *Modern Time*. All workers are in the factory, and they are monitored by giant Orwellian monitors. The Tramp suddenly in the attack of nervous breakdown starts to pull everything that will look like a nut, such as the noses of the co workers, the buttons on the women's dresses. Though the scene is comic and makes the people laugh, a huge deep and melancholy note is hidden on the surface of the comedy. It is an attempt to reveal the condition of the emotional human beings in the mechanic world. The emotional people have no room in

practical world where machines are dominating. Everyone behaves like a machine with the absence of human emotions and feelings. That is why the Tramp is like an odd man who acts madly. It is because he/she cannot tune himself to the emotionless world. The machines and labours are the symbol of the people who have no creativity or cannot use their creativity.

Surrealism in Modern Cinema

Surrealism is also one of the elements of Modernity. Many such scenes are there in Charlie Chaplin's films, where the real men and real situations are shown in an odd manner or unbelievable way. For example, in one of the most popular scenes in *The Gold Rush*, Charlie has been caught in a cabin with his partner Big Jim. Both of them are starving. They take one of Charlie's boots in their dish and act as if it is a delicious meal they are having. Eating meal is the realistic presentation, but eating boot in the meal is surrealism. Unreality is shown through reality. One more scene is there in *The Modern Time*. In this scene, Charlie is shown as getting stuck in the machine and moving around with the wheels. Here the moving machine is reality but after getting trapped in the machine, he is still alive, it is unrealistic presentation of the reality. In many such scenes, Charlie Chaplin has used surrealism in a comic way.

Post modernity and Cinema

Modernity ended after World War II. The modernity brought complete disillusionment, and it led to the post modernity. Modernity was the personal response to the modern society. Like that, post modernity was the personal response to the postmodern society. Post modernity can be divided into two

distinct phases, late 1940s, after the WWII which last till the end of Cold War, and the second phase is from the end of Cold War to the present period. Post modernity was the satirical response to the Modernity. The Postmodernist cinema has three major characteristics.

- Pastiche of many genres and styles.
- A self-reflexivity of Techniques
- Expressionism
- Surrealism
- Nostalgic Stylization

While studying the films from postmodernity point of view, it is important to know what postmodernism is. Susan Hayward defines modernity as, “ the post-modern aesthetic relies on four tightly inter-related sets of concepts; 'parody and pastiche', 'prefabrication', 'inter-textuality', 'bricolage'.”

Pastiche of many genres and styles

David Lynch's Blue Velvet is the best example of post modernist cinema as all these major characteristics are found in Blue Velvet. It has a pastiche of many genres and styles incorporated in a single movie. Pastiche in film means the combination of different genres such as action, thrill, mystery, erotica and romance. David Lynch has incorporated many disparate elements together. The first genre of the film is that it is an action film where there is crime and thrill. It is an absurd crime behind the facade of the real crime of murder. Being a crime film, it has incorporated the blackmailing, underworld, murder, and rape. The antagonist Frank Booth is a psychopathic gangster, drug dealer and a pimp. He is shown as a don of Lumberton underworld. He kidnaps singer Dorothy's husband and son. Cutting of the ear

also connotes crime. The action movies the good guy is shown battling with bad guys. In Blue Velvet the battle is seen between Jaffrey (a good guy) and Frank (A bad guy). The film is also categorized as 'film-noir.'

The film is a psychological thriller, where Frank is shown as a disordered personality. He is a psychopath and he has a split personality. His perversity in sexual act also signifies his psychopath character. The movie also comes under the category of mystery. The mystery and suspense starts with the falling of human ear. In the end it is revealed that the ear belonged to Dorothy's husband. Frank kills his husband and cut off his ear. Within several genres the film also exhibits the romance between Jaffrey and Sandy.

Self-reflexivity

The second characteristic of the Postmodernist cinema is the self-reflexivity. A self reflexive film is the film, in which the audience get familiar with the making of the film. It is a film with self-awareness. Everything is shown as a reality. The self reflexivity is the technique which is used by David Lynch in Blue Velvet very effectively.

Expressionism is another characteristic of postmodern cinema which is found in Blue Velvet. While using expressionism in film, the director shows emotional, social, and psychological disturbances or abnormalities. Every character in the film is psychologically disturbed. Jaffrey has oedipal feeling for Dorothy. Somewhere he is trying to find a sex partner and a mother figure in Dorothy. Dorothy is also completely collapsed due to the breaking of her family. Her husband and son are kidnapped by the underworld Don Frank and she is facing loneliness and excessive emotional disturbance. She is also suffering on social level. She has lost her family and tormented by a

psycho, Frank.

Surrealism: Surrealism is associated with the major elements such as surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and non sequitur. The film, right from its beginning gives various surprises to the audience. A twist from an optimistic note to the presentation of dark and negative side of life is a surprise to the audience. The falling of human organ is also a shock and not expected by the audience. The unexpected juxtapositions are seen in the film in the sunny and bright part of the film and b-movie melodrama. The dialogues between Jaffrey and Sandy, there are a rhythm and beat which is removed in the dialogues. The post modern theme is commonly based upon the reality. But the reality is always exaggerated. Sometimes it is a fractured reality. In philosophical term, it is known as surrealism. Lynch presents the real portrayal of the dark side of the world in an exaggerated and sometimes in an absurd and perverse manner.

Postmodernist films show sex as filthy, violent, undignified, unhumanized and perverse activity. In Blue Velvet, Dorothy's sexual encounters with male are full of perverse or violent way. Jaffrey's sexual encounter with Dorothy is very weird, where she undresses him and begins to fellate him. Her sex with Frank Booth is also not the normal one. The sexual act exhibits psychological disorders or perversity in the character of Frank. He is violent sociopath and his sex is full of sadomasochism. Even Dorothy, who is his sex slave, is also used to this sadomasochism in sex. The concept of gazing, fantasy of watching the women are the male perspectives towards women. A woman is objectified in postmodernist cinema. For example, Jeffrey is excited to watch Dorothy having sex with Frank. Watching a woman than having sex with her

is more exciting for Jeffrey. The woman is a femme fatale in most of the postmodernist films. They are blackmailed by the male to have sex with them. Dorothy is used as a sex partner by Frank forcefully.

Nostalgic stylization

The film talks about nostalgia. There is an urge to go into the past life. It is one of the characteristics of Postmodernism. The technology has made man lonely. Everyone is restless and insecure because of loneliness and tries to find out the answers of their present questions in the past. Everyone is obsessed to stay in the past. The beginning of the film presents a world that goes in the past and finds the shelter there. The nostalgic feelings are carried on when the audiences see school children in particular dress. The scenes signify that the past is more comfortable. The children feel safe because they do not know the realities of life. In the same way, the American community in the past was very happy as they were unaware about the miseries of real world full of miseries. As soon as the film starts developing further the darker side of the previously pleasant life comes before the audience. The absurdist qualities of the film start becoming louder.

Modernity & Post-modernity

Human Subjectivity in Modernist and Postmodernist films:

While studying the connection between modernity and post-modernity, we can find many similar factors but taken in different manners in modernist and postmodernist films. For example the human subjectivity is the common factor handled in modernist and postmodernist films but the approach is different. The association of the two phenomena is that the modernists focus

on the fragmented views of human subjectivity, but at the same time the fragmentation is presented in a tragic manner. It is expressed as if there is an extreme loss of human beings. They are lamented. Postmodernists on the contrary focuses on the same fragmented views but not in a lamented or tragic manner. The fragmentation is taken in a light indifferent and celebrated manner. The post modernists have accepted the meaninglessness of the life and it is their way of life not to pretend. If the life is meaningless, let's enjoy this meaninglessness. Post modernist view is careless about everything. (Klages) In short the things are taken as it is by the modernists and postmodernist but there was a difference in the ways of looking at it. The approach was different.

Human Relationship

Formation of newly defined human relationship is common in modernity and post-modernity. Yet it has also some uncommon approaches. Before industrialization, the large family was prevalent in the society. There is a rapid and significant change in the family structure after industrialization. People started migrating for working in the industry and the family size reduced. The morals values and definitions of relationship also changed in course of time. The new relationship was established among human beings. The concept of individual space became popular. The family is lost and the dignified and trusted relationships of family members also became perverse. For example, Lynch in Blue Velvet shows the scattered family of Dorothy. The topic of lost families has been handled in other films of David Lynch. For example In Twin Peaks, the Lynch shows the exaggerated reality, when Laura's father raped her.

As said above, the established relationships between human beings out of some necessity is the characteristics of modernist as well as postmodernist cinema. In Charlie Chaplin, the relationship of the kid and Charlie has been established out of miserable conditions. The relationship between man and machine is also shown in which there is no emotions, only material relationship is involved. The workers also behave with each other in a mechanical manner. The relationship between Charlie and his boss in the factory is of master and servant relationship. It is exploitative relationship. The changing definition of relationship is there in modernist films but the relationship is not complex like post-modernist cinema. The relationship on the other hand is linear, and clear. There is no complexity hidden. On the other hand, the relationship has become more complex in post modernist presentation. In Blue Velvet, Jaffrey and Dorothy have shared oedipal relationship. Dorothy is a sex object for Jaffrey. They try to perform sex on each other initially, and at the same time she is a mother figure for Jaffrey. Sometimes even he is shown calling her Mummy. Frank at the same time is like a father figure for Jaffrey. The fight between Jaffrey and Frank is Frank's jealousy for his father figure who is trying to separate his mother from him. The human relationship is more complex in postmodern films.

Conclusion:

Modern age was the age of knowledge and scientific enlightenment. On the contrary, the post-modern age witnessed the consistency in technological and scientific development but the society is disillusioned by the false commitment given by the modernist society. The cinema in contemporary society has always been the mirror of the existing society. Charlie Chaplin's

sensitivity towards the contemporary social issues is revealed in a comic manner in his films. Chaplin creates a parody on the contemporary mechanical life of the individual. David Lynch on the other hand creates a dystopian society. It cannot be called parody.

The common thing I found between these two phases is that the individual everywhere is striving for his/her identity. There is no room for emotions. Everyone is living a lonely life in the crowd of people. The restlessness and deterioration of humanity are the common factors in both modernity and post-modernity. Both modernists and postmodernists think that reality can never be good but it is always harsh or bitter. Post-modernity can be said as the parasite of modernity

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