
Postmodernism and Film: Take *Matrix Trilogy* as an Example

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Abstract: This thesis is to explore postmodernism trend in American films, to discuss the relationship between postmodernist film and the social background. In part one, the author will introduce postmodernism theory in comparison to Modernism. Postmodernism carries forward the negativity of modernism and tries to deconstruct the “grand narratives” into heterogeneous, decentralized narratives that are usually full of paradox. In part two, the author will analyze *Matrix Trilogy* and discuss how postmodernist film relates to society, how the directors adopt postmodernist ideas to deconstruct Classic narratives by analyzing the film and the researching sources from postmodernism theorists.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Deconstruct; Film

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1. Introduction

Since 1960s, postmodernist thoughts have gained popularity in academic world as well as in other fields. As one of the most integrated cultural medium, film assimilates postmodernist ideas and aesthetical methods to subvert previous limitation of classic narratives. Comparing to Modernist film’s interest in presenting reality on screen as well as transferring Enlightenment values, industrialism and liberal-capitalist ideology, postmodernist film places itself in anti-essentialism discourse. In this essay, I will take *Matrix Trilogy* as an example to analyze how the films adopt postmodernist ideas to deconstruct the grand narrative and dissolves significance.

2. What is Postmodernism?

Nietzsche once said: “All concept in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition. Only that which has no history is definable.” Applying his idea to “postmodernism”, it seems that this term is hardly definable. Literally, “postmodern” connotes a concept associated with time. It consists of two affixes “Post-” and “-Modern”. Lyotard explains this term from its word formation. “Modern” originates from Latin “modo” which means “current, present”. So “postmodern” could be understood as “ after-” “-present”. It is something in the future, something ahead of our times. At the beginning, “postmodern” is near synonym of “avant-garde”.

Interestingly, the word “postmodern” itself implicates a linear view of time, “a sense of simple succession, a diachronic sequence of periods in which each one is clearly identifiable”, which is very “modern”, however, postmodernist works are usually against the modern idea of linear chronology. Jean-Francois Lyotard interprets “post-” in various ways, because he thinks the literal explanation is insufficient. He tries to reveal its connotation relating to social context and art works, and concludes that the prefix “post-” is a “procedure in ‘ana-’: a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborate an initial forgetting”. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud expounds that dream collects the materials from everyday events especially some we ignore or forget, some we try to hide or suppress, and it reorganizes them (very often disguises them) into stories that are funny or absurd. If we wake up and laugh at the most ridiculous dreams we just had, then they have to be taken note of, for there must be some hidden secrecy in them. The relationship between postmodernism and modernism is like the relationships between dream and its source from everyday life. Postmodernism has no intension to abandon or oppose tradition, rather, it is “anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis” of the suppressed, ignored part of the past, and it appears in signs which needs to be diagnosed. It could be used as a perspective, through which we rein-

interpret the past in various ways.

In the 18th century, the core of modernity is to believe in the emancipation of humanity. Since the time when “God is dead” is claimed, human beings have been free from medieval theological narrative. There are two sides in this modernity, on one hand, human liberate their desire from religious asceticism, which stimulates individual creativity and propels the rapid industrialization in the last two hundred years ^[1]. Knowledge, art, technology developed unprecedentedly. There is an optimistic belief that the innovation and accumulation have a purpose which is to keep advance in the future; that the accumulation of knowledge would liberate people from ignorance and evil; that the development of technology would erase poverty and inequality; and that the creation of art is to refuse banality. On the other, there is the pessimistic side of modernity ^[2]. The “death of God” brought the confusion in existence. People find that they are merely the product of uncertainty, standing all alone in the universe without any predetermined destiny. Science still couldn’t offer the full, reliable evidence to solve the basic ontological doubt: Where are we from? Where do we go to? This doubt achieved its culmination after the World War Two, when the nightmarish experience, with its revelation of brutal and demonic side of modernity, disintegrated the myth of progress and the conviction that knowledge brings about civilization. Since 1960s, Postmodernism has become a trend in literature, art and philosophy ^[3]. Philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard deconstruct the metanarratives of modernism. Foucault argues that Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare, humanity installs each of its violence in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination. He opposes to the modern view which regards knowledge and truth to be universally objective, or to be the means of achieving emancipation. Knowledge turns to be a power, which produces a form of domination that constitutes human subjectivity. Baudrillard describes himself as a terrorist of knowledge. He is regarded as a scholar who represents the postmodernism temperament. In his book *Simulation and Simulacrum*, he says that the world dominated by media and consumption has developed into a society organized by symbolic system, in which reality, essence and continuity are fading away ^[4]. It has become hyper-real place with free floating, meaningless symbols, where everything is simulated without origin. Hyper-reality is the highest level of simulation. Those philosophers

deconstruct the theoretical foundation of modernism, and they prove the ahistorical assumptions to be untenable. As Nietzsche says “Facts are interpretations” or Derrida says “There is nothing outside text”, postmodernism is actually a kind of hermeneutics. Mchale argues that the dominant of modernist narratives is epistemological, while the dominant of postmodernist narratives is ontological. Modernist narratives tend to raise the questions such as “what is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another and with what degree of reliability? etc.” Postmodernist narratives tend to raise the questions such as “What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? etc.” ^[5].

3. Nothing outside the System--the Postmodern Logic of *Matrix Trilogy*

The story of *Matrix1* (1999) structures around the inversion of subject/object, reality/illusion relations, which is full of postmodern metaphors. Around the year of 2199, defeated by the sentient computer, human beings are raised as body battery ^[6]. In order to explore more energy source from human’s body heat and electrical activity, the intelligent machines connect Man’s consciousness up to the network, which simulates virtual reality by transmitting programmed signals to the brain. The digitally generated experience is so “real” that Man are kept as whole-life slaves without realizing that they live in a simulated world. The notion that the connection between body and mind needs to be accomplished by a third party--electronic signals, brings us an interesting question of what is “reality” ^[7]. Modern Science points out that our senses of smell, hearing, taste, touch and vision collect all information from outside world, and those information is transmitted to the brain by various neural signals through which we obtain the sensory experience of the reality. In the film, *Matrix* creates an artificial world by manipulating those signals, and gives out order that the beefsteak is delicious, the perfume is pleasant, the girl in the red dress is sexy... *Matrix*, like the Lacanian “big other”, is the symbolic order which constructs the reality. People believe that they are being themselves, instead of being aware of having been controlled by the “non I”. The story of a mega- computer which is manipulating Man is not without any relation to today’s society ^[8]. In the age of images, we enjoy traveling across hundreds of channels, being

fed with all kinds of visual feasts, and our perception of time and space has been shredded in the fast montage. History is losing its depth, because it becomes images which are reproducing themselves through duplication and collage^[9-15]. Advertisement ostensibly enables people to enjoy the right of choosing thousands of products, but actually drives them to pursue a universally predefined happiness which could be only achieved by fulfilling the consuming needs. Commodities' symbolic value even surpasses their value in use or value in exchange. Coca Cola is not just to relieve thirst; rather, its images in the Advertisements represent numerous connotations: happy, sexy, vigorous, nostalgic, democratic, free, bawdy, fashionable... Coca Cola is no more a drink, but a black hole that absorbs all the meanings into its embracing nihilism. The Tele-communicative devices project people onto cybernetic dimensional spaces. I have a friend who owns an on-line fashion shop and lives her life in the networks all day long. She does business in the internet, orders take-away from on-line restaurants, keeps an electronic pig as her pet, and even owns a virtual garden that needs to be watered everyday. She is quite satisfied with her virtual husband who never forgets to feed her pig. "When I go to the streets after four days' staying at home, I usually have a weird feeling that what around me is illusory in the first ten minutes." Once she said. Baudrillard uses Borges' fable in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* to discuss the simulation of reality^[16-27]. "The cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly." The map is the double that mirrors the collapse of the empire, and now "this fable has now come full circle for us". "Inverting the traditional causal relation between reality and the image, the map no longer acts as a copy of a prior reality; instead it recreates the real as a copy of the map, thereby engendering the hyper real". In *Matrix I*, "the desert of the real" City Zion functions as the ideological blanket to convince Man that they still own the right of resistance, that "the one" will lead them to the ultimate freedom, until in *Matrix II* Zion proves to be another level of Virtual Reality generated by Matrix on the purpose of updating the whole system^[30-33]. Zion is a pre-programmed seduction which absorbs all the rebels so that the unstable factors could be deleted efficiently. Neo, the Protagonist, once believed as the only hope to lead human revolution, turns to be a codified program served to update the whole system.

4. Conclusions

In the end, the two sides of the coin Smith and Neo,

who have the same aim of destruction out of different motivations, end up with the same fate--Smith reproduces Neo. They finally merge into one, and bring about successful updating of the matrix, through which matrix regains its stability. Their negation of the system actually results in the integration of the opposites due to Matrix's ability of neutralization which "has the power to pour everything including what denies it, into indifference." The desperate postmodern logic of nihilism in the film is that there is nothing outside the system.

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