

Classical and Postmodern Screenwriting

White hats, black hats, and a clear and mostly good ending shortly after the second plot, that is Wild West. But times have been getting more complex and the audience bored with the simplicity of classic films. 'Postmodern' became the attribute for all kind of films that have brought relieve from this situation. But still, the term is hard to grab.

Philosophically, 'postmodern' stands for the negation of science's or a special paradigm's dominance in the generation of common sense meaning. After the Middle Ages religion lost its power in this field, which was shifted to science and justified by technological achievements. Empiricism was the only acknowledged means for the generation of meanings.

But as contradictions grew and paradigmatic systems could not coexist, constructionist epistemologies became more popular, conceiving of reality as a social and biological construct and not as a perceivable, independent field 'out there'. Many others before like Plato, Leibniz, or Kant had similar opinions, but none of them neither would nor could reason in a politically coloured postmodern manner.

Some characteristics of postmodernism are decontextualization, bricolage, constructivism, fragmental or loose structure, intertextuality, and polysemic signification.

Decontextualization is best exemplified by DocMarten's shoes. First they were popular with the working class for the functional reason of foot protection. But with the working class in the political sense of the word disappeared the functional need for many people. Then punks and skinheads began to use the shoes as signifiers, placing them into another, non-pragmatic context.

For a film related example, refer to Blair Witch's decontextualization of the amateur documentation frame or Trainspotting's situating of the heroes in non-heroic contexts, turning them into antiheroes. Decontextualization can lead to bricolage, when the new combination of signifiers becomes significant to recognise a new genre or film identity copied and pasted from formerly foreign fields of meaning.

Constructivism is the questioning of everyday common sense. The Matrix and Memento are prototypes of this characteristic, but also impressionist films from the twenties can be situated here. Closely connected to that and also best expressed in Memento is the fragmental style of postmodernism.

Discovering the 'hegemonic' role of structures like the mathematical logic or a classic plot structure, postmodernists invent a third value in addition to right or wrong and, correspondingly, cut drama and film structures into pieces to relate them in a different way. This cannot take place in an arbitrary fashion because the audience would not comprehend the film then. Pulp Fiction or Amores Perros also have their structures, although the beginnings and the ends cannot be found in the typical slots.

Intertextuality stands for the appearance of or reference to other texts in a text. Texts are understood here as everything from newspaper articles to soap operas but also characters and actors. A television family watching Dallas is such a case. Another is mentioning the name of a real-life director or actor in a film's dialogue.

Finally, postmodernism opts for an excess of meaning, using all the mentioned means. Extremely polysemic films like David Lynch's can come close to being not comprehensible at all while at the same time giving way to plenty of interpretations. A theorist discovers here the postmodern equality of all standpoints.

Nowadays we are not bored with Wild West anymore. But we can hardly say what kind of substitute we have got. The mentioned characteristics are neither excluding nor exhausting. You can, for instance, be postmodern without a fragmental screenplay. On the other hand, a certain level of intertextuality is essential to all films. It's a shame: the good old days were so simple…