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Modernism and Citizen Kane

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LAST WEEK I SUGGESTED THE IDEA OF THE “SUTURE,” A SYSTEMATIC ATTEMPT (CONSCIOUS OR NOT) TO PLACE THE AUDIENCE WITHIN THE WORLD OF THE DIEGESIS, THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF THE FILM.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FILMMAKER COMES ALONG WHO DELIBERATELY PULLS AT THE STITCHES?

Let's call him Orson Welles. He's a theater and radio personality, he knows film well as an outsider, but he either doesn't know or doesn't care about Hollywood's rules, written or otherwise. Today we'll see what happens when a movie studio gives him a completely free hand and what he will call "the best electric train set a boy ever had."

But let's step back a moment and look at the larger world of the arts, which Welles is going to bring to bear on Hollywood conventions.

MODERNITY

- Marx
- Darwin
- Freud
- Einstein

Each of these men brings to the forefront of the modern world ideas that challenge, even shatter long-held systems of thought.

- Marx offers a view of history and human behavior in which the individual doesn't form his/her own consciousness, doesn't control his/her own destiny. As the British punk band Gang of Four sings of history, "It's not made by great men." It's made by the dialectical movement of class struggle.

- Darwin posits a world in which humanity is the product of a millennia-long process of evolution, in which we are descended from other primates. In short (and to oversimplify shamefully), humanity is not the result of Divine creation but merely part of an ongoing scientific reality.

- Freud, like the two giants who preceded him, rejects the idea that we are given complete free will (or, just as tellingly, are guided by fore-ordained Divine Will), and always act on our own choices. He offers instead a vision of human behavior as driven by the subconscious, by forces at work within us of which we are not even aware. (Oh, and he links most of those forces to sex, which upsets a lot of people.)

- Einstein completes this quartet by envisioning a model of the universe in which the classic Newtonian concepts that govern our understanding of the physical universe do not apply at the subatomic level.

In short, everything you know is wrong.

And the upheavals in human values brought about by the Industrial Revolution -- and the political revolutions in America, France and across the face of Europe (despite the failure of all but those first two) – have placed us in a new, unprecedented place.

Call it “modernity.”

Inevitably, a new reality calls forth new aesthetics and in the last decades of the 19th century we see the rise of arts that respond to the growing uncertainties bred by these changes. When WWI shatters the last political certainties of the modern industrial world, the result is a radical discontinuity in thought, “modernism.”

It starts with painting. The invention of photography raises an obvious question: if a camera can take an “accurate” photo, who needs to have a painting of the same image?

Painters begin to depart from the representation of “reality” and beginning (roughly) with J.M.W. Turner, pursue new goals that frequently include drawing attention to the process of painting itself.

Look closely at the works of the painters of the Renaissance; even seen up close, the brushstrokes are barely discernible. Compare that to this work by Turner:



As the certainties of life were increasingly undermined by the new thought emanating from the likes of Marx, Darwin, et al., the other arts began to reflect the shift as well.

Consider the following timeline:

1857: *Madame Bovary* (Gustave Flaubert)

1850s-'90s: French Symbolist Poetry

1855: *Leaves of Grass* (Walt Whitman)

1860s: First major works of Fedor Dostoevsky

1870s-'80s: Major works of Friedrich Nietzsche

1889: *Time and Free Will* (Henri Bergson)

1896: *Ubu Roi* (Alfred Jarry)

1901: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud)

1903: The Special Theory of Relativity (Einstein)

1905: *Three Lives* (Gertrude Stein)

1907: *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Pablo Picasso)

1908: 2nd String Quartet (Arnold Schoenberg)

1909: Proust begins work on *Remembrance of Things Past*

1911: *The Blue Rider* (Wassily Kandinsky)

1913: The Armory Show (NYC), *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Marcel Duchamp); *Alcools* (Guillaume Apollinaire)

1914: World War I begins in August

1915: *The Metamorphosis* (Franz Kafka)

1916: Tristan Tzara and others create Dadaism

1920: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene)

1921: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Luigi Pirandello)

1922: *Ulysses* (James Joyce); *The Waste Land* (T.S. Eliot)

1924: First Surrealist Manifesto

1925: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf); *The Trial* (Franz Kafka); *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein)

Painting, theater, poetry, classical music, drama, even some European cinema – who is significantly absent from this list? American narrative film, Hollywood, perhaps the most dominant cultural force in the world by the mid-1920s.

Why?

