



ESCAPISM- A CONTEMPORARY POSTMODERN TREND AS OBSERVED IN THE MOVIE THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY

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Abstract: The paper attempts to describe escapism as a postmodern trend that materialises in the contemporary life of men, as observed in the 2013 movie *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. The twenty first century marks a world of virtual realities, surface meanings and repetitive images produced with industrial precision. Humanity is enslaved in a vicious circle of capitalist commodification in turn demanded by artificially created retroactive needs. Escapism, is thus an inevitable coping mechanism devised to channel out the postmodern angst that burns inside all of humanity. The paper discusses through the character arch of the protagonist Walter, how the contemporary postmodern dilemma of existence is dealt with through escapist tendencies that positively materialises in the form of creative imagination, travel and a passionate purpose.

Index Terms: Escapism, postmodernism, angst, travel, zone outs

The postmodernist trend in cinema can be traced back to the advent of non linear narration and bombardment of images, reflecting not the real world that the twenty-first century men find themselves in, but a virtual world that they could escape to. The fantasy films which are farthest from reality provides sharp but very fragile escapades that often crumples the moment they are back in reality. The escapism that the contemporary man seeks must be logical, seemingly achievable and above all must cater to the dying ember of hope in a hopeless world. The escapist trend that is explored in the paper as observed in the 2013 movie *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* is one such phenomenon. The movie adaptation of James Thurber's short story of the same title was scripted by Steve Conrad and directed, co-produced by and starring the multifaceted American artist Ben Stiller. The movie was a major box office hit, grossing over \$188.1 million worldwide. Walter Mitty, a negative asset manager who toils day and night at LIFE magazine, escapes his insecurities, his lack of charm or personality, the bullying of his egoistic boss and his non-happening love life, through his mental detours and dreamy zone outs, until he is pulled in to an adventure the likes of which he has only experienced in his head.

"TO SEE THE WORLD, THINGS DANGEROUS TO COME TO, TO SEE BEHIND WALLS, DRAW CLOSER, TO FIND EACH OTHER AND TO FEEL. THAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE."

These lines serve as the motto of the magazine that Walter Mitty works for, the place that sets him off to his greatest and ironically the most mindful escapist endeavour of his lifetime that underlines the major thematic concern of the movie- finding oneself, by letting oneself go. A major film critic and theorist Prince Stephen, in his book *True lies: Perpetual Realism, Digital Images, and Film theory*, talks about how life constitute of certain linkages "...that connect the represented fictionalized reality of a given film to the visual and social co-ordinates of our own 3-D world (Prince, 1996: 27, 33)". On closer analysis the motto in itself, speaks indirectly about the contemporary man isolated within his industrial walls, surrounded by images- the computer screens and billboards, mindlessly lured in to capitalist traps, running away from which only causes him being a pawn to yet another power game. The postmodern essence of celebrating the meaninglessness, the sense of lethargy of casual acceptance with no strength for resistance can be read in the actions of Walter throughout the movie. However, as opposed to the initial moments when he fell prey to the lifeless 9-5 routine, finding solace only through his mental zone outs, In the later part of the movie we find Walter freeing himself from the postmodern angst by materialising the escapist tendencies in the form of physical travel motivated by a purpose at hand.

While discussing the paradigm shift in Hollywood Cinema with the advent of postmodernism, Boggs and Pollard in their book, *A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema* notes, that the postmodern cinema in its varied sensibility "captures a range of experience, knowledge and subjectivity", that has so far been "repressed or obliterated" by modernity (Boggs and Pollard, ch.1, p.6). Boggs and Pollard clearly distinguishes the postmodern traits in current movies stating that: "What distinguishes postmodernism from earlier grand traditions, ideologies and discourses is it's self-conscious rejection of its integrated paradigms or structures of thought, its refusal to adopt "modern" forms of instrumental rationality. At the same time, postmodernism embraces a wide range of philosophical claims and conceptual departures- with far reaching political and cultural implications- that we believe have strongly influenced the trajectory of contemporary American cinema" (Preface xi).

Though it does not essentially meet all the criteria for a postmodern cinema, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* embraces the thematic concern addressed in this paper – **The postmodern angst in the twenty first century man which materialises through his escapist tendencies as observed in the life of the titular character Walter Mitty.**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Escapism as "The tendency to seek, or the practise of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured". Escapism, the tendency to mentally divert the aspects of life which are unpleasant, have become the part and parcel of the fast-paced twenty-first century life. The countless number of ASMR videos available online and the increasing market for stress relieving toys and even the commercialization of spiritual practises of meditation are various examples of the demand for distraction and escape from the norm. The contemporary life styles that revolve around various digital advancements has without doubt robbed men off some of the leisure that was readily available in the so called primitive, less developed and industrially backward era. While medical advances do help to increase the life expectancy of the people, it however shifts the focus from 'living' to merely 'staying alive'. Movies and books offer them the alternative. It opens up their zombified monotonous lives to numerous adventures and opportunities of change- a change of scenery, a change of routine, a change of lifestyle. Escapism in the contemporary world is hence a desperate call for change and movies and books act as a medium that offer this channel of escape to this postmodern angst repressed within their psyche.

Escapist trends in movies were scrutinised by the public for the longest time especially during the war years, due to the uncertainties and the fragile contentment that such leisure activities promoted, which the elite found to be harbingers of grave danger to the cultural autonomy that they possessed. George Mitchell, in "*The movies and Munsterberg*" writes strongly about the reasons for such harsh judgements:

"One factor behind this negative assessment of escapist leisure was the idea that such escapism undermined productive relations and an atmosphere of discipline and repression, seen as necessary to keep the populace hard working and orderly. The often erotic and violent content of commercial amusements seemed a threat to social control". (p.57)

However, he goes on to state that over the years the approach to said movies have changed enormously owing to their increasing popularity among the masses, as it inadvertently catered to the postmodern lucidity dormant in the modern man:

"...this ideological shift was tied to new forms of work and consumption; other contributing factors deserve note. One, people's attitude changed about sexual morality and the upper classes' role in morally policing public amusements. New ideas about sexuality gaining rapid acceptance around this time made the old moral critique of popular amusements seem time-worn and repressive" (Movies and Munsterberg, p.58).

The life of Walter Mitty opens our eyes to the myriad possibilities in this world that we have ignored in our race to survive. Nature, with its unexplored pockets of wonder, the weather with its ever-changing face, the universe itself with its hidden agenda and above all the human body and mind with its limits unknown until when put to the test of living are some of the undiluted themes discussed in the movie. In the postmodern life where one no longer delves deeper in to life's conundrums and are widely disconnected from their surroundings, escapism works retroactively as a way back in to their true selves.

On the surface the story runs nonchalantly, with the protagonist stuck to his desk as an analyst, a negative asset manager for a magazine named 'Life'. Lifelessly confined to the basement for a long seventeen years, Mr. Mitty has never done anything great or worthy of his talents. It is an unfortunate twist of events which was never anticipated or desired by him, that sends him off to a life altering adventure across continents, all in search for the negative of a photograph supposed to be the front-cover of the special anniversary edition of the magazine. The audience watch mesmerized as Walter wrestles a shark, make new and strange friendships, skateboards across the highway at great speed, goes to the site of a live volcano and finally embark on a hectic journey to the Himalayas, all in search of that one single photograph. The guy who at the beginning of the movie had nothing worthwhile to say about him, ends up having tonnes of experience, classifying him as an adrenaline junkie, an explorer and an adventurer.

Through Walter, the movie brings to the foreground the postmodern angst that burns within the city dwelling folks of today. The twenty first century man buried amidst the wide array of technology that supposedly offers him shortcuts to a seemingly simpler, easier life and livelihood however on closer observation proves to be conduits, slowly feeding them to the capitalist mechanism of consumption and use. The postmodern angst characterised by helplessness, hopelessness and alienation burns true in all of humanity, temporarily smoothed by distractions offered by the vagaries of capitalism.

Chris McDonald, in his analysis of *The Rush Rock Music and the Middle Class*, describes how the postmodern lucidity finds escape through music:

Rush provides such deep and long-lasting experiences because they "provide a vehicle for escaping into worlds of interiority, and enriches the experience of a private, even isolated, imagination" (McDonald 2009). Notice McDonald's use of the word "escape" in order to both capture the struggle of middle-class life and extend its meaning into the realm of the unknown. If Nietzsche were alive today, he might say that this "escapism" is a manifestation of a movement against a conformist society; the rejection of the Apollonian ideology of structure and regulation in favour of Dionysus.... (qtd.in Fantaccione, 5)

The contemporary man is subjugated by conformity limiting his sense of self. This results in the working-class angst which stems from the subsequent loneliness and isolation. It seems that these Apollonian values account for "some of the most urgent problems with the suburban context" (McDonald 2009). The movie centralises the postmodern angst and the various mechanisms that the contemporary man incorporates, consciously and unconsciously to alleviate it. Escapism at it's centre has always been a method to cope with the social and often psychological grievances that one is affected by.

We find out that Walter has worked in the Life magazine in the same position for almost seventeen years, always following protocol and sticking to his limits. It was only through his occasional daydreams that he escapes in to a life that he actually wants to live. Walter's occasional mental detours far exceeds that which can be called normal or healthy. The contrast between the vibrant and fantastic life that he dreams about and the dull, witless life that he actually leads stresses the importance and the inevitability of an escapist method in his life. Whether being immersed in the virtual reality offered by a video game or being engrossed in the music playing at high volume on the headphones while on a daily office commute, the contemporary man is also addicted to one or other forms of escapism just like Walter, desperately trying to separate himself from the fragmented world that he feels alienated from.

The twenty first century man is embedded in a cocoon of visual stimulants wherein he is bombarded with images from all around. It is then a fair assumption that he seeks solace in the same. In the movie we find Walter living a considerable part of his day in a virtually pleasing reality that he has built inside his head. As evident from the multiple insults that have been thrown his way by his colleagues and bosses, the escapist tendency clearly hinders with his day-to-day life. One could read the depression infesting Walter's mind, deepening it's hold as he becomes aware of the disappointment that the real world offers him as opposed to his escapist zone. This surfaces at various points of the story, like when he couldn't muster the courage to begin a conversation with his lady love. He would pathetically rather take refuge in the alternate heroic scenario with her that he had cooked up in his head.

Nasrullah Mambrol in his educational website describes that “postmodernism’s celebration of fragmentation”, has “an underlying belief in difference, a belief that unity, meaning, coherence is continually postponed”. The material manifestation of this postponement resides in ‘physical motion’. Travel, thus can be seen as a positive materialization of the postmodern escapist tendency. However, it can also be derived how the contemporary investment in travel as a method of leisure, as a choice of career (like travel vlogger, travel marketing) or even as a capitalist commodity (destination weddings, privatization of tourism) is rooted in the postmodern escapist trend.

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