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## Postmodernism in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

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### **Abstract**

*Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a film that epitomizes the various forms of deconstruction in Postmodern Philosophy. The 1975 film presents a farcical version of the Arthurian Legend of the quest for the Holy Grail, along with this are a series of metanarrative deconstructions that permeate the film. Consistent with the definition of Postmodernism presented by Jean-Francois Lyotard, the film disparages metanarratives. This is presented at a surface level in the deconstruction of Arthurian tropes, from the base concept of the chivalrous noble to the knights of the round table and King Arthur. As each of the Arthurian characters is presented with a challenge, each acts counter to the expectations set by the modern Arthurian canon. Furthermore, interspersed throughout the film are moments of addressing the audience, and interactions between those making the film and the viewer. Beyond the deconstruction of the film as a means of conveying narratives, this also supports a Heidegger's notion of Postmodernism as a means of bringing the audience to an awareness of their own essence rather than allowing them to be passive participants in a story flatly presented to them. The plethora of narrative, archetypal, and presentation deconstructions are layered throughout the film in such a way that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail's* essence is that of a Postmodern narrative.

*Keywords:* Philosophy, Philosophy and Film, Postmodernism, Monty Python, Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Holy Grail, Postmodern Deconstruction

## The First Section

In the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the principles of postmodernism play a vital role in the understanding and development of the movie. Throughout the film, there are self-referential metacommentaries that are used to undermine the film. The idea of the movie itself, the historical context it presents, and each classic archetype of Arthurian legend are undermined and subverted in some way. Postmodernism, as characterized for this paper is a broad skepticism and suspicion of reason and questioning of Enlightenment rationality leading to the deconstruction of metanarratives (Butler 2002). As the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard said in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language” (Lyotard xxiv-xxv). This incredulity plays in with the deconstruction of metanarratives present in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as the film satirizes, among other things, Arthurian Chivalry, Christianity, Logic, and Film as a form. The deconstruction of Arthurian Chivalry is one of the more apparent and central deconstructions present within *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Whereas classic Arthurian knights were idealized as honorable and self-sacrificing, the film continually mocks and undermines these traditions. In the second scene of the movie, as King Arthur trots through town, a conversation takes place off to the side:

Customer: Who’s that, then?

Cart Master: I dunno. Must be a king.

Customer: Why?

Cart Master: He hasn't got shit all over him (Chapman)

The act of characterizing nobility as merely being the individuals with the time and ability to stay clean, and not as the heroic, self-sacrificing heroes of classic medieval literature actively undermines the classic tropes of a medieval hero's tale. The narrative tropes undercut the brave and bold knight facing danger when, in the ninth scene, when faced with danger the knight, Sir Robin, runs away. Furthermore, the minstrel in his company, who would sing of the brave exploits of his lord, sings, "Brave Sir Robin ran away, bravely ran away, away. When danger reared its ugly head, he bravely turned his tail and fled," undermining the core concept of the brave knight and the heroic tales sung about his deeds. The minstrel underscores the point by singing how he "bravely turned his tail and fled" (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). No matter how the hero acts, the classic narrative bard will sing of his glorious exploits.

Furthermore, whereas the triumphant arrival of King Arthur in Camelot is often a solemn moment and a triumphant highpoint for Arthurian legends, (Lanier 18) the film turns the arrival in Camelot into a silly musical number. Once the musical number finishes undercutting the dramatic tension behind the moment, Arthur decides to not even journey to Camelot saying, "Well, on second thought, let's not go to Camelot. It is a silly place." (Monty Python and the Holy Grail) thus undercutting the metanarrative of classic Arthurian tales further as the characters acknowledge the absurdity of their situation.

As the film continues to exam Arthurian tropes using a postmodern viewpoint, it undercuts the archetypes of each chivalric hero presented. The gallant and honorable King Arthur (Lanier 6-20, 275-321) is portrayed as power hungry and demands the subservience of everyone he engages. This behavior is exemplified in Scene 3:

Dennis: What I object to is that you automatically treat me like an inferior!

Arthur: Well, I am King!

Dennis: Oh, King, eh, very nice. And how'd you get that, eh?

As the discussion between King Arthur and Dennis escalates, Arthur resorts to physical violence shaking Dennis,

Arthur: Shut up, will you? Shut up!

Dennis: Ah, now we see the violence inherent in the system (Chapman)

This scene in a variety of ways deconstructs the narratives classically presented. The first instance of this is the character of Dennis. Within classic Arthurian legends, peasants do not have names and are hardly acknowledged, (Lanier 193-232) whereas the character of Dennis is not only named and engaged but is intelligent and actively questioning the King and the political realities of their day. The nature of an intelligent and informed peasant then leads to the break in King Arthurs honorable façade as he yells at and eventually attacks Dennis for speaking up. Beyond the deconstruction of Arthurian character archetypes, this scene deconstructs one of the bases for the Arthurian narrative. As Arthur and Dennis quarrel, the King explains how he came to wield his supreme executive authority, Dennis then cuts him off saying, “Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony” (Chapman). Seeing as the legend of Excalibur is one that appears, in one form or another in retellings of Arthurian tales, this not only builds up the character of the intelligent peasant but undermines the basis for Arthur’s rules within the traditional narrative. (Lanier 3-6)

Similarly, when Lancelot receives a letter from a lonely maiden, he rushes to rescue her. On his way to rescue her, he cuts through people in the castle murdering them without a second

thought. These actions are justified within classical narrative structures, as the chivalrous knight must stop at nothing to rescue an imprisoned maiden (Monty Python and the Holy Grail).

However, when Lancelot arrives, he learns that there is no maiden to save and he was brought here by the Lord's son. Lancelot then stops to have a conversation with the father- underscoring the whole ordeal:

Father: You killed eight wedding guests in all!

Lancelot: Well, uh, you see, the thing is, I thought your son was a lady.

Father: I can understand that (Chapman).

Therefore, the character of Lancelot, the brave knight rushing to the rescue of a lovely maiden, is revealed to be a presumptuous murderer. This revelation not only subverts the actions that occurred at the beginning of the scene but also points to how the stories people tell themselves enable them to justify their actions, no matter how horrible. The metanarratives of Arthur and Lancelot allow them as characters to justify their oppressive and violent actions. This twisted use of the characters metanarrative is then undercut further as they are revealed to be untrue. The Knightly heroes are revealed merely to be cowards, hypocrites, and violent warriors willing to do whatever they can to fulfill their given ideals (Monty Python and the Holy Grail).

Another form of deconstruction undertaken within *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is that of the medium of the film itself. One way is through narrative interludes. On multiple occasions throughout the film, the narrator gets sidetracked, and the characters show awareness of being within the film. One example is when the narrator goes on a tangent talking about the ongoing conundrum of Swallows carrying coconuts, in this instance, the narrator gets called out by an angry crowd that shouts, "Get on with it!" thus breaking the fourth wall (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). This break calls attention to the medium of the film used in the presentation

of this narrative. The deconstruction does not stop with that, however, as the narrator doubles down on the commentary by saying, “Oh, anyway. On to scene twenty-four, which is a smashing scene with some lovely acting, in which Arthur discovers a vital clue, and in which there aren’t any swallows” (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). This further comment from the narrator before the story progresses has a dual purpose. Firstly, it doubles down on the fourth wall break from before and calls attention to the medium of the film. Secondly, it makes an overt reference to scene progression within the movie and the acting within that scene.

The specific importance of Scene 24 is an identifier for this idea that the movie is, in fact, a movie. This concept comes up again as King Arthur, and his Knights approach the bridge keeper, and Arthur remarks “Look! There’s the old man from scene twenty-four!” (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). Therefore, reaffirming this deconstruction of the medium of the film itself. Now, going beyond the narrator, the characters of the film itself have acknowledged the existence of the movie. It is not a side comment either as Sir Bedevere reacts to Arthur’s question by saying, “What is he doing here?” (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). acknowledging that this is an accepted state of being for the characters within the film. This acknowledgment calls into question the metanarratives presented by deconstructing the presentation along with the concepts themselves.

The deconstruction of the medium of the film is underscored most entirely in the final scene of the film. At this point as the film had progressed a form of postmodern commentary, known as temporal distortion, has been taking place (Hutcheon 3-32). Early in the movie, a character credited only as ‘historian’ was describing the plot of the movie thus far, before being killed by a Knight galloping by on a horse (Chapman). That event had two primary effects: it underscored the knightly deconstruction of King Arthur and his knights using coconuts to

simulate horse sounds rather than riding actual horses. Secondly, it begins a subplot that continues throughout the movie investigating the historian's murder (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). There is the further suggestion of temporal distortion that takes place, wherein the 'historian' was discussing the events of the film as if they had already happened, however, a knight from a present scene, not past, appears as the killer. This distortion suggests time itself is simply another construction that has to be accepted — continuing from the murder, detectives, and police that continue investigating the incident culminating in the finale to the movie. As King Arthur and an army of soldiers prepare to assault a French castle for the Holy Grail, modern-day police vans show up. As this occurs, the characters from the modern day say:

Historian's Wife: Yes, they're the ones. I'm sure.

Inspector: Come on. Anybody armed must go, too (Chapman).

It is at this point when the primary plot and subplots meet directly, and temporal distortion is used to its greatest extent. The police begin arresting the Knights, and in the process, an exchange occurs between an officer and a character credited as 'cameraman':

Officer 1: All right, sonny. That's enough. Just pack that in.

[crash]

Cameraman: Christ! (Chapman)

Having the characters be arrested by modern day police finalizes the temporal distortion by forcing characters from two assumed time periods into conflict (Hutcheon 11, 23). Further breaking the medium of the film, the final scene of the movie is closed out with an overt reference to there being a camera, and that everything that has transpired did so within a film.

Therefore, the film that subverts its tropes subverts the film itself by making the audience abruptly aware of its existence.

This principle expressed itself in other, more fleeting ways, throughout the fight with the Beast of Argh and the encounter at the Castle Anthrax. While in the Castle, Sir Galahad is propositioned by the occupants, leading to one of the leaders questioning the validity of the scene. This conversation has the leader, Dingo, look directly at the camera and address the audience saying, “Do you think this scene should have been cut? We were so worried when the boys were writing it, but now, we’re glad. It’s better than some of the previous scenes, I think” (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). Not only does this suggest someone is watching a film but furthermore, the characters have a discussion about aspects of the movie, while the movie is taking place. A similar break within the structure of the film occurs towards the end of the quest for the Holy Grail; the live action abruptly breaks as an animated chase scene where the Knights are pursued by the Beast of Argh occurs. Then the scene ends as the narrator says, “As the horrendous Black Beast lunged forward, escape for Arthur and his knights seemed hopeless when suddenly, the animator suffered a fatal heart attack... The cartoon peril was no more” (Monty Python and the Holy Grail). This statement is accompanied by another live-action scene that shows the narrator sitting at a desk before careening backward. This section is the only scene within the movie that directly shows something taking place outside of the scope of the movie itself. This scene goes beyond temporal distortion and straight on deconstructs the film by directly showing a portion of classic movie production.

All of this establishes *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as a film compliant with Heidegger’s notion of Postmodernism. The film, in its continued use of self-aware commentary, along with its narrative deconstructions makes the audience aware of what they are watching and

of the absurdity within its conventions (Heidegger 216-217). This abrupt, and intrusive awareness of self is what Heidegger described as the key to contemporary postmodernism as the rest of western metaphysics provided simple dissatisfaction (Heidegger 208-209). As commented within his collaborative work, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the modern world sans postmodern commentary provides that, “Everywhere we are underway amid beings, and yet we no longer know how it stands with being... precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence” (Heidegger 217). Therefore, when a postmodern narrative is present, the audience will experience a reversal of this with a state of acute awareness of their situation (Heidegger 217). Thus, it is so with Monty Python as the film has fourth wall breaks, self-referential humor, and temporal distortion. These are all aspects of postmodernism that enable deconstruction of the film and in the process, make the audience aware of themselves and that they are watching a movie.

While the Postmodernism as a construct has yet to be defined by a singular concrete list of aspects that are recognized universally, there are consistent ideas that are pervasive throughout accepted postmodern works. (Frankova 233-37) As noted in *The Postmodern in Contemporary British Narrative*, “Nevertheless there are several features that undoubtedly participate... Among them is the omnipresent sense of multiplicity, erosion or authority and accompanying sense of relativity and permeability of all kinds of boundaries” (Frankova 233). All of which are presented in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* through the varied deconstructions that overlap and undermine history, cultural mythos and time. This is consistent with the film as an exploration of the extent to which deconstructions can vary, overlap, and act on each other within a single medium. The deconstruction of time further serves the role presented here in establishing the erosion of authority in a universal constant. As later pointed to in the same paper, “The

postmodern rejection of linearity in narration goes hand in hand with the general sense of fragmentation” (Frankova 234). As the story is cut between various deconstructions that occur at varying points through differing scenes and times with minimal cohesion, the deconstructions within the narrative are subjected to a nonlinear fragmentation. This pulls the audience out of a passive viewing of the narrative, in a manner consistent with Heidegger’s notion of Postmodernism.

The continual overt use of deconstruction within and throughout the narrative, comprising the essence of the entire film, serves as a standalone reason for the narrative epitomizing Postmodern narratives. This understanding of Postmodern narratives in relation to traditional fictional narratives is pointed to by Mark Currie in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, “one being realistic, transparent and aiming to disguise the codes and conventions that mark its textuality while the other is overtly artificial declaring its textuality by exposing its codes and conventions”(Currie 100). This definition of a Postmodern narrative is supported within the film. The absurdist humor helps to highlight the artificiality of the narrative presented. With an overt deconstruction of each narrative and convention present within the film, the artificiality of the world is overtly expressed.

Ultimately, the postmodernism present within *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* encapsulates the film within its own metanarrative. The self-reflexivity displayed throughout the film deconstruction shows the film itself is just as artificial as the Arthurian tropes presented within it. The layered deconstructions epitomize postmodern film, as there is not just one aspect of the world that is deconstructed and challenged, but the entirety of the world. Within the film, there is a deconstruction of narrative structure within a deconstruction of Arthurian tropes, within

a deconstruction of the film medium itself. Thus, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* exemplifies postmodern commentary by being its own metanarrative and proceeding to dismantle itself.

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