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Swiss Army Man – A Reflective Essay

Course: Music Technology

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I was 15 when I first experienced 2016's most bizarre film, *Swiss Army Man* (2016, Daniels). The debut studio film by directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, starring Daniel Radcliffe and Paul Dano. *Swiss Army Man* tells the story of a lonely, depressed and suicidal man (Hank) who is lost on an island. Shortly after a suicide attempt a dead corpse (Manny) washes onto the shore, a very flatulent corpse that also slowly learns to speak throughout the film. Somewhat inspired by 'Weekend At Bernie's (1989)', the story is of a man and a dead corpse becoming friends, it's absurd, it's surreal and it's heart-warming.

The affect this film had on me is still being felt. The themes of the film have impacted the themes I like to approach in my lyricism, with topics such as masculinity, gender-politics, loneliness and mourning. Seeing a film that presented these themes so beautifully and so vibrantly really made me want to present these themes with beautiful chords and vibrant sounds. For example, here are some lyrics I wrote 6 months ago regarding the theme of masculinity and the restrictions of it:

"There's a lipstick stain on my cell bars

Solid and vertical

They are solid and vertical

Can I bend it, twist it horizontal and leave it all behind?

Past the man stood guard

Beady eyes they are, beady eyes they are

If I run fast enough I could break into a blank slate"

Every time I watch the film or listen to the original score, I feel a burst of creativity and it inspires lyricism and musical ideas. The film delves so deeply into what I can relate to and the emotional tone of the film is very bittersweet. The film uses a surreal metaphor as a vessel to tell a relatable and poignant tale.

This film is divisive due to how zany and unique it is. During the screening of the film at the Sundance Film Festival, many people walked out during the showing. Despite this, it remains my favourite piece of cinema and remains a reminder to be daring when it comes to art. The experimentation and absurdism of *Swiss Army Man* is inspiring to me. I want to create art that instigates discussion and strong opinion. It reminds me of a line I saw in 'DADA, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect' which states that "early writers on film were troubled by the cinema's origins in 'the vaudeville peep show and the circus side show,' fearing that its vulgarity made it unworthy of the honorific designation "art" and an unsuitable companion for the great high arts" (Elder, 2015, p2). Some people could not view *Swiss Army Man* as art due to its vulgarity, seeing it as juvenile rather than a high art. It's interesting that this idea of vulgar art not being appreciated is still being seen. Another thing that makes this film so unique is its lack of characters. With only three named characters, *Swiss Army Man* goes against Vladimir Propp's character theory in which he states that there are 7 character roles within a good story (The Hero, Helper, Villain, Donor, Princess, Dispatcher, False Hero). The film ignores this structure and keeps it minimal, a decision that could put some people off.

I have always favoured bittersweet entertainment because of the authenticity of it. Growing up, I always enjoyed bittersweet music. The sense of sadness mixed in with the hope, it always appealed

to me. Swiss Army Man presented that tone perfectly and the music I produce since then has been rather bittersweet in tone too.

The film does a good job at creating an emotional impact on the audience because of how culturally relevant the film is. The theme of loneliness and depression it's so relatable to so many people in a generation filled with alienation and technology that people (especially younger audiences) may have an easy time putting themselves in Hank's shoes. According to the Office for National Statistics, 5% of adults in England reported feel lonely and, according to Samaritans.org, there were 5,691 suicides in England and Wales (2019). The film showcases someone who feels lost for identity and lost for hope due to being a part of society that puts a lot of pressure on people to be a part of a certain category. You can easily see that this film tackles with the theme of masculinity in this generation and how it is affecting the youth. A lot of men, as a result of not feeling able to open up, end up becoming depressed and sometimes suicidal. This passage from the novel 'Normal People' by Sally Rooney perfectly sums up the danger of men being unable to open up:

"Their feelings were suppressed so carefully in everyday life, forced into smaller and smaller spaces, until seemingly minor events took on insane and frightening significance. It was permissible to touch each other and cry during football matches." (Rooney, 2018, p142)

According to the Office For National Statistics, three-quarters of suicides in 2019 were among men. This is a big problem for this generation of men, a generation that feel pressured to be a certain way due to societal standards. A generation of men influenced by what they see on social media and on TV, wondering why they can't be like the men on screen. Grayson Perry states in their book, 'The Descent of Man', that *"One of the fundamental ideas of gender is that we perform it."* (Perry, 2017, p45) This leads to people who are confused with what is actually them and what is performed. Charlie Hoare talks about this in his book, 'Man Down: A Guide For Men on Mental Health':

"I've spent most of my life repressing my emotions so that I can present what I think is the "correct" or "socially acceptable" version of myself to the world – regardless of how I've felt." (Hoare, 2020, p3)

Swiss Army Man asks the question: if you took the man out of society and isolated him from expectations, what happens? The answer is, he becomes himself, he feels liberated. The film takes a person away from society and puts them with a child-like character, one without judgement. By separating Hank from a society made up of categories and pressure, it results in a character who feels happier in themselves and happier being themselves. The author, Teal Swan, in her book, 'The Anatomy of Loneliness: How To Find Your Way Back To Connection (2018)', goes through a similar experience:

"I disappeared into loneliness by shamanic journeying in Central America, where I decided I would look the devil in the face. It turned out to be a little more than a year-long process. Seeing loneliness for what it was, and its anatomy, allowed me to understand its opposite. By seeing loneliness clearly, I saw connection clearly. And so, I emerged into the world again ready.." (Swan, 2018, p4)

Like Hank, Teal Swan took herself out of society and confronted her loneliness and sadness, it resulted in a deeper understanding of herself. Swiss Army Man is a journey of self-discovery during the most lonely moment of someone's life. Hank explores his gender and sexuality by being alone. Author Grayson Perry states that, *"When discussing manliness, the elephant in the room was not homophobia but perhaps a fear of appearing gay."* (Perry, 2017, p68) There is a moment in Swiss Army Man in which Hank kisses Manny in, what is, a euphoric and beautiful scene. By referencing

Grayson Perry's quote, we can see that this moment was the moment of Hank fully embracing his identity and leaving behind a concern of "masculinity". An important scene for many LGBTQ+ people as they can feel like they are represented. According to the Office For National Statistics, *"In 2018, there were an estimated 1.2 million people aged 16 years and over identifying as LGB."* This shows that a moment like this is culturally important for cinema and for those who feel underrepresented by film.

The film uses an entirely acapella soundtrack that using the actors' voices. A very original approach to scoring a film, it gives the films it's own sound that couldn't be mistaken for any other movie. The soundtrack features a vocal cover of the Jurassic Park (1993) theme by John Williams during the first moment of wonder in the film, when Hank rides Manny corpse along the sea like a jet ski. This is a very post-modern technique as it references other media that we know. The film almost makes fun of itself by letting us know that this is the wonderful and awe-inspiring moment of the film, much like the first appearance of the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park. Knowledge of this other piece of media will make us laugh at this scene, it is the first moment of levity in the film.

The film seems influenced by surrealist cinema as it uses surrealism to tell a beautiful story. Surrealist cinema was revolutionised by the German Expressionism movement of 1919-1931. This movement showed an increase in surrealist film in which it had less interest in portraying reality and more interest in creating its own reality. Swiss Army Man creates its own absurd reality that is based on emotion, much like most German Expressionist film.

Reading into this film and researching has really deepened my understanding and appreciation for Swiss Army Man. It has helped me understand why exactly it is my favourite piece of art and why it has been so influential for me. Its themes, the experimentation, its tone, its cinematography and music are the reasons it has stayed with me. Messages of loneliness, masculinity, depression, self-love and self-discovery were all themes I needed when I first watched the film. Being a teenager who struggled with mental health and identity, this film really helped me and knew exactly how that felt. It managed to show it through beauty and surrealism. It made me realise how much I wanted to create that experience for other people, whether through film, music or poetry.

This exercise has really made me understand myself as an artist, I realise why I'm drawn to art as an outlet. I realise that being able to create something completely unique and experimental is exciting. I also realise that I am drawn to being able to put my emotions into art and presenting them through beauty. Swiss Army Man started that journey as an artist and remains a reminder of why I love art and why I need it.

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