

“SCHRODINGER’S DOCUMENTARY”

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”Life wants to be messy, our job is to tidy it up”

- Mark Twain

There is a scientific law that goes something like this: The act of observing an object changes the actions of the observed object even if that object is unaware that it is being observed.

Interestingly, this law has nothing to do with documentary filmmaking. And yet, it has everything to do with it. Originally, the law was formulated as a result of experiments in quantum physics. But, it could just as easily be applied to the aforementioned documentary filmmaking process because a basic tenet of making a documentary is observation, and the subjects of the film? Nothing more than human-sized petri dishes.

There’s a thought experiment that’s used to illustrate some of the complexity of the observation law. In a laboratory, a box sits on a table. Inside the box is a cat. However, due to bunch of factors that are just way too complicated to go into here, the cat may or may not be alive. The whole live cat/dead cat thing is determined by the actions of an observer lifting the lid to the box and looking into it. Until the observer looks into the box the cat exists in, for the cat, a very uncomfortable state, neither living nor dead. Zombie-like, if you will. But without the whole eating brains thing.

To some people, science-types I suppose you’d call them, the question of cat viability is the point of this experiment. Countless books, unknown numbers of studies, thousands of man-hours have gone into solving this question, with only the vaguely unsatisfying answer of, “Could go either way” being the result.

And the similarity between scientists and doc makers and their observational tendencies? That’s too easy. As the above law states, quantum theory has shown us that there’s no such thing as non-impactful observation or, in this case, filming. Just setting up a camera in a room changes the reality of that room. The room is different, the actions of the people in the room are different. Cats may live or die in that room...who can tell? And between filming, editing, music, sound mixing, graphics and any number of other factors, even the most impartial film is an editorializing nightmare. Every choice in every situation nudges a film ever further away from ‘reality’. Anyway, this comparison is not worthy of our time.

Let’s go back to that lab with the box on the table. And the cat? For our purposes, not important. But don’t tell the cat that. Now, in this room, let’s add a documentary filmmaker to this equation. The docmaker does what docmakers do, observe. And what he sees is someone watching a box. Now, documentarians actually do two things: observe, and question. So, he ponders the scene playing out in front of him. As he observes the observer observing the box, the question that the filmmaker asks the scientist is, ” Why are *you* observing the box?”

And when the observer would begin answering by trying to explain the differences between a wave and a particle and how cats and boxes fit into that equation, the documentarian would gently rephrase the question, “No, not why are you *observing* the box. but why are you, the person, doing this? What in your past brought you to this time and place, standing in this room, looking at this box that may or may not have a living cat in it? You, who may hate cats due to an incident when you were eleven involving Fluffy, a lego castle and a bottle of Pepsi, and who secretly hopes that when the lid is lifted, the cat will be dead. Or, you who may love cats and would bring the happily living feline home and feed it and give it a scratchy post and a nice soft bed, why are *you* standing in the small room, looking at this box?”

Doc makers ask a lot of questions, it's both part of the job and who they are. So, to better understand the effect observation is having in our laboratory, let's now add a second documentary filmmaker, following the first documentary filmmaker following the scientist. And let's have him ask the first filmmaker, “Indeed. Why are *you* here, filming this person watching this box? What are you hoping to accomplish? What message are you looking to bring out into the world? Who's your audience for the cat/box movie? Cat aficionados? Box lovers? Sounds pretty limited. Do you have funding or are you doing this for the love of it? Is it a hobby? Are you prepared to be audited by the IRS for trying to make documentaries that make science exciting?”

Unfortunately, documentarians rarely ask themselves the same kind of questions they ask others. And it's not because of negligence or willful ignorance or even incompetence. Usually, doc filmmakers are too busy making films to bother with asking themselves the hard questions. Who has time for serious career introspection when a plane has to be caught? Or a visa procured in 13 hours. Or a cameraman sprung out of jail. Or any number of a hundred things that come up during the filmmaking process. A filmmaker makes films, stop asking stupid questions and hand me that duct tape! And before you know it, 15 months have gone by, hundreds of hours of footage shot, and everyone is sitting around in the edit room wondering, ummmmmmm...what's this film *really* about?

And right there, that moment, when faced with tons of wayward, seemingly random images, some brilliant, some insane, some incomprehensible, *that* is the dead cat/live cat moment that nearly every film faces. The moment when the film is both good and not good; an idea for a film and an actual film; a complete waste of years of effort and thousands of dollars and the magnificent culmination of years of hard work that was in the end, all worth it. When the film is all of these things and yet, none of them.

And as the filmmaker's metaphorical hand hovers over an equally metaphorical, but no less imposing box, that is the time when the big questions are asked: What am I doing? Why am I making this film? Who's gonna wanna see a film about ... (fill in the blank). Shouldn't I have asked these questions before I started this insane process?

At some point, the film will come out of the box and the filmmaker should try and prepare for the eventual reality of a post-box life. The new doc maker has an excuse, ignorance. Never having done this before, the problems down the road are either unknown or seem relatively easy to solve. But the doc maker who has made a film or films before, has no such excuses. A scientific study has not been conducted (all available scientists seemingly being too busy with the whole cat/box quandary), but casual observation leads us to assume that 'selective amnesia' would be the prognosis. Those who have done this before know how hard it is. They also know that even with all the problems that are going to be kicking their ass from here to Toledo, that there's nothing they like doing better. So they play a game with themselves, a fun game that's called, 'This Time It Will Be Different'. Kinda like Russian Roulette, but played with cameras instead of guns. The goal of this game is to casually start a film, pretending that they're just 'testing the waters', or maybe 'doing some research'. Soon, shoots on other continents are being planned and duct taped piggy banks are once again being crushed by well-placed blows with a Pelican case. And those hard to answer questions are conveniently forgotten. For now.

So when you're standing there, next to a box wondering if the film inside is dead or not, think about that observer standing in that lab, about to lift the lid of that other box. Remember the law of observation. We change things just by observing. We determine outcomes and finishes. Interestingly, a film is not a cat. We can decide that the film will be alive and friendly. It's a little cranky because it was in a box without food or water, but it'll get over that. You just have to want it.