The Death of the Freedom Lie in The Graduate and the Mutation of the American Dream in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

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THE DEATH OF THE FREEDOM LIE IN THE GRADUATE AND THE MUTATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

By
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THE DEATH OF THE FREEDOM LIE IN THE GRADUATE AND THE MUTATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

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The type of commentary a narrative is able to make is fully dependant on the type of narrator who is relating it. The visual elements present in a film are the true narrational forces which guide it. The presence of the camera, the use of lighting, the architecture, and the objects present in the film each have their own meaning. These elements come together to make a greater commentary than the dialogue. How these meanings interact with each other is what defines what type of narrator is present in the film. By analyzing what type of narrator is relating the story it is possible to examine what commentary the film is able to make.

Mike Nichols’ 1967 film The Graduate and Terry Gilliam’s 1998 film adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson’s 1971 literary work Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas make commentaries that act as bookends for the ideals of the youth culture during the late 1960’s. Where as The Graduate is condemning the shining emptiness of 1967 suburban California society which its narrator inhabits, Fear and Loathing’s narrator is depicting the twisted abomination which grew within the emptiness of that society during those four years. The fact that Gilliam’s adaptation came 27 years after the source material was created allows for an even more specific translation of Thompson’s message.
The Graduate is looking towards the unknown future where as Fear and Loathing is look backwards at the results. The Graduate is commenting on the current situation and looking forwards where as Fear and Loathing is looking backwards to see what has happened in the interim. It is this difference that forces the type of narration and the visual style employed by the films to be diametrically opposed.
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Genuine communion, said Demian, is a beautiful thing. But what we see flourishing everywhere is nothing of the kind. The real spirit will come from the knowledge that separate individuals have of one another and for a time it will transform the world. Herman Hesse

Introduction

The type of commentary a narrative is able to make is fully dependant on the type of narrator who is relating it. Visual elements present in a film are the true narrational forces which guide it. It is the presence of the camera, the use of lighting, the architecture, and the objects present in the film which come together to make a greater commentary than the dialogue. By analyzing these four elements it is possible to identify what type of narrator is relating the story, and following that what commentary the film is able to make.

Mike Nichols’ 1967 film The Graduate and Terry Gilliam’s 1998 film adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson’s 1971 literary work Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas make commentaries that act as bookends for the ideals of the youth culture during the late 1960’s. Where as The Graduate is condemning the shining emptiness of 1967 suburban California society which its narrator inhabits, Fear and Loathing’s narrator is depicting the twisted abomination which grew within the emptiness of that society during those four years. The fact that Gilliam’s adaptation came 27 years after the source material was created allows for an even more specific translation of Thompson’s message. The Graduate is looking towards the unknown future where as Fear and Loathing is looking backwards at the results. It is this difference that forces the types of narrator employed by the films to be diametrically opposed. The visual styles of the two films being discussed in this paper are in direct contrast to each other because they are making
opposing commentaries. The Graduate is commenting on the current situation and looking towards the unknown future where as Fear and Loathing is looking backwards to see what has happened in the interim. It is this difference that forces the type of narration and the visual style employed by the films to be diametrically opposed.

My first chapter discusses several of Roland Barthes’ visual theories in order to illustrate how each element creates meaning, and how those meanings interact with each other to create the film’s over all message. The intention of my theoretical summary is to show how the differences in visual style are actually differences in narrational style. This provides the context for each subsequent chapter’s breakdown of the fundamental differences between two film’s narrational styles.

The four narrative visual structures dealt with individually in the other chapters of this paper. This was a way to illustrate the specific messages created by those structures. Since each film is the opposite of each other in all four respects, I felt that organizing the paper in this manner would be the best way to juxtapose the structures in The Graduate to those in Fear and Loathing.

After dealing with each structure by itself in chapters two through five, my concluding chapter illustrates how the structure’s interactions define what type of narrator is present in the two films. Once the narrational styles have been fully defined it is possible to examine how the final message itself is dependant on the narrational style relating it.

The Graduate is seen from the perspective of a disenchanted college graduate named Benjamin Braddock who is unhappy with his place in the suburban California society in which he was raised. Ben was internally questioning the structure of his
society unlike the members of student activist groups such as the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM) who were openly confronting society. Mario Savio, one of the leaders of the FSM, viewed the college campus as a “place where people begin seriously to question the conditions of their existence and raise the issue of whether they can be committed to the society they have been born into.” (112) The FSM’s confrontation concerned an academic institution’s ability to exercise control over a student’s right to question suburban social institutions in a formal academic setting.

During the fall semester of 1964 the administration at the University of California at Berkeley decided to prohibit their students from protesting or supporting any off-campus political causes or organizations. This resulted in mass protests including one where almost 800 students non-violently occupied Sproul Hall, the main campus administration building. The big sit-in, as it was called, resulted in the largest mass arrest in California state history.

When Ben eventually moves to Berkeley he is asked by his landlord if he is one of those outside agitators. Though he replies no because he is not a radical Berkeley activist, he is an agitator of sorts in that he is questioning the same society the FSM and those who came after had questioned. Ben’s intention was not to confront Berkeley’s institutions, he was there because he was dissatisfied with his condition and wondered if there was more to life than the repressive social structures he saw around him. Ben is merely an object for his parents to display in their superficial world and sees that he needs to escape, rather than fight this oppression.

_Fear and Loathing_ depicts journalist Raul Duke’s twisted journey to the epicenter of the American dream four years after Ben leaves the old society behind in search of a
better one. Duke is looking back at what happened to the idealists like Ben who tried to create a better society and to the society they felt needed to be improved. The idealist’s general feeling was that the old concept of society did not work and it was up to the youth to create a new one. There were several different hippie tribes centered around San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury district and Berkeley who tried to create a new concept of how society should work. Though Ben was not a hippie, his searching and desire for something better was shared by the hippie ideal.

The Merry Pranksters, one of the most famous tribes, was a group in Berkeley centered around Ken Kesey, the author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Sometimes a Great Notion. They were, as Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead put it, “…colorful, snappy and quick – college stuff.” (Garcia 22) They called their aim “furthur”, rather than further, after the day-glo bus they drove around in. Their goal was to spread their new understanding of the universe. They started a dedicated effort to bring a new form of technologically enhanced aesthetic experience to as wide of a collection of people as possible. They wanted to spread the idea of consciousness expansion through a combination of LSD, audio visual experiments and psychedelic rock music. (Wolf)

On the other end of the academic spectrum were a collection of groups in the Haight-Ashbury district. This group of dropouts and musicians were, according to Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, considered “undesirable, [the academic crowd] didn’t really want us, nobody really wanted us hangin’ out” (Garcia 22). Their “…scene was totally anarchic, you know, we had no plans, we had nothing to prove or anything like that.” (Garcia 20) The Dead’s communal existence in a house at 710 Ashbury street was a
representation of the spirit of their scene. They wanted to have a good time and change the way they saw the world by gliding with their own glow rather than going with a forced flow. As Mountain Girl said, “everybody felt pretty much responsible for each other.” (Garcia 24)

Mountain Girl’s sentiment of people feeling responsible for one another is what came to define the hippie ideal. This concept was applied in full force by a group called the Diggers. Their idea was that of a “free city” composed of “free families” which was outlined in a manifesto entitled “The Digger Papers.” These “free families” were to consist of various political and social groups acting together for a common goal, to provide free services for localized communities in urban centers.

Though their idealistic goal never expanded beyond the Haight they managed to set up free stores in that community which gave everything away for free. Free clinics were established, and eventually a free switchboard call center designed to find free housing and other services for people living in the community. The Diggers, as well as another group called the San Francisco Mime Troupe, held free outdoor concerts and theater productions.

The pinnacle moment of the true spirit of free was Human Be-In, also referred to as a “Gathering of the Tribes.” It was held on the polo field in Gold Gate park on January 14th 1967 (Swick Perry), and was a representation of the sum total of the pure hippie consciousness. It was a free event. There were 10,000 free tabs of acid and 75 free turkeys. There were speeches and reading given by Dick Alpert, Tim Leary, Allen Ginsberg and many others. There were performances by The Grateful Dead, The Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company amongst others. It was a
“calling for marriage between the Berkeley and Haight Ashbury tribes.” (Miles 188)

According to Allen Ginsberg it was the last idealistic hippie event.” (Miles 191)

In the summer of 1967, called the Summer of Love, tens of thousands of young idealists flooded the streets of the Haight. The mass influx of people caused the quick demise of the small, self-sustaining community, and the practicality of their ideals. The free concept was overrun by “too many people to take care of and not enough people willing to do something. There were a lot of people there looking for a free ride.” (Garcia 36) By the end of 1967 the attempted new society was dead and the original residents who had created it were gone.

In December of 1969 The Rolling Stones and The Grateful Dead held a concert at Altamont Motor Speedway. The concert’s organizers hired the Hell’s Angels to provide security for the event. The scene turned ugly when the Angels killed a man named Merideth Hunter when he drew a revolver. The resulting chaos resulted in two more deaths. What occurred at Altamont would become the defining moment which symbolized the death of the free love movement.

Raoul Duke comes in after Altamont to discover that Ginsberg was right. Duke, who was one of those idealistic dreamers, shows that they never succeeded in creating their new society. They lost to the society they attempted to escape. It is the contrast between the ideals that existed at the onset of the societal experiment of sorts and its rapid collapse fueled by outside pressures from the traditional society that cause such a significant rift in the styles of narration the two films present. Ben’s perspective is that of the hopeful idealistic question, where as Duke’s is that of the forceful and destructive answer. Gilliam describes Duke as an existential character, this designation could also be
applied to Ben. Though Ben is not aware of it, his future is already determined. No matter what actions Ben takes his end is already spelled by Duke’s despair that the American dream never come true in Fear and Loathing. (Gilliam 246; 249)

The camera of The Graduate places the film’s perspective firmly in the unconscious mind of Ben. It is imperative that he is unaware of his role as a narrator for the development of the question to exist. The camera follows Ben’s perspective. It shows not what he sees, but what he feels. Ben’s visage is a visual representation of how he views himself. It does not coincide with other’s views of him, that of a lady’s man, a track star. In the commentary track on the DVD Nichols describes Ben as “a loser who is really more, which is how we all perceive ourselves as we begin. Someone who is the way we all felt starting in life starting with women starting what felt like behind a permanent 8 ball.”

The camera also depicts Ben’s feelings of being trapped and on display by, amongst other things, showing Ben looking through panes of glass. Nichols mentions the themes of glass, plastic, and water in order to compare Ben to a trapped animal in a cage. The visuals also create a great deal of discomfort by presenting scenes through strange and uncomfortable framing. The use of long takes also serves to highlight these feelings. Once Ben escapes the repressive society to which he has returned the camera begins to present things in a very different light.

As the film progresses a truly external view of Ben never emerges. The only point of view depicted besides Ben’s is that of the hotel clerk at the Taft Hotel. The shot appears in the scene where Ben is getting a hotel room for the first time he has his affair with Mrs. Robinson. However, the hotel clerk is played by the screen writer of the film
Buck Henry. Following this, the perspective, though not Ben’s, is still a visual manifestation of Ben’s consciousness. In presenting things as it does, the camera allows the visual element to become the film’s dominant commentary. As Steven Soderberg said of the film during an audio commentary in *The Graduate* DVD, “a good movie is about something, and is also about something else.”

Though Soderberg and Nichols discuss the visual messages present in *The Graduate*, the scholarly writings on the film all concern themselves with social theories related to the film or musical theories related to its soundtrack. Thomas Schatz, in an article entitled “The New Hollywood”, discusses *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* in terms of reshaping of American cinema from a financial and social standpoint. Dennis Kurzon, in his book *Discourse of Silence*, examines the film’s use of the song “Sounds of Silence” and the concept of the silent answer to a question in film, but does not go into any depth regarding visual theory and the presence of darkness in the film.

The camera in *Fear and Loathing* serves the same function as it does in *The Graduate*. In the opening sequence of *Fear and Loathing* bats are shown in the circular lens of the sun glasses worn by Raoul Duke. The glasses lens, a representation of the focus of the camera, announces that what follows is a visual representation of the inner thoughts and hallucinations of Raoul Duke. The camera’s movements mirror the drug addled hallucinatory images present in Duke’s mind. In reference to the camera’s motion Gilliam said that in *Fear and Loathing* “the world is always moving sometimes with-in shots where we go from the horizon tilted one way to then another all in one movement.” His mind-state and as such his understanding of the situation has become the mise en
scene. His commentary is related by way of his visions. Gilliam said that he wanted to “stay back so the environment is ever present.”

Given Ben’s opposing nature to the society he had returned to after college, he and the hollow inhabitants he returned to are presented in stark contrast to one another. Ben’s true nature is only revealed in an isolated darkness, away from the prying eyes of a world that sees him as a trophy to be possessed. Those happy to be empty possessions, devoid of any true humanity, are presented as such. They are only able to be depicted in the light because there is nothing inside of them.

The abomination Duke encounters is depicted using garish, vulgar, almost demonic neon. He is walking through a putrid, thousand watt hell. He is almost unable to fathom how things have become so repressive and beyond all redemption. This is the evil light that gives the hollow trophy people their preternatural glow. The radiant outer light distorts all that it illuminates within these hollow people and their demented dreams. It radiates from the greed and illusion “of the big winner somehow emerging from the predawn chaos of [the] Las Vegas casino” that their lives have become. Gilliam and his production crew “spent hours talking about colours and textures in a political context.” They used “basically German expressionist colours” like those present in the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Calagari*. (Gilliam 252, 253)

From the very beginning of *The Graduate* the architecture poses the questions asked of Ben, which are answered in stages throughout the film. At the onset of the film a sign on the airport baggage carousel asks if Ben is to become an object like the suitcase he is waiting for. It is asking if he matches Mrs. Robinson, the woman he has an affair with, or her daughter Elaine. Elaine is a person like Ben who has yet to be fully
embalmed and placed on a pedestal. By seeing a part of himself in Elaine she ultimately comes to represent Ben’s ability to save himself. Ultimately though, the sign is asking if Ben, and by extension Elaine, matches the society to which he is returning.

The many of the physical structures present in The Graduate are made of, or representations of, “plastics, water, and glass.” (Nichols) These are all components of the fish tank Ben is to be displayed in. Themes of feeling trapped and repressed are continually represented by physical structures throughout the film. Of the many architectural symbols present in the film there are two that stand out above the rest.

The first is the pool in his parent’s backyard. It exists perpetually throughout Ben’s trapped existence and represents the continuous nature of the suburban tank he has been placed in. The other significant architectural element found in is the church where the final scene of the film takes place. The church is a large, white bunker like structure made of concrete. It is within its walls that Elaine Robinson, who Ben ultimately identifies with, is to be turned into a trophy wife, devoid of all humanity, to be put on display. Ben traps the hollow congregants within its walls, leaving them there to fester and become consumed by their repressive and materialistic dream.

The architectural elements in Fear and Loathing depict what the drugged out journalist Raoul Duke, the main character of the film, discovers while in Las Vegas on a journey to find the heart of the American dream. He is essentially descending into the church to discover what has grown inside over the course of the four years between 1967 and 1971. Duke travels through large, cavernous spaces filled with a myriad of horrors, and nightmarish, claustrophobic chambers of depravity and destruction. “Architecturally, it makes no sense, in a most disturbing way. Nothing has any meaning is what Vegas
says. All that’s left, all that means anything, is winning or losing, which is America today. It’s about money and materialism.” (Gilliam 260)

Of the various structures present in the film, the hotel rooms Duke and his companion on this demented trip represent the various stages of the American dream’s degradation. He eventually finds the very heart of this mutated dream inside of the casino Bazooko Circus. It is owned by a man who wanted to join the circus as a kid, and now owns a circus of his own. To Duke this is the heart of the American dream. To enter the epicenter of the mutant dream he must pass through the gaping neon mouth of a demonic clown. He is literally entering the belly of the beast, descending into the hell which Ben escaped.

Given the object oriented nature of the society the films are dealing with, certain objects have significant narrational roles. In The Graduate Ben’s car, above all else, is both his object of salvation and oppression. It is what ties him to the materialistic suburban society that is repressing him. It also allows Mrs. Robinson to enter his life and place him even further into the fish tank. Despite this, it is also an object of transition that allows him to make his eventual escape. In Fear and Loathing the American flag is used to signify the various elements of the American dream. Its presence throughout the film accompanies Duke as he descends further into, and eventually out of, the heart of the nightmare that the American dream has become.

Since the films are looking at the beginning and end of a generation, the narrators must have opposing perspectives. Benjamin Braddock, the narrator agent in The Graduate, must be unconscious of his role so the commentary made by way of his perspective is looking forward rather than backwards. His experience is a journey of self
discovery and escape to an uncertain future. Conversely, Raoul Duke, the narrator agent in *Fear and Loathing*, must be conscious of his role in order to comment on what has already happened. Duke is relating what he has experienced in the past as a eulogy of sorts for the death of Ben’s escapist idealism.

The films use lighting, camera placement, architecture, and objects as individual narrative elements. In an interview Gilliam said “that there is a secondary language embedded in [Fear and Loathing] that people either grasp or don’t grasp.” Despite Gilliam’s statement there has only been one short section of a book that deals with the secondary language present in the film. Bob Mc Cabe, in his book *Dark Knights and Holy Fools*, attempts to reveal some of the secondary messages, but he quotes an interview with Gilliam rather than making his own comments. Beyond Dark Knights, the only other look at the underlying messages comes straight from the full transcript of the Gilliam interview quoted by Mc Cabe. Other writings on the film are merely reviews which were published upon the release of the film. This seemingly uninvestigated secondary language present in *Fear and Loathing* as well as *The Graduate* is grounded in visual and literary theory, most notably in the writings of Roland Barthes.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

According to Roland Barthes in his essay “The Photographic Message” a visual message is formed in three steps. The message is “formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception.” (Barthes 15) The visual image in and of its self is nothing more than a denoted message, one with no connotations. It would then stand to reason that “the characteristics of the literal message cannot be substantial but only relational.” (Barthes 42) This means that it is by definition inexpressible and must be accompanied by another, linguistic message. The linguistic message is formed the moment the conscious mind attempts to interpret the image it is perceiving. This message is linguistic in that the mind must use a form of language to define what is being perceived.

Language is communication by analogy in that image is language by representation. “…in the cinema itself, traumatic images are bound up with an uncertainty (an anxiety) concerning the meaning of objects or attitudes. Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signified in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques.” (Barthes 39) However, this anxiety can be applied to any emotion or intended effect.
By interpreting a visual message the mind literally transforms that image into a verbalized structure. In its transformation, the denoted visual message, now in linguistic form, develops connotations. The connotation is in reality an element of subjectivity which is created by the mind as it changes the structure of the information it is perceiving. Even more so that of the translation of meaning from one language to another, the translation from a denoted visual structure to connoted linguistic one allows for a great degree of interpretation.

What becomes apparent is that the creator of an image is able to control, to some extent, the intended messages that will be produced. “Connotation, the imposition of a second meaning on the photographic message proper, is realized at the different levels of the production of the [image].” (Barthes 20) “We saw that the code of connotation was in all likelihood neither ‘natural’ nor ‘artificial’ but historical, or if it be preferred, ‘cultural’.” (Barthes 27) Because of the need for a cultural, historical, context that a history of the time period being discussed is necessary. Without such a history, there are no cultural signifiers and as such there is no context. If there is no context, no ideals presented, then there can be no commentary made about them because they would not exist.

That an image contains heavily coded and signified iconic imagery does not change the fact that it would initially be a denoted image, which means that it is an uncoded iconic message at its inception. It is here that Barthes specifies six connotation procedures; trick effects, the pose of the subjects in the image, the specific objects present in the image, photogenia, aestheticism, and syntax. “…Framing, distance, lighting, focus, sped all effectively belong to the plane of connotation.” (Barthes 44) “Even when
the signifier seems to extend over the whole image, it is nonetheless a sign separated
from the others; the ‘composition’ carries an aesthetic signified.” (Barthes 46) It is the
creation of connotation by using certain cultural signifiers, iconic images, that allow the
creator of the image to relay an intended message.

Barthes, in his essay “The Third Meaning”, breaks down the visual message into
three layers of meaning; the informational, the symbolic, and the obtuse. He defines the
informational level as all that can be gathered from the relationships between the visual
representations present in a scene. The symbolic level deals with the signifiers present in
the visual elements. The obtuse meaning is also a symbolic level, though it is one which
is concerned the significance of the symbolic signifiers. It is only when the first two
layers interact with each other that the third meaning, in effect the overall meaning, is
established.

“The obtuse meaning, then, has something to do with disguise.” (Barthes 58) It is
disguised in that it has the obvious meaning, the informational, and then another layer,
the symbolic, hidden underneath. By being hidden “the obtuse meaning carries a certain
emotion… which simply designates… an evaluation” (Barthes 59) By carrying emotion
the obtuse meaning creates a layer that is outside language, a different structure, yet it
still manages to act as an “accent” for a scene. “The third meaning – theoretically
locatable but not describable – can now be seen as the passage from language to
significance and the founding act of the filmic itself.” (Barthes 65) It is in this creation
of emotion by way of significance that allows a film’s linguistic nature to have context,
and in turn meaning.
Barthes, in his discussion of an advertisement, talks about written text accompanying an image in a similar manner to that of the third meaning in film. While discussing the presence of accompanying text Barthes explains that “it is the image which is read first and the text from which the image is constructed becomes in the end the simple choice of one signified among others.” (Barthes 40) In the case of the cinema, it is the sum total of the various types of signified images present in the mis en scene that create the intended effect and by extension the message. Each element’s individual message must support the message of the whole. If this is the case, then the image in film is what creates the context for dialogue and in turn generates greater meaning than the spoken words. In Barthes’ estimation, it is the function of dialogue to merely advance the action.

“Connotation is only system, can only be defined in paradigmatic terms; iconic denotation is only syntagm, associates elements with out any system: the discontinuous connotators are connected, actualized, “spoke” through the syntagm of the denotation.” It stands to reason then that the images are the spoken narration of a film, and in turn those images define the type and function of a film’s narrator.

Wayne Booth, in his book The Rhetoric of Fiction, says that “we should remind ourselves that many dramatized narrators are never explicitly labeled as narrators at all. In a sense, every speech, every gesture, narrates; most works contain disguised narrators who are used to tell the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out their roles.” (Booth 152) The visuals in these films are generated by the narrators the visuals are direct representations of the commentaries being made. By being as such, they drive the narrative more so than the words spoken or the specific physical actions taken
by the characters. It is in this way that the visuals define the dramatized form the narrator takes in both of these films.

Following the idea that these dramatized narrators are indeed creating the representations of the world they inhabit, it would stand to reason that they would be classified as narrator agents. Narrator agents, as opposed to mere observers, “produce some measurable effect on the course of events.” (Booth 153, 154) “Cutting across the distinction between observers and narrator-agents of all these kinds is the distinction between self-conscious narrators, aware of themselves as writers… and narrators or observes who rarely if ever discuss their writing chores.” (Booth 155) Upon analyzing the opposing visual styles each film employs it became evident that Ben is an unconscious narrator in *The Graduate* and Duke is a fully conscious narrator in *Fear and Loathing.*
In both films the placement of the camera shows the characters’ relationship to their surroundings. This creates a further context for the linguistic message created by the visuals and allows for a greater meaning to come from the characters’ interactions. The placement of the camera in *The Graduate* serves to highlight Ben’s relationship to his tank like prison by depicting his relationship to the film’s architectural themes of glass, plastic and water. The camera also serves to add weight to Ben’s relationship to the other characters in the film. The camera never presents a candid external view of Ben. It is unable to present an external view because that view would be inherently self reflexive. This inability to look outside of himself is due to the fact that he is not relating past experiences, he is seeing things as they unfold around him.

When Ben is first introduced to the suburban tank he is immediately depicted sitting in front of a fish tank. This initial depiction immediately begins his relationship to the glass and plastic enclosure filled with water. The shot represents how Ben feels about his existence. Since Ben is the focus of the scene, when his father enters Ben’s space only the back of his father’s head is shown. His father is represented as nothing more than an intrusion.
Once Ben is downstairs at the party he is bombarded by family friends. They too are viewed as intrusions, and as such are not the focus of any shots. When he is stopped by two women during the course of the party the camera is placed behind the women who are essentially talking about him rather than to him. We do not see them, they don’t matter. The shot is about the self-consciousness created by their presence. Following his escape from this conversation he is cornered by another family friend, Mr. McGuire, who wants to talk to him about his future. Mr. McGuire says that there is a bright future in plastics.

When Mrs. Robinson is first introduced, the placement of the camera immediately establishes that Mrs. Robinson’s relationship to Ben is going to be more substantial than his relationship to the other guests at the party. She is sitting on a white chair, dressed in black, observing Ben while smoking a cigarette as Ben talks to some unseen non-person. The shot of her is an over the shoulder shot from behind Ben’s right shoulder, even though a traditional over the shoulder shot would focus on the person Ben was talking to. That being the case, the shot immediately establishes a relationship between the two characters by placing them in conversation.
Once Ben escapes to his room the camera confirms his place within the tank by depicting him staring out of a glass window down at the guests by the pool. He then sits down next to the fish tank in his room and stares empathetically at the plastic scuba man at the bottom. The camera is placed on the other side of the tank, once again confirming his place in the tank. It is at this point when Mrs. Robinson enters his room to ask him to drive her home. Before they leave she throws his keys in the tank. When he fishes the keys out he is once again placed within the tank by the camera.

Once they get to the Robinson’s house he tells her that he thinks she is trying to seduce him. As he says this, the camera depicts Ben enclosed by Mrs. Robinson’s leg. She has trapped him. As Ben attempts to leave the Robinson’s house we are presented with a shot that further solidifies the camera’s relationship to Ben. Once he gets downstairs Mrs. Robinson asks him to bring her purse upstairs. When he goes to get it he is not viewing or being viewed by anyone. He is in a totally safe place away from any form of self-consciousness, he is merely getting a purse. Because of the absence, the
only thing shown is the stairwell in the empty house that surrounds both of them independently.

When he comes upstairs with the purse she walks into the room completely naked. The camera is placed behind Mrs. Robinson and focused on Ben. Despite this, as his eyes dart down to sneak quick glances at her body, the camera keeps cutting for only a few frames at a time to her naked form. The camera has once again confirmed its place within his head.

When Mr. Robinson returns home he gives Ben friendly advice. While he is talking to Ben we get a privileged view of Mrs. Robinson, who is the real focus of the conversation. The camera zooms in on her smoking in the background. She is staring off past the camera, signaling she is not focused on the action inside the scene, but focused deep within herself, reveling in the fact that Mr. Robinson is unwittingly advising Ben to sleep with Mrs. Robinson.

When the affair is finally revealed to Elaine Ben does not actually say who the woman is. There is a close-up shot of Elaine standing in front of a half open door. Mrs. Robinson appears out of focus in the opening. Elaine, not Mrs. Robinson, is Ben’s main concern. Ben’s focus has literally and figuratively switched from Mrs. Robinson to
Elaine. Rather than tell Elaine it is her mother that he is sleeping with, the camera cuts to his eyes looking past Elaine, highlighting the presence of Mrs. Robinson. Elaine follows his glance and understands what has happened. The visual, not the dialogue, tells Elaine the woman’s name.

Once Elaine kicks Ben out of her bedroom the shot becomes a close-up of Mrs. Robinson. The camera zooms out to become an over the shoulder shot from behind Ben’s right shoulder, which was the same shoulder. Robinson over which Mrs. Robinson was introduced. Mrs. Robinson wearing black surrounded by the white walls as the camera zooms out, making her small, shriveled and destroyed.

Now that Ben has escaped his tank and come to Berkeley to marry, in effect save Elaine the shots of him looking through glass are presented only to show Elaine on the other side. He is now looking into the tank rather than out of it.
Later in the film Elaine comes up to Ben’s room at Berkeley and tells him that he shouldn’t leave until he has a plan. When she leaves the room Ben watches her walk down the street through his closed glass window. She has gone back into the tank that Ben wants to rescue her from.

After asking her to marry him Ben begins to press the issue. While in the gym during a girl’s basketball practice Ben is the only person in the entire gym of white clad trophy children wearing all black. The scene is framed within a glass backboard. Elaine is still in the tank.

During another instance of marriage talk, the camera is placed behind windows in the darkness of a classroom watching them talk on a walkway. Ben and Elaine are in the dark on the other side of the glass, but the camera is also in a darkened space. He has brought the concept of true self briefly into the tank for Elaine.

The ultimate symbolic glass as tank shot in the entire film occurs near the end of the film. As Elaine is about to be married Ben is trapped behind a huge glass wall looking down on the church congregation, those in the tank. The camera zooms into the tank from behind Ben, focusing on Elaine about to be married. He is banging on the glass and yelling her name, one last great effort to save her. She hears him, yells his
name, and they escape the church. Their final gesture to the tank world is to lock the congregation in the tank behind the glass doors of the church.

In the opening sequence of Fear and Loathing bats are shown in the circular lens of the sun glasses worn by Raoul Duke. The lens is a representation of the focus of the camera which places the narrative firmly within the thoughts and hallucinations of the character. The visual representations which reflect the narrator’s mind-state can exist within the mise en scene organically with no need for further announcement, since it is established at the onset of the film through auditory narration that we are in the confines of the narrator’s perceptions. The film quickly transitions to a flashback. The presence of the auditory narration and the use of the flashback immediately announces the conscious omnipresence of the film’s narrator.

In one scene the characters attempt to go to the casino Bazooko Circus, a bizarre and demented imitation of a circus. As the characters approach the turnstile Duke wobbles along bending and contorting as he moves, dizzy from the ether he has used. The camera follows this motion using distorting lenses and flowing, but unstable movements. It moves in and out with deliberate movements and zooms, putting the frame off balance. These elements combined with the vulgar, garish, high contrast lighting and a huge distorted set, come together in a purely German expressionistic way.
The feeling of an ether binge in a nightmarish place, the fear and wonder, is communicated perfectly.

In the scene where Gonzo and Duke confront the *Life Magazine* crew in an elevator, the camera employs the use of certain point of view shots combined with candid views provided by the conscious narrator’s view. This serves to highlight the tension between the characters and show their different perspectives. The scene opens with what we assume is a point of view shot from the perspective of Duke and Dr. Gonzo who are entering the elevator. The frame is askew leaning left, but as the camera pulls back the angle shifts leaning right and our characters enter, erasing the notion that it was actually their view and not that of the narrator. Once the camera has pulled back, it follows our characters into the elevator, shifting the perspective back, leaning left. As they enter the closed space we see their distorted reflections on the walls of the elevator’s entranceway. This suggests that their unstable and fractured consciousnesses have not changed following the extreme violence of the prior scene which takes place in their hotel room. The reflections also foreshadow the twisted nature of the events to come.

The door then closes in the camera’s face, isolating the action which will take place in the elevator. Once inside the elevator the camera switches between its own
perspective and that of the three characters who are the main focus of what is to follow.

We are mostly seeing the events from the perspective of Gonzo and the female reporter who are the main focus of the scene. Gonzo is shot at a distance from the reporter’s view, low, menacing and powerful. The space between them is much larger than the distance we see while looking at the reporter through Gonzo’s eyes. To him she is smiling and close, which belies the knowing sarcasm that underlies her advances.

We see the two of them from Duke’s perspective. She is goading Gonzo on as an unstable rage builds slowly in the beast of a man. It is at this point where the camera takes a moment to candidly show Duke’s apathetic awareness of what is to come. He already knows that the scene is going to take a violent turn. He looks up and takes a long knowing drag from his cigarette. Once Gonzo pulls out a knife to threaten the photographer Lacerda, we get another candid view of Duke. This time he sighs, as if to say to his audience here we go again.

The long take in the bar scene with the lizards uses both deep focus and wide angle lenses to achieve the effect of the audience being engulfed by the scene in front of them. The shot begins with the camera pulling back
from a view of a torso carrying drinks moving off screen as Dr. Gonzo and Duke move into the shot. The camera moves along with Duke as we see him encounter his reflection in a mirrored column as he passes by. He peers into the mirror with an expression of confusion on his face as he does not understand how he can be encountering a vision of himself. He tries to escape his doppelganger, sliding around the column.

As this is happening we can see just in the background an older man watching Duke behave in this manner. We can also see the other bar patrons sitting at their tables not yet aware of Duke’s presence. The camera is allowing us to take in not only what would be the main focus of our attention, but all that is occurring at the moment.

The camera then moves away from Duke, behind the column, to focus on a couple sitting at a table. As the man begins to light the woman’s cigarette Duke walks into frame to steal a light for his own broken smoke. He then runs into a waitress as Dr. Gonzo comes to lead him to the bar.

Once Duke is led away from the table he once again runs into a mirrored column and becomes confused. Much like the last time this occurred, the camera does not follow him directly. Instead of following Duke, the camera moves past the column to place a showgirl in the foreground, Duke in the middle, and then other showgirls in the background. These layers come together as the girls in the back hit Duke with a feather
boa. This contact breaks Dukes oblivion, causing a cut to his face as he peers out towards the bar. He is put in the perspective that we as an audience were placed in by the use of a long take.

The fluidity of the camera’s motion captures the flow of Duke’s movement as he makes his way through his environment. At the same time it allows the audience to see the entirety of the expressive movements of the characters in the bar. The narrator is guiding us as he looks back on his situation from an external view. We are not following the impressions of the characters as they interact with their surroundings, but an self reflexive interpretation from the narrator’s point of view. Duke’s conscious and self reflexive control over the camera’s placement and focus in *Fear and Loathing* is in direct opposition to the unconscious and fully internalized control Ben exerts over the camera in *The Graduate*. 
Chapter 3: Lighting

The lighting in both films is used to provide a greater insight into the true nature of the things it illuminates. In *The Graduate* the lighting is used to highlight the stark contrast between Ben as an individual and Ben as an object. The objects, the trophy people, are only comfortable when presented in bright shining light. Ben is only comfortable in darkness because it is in the dark that he is unable to presented as an object, he is not on display. When he is an object he is not himself. It is only when he is obscured by darkness and is not an object that he is truly himself. The other characters in the film who are themselves in the light are comfortable being objects. It is their true nature to be objects. This contrast begins the moment he returns home to the suburban fish tank.

In the first shot of Ben at home during his graduation party he is shot in a close up in front of a fish tank with half of his face in the light and the other half in the dark. Ben is immediately presented as conflicted with regards to his status as an object. The very presence of this conflict reveals that he is not looking from an external vantage point. There is no reflexivity because he is not sure what will happen to him. He is not looking back at past events, he is relating what is currently happening to him.
The other characters in the film have clearly defined positions with regards to their object status. When Mrs. Robinson is first introduced, she is concealing her true nature within the confines of a black cocktail dress. She uses the darkness to her advantage. She, the trophy wife, is concealing her true identity which is that of a scheming adulteress. The darkness serves her intentions well once Ben drives her home from the graduation party.

When he drops Mrs. Robinson off at home she says “I feel funny coming into a dark house.” (Nichols) This is a lie intended to get Ben to come inside the house. Once the front door is opened, it is only half opened with bright light coming out of the open half. She is standing in the light, now revealing her true intention which has nothing to do with the dark house. He is standing obscured by darkness in front of the closed part of the door. He is able to be himself for a moment and desperately, yet unsuccessfully, try to escape.

Once inside the house they proceed into a glass enclosed room with a bar. As their conversation progresses we come to realize her intention is to seduce him. She is revealing her identity as an adulterers so she is brightly lit. On the other hand, Ben is slowly walking into the darkness. Ben, now in the darkness, sees what the light is
revealing about Mrs. Robinson and he is able to reveal his understanding of the situation, that she is trying to do this to him. He is himself for that brief moment.

When Ben tells her what he thinks of the situation, Mrs. Robinson, who is still wearing a black dress and now obscured by darkness herself, lies to him and tells him she is not trying to seduce him. Upon hearing the lie Ben is suddenly exposed by light. He has been deceived and has become a sexual possession, a symbol of Mrs. Robinson’s conquest. Now she walks into the light and tells him to come upstairs.

She slowly seduces Ben, initially asking him to unzip her black dress. She tells him that there is no ulterior motive. Her disguise is literally being removed as she removes her dress and begins to reveal her true motive. It is only once she standing naked in front of Ben that she tells him that she wants to have an affair with him.

When Mr. Robinson comes home he is wearing a white sweater, showing that he too is a trophy person. When Ben leaves the house Mr. Robinson is standing in front of the darkened door where Ben stood, but clearly defined in his white sweater. Mrs. Robinson is standing in the light with a black dress, a direct contrast to her husband. Her black dress allows her to hide what had happened earlier, but the light that surrounds her makes it appear as though she has nothing to hide.
When Ben arrives at the Taft Hotel to begin his affair with Mrs. Robinson he is immediately confronted by the trophy world he is about to enter. He accidentally goes into the Singelman party, an event where the family who are greeting the entering guests are all wearing white. Their son, Jeffery Singelman, is displayed for the guests entering the party wearing a white suit.

On the way to the hotel room Ben has gotten for himself and Mrs. Robinson he walks down a hallway which is filled with pools of darkness and light. This lighting scheme represents the conflicted nature of his personality walking through his consciousness with the question of who he is bathed in light and darkness on the walls. He is still not sure what part of himself he is heading towards. Upon entering, he finds that the room is half in shadow. At first he turns on all the lights which makes him uncomfortable. He then turns them off and turns on the bathroom light. First he closes then he opens the bathroom door. Once again he is conflicted, unsure which identity is more comfortable he is asking himself who he should be.
When Mrs. Robinson enters the room she turns on the lights. Not being comfortable as a trophy, he immediately turns them off. When she challenges him by calling him inadequate, he turns off the lights to establish what he believes to be his dominance. It solidifies his current identity as an adulterer.

Further into their affair he decides that they should get to know each other and have a conversation. Since Mrs. Robinson can only reveal herself in light and Ben can only do so in the dark, the lights are turned on and off throughout the scene. She does not want to talk, but when forced to pick a topic of discussion she chooses art. In the dark she lies and claims not to know anything about the subject. As the conversation progresses Ben makes her say what she studied in college.

Mrs. Robinson turns on the lights, and staring off into her distant past with a pained expression of loss says that she studied art. She then reveals how Elaine’s conception caused her to lose her identity and become a hollowed out trophy wife. In the same scene he reveals that the only thing he has to look forward to every day is meeting her in the hotel. He reveals this standing in the dark facing away from the camera.
Ben finally finds something more substantial to look forward to after he goes on a date with Elaine Robinson. In the darkness, when he drops Elaine off at her house after their first date, he tells her that she is the first person he can stand to be with in a long time and that his life is a waste. It is at this moment that he realizes and reveals how he feels about the hollow existence of being the trophy of a trophy person.

Ben’s association with Mrs. Robinson must be completely destroyed in order for him to begin his transition to Elaine Robinson. Upon revealing the affair to Elaine Mrs. Robinson’s lonely hollow existence is fully exposed. She is depicted as small, isolated, and soaking wet. Wearing black, surrounded by the shining white walls of her trophy coating all she wants to do is feel comfortable in the darkness. She wants to hide in the dark, to be a person, but is totally exposed in the light with no where to go and no humanity left within her. Meanwhile, Elaine leaves for Berkeley with no intention of seeing Ben again.
When we are reintroduced to Elaine she is presented in the light. She is shown walking through Berkeley’s college campus. Ben finally has an encounter with her on a bus while she is heading to the zoo to meet Carl Smith, he soon to be fiancé. Upon arriving at zoo she confronts Ben as to why he is in Berkeley. He, in the bright light, lies and says he is just there to sit in on classes and look around even though his true intention is to marry her. When blonde haired, shining trophy child Carl Smith appears Elaine lies to him and says Ben is just some guy who rode with her on the bus.

Elaine is not shown as a person until later in the film when she comes to Ben's darkened room. Initially she tells him to leave her alone and Ben says that he will leave Berkeley. Now that she is in the dark she is able to reconnect with the humanity she felt on the date with Ben earlier in the film. Since she has entered her own world of the self she says she doesn’t want Ben to leave until he has a plan.

Later she comes to his dark room and asks him to kiss her. She is testing her self to figure out what she wants. Ben asks her to marry him and she, still not sure what world she wants to inhabit, says she might marry him. She still hasn’t decided between the light world of the trophy and the dark world of the self. As the film progresses he keeps asking her to marry him. He waits in the dark by her class after walking her there to wait for her to come out.
When Ben returns to his room excited by the possibility of marrying Elaine Mr. Robinson is there, waiting for him in the mostly darkened room. When Ben enters Mr. Robinson says “I can see in the dark you know” (Nichols) What he is really saying is that he can see Ben’s true identity. He knows that Ben does not respect him and as he leaves he calls Ben scum, a degenerate. From the perspective of what Mr. Robinson represents Ben has fallen from grace and by being a flawed human is no longer acceptable in their world.

Fear and Loathing uses color as a form of expression as well. By using different colors and brightness to convey certain moods, times, and locations, the film takes on an expressionistic tone. In its depravity, the vile nature of the self which grew within the world Ben had left behind is exposed. The garish neon glow of the hotel signs that flash by Duke as he drives around the city are used to depict the beacon of possibility and prosperity that is the trophy world. These buildings are the epitome of the that existence. The lights take on a much more ominous tone within the buildings themselves, exposing the true nature of what the structures represent. The overall lighting scheme stays consistent because Duke is relating a fully formed impression of what he is consciously representing.
As Duke and Gonzo walk to a theater in the casino where the singer Debbie Reynolds, a shining star, is performing her act, the scene is lit with a hellish red light. The sign with her face on it is bright, white, and exaggerated. It shows who is the main focus of the space that they are inhabiting. While entering the hotel Flamingo’s casino the colors in the frame have a dark eerie tone. This darkness serves to highlight certain pieces of the set such as the plastic palm trees. Plastic is one of the major building blocks of the world presented in *The Graduate*. The presence of continuity in the use of lighting in *Fear and Loathing* is in direct contrast to the evolving nature of the way Ben was lit in *The Graduate*. Duke’s understanding has already been solidified before hand, where as Ben is learning as the narrative progresses.
The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization. Frank Lloyd Wright

Chapter 4: Architecture

As The Graduate opens we see Ben passing smoothly through the airport on a moving walkway, essentially a conveyor belt. Upon arriving at the Los Angeles airport Ben’s luggage passes through the baggage claim carousel. As the bag passes into frame moving smoothly on another conveyor belt, a sign on the carousel asks the question “do they match?” This sign is asking several questions which the rest of the film answers. It is asking us if Ben is an object because both Ben and the suitcase are on conveyor belts. According to Nichols “He is in danger of becoming an object like the suitcase.” The answers to the following questions asked by the sign serve to decided whether or not Ben becomes an object.
The next question the sign is asking is whether or not he and Mrs. Robinson match? At first they do, feeling like objects who are emotional outcasts. It is only once the question do Ben and Elaine match can it be known that he and Mrs. Robinson don’t. When Ben realizes that Mrs. Robinson has resigned herself to being merely an empty vessel that he realizes they do not match. As Ben progresses he realizes that he and Elaine are fully compatible. They both need to escape the slow fate that emptied Mrs. Robinson of her humanity.

The final question asks if Ben matches the society to which he is returning. It answers the initial question concerning his status as an object. It is his transition from identifying with Mrs. Robinson to identifying with Elaine, from isolated object to a man in full, that allows him to avoid becoming like the suitcase.

While on the plane the captain announces “we are now beginning our descent into Los Angeles.” This announces Ben’s descent into the suburban fish tank where he is to be on display. The use of a fish tank, and later other panes of glass, is a coded iconic message which represents Ben’s constant feeling of being trapped and viewed. It also serves to show his need to escape. Nichols says that Ben “is drowning in objects – themes of plastics water and glass.” These are all components of a fish tank. We are made painfully aware of this theme during Ben’s first encounter with Mrs. Robinson.

Their first encounter occurs in his bedroom during the party. When he finally agrees to drive her home she throws his car keys into his fish tank. Her action signifies throwing him into a tank for her to possess. When he looks into the tank he sees a plastic scuba diver submerged at the bottom of the tank. He looks at the plastic man with
empathy. At Ben’s birthday pool party later in the film he is literally forced to become the plastic scuba man.

Ben’s birthday present is scuba diving equipment. The guests at the party only consist of Ben’s parents’ friends. They are there to view the plastic scuba man. As Ben walks to the pool the audio alternates between the sounds outside of the wetsuit and the sound of his breathing. When Ben finally drops into the water we hear nothing but the breathing, total isolation. He tries to get out of the water, out of his tank, but his parents keep pushing him back in. Nichols states that Ben is depicted “…as a creature in a corner in his wetsuit.”

The transition from the scuba scene to the following scene relays Ben’s continued existence in the fish tank. The audio transition Nichols employs is created by Ben calling Mrs. Robinson to set up the affair while he is still isolated visually in his scuba gear at the bottom of the pool. He calls her from a glass enclosed phone booth, another tank. The tank of the phone booth is used to transition to the hotel room, another tank, where he and Mrs. Robinson have their affair. The pool continues to make its presence felt once Ben’s affair with Mrs. Robinson begins.

There is a montage that depicts Ben’s passage between one tank to another, between
the pool to the hotel room. The scene which transitions into the montage begins with Ben floating above the shining surface of the pool on a black float, wearing black sunglasses. At this moment he is able to be himself. He is, in this brief moment, on a tiny island of darkness above the transparent enclosure in which he exists. The song “The Sounds of Silence” begins to play and we enter the montage.

Ben slides off of the raft into the pool, back into the tank. He gets out of the water but puts on a bright white shirt indicating he hasn’t really escaped. He begins his descent into his confined existence. As he walks through the door, buttoning the shirt, he enters the hotel room rather than the house. The montage uses black as a transition. As he transitions from one tank to the other he has these brief moments where he is hiding in the dark while trapped in his tank. For the moment he seems to accept his captivity.

The montage ends with an audio transition. When he pops out of the water and onto Mrs. Robinson there is a line spoken by his mother which leads to a cut to him
floating above the water of the pool on the raft with his sunglasses. He is looking into the
sun which partially obscures his parents and the Robinsons. His father then tells him to
say hello to Mrs. Robinson. He says “hello Mrs. Robinson” and we cut to him in a
completely white, steamy bathroom inside the house.

Later in the film, Ben’s parents confront him about taking Elaine out on a date. He is floating on the raft in the pool, which normally indicates that he is comfortably out
of his tank. In this case he is wearing his scuba mask with his eyes submerged in the
water, which places him firmly inside the tank.

Once Ben decides to leave the tank he
must drive over the Golden Gate Bridge,
which spans the massive expanse of San
Francisco Bay. The bridge acts as the
symbolic gate to paradise. It allows him to
cross the largest body of water he encounters. Once he has transitioned from his
identification with Mrs. Robinson to Elaine, he drives through a tunnel and over the
bridge, leaving the tank behind. The song “Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme” plays
as he drives from his transparent prison to the Eden that is Berkeley. He is now free to
discover his own identity, his own concept of the American dream.
Where as the Golden Gate Bridge symbolized Ben’s freedom from a middle class fish tank, the church where Elaine is to be married is a symbol of the suburban American dream Ben has escaped from. The church is a white, cavernous, bunker like structure, a physical manifestation of this world of hollow object people that was to become his prison. It is now his job to save Elaine from the fate he has escaped.

When Ben arrives at the church he is seemingly trapped behind an impenetrable glass wall on the second story of the church which separates him from the congregation on the lower level inside. However, unlike before, he is looking into the tank from the outside. He has finally escaped. He is banging on the walls of the tank, screaming Elaine’s name. It is his last desperate effort to convince her to escape the tank. Inside the tank, Elaine is wearing a white wedding dress, it is as if she has been dipped in the outer coating of the trophy she is about to become, she is about to lose her humanity. It is at the very moment of her sacrifice to the suburban death cult of sorts that she realizes what is about to happen to her. She turns and screams Ben’s name, in effect saying save me from this fate.
Ben rushes downstairs to meet her as she runs out of the chapel. He grabs a large Christian cross, the symbol of congregants’ cult-like existence, to fight them off and save Elaine. She has to fight off her mother, who yells that it is too late for Elaine. Elaine responds “Not for me.” Ben then traps the congregation inside the bunker with the cross by placing it through the outer handles of the front door of the church. The hollow trophy people are left there, as Ben and Elaine escape, no longer objects themselves. Those left behind are trapped within the chapel of the self, festering in their anger, destined to become the monstrosity depicted in Fear and Loathing.

A vision of what has evolved inside of the church is depicted in Fear and Loathing when Duke and Gonzo find their way to the casino Bazooko Circus. The nightmarish entrance to Bazooko Circus is the neon mouth of a demonic clown. It’s large teeth are covered in light bulbs, its mouth is agape as if it will swallow the characters.
Duke and Gonzo are about to enter the cavernous belly of clown which is both overwhelmingly large, yet exceedingly claustrophobic and menacing.

Upon entering the circus casino Duke comes to realize that “Bazooko Circus is what the entire hep world would be doing on a Saturday night if the Nazi’s had won the war. This was the Sixth Reich” (Gilliam) This is what Duke describes as the “ultimate realization of the America dream.” (Gilliam) He has found the part of the American dream that has mutated beyond all recognition. “A drug person can learn to cope with seeing such things as seeing their dead grandmother crawling up their leg with a knife in her teeth. But nobody should be asked to handle this trip”(Gilliam)

The spaces they pass by are monstrous in size, but more so in nature. Though the space is large, the oppressive presence of these horrors close in on them. High overhead the Flying Bellinis acrobat act perform their vile trapeze act. The acrobat’s routine consists of a woman giving birth to a space baby while flying through the air. Then a snarling dog makes the high flying trip. Though this is all occurring high overhead, the bottom safety net is close to the casino floor. When a wolverine falls from the lofty heights onto the net, it snarls and claws at Duke, trying to get at his flesh.
Inside the casino there are a bevy of carnival games including one where a Hassidic Jew is throwing meat cleavers at pigs and another where people can throw needles at an “actual victim.” (Gilliam) Guests can even shoot pregnant ladies to win a prize. The intense attention to detail and the sharp ever-changing lighting that distorts all it touches, morphing with the character’s perceptions in the dream like sets, are Duke’s impressions of the nature of America. This circus chapel of horrors is filled with murals depicting demons and burning souls.

In The Graduate Ben does not feel comfortable in the sterile anesthetized spaces. Though he does not know what truly lurks within them he knows enough to see the hollowness they represent. In Fear and Loathing the spaces are vibrant and almost bleeding with color. Duke is aware of this contrast and able to reflect on it because he has seen the progression. Once again the opposing visual styles serve to highlight the differing nature of the narrators.
This chrome-plated consumer’s paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children.
Mario Savio

Chapter 5: Objects

In both films objects play a significant narrational role. The world Ben returns to is populated by objects. Nichols says that Ben is literally drowning in objects. Duke is observing the post-apocalyptic version of that society in the object oriented city of Las Vegas. In both cases the objects add further depth of meaning to the structures they are housed in.

During Ben’s welcome home party at his parent’s house, he walks down the stairs and passes a painting of a sad black and white clown. Much like Ben, the clown is an object of the Braddocks. Unlike Ben, the painting of the clown is a natural object. Those happy to be objects are only themselves in the light, so the clown is forgotten and alone in the darkened stairwell, unable to realize its true nature.

Elaine is initially introduced by way of her painted portrait. This represents Elaine’s place as a living portrait on the wall of her mother’s life. The portrait is all that Mrs. Robinson has to show as an accomplishment in her life. She uses the possession that is Elaine to help trick Ben into becoming another of her possessions. The paintings serve as a reminder of Ben and Elaine’s current place in the world.
Cigarettes are objects that tie Ben to Mrs. Robinson. Before their affair, during their first encounter in his bedroom during the party, Mrs. Robinson asks Ben for an ashtray. Ben says he does not have one and she says “that’s right the track star doesn’t smoke.” (Nichols) Once Ben decides to have the affair with Mrs. Robinson, he begins to smoke. The first time we see him do so is while he waiting for Mrs. Robinson at the hotel bar.

Ben begins to smoke once he starts the affair, it is as if he is trying on a new personality. We see him smoking again at the strip club he takes Elaine to on their first date. He puts it out once he realizes what he is doing to her. He realizes in that moment that he is not the person he is trying to be. When he begins to disassociate himself from Mrs. Robinson and begins to relate to Elaine, he puts out the cigarette. Though he does not stop smoking as the film progresses, we do not see him smoke for the rest of the film. It is the progression away from the cigarette that adds weight to Ben’s shift in association.

Mrs. Robinson uses cigarettes the opposite way. The moments where she is smoking are moments where she reveals herself. When she begins her plan to have an affair with Ben in his bedroom, she is smoking. She is smoking again once she propositions Ben after the graduation party. As Mr. Robinson gives his friendly advice to Ben, to sleep with a few girls that summer, he asks Mrs. Robinson if she agrees with his advice. She inhales the smoke and says yes, with a look on her face that fully reveals her true intentions with Ben.

Several of Mrs. Robinson’s most revealing moment in the film occur in scenes where she is smoking. When Ben wants to have a conversation with her she reveals
herself when smoking. While she is smoking a cigarette in the hotel bed, she stares with a pained look on her face, exhales and reveals that she studied art in college but had to give it up because she got pregnant. As she exhaled she revealed the moment where she became trapped in the fish tank she never escaped from. All she has to show for her life after that are objects like the one she became.

When Ben finally begins his affair with Mrs. Robinson at the Taft hotel, he walks out of the hotel bar and into the lobby to get a room. When the desk clerk asks him if he has any luggage he initially responds that it is in his car. When he realizes that the porter will take his bags to the room, he says that all he has is a toothbrush.

As he walks into the hotel room before Mrs. Robinson arrives, the first thing he does is walk into the bathroom and brush his teeth. The toothbrush was an object of discomfort in the lobby, used as an excuse. Brushing his teeth is a validation of his existence in the room. Another bathroom object, shaving cream, serves a symbolic function in the film.

The presence of shaving cream, which is white and covers Ben’s face, represents a mask which Ben uses to hide his true nature. The first of the two instances where Ben shaves occurs while Ben is still having his affair with Mrs. Robinson. Ben is looking into the mirror while shaving, his face covered in white shaving cream.
His mother walks to the bathroom door and asks him where he goes at night. At this moment there is a close-up of the razor removing shaving cream from his face. When his mother asks her question he pauses shaving, leaving the mask on as he answers her. He lies to her when he says he wants to tell her where he goes. He says he goes out driving. His mother is in the darkness outside of the bathroom, she is also not her true. She lies, responding that she doesn’t want to pry into his private life.

The second time Ben shaves in the film occurs while he is living in the boarding house in Berkeley. Elaine comes into Ben’s darkened room while his face is covered in shaving cream. They begin to have an argument and she screams. He wipes off the shaving cream mask and tells her he is going to leave Berkeley because she doesn’t want him. She asks him where he is going to go and he tells her he doesn’t know. She responds by telling him he can’t leave until he has a plan. With out his mask on he is able to reveal his true feelings, that he listens to her and respects what she wants. His progression as a person is highlighted by the presence of this object.

At the party Ben’s parents mention the Alpha Romeo they bought him as a graduation present. This is the first mention of the most important representational object in the film. A car given as a graduation present is the ultimate symbol of an upper middle class suburban upbringing. The car is also what enables Mrs. Robinson to enter Ben’s
life. Despite this association, it also represents a certain degree of freedom. His car is the object which allows him to transition from his identification with Mrs. Robinson to his identification with Elaine.

On he and Elaine’s first date, they go to get hamburgers in his car. While sitting in the car they begin to talk about how the rules of society don’t make sense to them any more. They both feel that the rules of society seem to be making themselves up, with no basis in reality. The car next to them at the drive up burger stand is making too much noise so Ben closes the roof of the convertible. He has placed them firmly in the fish tank in order to contemplate the tank’s very existence and their place within it. This conversation allows him to make the decision to not become an object like the suitcase. It does not mean he has succeeded in his goal, but it does give him a new one which is represented by Elaine.

When Ben drives to the Robinson’s house to pick Elaine up for a second date he is driving with the top up in the rain. He is still an object in the suburban tank represented by the car. When Mrs. Robinson gets in the car instead of Elaine, Mrs. Robinson threatens to reveal their affair to her family as well as his. Her threat to destroy both families is also a threat to smash the walls of the tank, to set Ben free. Unbeknownst
to her this is Ben’s moment of truth. He has been firmly faced with the question of do I resign myself to the fate of being in this tank, or do I break free from my prison?

Ben’s answer to the question is to get out of the car run hard and with the purpose of going after Elaine. When he arrives in Elaine’s room he is soaked as if he had actually been submerged in a fish tank. This mad dash through the tank towards Elaine, his goal of freedom, is what allows him to transition to Berkeley and his period of self discovery.

When Ben goes to rescue Elaine, the car is an object of transition once again. He heads back into the fish tank to the Robinson’s house to find that Elaine is not there. He gets back in the car with the windows and top down, half way to escaping the car which is his final tie to the tank. He is feeling determined and confident, but desperate. Elaine is the symbol that allowed him to escape, he cannot allow her to be left behind.

On his way to the church he pulls over to a gas station to use a phone and find out which church it actually is. The gas station attendant asks Ben if he needs any gas, but in his haste does not hear the question. The question is really asking Ben if he needs his old life, his old religion, his old world, and his old possessions any more.

When his car runs out of gas, the last vestiges of his middle class life have been abandoned by the side of the road as he leaves the car behind. His old life literally ran
out of gas, he is now completely free. At the end of the film he and Elaine escape on a bus, the complete opposite of everything the car stood for.

The presence of the American flag signals a conceptual representation of the American dream. In The Graduate Ben came to Berkeley to fully realize his burgeoning identity. For Ben, the freedom to create his own identity is the ultimate American dream. The American Flag appears consistently throughout Fear and Loathing as a representation of the various aspects and forms of the American dream. The consistency of representation is in keeping with the presence of the camera, lighting and architecture in the film. When Duke looks back at a memory of seeing the band The Jefferson Airplane in the early part of the Haight’s existence, a free spirited innocent hippie girl is wearing the American flag as a shirt. She is the embodiment of the spirit long gone.

While on mescaline at the beach, before leaving Los Angeles on the journey to find the heart of the American dream, Duke is wrapped in the flag standing in the shallows of the surf flapping his arms as if the flag was a set of wings. He is already becoming enveloped by the mad vision that he is hoping to find. This states that he is going to attempt to test the very essence of the dream as he sees it.

The flag’s most consistent presence throughout the film is its appearance in the sets used for the destroyed hotel suites that the characters inhabit through their stay in
“the vortex of the American Dream.” (Gilliam) The flag’s presence in their lodgings shows how the American Dream, as represented by the flag, is descend further into a frenzy of debauchery and excess. The characters destroy their suites and as such depict the destruction of the American Dream.

To Duke this is a “classic affirmation of everything right and true in this country.” (Gilliam) Their ability to destroy and co-opt all they inhabit in Las Vegas, to question the very reality of a society gone mad, is what Duke believes is the right of an American. In one of Duke and Dr. Gonzo’s rooms the ketchup splattered and splintered horror, hanging over the burning remnants of a rats nest of a bed, as pools of brackish water cover the floor, is how far into madness the dream has descended.
It is only when Duke awakens wrapped in the flag in the aftermath of the complete destruction of their final suite at the Flamingo Hotel and Casino that he is able to relate exactly what has become of the dream that was America. Present throughout the wasteland of their room are symbols of the American nightmare that Duke is traveling through. He bares witness to the resulting chaos.

Before entering Bazooko Circus Duke and Dr. Gonzo huff ether from an American flag. Ether, as explained by Thompson’s narration, is a total body drug. It numbs the body causing a person to lose total control over their actions while being able to watch themselves behave in this way. The fact that the flag is used as a means to achieve such a state suggests America is causing this numbed and out of control behavior.
During the demented trapeze act in Bazooko Circus a woman gives birth to a baby doll wearing tinfoil and a space helmet in mid air. The flag is pasted on the front of the baby’s helmet. The flag is also draped at the top of the platform where the performers are jumping from. The space baby is Gilliam’s representation of how the innocent and idealistic concept of space travel has become vulgar and infantile. The space baby makes another appearance later in the film. It is found drowned in a fishbowl which is lying in a pool of murky water on the floor of their final hotel suite after it has been completely demolished. It is almost a eulogy of sorts for the drowned innocence of what has now become a symbol of the cold war which is an integral part of the dream.

The flag is shown once again on the stage of the National District Attorneys Conference. The entire stage is tinted blue except for the two flags, one on the stage and one on the podium. The representations of the police officers who are attending this conference tread the line between excessively gruesome and scathingly comical. They are presented as pale, bloated, angry rednecks. Dr. Gonzo comments that they look like they are from the film Easy Rider.
The keynote speaker of the conference, Dr. L. Ron Bumquist is a wiry, disheveled caricature of a man. He is spouting nonsense about the drug culture, something which he knows nothing about. One of his big theories is that “a dope fiend refers to the reefer butt as a roach, because it resembles a cockroach.” (Gilliam) As he says this he comically holds up a plastic bag containing the remnants of a marijuana joint. As far as Dr. Gonzo is concerned “you’d have to be crazy on acid to think a joint looks like a goddamn cockroach” (Gilliam) The use of the flag in this scene further illustrates the point that mainstream America has become mislead by “two bit academic hustlers” (Gilliam).

The flag is used in another official capacity as it makes an appearance in Duke’s paranoid courtroom nightmare. Chiaroscuro lighting is used; eerie creeping light contrasted with a darkness surrounding the frame. There are exaggerated bars and chains looming over and around them. Their uniforms are striped black and white. The bench looms high overhead, but it is off in the distance so it appears more authoritative despite being on another, smaller plane of vision. The floor is a large distorted pattern of black and white tiles stretched and twisted. The American flag however is highlighted with its own source of light, the only distinct color in the frame.

It represents the authority that is America, the current nightmare coming down on them, destroying their vision and closing in on them with great force. It is a sentencing
not only for crimes committed against Lucy, but for existing as they choose in a society that sees in black and white terms. To the forces opposing Duke and Dr. Gonzo there is only right and wrong as it appears in the eyes of authority, there is no freedom of interpretation, no choice.

At the end of the film, Duke passes a road sign that says: Now leaving Fear and Loathing, Population 0. He disappears into the desert, American flag flowing out the back of his destroyed convertible. As he leaves Fear and Loathing, that terrible nightmare where no one permanently lives, it is understood that he has found the vulgarity of America and now can retreat homewards towards oblivion, to be “just another freak in the freak kingdom.” (Gilliam)

All of the objects used in Fear and Loathing are used in a consistent manner to further the same messages. In The Graduate the meanings and relationships of the objects change as Ben’s identity develops. Duke presents his eulogy with a specific continuity that progresses from the moment Ben escaped on the bus.
Conclusion

Ben initially seems to be an observer who is merely processing what he perceives. He is not conscious of the fact that he is a narrator agent who is shaping the world around him and physically creating the visual elements in the film. Since the visual elements in The Graduate are in fact linguistic narration by their very nature, it is in this way that the visuals themselves force Ben into becoming an unconscious narrator agent.

Only by being unconscious of his status as a narrator agent is Ben able to present a clear and ostensibly reliable commentary. He is able to relate the purest conception of his reality by unconsciously creating a visual commentary that narrates his thoughts. The visuals relate how he comes to perceive the tank and the society that created it. In this manner he is also able to relate the fact that he is an idealist who has no idea of what is to happen after he escapes the suburban fish tank.

In Fear and Loathing, Duke is fully conscious of his role as a narrator agent. He is narrating the story verbally, explaining how he is relating what is being presented visually. The verbal narration is not the source of the main commentary, but it serves to highlight the degree that Duke is aware of his status in the work. In being fully self-conscious, the diametric opposite of Ben, Duke is able to provide a definitive commentary on his perception of what has happened in the four years separating the two narratives. In being presented by two opposing types of narrators the two films have
diametrically opposing visual styles and are able to present two distinctly different commentaries.

Ben decided he was free to escape the suburban prison and make his own identity, his own way in the world. The Graduate ends on a hopeful but uncertain note as he and Elaine trap the old society in a prison of its ideals and escape on a bus. By the time of Fear and Loathing Ben and Elaine’s ideals have failed. Duke discovers that society will not tolerate the freedom to chose how one exists in the world. He sees that the world left behind in the church, rather than dieing, has become even more repressive and terrifying. By commenting on the horrors of traditional American society the two films manage to show the progression and ultimate failure of what Duke calls “the freedom lie.” (Gilliam)

Duke’s goal was to see if the identity which he was free to choose, a vision of excess, barbarism, and total disregard for the conventions of society, could survive in the current society. An America where people are free to chose their own identities is the one Ben conceived of upon arriving at Berkeley in 1967, and the one Duke tested in Las Vegas four years later. Duke went to a place that supposedly tolerated anything, and found that it did not tolerate the freedom to choose one’s own identity. Duke discovered that it is neither his nor Ben’s time any longer, the world has moved on, their ideals are officially dead.
Works Cited


