

DEVELOPING VISUAL ASSOCIATIONS THROUGH FILMMAKING

A Thesis

by

VISHWANAND V. SHETTI

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2008

Major Subject: Visualization Sciences

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Developing Visual Associations through Filmmaking. (August 2008)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Prof. Carol LaFayette

Associations are embedded in many aspects of filmmaking. It is this artist's goal to analyze visual associations in the process and product of an original narrative video piece called *Discretion*. Character relationships and plot structure are examples of non-concrete visuals developed in preproduction. Family trees and plot diagrams provide a structural map for the film and are helpful tools to communicate with the cast and crew. Art direction and wardrobe are examples of concrete visuals developed during production. For example, wardrobe with certain colors may be assigned to each character in the film. Editing and compositing allow further development in the postproduction phase. Juxtaposing scenes and imagery results in a more complex web of connections for the viewer to discover. In effect, this thesis is meant to explore the filmmaking process with a special emphasis given to visual associations. In this discussion, the video will be referred to as a film to relate concepts to other films and to the filmmaking process. However, it is important to note that interchanging these words is a common practice that is not acceptable in many industry settings.

For Pandora Pumpkin

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPTION OF *DISCRETION*

Over the past century, filmmakers have often chosen not to follow convention, and when successful, new techniques emerge and begin to develop. In early films, every location that was seen needed to be established. Over time, filmic convention evolved, enabling audiences to understand a location change without an establishing shot. For example, if a film cuts to a hallway with doctors and nurses, the audience will understand that the setting is a hospital. Over the years, my approach to shooting and editing movies has divided audiences in very fundamental ways. Often beyond the work itself, there is a struggle whether or not to accept a film that leaves too much for the audience to interpret. Generally, my shorter movies with fewer details are highly accepted whereas my longer, highly abstracted, work tends to be hit or miss. There seems to be a trend that shorter work can be conceptual and that longer work should be composed of more concrete details. However, as history proves, these kinds of generalizations are constantly being discredited as filmmakers and filmgoers evolve. It is this artist's goal to further explore how visual associations have an impact on storytelling and more specifically, filmmaking. In this discussion, movies shot with digital video will be referred to as films to relate concepts to other films and to the filmmaking process, but it is important to note that interchanging these words is a common practice that is not acceptable in many industry settings.

This thesis follows the style of *Cinema Journal*.

Author Dudley Andrew notes that “today, even the most empirical psychologists hold that learning to see should mean the acquisition of connections among perceptual elements rather than the reception of those elements themselves” (Andrew 1984, 32). It is important to note that symbols are not always metaphysical in nature. A color scheme may take on a hidden meaning that is defined within the film itself. That is, this scheme may not follow any universal conventions. For example, red may often be symbolic of sin or death, but in the context of a film, it may represent something else, such as a family. An opposing color may represent an opposing family. In essence, to be better understood, elements must be seen in relation to each other. Resulting from my study was an original narrative video project called *Discretion* where, as Andrew describes about narrative cinema, “signifying materials articulate elements of mental concepts until large units of significance (signs) are recognized or begin to function” (Andrew 1984, 75). It is interesting to note some of the connections to my previous bodies of work. Playgrounds, diaries, guns, walking paths, woods, telephones, telephone polls, cantors, dollar bills, and flowers are all fundamental images I have used frequently. However in *Discretion*, some of these objects and locations are presented in an entirely different context.

Even with all the challenging abstract elements in this film, there are noteworthy clues of a solid underlying structure. Film theorist and author Warren Buckland comments that French New Wave directors are not “demonstrating the nonexistence of ‘syntax’,” but instead, they are “really discovering new syntactic regions while remaining (at least as long as they are intelligible, as is the case almost always) entirely

submissive to the functional requirements of filmic discourse.” I chose to develop “ungrammatical” sequences to convey the world in *Discretion*, and as Buckland hastily pointed out, “such orderings have never been seriously tried by film-makers,” but if so, “one would have to examine the matter more closely by some extreme avant-gardist who had deliberately abandoned the effort to make himself understood” (Buckland 2000, 124). Accordingly, *Discretion* is not a film that can be entirely grasped with only one viewing. There are multiple layers of both imagery and plot structure that need be digested over multiple viewings. Even with a clear comprehension of the events, one can develop many sound theories about the construction of sequences that cannot entirely be proved or disproved. The heart of Buckland’s statement was challenged many times during the process because I’ve wanted audiences to at least subconsciously accept the overall emotional arc of *Discretion*. To follow through with this goal, it was important to note author Dudley Andrew’s statement that “rationality today is seldom conceived of in pure terms; rather it is determined by culture, by need, by power, and by the physical limits of language.” He eloquently concludes “this orientation shapes the thought of thinkers with quite varied attitudes toward life” (Andrew 1984, 175). I would have to find some sense of commonality for the viewer to empathize with moments in *Discretion*. While movies are often seen as a form of escapism, I found that curiosity would be an element that would drive the viewer forward by introducing the notion of choice in *Discretion*. In contrast to becoming lost, viewers will have the ability to delve into an abstracted world that they can consciously lose themselves in. Andrew concludes, “reason is seen as a governed as much as a governing power” (Andrew 1984,

175). In parallel, the will of the audience to dig themselves out of the confusing rabbit hole will be determined by their need to find structure in *Discretion*. To encourage this analysis, I arranged the story in a way that helps it fall into the mystery genre. In the end, if *Discretion* is not entirely understood, there is consolation in knowing audiences recognize there is more to be understood. My previous work has often lacked simple cues for the audience to look deeper. As I've developed a niche during my postgraduate career, I realize the darker tone of my work is perhaps the cue I'm looking for.

2. INSPIRATION

The Tibetan Book of the Dead contains some of the most influential ideas embraced by this artist. Most notably, the concept that a person can extend the moment of their death has triggered much contemplation about space, time, and body that has seeped into my interpretation of other films. I have coupled the notion of an extended moment with the commonly mentioned idea of one's entire life flashing before his or her eyes. A scientific explanation could be that one's brain is firing conscious and subconscious memories very rapidly. A more spiritual explanation could be that this is the way the mind transitions into death.

By being relatable to both western and eastern cultures, these views have proven to be useful in my experiences as an editor. Even during his time, Sigmund Freud searched for such universal theories about the human mind. Author Sharon Packer points out that "like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Freud recognized the role that personal memory plays in dreams," and "like the structuralists of his own era, Freud searched for a common substructure to dreams, one that was shared by all human beings" (Packer 2002, 173). It is this artist's belief that the mind is capable of reinterpreting our memories into an optimal, and often optimistic, construal. Similarly in film, it is the job of an editor to optimally piece together a film with the footage that was shot. This can be better described by examining the job of a wedding video editor. A wedding video can be created simply to document the events of a wedding day. However, a good wedding video can remind a married couple of the excitement and anxiety they were feeling as well as the emotions of the people that surrounded them. In

the past, I've approached the editorial aspect of wedding videos by recalling the myriad of sentimental moments. I take note of my feelings and memories when editing the video. Often through montage, I look to connect moments, feelings, and figures, reflecting on the actual event and achieving the greatest emotional impact possible. Parallels to such experiences proved useful when constructing the sequences for *Discretion*.

My interpretation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) follows the aforementioned ideas about the human mind. This useful construct begins with the idea that Dorothy died in the twister that hit her house. Dorothy's journey in Oz, consequently, is a journey to find a form of heaven, or a sense of peace, in her conscience. In the end, this heaven consists simply of her friends and family in Kansas and not the magical Wizard in the Emerald City. This artist has observed very similar stories of redemption in movies like *Fight Club* (1999), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

Author Catherine Russell writes that an exploration of mortality in narrative film is "an 'undoing' or 'reading' of the ideological tendency of death as closure" and further explains that it is "a method of understanding the function of narrative endings in the politics of representation, a means of moving beyond formalist categories of 'open' and 'closed' endings, as well as mythic categories of fate and romance" (Russell 1994, 2). In order to resist equating narrative ending with closure and death, I created *Discretion* with the notion that the entire story is merely the perception of one character's life at the moment of death. The perspective presented in the film is determined by understanding the relationships to Dr. Fernandez and the monumental events that lead to his eventual

demise. His death is merely a catalyst for this story about letting go and transitioning into the afterlife with a clean slate. Actors in this story play several roles to explore the possible fates of Dr. Fernandez. For example, one of the final acts of this man is to kill a woman who proves to be an antagonizing figure. In reality, within the story, this man would never have actually seen her face, but for emotional reasons, he sees himself killing another woman, one he has always loved, and, in essence, letting her go in his conscience. Similarly, death will be a catalyst for exploring many of the mysteries surrounding the characters in *Discretion*.

If a story were to be comprised of real and surreal events drawn from the mind of one character, a visual system, or set of clues, would be needed for the audience to begin making associations. As described later, the use of color in *The Wizard of Oz* is an important clue this artist can draw upon in the thesis film. In effect, the referral of this color palette is one example of a visual system used to develop a language unique to the context of this thesis film. To further encourage associations to be made, some obvious references will need to be in the movie. This may take the form of direct quotes, similar characters, or familiar objects. For example, the thesis film may contain a pair of shoes that resemble the ruby slippers from *Oz*. On a related note, the 1939 film is one I hold dear to my heart, and after long hours of editing, my thoughts about the jumbled up reconstructions would often follow me into my dreams. On several occasions, the subconscious part of my mind would continue a story that made sense out of the symbols I had developed during the course of making the movie. For example, juxtaposing the

composition of a sexual encounter during the Vietnam War scene and the imagery of the toy soldiers, the lamp, and the cantor was the result of a dream I had.

3. CHOICES

Thoughts do not necessarily occur in any particular order. People generally have a certain amount of control over what they are thinking. A catalyst for this thesis was the notion of choice. Several questions arose when choice was explored in terms of storytelling. First, how would information be organized if the viewer could make choices for the central character or characters? Secondly, how would and could viewers of the final product process the information differently? Using an interface such as a website with flash movies or a podcast, choices would allow the viewer to interactively decide how to navigate through the film. That is, the viewer could choose to enjoy the film linearly by traversing segments in order or nonlinearly by skipping around. The intention of creating such an interface would be to help viewers visualize the underlying structure of the film. However, the most important question to be explored by this artist is how a nonlinear story with choices is also effectively organized into a linear experience. Since *Discretion* would already be challenging to understand, I wanted the film have some interactivity to maintain the attentiveness of the audience. Tom Twyker's *Run Lola Run* (1999) exemplifies a film with a structure based on choices that the main character faces. The film is divided into three sections, each presenting very different conclusions to the situation at hand. Each of the three sections branches off from the same moment in time within the film. Even though each branch is different, there are a common set of people, places, and particular events that run through each section. For *Discretion*, it was realistic to only consider embedding a finite amount of choices when writing the script. The scope of these choices needed to be limited in

order to complete the film. I decided every choice would somehow involve alcohol.

The main character would either be offered a beer, a shot, or some other drunken choice.

The conception of choices led to a visual abstraction of the film's structure, or a roadmap as I called it.

4. CREATING THE ROADMAP

Before adding all the details that occupy the world of *Discretion*, a very basic roadmap was created to visualize the basic decisions and consequences over the course of the piece. The choices in the film presented only two options at certain moments. For the most part, I used the option for characters to have a drink as the vehicle for choice. Choosing yes or no determined how to continue traversing the roadmap. Of course, each choice led to different consequences, and there was never a way to retrace your path in the roadmap. In other words, there were no loops that one could cycle forever. As a former computer science student, I did note the map's resemblance to a binary tree. Binary trees are data structures where parent nodes branch off into one or two child nodes.

5. TRAVERSING THE ROADMAP

Similar to the challenge faced by computer scientists, I needed to develop a system to get to every piece of information in this story. While choice is embedded throughout the roadmap, I decided this film needed to be viewable linearly in its entirety without an actual interface for the viewer to make choices. What this entailed was traversing the previous roadmap in a way that would logically reveal information throughout the piece. When the viewer would hit the end of one road, they would be transported back to the previous decision point and see the alternative path. In this laid out form, the moments of choice, or decision points, are not obvious until we jump back to a line of dialogue or action that clearly marked that moment. Alternately, I could choose to make certain decision points less obvious so that the roadmap is less apparent and not easily constructed by the viewer. Effectively, this thesis film would tell a story nonlinearly through the use of visual associations.

6. DEVELOPING A HISTORY

Discretion is a story that unfolds as information is revealed over the course of the film. Some of the revelations are unlocked as we reiterate scenes we've seen before with more information. For example, one of the first scenes shows a man, face hidden, walking into a motel room and doing various things. Towards the end of the film, we see the same scene, clearly seeing the face of Dr. Fernandez.

7. WITHHOLDING EVENTS

Scenes are divided to embody either questions or answers. Basically, many scenes are cut into two or more segments that occur at different points of the film, delivering important information over time. The first shot of the film is a young woman walking in the woods (Figure 7.1). We don't see this again until late in the film when we see that she is going to sit and read in a secret place in the woods. The scene with Young Jackie and the older Dr. Fernandez on the playground is also cut into two segments to spread out the information presented in that scene.



Figure 7.1. Girl Walking in the Woods

8. COMPREHENSION

The Wizard of Oz (1939) portrays Oz as a colorful dreamlike world filled with characters whose faces are borrowed from Dorothy's life in monochrome (Sepia) Kansas. *Discretion* follows a similar convention. However, during production, the actors would only be able to see what is in front of them. I would need a way to lessen the confusion of which character they were portraying and at what time. I decided it was best to only give each actor a script for the scenes they were shooting. By doing this, I could describe each scene as a standalone situation without having to describe the complexities of the entire film. Even though I knew there would be a more complicated mix of information in editorial, the actors were able to stay focused, and as a result, we often stumbled upon new layers within the story. For example, Dr. Fernandez has a young girl named Jackie as a patient, but his tone of voice in their scene together unquestionably makes him a father figure to her. I furthered emphasized his influence on her by making him a smoker and having the older Jackie also become a smoker. Similarly, the actors and I were able to further explore the relationships within each scene, often reinforcing how information is transferred between older and younger generations.

9. WORDS FORM SENTENCES

Written language begins with an alphabet. Letters combine to form words, and words combine to form phrases or sentences. Similarly, visual associations are created when basic objects represent ideas. Combining these symbols can represent more complex ideas that relate to and from the film itself as well as other films, other works of art, and life. Layering imagery within the film is an important storytelling tool. For example, the Vietnam War is referenced from toy army men we have seen earlier in the film (Figure 9.1). The actor playing the cabby, now clearly playing the role of the elder Peter Douglas, does the voiceover. Shots of the lamp and Evelyn (or Elisa depending on one's interpretation) help complete the range of ideas presented in the scene. By shooting all the elements separately and layering the imagery, I was able to create a sexual juxtaposition with the soldier and the Vietnamese girl who is helping him (Figure 9.2).



Figure 9.1. Toy Soldiers

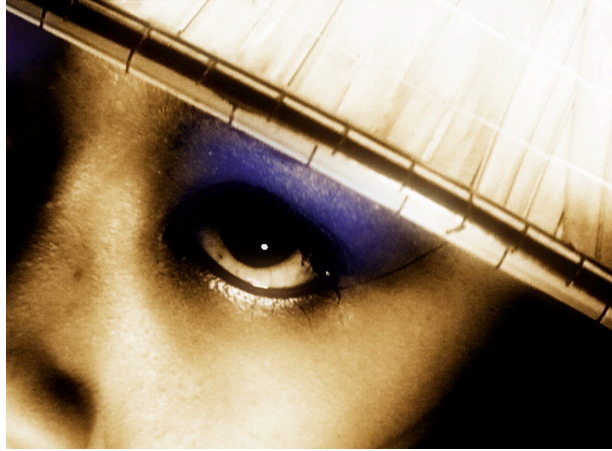


Figure 9.2. Vietnamese Girl

10. FORMING A CONCLUSION

I found that the biggest revelation at the end of this laid out story occurs at an early and elusive decision point. The revelation was a very simple poignant ending that would have been a disappointing set of events if traversed before the rest of the story.

In *Discretion*, this revelation is simply Hugh watching a movie in his motel, falling asleep, waking up, urinating, washing his face and hands, and driving off after having a shot of liquor from the flask. I knew that the development of visual associations would make this seemingly simple ending embody more meaning. For example, Hugh wakes up many times in the same bed during this film, but this is the first time he wakes up in a different bed. Also, after seeing the sink many times throughout the story, this is the first time any man washes his hands. Hugh drinks from the flask then drives off, alluding to the ominous discussion of drinking and driving he had with the cabbie earlier. After a short discussion with my committee chair, Carol LaFayette, the decision to end the movie with the truck driving off stuck throughout the entire process. Intrinsically, I knew it would be a breath of fresh air from all the confusion and turmoil that the audience has just witnessed. In the last shot, I allowed the blue of the truck to show for a moment before the image becomes entirely sepia. If blue is seen as innocence, the last shot can be interpreted as a sign of redemption. As the shot lingers, one may also take note that it is one of the few wide shots seen in this film. Previous wide shots were following a person walking. This time, however, the character is driving, too fast to be followed. One may also take note of the telephone pole, which has been focused on before, connecting the cross-shape to a crucifix. If noticed, there

are many simple conclusions that can be made depending on which character is associated with it. For Hugh, this is a sign of cleansing and a fresh start on a full tank of gas. If we relate everything to Dr. Fernandez, we can see this as a sign of regained faith or redemption as he transitions into death. These are, in no way, the only interpretations that can be made. Much care was given to allow people to extract countless ideas through the complex structure of imagery and events. The use of actors playing multiple roles allowed for multiple interpretations about the ultimate fate of key characters. Seeing Hugh's face and the drug dealer's black shirt during the scene in the woods, for example, provides some insight to the possible fate of Hugh if he travels down the same path in his life. The actresses that portray both the younger and older Elisa and Evelyn allow us to see how women in this story can make sacrifices for their children as well as betray the men they love.

11. A TWISTED STORYLINE

Discretion tells a story nonlinearly through the use of visual associations. It should be evident that the events embody a greater scope than if they were presented in a linear fashion. By forcing viewers to make associations before having a clear grasp of the story, they should better understand how simple moments have a bearing on the tragic events that unfold. In effect, the film is a psychological journey. However, there is often a resistance to new forms of cinema that the viewer must overcome. For example, one female viewer observed that the meeting between the American soldier and the Vietnamese woman looked like a sexual encounter, but she did not instantly see my intentionality to present the scene in that way. Only after my explanation did she accept and build on that information. From what I've seen, viewers are not entirely trusting of their initial reactions. I find this due to their lack of exposure to abstract forms of art and cinema. All too often, viewers turn to the artists for answers through DVD extra features or interviews. As a result, we dissect the artist's intentionality in the process as opposed to exploring our reaction to the product itself. These observations led me to think about how I presented information in *Discretion* so that viewers would return to the film to find answers to their questions.

Purposefully, I've structured the story to emphasize that the relationships between characters are the building blocks to understanding this story. Visual associations are often subversively used so audiences can comprehend important information in each scene. Author Fabio Vighi describes the series of scenes in *Life is Beautiful* (1997) where "having just rescued Dora from her unwanted wedding with a

Fascist official, Guido takes her to his home on a horse” where they disappear in a room, and “seconds later and within the same shot, young Giosuè (their son) comes running out playing with a toy car, in effect, avoiding “*the central question of the deeply antagonistic nature of family relations*” (Vighi 2006, 159). In other words, an unconditionally loving relationship between a young boy and his parents is introduced. As seen in this example, a filmmaker can allow the assumptions of the audience to define associations based on paradigms from society. With this in mind, a viewer can potentially establish a scene, location, or situation without unnecessary exposition. Before shooting *Discretion*, I revisited the script to replace scenes that were purely expositional with scenes that described characters more profoundly through actions or dialogue. To contrast the example from *Life is Beautiful*, a filmmaker may choose to fully describe a dysfunctional situation before revealing the full extent of a relationship. An example of this can be seen between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in the original *Star Wars* (1977-1983) trilogy. The antagonism was explored before it was revealed Darth Vader was actually Luke’s father. My intention is to allow the viewer to develop bigger theories about *Discretion* based on similar relationship-driven building blocks.



Figure 11.1. News Reporter

In one of the early scenes we hear a phone conversation loudly over a breaking news story about an escaped convict. This is the first clue for the audience to pay attention. The sequence is designed merely to present certain keywords that will be explored again later. The conflicting audio also is a small clue to the dysfunctional relationship of the man on the phone and the woman on the television (Figure 11.1), who are subtly revealed to be husband and wife in real life. Author Martin Barker states that “art is a ‘world apart,’ and has first to be investigated from the inside, in order to discover the principles which govern it.” I do not expect any viewer to piece together the chronological events of the story in one viewing. There are clues in the scenes to construct the timeline, more than likely over multiple viewings if the viewer chooses to revisit the film. These clues include color usage and naming conventions. Because actors play multiple roles, the viewer cannot accurately rely on only one physical figure to guide them through the film.

12. DREAMS VS. REALITY

When this fictional film was first conceptualized, I foresaw a mixture of dreams and reality throughout the film's timeline. Most scenes would either be real, composed of actual events within the realm of the story, or dreamlike, composed of jumbled imagery and sounds that were distinguished during actual events. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is a film that inspired my use of color and sepia as a clear distinction between dreams and reality, respectively. In *Discretion*, this distinction is a very good starting point for an audience to piece together the details of the story. The dream scenes compose a large portion of the movie's first half. Many elements are introduced to the audience, but the origins of those elements in the story will be discovered towards the second half, which is based in reality.

13. IDENTITY

The color of the actors' wardrobe was also intentional. Black, blue, red, and pink were used throughout the story, often in conjunction with certain characters. For example, the central actor we follow for half the story is wearing a shirt with a blue color similar to Dorothy's dress in OZ (Figure 13.1). It is important to note that the actor is initially shirtless and becomes clothed after we hear the news of a missing girl.



Figure 13.1. Blue Shirt

14. LINEAGE IN REALITY

I communicated a simple color convention to the actors without letting them lose focus of the scenes at hand. Red and blue are colors associated with characters in the main family tree of this story. Red is also a color assigned to characters that were killed, or thought to have been killed like the soldier in the war (Figure 14.1) and Elisa from cancer (Figure 14.2).



Figure 14.1. Soldier in Red



Figure 14.2. Elisa Ramirez in Blue and Red

Blue is associated with America and red with outside countries (Figure 14.3). In effect, the characters' initial colors were blue if they were born in America or red if they were born anywhere else. Characters could change colors from red to blue if they gained U.S. citizenship. A war that successfully spreads American influence could also potentially change the color associated with another nation. As with the soldier and Elisa, death and disease were causes for characters to change from blue to red.

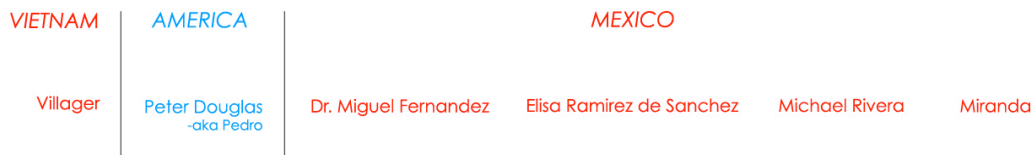


Figure 14.3. Original Character Lineages with Red and Blue Assignments

Offspring of this first generation followed the same convention. Eduardo was born by two Mexican parents, making his initial color also red (Figure 14.4). Note that Eduardo never knew who his father was.

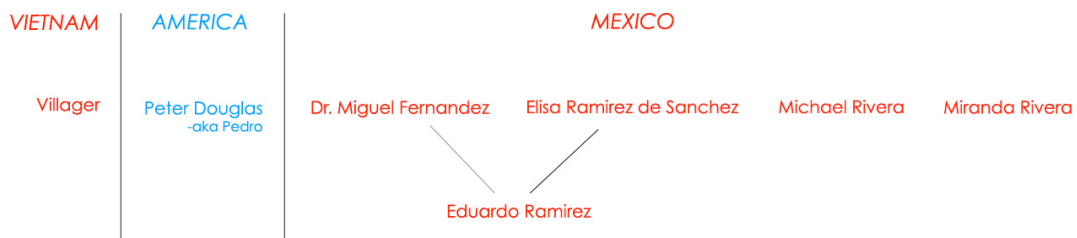


Figure 14.4 The Birth of Eduardo

The Mexican born first generation all migrated to America during their early lives (Figure 14.5). Evelyn was born in America, making her a U.S. citizen. Eduardo got a new stepfather who was potentially able to pull some strings, giving U.S. citizenship to Elisa and Eduardo.

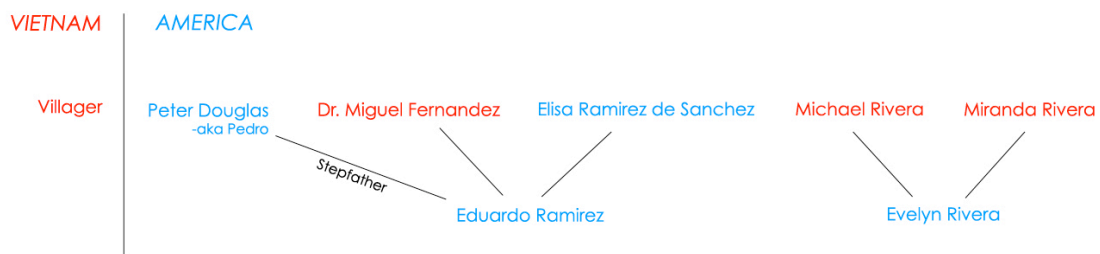


Figure 14.5 Migration and the Birth of Evelyn

The Vietnam War was an opportunity for Americans to spread their values beyond the border (Figure 14.6). This is cause for Vietnam to also be associated with blue. Peter Douglas was reportedly killed during battle, associating him with red from his bloodied face. Evelyn died of cancer around the same time, causing Eduardo to only have a father figure in Dr. Miguel Fernandez, who, coincidentally, was also his real father. Elisa and Eduardo's true color, red, regained control like a cancerous cell.

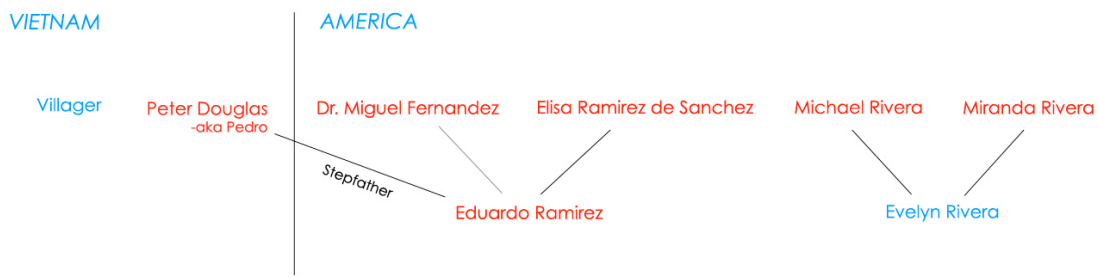


Figure 14.6 The Vietnam War

Eduardo becomes a drug dealer and a lover to Evelyn Ramirez, also known as Eve. Her devotion to him mirrors her addiction to drugs. Evelyn succumbs to red when she says she wants to be with him forever, sealing her own fate. In Vietnam, a female villager with blue eye shadow saves Peter, and so he regains the color blue, as seen in the sky during several shots (Figure 14.7).

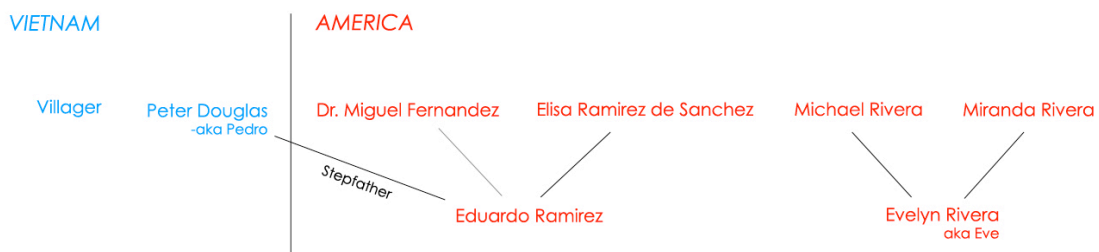


Figure 14.7 Liberation and the Deadly Relationship

Eduardo is arrested and goes to jail, allowing Evelyn to start a new clean life as Cynthia Douglas (Figure 14.8). The change of name allows her be associated with blue again. This also goes for her American born son, Hugh, who also doesn't ever know his real father.

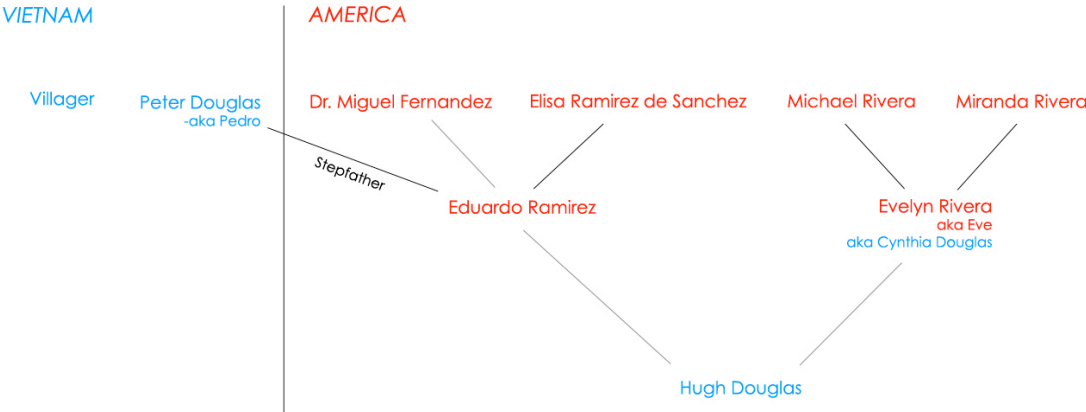


Figure 14.8 Identity Change and the Birth of Hugh

Because America lost the war in Vietnam, red regains control over that country again, and Peter eventually dies from poisoning his doomed liver with alcohol (Figure 14.9). Dr. Miguel Fernandez kills Cynthia Douglas, giving her a red color again. As the story ends, Hugh is the only blue entity left in the entire set of characters.

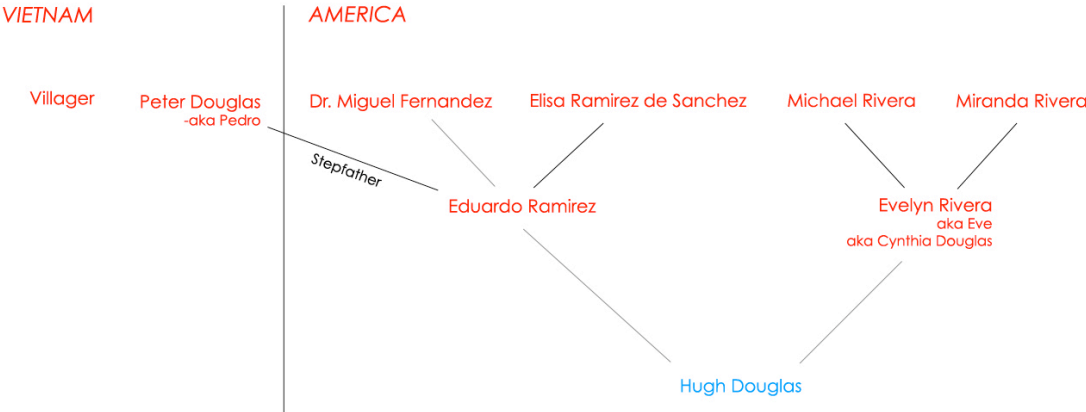


Figure 14.9 Final Consequence

15. REVISING THE STORY

Postproduction on *Discretion* consisted of editing, visual effects and compositing, and sound design. Each was an opportunity to enhance the visual associations developed in the film. As always, I feel a story is defined by the performances and not the original vision. Things change as the actors have made the characters their own. Their devotion to the characters they portray creates personal nuances that I never expected when writing but enthusiastically welcomed during production. Postproduction was a chance to forget the difficulties of production and to reevaluate the footage. This was a chance to look at the story from the ground up. Based on the footage shot and not necessarily the original script, certain aspects about the structure of the film could be rethought. There was a chance to rearrange the scenes based on the visual associations that were apparent in the forage. Notably, this is similar to the concept in the film that a mind can reconstruct a man's memories and dreams at the moment of death. In many ways, these theories about life and my attitude towards editing influenced every aspect of *Discretion*. Many viewers, however, have found themselves lost by the end of the movie. With some informal questioning, I have found that they have clued in on many of the basic building blocks. Several had taken note of the dollar bill that changes hands several times or the clock that strikes twelve. Many had also noticed the wardrobe colors. These are all elements for the viewers to latch onto during the first viewing. Undoubtedly, second-time viewers have picked up on even more and have begun developing their own interesting theories about the movie.

The basic roadmap of the film has always remained the same, but I could now invoke other scenes and imagery through montage and juxtaposition. An example of this is during the cab ride scene back downtown where imagery and dialogue are presented in a stream of consciousness manner. The characters involved in this segment include Hugh, Eduardo, the cabbie, the soldier, the psychologist, and both the younger and the older Jackie. Along with those characters, the ocean, the diary, the doll, the psychologist's office, the mirror, and the shot of alcohol are introduced and will be seen again later in the story. One of the underlying reasons for the entire segment was to energize this portion of the film. As an editor, it is imperative to have some extra range in the pacing of the scenes to strengthen the emotional journey. I purposefully tried to shy away from using too much humor or lightheartedness in *Discretion*. It is often one of the first things mentioned in people's critiques. However, while I took control of the pacing, I did little to inject a balance in tone. Because the story happens virtually during an instant in time, I wanted *Discretion* to feel like a painting where a certain hue or saturation can overtake the image.

To further influence the roadmap, I deleted other sections towards the end of the film. Originally there was a scene where Hugh goes up to the motel room only to confront and be shot by the older Eduardo Ramirez. Emotional reasoning also led to the decision to cut this scene. Eduardo was in an earlier scene that concluded his journey in this film. It is fitting that the goodbye from Dr. Miguel Fernandez should be a release of the older Eduardo's presence in the film. The lasting impression of his character resonates again when the black shirt is first seen worn by the doctor. The shirt is also

seen in the woods worn by a younger Eduardo, also played by the same actor who plays Hugh. In a film that hinges around Hugh's innocence, seeing the initial descent of Eduardo's character with Hugh's face holds a lasting impact on this journey that is unmistakably felt if not entirely understood. Of course, I chose to bring back the peaceful image of the older Eduardo during the last scene to show that Hugh will either live with the mistakes of his father or be prone to repeat them. It also signifies the escape from prison as well as the motel room. This resonates emotionally with audiences as the story ends on an optimistic note.

16. PAINTING THE INEBRIATION

Many of the scenes were shot in front of a blue or green screen. Backgrounds were composited, allowing this filmmaker artistic license to be more abstract with the imagery. It was a chance to present even more visual associations to the viewer.

Visual effects and image manipulation serve as clues to the building blocks that make up the associations in the film. This may involve color manipulation or other forms of image control. During the Vegas sequences, colored light engulfs the scenes to create a dreamy landscape with little detail. By this point in the film, our main character has had a lot to drink, so I wanted the audience to feel the spontaneity and the excitement of the scenes without the baggage of complex visuals. Imagery was chosen to seem basic, but strong enough to be remembered.

17. HEARING CONNECTIONS

Lastly, sound can have an entire language of its own. However, for the sake of this thesis, the discussion will entail how a system of sound cues and music can be used to help visualize the elusive underlying structure of the film as well as complement the onscreen images.

A rumbling sound of a violent battle occurs as the title of the film is presented. This sound is used to define every decision point in this story's roadmap. I wanted the sound to be electric to enforce the idea that this film is the mind of a man whose brain is firing its last signals.

Songs contributed to defining different scenes in the film. It was a way to quickly transport the audience back to a certain time or place or to make a connection between two or more scenes. For example, I make the visual connection of the girl walking in the woods to Dr. Miguel Fernandez walking up to the front door of a house. The music adds more weight to the comparison. It signifies that these two scenes are directly related and not just visually related. In the story, these two moments mark the start and end of Evelyn Rivera's tragic downfall. Another example is the scene at the doorway of Hugh's home. It shows the connection of the scene where Hugh wakes up to discover the envelope and the scene where Dr. Fernandez delivers it.

18. INTERPRETATIONS

Author Martin Barker states that “in any work of art, normal rules of life are set aside and events proceed according to an inner logic which has to be discovered, utilized and responded to” and that “people can of course fail, refuse, turn away” (Barker 2000, 33). Viewer acceptance is an important, albeit indirect, part of this project’s relative success. As author Warren Buckland summarizes from Noam Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, “wellformedness, or grammaticality, does not wholly determine acceptability: Acceptability is a concept that belongs to the study of performance, whereas grammaticalness belongs to the study of competence” (Buckland 2000, 122). While producing this film primarily using visual associations, I was mindful of the need to achieve audience tolerability. Initial reactions to the piece have noted boldness of the imagery in each scene. The only reactions that called it amateur were because it lacked the normal variety of camera focal lengths. As previously stated, that was an intentional decision. The ability to navigate through the film is best explored through new mediums like flash movies on the Internet or portable devices like Ipods. The use of close-ups in *Discretion* is better suited for many viewers on these smaller screens. The visual cues in the piece are just as easily seen on a smaller screen as they are on a bigger one. I could also make the case that *Discretion* should be seen on personal devices by individuals rather than on larger screens with a group. Including the notion of choice through an interface or a menu is a call for viewers to explore their individual curiosities rather than to allow groupthink to guide their personal experiences.

In general, art is capable of creating symbols by associating objects with ideas. Symbols, like film characters, can evolve through the course of a story and beyond the boundaries of the film. It is important to note that as objects are abstracted into symbols, concrete elements become non-concrete. Actors, props, sets, makeup, and wardrobe are examples of concrete elements. In other words, they are part of the image onscreen, and we can perceive them by simply watching. The concrete elements of a film comprise the non-concrete visual systems used for storytelling. Plot structure, character relationships, and story timelines are systems that organize information within a story and further charge objects with ideas. These abstracted visual associations add emotional depth to a story by logically spreading out information over the running time. For this reason, a story may be told linearly or non-linearly, depending on which creates a more powerful emotional arc. Author John Lyden notes the observation of theorist Martin Barker that “audiences might make interpretive moves by reacting to certain elements of the film, based on their own prefilmic assumptions as well as how they connect the diverse elements of the film in their own understanding” (Lyden 2003, 138). For example, someone may differently interpret the references to *The Wizard of Oz* based on their recollection of that film. The use of the name ‘Eve’ may also generate different ideas in connection with the Bible.

David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) was a source of inspiration for this artist. Lynch weaves motifs throughout the film, thus, forming an emotionally developed journey. Objects traverse both dreams and reality in *Mulholland Drive* similar to the way characters’ faces traverse Kansas and Oz in *The Wizard of Oz*. In

contrast to *Oz*, Lynch creates a mystery by withholding the origins of objects in the dream. For example, there is a blue box that needs an odd shaped blue key to be opened during the first half of the film. Towards the end of the film, we see that the origin of this image in the character's dream was an ordinary blue key given by a killer in reality. The killer says the key will be seen only after a murder takes place. This, in effect, creates a symbol by associating the key with an idea. By revisiting previous scenes and inferring this idea, the viewer can develop more profound associations within the story.

In *Discretion*, associations of objects, or symbols, are used to connect various parts of the film. Examples include a dollar bill, a lampshade, a diary, and several clocks. Some scenes introduce these objects. Other scenes invoke more complex ideas. Associations also change and develop, giving life to these inanimate items. As noted before, audiences are led to invest importance upon these objects and use them to help guide their journey through the story. As a result, I can influence viewer interpretation of *Discretion* through the use of these fundamental images.

For example, the dollar bill changes hands several times, building a mystery about its fate. One phenomenon to note is that the bill traverses the scenes as if they are happening in order. Possession crosses over leaps in time and space between scenes. This object is above the rules of any particular reality, transcending the different realities presented. One thought behind this is that if ideas can cross the boundaries of dreams and reality in the context of the film, then the objects representing those ideas should also possess that ability.

In the film, a key character hides under a lampshade and becomes the lamp (Figure 18.1). The lamp is the first obvious clue that this story is not entirely based in reality. The lamp is part of a visual language that is developed over the course of the film.



Figure 18.1. Lampshade

With such a tight shooting style in *Discretion*, the emphasis on the lamp makes it a defining object of that space. Later in the film, a shot of the lamp through a mirror connects that space to a psychologist's office, revealing that two locations in the film are indeed one.

By having a character become the lamp, I hope to embody ideas and characterization into the inanimate object. The light turns on during a sexual encounter within the scene (Figure 18.2). This can be interpreted as a moment of sexual discovery. Later in the story, a quick cut to the lit up lamp can be used like paint to create a larger picture. In addition to the obvious blocking, the American soldier being treated by the

Vietnamese woman is painted as a sexual encounter by referencing symbols like the 'turned on' lamp.



Figure 18.2. Lamp Turned On

There are several clocks showing twelve o' clock within the film. Early in the film, a digital clock shows the minutes leading up to midnight, and it finally shows twelve o' clock when a key character kills himself. There is another wall clock that shows twelve o' clock at the moment it is revealed a character was conceived. The cyclical nature of time is important to emphasize the idea of endings and new beginnings through death and conception, respectively. While not specific to reincarnation, there is a definite intention to show that information passes along like knowledge of past wars from generation to generation. Like the hands of a clock, mistakes are repeatedly made by different generations in *Discretion*.

19. EXISTENTIALISM

Author William K. Ferrell notes that after World War I, “a new appreciation emerged in the West for the philosophy of existentialism” as well as nihilism, or the idea that “life is merely existence in a world of reality we cannot really know; that is, we can know only what our experience and intellect allow us to know based on the limits of individual perception” (Ferrell 2000, 93). In *Discretion*, the psyche of one character formed the basis of limitations imposed on the scope of the entire story. Even the dreamier lampshade and Vegas sequences were built using elements from this one character’s life.

These ideas have parallels to the relationship between a film and its viewer. There will often be times when this filmmaker chooses to withhold information for creative reasons within the film as well as in his life. Therefore, audiences must study the body of work not only by itself, but also through visual language, using elements from their own psyche to help translate the story. As mentioned before, it is desirable that viewers do not turn specifically to the filmmaker for answers. Lacking in some of my previous work, the elements to construct the entire relevant story are presented in *Discretion*. I chose to introduce and not explore some details as well. The woman in the bed sheet at Hugh’s home is never fully explained. She could be his girlfriend or possibly a one-night stand. Another element briefly mentioned in the last scene is the money hidden in the woods. These were purposefully kept unexplored for the possibility of sequels or continuing episodes. In context to this episode, these are

elements that could potentially lead Hugh down the same road as his descendents. Even this could be an interpretation of the road in the final shot.

20. CONCLUSION: RELEVANCE

One of the inspirations for this thesis is an important question this artist often asks himself: Why explore alternate approaches to filmmaking and art in general? Theorist Martin Barker answers this question by noting one formalist idea that “Art is important because it has the capacity to undo routinism, ways of thinking and understanding that have become commonplace to us, making us vulnerable to outdated ideas, or to ideas which may run against our interests” (Barker 2000, 33). In summary, expanding the capacity to use visual associations in film is a fundamental part of the art itself. The ways to view visual media are changing. Portable devices like phones and Ipods are becoming more popular as well as media websites like YouTube. While filmmaking as an art form has grown out of plays and literature, the advent of new technology will constantly allow the creative process to evolve. Furthering our understanding of visual associations in films will, in turn, allow filmmakers to take full advantage of these new mediums as they arise.

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