

Synthesis Paper
Fisher King (1991)

Submitted By:

Michael Siebenaler
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Introduction

This synthesis paper of the *Fisher King* will integrate various methods used by filmmakers, most notably director Terry Gilliam, including one key scene and the film's overall ideology. Gilliam and the film crew do a fantastic job of communicating, entertaining and satisfying the audience, except for one bad edit (you can see the edit when Jack puts teabags on Parry's eyes when they get ready for their group date). The film begins and continues through the point-of-view of Jack, played by Jeff Bridges, a popular, but controversial disc jockey, who values popularity and materialism. Jack eventually encounters Parry, played by Robin Williams, who inadvertently saves Jack at his greatest time of need – a suicide attempt that would've ended Jack's life. Notice how Parry first looks at Jack when they first meet – almost like they know each other which would be realistic because Jack is a very recognizable person. Ironically Jack ends up saving Parry and inadvertently saving someone else's life by the end.

Scene analysis

Here's one relevant scene that takes place in Parry's living quarters and sets up a lot of important plot points and other concepts. When Jack wakes up after passing out from drinking too much. The camera shows Jack's point-of-view as he sees a side view of Parry who says, "Hi, welcome back." Gilliam uses distorted camera angles to illustrate the mise-en-scene and show how Parry perceives the world and Jack. The colors remain dark and dingy throughout the scene. The lighting comes in through small openings, nothing like the uniformly warm lighting seen in the dinner scene (which represents people caring about each other and enjoying each other's

company – a Godly and moral ideology of the ideal world. No one is fighting over who gets the check; they're just enjoying being with each other). Though the structures and panels of the building are distorted, they still center on Jack, just like the large panels of the walls centered on Jack as he read the TV script in the bathtub. Some natural light comes through, but most of the environment has a cluttered, distorted appearance. Parry seems to be a stereotypical homeless person who's crazy and disconnected from a world he used to function in, but the audience discovers something deeper through Parry's ideology. Jack, still a bit disoriented, listens to Parry's explanations, then begins to try and find a way out of this place. The camera tracks Jack's slow movement toward a small sanctuary which has an open book with a picture circled, but the audience can still hear Parry yelling and chasing the "little people". Parry suddenly appears out of nowhere and pulls Jack out of the sanctuary exclaiming, "You can't be in there." In this highly distorted and messy place, Jack has stumbled upon an area of special significance that Parry has constructed which also provides some key information to Jack about Parry's motives later in the plot. Jack has violated a part of Parry's world, but since Jack is "The One", Parry wants to explain it himself to Jack. This scene demonstrates the logic and intellect Parry still possesses after his traumatic experience, much like his comment to the boy who assaulted Jack in a beginning scene – saying how 'crazy can be a fabulous advantage.' Gilliam shows Jack at a very high angle and Parry at a very low angle with a small sword drawn up, almost in a stance of servitude towards Jack demonstrating Jack's unknown power to save Parry. Parry then shows Jack a page in a book that shows what he thinks is the Holy Grail – God's symbol of divine grace. In Parry's world, he still yearns to do good and embrace life even though he's suffered a great loss.

Parry wants this grail but can't get it's because, as he says "he's out there, he's always out there." Gilliam uses mysterious background noise to foreshadow the Red Knight. "I'm not anyone," Jack says. Parry has such a strong identity, but Jack still feels distraught and lost – like a victim of life that won't find his way or have true success until he rejects his selfish lifestyle. Jack represents most people in today's world. They know what is right and humane, but will not sacrifice their lifestyle and needs for the good of others. Jack uses the "pay the fine and go home" justification later and offers Parry money to buy him off which opens to the plot to Parry's biggest motive – getting the Grail from the castle house. Parry represents the only person who can break through Jack's selfish heart and sees past his defenses. What Jack was beginning to interpret as the ramblings of a crazy person have now become a deep, personal issue that seems like a consequence and eventually becomes Jack's salvation from his selfish life. The director gets a close-up shot of Jack's eyes which parallel the same empty look when he was watching TV and first discovered about Edwin's shooting on TV where Jack is in view from a large window at the top of a building. Gilliam uses a low camera angle to show Jack in a state of power or knowledge over others. The background song, titled "The Power", provides a complimentary diegetic element at the same time.

Jack's journey/ideology change

Jack resists giving up this lifestyle and demonstrates a hateful attitude through his course profanity and selfish reference like his self-proclaimed biography excerpts (one of his goals to qualify himself as a success, much like the TV show). When Jack first begins work at the video store, Gilliam uses a fishbowl camera lense to show Jack's point-of-view when drinking and to represent the way he looks at the world. The background "elevator music" also has a lot of

distortion. He's detached from the world he's living in and wants to blame the world, when he really just resents himself and can't yet understand why he doesn't have a fulfilling life. He resists Anne's orders to even go out in the store to work and eventually pokes fun at a customer, played by Kathy Najimy. Jack just wants to 'pay the fine and go home' – a materialistic view of the world that leaves many unfulfilled. Money as part of his way to bring closure to the situation but Perry keeps stringing him along. Jack sees money as a way to get ahead in life just like popularity or success. Parry sets Jack's mind on things not of this world.

Another sequence shows Jack putting on face mud in a set design with tall pieces of the wall coming to a point where Jack sits in a bathtub. It doesn't really look like him. Jack reads a TV script for a show he's about to audition for and he repeats the line "Forgive me" – a line that foreshadows Jack's personal life and represents a phrase that becomes a popular catch phrase that could've made him a star. The scene where Jack leaves Anne's apartment to eventually try to commit suicide, Gilliam uses a lot of visuals and audio elements to represent Jack's mindset as he goes over the edge. Jack tears coat on the door, then Gilliam uses a tilted angle at Anne's upstairs apartment where Jack can still hear the "Forgive me" audio from the TV show upstairs. His profanity is high, then Jack walks in front of a taxi driver who yells "forgive me." Jack finds a Pinocchio Doll from a boy who thinks he's a bum and begins to elaborate on several different ideologies on how some people destined for greatness and some people are just victims - the bumbled and the botched- ideals taught to him by society, not from a spiritual background. As Jack hugs the doll, he states that he feels he's being punished for his sins. These views, plus his

drinking, logically lead to a suicide attempt where Gilliam uses sharp angles and even a reflection of the water on Jack's face.

More ideology/male & female roles

Filmmakers present a lot of ideology, elements of God and male/female roles. For example, after Jack explains Parry's situation to Anne, Jack's girlfriend, played by Mercedes Ruehl, who refers to the grail disrespectfully as "Jesus' juice glass" – another indication that Jack does not have much of a Godly view in his life. She continues to discuss concepts and ideologies. She says that women were modeled after God because they can have babies which is similar to creation. In the sequence where Parry and Jack lay naked on the ground in Central Park, Jack how women give men strength, but Parry can tell Jack doesn't really feel that way about Anne. Later when Parry is in the hospital, Jack objectifies Anne by referring to her as a fuc**ng gorgeous girlfriend even when Jack and Anne aren't speaking to each other. Jack's feelings for Anne don't have the true, heartfelt sincerity. The ideology of guilt represents powerful emotions that deter peoples' lives and leave them unfulfilled because they're concentrating on themselves and not others – a common theme in a modern culture. Jack struggles to tell Anne and he thinks this friendship with Parry will change his fortune as well as benefiting Parry. Jack also does his 'penance' by setting up Parry's date with Lydia, played by Amanda Plummer, who later becomes, not a replacement of Parry's wife, but a chance for Parry to save himself, just like possessing the grail will redeem him and the quest to obtain the grail will save Jack. As Anne talks with Lydia before they all go to dinner, Lydia thinks she was a man who mistreated women in a formal life and is now being punished for it, just as Jack feels he's being punished for his sins. The male/female roles eventually show how true, unselfish love can conquer all adversity and truly fulfill someone's

life. Jack and Lydia protect themselves with various defenses, but find true emotion through Parry's actions.

Why New York?

Filmmakers specifically chose New York, a large modern setting full of tall buildings and complexity to show how individuals can find themselves amid so many obstacles and distractions. Three years later, after Jack saw Edwin's crime on TV, Gilliam uses ground level shot of the building to eventually transferred to the front of the video store then pans across to the bottom of a tall building to accurately show how Jack has symbolically reduced his stature in society. Instead of being at the top of an ultra-rich modern building, Jack finds himself on the first floor of a tall building working in a video store. Gilliam creates a wonderful film universe with reality and the sequence in Time Square where Perry spots Lydia. The audience hears some uplifting and hopeful music, then the lighting changes, and finally people surrounding Lydia and Perry began to dance together. Eventually the lighting those dark again and the people began walking as 'normal' as the dream sequence ends. The central park sequence where again shows the opposite views of Jack and Parry come together. Once Jack settles down again in the men are laying on the ground. Jack again refers to his biography and how people would write in his death if he died now that he would be beside a naked person in his death. More importantly Perry begins to describe the Fisher King story. He describes how the grail would heal the hearts of men and have the power to be invincible. Parry cares like the fool in this story and has the intellectual ability to help people. As Parry's journey to find the grail progresses, the first scene showing the castle house demonstrates how a lot of differences between Jack and Perry become fleshed out. It seems Parry doesn't care about consequences in a modern world, when he really does except

he's concentrating on goodness and helping people. Jack wants Parry's life to be rooted in the modern world like him, but still attempts to understand Parry and go along with his adventures only to erupt in anger when he can't take anymore. Parry never hurts Jack; Jack only hurts himself by hanging onto selfish ideals and motives that don't help anyone especially himself. For example, Parry shows Jack the castle house where the grail is being held (another symbolic symbol of Parry's concept of knighthood). Jack thinks taking the grail would get them killed, then Parry deduces that Jack cares for him and yells in the street, "I love this guy." Eventually Jack gets so infuriated that he presses Parry to snap out of his 'delusion' of getting the grail. This action brings a lot of stress on Parry which triggers the appearance of the Red Knight. Parry thinks the red knight fears Jack. At chase sequence begins to the woods as adventurous musical score plays in the background. Again a large setting like New York allows filmmakers to use the environment to a great advantage.

Character closure

The film's climax comes when Parry has another traumatic experience as the audience sees the full flashback of his wife's death. Parry is in the middle of the street with the shadow behind him symbolizing he still is carrying a lot of emotional baggage. Parry's white jacket he wore to dinner that symbolized his honesty and pure heart now looks like a straight jacket as he runs down the street as the red knight chases him. Parry ends up at the same spot he saved Jack and actually thanks his assailants for what seems to be ending his life. Parry has fought hard to be good, but it has been such a struggle that giving up becomes an easy way out of his pain and hardship. As Parry is in the hospital, Jack must hold himself accountable for his actions which Jack greatly resents. Again, Parry doesn't have to try to fix Jack. Parry just shows Jack what he

must do and leaves it to him. “I’m not God! People survive...I’m not responsible,” Jack yells and again uses a high amount of profanity. He begins to act selfish again saying he needs to figure out what he is doing and again exclaiming that he is not “the one” saying “There is nothing special about me.” Filmmakers use more dialogue to express Jack’s feelings and ideology which probably parallel many people’s ideologies today. Jack is mired in reality and won’t yet take that important step past his personal inhibitions and beliefs. Jack finally makes a crucial turn and says in tears, “If I do this, I want to do this for you.” Jack even wears Parry’s hat for inspiration. During the sequence in the castle house Jack finds himself and finds that Parry wasn’t so crazy after all. Jack sees the Red Knight on the stained glass window in the house and even Edwin with the shotgun on the staircase. The next morning in Parry’s hospital, Gilliam adds a shot of a patient in a wheelchair reading a newspaper with the headline describing how Jack’s action – mainly triggering the alarm which called the police – saved the rich castle owner’s life.

Conclusion

The overall ideology and key scene where Jack awakes in Parry’s living quarters illustrate how Jack’s time spent with Parry creates a personal responsibility and obligation to do good. Since Jack represents the majority of the audience, the filmmakers create this message through Jack’s point-of-view for a more personal, emotional experience. Jack represents the crumbling morality in the modern world full of people desperately looking for hope. People don’t like to be told how to live their lives and neither does Jack, but Parry never forces Jack. Parry simply shows Jack the way by example. It would have been very interesting to see the affects of Parry’s ideology on other people besides Jack, Lydia and Anne. Could you imagine Parry debating with a greedy stockbroker on Wall Street?