

Final Paper

The Secret to Eternal Happiness

Narrative and Genre Criticism: “Gun Shy”

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THE SECRET TO ETERNAL HAPPINESS

We live in a time of economic uncertainty where people face many stresses in their lives. We also live in a time of political uncertainty, not knowing from day to day what horrors we will face on the nightly news. “Our present societal context—the uncertainty and fear of terrorism and economic stress... Fear—of pain, of suffering, of loss, of abandonment—is central to (our) lives” (Gallagher, 2002, ¶ 2). Living with fear as such an important aspect of life is harmful and causes pain and disease in our physical bodies (Gallagher, 2002, ¶ 3). It would seem, then, that escaping from fear and stress would be a desirable goal.

People escape from the fear and stress of daily life through many forms of diversion – television, sex, books, video games, hobbies, and movies. Escaping by the use of a method that also helps us deal with these stresses in the long run benefits our emotional and physical well-being. ABC Entertainment president Steve McPherson believes that "escapism" equals success in entertainment (Pierce, 2007, ¶ 7). Comedic and satirical movies are a very common choice for escapism.

The movie *Gun Shy* was released in February 2000. It was written and directed by Eric Blakeney. *Gun Shy* starred Liam Neeson, Oliver Platt, and Sandra Bullock – who also produced the movie (Anthony, 2000, ¶ 7). Blakeney is most notable for being a writer for the original season of the television drama *Wiseguy* (Mitchell, 2000, ¶ 3). It is not surprising that his directorial debut would be a movie about gangsters. *Gun Shy* is a movie about an undercover DEA agent, embedded with Colombian drug lords, who is consumed by fear.

But, *Gun Shy* goes far beyond movie escapism. Blakeney specifically portrays values and messages that can help us overcome the fear and uncertainty of our modern lives while openly acknowledging the stress and physical symptoms it can cause. He uses the genre of a

“cop” movie to place the audience into a state of familiarity with the subject matter. Certain expectations are present based on the genre. But Blakeney twists those expectations into an almost uncomfortable reflection of the fear and uncertainty of real life by introducing unexpected outcomes to situations. He takes the audience on a strategic roller coaster ride designed to throw them off-balance and prepare them mentally to be persuaded by the value he presents. Blakeney makes his audience share the “existential jitters of the characters, keeping us pleasurably on edge” (Taylor, 2000, ¶ 6). He then delivers the message that we need to “be alive, every second we are alive” (Blakeney, 2000). And he illustrates the message through Charlie’s escape from danger time after time and Judy’s parables.

I will argue that through the use of the characters portrayed as exaggerated stereotypes and Buddhist parables, *Gun Shy* paints a persuasive picture for the audience of the desirability of the Taoist value of Wu Wei – working with the natural order of things and operating with minimal effort (Hoff, 1982, p. 69). It demonstrates how, by following this value, we can be free of the fear that dominates our lives. Additionally, I will show that the juxtaposition of what the audience expects from the “cop” genre and what is presented in *Gun Shy* is further support for following the concepts of Wu Wei.

I will begin by giving a synopsis of the movie. I will discuss the context when the movie was released followed by a summary of the narrative and genre methods of analysis. Finally I will analyze the movie using narrative and genre methods.

JUST ANOTHER GANGSTER MOVIE?

On the surface *Gun Shy* seems to be just another of the many gangster movies of the late nineties and early twenty-first century (Berardinelli, 2000, ¶ 3). It has often been compared to *Analyze This* and *The Sopranos* (Berardinelli, 2000, ¶ 3; Edelstein, 2000, ¶ 3). But while it uses

comedic action, the overall message is delivered in “Zen deadpan,” transforming the silly situations into a higher message (Edelstein, 2000, ¶ 6).

Characters

The characters are written and portrayed as stereotypes: Charlie Mayo, the undercover DEA agent (Liam Neeson); Fulvio Nesstra, the psycho-killer mafia thug (Oliver Platt); Fidel Vaillar (Jose Zuniga), the Colombian drug-lord (or rather son of a drug-lord), and his body-guard/lover, Estuvio (Michael de Lorenzo). Jason Cane is a preppy, Wall Street investor (Andrew Lauer). There are two DEA captains – Dexter Helvenshaw (Mitch Peleggi) and Lonny Ward (Louis Giambalvo), the mafia Don – Carmine Minetti (Frank Vincent), and the Don’s daughter, Gloria (Mary McCormack), who is married to Fulvio. Besides these expected characters there is the men’s therapy group – four very unhappy middle-management types who have the same kinds of stresses and complaints about their jobs that Charlie has – including Elliot (Richard Schiff), Howard (Paul Ben-Victor), Jonathan (Gregg Daniel) and Dr. Bleckner (Michael Mantell). The most unexpected and key character is nurse Judy Tipp (Sandra Bullock) – “the enema queen” (Blakeney, “Gun Shy,” 1999).

Plotline

The plot follows Charlie through an assignment as an undercover agent embedded with a Colombian drug ring, the Vaillar family. The movie opens in the Miami airport with Charlie on the floor of the men’s room, pants hanging on the divider to dry, reliving the scene of his last interaction where he was exposed as a DEA agent. His “quarry,” one of the Vaillar henchmen, trussed him up like a pheasant, naked on a silver-serving tray; face down in a pile of sliced watermelon, before the surveillance team rescued him. Charlie is a wreck who has lost his nerve (Mitchell, 2000, ¶ 3). He wants to retire and not finish the assignment, but his superiors,

specifically Dexter, convince him to stay with it to the end. The next operation is to connect Fidel Vaillar with a Wall Street investor, Jason, to launder Fidel's money. Fulvio's Don is providing the "set-up" for a fee. Charlie is in a constant state of terror that causes his Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) to flair out of control creating symptoms of uncontrolled flatulence, growling guts, and frequent diarrhea. On his way to New York, Charlie meets a psychiatrist on the plane (Dr. Bleckner). He makes an appointment and is subsequently invited to a men's group therapy session. Charlie meets these four normal guys and listens to them complain about the things that make them crazy. When it is his turn to share, he first shocks, then fascinates them with the tale of his narrow escape in Miami.

Because of the physical IBS symptoms, Dr. Bleckner refers Charlie to a Gastroenterologist. Nurse Judy Tipp administers a barium enema as part of his tests. As unlikely a meeting as that may be, the two hook-up and hit it off. Judy views healing from a more holistic approach than the doctors; she tells Charlie that she knows what he needs better than any doctor... "a great piece of ass and the secret to eternal happiness." They both laugh, but they know it is true. She attempts to teach Charlie through common sense perspective and Zen parables that fear is his only problem – it is "consuming" him (Blakeney, "Gun Shy," 1999).

Charlie, Fidel, Estuvio, Fulvio and Jason put together several meetings to discuss and put their money-laundering plan into play. Fulvio shows his out of control violence by first shooting off the testicle of Estuvio and later hitting him in the head with a bottle of champagne. At every stressful outburst, out fly the guns and everyone is ready to shoot everyone else. Charlie is most terrified of Fulvio. He is positive that Fulvio is going to kill him.

The story ends by revealing one of the DEA captains, Dexter Helvenshaw, as the man behind the whole operation. Dexter is working with the Mafia Don in a plot to steal money from

the Colombians. The finale of the movie is one of the most unpredictable scenes and also the most unbelievable for many people (Cornell & Petricelli, 1999, ¶ 5). Charlie, Fulvio, Fidel, and Estuvio meet Jason to deliver \$40 Million dollars cash for the next stock market investment to launder the money. Dexter bursts in and reveals that Charlie is with the DEA; bullets start to fly. The group therapy men pose as FBI agents to rescue Charlie and Fulvio, who have become friends, and get away with half of the \$40 Million on the table.

A PRE-9/11 WORLD

The movie was released in February 2000 in a pre-9/11 world. The 1990s had high crime rates, especially related to drugs. America was at “war on drugs,” as opposed to a war on terror. In the 1980s and 1990s, more than a million people were arrested each year on drug charges (Sullivan, 2007). We created a new cabinet position called a drug czar (Burnett, 2007). Cop shows on television and in the movies were popular. *The Sopranos* was a huge hit on HBO and *Analyze This* had just been released to rave reviews predisposing the audience to certain expectations of behavior and comedy in a mafia movie (Berardinelli, 2000, ¶ 3). By 2003, when the DVD was released for the second time, we lived in a post-9/11 world where fear was a major part of our lives. We had been attacked by terrorists on our own soil and lived in a state of constant fear that more violence could occur at any time (Gallagher, 2002, ¶ 2). We were ready for Blakeney’s message.

FISHER’S NARRATIVE PARADIGM

Walter Fisher, the originator of the narrative method of rhetorical criticism, contended, “the most basic human symbolic response to rhetorical exigencies is storytelling” (Fisher qtd. in Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 186). In other words, humans tell stories as our first response to the

need to communicate. The histories and stories of ancient civilizations are some of our most basic educational texts, such as the Bible and the Tao Te Ching.

“The concepts of the narrative paradigm help us account for what was said and why” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 186). These interrelated concepts include characters, plotline, and setting or context. Fisher’s paradigm is not limited, however, to a mere description of these elements.

The primary function of the paradigm is to offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a *reliable, trustworthy, and desirable* guide to thought and action in the world.

(Fisher qtd. in Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 188)

The paradigm is a tool to help us assess the values presented in a discourse. When using it, we are to analyze the actions of the characters within the context of the story and within the context of the audience’s experience to determine if a “reliable, trustworthy, and desirable” value has been presented and if that value provides a rationale for action. Two concepts aid us in determining whether or not the narrative does, indeed, serve as a reliable, trustworthy, and/or desirable example. These concepts are narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 190).

Narrative probability occurs when there is cohesiveness and freedom from contradiction within the context of the story (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, pp. 190-191). This conclusion can best be reached by examining the characters, the plotline, and the setting of the narrative and deciding if the story is probable. Ask the questions, “could this happen?” and “does this make sense within the context of this story?” If the answer is yes, then the narrative has probability. For

example, when watching a science fiction genre movie such as Star Wars, we accept that humans can travel through space with ease and that energy weapons are commonplace. So while that is not probable in our own time and space, we accept it as probable within the context of the story.

Narrative fidelity, on the other hand, must ring true within the context of the audience; it must correspond with our experience. It must have a “soundness of reason according to standards of formal and informal logic” as well as “relevance, consistency, and so on, of values” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, pp. 190-191). Using the above example of Star Wars, while the energy weapons and commonplace space travel do not ring-true with our experience, the story development follows expected and reasonable paths matching our standards of logic, and the value portrayed of good-versus-evil does resonate with us as a reliable, trustworthy and desirable guide to thought and action.

Narrative probability and narrative fidelity help us assess the values presented in the discourse. They help us understand the message being portrayed and highlight the motive behind the message (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 186).

ALTMAN’S GENRE CRITICISM

The parameters of an artifact are set within a genre, whether that be a western movie or a political speech. Genres give the audience context. The audience expects certain things from a detective story or a western and so the author includes those pieces (Sexton, 2007, ¶ 2). The different genres are essentially modern myths. We have common, understood stories that we retell over and over. These genres, or myths, have specific meanings. And the audience understands them without the author having to describe and retell them – they become traditions.

“These traditions are comprised of generic conventions, common pools of familiar visual, narrative and thematic traits which by mutual consent on the part

of artist and audience (the "contract") both express and confirm our notions of reality. Moreover, genre films restate, hence ritualize, our social beliefs... Thus film genres are often referred to as a modern or secular equivalent of myth for, as Bronislaw Malinowski says, myth 'expresses, enhances, and codifies belief.'"

(Grant, 1978, ¶ 4)

These myths are the foundation upon which the stories are then told. A common understanding has been established simply by presenting the story in a particular genre. These myths are reliant on the culture as well as the time in history in which they take place. They are audience based.

Richard Altman further developed the theories of genre criticism by dividing components of the rhetorical artifacts into semantic and syntactic elements. Semantic elements provide the basis for the audience to identify the genre and thus understand the underlying myth. These elements include the characters, setting, camera angles, lighting, plotline, and so on. The idea of semantics comes from the study of signification, the branch of semiotics dealing with the relations between signs and what they denote (Dictionary.com). Thus we understand specific ideas from the signs, or characteristics, in a particular genre.

Syntactic elements help explain the relationship between the myth or message and society in general. "The genre film contains mythic archetypes and essential principles, as well as the presentation and resolution of conflicts which are current in society" (McDowell). Syntactics is "that branch of modern logic that studies the various kinds of signs that occur in a system and the possible arrangements of those signs, complete abstraction being made of the meaning of the signs" (Dictionary.com). Syntactic analysis looks at all of the semantic elements and their arrangement and reaches a conclusion about the intended or actual meaning. Taken a step further, "the syntactic analysis can tell us something about the societies in which the films are

produced and consumed” (McDowell). By defining the genre, it becomes easy to identify the audience and what it expects from an artifact.

Using the genre method I will show how the juxtaposition between the expectations of the audience and what is presented serve to unbalance the perception of the audience. Through the use of the narrative method I will discuss the characters, setting and plotline showing how Blakeney intentionally creates a story that lacks coherence and further strengthens this unbalance. Finally, I will show how he creates correspondence to real life and presents a value to help overcome fear.

“COP” GENRE

Gun Shy includes all of the traditional semantic elements of a cop genre movie: guns, a show-down, car or foot chase, good guys and bad guys, bad guys are rich, successful and happy, drug dealers use drugs, and so on. These elements help define the myth that the audience is expected to subconsciously understand. This genre automatically tells the audience to root for the cop – the good guy. Since Charlie is an undercover cop, it is expected that he will engage in questionable or illegal activities. Because the movie is a comedy, it is expected that Charlie will show more of his inner personality; the audience will see his insecurities and be able to laugh at his foibles. Blakeney does not disappoint his audience. As all good cop movies must have a chase scene, *Gun Shy* provides a comedic take on the element. Charlie is leaving his hotel one morning. He notices that he is being followed. He detours into Central Park in an effort to lose his pursuer. The scene includes all of the expected elements: moving through crowds of people, crossing bridges, darting down side paths and finally going through a tunnel and lying in wait at the other side to ambush the pursuer. All of the required semantic elements are extant. But in a comedic twist, the entire “chase” is done at a leisurely pace. When Charlie ambushes his

pursuer, it turns out to be his surveillance man, Juniper. Charlie reminds Juniper that he should not let Charlie see him because if Charlie can see him, the bad guys can see him and that gets Charlie killed. Charlie then tweaks Juniper's nose and walks away. The semantics of this situation clearly give the audience certain expectations – specifically that this is a chase scene. It is likely, or at least probable, that at the end, there will be a confrontation. But the syntactic elements, taking all of the semantics into consideration, actually lead the audience to a bit of confusion. The expected confrontation is funny and not with a bad-guy. This is an example of the kinds of small twists that lead the audience into confusion.

This juxtaposition between the expectation and what is delivered builds with each individual example. The first glimpse of Fulvio Nesstra is completely within the expectations of the genre. He is face to face with a mousy little man who is obviously terrified. Fulvio is accusing him of stealing his newspaper. He asks the man what he thinks of Arabs. Fulvio explains that Arabs respect the law, because if they steal their hand will be chopped off. He demands that the man put his hand on the table. The man keeps insisting he did not steal the newspaper. But Fulvio does not care. He is going to chop off his neighbor's hand. The situation is tense with music building in the background. The camera angles are close showing the sweat on the neighbor's brow. It is raw and violent. This scene is deeply within the cop movie genre. This is the type of crazy and psychotic behavior expected from a character such as Fulvio. But Blakeney twists that perception again to put unbalance into the audience's perception. Gloria, Fulvio's wife, drops the newspaper onto the table telling Fulvio to "let the neighbor go" (Blakeney, 1999). Fulvio lets his neighbor go and turns around to ask in a perfectly calm and normal voice, "Hey, Larry. You going into the city? My car's in the shop" (Blakeney, 1999).

Time and time again Blakeney takes the audience into familiar ground and then spins the situation into unfamiliar territory. This manipulation of the myth of the cop movie and the expected traditional stories serve Blakeney's purpose of getting the audience off-balance and slightly confused. The syntactic evaluation is that we recognize the genre, but there are so many contradictions that we do not quite know where we or anyone else stands.

JUST "SHY" OF PROBABLE

The plotline in *Gun shy* is improbable within its own context. The character stereotypes are exaggerated, ridiculous events happen, and impossible situations are encountered (FilmBlather, 2000, ¶ 1). It is so extreme it is almost impossible to believe.

The characters in *Gun Shy* are portrayed as extreme stereotypes. Each is painfully aware of, yet resists, the stereotype in which they are cast. Each of the characters knows what image their role or occupation *should* have if they were on television or in the movies. This is illustrated in the scene where the main characters of Charlie, Fulvio, Jason, Fidel and Estuvio meet together for the first time. They are in a private salon at a very trendy New York City club and Jason has arranged a "party" with girls, music, drinks and food for their pleasure. Fidel gets very uptight about the whole thing. But Charlie puts him at ease. Fidel tells the group, "To tell you the truth, I'm just very sensitive to this Colombian coke-dealer stereotype and it prevents me from loosening up" (Blakeney, 1999). They have their party complete with loose women, food, and lots of alcohol.

This type of dialogue directly addresses the stereotypes that the characters are so carefully crafted into and occurs time and time again. Jason buys their first \$2 Million of "laundered money" into the soybean market, and Fidel explodes shouting that he is not going to tell his father that they are calling him a "beaner." In another conversation Fulvio tells Charlie

that he hates being a leg-breaker thug and is excruciatingly aware that he is a mafia cliché. Charlie is surprised because Fulvio is “so good at it. I thought you loved your work” (Blakeney, 1999). In fact, the bad guys in *Gun Shy* have become so sensitized by media depictions of people like themselves that they are offended at being treated like stereotypes even as they act like them. (Edelstein, 2000, ¶ 4)

As Blakeney weaves this tapestry of surface stereotypes and the characters’ acknowledgement of being trapped in them, he also inserts surprising sneak peaks into the inner personality of each of the characters that almost seems out of place. As the two Colombians are escaping in the final scene, Fidel encourages Estuvio to keep going even though he has been shot by promising that they can get “that co-op at Hudson and Perry” because they “must design clothes” (Blakeney, 2000). This illustrates their desire to be business owners and to follow their dreams, escaping the stereotype of a drug cartel family to which they were born. In an earlier scene, when Fulvio gets home late after the party at the club, his wife meets him at the door. Her greeting is that she does not care who he kills for a living or how much stuff he pushes, but if he starts that “Don Johnson Colombian party scene (she) will staple his dick to his forehead” (Blakeney, 2000). Fulvio is very angry. He reaches into the sink and grabs a large knife. He then violently throws it into the sink and washes all the dishes and scrubs the kitchen. This reaction is a contradiction of Fulvio’s behavior everywhere outside of his home. He shoots Estuvio’s testicle off for a comment about his prostate. But his wife browbeats him, and his reaction is to work out his anger by cleaning their kitchen.

From the opening scene, Blakeney makes it clear to the audience that *Gun Shy* does not conform to the ordinary. The movie opens in the Miami airport with Charlie sitting on the floor of the handicap stall of the men’s room talking wildly to himself; his pants are hanging up to dry

on the divider. He relives, via flashbacks, the near-fatal last drug deal with Fidel's partner. He is trussed up naked on a giant platter with watermelon garnishes all around him. His partner, in a similar pose, is shot. Just before Fidel's cohort kills Charlie, the surveillance team arrives killing everyone but him. Charlie remembers it as a slow-motion ballet with the drug-dealers flying through the air in beautifully choreographed arches and the columns around the fountain turning into naked girls flying away like birds. "These flashbacks are produced beautifully and artistically. They are a ballet of bullets and bodies, blended with a marble-rich mix of humor, fear and hallucination" (Anthony, 2000, ¶ 1). They serve to immediately put the audience off-balance.

Other scenes in the movie play on the ridiculous as well. The party described above ends literally in a "pissing contest." Fulvio and Estuvio standing side-by-side at the urinals in the club men's room. Estuvio obviously is having no problem relieving himself, but Fulvio is struggling, producing barely a trickle. Estuvio comments that it is probably Fulvio's prostate and that Fulvio "needs to have more sex." Fulvio's response to this is to pull out his gun, shoot off Estuvio's testicle and say, "you win the pissing contest and I win the shooting contest." Fulvio explains this behavior to Charlie by saying, "If you let a man make fun of your prostrate, where are you?" (Blakeney, 1999). This type of behavior simply does not fit with our model of reality. Since the movie is set in New York City in 1999, it is ridiculous even within its own context.

These outrageous situations and exaggerated stereotypes keep us off-balance and seem to create contradictions within our minds. The story seems to lose coherence. It appears to have a pointless storyline that plods along implausibly (Berardinelli, 2000, ¶ 4). Blakeney builds up the tension to the point where the audience may not understand what is going on anymore. Charlie,

as the audience's proxy, is also led to this state of incoherence as evidenced by his uncontrollable IBS symptoms and all-consuming fear.

CHASED BY TIGERS

Once the audience and Charlie are near the breaking point with how out of control this situation is, Blakeney begins to reach out to the audience with a different way of viewing the situation. Charlie decides to explain to Judy in exhausting detail what he does for a living and how he knows he is going to be killed at any minute. Judy's response to his fear is to tell him a story:

I think I have a great parable for this problem. There was this Buddhist monk walking through the mountains. And out of nowhere, this tiger appears. It chases him to the edge of the cliff. The monk climbs over the side and he sees below him five more tigers just waiting to eat him. Now the monk is just hanging there holding onto this little wisp of a shrub, when all of a sudden he notices a strawberry. And he smiles and says, 'Wow! What a perfect strawberry!' So he picks it and he eats it.

(Blakeney, 1999)

She then explains that it means "we're supposed to be alive, every second we're alive." And we are not really alive if we are consumed by fear. Even if we have been saved multiple times by the "Gods." We are not running around grinning from ear to ear because we are so lucky; we are popping tranquilizers and suffering the physical symptoms of stress (Blakeney, 2000). This is how the audience is introduced to the Taoist value of Wu Wei.

WU WEI

Wu Wei, pronounced *woo way*, literally means without action (Wikipedia, Wu Wei, ¶ 1).

It is often defined as “effortless doing.”

The Taoist attitude, like an underground river, emulating water, flowing easily along, was the reverse of both (Indian Buddhism and Confucianism): uninterested in ethics, believing that right behaviour sprang spontaneously from the exigencies of the moment, and in respect of the workings of the mind, by ‘action in inaction’ (wu wei) to overcome obstacles which are in fact merely a product of the mind.

(Page, 1988, p. 33)

The ultimate aim of Wu Wei is to achieve a perfect balance with the natural order to overcome perceived obstacles by not resisting.

“GUNNING” FOR FIDELITY

The goal of the Taoist, following the value of Wu Wei, is for each individual to reach that stage of spontaneity in action that comes with oneness with all of nature, indeed with the universe itself. It is a state of being in which he takes “no initiative to produce either happiness or disaster; he responds to each influence, and moves as he feels pressure, acting when he must, like a skilled yachtsman who uses the forces of nature to move towards a goal” (Page, 1988, p. 39). Blakeney uses three main tactics to guide the audience to this state of being: the metaphor of the garden as a connection to nature and simplicity, Judy’s constant encouragement of Charlie to embrace this concept, and an example from the therapy group of how things can go horribly wrong when you try to hold all your anxieties in.

The Big Apple

The setting of *Gun Shy* is New York City. The cinematographer, Tom Richmond, does a fantastic job at presenting the city with an “airy, European feel,” highlighting unusual New York buildings and “the sea of red taillights along an avenue at night” (Edelstein, 2000, ¶ 6). But the setting is most important because it offers a diverse location where the various stereotypes can easily be found and it allows Blakeney to play on the connotation of New York as a round, red fruit to subtly introduce the metaphor of gardening as a symbol of nature and simplicity (Alix, 2004, ¶ 6). Fulvio hates his life. He is a Brooklyn born Italian who grew up to marry the Don’s daughter, but he has a passion to be a farmer; Blakeney shows Fulvio on his knees in the dirt laboring over his withered tomato plants while his wife ridicules him because he is Italian and cannot even grow a tomato. Judy, on the other hand, is at peace with her life. On her first date with Charlie she takes him to a roof-top garden where they work manure into the soil and plant seeds – a striking contrast of harmony and vitality to the scene of Fulvio’s scorched tomato plants in barren soil (Blakeney, 1999). The roof-top garden scene is shot at night and is playful and fun. When Blakeney shows Fulvio’s garden it is shot under the noon sun and he goes so far as to play a vulture call in the background. Blakeney continues this metaphor right to the end of the movie. He interrupts the credits to show that in the end, Fulvio has embraced Wu Wei and is a contented tomato farmer in Italy. Through embracing his dream and accepting the simple life of a farmer, Fulvio has released his anger and fear. His garden is lush and full, indicative of a full life when one lets go of the cares of the world.

Fear is a Magnet

From the opening sequence of the movie, Charlie has had a dream to retire to an “ocean view” villa in some far-off, and undisclosed, land. He has shared his dream with the therapy

group and with his boss Lonny. Near the end of the movie it is apparent that Charlie is beginning to believe Judy that he needs to let go of his fear. They attend a Fantasy Home Show. As they enter the Moorish Villa, Judy comments that it looks like a temple. Charlie tells her, “that’s the dream, to survive this insanity and retire to a pure life” (Blakeney, 1999). As they emerge into the home show Charlie sees Fulvio and his wife. While trying to avoid them he sees Jason and his girlfriend. He is trying to drag Judy out for a hasty retreat when he almost runs into Fidel and Estuvio. He tells her that he knows she thinks he is crazy but that “for a normal person with normal consequences” it would not matter. But he is going to get killed if things go wrong. Judy disagrees and points out things “constantly go wrong and they always turn out okay.” She tells him his “fear is like a magnet, all the things you are running from are going to show up even bigger” (Blakeney, 1999). They escape to the street and find a restaurant to eat in. But all of his partners in crime have chosen the same restaurant. To further complicate matters, Elliot, the most neurotic of all of the therapy group members, is sitting right behind Charlie in the restaurant. Elliot has issues controlling outbursts in tense situations – “Corporate Tourettes” is what he calls it. He starts to blow Charlie’s cover; Charlie punches him in the face and drags him out to a taxi while Elliot’s wife is screaming at him. After paying off the wife and the waiter to not call the police, Charlie smooths things over with “the guys” and they plan their next deal.

Anxiety Released

The next scene in the movie is at group therapy. Charlie arrives late to find Elliot in tears, with broken nose and black eyes, at the center of the group. Charlie rushes over and apologizes for hurting him explaining that he was afraid Elliot was going to get him killed. But Elliot is not upset about what happened at the restaurant or that his wife left him that night, or that he got fired from his job. He had a breakdown during a meeting at work where he “called

the skills of the head of marketing into question. Then jumped onto the table screaming that she was a psycho-nigger-cunt not fit to work anywhere but a low level bureaucracy” (Blakeney, 2000). But after all of that Elliot is most upset that he hurt the feelings of a young secretary at his company who “has the face of an angel” but is African-American. And he really did not like hurting her (Blakeney, 2000). And it was all because he could not control his hatred for the head of marketing. Through this scene Blakeney makes a blatant example of what happens to people when they try to force themselves into unnatural situations of stress, fear, and anxiety.

Before the group session ends, the members ask Charlie what he is going to do in his big showdown the next day. He has finally accepted Wu Wei, believing that things will work out in their own way, regardless of his efforts. His response to them is that he is going to show up and try not to get killed. This exemplifies his transformation from fear to acceptance.

These three tools – the metaphor, Judy’s teachings, and the example from group therapy, persuade the audience that the value of Wu Wei is a “reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 188). Wu Wei is such an old concept that it has crept into the subconscious minds of even Western civilization. It is the Chinese "correspondence", or "synchronicity" theory, where the macrocosm is reflected (or even duplicated) in microcosms (Wikipedia, Wu Wei, ¶ 2). This correspondence, that we cannot help but feel because of the relevance and values that are portrayed, allows the audience to overcome the improbability of the story within its context and accept the story *within* the greater context of our lives. Blakeney associates with the audience even more by using the men’s therapy group. Charlie’s anxiety about maintaining a façade every second strikes a resonant chord with the middle-aged men in business suits who compare his job to "a life of permanent job interviews. You're on your best, phoniest behavior all the time." (Edelstein, 2000, ¶ 2) The audience can

easily see that if Fidel can leave the drug cartel to design clothes with his lover, Fulvio can be a happy tomato farmer, and Charlie can finally get the ocean view he is seeking – all by giving up the fight and going with the flow, then it is an achievable objective for those of us with less complicated lives.

CONCLUSION

Blakeney connects with the audience demonstrating correspondence with the value of Wu Wei through a metaphor, a teacher, and an example. He also used the tool of putting the audience off-balance by presenting an incoherent story that does not fit within the expectations of the genre. In the end, the audience is left with the belief that the value of Wu Wei demonstrated in *Gun Shy* is reliable, trustworthy and desirable. Through the rhetorical strategies used in *Gun Shy* we are persuaded to embrace the value of Wu Wei or else attract a miserable, uptight, go-nowhere life. If we will let go of stress and stop fighting against the natural order of things, we are more likely to live a life of happiness. We can have “the ocean view” (Blakeney, 2000).

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