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Critique Two

*The Graduate*

Director: Mike Nichols
Dustin Hoffman: Ben (Benjamin) Braddock
Anne Bancroft: Mrs. Robinson

**Plot Synopsis**

*The Graduate* centers on Benjamin Braddock, who has recently graduated from an elite eastern college. After returning to his home in California, his parents throw him a homecoming party. Although the party is meant for Ben, none of his friends are there. Instead, his home is filled with Mr. and Mrs. Braddock’s friends and business partners. During the festivities, Benjamin is constantly asked what he’s going to do with his life. However, the recent graduate is unsure what to do with his future and feels uneasy and confused about the road ahead of him.

In an attempt to escape the incessant questioning, Ben secludes himself in his room. Soon afterward, Mrs. Robinson, the wife of his father’s business partner, stumbles into Ben’s bedroom, ostensibly mistaking it for the bathroom. After a short conversation, she asks Benjamin to drive her home, telling him that her husband took the car. Once at the Robinson residence, Mrs. Robinson asks Benjamin to accompany her inside, because she is afraid of the dark house. After convincing Benjamin to enter her home, Mrs. Robinson encourages Benjamin to drink with her, which he declines. However, Mrs. Robinson is persistent and finally gets Benjamin to
accompany her upstairs to see her daughter’s (Elaine) room. While in the room, Mrs. Robinson offers herself to Benjamin, suggesting they start an affair. Alarmed, Benjamin hurries from the room. Shortly afterward, however, he decides to accept Mrs. Robinson’s offer, and they begin their affair. Mrs. Robison’s one condition is that Benjamin will stay away from her daughter Elaine and never date her.

Benjamin is forced to break this promise, because his parents insist he take Elaine on a date. After taking Elaine to a strip joint, attempting to ruin their date, he finds that he enjoys her company and wants to spend more time with her. He decides to end his affair with Mrs. Robinson and pursue Elaine. A jealous Mrs. Robinson threatens Benjamin, who tells Elaine of the affair. She is horrified and moves back to Berkley to attend school, where she ends up promising to marry Carl, a successful businessman. At the end of the film, Benjamin crashes the wedding, sweeping Elaine off to an unknown future. The two jump on a bus and quietly smile at one another as it drives off into the distance.

**Theme**

*Find your own place in the world, not the place people choose for you.*

Throughout *The Graduate*, Benjamin is constantly given advice on what to do with his future. In the beginning of the film, he is pressured by all his parents’ friends to inform them what he was going to do and what he should do with his talents. Benjamin’s father pressures him to attend graduate school, while others, like Mr. McGuire, push him to consider business partnerships: “I just want to say one word to you. One word. Are you listening? Plastics” (Nichols, Mike). Furthermore, Mrs. Robison offers herself to Benjamin, persuading him to start an affair. She manipulates Benjamin into fulfilling her needs, while keeping him away from Elaine. However,
Benjamin realizes after meeting the innocent Elaine that he must stand up for what he wants and find his own place in the world, rather than have others dictate his future.

**Symbol**

*Benjamin’s aquarium symbolizes his alienation and isolation from the rest of the world. Benjamin is trapped, just like the fish in the tank.*

Benjamin is constantly looking through glass, unable to break free from the clear box he lives in. He sees the world around him, yet he is helpless in affecting the events that take place. In the film, Benjamin is portrayed several times aimlessly drifting in his pool, which reflects his situation in life. Later, Benjamin is even dressed up in a diver’s suit by his father and sinks to the bottom of the pool, trapped, while the guests gaze at him from above. Just like the fish, he is a spectacle for onlookers, powerless to change his circumstances.

**Camera Choices in specific scene**

The opening sequence of *The Graduate* is masterfully shot, already giving the audience a feel for
Benjamin’s character and place in life. The film begins with a fade in from black to a close up of Benjamin Braddock with a far off look in his eyes, bringing the audience into the action and making them care for Benjamin (Nichols, Mike). The camera zooms out to a long shot, which establishes that Benjamin and others are passengers on a plane. However, this long shot also disconnects the audience from Benjamin, as he is lost in the sea of other faces. By using a long shot, the viewers are able to feel as lost as Benjamin.

The dominant angle of the camera in the beginning of the film is a constant high angle, which makes Benjamin appear weak and vulnerable. In just the first thirty seconds of the film, the audience is allowed to feel Ben’s uncertainty and insecurity. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Benjamin riding a moving walkway, while other pedestrians pass him (Nichols, Mike). The audience is made to feel that they too are riding the walkway, watching as others pass them by, feeling like they are unable to move. Throughout the entire opening sequence, other forces are moving Benjamin, adding to the uncertainty of his character.

Once Benjamin is home, Director Mike Nichols continues to work magic with the camera. Another close up of Benjamin shows him in front of his fish tank, another distant look in his eyes. He is trapped, and the audience can relate to his helplessness, because of the close up shot. Ben is pressured by his father to meet all the guests who have come to welcome him home. However, none of the guests are his friends. They are all old acquaintances of his parents. As he saunters downstairs, the camera maintains a continuous close up of Benjamin as he is swarmed by chatty visitors. A thin layer of sweat is visible on his forehead as he struggles to break free from the
fake smiles and shallow conversation. Benjamin is still framed at slight high angle, adding to his vulnerability and helplessness to escape the never ending question “what are you going to do with your future?” Still observing Benjamin in a close up shot, the audience experiences the young college student’s anxiety.

After escaping two talkative women, Ben is cornered by a Mr. McGuire, who immediately tries to sell him on a business opportunity of “plastics”.

Mr. McGuire is shot at a low angle, giving him a sense of power over Benjamin. He uses smooth words and a fake smile in order to persuade Benjamin to take a specific career path. Mr. McGuire promises Ben that there is plenty of money involved in the business. The scene ends with a cut to an overwhelmed Benjamin returning to his bedroom as he watches guests mingle from his upstairs window, a look of imprisonment on his face (Nichols). All of these beginning shot lengths and angles reinforce Benjamin’s character and set the pace for the rest of the film. His future is unsure, and he is living a trapped life. Within the first five minutes, the audience is able to feel all of his doubt.

Design of Visual Elements

The scene leading up to Mrs. Robison’s endeavor to seduce Benjamin and the following scene of her blatant attempt contain masterful design and visual elements. The scene begins with a cut of Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson walking to the sunporch. As Benjamin walks ahead of Mrs.
Robison, the audience is given a glimpse of the home. The scenery includes framed pictures on the walls, expensive pottery, and lavish light fixtures illuminating the seating area. The main color of the house is white, which usually suggests goodness and purity. However, the white makes the home feel empty, washed out, and sterile. As the two figures walk to the sunporch, the lighting is dim, which makes the audience unsure of what’s going to happen next. The seating area is filled with black and white accessories, creating a visual tension for the audience. For example, the fireplace is black, while the chairs are white. Furthermore, the awning outside is composed of black and white stripes, furthering the tension. There is greenery everywhere, mimicking a jungle. Mrs. Robinson is the predatory, and Benjamin is now her prey.

As she continues her attempts to seduce Benjamin, Mrs. Robinson walks behind a fully stocked bar, offering him a drink. The props include extravagant liquor containers, pristine glasses, and a gleaming ice pail. All these items handled by Mrs. Robinson reflect the opulent, yet empty life she lives. After pouring two drinks, the forward Mrs. Robinson lights a cigarette with an expensive lighter and continues to speak to Benjamin.
The costumes worn by both Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin are also worth noting. The awkward Benjamin is wearing a two-piece, black suit, accompanied by a yellow button-down and a tie. However, the tie is an interesting addition to Ben’s character. Instead of a solid color, the tie is multicolored (navy, white, and gold), suggesting an inner conflict within Benjamin. Although he seems strong in his suit, he is insecure and unsure. Mrs. Robinson, on the other hand, is a force to be reckoned with. She wears a short grey and black evening dress, while her hair is pinned up. Her dress matches the surrounding of her home – cold and sterile, lacking any sense of warmth or emotion. Furthermore, the dominant color of her clothes is black, suggesting darkness and mistrust, a fitting rendering of Mrs. Robinson’s character. However, the audience’s gaze does not stop anywhere on her clothing, which gives her a sense of strength and power. Finally, Mrs. Robinson persuades Benjamin to view Elaine’s portrait, and the subtle but powerful visual elements continue. Once in Elaine’s room, the lighting is extremely vivid, illuminating the white room. Once again, white is used in a negative way. The color does not signify purity, but the loss of Benjamin’s innocence. The room is bright, yet lifeless. Here, Mrs. Robinson sneaks into the room behind Benjamin, locks the door, and offers herself to him. Ironically, Mrs. Robinson’s naked figure is reflected in her daughter’s portrait, a poignant foreshadowing of what’s to come in Benjamin’s story. Using scenery, specifically a window, the director traps Benjamin in a visual cage, allowing the audience to feel anxious and uncomfortable.

**Hero’s Journey – Archetype and Stage**

The Hero driving the action is Benjamin, an insecure college student trying to find his place in the world. During his Hero’s Journey, he changes from “I” to “we” when he chooses Elaine over her jealous
mother, Mrs. Robison. He risks everything by telling Elaine about the affair, wanting there to be no secrets between them.

Benjamin does not know what to do with his life. He is lost and insecure when he is reacquainted with the Braddock’s old family friend, Mrs. Robinson. Mentors come in all shapes and sizes and can be a positive or negative influence on the Hero. In *The Graduate*, the Archetype of the Mentor is Mrs. Robinson. However, she is a manipulative and malicious mentor, who offers Benjamin his “Call to Adventure.” This interaction takes place in the Robinson residence. While in the room of Elaine Robinson, Mrs. Robinson offers herself to Benjamin, enticing him to start an affair. However, Benjamin rejects the call and flees the home in shock. Eventually, Benjamin “Crosses the Threshold” when he calls Mrs. Robinson in order to take her up on her offer. This Mentor/Hero interaction is important in developing Benjamin Braddock’s character, but it also serves to demonstrate that not all mentors are positive role models.

**Sound Effects**

*The Graduate* is far from a special effects extravaganza, but Director Mike Nichols still uses sound design effectively. An excellent example occurs near the beginning of the film. It is Benjamin’s birthday, but his parents have dressed him in a ridiculous diver’s outfit, forcing him to give a presentation for their guests. The camera switches to a POV shot through the diver’s mask. All
noise ceases except for Benjamin’s slow breathing. Through the mask, the audience can see Benjamin’s parents urging him to jump in the water and their guests cheer him on with fake smiles. Once Benjamin jumps in the pool, the sound of water rushes in, but his breathing is still the dominant focus. By using this effect, the audience not only feels isolated like Benjamin, but constricted and claustrophobic. As the unfortunate college student sinks to the bottom of the pool, he is nothing more than one of his plastic figurines sitting at the bottom of his aquarium.

**Music**

The main soundtrack consisted of music written by Simon and Garfunkel, making *The Graduate* the first major motion picture to incorporate contemporary music as the main soundtrack (Ruiz-Esparza 251). By using current music, Mike Nichols appealed to a younger audience. For example, Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence” is the opening track of the film. This song not only sets the mood for the entire film, but it communicates Benjamin’s inner conflict long before his character speaks a word. While the track is playing in the beginning of the movie, Benjamin sits on a plane, a lost look in his eyes.

Ironically, the same song plays at the end. Although Benjamin gets the girl in the end, he continues to live in silence. As he sits in the back seat of the bus with Elaine, he looks onward to an unknown future.
Editing

Not only does the film flow effortlessly, but editing is used to skirt around the production code. For example, the scene where Mrs. Robinson offers herself to Benjamin is cleverly edited. Since the Production Code didn’t allow nudity, Mike Nichols shot the entire sequence from Benjamin’s point of view. His eyes never rested completely on Mrs. Robinson’s naked form. He is extremely uncomfortable, his eyes nervously darting back and forth. Jump cuts are utilized to show Mrs. Robinson’s stomach, her bra tan line, and her slightly bare chest from Benjamin’s eyes, but the audience never sees Mrs. Robinson’s entire body. Through the use of constant cuts, the audience is able to feel uncomfortable, awkward, and anxious to leave the presence of Mrs. Robinson.

Goethe’s Three Questions

What was the artist trying to do?

Director Mike Nichols was attempting to show an aimless and apathetic generation through the eyes of an insecure college student. Furthermore, he was encouraging a younger generation to pursue their own path, rather than have it dictated for them. Nichols thought it was important for younger generations to question the older generation’s morals and values. The Graduate opened in 1967, a when America was in the throes of the Vietnam War. The age of the teenager was in its infancy as young people began to think about what they wanted in their futures. In generations past, children quickly transitioned to adults and lived the life that their parents did. However, in the 1960s the younger generation was realizing what they wanted differed from their parents’ plans. As a young filmmaker, Mike Nichols was the first to challenge the Hollywood norm with his film The Graduate, a task no one had attempted before. However, many appreciated Nichols’ challenges to social norms. Shortly after Nichols’ death in 2014,
Author and writer for Los Angeles Daily News Rob Lowman stated that, “As a director, he often took on big projects, from Edward Albee’s explosive portrayal of marriage in the 1966 film “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” — starring the “it” couple of the time, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton — to Tony Kushner’s epic “Angels in America,” about the AIDS epidemic. But what made Nichols such a masterful director was his ability to make the small personal moments memorable” (Lowman). His theme of finding oneself and forging your own destiny spoke to a young generation with no voice. His film had such an impact it ended the Production Code, a momentous breakthrough in film history (Ruiz-Esparza 250-251).

How well did he do it?

Mike Nichols is a master behind the camera. It’s hard to believe that The Graduate was only his second film, his first being Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf? (IMDb.com). The Graduate earned Nichols an Oscar for Best Director (IMDb.com). He uses rich imagery and subtle, visual metaphors to communicate to his audience. Many would agree with Author Rob Lowman when he stated, “Without being preachy or obvious, in a few seconds Nichols captured the uneasiness young people of any generation have felt about the future” (Lowman). For example, Nichols’ use of glass and water is remarkable. The way he “traps” Benjamin behind glass is subtle, but meaningful.

The casting of Dustin Hoffman as Benjamin and Anne Bancroft as Mrs. Robinson added to the authenticity of the film. Although Hoffman was not the first choice for Benjamin (Robert Redford was in the running), nobody could have portrayed the character better. Hoffman depicts Benjamin’s nervous, anxious, and awkward mannerisms to perfection. By using slightly high angles, Benjamin is always depicted as vulnerable and unsure (Nichols). Many viewers also appreciated Anne Bancroft’s performance. Although she is a manipulative and malicious
woman, the audience can’t take their eyes off her. When she walks into a room, everyone holds their breath. While trying to seduce Benjamin, she is shot in a high angle, giving her power and strength. Nichols’ decision to use contemporary music is also brilliant (IMDb.com). Using Simon and Garfunkel’s song “Sound of Silence” in the beginning of the film sets the tempo for the entire film. Late American film critic Roger Ebert eloquently summed up *The Graduate* by stating, “Nichols stays on top of his material. He never pauses to make sure we're getting the point. He never explains for the slow-witted. He never apologizes. . . "The Graduate" is a success and Benjamin's acute honesty and embarrassment are so accurately drawn that we hardly know whether to laugh or to look inside ourselves” (Ebert).

**Was it worth doing?**

*The Graduate* is a subtle and rich masterpiece. Director Mike Nichols delivered his message with precision and poise. The design of the film was beautiful, and every shot of the film had a purpose. The film held my attention the entire time, and I appreciated all of Mike Nichols’ film techniques and creative camera angles. Although I did not relate to the film’s hero on a personal level, I appreciated Hoffman’s portrayal of his character. He made me laugh and cringe simultaneously. However, I still cared about what happened to him in the end. Once *The Graduate*’s credits rolled, I actually felt pity for Benjamin. He was lost in the beginning of the film and remains lost in the end. He realizes that there’s more to life, but the future is still unknown. I also loved the music. The haphazard fading in and out of the music supported the tone of the film. I would recommend this movie to anyone, film lovers and casual viewers alike. Not only was this a tremendous film, but it's a staple in Hollywood history.
Works Cited


