

The Graduate

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The A List: The National Society of Film Critics'

There are two versions of Mike Nichols's "The Graduate," and only one of those is a brilliant, scalding portrait of an aimless college graduate adrift in a world he rejects but doesn't have the energy or know-how to escape. The other version, equally funny but nearly as aimless as Benjamin Braddock himself, is the pan-and-scan version made to fit on TV screens. See this movie widescreen or letterboxed, or don't see it at all.



Dustin Hoffman tries to remain stoic under the seductive eye of Anne Bancroft as Mrs. Robinson.
Courtesy Library of Congress

In the opening scene of the landmark 1967 film, Ben (Dustin Hoffman in his first star-making role) arrives at the airport, home from college. While the Simon and Garfunkel soundtrack plays the eerily apt "The Sounds of Silence," the camera begins its tireless depiction of Ben as isolated, mute, choked off from the world. First he is a face in a crowd on the airplane. Then he glides along passively on an escalator, as in life, nudged to the far right of the screen with vast emptiness stretching before him. (Except, of course, in the pan-and-scan version, in which he is oddly front and center in close-up.)

"What are you going to do now?" he is asked at the party his parents throw to show him off to the neighbors. "I'm going to go upstairs," he says, misunderstanding. The neighbor clarifies that the question is about Ben's future, a topic of unending speculation and sly jibes throughout the movie. "I want it to be... different," he says in the nearly toneless, ultra-deadpan, sleepwalking style that Hoffman used to such unique comic effect.

Different, indeed. But different, how? All that summer, Ben drifts in his parents' pool. His face is refracted by glass windows and the murky, gurgling depths of his fish tank. Wearing a diving suit and mask in which his father has mummified him for his birthday, he stands submerged in the pool, a deep-sea creature mired in the shallow waters of his upbringing. Better down there than among the chattering idiots by poolside.

The most specific advice Ben gets regarding his future (unsolicited, of course, but offered with the wink-nudge

of a hot stock tip) is also the most general, frightening, and soulless—"plastics!"—which became a watchword for dreary conformity.

The late 1960s was a time of great social upheaval in America, a time of drugs, antiwar demonstrations, the sexual revolution, the splitting of society along generational and political lines. Ben is almost untouched by this. He's a virgin when Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), his father's partner's wife, seduces him in take-no-prisoners style. He espouses no cause and feels nothing as he floats in the amniotic fluid of that summer of indecision between college and "real life." The movie expressed the confusion felt at the time by a population caught between the old school and the heady possibilities of a new one. When Mrs. Robinson tells her daughter, Elaine (Katherine Ross), that it's "too late" for her to run off with Ben and grab life by the throat, Elaine retorts, "Not for me!" Life may have passed by the middle-aged, alcoholic Mrs. Robinson, who gave up art studies to have an unplanned baby and a shotgun wedding, but the Elaines and Bens of the world still had choices, if only their parents would give them enough leash.

The camera continues to describe and comically exaggerate Ben's alienation. He is almost always alone onscreen, to the right of the composition, with a great expanse of emptiness to his left. Only later when he finally has a goal he can believe in, claiming Elaine even though she is about to be married, is Ben finally on the left side of the screen, no longer drifting, now filled with purpose, rushing toward the destiny he has chosen.

At the end of the film, he shares the frame equally with Elaine on the back of the bus as they move ahead into an uncertain future. He has found a kindred spirit with whom to share his isolation. But the ending is unsettling, if not downright pessimistic. What, exactly, are they running to? Probably plastics and a bad marriage. They've been together all of a few minutes, and already there are the sounds of silence between them.

Ben's quest for meaning in his life is the theme of the movie, but the fun of it resides in his initially bumbling affair with Elaine's mother, who Ben continues to refer to as "Mrs. Robinson" even when in bed together. Bancroft was only in her mid-thirties when she played Mrs. Robinson, which accounts for the shapeliness of her stockinged leg, through the crook of which we can see Ben, typically panicked. Hoffman was close to thirty when he was cast. "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me... aren't you?" he falters before she sets the ground rules for what will be a wordless, unengaging affair that leaves Ben feeling even more alone than before. "We're gonna do this thing, we're gonna have a conversation!" he insists during one encounter as she keeps trying to turn out the light.

The comedy seems effortless, thanks to several elements, not the least of which was director Nichols's long-time comedy association with Elaine May, which honed his timing and his wicked, absurdist, society-skewing sense of humor. With intellectual precision, Nichols rehearsed his actors for three weeks prior to filming in such detail that they could have "taken it on the road," as one of the team later recalled. Notice the well-oiled comic bit when Ben tries to stop the hotel clerk (Buck Henry) from summoning the bellman: Henry hits the bell; Hoffman flattens the bell to silence it; Henry slaps at the bell again but gets Hoffman's hand instead; Hoffman withdraws his hand sheepishly and each gives the other a look. Rat tat tat tat, considering that most of the movie moves like Benjamin underwater in his wetsuit.

The casting was also fortuitous. Co-screenwriter Buck Henry has said that they were initially going for an all-American look, where Ronald Reagan and Doris Day could perhaps play Ben's parents and Robert Redford

and Candice Bergen could play Ben and Elaine. They referred to this early dream casting as "the family of surfboards," a very blond, square-jawed bunch of Southern Californians who seemingly had it all. Hoffman, who had thought he was destined to play ethnic actors because of his height, looks, and New York theater base, was inspired casting, like a genetic throwback in the middle of this perfect family, or a baby switched at birth, a cuckoo egg left in a red warbler's nest, someone who just couldn't fit in. He was part of a wave of leading actors of the 1970s with character-actor faces, like Al Pacino and Robert De Niro.

Occasionally, Nichols would leave in something improvised by the actors. When Ben startles Mrs. Robinson by putting his hand on her breast, he walks off and sets to banging his head against the hotel room's wall. Nichols thought that was just so Ben, consternated and reprimanding himself, but Hoffman had started cracking up at Bancroft's stunned response and he was actually trying to get a hold of himself without breaking character. It stayed in the film. And that little squeak of anxiety Ben occasionally emits is something Hoffman observed in his older brother.

Nichols sometimes gets credit for things that were beyond his control—the Christ imagery, for example, as Ben spreads his arms to tap against the church window as he bellows for Elaine. That was simply, according to Hoffman, the only way to reassure the people who had agreed to the location shoot that he wouldn't break the glass. The filmmakers thought it a cheesy compromise at the time, but Nichols whispered to Hoffman, "Make it work!" He did.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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