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Hollywood Cinema: 1960s to Present

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Vigilating Benjamin Braddock

The Graduate (Nichols, 1967) is a 60's Hollywood classic that has withstood the test of time with its iconic characters and story. In his path of finding his place as a new college graduate, Benjamin Braddock confronts the struggles of being a youth in a society dominated by his parent generation, while having an affair with his father's business partner's wife Mrs. Robinson. Through the story of Ben, the film confronts the values of old Hollywood cinema and the American society in the 60s dominated by the parent generation of the baby boomers.

The famous opening title sequence shows Ben standing on the magic carpet in the airport being sent to the other side of the walkway. In the following shot, we see his luggage also being sent through the belt, before Ben picks it up. The parallel between Ben and his luggage suggests his passivity and confusion in the object-like way of moving through space. This comparison shows not only the mood of people in the 60s counterculture movement in the despair social environment, but also the 60s materialism. The objectification of Ben through the cinematic gaze continues in the following scene of his graduation party, where the camera and the adults serve as surveillance within the sphere of the house. The camera performs a tracking shot following Ben around the house, where he receives overwhelming attention from family friends. The tracking shot is close up to Ben's face, which is in the majority of the shot is surrounded by many adults' faces in an uncomfortably upclose way. The parent generation creates a community that

pressures Ben to think about his future, but they cannot get an answer out of Ben who cannot figure out anything in being constantly stared at.

The product of Ben being the speculation of his parent generation is his nihilism and counter-social behaviors. Pheasant Kelly argues in his article "Institutions, Abjection and Subjectivity" that chaos is the individual's to attempt to break their identity as "inmate" of the social institution. When Ben goes to the hotel for the first time, he causes chaos though, unconventionally, passivity. When he talks to the elderlies who think he is supposed to work for them, he did not deny anything that they say until he has to go, which causes chaos because it surprised the elderlies. "I don't understand", one of them exclaims as Ben threads through the small crowd of them surrounding him. By being passive, Ben is negating his existence and denying his identity as a youth in the hotel populated by the elderlies. In the film especially in Ben's house parties, the older generations are all portrayed as well off and treating Ben like a child. When his father talks about him, he addresses him as "this boy, oh I'm sorry, this young man". In effect, the audience sympathizes with Ben on the weirdly premature way he is being treated and the will of defying it, which is only aggravated even more with Ben's passivity in the beginning. Of course only the youth generation makes sense to the audience because it is the voice of this countercultural film which defies the dated expectations of the lavishly made old Hollywood cinema that led to the downfall of the studio systems. But the old Hollywood studio system can be overwhelming as it happened in film history when it took place instead of other alternative waves, therefore Ben feels overwhelmed surrounded by people of that kind of institution. The camera reflects Ben's mentality of wanting to become invisible in the scene where he is at the front desk of the hotel. The camera adapts Ben's point of view, looking at the

front desk staff though a part of the desk that he tries to hide behind. These nihilistic behaviors of Ben break the social norm, which leads to chaos.

Although violence and suffering, themes common in 60s counterculture films do not directly pertain to *The Graduate*, the themes are suggested in various means. When Mrs. Robinson threatens Benjamin to not see Elaine ever again in the car. In the last few scenes of the film, we see Ben painfully running on the road chasing the bus and rushing to the wedding. The most direct way that the themes of violence and suffering appear in the film is when Elaine screams at Ben's parents' friend's house near Berkeley which causes the neighbors to think it is violent. On that scene where the neighbors all come to Ben's room to see if she is okay, the film makes a commentary on the theme. On the one hand, Ben did not use violence on Elaine (or perhaps one can argue that it is a delayed effect of emotional violence when he has the affair with Mrs. Robinson) but Elaine overreacts to create the illusion of it. On the other hand, it is almost comical how responsive that the neighbors are to the chance of witnessing violence. Instead of telling them to keep it down and going back to their own places, the neighbors crowd up against the door trying to check up on what is going on. The commentary can be a criticism of the cinema as an art form, in which the studio and the audience willingly engage in the production and consumption of the guilty pleasure that is not necessarily pleasant in itself, but the purpose of the Hollywood film industry is more to generate revenue than to produce films with necessarily good taste. That is not to say that the film is poorly made. In fact, the theme of bad taste is isolated into a thematic statement because of how well-produced the rest of the film is, especially when Ben's awkward personality and lifestyle is contrasted with the elegance of the social environments and the rest of the people in the film.

In the capitalist and materialistic environment, the relationship between filmmaker and the audience has become that of the exploiter and the exploited, instead of the expresser and appreciator. However, this new kind of relationship does in fact encourage more film productions, especially when it is about making the most of the buck instead of spending a lot of bucks with the expectations of making a great film. The criticism of capitalism is also true in the film's discussion on college. The parents spend a lot of money for Ben and Elaine to go to college, and yet this film is about Ben's confusion about his career and future despite him having graduated from college. On top of that, there is a strange inconsistency between Ben's lifestyle of scuba-diving in home-owned pool, driving his race car and him not having a job or a future. Being on the receiving end of the materialistic relationship between him and his parents, Ben is trapped in the family institution in which he has to fulfill the responsibilities of being a son and makes him lost in his own direction of life. Ben still lives with his parents after college, despite them nagging about his future and forcing him to go on a date with Elaine, because he does not have the means to be financially independent, especially when he has a lavish standard of living chilling in the pool in his parents' house. In the dimension between generations in the 60s, money creates the family institution that traps and pacifies those who do not have money or power.

Mrs. Robinson's backstory supports the film's criticism on the cinematic art. As the audiences are told in one scene with Ben and Mrs. Robinson in the hotel, Mrs. Robinson used to study art in college but now she hates it. In a way, Mrs. Robinson symbolizes the old Hollywood aesthetics under the failed studio system, in which they want to make everything look pretty and in good taste, but that kind of art does not survive in the mass audience because it does not respond to the changes in the current society financially and politically, even though it is attractive enough to those who know art to be nostalgic. On the contrary, Benjamin's

youthfulness, awkwardness, and confusion sympathize with the young baby boomer generation. The juxtaposition of Ben and Mrs. Robinson, them crossing paths and coming together, suggest the breaking of divisional boundaries between the two generations, between the good taste and the bad taste, and eventually to reach the realization of concentric nihilism, in which Mrs. Robinson and Ben are equally uncertain about their futures. Beneath the facade of Mrs. Robinson who dresses as if she is well-off and has a great family life with her husband and daughter like almost all other grown-ups in the film, she is uncertain about her passion or her marriage. The differences in the facade of the two generations symbolize the difference between the mainstream and counterculture in American society in the 60s, with two seemingly different goals to the same end of the generally older generation who wants to work hard and the hippie youths who want to live a life of passivity and peace, each group does so because of the emptiness they feel under the economic and political circumstance. However, the wedding scene in the end suggests that these two cultures can never come together, because the success of counterculture is the death of it. Ben gains the strength to eventually stand up for himself because of the pressure that he receives from the parent generation, but when he is on his own again with Elaine on the bus in the end, both characters again drift to the uncertainty in their futures, as told by their facial expressions.

Even though the characters are still uncertain about their futures at the end of the film, the film has established through Mrs. Robinson that this is an inescapable fact that does not change as people age. However, Benjamin gains his independence and the adult-like elegance from the moment that he decides to own up to himself as an individual when he tells Elaine about his affair with Mrs. Robinson. Before that point, the film is filled with abrupt cuts such as when him jumping onto the float which cuts into him jumping onto Mrs. Robinson in bed, and when there

is a sudden cut into Ben driving Elaine around in the race car at a ridiculous speed. A slow fade is first used on the scene where Mrs. Robinson stands in the hallway with vulnerability and defeat and says "goodbye Benjamin". This is when the camera first acknowledges that the audience is supposed to keep this scene in mind as they move to the next scene, it is when the viewing experience first gained awareness instead of drifting from shot to shot. From this point on, multiple slow fades are used to express the ambivalence and pain inside Benjamin, a side that the audience has never seen before because they are still sympathizing with Ben's confusion and the shock that he experiences from the happenings in his life.

In the camera's speculation of Benjamin, the audience can both sympathize and speculate his experience as a young adult in the 60s. *The Graduate* is not a film about the coming of age, but instead, it dismisses the boundary of age and takes on a nihilistic point of view on people's lives in the capitalistic society and the identity of film as a media.

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