

Review  
by  
Andrew Sarris

*The Graduate* has been adapted by Mike Nichols, Buck Henry, and Calder Willingham from a novel of the same title by Charles Webb. I like the movie much better than the book, but I had no idea how literally faithful the screenplay was to its source. Charles Webb seems to be the forgotten man in all the publicity, even though 80 percent or more of the dialogue comes right out of the book. I recently listened to some knowledgeable people parceling out writing credit to Nichols, Henry, and Willingham as if Webb had never existed, as if the quality of the film were predetermined by the quality of its script, and as if the mystique of the director counted for naught. These knowledgeable people should read the Webb novel, which reads more like a screenplay than any novel since John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Webb's book is almost all dialogue, with the intermittent straight prose passage functioning as visual tips for the director. That is not to say that Nichols, Henry, and Willingham are not entitled to their credits, but merely that their contributions pertain more to nuance than substance, more to the how than the what.

*The Graduate*, more than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is Mike Nichols' diploma as a director. Whereas Nichols merely transferred Albee, he actually transcends Webb. *The Graduate* is a director's picture not because Nichols wrote all the dialogue and acted out all the parts and sang and composed all the songs under the double pseudonym of Simon and Garfunkel and directed the cinematography under the alias of Robert Surtees, et cetera, *ad infinitum*, ad credit sheetum. *The Graduate* is a director's picture because even its mistakes are the proofs of a personal style.

Style is more an attitude toward things than the things themselves. It can be a raised eyebrow or a nervous smile or a pair of shrugged shoulders. It can even be an averted glance. By playing down some of the more offensive qualities of the book, Nichols expresses his own attitude toward the material. The main trouble with the book is its reduction of the world to the ridiculous scale of an overgrown and outdated Holden Caulfield. The catcher in the rye has been perverted by time and affectation into a pitcher of the wry. Charles Webb's Benjamin Braddock expresses himself with a monosyllabic smugness that becomes maddeningly self-indulgent as the book unravels into slapstick passion. Ben even goes "on the road" for a brief period to demonstrate his beatification at the expense of the beatniks. He is superior to his pathetic parents and adults generally. He is kind to the wife of his father's law partner even though she seduces him with cold-bloodedly calculating carnality. Ben then falls in love with Elaine, his mistress' daughter, and makes her marry him through the sheer persistence of his pursuit.

The screenplay has been improved by a series of little changes and omissions constituting a pattern of discretion and abstraction. the hero is made less bumptious, the predatory wife less calculating, the sensitive daughter less passive. The "on the road" passage is omitted from the movie, and the recurring parental admonitions are reduced in number

and intensity. The very end of the movie is apparently the result of an anti-cliché improvisation. In the book Ben interrupts Elaine's wedding (to another) before the troths have been plighted or the plights have been trothed or what have you. In the movie the bride kisses the groom before Ben can disrupt the proceeding, but the bride runs off just the same. And this little change makes all the difference in dramatizing the triumph of people over proceedings. An entire genre of Hollywood movies had been constructed upon the suspenseful chase-to-the-altar proposition that what God hath joined together no studio scriptwriter could put asunder. The minister could turn out to be an imposter, the bridegroom a bigamist, but once the vows were taken, that was the old ball game. *The Graduate* not only shatters this monogamous mythology; it does so in the name of a truer love.

The emotional elevation of the film is due in no small measure to the extraordinarily engaging performances of Anne Bancroft as the wife-mother-mistress, Dustin Hoffman as the lumbering Lancelot, and Katherine Ross as his fair Elaine. Nichols is at his best in getting new readings out of old lines and thus lightening potentially heavy scenes. The director is at his worst when the eclecticism of his visual style gets out of hand. The opening sequence of bobbing, tracking, lurching heads in nightmarishly mobile close-ups looks like an "homage" to Fellini's *8 1/2*. A rain drenched Anne Bancroft splattered against a starkly white wall evokes images in *La Notte*. The languorous lyricism of Ben at Berkeley seems derivative of Varda's *Le Bonhuer* and even some of John Korty's landscape work in the same region. Unfortunately, the cultural climate is such that the intelligent prose cinema of Mike Nichols tries to become the intellectual-poetic cinema of Michelangelo Nichols. Still, I was with *The Graduate* all the way because I responded fully to its romantic feelings, and my afterthoughts are even kinder to a movie that, unlike *Morgan*, didn't cop out in the name of "sanity." Some people have complained that the Bancroft-Hoffman relationship is more compelling than the subsequent Ross-Hoffman relationship [see Pauline Kael review]. I don't agree. As Stravinsky once observed, it is easier to be interesting with dissonance than consonance. Similarly, it is easier to be interesting with an unconventional sexual relationship than with a conventional love pairing. *The Graduate* is moving precisely because its hero passes from a premature maturity to an innocence regained, an idealism reconfirmed. That he is so much out of his time and place makes him more of an individual and less of a type. Even the overdone caricatures that surround the three principals cannot diminish the cruel beauty of this love story.

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