

# THE GRADUATE

Directed by Mike Nichols  
Produced by Lawrence Turman  
Distributed by Embassy Pictures  
Released in 1967

**W***ho's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* heralded the arrival of a new talent, whose ability to switch from theater to screen direction recalled the multi-talented Orson Welles and Elia Kazan. Mike Nichols's second movie is even better than his first.

*The Graduate* is, perhaps, the definitive coming-of-age film. It concerns Benjamin Braddock, an outstanding college student who returns home to California and is confronted with grandiose expectations. We see everything from his perspective. His parents and their similarly well-to-do peers expect great things from Ben, but Ben wants his life to be something special, meaning he doesn't want to end up like his father. His dad doesn't care. At a party held in his honor (which he works prodigiously to avoid) Ben begins talking to the wife of his father's law partner, known in the film as only 'Mrs. Robinson.' Asking Benjamin to drive her home, she attempts to seduce him. She fails. But after the humiliation of a birthday party hosted by his parents, Benjamin calls Mrs. Robinson and agrees to an affair. Ignoring his burgeoning shame, Mrs. Robinson manipulates Benjamin into having sex by characterizing his hesitancy as a by-product of his inexperience with women.

Over the course of the summer, Benjamin grows disgusted by the affair. What Benjamin may have started to be a 'real man' has reduced him to an overgrown child. His mother suspects something is up, but Ben won't talk straight to her. His guilt over Mrs. Robinson is compounded because his mother and Mrs. Robinson are similarly attractive and dress the same. So adultery takes on the connotations of incest. He and Mrs. Robinson have a bitter fight over her disregard for him as anything but a sex object. But Ben is guilty of the same thing, so their affair continues, each partner equally dispassionate.

The Robinsons' extraordinarily beautiful daughter returns from Berkeley. Ben's father manipulates him into taking her out on a date. Mrs. Robinson vociferously objects. Having promised his lover that he would never date her daughter, Benjamin tries to sabotage the outing by taking Elaine to a strip club. Subjected to gross humiliation, Benjamin apologizes and they kiss. The date begins anew, and the two discover a lot of common ground. Ben tells her he had an affair with a 'married woman.' The next day Ben hopes to take her out again, but Mrs. Robinson threatens to expose everything. Ben beats her to it, dumping the whole scandal on Elaine. And so that's it; Elaine goes back to school and the Robinson family splits apart. After some time, Benjamin tracks down Elaine, they deal with the past and talk of marriage. But Mr. Robinson intervenes, pulls Elaine out of school and compels her to marry a college beau. Driving up and down California, Ben succeeds in locating the church, but he's too late to stop the wedding. Calling out to his love, Elaine abandons her new husband and her parents. After an extraordinary confrontation, Elaine and Ben succeed in breaking out of the church. Finding refuge on a bus, and without a word, their initial glee yields to disenchantment. She looks to him for direction, but he just stares blankly ahead. There's no telling where this bus is headed.

What is so extraordinary about Mike Nichols's direction is his facility with images. The dialogue is spot-on, but a stage director, naturally, has an ear for that. It's the way Nichols uses the camera that astounds. Some shots are merely visual flourishes, but a greater number supplement and, at times, transform the meaning of the dialogue. Given that the entire film is seen from Benjamin's perspective, these images convey what dialogue cannot. (Thankfully) denied voice-overs, we still know what Benjamin thinks and feels. The imagery does the talking. Most exceptional is the first montage, a profound visual representation of loneliness, complemented aurally by Simon & Garfunkel.

When first we see Benjamin, he is staring into space. The camera pulls back to reveal that Ben is one of many on an airplane. They look just as put-out as he does. This is the first of many shots dealing with the paradox of Ben's isolation and his desire to secure Individuality. But even as he deals, in isolation, with his struggle to be special, we see his concerns as a universal struggle. The shots convey all of this. Twice Ben is shown looking into his fish tank, a nice visual shorthand of self-perception and deep thought. Twice he is isolated at his own parties. At the second party, embarrassed at the ridiculousness of parading about in new scuba gear, Ben submits to the exhortations of his parents and jumps into the pool. As the assembled throng (none of them his own friends) cheer and holler, Ben weightlessly stands at the pool's bottom, half a world away. He is the reluctant juvenile. He is the perpetual juvenile. The affair was launched by him to change just that. But his dependency and immaturity only take on a darker air as the summer disintegrates around him.

The physical connection he makes with Mrs. Robinson and the spiritual one with her daughter alleviate his separateness, but with the Robinson family crumbling, Benjamin stands again on his own. Driving to Berkeley, one remarkable shot focuses on Benjamin in his Alfa Romero on the Bay Bridge—we pull back and he is lost amidst the steel cables and traffic—he wants to be unique, but he is just like everyone else, just a pitiable ant. However, he is not alone in his search for purpose. When he walks onto the Berkeley campus he is all alone, but suddenly he is surrounded by students on every side. Each is trying to answer the same questions as Ben.

These vague problems of purposelessness were widely shared at the time of the film's release in 1967. Before WWII few could identify with Ben's concerns. Hardly anyone had money like the Braddocks, careers were rarely chosen, but were thrust on uneducated kids. And they weren't Careers, they were Jobs. But two things changed—lots of families had money like the Braddocks by 1967, and parents' expectations for their kids had mushroomed proportionately. Such is the mental anguish of the new leisure class. Before, there was never time to worry about Life. But now, with people enjoying material abundance, the honest work of old has been replaced by worry.

The first time we see Ben smoking is just after he has summoned Mrs. Robinson to the hotel. Nervous, he finally sits himself down in the hotel bar. The camera is fixed on Ben's reflection in the glass table top. Mrs. Robinson appears, and between their heads is an ash tray. Things progress, and his attempt to initiate love-making hilariously backfires; he starts kissing

Mrs. Robinson before she's finished exhaling her cigarette smoke. Cigarettes represent corruption in *The Graduate*. Pointedly, Benjamin does not smoke at the film's beginning. He is a track star—healthful, innocent, ignorant, and pure. But Mrs. Robinson smokes constantly.

The purpose of the many televisions is a touch more obscure than the cigarettes, but their frequent appearances in conjunction with Mrs. Robinson demand interpretation.

Television first makes its mark in the film during the montage that conveys the passage of the affair. In one shot, the camera rests in close-up on Ben's expressionless face, pulling back to show a headboard behind him and a television in front. Mrs. Robinson crosses in front of the TV and leaves the room without a word of farewell. After the montage, during their big fight over Elaine, as Ben tries to summon the willpower to leave, Mrs. Robinson feigns indifference. Putting her hosiery back on, her legs are prominently (and famously) displayed in the foreground. Ben's lust persuades him to stay. He stands next to a television set, which sits dispassionately silent. A third instance of television typology occurs when Ben is waiting to take Elaine out on a date. He and Mrs. Robinson argue over this turn of events. She won't look at him but keeps her eyes fixed on the very loud television that was silent witness to her first attempts at seduction many weeks before.

Sometimes the way the camera is utilized becomes a message in itself. In one of the most original, expressive shots in all of cinema, Elaine realizes that Benjamin is telling her that his paramour was her mother. The camera focuses on Mrs. Robinson, out in the hall, who is overhearing Ben's explanation. As Mrs. Robinson steps away, Elaine, in the foreground, remains blurry. Holding the shot for several seconds, director Nichols slowly alters the depth of field. Once we can see Elaine clearly, we know she has grasped the truth. The shot also conveys the shift of Benjamin's focus from Mrs. Robinson to Elaine. Mrs. Robinson is out of the picture, and though Elaine is incredibly upset, she's the only person in the world for Ben.

Completing the sequence with flair, we're given a close-up of Mrs. Robinson. The camera tracks back, revealing her isolated in the hallway's corner, clad in guilty black amidst the sparkling white of the interior. This shot expresses the isolation she feels now, ostracized from her family.

In the next few minutes, with another remarkable montage, we see the breakdown of a family without a word of dialogue. The best shot is where Mrs. Robinson tries to secure a gesture of farewell from her husband and daughter as they pull out of the driveway. She expectantly steps forward, but the car pulls away. She is to them a nonentity.

Jumping ahead in the film, when Ben tries to attract Elaine's attention at the wedding, Elaine, deeply torn, looks to her mother and father. They sit glowering at Benjamin with unalloyed hatred, mouthing silent invective. She looks to her husband. His anger is directed at Elaine. He looks down and spews hate right in her face. The point-of-view-shots are devastating and we instantly understand what Elaine is thinking—Ben may not be the real draw here, but he is a means of escape from these despicable characters.

Further visual enlightenment is developed in the juxtaposition of Elaine and her mother. When Mrs. Robinson, after systematically breaking down Benjamin's defenses, is first seen naked, she appears as a reflection in Elaine's portrait. Later, after Ben has come to collect Elaine

for another date, we think Elaine is running down to the car through the rain, but it is actually Mrs. Robinson.

Mrs. Robinson is continually presented as a model of decay, contrasted with Elaine who is seen as virtuous and kind. Both are attractive, but a lifetime of regret registers in Mrs. Robinson's bearing. No shot in the film better conveys the destruction of adultery than the one that concludes the big fight between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson in the hotel room. Far apart, they've turned away from each other as they undress with visible disdain, proceeding languidly. Compare this to the scene where Ben takes Elaine to the strip bar. Ben takes a seat, but Elaine hesitates, standing between Benjamin and the stripper. She's questioning his decision to bring her there but also, symbolically, trying to protect her date from this lasciviousness. Relenting, she sits, numb. Ben seems not to care, keeping his sunglasses on. The stripper embarrasses Elaine in a most degrading manner. Elaine cries silently. Finally Benjamin takes off his glasses and shoos away the performer. From there on the two are inseparable. Though the scene does have some dialogue, its entire meaning can be grasped on a visual level. The whole mess with Mrs. Robinson has plunged Benjamin into darkness. Elaine is pure, Benjamin's best shot at escaping his self-loathing. And she is, on so many levels, the ideal representation of beauty. Stalking her at UC-Berkeley, one shot plunges Benjamin in deep shadow as Elaine walks by in the light, oblivious to him. That shot eloquently conveys the nature of their relationship at this juncture of the film. Later, in his rented room, when they begin kissing, they are heavily shadowed. He tries to pull her back to the bed, but she disengages. In comparing mother and daughter, a most salient conclusion is that Mrs. Robinson brings out the worst in Ben, and Elaine elicits his very best.

Before concluding this essay with an in-depth consideration of the first montage, let's consider visual humor in *The Graduate*. Ben veers onto the curb when Elaine recommends for a drink the same hotel that he has frequented with Mrs. Robinson. Later, through the magic of editing, Ben appears to have waited the entire length of class standing in the same spot, eager to resume his conversation with Elaine. But the funniest visual joke is Ben opening his door to reveal to the landlord that his guest has not been abused, but is sitting all-too-placidly with a glass of water, a smiling beacon of innocence unsullied.

The affair montage is a glittering example of cinema's latent potential. Rarely does a filmmaker use his chosen medium to do something to which artists in other media can only aspire. This five-minute montage compresses the affair between Ben and Mrs. Robinson, rendering the summer not as a sequence of events, but a sequence of feelings. Save for two sound effects, the only sounds of the montage are "The Sound of Silence" and "April, Come She Will."

The sequence begins with Benjamin laying on a raft in the pool. Given that we've just left him on the cusp of his first occasion for intercourse, his expression and behavior suggest post-coital turpitude. In a succession of similar images, Ben just lounges his day away. Finally he gets up, collects his shirt, and goes into the house. But now he's in the hotel, not the house. He's going to another rendezvous with his paramour like he's going to be executed. Laying on the bed, she undresses him like a child. She rubs his chest with her hands, eager for a taste of

his bronzed flesh. We cut to Ben eyeing something with disdain. He gets up, and we realize he's back in his house. He closes the door on his parents, who are sharing dinner. They have no idea what is going on, and he's not going to tell them.

Ben returns to his place in front of the television. With another cut, we've seamlessly progressed from his house to the hotel, to his house, and back to the hotel. Another meeting is over, and his face registers dispassion, not satisfaction. Television links his parents' house with the hotel; it represents his listless, hollow existence.

Now we cut to Ben in his room at home, his face framed by a black pillow. He decides to (what else?) take a swim. He puts on black trunks. He passes his mother in the kitchen, not saying a word. She is wearing white, arranging white flowers. She turns to watch him take his listless dive. She is powerless, knowing something is wrong with her son, but aware that because of the distance between them, a distance all the more difficult to bridge given Ben's advanced age, all she can do is watch. Her son has grown up. He is no longer the vibrant innocent, but has evolved into a disaffected misanthrope. It is the most beautiful moment of the film, positively heart-rending.

Finally the sequence ends with a succession of three shots—Ben swimming under water, Ben emerging to grab a raft, and that raft becoming the supine Mrs. Robinson, restful after another night's exertions. His life is his pool and his lover, and to him, Mrs. Robinson is just a raft—just an inflatable toy. Everything he does is play, whether innocent or otherwise. He takes nothing seriously. And soon he wants to escape from his own escape. The affair was a way to avoid the tough questions of his future, and a way to generate for himself the pride that everyone else has in him. But the affair only causes more problems. And Elaine, who may just be a distraction from all his problems, could be the one good thing in his future; she's not plastics, but flesh and blood. But he can't have her, because of his transgressions. Had he known he surely would have waited for her. And she wanted him, but once she learned of the affair, Benjamin became a means of escape from that pain, even as he's the cause of it. There's no going back. All three characters, Ben, and Elaine, and Mrs. Robinson, want to break away. But matters only get worse. Their only solution is to keep running in place, and try not to think of what might have been.