

The Graduate: Shooting Through Glass

I saw “The Graduate” in 1967 shortly after it was released. My girlfriend’s uncle served as an attorney to the company that owned most of the theatres in Ithaca, New York and was able to get us an unlimited movie pass, my most precious possession at the time and a certificate I would dearly love to have nowadays. At the time I was two years older than Benjamin Braddock in the movie but just as inexperienced. At the time I didn’t see any of the shortcomings that critics have since pointed out: that the film seems to fall into two separate stories—a sex comedy and a romance; that Elaine Robinson seems something of a twit (imagine coming to a boy’s room for a quick kiss to decide whether you want to marry him); that Benjamin Braddock, supposedly a champion debater, can’t manage to form a coherent sentence for the entire first half of the film. Rather, I was dazzled by Katherine Ross’s beauty and delighted when she agreed to stay out late with Benjamin. Like Benjamin, I had never known a girl who loved me back, so when he asked her to marry him and she answered, “I might,” that was good enough for me, just as it was for him.

The film resonated again for me three years later when I travelled to southern California for my first teaching job. San Bernardino, though not quite the affluent Los Angeles suburb to which Benjamin returned after four years at an eastern college, still embraced its values: late-model cars in the driveways, fences around the properties, a monument to the triumph of materialism over spirituality. Whenever possible I escaped to San Francisco, whose very air seemed as different for me as Berkeley seemed to Benjamin, and whose magic justified the long, long drive

At the time I drove a red Volkswagen Beetle. In the film Benjamin drives a graduation present from his parents, a red Alfa Romeo that seems almost as important as any of the human characters in the film. Toward the end of the movie Benjamin practically lives in the car. After learning that Elaine has left Berkeley, Benjamin drives 400 miles to her house, discovers from Mrs. Robinson that Elaine is going to get married, drives 400 miles back to Berkeley, learns from her fiancé Carl’s fraternity brothers that the wedding is to take place in Santa Barbara, then drives 300 miles south to Santa Barbara, where he runs out of gas.

Moving to California in 1970, I was impressed with the state’s freeway system: I had never seen so many lanes on one highway, so many layers in a cloverleaf, or highways in such good condition (it’s much easier to maintain road surfaces in the absence of snow). After nine years of attending movie theatres within walking distance, I eventually came to think nothing of driving forty miles to a movie

I became a fan of Simon & Garfunkel long after their heyday (with popular music I was always behind the times: I came to love the Beach Boys in the 80s and never even heard an ABBA song until seeing “Mamma Mia” in the year 2000) With one exception, “The Graduate” drew on pre-existing Paul Simon songs: “Scarborough Fair” (which serves as a musical symbol of Ben’s growing love for Elaine); “April Come She Will,” and, especially, “Sounds of Silence,” which, as a number of critics have noted, tends to make Benjamin Braddock’s alienation from his parents’ culture seem much more profound than it really is.

And in the naked light I saw, ten thousand people, maybe more.

People talking without speaking, people hearing without listening.

People writing songs that voices never shared, no one dared disturb the sound of silence.

The song “Mrs. Robinson,” which quickly became a number one hit, was almost an afterthought. Only a couple of phrases were composed for the film. Later, when Paul Simon was approached to compose an entire song that might be released along with the film, he initially resisted, before creating what might be thought of as the theme song for an entire generation.

The movie itself served as a kind of theme song for young people in the late 60’s, a phenomenon that has baffled some critics. How can the counterculture claim Benjamin Braddock, with his short hair, jacket and tie? Nowhere does the film make reference to the war in Viet Nam, to the civil rights movement or to the drug culture. (Benjamin the track star, after taking up with Mrs. Robinson also takes up smoking, but only tobacco, not pot).

Approaching this film as an adult, hoping to see past the romance, I’m struck by a particular trait, the movie’s penchant for scenes shot through, or reflected in, glass. Glass serves as a common boundary in our lives: windows admit light but keep out the cold. In the film, glass serves as a symbol for invisible barriers, a metaphor for psychological walls that keep characters from acknowledging or showing feelings.

Benjamin Braddock, like the young man I was when I first saw the film, seems rather out of touch with his feelings. In the first half of the film he speaks almost tonelessly, his face remaining at all times an expressionless mask. When he tells Elaine Robinson that she’s the first person he could really talk to, we believe him. In my own experience, when a counselor in California asked what I was feeling, not only could I not answer the question, I couldn’t even understand the question. Throughout the first half of the film, scenes shot through glass show us how Benjamin is separated from his parents’ world yet also isolated from himself.

The affair with Mrs. Robinson, confronting several barriers at once, is marked by a cinematic *tour de force* in which the camera shoots through not one but two layers of glass. At their first encounter, Mrs. Robinson tosses Benjamin's car keys into his aquarium, between the glass walls of the fish tank. Later Benjamin meets her for an assignation at the Taft Hotel, but can confide the number of the hotel room only through two layers of glass: the telephone booth in which he has taken refuge and the window of the lounge where she has come to meet him.

The climactic scene at the church finds Benjamin, locked out of Elaine's marriage to Carl, banging on a huge plate of glass at the rear of the church. Much has been made of the so-called Christ symbolism here. In fact, Dustin Hoffman adopted that posture at the suggestion of one of the technicians when the pastor of the church threatened to evict the entire crew when the more conventional fist pounding threatened to break a glass panel donated by one of the parishioners.

It would be tedious to describe each such set-up in detail. Instead, I have compiled a list of the film's "shots through glass," along with a brief comment on each instance. I invite you to look over the list and then see how this purely cinematic device serves to convey one of the principal themes of the story, the breaking down of personal barriers and the birth of true feeling.

It has been said that there are four ultimate existential concerns: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. As a general rule, we come to grips with death fairly late in life, but we often begin wrestling with the other three questions—freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness—during our university years. Like Benjamin, I attended a small men's college in the East (I should explain that "college" has a different meaning in the States than it does in Canada). In my final year I spent many an hour lying on my bed, trying to decide between mathematics and music as a career, a freedom of choice that I found almost paralyzing. And the existential implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics—the eventual "heat death" of the universe—brought about my first crisis of faith. How could there be any meaning in a universe due to end in entropy? As for isolation, I've already alluded to being closed inside myself with no real understanding of feelings.

Benjamin, as the movie posters advertised, "is a young man concerned about his future." At the start of the film, Benjamin returns home, winner of a scholarship to pursue graduate studies at the university of his choice. Yet this freedom compels him to make that choice, in the context of a career to which he seems to have given no thought. Instead, Benjamin seems to be paralyzed by the question of meaninglessness, and spends the

summer either floating on an air mattress in the pool or having impersonal sex with Mrs. Robinson. (Clever editing convinces us that one activity is no more meaningful than the other. As critics have noted, Benjamin only addresses her as Mrs. Robinson, and we never do learn her first name.) Benjamin's essential isolation never seems clearer than in the scuba-diving scene, mostly viewed subjectively through the visor of his wet-suit.

Keeping in mind the symbolism of glass to represent invisible barriers, let's consider a few scenes before watching the film. At the start of the movie Benjamin is travelling on a "people-mover" at Los Angeles International Airport, but the camera moves along with him so that he never appears to make any progress—a recurring theme in the film. He seems to be imprisoned by the camera at the right of the screen. When Benjamin finally arranges a rendezvous with Mrs. Robinson, he walks down a long, long corridor to get to the hotel room, and we sense his mixed feelings about whether he really wants to arrive.

Mike Nichols, who directed the film, stuck closely to the Buck Henry's screenplay (you'll see Buck Henry in the movie as the hotel clerk). The only bit of improvisation came in that first hotel rendezvous. Dustin Hoffmann, as Benjamin Braddock, in an inspired gesture, reached out and put his hand on the right breast of Anne Bancroft, playing Mrs. Robinson, as she undressed. Bancroft never showed the slightest response and Hoffmann, to keep from laughing, walked to the other side of the room and banged his head against the wall. The director accepted the scene just as shot.

The affair with Mrs. Robinson conveys Benjamin's sense of isolation. Naively believing that physical sex should be accompanied by emotional intimacy, he attempts to engage Mrs. Robinson in conversation. She responds, "I don't think we have much to say to each other." His persistence in trying to talk with her produces one of the funniest sequences in the film, but ultimately he abandons the effort, saying "Let's not talk at all."

The second half of the film takes up Benjamin's romance with Elaine Robinson, played by Katherine Ross, who later appeared as the love interest in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Through Elaine, Benjamin begins to get in touch with himself. On their first date, after he has deliberately humiliated her in order to avoid ever having to see her again, he tells her "I'm not like this. I hate myself like this." Later he says, "You're the first ... you're the first thing for so long that I've liked. The first person I could stand to be with." Not exactly a declaration of love, but something of a breakthrough for someone imprisoned within himself. When Elaine learns of Benjamin's affair with her mother—her mother's version of the story is rather different from what we've seen on the screen—she wants

nothing more to do with Benjamin, who spends the rest of the film trying to win her. He writes her name all over a piece of paper, anticipating the climatic scene in which he shouts her name from outside a glass wall.

We like to look back on the 60s as a liberated era, but the liberation pretty much confined itself to men. The women's liberation movement began only in the 70s. At the time the movie was made, for example, a woman could not obtain a credit card in her own name. So when Elaine asks Benjamin, "Why don't you just drag me off if you want to marry me so much?" she speaks within a social context in which men, not women, were expected to take decisive action. When Elaine goes along with her parents' scheme to marry her off to a medical student she leaves Benjamin a note, rather than telling him directly. Her roommate walks down another long, long corridor to bring the message: "I love you but it would never work out."

The refusal galvanizes Benjamin into desperate action. In contrast to the inert young man in wrap-around sunglasses floating in the swimming pool, or the solitary stalker following Elaine about campus, we now see Benjamin scale the wall of the Robinson house, make a series of marathon car trips in his Alfa Romeo, and exercise a fair bit of resourcefulness to determine the location of Elaine's wedding. When his car finally runs out of gas, just as he has seemingly run out of options—after all, every Hollywood movie up to this point required the hero to arrive *before* the wedding ceremony had been carried out—the long lens of the camera gives the impression that despite all his exertion, Benjamin, the track star, isn't getting anywhere. Then we get the final scene at the church, the celebrated use of the cross first as a weapon then as a lock—which evoked many objections from church groups at the time—and the couple's escape on a bus to a very uncertain future.

This film has received an abundance of scholarly treatments, some focusing on the element of water, others on the choice of colours, others on possible religious symbolism. I invite you to focus on glass in its many manifestations, to see how glass functions as a metaphor for the invisible barriers that isolate people from one another and even from self-knowledge. When the barriers come down, you may want to reflect on whether the intimacy that follows is permanent or only a fragile, temporary gift.

Shooting Through Glass: The Graduate (1967)



Directed by Mike Nichols (Academy Award winner). Screenplay by Calder Willingham & Buck Henry. Based on the novel by Charles Webb. Camera, Robert Surtees. Editor, Sam O'Steen. Music, David Grusin. Songs by Paul Simon and sung by Simon and Garfunkel: "Mrs. Robinson," "The Sound of Silence," "April Come She Will," and "Scarborough Fair." Produced by Lawrence Turman. Embassy. 105 min.

Mrs. Robinson ANNE BANCROFT
 Ben Braddock DUSTIN HOFFMAN
 Elaine Robinson KATHARINE ROSS
 Mr. Braddock WILLIAM DANIELS
 Mr. Robinson MURRAY HAMILTON
 Mrs. Braddock ELIZABETH WILSON
 Carl Smith BRIAN AVERY
 Mr. Maguire WALTER BROOKE
 Mr. McCleery NORMAN FELL
 Second lady ELISABETH FRASER
 Mrs. Singleman ALICE GHOSTLEY
 Room clerk BUCK HENRY
 Miss DeWitt MARION LORNE
 Berkeley student RICHARD DREYFUSS

Scene	Commentary
Ben looks through his bedroom window at the guests	Although Ben's parents have organized a party in his honour, they have invited only their own friends. Ben looks on as an outsider. The set up anticipates the climactic scene in which Ben views

	Elaine's wedding ceremony through a large plate-glass window.
Ben shot through the aquarium as Mrs. Robinson enters his room.	Ben's repressed sexual feelings will repeatedly be symbolized by shots through multiple layers of glass, in this case the two walls of the fish tank.
Mrs. Robinson tosses Ben's keys into the aquarium—shot through glass.	The keys, landing between the glass walls of the fish tank, anticipate the breach of Ben's protective shield by the sexually rapacious Mrs. Robinson
Reflection of the naked Mrs. Robinson in the glass covering Elaine's portrait	The glass allows us to see the two themes of the movie juxtaposed: sex with Mrs. Robinson in the first half; romance with Elaine in the second
Ben's 21 st birthday: frogman episode shot from Ben's point of view through a face mask	Ben's protective denial of feelings takes literal form in the frogman suit; Ben cannot hear the voices of his parents or friends and can see them only through a limited oval shape.
Ben calls Mrs. Robinson from a phone booth	Ben seems as trapped inside the glass phone booth as he is enclosed within his own shell
Mrs. Robinson appears in the reflection of the table top	Recalls the seduction scene reflected in Elaine's portrait. Even as Ben enters the affair he still retains his protective shield.
Ben calls Mrs. Robinson from a phone booth.	An extraordinary shot through two layers of glass: the phone booth and the window of the bar
Seen through kitchen window (his mother's point of view), Ben dives into the pool, then climbs onto a floating air mattress which, through a clever cut, becomes Mrs. Robinson in bed.	Here the glass symbolizes the barrier between Ben and his parents. The next words we hear are from Ben's father: "Ben, what are you doing?"
Ben seen in mirror, shaving, while talking with his mother.	Again glass, this time the glass in the mirror, symbolizes separation: Ben doesn't like deceiving his mother, but he isn't ready to confide in her.
Ben and Elaine converse in his	Ben and Elaine have enclosed themselves

convertible with the top up, seen from outside.	briefly in a private world into which we are not permitted to intrude.
Ben comes to pick Elaine up for a picnic; legs seen through car window; Mrs. Robinson enters the car	Ben is protected (from the rain) in the shell of his car. He expected to let Elaine in; instead, Mrs. Robinson breaks in.
Elaine goes away to graduate school, seen in a mirror and then through a window.	The glass marks the separation of Ben and Elaine.
Ben seen through bus window as Elaine goes to meet Carl at zoo.	Window shows physical and emotional separation between the two, breached when Ben gets on the bus.
Elaine leaves Ben's rooming house, seen through a window.	Again the glass symbolizes the separation between the estranged pair.
Girls basketball game shot through the glass backboard.	Glass symbolizes Elaine's separation: she can't commit to Ben and doesn't want to take responsibility for her feelings. "Why don't you just drag me off if you want to marry me so much?"
Famous telephoto lens shot of Ben running to the church.	Long focus lens gives the impression that Ben, though running as fast as he can, is not getting anywhere.
Wedding ceremony with Ben on outside, pounding on a very large pane of glass.	Glass excludes Ben from the wedding party, who are viewed as being in a kind of fishbowl.
Final shot through back window of bus shows a trace of Elaine's veil.	As with the scene at the hamburger joint, we are excluded from Ben and Elaine's world. It may seem like a happy ending, but considering the way their smiles fade at the end, and director Mike Nichols' remark that within five years they will end up just like their parents, we may have second thoughts.

Bibliography

The script of "The Graduate," adapted by Buck Henry from the novel by Charles Webb, may be found at

<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/8200/gradscr.htm>

Reviews, essays, interviews, and biographical information may be found at <http://web.infoave.net/~denmac/>