

estrema

REVISTA INTERDISCIPLINAR DE HUMANIDADES
INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES

Title: “Fantasy and Anxiety: Light, Shadow, and Jewish Alienation in Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* (1967).”

Author(s): Peter Scott Lederer

Source: *estrema: revista interdisciplinar de humanidades*, s. 2, no.1, p.76-103. May 2022.

Published by: Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEComp) da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa

URL: <http://estrema.letras.ulisboa.pt/ojs/index.php/estrema/article/view/229>

Recommended Citation (*The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*):

Lederer, Peter. 2022. “Fantasy and Anxiety: Light, Shadow, and Jewish Alienation in Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* (1967)”. In *estrema: revista interdisciplinar de humanidades* 2(1), p.76-103. [<https://doi.org/10.51427/com.est.2022.0004>].

Fantasy and Anxiety: Light, Shadow, and Jewish Alienation in

Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967)

Peter Scott Lederer¹

Abstract: The European film renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s notably influenced Hollywood cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. This period is usually referred to as New Hollywood or the New Wave. The post-neorealism of Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini heavily informs the styles of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Chinatown* (1974), and *The Graduate* (1967). However, this article suggests that Jewishness also influences the films of this era, specifically *The Graduate*. Mike Nichols effectively uses chiaroscuro, creating strong contrasts between light and darkness to emphasize Jewish alienation, particularly as this feeling relates to the coded Jewishness of its main character, Benjamin Braddock, played by Dustin Hoffman. Post-Holocaust readings of several scenes explain how shadow and light throughout the film underline the sexual, cultural, and ethnic dichotomies as well as the dread associated with an undesirable future outcome and a hopeless romantic fantasy. The Christian and Jewish worlds collide and are critiqued through these images, informed by the Jewish history of exile and persecution, and the shadow sides

¹ Peter Scott Lederer earned his BA and MA in English from San Diego State University, and his PhD in English from Queen's University Belfast, where he researched Jewish-American filmmakers and is currently a tutor. His recent works include "'Differentness' and the American Jew-Gentile Heterosexual Romantic-Comedy" (*Question* 5) and a chapter in *Jewish Radicalisms* (eds. Frank Jacob and Sebastian Kunze) titled "Mel Brooks's Subversive Cabaret" (De Gruyter, 2020). He is currently working on a chapter in an upcoming volume, *The Alejandro Jodorowsky Film Studies Anthology*, due to be published by Edinburgh University Press.

Email: plederer01@qub.ac.uk

(suspicion and bewilderment) of faith in conflict with the flight of fancy and the mystery and elusiveness of the Jewish God.

Keywords: Mike Nichols, New Hollywood, *The Graduate*, post-Holocaust film, Jewish alienation

Fantasy and Anxiety: Light, Shadow, and Jewish Alienation in

Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967)

Peter Scott Lederer

The American cinematic revolution of the 1960s and 1970s emerged in part as an attempt to “challenge traditional cultural myths” (Man 1994, 4). Whereas “*The Graduate*’s satiric look at the sexual mores of the emotionally and spiritually bankrupt middle class” emulates Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *8^{1/2}* (1963) (*ibid.*, 35), or even Michelangelo Antonioni’s sense of “bourgeois malaise” in films like *L’Avventura* (1960) (*ibid.*, 35), I argue that Nichols’s film corresponds to a specific Jewish aesthetic that emphasizes the sense of alienation that evolved from the cultural disruption caused by Jewish comedians and their projection of anti-Semitism onto American culture. The New Hollywood (1967-1976) has been commonly documented as a period in American cinema that reflected the political radicalism of the times. It may have mirrored “the youth movement” through narratives and visuals that directly or indirectly critiqued Vietnam, conservative politics and attitudes, as well as civil rights issues (Man 1994, 1). However, it was also a Jewish phenomenon. Mike Nichols is one example of a Jewish filmmaker who did not share the same counterculture values of his generational peers, but instead developed a post-Holocaust sense of guilt, projecting this onto American culture and society, thus revamping the nightclub model of aesthetic resistance. A former comedy performer, Nichols uses unconventional methods that are the result of his Jewish cultural experience.

The film is usually placed as the first of many Hollywood Renaissance works (Auster and Quart 2001, 85), and there is considerable literature to draw from when discussing its “countercultural” themes and “ground-breaking” aesthetics (Williams 2006, 102). Linda Ruth Williams, for example, describes the film as art-house worthy because it “attain[s] a visual and

narrative edginess while never alienating its financiers”, while showcasing “soft avant-garde techniques”, and bearing “a certain Hollywood Renaissance ‘look’ and attitude to counter-cultural subjects” (2006, 102). As social critiques, New Hollywood films were emulating European art films like those of Fellini and Antonioni, in which the “social milieu of modern-day Rome” and its “moral malaise” were revealed (Man 1994, 153). The imagery, themes, and narrative structure (or the lack thereof) of these European and American works present open sequences that interrogate culture, and often conclude with unresolved open endings.

While the breakdown of the studio system and the influence of these European post-War works are relevant for analyzing *The Graduate* (Man 1994, 7), it is the unexamined problem of Jewish anxiety that this article argues requires consideration. I analyze Nichols’s use of tilted angles, close-ups, high-contrast lighting, and shot sequences to emphasize how the Jewish cultural experience informs the director’s artistic decisions. In turn, these emphasize Jewish off-centeredness. The Jewish nightclub tested Gentile boundaries and is here represented through Benjamin Braddock, which can be read as Dustin Hoffman’s recreation of Nichols’s characters.² The sexual frustration of the protagonist underscores the Jewish anxiety that torments him. Furthermore, my analysis will also showcase how Simon and Garfunkel’s songs accentuate Nichols’s examination of Jewish identity in the film, thus becoming essential to his style.

The Graduate (1967) is a narrative that mirrors the lived experience of the film’s director and many American Jews. It established a ground-breaking Jewish aesthetic with its use of shadow and light. Furthermore, the comical circumstances in which Benjamin Braddock finds himself are related to the character’s coded Jewishness. The film uses stereotypical Jewish behavior to explore the challenges of assimilation. Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) lures

² “Gentile” refers to the non-Jewish audience members, especially those for whom Nichols would have performed.

Benjamin into an adulterous affair to sabotage his chance of marrying her daughter, Elaine (the shiksa), whom he chases to fulfill his desperate romantic fantasy.

Jewish comedy is rooted in survival. Israel Knox argues that Jewish humor is a form of “tragic optimism” (1963, 332). He proposes three primary themes: first, the reaction of the Jew to “anti-Semitism in all its varieties and manifestations, with its implications for the position of the Jew in modern society; second, the marginal aspects of Jewish existence, insofar as it has not yet been fully integrated into the main currents of the dominant culture”, and, finally, the “ambiguity” and “irrelevance of traditional values” in an “age of change and transition” (*ibid.*, 327). Jewish comedy is a humor filled with suffering, history, memory, and most of all disappointment or “wounded hope”: the world is *tsebrokhener*, a Yiddish expression meaning “broken” (Feuer 2014, 80). What remains understood, then, is that Jewish humor concedes that “hope, while foolish, is wounded by reality, memory, and suffering” (80). More light-hearted, which allows one to momentarily suspend life’s burdens, too easily “takes the sting out of life” (80).

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s psychology-philosophy emerged from the horrors of the Theresienstadt concentration camp. In *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959), Frankl writes: “Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs. We had realized its hidden opportunities for achievement” (1959, 86). Adversity gives comedy value in ways that parallel how suffering creates meaning in life. Dark humor can help one deal with suffering in a healthy manner. In *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy* (1955), Frankl insists that “the right kind of suffering [...] is the highest achievement that has been granted to man” (1955, xiii):

When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering

or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden (86).

This is a key to understanding why Jewish comedies use offensive imagery and jokes that form the core of anti-Semitic belief; it communicates the Jewish experience of reality. The suffering of the Jewish people is not taken lightly by Nichols, who had direct experience of the Holocaust, and shares with diverse audiences the Jewish distress of God's absence during this time in history. Nichols's decision to cast a Jewish man as the protagonist in *The Graduate* emphasizes this awareness. Furthermore, casting Dustin Hoffman as the lead is a reversal of the earlier trend to de-Semitize Hollywood, since the character is not Jewish in Charles Webb's original 1963 novel. Hoffman presents the nervous Jewish persona convincingly, as he is a descendant of Russian Jews and originally from Los Angeles. He spent his early years in theater in New York. The Jewish stereotype that Hoffman explores is approached with careful control. Benjamin's peculiar behavior and insecure mannerisms immediately code him as Jewish.

The opening of *The Graduate* shows the recently graduated Benjamin on a plane as he makes the journey from the East Coast to Los Angeles (Fig. 1). This introduction shows not only the return of the "enlightened" student to his dreary, suburban origins, but also the conditions of the outsider Jewish immigrant in America circa 1967. The pilot announces the four-hour and eighteen-minute flight has arrived on schedule (Nichols, 00:00:25). Given no proper prologue or information about this character, nor the conventional establishing shot, viewers suddenly see him there. Establishing shots normally identify the setting in which characters will be placed, providing audiences with context. Here, however, Nichols emphasizes that it is not objective reality that is significant but instead the protagonist's subjective state of mind, which determines how he experiences the world around him. It is this self-reflection that the aesthetics of the film are built upon.



Figure 1. Nichols (1967, 00:00:25).³

Space in *The Graduate* is important aesthetically and thematically; it accentuates the character's anxiety. There is a close-up of the twenty-year-old against a white backdrop, confining him to white space that emphasizes his being an outsider. Within this white space, he is gazing. His body is necessarily removed from the frame, showing not only that he cannot twist or turn to adjust himself physically, but that he is in this same state mentally. The shot establishes that Benjamin is out of touch with those around him, even though they all share the same ride and are neatly organized into tidy rows. It also signifies that the film will be a Jewish character study of public performance in hostile environments, with the camera and Hoffman's body as two of its main components. Throughout the film, Nichols zooms out effectively, usually slowly, where an extreme close-up is followed by a medium shot and then a long shot. This unconventional style permits one to identify with the character and then to be immersed in their surroundings, moving from the particular to the general. It is the necessary beginning of an uncomfortable awareness: starting from the subjective and moving to the wider picture of where one is in relation to others; with Benjamin, it is usually darkness. The effect is one that shows an introverted, withdrawn, and detached figure who is suddenly part of a larger group. The result is emotional tension and discomfort.

³ All screenshots in this paper were taken by the author.

It is the drawing of a disgruntled clown seen in the hallway of Benjamin's home that first indicates the specific Jewish quality of Nichols's film and demonstrates the split lighting with heavy shadows that Nichols employs throughout the film (00:04:36) (Fig. 2). The shot is a tragic reminder of the Jewish clown. This poignant image of the sad clown symbolizes Nichols's own philosophy of comedy so deeply affected by a childhood that taught him to laugh through his tears. In this sense, *The Graduate* is a dark comedic work that reflects on the experiences of the Jewish outsider.



Figure 2. Nichols (1967, 00:04:36).

Jews are a minority in the country where they are greatest in number. In 1967, 5.8 million of the estimated global Jewish population of 13.6 million lived in the US, whereas only 2.4 million lived in Israel (Morris and Jelenko 1968, 543-46). Benjamin is a 1960s' reimagining of this perennial outsider. Nichols describes his own childhood as one of loneliness and exclusion: "I was quietly unhappy [...]. I felt strange and solitary. I didn't fit" (Nachman 2009, 326).

Nichols was only seven years old when he arrived in the US from Nazi Germany, in 1939. He recounted how, upon arrival, he had to ask his father if the Hebrew writing advertising a Jewish delicatessen was "allowed here?" (Nachman 2009, 326). The boat on which he arrived was one of the last to leave before the war broke out. In 1992, Nichols discussed how this

narrow escape profoundly affected his life: “I’ve never been able, having been part of it in some way, having escaped, [...] it was like the bullet whistled by my head. I’ve had a sense of many things, of, uh, guilt, among other things, and I have never been able to deal with the six million” (Manufacturing Intellect, 00:44:36-00:45:57).

This outsidersness is expressed throughout the entire film, but it is perhaps the shot of Benjamin sitting alone next to the American flag after he chases his love-interest to Berkeley that stresses Jewish alienation the most (Nichols, 01:15:17) (Fig. 3). As Benjamin sits himself in front of the fountain, with the flag occupying most of the frame to his left, the camera zooms out to a high-angled, extreme long shot, and dissolves into another shot, showing the busyness of the students. This shot, despite its use of a value-laden national symbol, has received less critical attention than it deserves. It clearly shows the distance between Benjamin and the notion of “Americanness”, similar to another telephoto lens shot used later in which he is “crucified”, demonstrating his distance from “Christian America” (*ibid.*, 01:42:36) (see Fig. 15). The clear blue water also recalls the feeling of isolation associated with the aquarium in Benjamin’s boyish room, and the pool that he must dive into to claim his manhood. Both elements allow viewers to reflect on Benjamin’s Jewish-American identity.

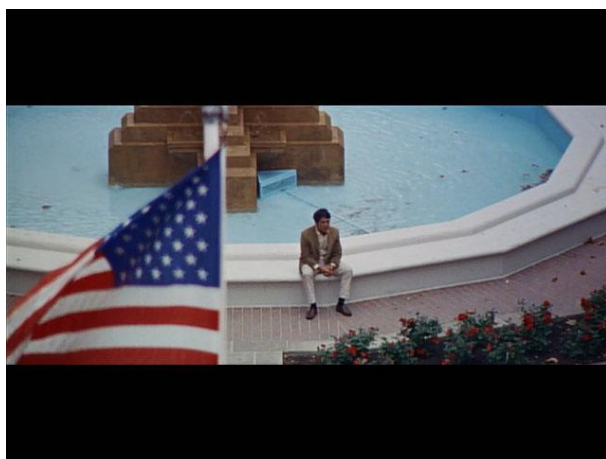


Figure 3. Nichols (1967, 01:15:17).



Figure 4. Nichols (1967, 00:00:54).

In the opening scene of *The Graduate*, Benjamin rides a people mover in the airport, and the viewer is presented with Hoffman's face in profile (*ibid.*, 00:00:54) (Fig. 4). Hoffman offers an anxious tragic-comedic physical performance that signifies sorrow and confusion. Benjamin's future is still unwritten, so there is a space in front of Hoffman as the film's credits appear to his left, placing him within an even narrower space. It is an unforeseen future with little expectation as he rides the airport's moving walkway from right to left, suggesting he is returning to his origins, rather than left to right, which would suggest progress. Nichols again places Hoffman against a white backdrop. The hard side lighting here is used to create a silhouette to communicate to viewers the burden Benjamin carries, establishing the cynical mood of the sequence; it creates a sense of drama by letting viewers know that the character is not one-dimensional. The angle brings Hoffman's aquiline nose into clear view, thereby emphasizing that the leading man is not a Gentile.

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's paradoxical non-diegetic "The Sound of Silence" during the moving walkway shot enhances the themes of outsidership, shadow and light. Distinguishing itself from many films of the classical period, *The Graduate* does not utilize a composed score but a compiled one to further emphasize the protagonist's Jewishness. Simon's somber lyrics immediately communicate the dark Jewish tone of the film and its use of light

and shadow: “Hello darkness, my old friend / I’ve come to talk with you again / Because a vision softly creeping / Left its seeds while I was sleeping / And the vision that was planted in my brain / Still remains / Within the sound of silence” (*ibid.*, 00:00:48-00:03:08).

The somberness of “darkness” as an “old friend” that one revisits is a recurring theme throughout the film, especially as it relates to its post-Holocaust visuals and use of shadows. “Vision,” or the hope and expectations with which one views the future, can become obscured by the extreme limitations of a lack of communication (“talking without speaking / hearing without listening”). The voiceless about whom the duo sings are the chattering masses who say nothing of consequence and bow before false gods: Gentiles and immoral Jews who have disobeyed or forgotten God. “Silence” spreads despite the attempt to communicate, and it is magnified by prejudices, assumptions, culture and tradition, “neon” gods and a currency of consumerism and shallow relations. Yet, these are the false idols of the non-Jewish Other, to which the masses in Benjamin’s world choose to “bow and pray”. “The prophets” mentioned in the song are Jewish, and the “tenement,” of course, differs vastly from the large home in which Benjamin lives. The multi-ethnic tenements in the Lower East Side of Manhattan (where Jews predominantly lived in the early twentieth century) experienced considerable changes in the 1960s, with crime, poverty, and drugs becoming increasing problems (Hodges 2010, 769-70). The lyrics authentically describe this group, contrasting them with the Gentiles that act as a mechanical mass in ubiquitous slumber, who are found in Benjamin’s parents’ social circle. Benjamin has been “asleep” as well, but he is now awake to realizing his role as an outsider.

Benjamin’s body next to his shadow underlines Jewish self-consciousness, anxiety, and timidity. Upon his return from college, he exhibits a body language that is not yet confident—one of repressed Jewish masculinity. He dislikes the crowd, and struggles with maneuvering in it. This Jewish anxiety is emphasized again later with Nichols’s use of split lighting during the bedroom fish aquarium scene (00:03:11) (Fig. 5). These shots aid in making the comedy

especially dramatic, reminding viewers that the film is a dark comedy, stressing the discontentment, disillusionment, and dissatisfaction the young man possesses.

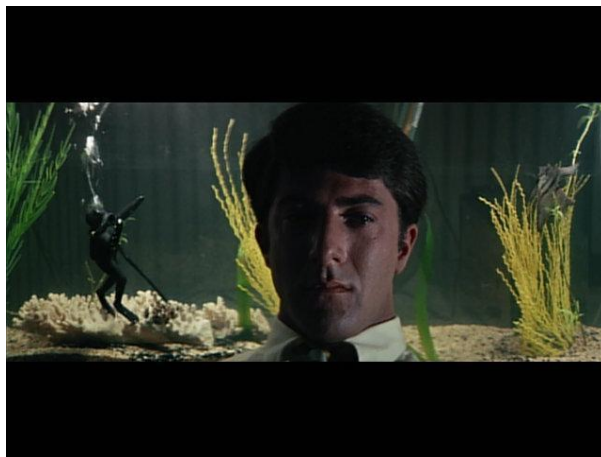


Figure 5. Nichols (1967, 00:03:11).

The “body of the Jew”, Sander Gilman argues in *Freud, Race, and Gender* (1993), is specifically associated with “the body of the male Jew [as] the sign of masculine difference that was inscribed on the psyche of the Jew. The fantasy of the difference of the male genitalia was displaced upward—onto the visible parts of the body, onto the face and the hands where it marked the skin with its blackness” (21). Such qualities, Gilman suggests, can be traced back to the act of circumcision, which results in the “‘feminization’ of the male body” (1993, 25). There are several images and moments in the film that underscore this problem of Jewish sexuality and passivity that demonstrate not only that Benjamin’s behavior associates him with the “Jewboy” stereotype, but also that he breaks free from this stereotype by confronting the expectations of others. In the first half of the film, Nichols uses shadow and light to underline this insecurity, and the pool is used repeatedly to effectively achieve this.

The pool is a disturbing place for Benjamin, a site associated with emasculation and victimhood, until he is able to take the plunge of his own accord. Note how Nichols’s lighting choice again creates the familiar shadow that dominates much of the first half of the film, emphasizing Benjamin’s need to reshape himself (00:22:38) (Fig. 6). Scaling here underlines

how the protagonist is swallowed inside his own environment. The long shot shows Hoffman's entire body in a totally spotless, empty kitchen, emphasizing the strong contrast between this toy-like Jewish figure and the clean, even lines of his stable, suburban surroundings; white backgrounds, level framing, and even lines in the film are always non-Jewish, while canted framing is always Jewish. Whereas this scene has primarily been interpreted as a critique of suburban life (Cooley 2009, 366), the clumsy, disproportionate figure that moves unsteadily forward with limbs made heavy by large flippers that drag across the floor is also an oblique reference to the awkward Jewish stereotype. When Benjamin is forced to the bottom of the pool, this is another symbol of his Jewish "boyiness". A point-of-view shot is used from Benjamin's perspective as he walks out to the backyard in the outfit.⁴ The crowd, representing the hostile audience, led by his father, encourages him to head to the pool. The POV shot creates comical empathy, connecting viewers with Benjamin's internal situation; the suffocation he endures is emphasized by his heavy breathing aided by the oxygen tank. Here, again, physical and emotional tension is present as Benjamin moves clumsily toward the pool, hardly something expected of an athlete (he is a track star). It is, however, Benjamin's first time. Considering the sequence occurs on his twenty-first birthday, and immediately before his encounter with Mrs. Robinson at the Taft Hotel, its sexual connotations are obvious. The discomfort is magnified when Mr. and Mrs. Braddock force Benjamin (with whom the viewer still identifies through the POV shot) back into the pool, pushing him deeper. This event is a coming-of-age ritual, a rite of passage for the newly arrived male. Baptism in the pool officially marks his emergence as the suburban male proper who has to "fight them off." At the bottom of the pool, Benjamin's embarrassment and awkwardness have reached new depths. Only the sound of bubbles from his breathing, reminiscent of the bubbles from his fish aquarium, can

⁴ POV, henceforth.

be heard as the shot zooms out, underlining his limited experience and the humiliation of being a virgin. Mr. Braddock never does grant Benjamin his proper manhood at any point in the narrative, always emasculating him in one form or another.



Figure 6. Nichols (1967, 00:22:38).

Nichols also uses practical lighting in a night shot early in the film to illuminate the pool, while soft lighting is used to distort the faces of the crowd and eliminate shadows to indicate their being different from Benjamin, who is encased in blackness with low key lighting to create the sense of isolation and uneasiness he feels, as well as increase his Jewishness. As a suburban, Gentile hangout, the pool excludes Benjamin (Fig. 7). Throughout the film, Nichols makes use of this sort of scaling, using depth of field to contrast two emotions or moods (the serious and the comical) and emphasize outsidership. The tilted angle of the window frame in the first shot symbolizes Jewish anxiety (Fig. 7); the even lines of the window frames at the church represent the Gentile environment (Fig. 8). The Gentiles are easily identifiable, but it is “group loyalty” rather than specific ethnic signifiers that mark membership. Indeed, Lipset and Raab argue that a focus on sectarian rather than ethnic affiliation is a distinguishing feature of the American Christianity of the 1960s (1995, 55). The pool offers immediate assimilation, a reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism. The pool, the Los Angeles sun, and the bright

clothes are all symbols that portray the carefree Gentile Southern Californian comfortable in his or her own body.

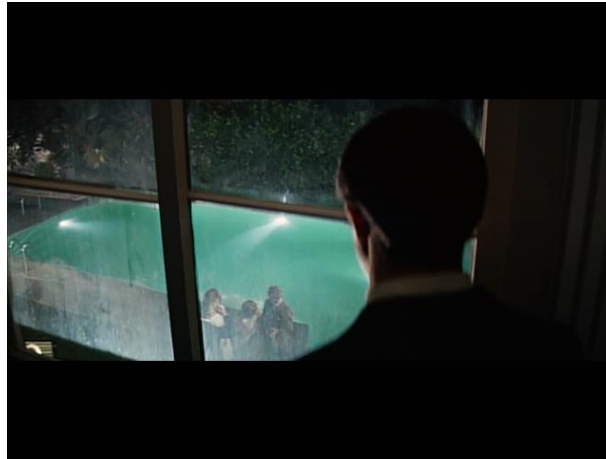


Figure 7. Nichols (1967, 00:07:05).



Figure 8. Nichols (1967, 01:42:10).

Benjamin further attempts to rid himself of this “Jewboy” image through sexual relations with Mrs. Robinson, but he never gains her respect. Indeed, no adult ever addresses Benjamin as an equal. He is either praised for being a fine student (a nice Jewish boy), chastised for being lazy (by his father) and dishonest (by his mother), or disparaged (by Mr. and Mrs. Robinson). His sexual partner repeatedly denigrates him. Dutch angled shots at the Taft Hotel emphasize Benjamin’s pre-coital tension and disorientation (Nichols, 00:34:56-00:36:34). Mrs. Robinson calls Benjamin sexually “inadequate” (*ibid.*, 00:37:37), an especially hurtful comment for the Jew who already feels like a boy. In his prelude to the sexual act, Benjamin

moves to the corner of the room and repeatedly bangs his head on the wall as he proclaims that he cannot go through with it. After Mrs. Robinson's insult, he lashes out against the emasculating concept of the Jew as feminine and scholastic, as queer/sissy.

Nonetheless, the problem of the impotent and inadequate male protagonist who has problems fitting into his community is not strictly a Jewish one; it appears throughout other New Hollywood films directed by Jews: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) also address the mythology of male virility. Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) and Joe Buck (Jon Voight) are imperfect copies of the fantasy of the masculine outlaw and the male prostitute they portray. They are both new Anglo-Southern variations of the *shlemiel*; they are large, white, loquacious yokels hiding behind fake machismo and bravado. Benjamin's "sissiness" can be found in both characters; their narrative is the myth of Gentile masculinity, and their unconventional, non-conformist lifestyles reject the institutionalized norms governing the means and ways for attaining success. Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) is constantly disappointed over Clyde's sexual inadequacy. Here, Penn's composition is similar to Nichols's; he effectively uses chiaroscuro, creating strong contrasts between light and darkness to emphasize sexual frustration (Fig. 9). Michelangelo Antonioni's and Federico Fellini's post-neorealist use of shadow and light has been noted as influencing the New Wave style of both films (Man 1994, 35). Indeed, one sees the opening of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) (Penn 1967, 00:02:33) (Fig. 10) as reflecting the composition of Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) (01:59:42) (Fig. 11). Lingering shots communicate disillusionment, upsetting audience expectations of modern heroes, replacing the fantasy of the macho outlaw with an existential reality. Films like *L'Avventura* were pivotal for emphasizing "the plight of alienated modern man and woman" and for revelatory sequences with "brief tender glimpses of humanity" (Man 1994, 188), which *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Midnight Cowboy* emulate. In *L'Eclisse* (1962), Antonioni returns to visual motifs that underline these hopeless

quests and lost love in a final montage that shows the empty streets of Rome where two protagonist-lovers (Alain Delon and Monica Vitti) once excitedly roamed (Man 1994, 35). Interestingly, both François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard were propositioned to direct *Bonnie and Clyde* (Scott 2020, 2), an indication of the importance of these European styles and themes on American filmmaking. Penn, nevertheless, ultimately achieved the same effect. Note how his introductory scene echoes the opening of *The Graduate* in eschewing the establishing shot, thereby offering intense emotions in dramatic close-ups.



Figure 9. Penn (1967, 00:42:10).



Figure 10. Penn (1967, 00:02:33).



Figure 11. Antonioni (1960, 01:59:42).

Benjamin's affair with Mrs. Robinson finally permits him to transcend his "Jewboy" image. The summer affair is presented as a five-minute dream-like montage that showcases ecstasy, or the Jew's departure from his mundane world of scholastics and parental expectations. Such fantastical episodes in musical interludes are not uncommon in New Hollywood works. For example, in George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), a sepia-toned montage that uses panned shots of photos highlights the outlaws' journey from New York to Bolivia (01:03:57-01:07:09). Furthermore, the bicycle-riding episode in Hill's film is an excellent example of how soft, natural lighting can be used in dreamy, carefree sequences. It embellishes the playfulness between Butch (Paul Newman) and Etta (Katharine Ross), strongly revealing the intimacy the two share (*ibid.*, 00:25:42-00:28:53). The montage in *The Graduate*, however, differs from Hill's in that it underlines the protagonist's Jewish anxiety as well as the sexual affair. The montage relies heavily on dream-like qualities—soft focus, filters, and folk-pop music—to disrupt reality and place the protagonist squarely in the middle of the summer fantasy. Nichols uses "The Sound of Silence" again to begin the montage. Here, however, the song enhances the spiritual quality of the sequence rather than underscoring Benjamin's anxiety seen in the film's beginning. He is stripped of his suit and tie; the character's post-coital ecstasy is the release from the Jewish body.

The pool, devoid of eerie shadows and enveloped in natural daylight, now becomes an emotionally healing place representative of positive Jewish libido. Self-awareness replaces dread and is expressed through the body. Simon and Garfunkel's harmony and acoustic guitars magnify the invigorating sexual energy of the sequence. Benjamin's reunification with his body permits him to transcend its physicality. The pool is now part of his escape and pleasure seeking. A superimposed shot uses the shimmering water and Benjamin's face to suggest luminous space and highlight the young man's spiritual and emotional development. Whereas

previous close-ups suggest Benjamin's physical and mental entrapment, here his psychic energy is unbound; he possesses an increased awareness of the eidetic.

White replaces heavy shadows and highlights Benjamin's sexual reawakening: the linen, the bedroom walls, a nightstand, a lamp, and picture frames are white. Nichols does not rely on canted framing, as he uses in the previous sequence in the Taft hotel to underline Benjamin's anxiety; instead, the careful editing in this montage helps underline the young man's present moment of awe. Space-time is blurred as shots transition between Benjamin's bedroom at home and the hotel. He is no longer trapped in the vicious body-space dichotomy. Movement is not linear but cyclical; time is insubstantial, indefinable. The second non-diegetic song of the sequence, the tender and melancholy "April Come She Will", underscores the splendor of Benjamin's summer of love. Simon's ballad describes the passing of time for a young lover whose love appears in April "when streams are ripe and swelled with rain," stressing Benjamin's newfound sexual virility. The graduate swims comfortably in this deep state of being, and the white shirt he puts on as he steps out of the pool verifies this, as it appears whiter than the rest of his environment in a brilliant, overexposed shot.

High-contrast lighting in the montage almost resembles a split-screen, thereby emphasizing the separation of Benjamin's world from his parents'. The perfectly symmetrical "split screen" uses scaling that shows the protagonist as a slouching, disheveled, hoodie-wearing figure in the shadows, unlike the image of the upright academic on the people mover from the beginning of the film. The "Jewboy" closes the door on his parents, shutting out their overbearingness and intrusion on his romantic fantasy (Nichols, 00:40:49) (Fig. 12). Refusing to be suffocated any longer, Benjamin approaches the pool with confidence and dives in without hesitating, as his mother jealously watches—she recognizes that he is now a man. He forcefully rises to the surface, symbolic of the sexual climax, and jumps on the lilo, which dissolves into Mrs. Robinson. Showing how pleased he is with himself, the character breaks

the fourth wall and smirks at the camera with a raised eyebrow, but he finds himself back in reality as his father glares disapprovingly at him.



Figure 12. Nichols (1967, 00:40:49).

It becomes obvious later that Mrs. Robinson has ill will towards Benjamin and his family. Mrs. Robinson has a sultry film *noir* look and attitude, emanating fatalism and cynicism (Fig. 13). Nichols emulates the style of film *noir* lighting, which Roman Polanski would also employ in *Chinatown* (1974) (Fig. 14). This lowkey lighting underscores the seductive and villainous qualities of the characters. Mrs. Robinson's posturing is idiomatic of the classic *femme fatale* who ensnares her lovers in traps, emulated by Dunaway with her character, Mrs. Mulwray. Split lighting in both films indicates deception. In Mrs. Mulwray's case, she is keeping it a secret that Mr. Mulwray's mistress is her daughter from an incestuous relationship with her father (Polanski 1974, 01:29:00). Whether Mrs. Robinson is a victim or a villainess (like Evelyn Mulwray) has not yet been determined; whether she is more cunning and calculating than neurotic and damaged is unknown at this point. What can be ascertained is that Benjamin is small, inexperienced, and unproven next to her overbearing lawyer husband (William Daniels), who thrusts his cigar around, a symbol of authority and hypermasculinity. In another of Nichols's high-contrast, depth of field shots, Mr. Robinson is placed beneath the arch, signifying his position as head of the household. He advises Benjamin to "sow a few wild

oats”, points to his wife with his cigar, and asks, “Doesn’t he look to you like the kind of guy who has to fight them off?” (Nichols, 00:19:55-00:20:27) (Fig. 13). Mrs. Robinson’s seductive play as the comedic-villainess is a favorite mechanism for generating laughter in *The Graduate*. Early shots of Benjamin in the darkness as Mrs. Robinson teases and seductively laughs support this reading, as does one of the film’s most famous lines: “Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me” (*ibid.*, 00:12:32).

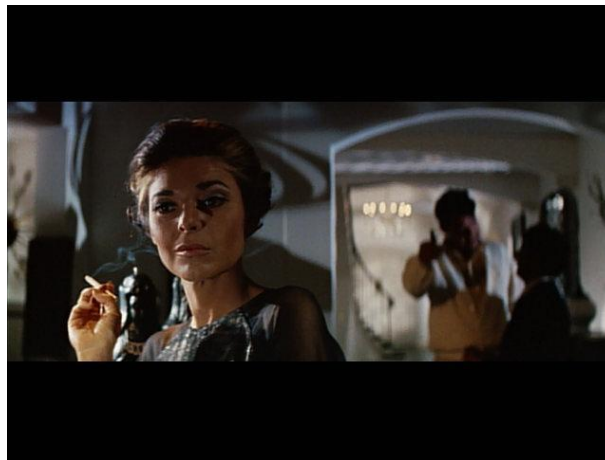


Figure 13. Nichols (1967, 00:19:55).



Figure 14. Polanski (1974, 01:29:00).

The final scene of *The Graduate* uses a Christian church in a sequence that puts an exclamation mark on the film’s critique of the Jewish-Christian dichotomy. Benjamin’s Alfa Romeo runs out of gas as he nears the Methodist church; his constructed self-image has stalled. The former track star finds the entrance of the church locked, a reminder of the restrictions that come with ethnicity, that the house of worship he enters in need is not the temple of his people: “The history of the Jewish people” is full of the psychological costs of defeat (Neusner 1984, 90); Jews remember that Jerusalem was once a Roman possession, where Jewish presence was

forbidden (91). Here, Benjamin is forced to find an alternate route; he climbs a staircase. High above the crowd, he looks out over the pews and sees the newly married couple. Although Nichols describes the image as a “moth fluttering at a window” (Gelmis 1974, 373), the Christological reference is apparent in this long shot (Nichols, 01:42:36) (Fig. 15). The shot, with its lighting, coloring, and detail, also recalls the even lines of the spotless kitchen where Benjamin was standing in his scuba outfit (Fig. 6).

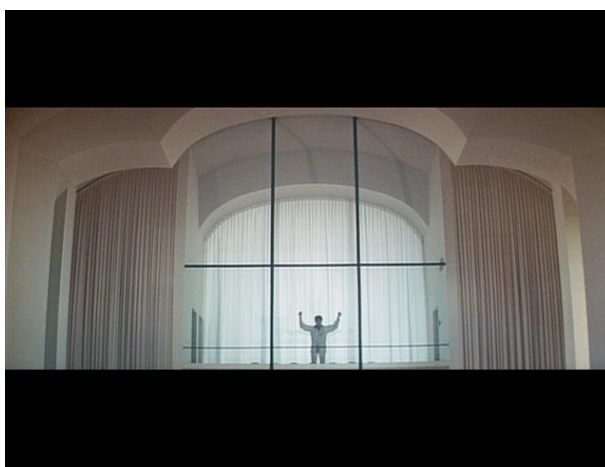


Figure 15. Nichols (1967, 01:42:36).

The Christian symbolism here is the height of dark Jewish humor in the film, literally and figuratively. However, by no means is this symbolism surrounding a Jew unique. Three years earlier Sidney Lumet's drama *The Pawnbroker* (1964), the first American film to seriously address the Holocaust (Desser and Friedman 1993, 203), displayed crucifixion imagery. As Desser and Friedman suggest, that film's “final image of Nazerman [Rod Steiger] impaling his hand on the pawnshop's receipt spike certainly leads critics to note the act's Christ-like implications and thus condemn the film for turning the Jewish survivor into a Christian” (1993, 213). What it truly demonstrates, however, is Sol Nazerman's belief that the Jewish God has abandoned him in his time of need. He, like the real Dr. Viktor Frankl, is a professor who survived the Nazi concentration camps. His young apprentice dies while trying

to protect him from robbers, and Nazerman pushes his hand through the spike in a display of the failure of duty, of friendship, and of faith (Lumet 1964, 01:52:13-01:53:00).

Benjamin's body language also hints at the Jew's ultimate failure to fully assimilate to a Gentile world. Like Christ, Benjamin finds himself banned from a community. The Methodists here have forgotten that their Savior was a Jewish rabbi. As the persecuted Jew in *The Fixer* (Frankenheimer 1968) reminds viewers, "who hates the Jew, or any other man, hates Jesus; to be anti-Semitic, you first got to be anti-Christian" (01:29:39-01:29:56). The Jews have had their monotheistic faith and laws adopted by the Christians, not the other way around. In *The Origins of Religion* (1990), Freud reminds readers, "the other peoples might have had occasion then to say to themselves: 'Indeed, they were right, they are the chosen people.' But instead of this, what happened was that the redemption by Jesus Christ only intensified their hatred of the Jews" (352; emphasis in original). The anti-Semitism of the Church has obscured the lessons of Jesus, and Benjamin re-establishes his Jewishness in a David-and-Goliath struggle. Antagonism must remain between the two peoples, so Elaine and Benjamin physically battle the Christian wedding crowd. The heavy, gilded crucifix he turns back on the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) is an anti-anti-Semitic action. Benjamin finally has fought to win Elaine in order to create his own path. The new couple escapes the crowd by hopping a bus: they are free of the associations that come with their cars. Nichols uses a final frontal close-up that resembles those of the opening, but with Elaine sharing the frame and the usual split lighting that divides characters removed to stress that both equally have anxiety about their future: the romantic fantasy has quickly faded (Nichols 1967, 01:44:46) (Fig. 16). Katharine Ross emulates Hoffman's deadpan expression, confirming that Elaine is now a part of Benjamin's confused lifestyle. The shot recalls the early bedroom aquarium shot, in which Benjamin ponders his future. Here, however, the natural lighting from the dirty back windows of the bus, instead of the heavy shadows of the fish aquarium with the tiny figurine, signifies

Benjamin's abandonment of the suffocating suburban existence and his journey toward what will likely be a lower-middle-class lifestyle. There is no dramatic high contrast lighting, no clever titled angles signifying confusion, only the return of the film's refrain, "The Sound of Silence", as the uncomfortable pair attracts the attention of a new crowd of onlookers, and the bus drives off toward the horizon.



Figure 16. Nichols (1967, 01:44:46).

There are alternative ways critics can understand the technical and cultural achievements of New Hollywood. This article addressed this issue by attempting to ask who or what instigated this change, and to what extent did American Jewishness play a part. Rather than understanding the films of this period only through a comparative study of the European film renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s, or through radical American politics, it is important to critically interrogate in new and unfamiliar ways how these works are informed by the outsidership of their Jewish directors. Disillusionment for Jews (or characters coded Jewish) in films like these is perpetual. The usual path to solving problems is still not an option in a post-Holocaust world. There is no solution to the dilemmas that Jews who are discriminated against encounter. The open and tragic New Hollywood ending underlines this: there is never closure, and romance is unreal and unattainable and certainly does not solve problems. This is also the dilemma for Jews who must deal with "the six million", the absence of God, and their

new place in a complex postmodern landscape of uncertainty. Such cultural and filmic adaptations were designed by Jewish dissidents who realized that assimilation, like the exclusivity of tradition, is not an option, and that a strategy of destabilizing pre-existing cultural and aesthetic norms is an acceptable and exceptional coping mechanism for handling anti-Semitism and escaping the Holocaust.

Bibliography

- Antonioni, Michelangelo, dir. *L'Avventura*. 1960; Culver City, California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2016. DVD.
- . *L'Eclisse*. 1962; Issy-les-Moulineaux, France: StudioCanal, 2007. DVD.
- Auster, Albert, and Leonard Quart. 2001. *American Film and Society since 1945*. 3rd ed. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Cooley, Aaron. 2009. "Reviving Reification: Education, Indoctrination, and Anxiety in *The Graduate*." *Educational Studies* 45, no.4: 358-76.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131940802649789>
- Desser, David, and Lester Friedman. 1993. *American-Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Feuer, Menachem. 2014. "Woody Allen's Schlemiel: From Humble Beginnings to an Abrupt End." In *Woody on Rye: Jewishness in the Films and Plays of Woody Allen*, edited by Vincent Brook and Marat Grinberg, 79-99. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press.
- Frankenheimer, John, dir. *The Fixer*. 1968; Los Angeles, California: MGM. 2002. DVD.
- Frankl, Viktor. 1959. *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust*. London: Rider.
- . 1955. *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1990. *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works*. Edited by Albert Dickson. London: Penguin.
- Gelms, Joseph. 1974. *The Film Director as Superstar*. London: Pelican.
- Gilman, Sander L. 1993. *Freud, Race, and Gender*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

- Hill, George Roy, dir. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. 1969; Los Angeles, California: Walt Disney Studios, 2019. DVD.
- Hodges, Graham. 2010. "Lower East Side." *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. 2nd ed. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.
- Knox, Israel. 1963. "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor." *Judaism* 12, no. 3: 327-337. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/f3d4a7058f1a84bad6ed4cf371d0664a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1817128>.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Earl Raab. 1995. *Jews and the New American Scene*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Lumet, Sydney, dir. *The Pawnbroker*. 1964; Los Angeles, California: MGM, 2000. DVD.
- Man, Glenn. 1994. *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance, 1967-1976*. New York: Praeger.
- Manufacturing Intellect. *Mike Nichols Interview (1992)*. YouTube. May 2, 2016. Video, 46:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iqaw4Ny7xGI>
- Morris, Milton Himmelfarb, and Martha Jelenko, eds. 1968. *1968 American Jewish Yearbook: A Record of Events and Trends in American and World Jewish Life*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Nachman, Gerald. 2009. *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.
- Neusner, Jacob, ed. 1984. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot*. Chappaqua, New York: Russel Books.
- Nichols, Mike, dir. *The Graduate*. 1967; Los Angeles, California: Embassy Pictures, 2007. DVD.
- Penn, Arthur, dir. *Bonnie and Clyde*. 1967; Burbank, California: Warner Home Video, 2006. DVD.

Polanski, Roman, dir. *Chinatown*. 1974; Los Angeles, California: Paramount Pictures, 2000.

DVD.

Schlesinger, John, dir. *Midnight Cowboy*; 1969. Los Angeles, California: Twentieth Century

Fox, 2011. DVD.

Scott, Helen. "François Truffaut's Bonnie and Clyde." *IndieWire*, March 3, 2020. Accessed

January 24, 2022.

<https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/francois-truffaut-bonnie-and-clyde-serge-toubiana-1202215097/>.

Williams, Linda Ruth, and Michael Hammond, eds. 2006. *Contemporary American Cinema*.

Berkshire, England: Open University Press.