

CORE107-24 Spring 2017
March 17, 2017
Discussing *The Graduate*

For this class, we're fortunate that one of the greatest American films comes from the 1960's and reflects the feeling of the period so vividly. We could spend several sessions looking at the direction and performances, but for our purposes, let's imagine that *The Graduate* is the ultimate sixties film: it was both made in the sixties, and explains the sixties for audiences to come.

Two of the main themes can be linked to 1960's social conflict, and I bet you can find more:

1. **Where are the grownups?** The shallowness of the older adults ought to strike you. The treatment of these characters reflects the mistrust of leadership and institutions in that moment (1967, to be precise). The parents present Benjamin like he's a trophy. Think about the moment at the end of the film when the adults scream silently at Benjamin: they have nothing to say.
2. **Is Mrs. Robinson a feminist hero?** Mrs. Robinson is the most important older character¹, and I've seen students react to her with either revulsion or admiration. You might focus on her exploitation of Benjamin and her willingness to use him just to escape her own disappointment and self-loathing. You might also react to her as a feminist icon, her victimhood and independence, her authenticity and willingness take what she wants from the world. Or something more complicated. What do you think?

For tomorrow, one useful way to organize the discussion is around specific scenes. Pay attention to scenes that seem particularly important, moving, or confusing, and we'll try to break them down as a group.

Pick three scenes (at least) that you would like to discuss, and be ready to explain your own reaction to them.

A few other things you should notice that we don't necessarily need to discuss:

1. **Dustin Hoffman's performance.** He appears in nearly every frame of the movie. He gives the character so much convincing anxiety that he seems to make the camera shake.
2. **The last scene in the movie** with Benjamin and Elaine. It's a scene could launch a thousand film school seminars every year. Think about it carefully.
3. **The use of black and white imagery, in relation to color.**
4. **The camera lingering in place**, a few beats longer than the viewer expects.
5. **The "behind the head" shots** that focus on a single character talking to another.

¹ The obvious generational gap of the two main characters is ironic, since Anne Bancroft, the actor who plays Mrs. Robinson, was only six years older than Dustin Hoffman.