

Opinion

Why 'The Graduate' Is a Vietnam Movie

BEVERLY GRAY VIETNAM '67 DEC. 21, 2017

And here's to you, Mrs. Robinson, for your part in stopping the Vietnam War. True, Anne Bancroft's seductress was hardly known for her interest in foreign affairs. But the movie in which she starred left an indelible mark on the Vietnam generation. Though it avoided all mention of an overseas military conflict, "The Graduate," which opened 50 years ago this month, surpassed every film of its era in connecting with the radically altered mood of American youth.

The war was raging, but 1967 was a banner year for Hollywood. College-age baby boomers, flush with discretionary income, turned out for a wide array of movies defining the adult world they were poised to enter. Some of these, like "In the Heat of the Night" and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," reflected the concerns of the civil rights era. Others touched, however obliquely, on the American presence in Vietnam.

The year's summer blockbuster, "The Dirty Dozen," featured American soldiers battling Nazis in World War II, but was accused by many critics of trying to whip up

public enthusiasm for America's expanding foray into Southeast Asia. At the end of the summer, "Bonnie and Clyde" depicted a brutal true-crime spree that played out in rural byways during the Great Depression. Though the setting of "Bonnie and Clyde" was pure Americana, its director, Arthur Penn, admitted that his film's copious bloodshed was meant to mirror the carnage of Vietnam battlefields shown on the nightly news. Slightly later movies, like 1968's flag-waving "The Green Berets" and 1970's flag-burning "Getting Straight," more directly addressed the war being waged overseas. None of these, however, could match the impact of "The Graduate."

On its surface, "The Graduate" is an escapist film about love, sex and the potential for happily-ever-after. Its story, of how a new college graduate is seduced by the wife of his father's partner and then runs off with Elaine, her pretty daughter, makes no claim to profundity. Still, it spoke loudly to a demographic that found itself embroiled in a war mandated by a previous generation.

Its filmmakers had imagined their tale as set in 1962, the year in which Charles Webb wrote the novel on which it was based. But in the late 1960s, it took on a different shading. In June 1967, while the film was still in production, President Lyndon Johnson signed a revamped Military Selective Service Act, signaling that within the year deferments for most graduate students would come to an end. And if an able-bodied male in his 20s was not enrolled in college, he was immediately draft fodder. "The Graduate" seemed to many moviegoers a perfect illustration of a young man struggling to cope with a social landscape over which he had no control (even though the idea of a new college graduate lounging in his parents' swimming pool without fear of a "Greetings" letter from his draft board, as the protagonist Benjamin Braddock does, was quickly becoming an anachronism).

Baby boomers weren't alone in comprehending the film's cultural power. Clergymen, politicians and pundits found "The Graduate" subversive, and they denounced it from pulpits to the letters page of The Times. Over in Vietnam, the military brass tended to agree. Unlike many first-run movies, it was hardly seen in-country, though soldiers who did get to watch it, perhaps while on R&R jaunts to Hawaii or Tokyo, embraced it as a comic howl against a status quo they were risking their lives to preserve.

Some young Americans, though, weren't entirely satisfied. After "The Graduate" made its debut, Mike Nichols, who directed it, and Dustin Hoffman, who starred as Benjamin, toured college campuses to show the film. Everywhere they went, they were asked by student activists, "Why isn't it about Vietnam?" Dismissing the war as "a fashionable topic," Nichols complained years later, "To make a movie for young people that was not about Vietnam actually affronted them."

Nichols was 36 when he made "The Graduate," and his comment suggests why, to many attending college in 1967, anyone over 30 was not to be trusted. Nichols seemed wholly incapable of grasping that for students of that era, Vietnam was a life-or-death concern. But both he and the activists who confronted him were overlooking one key point about "The Graduate." Though the young men who feared the military draft and the young women who loved them were of course hoping to be entertained at the movies, they were also boiling over with anxiety about where their post-graduation paths would lead. That fact made them cousins to the fictional Benjamin Braddock, who from the very first is preoccupied with his future.

Despite the kvetching by campus activists and intellectuals that Benjamin was the most feckless of rebels, the vast majority of those in his age group were firmly on his side. In Benjamin they found a hero who came to learn, with startling clarity, that adults who were decades his senior did not always have his best interests at heart. Repelled by the materialism of his parents, he was then appalled to find in Mrs. Robinson someone seeking to use his body for her own selfish pleasure. Benjamin may not have been protesting against a meaningless overseas war, but in breaking up a church wedding and running off with the bride he showed a belated willingness to shatter convention and to undermine the corrupted values of his elders.

Young audiences took from "The Graduate" a warning about an older generation's seduction of youth for its own ends, and also a call to action. The film's tacit endorsement of social resistance energized those who (like Benjamin) were starting to question the rules of the game.

In the film's final scene, Benjamin and Elaine, having run away from Elaine's wedding, sit in the back of a bus — he in tatters and she in her wedding gown — their faces transforming from elation to anxiety about what lies ahead. Benjamin had

made clear at the beginning of the film that he wanted his future to be somehow different. Although we don't know where the newly minted couple are headed, their very escape from conventionality paved the way for other youthful dissenters to take a stand against the deepening American involvement in Vietnam. And that resolve inspired older Americans who felt compelled to voice their own anti-war sentiments. In rising up to oppose the Establishment's incursion into Southeast Asia, all of them were paying "The Graduate" the ultimate tribute.

Beverly Gray is the author of "Seduced by Mrs. Robinson: How 'The Graduate' Became the Touchstone of a Generation."

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