

**ACTING SOCIAL: THE CINEMA OF MIKE NICHOLS**

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This dissertation argues for the study of director Mike Nichols by elucidating his aesthetic, historical, social, and political importance. He ushered in the turn from “Classical” to “New” Hollywood, and studying his work illuminates unacknowledged similarities and differences in both periods. Furthermore, looking at the cultural significance of his oeuvre deepens our understanding of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, as well as key events in the ensuing five decades of American social history. By analyzing the methods for crafting scenarios that Nichols carried forward to the cinema from his seminal work in radio and theater, I generate new insight into the representation of the interpersonal on-screen, particularly through the lenses of gender and sexuality. There is no scholarship devoted to Nichols’s study, and I look at what his exclusion from debates in Cinema Studies tells us both about his films and about the dominant approaches and theoretical paradigms used to interpret the cinema, particularly regarding concepts such as character, performance, dialogue, the psychological, the human, and the social.

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## Chapter One: The Avoidance of Mike Nichols

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“I think it’s a strange mistake to take the kind of work I do seriously, to think of it as important or lasting. Plays are forgotten. Film crumbles. We all tend to make the mistake of thinking film is forever.... There was a time when I really thought about this. And I concluded: ‘The biggest kind of schmuck wants to be remembered. And the next biggest kind of schmuck wants to remember you. And the least schmuck of all simply gathers information to take to his grave.’” – Mike Nichols (Gelmis, 282-283)

“The history of films is in great part the history of our attitudes toward our bodies, as they have been expressed and as we have attempted to imitate the fleeting film images.” – Leo Braudy (217)

In 1975, Leonard Probst interviewed director Mike Nichols as part of his exploration of “the nature of the superstar” (which, according to him, was a new type of star, self-conscious and ahead of the public). Nichols had already been a household name in America for almost twenty years. He had been half of the wildly successful comedy duo, Nichols and May, during the 1950s, had become the most successful comedy director in American theatrical history, and had directed the landmark films *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *The Graduate* (1967), *Catch-22* (1970), and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971). Probst begins his interview with Nichols by asking if he is possibly correct in observing that Nichols’ films are “very heavily social but not political” (109). Nichols responds:

Yes. I think that’s possible and accurate. When I worked with Elaine May, our concerns were with personal behavior, usually between men and women because we were one of each. We tended, as individuals, and together, to be more concerned with behavior than with ideas purely political. That is not to say I don’t have strong political feelings, but that my work, it seems to me, is more concerned with things interpersonal than political. Political things tend, in movies and plays, and God knows, in sketches, to be general rather than specific. I’ve always been interested in specific things between people.

Nichols’ investment in the social goes some way towards explaining his films’ consistent investment in understanding the ontology of cinematic characters.<sup>1</sup> Nichols’ quote directs us to

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<sup>1</sup> It has become commonplace among academics to assert that “everything is political.” While this is surely true, it can be an unhelpful generalization when discussing the representation of people in screen fiction. It can degrade the importance of particular identities that have historically grounded power relations, as well as reduce subtly interesting human actions into a hunt for their points of origin. Nowadays we also make use of the term “socio-political,” popularized in the 1960s through journals like *Partisan Review* and *The New Left Review*, to denote the convergence of the two domains. While it may be true that concerns we often call political (such as the consent of

consider behavior as expressive of the social, of the interpersonal as behavioral—and for behavior as the space of the interpersonal—calling attention to the phenomenon of expressivity, its role in communication, and, ultimately, the possibility of knowing other people.

After more than forty years and over twenty feature films, Nichols remains a prominent and respected Hollywood director who continues to comment on the American social vista. Needing two individuals to create an interpersonal scenario, Nichols' attachment to representing the interpersonal on-screen also hints at a reason his work has been neglected, for it speaks to both an interest in the microcosm of the social and in the possibility of representing psychologies—an unpopular view in the contemporaneous and burgeoning field of cinema studies. As cinema studies settled in the academy in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was on avowedly political territory. The concepts of the individual and the “human” were not estimable at this time in academia, but rather, were thought to smack of a bourgeois sensibility. The desire to demonstrate cinema's political significance—and the concurrent desire to prescribe filmmaking procedures seen as more efficacious for a progressive politics—resulted in the derogation of Hollywood as the product of capitalism and, in turn, chastised its devices as promulgating an unhealthy attention to the individual. Such attitudes diminished the field's capacity to engage and value the complexity of representing interpersonal behavior: in short, the cinematic character (as individual, not just social type) and her social relevance. As there are no individuals without minds and no minds without individuals, engaging the vicissitudes of psychological realism is a primary formal concern for Nichols. In his films, socially relevant meaning emerges from the meeting, and meting out, of performance and character, identity and action.

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the governed and the distribution of wealth) are basic to the movements in the twentieth century (such as civil rights and feminism) that we might properly call social, I do not want to assume contiguities to the detriment of elucidating the particular ways that Nichols reveals the cultural negotiation of this discourse.

This is true of even those Nichols' films that tempt us to call them political, such as *Primary Colors* (1998) or *Catch-22*: when he aims at the political, it is through the specific. His most recent film, *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), is typical in this respect; it features great performances, a narrative centered on human relationships embedded in a very real American socio-political moment, and is uneasy to locate generically. That the story involves events that contributed significantly to America's current predicament with Afghanistan and its post-9/11 atmosphere, and that the film was produced and exhibited during wartime, might lead one to nominate this film as "political" in earnest. But Nichols historicizes the nation's largest covert war through an interpersonal relationship between two individuals, Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts) and Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks). Employing two of Hollywood's most commercial stars, Nichols' film is a story of people effecting change by working within an imperfect system. Just to make sure we do not misread Nichols' agenda, in a scene where Joanne makes public recent footage of the conflict in Afghanistan, she demands to know what the government will do in response to its greatest threat since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Congressman Charlie replies, "Well, I don't think making another movie about it is going to help if that's what you're asking."

The primary aim of this dissertation is to analyze Nichols' cinematic works, and, despite his critical neglect, this project is timely. I ground Nichols' cinema firmly in the 1960s; this period marks his emergence as a cinema director, and his most lasting influence as the pioneer of what came to be called "New Hollywood." The 1960s, of course, witnessed a great many important changes in American culture, and cinema culture was certainly one of them, a topic receiving increasing amounts of attention.<sup>2</sup> As I will explain below, the study of the voice in cinema plays

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mark Harris' *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of New Hollywood* (2008) and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s* (2007).



a crucial role in our understanding of Nichols' consistent concerns.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, my focus on Nichols as an actor's director speaks to the growing area of scholarship on film performance, as does my examination of the constitution of cinematic characters through his films.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Nichols himself is beginning to garner notable attention. Collector's edition DVDs have appeared (and again, this is partly exemplary of the broader interest in the 1960s), and the Museum of Modern Art conducted a retrospective of his cinematic work in 2009.<sup>5</sup>

However, this study is also anachronistic, even nostalgic. As digitally-created characters and the concept of the "post-human" impart other developing fields of inquiry, Nichols' films provide the window through which to look at the category of the human in realist fictional cinema. The knowledge we will acquire about what makes Nichols "Nichols" will arise out of close readings of his films. Shockingly, this is the first sustained treatment of his films, which are some of the most important in American cinematic history. To point out that Nichols (a name which from here on functions metonymically for the author of the corpus of films for which we can attribute responsibility to him) has not been analyzed does not in and of itself warrant an examination of him; perhaps he is better ignored. I do not think so, and, accordingly, in this introduction I will justify his study and my approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Current interest in this area is demonstrated by Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (2008), Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), Sarah Kozloff's *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000), and Michel Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1999). These studies fall within the larger, and rapidly expanding field of Sound Studies.

<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps the largest area of timely inquiry. I believe the best of recent work on cinematic performance is Andrew Klevan's *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (2005) and George Kouvaros' *Paul Schrader* (2008) and *Where Does it Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> There has been a broad cultural light (both nostalgic and critical) shined on the late 1960s recently in America as Barack Obama's journey to the presidency led many to look back to the 1960s as the origins of the African-American civil rights movement, and because of the increasing parallels between the wars in Iraq and Vietnam. Not surprisingly, this discourse has illuminated Nichols' role as American commentator, especially evident in the attention paid to the fortieth anniversary of *The Graduate*. Besides the special edition DVD, there have been lengthy profiles of him in *Vanity Fair*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*.

Most historical chronicles of cinema fail to reference Nichols' work.<sup>6</sup> Other histories, mostly those specific to American cinema, include Nichols, but only as foundational to the post-studio revivification of American cinema commonly called "New Hollywood." They acknowledge *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'s ground-breaking foul language, which brought the classical Hollywood Production Code down, and *The Graduate*'s mammoth success with the youth movement of the late 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Until now, though, no one has sought to analyze his films, even those films with obvious historical importance. In this introduction, I will sketch a possible explanation for what I can only imagine is a purposeful circumventing of his films—that is, not just his neglect, but his *avoidance*—by elucidating relevant values associated with particular American aesthetic, historical, and intellectual histories in the hopes of finding Nichols by investigating the culture that avoided him.

Sigmund Freud once said that the finding of an object is, in fact, its re-finding (288), rightly pointing out that we have to know that something exists, and that it was lost, in order to discover it again. As the juxtaposition of the quotes in the epigraph above suggests, my analysis here is not simply for the sake of remembrance. As one of America's most popular, influential, quintessential, and enduring filmmakers, Nichols is an ideal source of cultural information for thinking about an American history of "attitudes toward our bodies." As we will see, the narratives of his films demonstrate America's changing attitudes towards sexual difference, sexual identity, and ethnicity (particularly Jewish ethnicity), but to do so they place our attention on characters' faces and voices, directing us to contemplate fictional characters as expressing,

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<sup>6</sup> For example, David Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* (2004) and Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's *Film History* (2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Jon Lewis' *American Film: A History* (2008), *Contemporary American Cinema* (2006), ed. Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond, Paul Monaco's *History of American Cinema: The Sixties* (2001), David Cook's *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (2000), and John Belton's *American Cinema/American Culture* (1994). Cook is typical for citing the cultural impact of Nichols' early work before adding in a pejorative tone: "He has since become a mainstream industry figure" (100). Mark Harris details the production history of *The Graduate*, but does not examine the text itself.

self-presenting, emoting, and uttering. In turn, Nichols opens up discussions of concepts that have been historically neglected by cinema studies, such as the representation of emotion, performance, dialogue, and comedy—precisely those subjects with which, we shall see, Nichols is most concerned and innovative.<sup>8</sup> For example, rather than follow the conventional shot sequence of establishing shot to long shot to medium shot to close-up, the visual trajectories of many of Nichols’ best films begin (and end) with facial close-ups. However, we should not mistake this choice as a decision to omit an establishing shot. Nichols establishes the diegetic settings of his films as the mind of his character, and establishes his formal concern for considering the relationship between bodily expression, behavior, performance and the spectator’s attribution of—and belief in—a character’s inner life. If cinema is a language, on-screen behavior is an important part of our vocabulary for understanding it. As speakers of the cinema, and the languages of bodies, and of English, what do we mean by “psychologically realistic” characters?<sup>9</sup>

In the following pages, I will first give a brief biographical account of Nichols’ life. His experience as a European émigré resonates with strong national-cultural myths of immigration and “Americanness,” and is thus relevant to my insistence on placing him in specifically American cultural, cinematic, and critical genealogies. Second, I will situate Nichols within the context of the American cultural upheavals of the 1960s,<sup>10</sup> which brings together radical changes in American social and political culture wrought by the expansion of citizens’ rights with the

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<sup>8</sup> I want to identify several Hollywood directors making important films in the 1960s, and whose work shares relevant affinities for this study: Robert Altman (finally hitting his stride), Hal Ashby, Peter Bogdanovich, Arthur Hiller, Stanley Kramer, Sidney Lumet, Paul Mazursky, Alan Pakula, Sidney Pollack, and Herbert Ross.

<sup>9</sup> I want to make it clear that, because I am focused on the constitution of the human character, I am not talking about the work accomplished by other cinematic components, such as music and *mise-en-scène*, for suggesting the presence and state of a character’s mind. For example, filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, Ang Lee, or Douglas Sirk often brilliantly use *mise-en-scène* to specifically contribute to the impression of characters’ psychological attitudes.

<sup>10</sup> When referring to “the 1960s,” I, like Andrew Sarris, Arthur Marwick, and many other scholars, designate a period extending into the early seventies.

radical changes in American cinematic culture wrought by the expansion of film to include the European “new cinema.”<sup>11</sup> Third, I will delineate attitudes toward realist fictional cinema propagated by European, and then American, cinema scholarship of the 1960s to begin accounting for scholars’ avoidance of Nichols before concluding that, by establishing a middle ground between notions posited as antithetical, Nichols clarifies theoretical treatments of psychological realism. Throughout this dissertation, I will have reason to turn to the writings of Stanley Cavell, and so, in the final section, I will sketch a background picture of his views that are relevant to this look at Nichols.

### **A Brief Biography**

On November 6, 1931, Mike Nichols was born Michael Igor Peschkowsky (the name Nichols was derived from his father’s patronymic). Nichols’ father was a quite prominent Russian doctor (his patients included Sol Hurok of the Russian ballet), and he was also Jewish (Gussow, 1973). To escape Bolshevik persecution, he fled Russia to Germany (*Playboy*, 63), where he met Nichols’ mother, also Jewish, and a celebrated “German beauty” (Lahr, 253).<sup>12</sup> Nichols’ maternal grandmother translated Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* for Richard Strauss, and his grandfather, Gustav Landauer, was a writer, activist, and leader of the German Social Democratic Party whose best friends included Martin Buber and B. Traven (Lahr, 261). Landauer’s “brutal execution” by the Nazis caused the family to flee to America. It was 1939 and Nichols was seven. He and his younger brother fled first from Berlin knowing “just two English sentences—‘I do not speak English’ and ‘Please do not kiss me.’” (Lahr, 253). The family eventually all immigrated, and his father established a practice in New York City.

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<sup>11</sup> I borrow this term from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who uses it in *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s*.

<sup>12</sup> Nichols’ parents shared what we might now refer to as an “open” marriage (Lahr, 259), a fact that may very well be relevant to Nichols’ parodies of social mores where sex and the sexes are concerned.

Besides being removed from his native homeland and language, Nichols had been permanently denuded of all body hair at the age of four due to a bad vaccination. He would lose his father at twelve (Lahr, 253), the same year Nichols would be certified a genius (R. Jameson, 10). His mother was a depressive, and, following his father's death, the family descended into "humiliating poverty" (Lahr, 260). In 2009, a *New York Times* profile underlined the lingering effects of Nichols' hair loss: "He wakes up every morning in his Fifth Avenue apartment, collects himself and, wearing a wig and paste-on eyebrows, plays a character called Mike Nichols" (McGrath, 1).

"He was Igor Peschkowsky," his future collaborator, Buck Henry, remembers of their time in grade school together; "He did not speak English. He wore a cap all the time" (Lahr, 260). By high school, Nichols had mastered English and wore a wig, but, by all accounts, was still very much an outsider. Nichols recalls: "The refugee ear is a sort of seismograph for how one is doing... I *heard* what they thought of me—'nebbish,' 'poor boy,'—and what they thought of each other. A thousand tiny victories and defeats in an ordinary conversation" (Lahr, 261). Perhaps it should not surprise us he would later turn to radio performing, and that understanding his films' depiction of ordinary language is crucial to their appreciation.

Things began to change for Nichols when, at seventeen, he departed for the University of Chicago to become a psychiatrist (*Playboy*, 63), and where he says he made his very first friend (Lahr, 262).<sup>13</sup> That friend was Susan Sontag. They were lifelong friends.<sup>14</sup> She told John Lahr:

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<sup>13</sup> Erving Goffman received his PhD from the university the same year Nichols left. While I have not discovered any biographical connection, Goffman created a dramaturgical theory of the self based on understanding human actions in their specific contexts (time, place, audience, and the social actor's awareness of himself as audience and performer). Hence, the self is an effect of one's immediate environment. Human beings present themselves to others in relation to cultural values, norms and expectations. Presenting a self is, thus, a form of communication, and one which only occurs within a given cultural context. We learn to act a certain way as we learn our cultural world. Success comes, for Goffman, when a performance, or "presentation," is convincing. We will see this is very similar to Cavell's theory of language, in which learning what to say when is identical to learning of our world. These theories also coincide with the rise of ethnomethodology, as initiated by Harold Garfinkel in 1967.

“I adored him from the start. He was totally alive and incredibly verbal. We talked about books, about feelings, about how to get free of our pasts. Because we were interested in theatre, we were interested in observing people. I would happily have become his girlfriend physically, except I was intimidated by the hair problem” (262).<sup>15</sup> Sontag also started her career as a film director in the 1960s after watching, and admiring, *Nichols do it* (Gussow, 1969). Another of Nichols’ college friends, future-publisher Aaron Asher, talked of their community, saying “[We were] refugees or first-generation Jewish intellectual guys... We were all freaks. We were way ahead of the country. There was sex. There was dope. There was a subculture” (Lahr, 262).<sup>16</sup> It was also at the University of Chicago that he first met Elaine May.

After dropping out of college in 1953, moving to New York to study The Method with Lee Strasberg (who also helped Nichols financially [*Time*, 1970]), and subsequently realizing he did not actually think The Method was a very good one, Nichols returned to Chicago in 1955 to help begin the Compass Players (which evolved into Second City), a theater troupe devoted to developing material through improvisational means where he and May quickly drew attention. Their new, socially conscious style of comedy became a phenomenon on television, radio, and albums, eventually producing legions of fans, and a hit Broadway show. Celebrated as “an extemporaneous potpourri of irreverent and often hilarious social satire unlike anything ever seen

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<sup>14</sup> Sontag and Nichols performed in plays together at university and the pair became a mainstay of the New York intellectual scene in the sixties, as well as celebrities in other circles. One anecdote which gives some indication of their social stature comes from hostess extraordinaire Elaine Kaufman, who recalls Sontag and Nichols bringing Jackie Kennedy to a party after the death of her husband to “cheer her up.” (Kaufman, 128).

<sup>15</sup> Lahr also writes that “Thirty years later, Sontag confessed to Nichols that she couldn’t accept the scars from her mastectomy: ‘I have this thing, and every time I take a bath I’m horrified.’ He said, ‘Susan, now you know how I have felt my whole life.’” (262).

<sup>16</sup> Another classmate of Nichols’ was Paul Ekman, the nation’s current leading scientist of facial expression. We will return to his work in chapter two. When asked if he began studying the face at the University of Chicago, Paul Ekman replied, “Yes, that’s right. I read Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures* in a humanities course on rhetoric, and studied it as rhetoric. It’s actually spectacular rhetoric. A wonderful writing style in which he anticipates perfectly every question that will come to your mind just about when it will come to your mind. So I got very interested in Freud. At the University of Chicago in those days, you had to have some area that you specialized in. Susan Sontag was my classmate, [Mike] Nichols and [Elaine] May. I mean, it was an extraordinary [pool of] talent ...” (Conversations with Paul Ekman).

or heard before on an American stage,” their five best-selling albums became “collector’s items among the cognoscenti for their ruthlessly funny satire of everything and everyone from marriage and motherhood to [Albert] Schwietzer and the Pope” (*Playboy*, 63-64). Their sketches were often perceived as edgy and provocative (particularly their sexual content), but, as we will see in chapter four, their work was often just as progressive on a formal level.

Nichols and May, the act, broke up at the height of their fame in 1961 (we will delve further into their history in chapter four).<sup>17</sup> In 1962, after flailing in summer stock in Vancouver as an actor and having a directorial flop with *The World of Jules Feiffer* (with music by Stephen Sondheim), Nichols was given a chance to direct Neil Simon’s *Nobody Loves Me*. Working closely with Simon, the play would become *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), beginning what is, Lahr informs us, “the most successful commercial partnership in twentieth-century American theatre” (274).<sup>18</sup> He quickly followed with *The Knack* (off-Broadway) (1964), *Luv* (1964) (the farce no one appreciated until critic Walter Kerr stepped in to save it—and Nichols’ reputation), and *The Odd Couple* (1965) to become “the hottest comedy director in American theatrical history” (*Playboy*, 64), racking up three Tony Awards for direction in four years. Then, in 1966, his friends Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton insisted he direct them in the film adaptation of Edward Albee’s lightning-in-a-play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1963). Nichols felt protective of the play, wanted to prevent it from being mangled, and so, agreed. By November of that year, *Newsweek*’s cover story, “Mike Nichols: Director as Star,” sang his praises as “America’s highest-paid, most sought-after director, its only star director of the moment” due to his “four hits running simultaneously on Broadway,” as well as “the hit movie of the year” in

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<sup>17</sup> They re-teamed for John F. Kennedy’s 1962 birthday bash, performing alongside Marilyn Monroe’s famous rendition of “Happy Birthday” (Sarris, *Confessions*, 52).

<sup>18</sup> Between 1963 and 1984, Nichols “chalked up a dozen Broadway hits in a row, half of them with Simon” (Lahr, 276). As more and more films were adapted from Nichols’ plays, and included his directorial additions, Nichols became the first Broadway director to receive a share of author’s royalties.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (95).<sup>19</sup> Significantly, and as a point I will explore, *Newsweek* declares Nichols “one of those absolute American success stories—a fellow who is recompensed enormously for being himself” (95). Nichols spent some time enjoying his success, and garnering a reputation for it: “[In the 1960s] he was a certified Beautiful Person, intimate of Lenny [Bruce] and Jackie [Kennedy], chum of Gloria Steinem... Twice married, once divorced, once separated, he was the most eligible married male in Manhattan” (*Time*, 68). However, come 1970, Nichols confessed: “The accounts of such rounds were beginning to sound like Evelyn Waugh parties in a dirigible during a war” (68).

In an open letter to the *New York Times* in 1967 (which he later chose to print with his collected works), playwright Edmund Wilson pleaded with Mike Nichols to be the future of a specifically American theater. Wilson cites Walter Kerr’s praise of Nichols’ production of *The Little Foxes* (1967) starring Anne Bancroft:<sup>20</sup> “Its one unmistakable message... is that we can have an American National Theater any time we want to” (237). Kerr’s (and Wilson’s) fear or “panic” was that Nichols would not choose to manifest it. Wilson goes on to suggest a number of projects he deems specifically American before pleading with Nichols not to “succumb” to the “fleshpots of Hollywood” (250). These examples of the architecture of Nichols’ public persona indicate more than just his popularity, critical respectability and financial viability. They connect his success as a performer, theatrical director, and director of film, not as a chronological chain, but as a locus; one centered around performance as stylistic marker of American-ness.

Following the success of *Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967) (for which he won an Academy Award as Best Director), Nichols beat out Orson Welles (who nevertheless

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<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to overstate the success of *Virginia Woolf?* Critics compared it to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), it was the second highest grosser of the year, and it received thirteen Academy Award nominations.

<sup>20</sup> *The Little Foxes* was adapted from Lillian Hellman’s play for film in 1941 by William Wyler, a director whose work intersects with Nichols and to whom I will return in chapter six. Nichols shared a romantic relationship with playwright Hellman during this period (Wilson, 497, 807)



agreed to perform in the film) to adapt Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Although the film, made in 1970, is undoubtedly Nichols' most visually stunning, its elliptical narrative and tone of bitterness caused it to flounder when it premiered on the heels of Robert Altman's more entertaining *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970). Nichols followed up with his masterpiece, *Carnal Knowledge* (1971). Sporting the recently-invented X rating, the film did not shy away from discussing sex, features the first unsheathing of a condom in a Hollywood film, and brutally depicts the paranoia and anxiety feminism was inciting in some men. The film was the subject of considerable controversy, which eventually reached the Supreme Court and resulted in the "community standards" criteria for determining obscenity in Hollywood (Probst, 109).

Nichols next took over directing *The Day of the Dolphin* (1973) from Roman Polanski, which furthered Nichols' investigation into language and human communication by looking at the possibility of teaching dolphins English. This film failed critically and financially, as did his next film, the farce *The Fortune* (1974), which chronicled two very close male friends who decide to break the Mann Act (an actual law), which forbids the transport of women across state lines. After this string of disappointments, Nichols abandoned filmmaking for seven years. He produced the television series *Family* (1976-1980) and continued to direct on Broadway (including his most critically successful play, David Rabe's *Streamers* [1976], a story about homosexual-baiting in the military).

When Nichols returned to filmmaking in 1983 with *Silkwood*, the true story of a woman who took on corporate nuclear power, he evinced a new, more conventional style. Although it still featured stellar performances, interesting framing, and highly verbal, intelligent dialogue, *Silkwood* did not evince the same expressionism and formal convention-breaking as his early period. It did, though, demonstrate expert traditional filmmaking, and while Nichols still favored

long takes, he multiplied his use of editing. *Heartburn* (1986), *Biloxi Blues* (1988), *Working Girl* (1988), and *Regarding Henry* (1991) follow suit. The expressionism and avant-garde techniques of his two films made for the Home Box Office cable television network, *Wit* in 2001 and *Angels in America* in 2003, demonstrate a return of the original stylist. And *Closer* (2004), a bookend to *Carnal Knowledge*, revealed he had not lost his ability to bottle the contemporary zeitgeist in the form of romantic conflicts waged by the sexes in the darkest of comedic lights.

We will look more closely at the shifts in Nichols' stylistics in chapter six. Nichols would refer to *Silkwood* and his departure from "long takes and the sort of hubris of not cutting" as an "awakening," a sign of maturation and his education in film grammar (Smith, 29). Nichols has said, "I don't think *The Graduate* and *Carnal Knowledge* were any different from what I'm doing now [in 2000]... All movies are pure process. A commercial movie isn't less process than an art movie. You can't make your decisions about a film on the basis of 'Is it important enough? Is it serious enough?' It's either alive or it's not for me" (Lahr, 283). But Lahr observes: "the fact remains that the early pictures said new things in an ironic, challenging way, and the later work ruffles no feathers" (283). One possibility omitted from Lahr's description of Nichols' reputation is whether it matters that Nichols can capture the ambivalence of women's place in the 1980s work force, can comment on the urgency of nuclear disarmament, and can introduce homosexual protagonists into mainstream cinema (as in *The Birdcage* [1996]) without ruffling feathers.

Lahr's description expresses a frustration that Nichols failed to live up to his early promise, but I believe this to be an egregious misinterpretation of both his early and late work. A thread running throughout this dissertation will be Nichols' devotion to being "middle-brow." We have already seen that his comedy with May garnered respect amongst the New York

intellectual literati, while also producing best-selling albums. Their routines flaunted the significance of “brows” by reference-hopping between Batman, Dostoyevsky, Anna Mae Wong, Proust, and Noel Coward, and they appealed to New York’s intellectual elite even as they did television spots for Jax beer. When Nichols and May were labeled high-brow, he said, “I object to the whole thing about ‘intellectual’ comedians... These days you can be an intellectual in twenty seconds just by saying certain names: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Dostoyevsky, Kafka. Intellectual used to mean a process of thinking, or a body of knowledge” (Nachman, 348).

In terms of his cinematic work, Nichols has been vocal about his influences—and they, too, come from varying “brows.”<sup>21</sup> He fired Haskell Wexler from *The Graduate* for making disparaging remarks about Fellini, whose *8 1/2* (1963) he screened ten times before filming began (Gelmis, 281). He admires the films of Ingmar Bergman above all others (Smith, 24); it is in “certain Bergman pictures, or occasionally, for [him] a Fellini picture,” that he finds “truth” (Probst, 123). And the first American film to “rock his world” was George Stevens’ *A Place in the Sun* (1951) (Gelmis). Still, in his book, *Director as Superstar*, Joseph Gelmis describes Nichols’ unique power to attain large budgets and complete artistic control in a time when Hollywood did not usually make such deals. As Gelmis Notes: “most of his personal pantheon of film directors—like Bunuel, Renoir, Bergman, Fellini, Welles—were never popular with mass audiences or the Hollywood moneymen. For so modest and astute a sensibility, the irony is acutely discomfiting” (266).

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<sup>21</sup> These brows were not fully established for cinema until the 1960s, and often aligned the low-brow with the popular in terms of financial success and/or accessibility. For more on these hierarchies, see Paul Coates’ *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture* and Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.

Nichols' interest in the interpersonal extends to his filmmaking practice. From his improv days (where he improvised thirty to forty scenes a night for forty-eight dollars [Gelmis, 265]), Nichols developed an appreciation for the sense of a working ensemble. As Gelmis says, "The basis of Nichols' career is his concept of community—a collaborative interplay between friends and colleagues. He is not a loner. He is not a hustler. He is, in fact, disquieted by being in vogue, being considered a Midas and a success" (265). "I don't think when I'm alone," says Nichols: "That's why I'm a director. I'm turned on by somebody else. A director works with other people" (Gelmis, 266). However, Nichols has also made it very clear that he considers his films his own: "I really need to control [my work]. Every aspect of it, every nuance of the reading. How long every second of every shot is... Partly because that's the job and partly because I just have to" (Lahr, 255). His cinematographer of thirty years, Robert Surtees, says, "Mike was the boss. Nobody was going to come to the set and question what he did. They wouldn't dare; he wouldn't stand for it. Which was nice for me. The only man I had to please was Mike Nichols. The director runs the show... The picture is what the director makes of it" (Gelmis, 266).

When asked why he keeps directing both theatre and film, Nichols replied: "Mostly for the pleasure of rehearsing. I love rehearsing more than anything in the world, with the possible exception of cutting a film" (Gelmis, 269). Nichols again professes to appreciate the process, the activity of creating. In 1966, with mostly theatrical experience under his director's belt, he talked about his own creative process: "There's a secret about directing and it's this—you're trying to help people... I don't mean to come on, but you can't beat Aristotle, who said that one of the great joys of life is to give order to things. That's why we have theater. You can control it more than you can life" (Nachman, 352).

The subject of our final chapter is Nichols' status as an "actor's director." There we will look at his work with actors, particularly his collaborations with star Meryl Streep. He regards one of the primary duties *of a director* to be the creation of character, a task he sees as synonymous with the creation of actor behavior; Nichols did not mince words when he declared in 1966: "A director creates behavior" (*Playboy*, 72). He elaborates: "the things that happen between people casually while they're just standing around are so extraordinary that if I can create that kind of behavior—I don't mean simply bizarre, but unique and revealing of character—if I can do that, I'm a director" (*Playboy*, 70). Significantly, he does not see his work as creating behavior that suggests a psychology, but rather the opposite. Psychological consciousness comes first: "Turning psychology *into* behavior is one of the director's jobs" (my emphasis, "Introduction to *Birdcage*," ix). Nichols explores finding "ways to express the underneath without words; sometimes it's the opposite of the words, or a tangent of the words...unexpressed undercurrents that are palpable" (Smith, 29). We will see that the particular ways his films reflect upon the representation of behavior shifts the emphasis back onto the spectator, and her desire to interpret behavior as legible on a psychological level.

However, it is not the goal of this introduction, or indeed the dissertation, to point to or demonstrate Nichols' intentions. That would be impossible, as he would be the first to admit. When asked "at what point does an audience ever know what the director, the writer, or the 'guiding consciousness' had in mind?" he replied: "Never. You don't know in a novel. You certainly don't know in a play...And no one will ever know what a film director or a screen writer had in his mind. It either hangs together and joins your life and becomes part of you and you trust it, or it doesn't" (Gelmis, 287). That, however, does not mean Nichols refrains from discussing his work. He has no qualms sharing his interpretations, for example, about the

ambiguous ending of *The Graduate*, but is quick to point out that, “[his] opinion really doesn’t have much more validity than anyone else’s” (Gelmis, 288).

### **Characters: Performing Actions**

Nichols’ interest in characters’ behavior and psychology motivates my look at the concept of performance—broadly conceived to encompass its etymological and theatrical senses. Within Cinema Studies, psychological realism is a term that has found greatest application in scholarship on performance.<sup>22</sup> “Performance” is an ambiguous term that can apply both to the activity of performing and the resultant object. That is, it is often used to refer to what the filmed actor did before the camera during production, but it can also refer to what we, as spectators, see on-screen as the work of the actor (which is articulated through the filmic language of shots, frames, selected takes, perhaps augmented by looping or other sound effects, etc.).<sup>23</sup>

Compounding ambiguities, it is also correct to say that the character on-screen “performs” an

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<sup>22</sup> See work by Klevan, James Naremore, Roberta Pearson, Virginia Wright Wexman, and Richard deCordova. That psychological realism is a culturally and temporally relative style has been proven in the work of Pearson and Wright Wexman. Klevan illustrates a way of conceiving performance which does not begin with the actor, but with the filmic scene or character as locus of expression; his aesthetic object becomes that which is expressed by the scene holistically. Klevan recognizes that the actions performed by a character on-screen do not exist elsewhere (even in the actor’s pro-filmic space). He does not provide anecdotal evidence of a star performer’s moods or techniques, but neither does he diminish his sense of the importance of the human figure by treating it as just another object within the *mise-en-scène*; it is a privileged object which interacts with other objects. Through him, we see that actions performed on-screen can function as meaningful in several registers: as a textual action performed by the character in the diegetic world, as a textual action performed by the actor to create *this* character, and as an action performed by the actor which contributes to our understanding of the actor as actor/star persona.

<sup>23</sup> Valuable and insightful work on the cinematic stardom can be found in works by Richard Dyer, Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy, Naremore, Wright Wexman, and DeCordova. Stars are often understood in specific, and contingent, historical contexts, celebrity cultures, and cinematic practices. Naremore observes in his book, *Acting in the Cinema* (1988), that theorizing cinematic *acting* has been neglected (2). Since cinematic acting contributes to the production of cinematic characters, Naremore’s observation contributes to our understanding of the scholarly neglect of Nichols’ films. In attending to character, I largely set aside concern for specific actors’ technique. As spectators, we do not have access to knowledge of a performer’s technique, merely the information that appears on-screen. Wright Wexman asks, “If some movies feature actors who meld their identities with the personas of the characters they play, how could we, as spectators, know this? And, why should we need to know? ... Would it matter?” We can build on Wright Wexman’s questions to recognize that good performances tell us how something is, not whether it is. Thus, we need not worry about notions like authenticity or the actor’s experience in our immediate look at performance.

action. As an element of a film, characters are often thought of as content, not form. But in a Nichols' film, even the form by which an actor is represented is in the service of character—like the wonderful rack focus in *The Graduate*, where Elaine's face comes back into focus as she emerges from her confusion and figures out that Ben was sleeping with her mother.<sup>24</sup> As we will see, Nichols' films isolate the cinematic articulation of characters' actions, guiding the spectator to reflect upon their performativity and expressivity.

In her conception of gender as performative, Judith Butler makes a valuable distinction between a "role" and a series of actions.<sup>25</sup> We speak of an action as "performed" whether we perceive it done by an on-screen character or our neighbor, and Butler utilizes the longstanding Western notion that "we are all actors" to look at "constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting [human] identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" (155). In this way, an important simultaneity is at work in which acts are "both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted" (155). Even if we begin with the assumption that a theatrical or cinematic character is performed, Butler instructs us not to conflate our thinking about characters as entities with characters as constituted by actions in our efforts to understand their ontology. Throughout this dissertation, I shall start with a concentration on the actions by which cinematic characters are constituted, borrowing a page from George Santayana, who wrote that "the acts are the data and the character the inferred

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<sup>24</sup> It is tempting to call Nichols' work, especially his early work, expressionist. Though it bears strong traces of expressionism, I find this designation too strong, for his films are too suspicious of the extent of behavior's expressive power. Billy Wilder intimated that, "Mike's scenes have a kind of inner content, which the audience feels and follows" (Lahr, 279). Other directors have attested to the influential nature of Nichols' emphasis on character. Steven Soderbergh is a disciple, co-commentating with Nichols on the DVD editions of his films. Steven Spielberg professed his admiration for the handheld camera in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the lighting in *The Day of the Dolphin*, the terror of *Silkwood*, and describes *The Graduate* as a "visual watershed," claiming that he "had never seen long lenses used [to] illuminate a character moment" (Lahr, 280).

<sup>25</sup> Like Butler, others, such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, collate performance's basic notion of doing something with its theatrical connotations of doing something to reveal not the essential, but the ordinary way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs.

principle, and a principle, in spite of its name, is never more than a description *a posteriori*, and a summary of what is subsumed under it” (111). But how do we infer the unifying principles of what call a character? How do we understand the expressions and actions which constitute it? What are the effects of our perceiving a unity?

By looking at what a character *does*, not only are we looking at what a character is, but, retroactively, we are asking how cinematic characters have functioned aesthetically, historically, culturally and socially. Such questions open up a discussion of what we mean by “psychological realism” in the cinema and so, of the relation between on-screen, fictional human characters and “real” humans. Investigating expressivity through the stylistic conventions of cinema, such as the facial close-up, dialogue, and actor’s performance, reminds us that we do not *perceive* mental activities such as emotion or intention, but *attribute* them to the character based upon the beliefs derived from our experience—and imagination—of the characters’ expression. In “reality,” when we perceive other people expressing themselves, we can react in many ways; we can doubt, deny, believe, or ignore the expression’s claims upon us, just as the expresser can emote, suppress emotion, or dissemble.

For example, in a pivotal scene of what is, in many ways, the quintessential Nichols’ film, *Carnal Knowledge*, the spectator is presented with a close-up of Susan (Candace Bergen), dressed in black, laughing against an almost entirely black background. This shot of her facial expression, almost floating in space, lasts for over one hundred seconds. The spectator might begin by identifying with Susan, and, following normative cinematic grammar, understand herself to perceive mirth. Slowly, though, Susan’s expression becomes strange; it rends itself from the expressed as we no longer see an expression of happiness, but a grotesque portrait. This moment enjoins the spectator to consider the ties that bind the expression of emotion with



the process of expressing and the object being expressed, opening up their relationships as topics for our deliberation. By pointing to the limits of the image's powers of representation, Nichols creates a negative space for the spectator to contemplate how characters' actions become meaningful as socialized forms of intersubjective communication.

### **Nichols as Cinematic Author in the American 1960s**

"[T]here is no incompatibility between the exploration of inner space and the rectification of social space. What some of the kids understand is that it's the whole structure of modern American man, and his imitators, that needs rehauling... That rehauling includes Western 'masculinity,' too."

Susan Sontag, "What's Happening in America (1966)"

What is perhaps most striking about Nichols' description of his films as social is that it comes at the tail end of a cultural revolution in America frequently thought of in political terms.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, scholars such as Nowell-Smith have recently argued that contemporary American culture is rooted in this moment: "the 1960s are to be seen mainly as a great step forward in the process of modernization which continues uninterrupted up to the present" (Nowell-Smith, 9). Popular culture embraced sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, liberating itself from religion, which lost "both its attraction and its coercive power" (9).<sup>27</sup> Not least of all, the country had been enjoying almost unparalleled and constant economic growth since the end of the Second World War. Nowell-Smith believes that, "In these respects, an unbroken line can be seen to connect the 1960s to [the 2000s]," and that the proliferation of screens today (in color, too) mark "a huge change in the phenomenology of everyday life which has crept up almost unnoticed and where, again, if a starting point can be located anywhere, it must surely be the 1960s" (9).

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<sup>26</sup> For a definitive detailing of the 1960s as a time of cultural revolution, see Marwick's *The Sixties* (1998).

<sup>27</sup> I should clarify that I am talking about those organized religions which had enjoyed real social and political power. There was a fascination with Eastern religions and spirituality that proliferated during the 1960s, but these were often valued precisely for their differences from religions already ensconced in American culture.

The 1960s was not only a cultural revolution, but demonstrated culture's political reach into the intimacy between the personal and political in new ways, a particularly important development for a nation founded upon a charter of citizens' individual rights. In chapter two, *The Graduate* will motivate a look at the context of the The Free Speech Movement which began at the University of California at Berkeley. It signaled a new, passionate generation and aided the Civil Rights Movement, which achieved equal citizenship under the law for racial minorities. This was quickly followed by the advent of second-wave feminism, the early assertions of gay and lesbian rights (then called "gay liberation"), the national debate over abortion, and a vocal group of citizens outraged over what they saw as its government's shameful involvement in Vietnam. The hyper-masculinity associated with the soldiers participating in Vietnam not only intensified attention to the male body as spectacle of masculinity, but as reports came back of the atrocities some American soldiers were committing, exemplified a form of conventional masculinity at its most indefensible. In her essay, "What's Happening in America (1966)," Sontag comments on the promise of the radical activities of "those youth who are sincerely making a fuss" (199) and objects to intellectuals, like Leslie Fiedler, who:

called attention to the fact that the new style of young people indicated a deliberate blurring of sexual differences, signaling the creation of a new breed of youthful androgens. The longhaired pop groups with their mass teenage following and the tiny elite of turned-on kids from Berkeley to the East Village were both lumped together as representatives of the 'post-humanist' era now upon us, in which we witness a 'radical metamorphosis of the Western male,' a 'revolt against masculinity,' even 'a rejection of conventional male potency'. (199)<sup>28</sup>

In Europe, radical movements radiated outward from anxiety over class differences, while in America, race, gender and Vietnam were the major impetuses for socio-political dissent.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In 1966, Fiedler published the revised version of his famous *Love and Death in the American Novel*, which looked at the American novel's departures and derivations from the European novel—a perspective also relevant to cinema.

<sup>29</sup> I am not implying that class difference is not a basic cause of unrest in America; indeed, that fact will be crucial to my reading of *The Graduate*. I am merely pointing out that the rhetoric of the time was far less concerned with the unequal distribution of wealth in America than with the unequal distribution of civic rights and possibilities. For

Second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement both implicitly and explicitly engaged the issue of who, and what, would count as human in America.<sup>30</sup> However, since these groups of citizens were always capable of being liberated, but were suppressed by a white patriarchy, the onus of change lay with the definition of “man”: who had the founding fathers meant when they said it was self-evident that all *men* were created equal?

An important strand running through the following chapters is Nichols’ treatment of contemporary American gender and sexual difference. As we will see in chapter five, his film corpus is an extension of his description of his work with May; that is, his films have been concerned largely with the performance of gender. Similarly, his collaborations with star Meryl Streep engage the self-presentation of womanhood in the American 1980s as well as its portrayal in Hollywood. Most frequently, though, Nichols body of work is entrenched in, and contributes to, the re-working of contemporary American masculinity. His casting of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* has been called “One of the most significant casting choices in American film... It ushered in a whole era of leading men; it opened up avenues for leading men that just didn’t exist before.”<sup>31</sup> One is tempted to say that one year earlier, in 1966, when *Virginia Woolf*’s George and Martha (who Albee named after the first couple of the nation) killed their fictional son—the idea (*qua idea*) of the blonde and blue-eyed boy-future—they did a thorough job of it. Nichols

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more on this, see Marwick, as well as Richard Rorty’s “Back to Class Politics.” The relevance of the discrepancy of attention to class in Europe and America will become clear when we look at theories of cinema developed amidst the radical political and cultural events in Europe of the late 1960s, when students and workers were the high-profile protestors, struggling to achieve alternative economic structures. Class issues simply did not obtain the same urgency in America; socialists and Maoists were visible, but had nothing like the force of their European cousins.

<sup>30</sup> 1968 also witnessed the announcement of the double helix, which revolutionized understanding of DNA. For a look at the cultural impact of the widespread dissemination of such technology in this era, see Marwick. Also, in his account of “pivotal artworks from the 1960s that outlined the genesis of robotics in art,” Eduardo Kac points out that, “The first commercial robots appeared in the early 1960s in the United States and in about twenty years had developed a stronghold in industrial facilities around the world” (60).

<sup>31</sup> Steven Soderbergh said this in his commentary on *The Graduate* 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary DVD edition, which he shares with Nichols. Similarly, James Monaco called it “the single most distinctive turning-point figure in the transformation of the Hollywood male star in the 1960s” (147). This is no small feat when we consider the reigning champs were such Aryan triumphs as Paul Newman, Robert Redford and Steve McQueen.

chronicles many of the nation's most pressing social developments through a masculinity in crisis: the youth movement's dissent in *The Graduate* in 1967, the crushing anti-war sentiment in *Catch-22* in 1970, and the reality of gender enmity in *Carnal Knowledge* and *The Fortune* in the early 1970s.

By the 1980s, he gave us the ambitious, morally upright and sexy heroines of *Silkwood* and *Working Girl*, who induced enough anxiety in the men they encountered (and, in the case of *Working Girl*, women acting like men) to reveal that it was not only the women that needed to change if their fragile place in the workforce was to be secured. *Biloxi Blues*, *Regarding Henry*, and *Wolf* (1994) display similar anxiety over the development of the 1990s' sensitive "New Man," a fear over the loss of traditional masculinity resulting in speech loss, impotence, or even, lycanthropy. Nichols also chronicles the increasing visibility of homosexual males over the decade through *The Birdcage* and *Angels in America*.

The 1960s also introduced European New Wave cinema into American culture, compelling Sontag to call film in 1966 "the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms right now" (11). That same year, Nichols made his cinematic directorial debut and echoed her claim, saying that film is the home to artists doing "the most extraordinary things right now" (*Virginia Woolf* DVD). *La Dolce Vita* (Frederico Fellini, 1960) made a cinematic splash in 1961, but it was not until the mid to late 1960s that foreign film was suddenly not so foreign. In fact, 1966 was also the year the New York Film Festival began (which never showed more than one or two American features in one year until 1970). The films of Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, Francois Truffaut, Alain Resnais and Ingmar Bergman set the tone within festival circles, and, in a few years, the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, Nagisa Oshima, and Jean-Pierre Gorin and Godard would be standard art cinema fare. Andrew Sarris

recounts how “Film Festival” fever hit the United States with predictable reactions and counterreactions ... As habitual moviegoers disappeared by the millions, serious scholars of film increased by the thousands” (188).<sup>32</sup>

In 1961, Sontag describes a distinction between the films of Marcel Carné, Federico Fellini, and Ingmar Bergman as “analytic” and those of filmmakers like Godard and Bresson as “expository”: “The first kind could be described as psychological films, those concerned with the revelation of characters’ motives. The second kind is anti-psychological, and deals with the transaction between feeling and things; the person is opaque” (“A Note,” 245). Sontag points out that distinctions were being drawn at this time not just on the basis of realism, but on differing attitudes toward narrative and character. A film by Godard or Bresson, for instance, might involve “sketchy,” seemingly unmotivated characters.

Nowell-Smith observes, “The old cinema was not only rejected, but denounced” (3) and asserts that one of the “advances” made by “theory” enabled “new cinema” to be seen as intellectually and politically valuable: “The first breakthrough was to see Hollywood (and by extension other conventional cinemas) as a fundamentally inexplicit cinema, that is to say one in which the marks of enunciation are suppressed or naturalized and stories are told which appear to be telling themselves rather than being developed from a position which the audience can locate and, if necessary, challenge” (4-5). In his recent analysis of “new cinemas of the 1960s,” Nowell-Smith follows Gilles Deleuze to nominate the 1960s as the dissemination of a movement begun with Italian neo-realism in the 1940s, a change from emphasizing the spectator’s experience of space to time “above and beyond the forward movement of the action” (6).

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<sup>32</sup> Referring to the “reigning *Antioniennui* of the period,” Sarris later reflected upon the “prevailing mood” of the sixties as “absurdist despair” (*Politics and Cinema*, 184-186) and reminds his reader of the plethora of middle-brow, low-brow, popular or failed art that was, even then, in danger of being forgotten in order to point out that not remembering such art removes exalted works from their proper context.

However, Nichols' films of the 1960s satisfy this criterion despite being made from within the Hollywood system (without foregrounding time to the extent of, say, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* [Alain Resnais, 1959]). From the events of *Virginia Woolf?*, unfolding in almost "real time," to *The Graduate*'s long, contemplative shots, and *Carnal Knowledge*'s extended close-ups, actions are posited for examination in time, as activities, not just plot points. Nevertheless, these films, which ostensibly departed from Hollywood convention, helped to save Hollywood.<sup>33</sup> *Virginia Woolf?*'s story of "frank" sexuality, complete with expletives previously unuttered by Hollywood on-screen characters and filmed in Fellini-esque black-and-white, appealed to the audience acquainting itself with the influx of European films and became the first picture released by Hollywood without approval by the Production Code Administration since its inception in the 1930s. *The Graduate* became the top-grossing picture of the decade (Lewis, 258), tapping into a need for new American visual sophistication, and appealing to the newly empowered youth audience. Along with Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* indicated a future for American cinema: "Years before American critics began touting an *auteur* renaissance, a golden age of Hollywood run by audacious film directors exercising creative autonomy unheard of in the old Hollywood, these two films revealed just how far movie directors might go stylistically and thematically and just how far the American moviegoer, circa 1967, was willing to go with them" (Lewis, 272).

Another byproduct of the changes in cinematic culture produced by the influx of European cinema was an increase in public attention to the director (Nowell-Smith, 4). Hollywood filmmakers had often been a significant factor in selling their films, but following the advent and popularity of Fellini, Antonioni, Godard and the like in America, the *auteur* enjoyed

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<sup>33</sup> Finances were grim for Hollywood at this time, and the 1960s saw the sale of the studios. For an account, see Lewis, Belton, and Monaco.

a new status, and Nichols was the first to benefit from this shift in Hollywood. We will look more closely at Nichols' early reception in our consideration of *The Graduate* in the following chapter, but it is relevant here to point out that, initially, he was positioned by critics "between" European and American cinema, a debatable American *auteur*. Sarris gave him the mock-moniker "Michelangelo Nichols" (*Confessions*, 327).<sup>34</sup> By the time *Carnal Knowledge* was ready for exhibition in 1971, its poster was entirely black, with "Mike Nichols, Jack Nicholson, Candace Bergen, Arthur Garfunkel, Ann-Margaret and Jules Feiffer" written on it uniformly in white before the film's title in red. Seen one way, the poster suggests an ensemble group of filmmakers (which accords with Nichols' true Stanislavskian and Brechtian roots, which we will discuss in later chapters); but seen another way, Nichols has top billing.

However, it was not long before the cultural revolutions of the 1960s shifted the definition of a true *auteur* away from a director with a degree of control and consistency, to one with an explicitly political agenda. Directing "serious" films which borrowed from European new cinemas, yet refusing to turn away from psychological topics associated with the "commercial" terrain of American Hollywood cinema, Nichols became a placeholder around which critics struggled to determine the "traditional" or "reactionary" from the "progressive" or "political." Eventually, Nichols' interest in the individual and his talent for making money were regarded as antithetical for an *auteur* worthy of regarding.

### **Hollywood as Paradigm**

Although cinema has been an object of study since its inception,<sup>35</sup> its crystallization into a scholarly discipline in the 1960s meant that theoretical debates no longer occurred only in the

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<sup>34</sup> Sarris promulgated the *auteur* theory in America, which made great strides toward reconciling the notion of an author with the industrial practices of the Hollywood studio system.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Hugo Muensterberg's *The Art of the Photoplay* or Dana Polan's *Scenes of Instruction*.

pages of journals written for an interested and educated public, but were finding their way into the institution of academia—and with them came a paradigmatic view of Hollywood.<sup>36</sup> “[W]ith the arrival of ‘film theory’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” as Nowell-Smith puts it, “concepts were developed which could be used coherently to define the ways in which the new cinemas differed systematically from cinemas which preceded them (and co-existed and even survived them)” (4). Perhaps the most significant mindset for our study of Nichols’ films is the view that Nowell-Smith encapsulates: “on the whole the 1960s was a period when Europe led, other countries followed, and the USA looked on” (14). If American cinema was only a distant observer, we begin to see how those working in the area were excluded. In order to arrive at an idea of Nichols’ place in American film culture of the 1960s, we must outline the state of American cinema at that time.

By the end of the 1960s, as a firm line was drawn between these two “types” of cinema, measuring Nichols’ work in relation to European cinema makes his name a catachresis: Nichols was evaluated against theories constructed to exclude him. Thomas Elsaesser tells us that “the relation between mainstream cinema and the avant-garde in the late 1960s and early 1970s was radically and absolutely antagonistic in both theory and practice” (177). Similarly, Robert Stam writes, “The terms ‘Hollywood’ and ‘dominant cinema’ became code words for all that was retrograde and passivity-inducing” (14). Avant-garde and new cinema were taken to alter communication between spectator and screen while at the same time creating (and condemning) a paradigmatic vision of “classical Hollywood” which was theorized as allowing the spectator to believe in a shared world between him or her and a film’s characters—that is, an objective world.

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<sup>36</sup> I want to point out that this was a fertile period for many academic fields, but particularly the study of texts. Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” was published in 1968, *S/Z* in 1970. In 1967, much of André Bazin’s most important work was translated into English and published in collected form. Substantial portions of Bertolt Brecht’s work was untranslated until John Willett’s edited collection in 1964.



The new cinemas of Europe and concomitant theoretical work in journals like *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen* argued for a politicized cinema which broke with (Hollywood) convention.<sup>37</sup> Nick Browne notes the major change in *Cahiers*: “The contesting... of Bazin’s description of the relation between the image and the real and the spectator and the filmic image—of transparency to things themselves and an opportunity for selection—is explicitly conducted in the language of a politics of illusionism” (8).<sup>38</sup> Browne observes that, “In general, the transformation of the traditional *Cahiers*, the general expansion of recognition and writing on cinema, and the emergence of these departments arose at roughly the same time—in the late 60s and the early 70s—in both France and the United States” (6).

Thus, the argument went that unlike European new cinemas’ skepticism of the notion of “reality,” Hollywood presented only a false illusion of “reality” to the spectator, thereby fostering identification and emotion, and rendering her passive. This condition related, symbiotically, to the fact that Hollywood offered its spectators narratives, complete with clear conflicts and resolutions. Such a position supposedly disables the spectator’s ability to think rationally, distracts from her awareness of her socio-political victimization by class conflict, and makes her amenable to ideological manipulation.<sup>39</sup> I want to take an excursion into the status of the concepts of realism and psychological realism as they were treated in cinema studies of the

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 “Manifesto” illustrates that although America was the principle target other national cinemas were seen as “conventional,” and therefore worthy of destruction: “[T]he American industry rules cinema the world over. There is nothing to add to this statement of fact. Except that on our own modest level we too should provoke two or three Vietnams in the bosom of the vast Hollywood-Cinecitta-Mosfilm-Pinewood-etc. empire” (quoted in Hillier, 18). Godard was a preeminent French Nouvelle Vague filmmaker and writer for *Cahiers* who became increasingly political over this period. Godard’s work, and particularly his *Tout Va Bien* (with Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972), is often held up as a model of the desired political cinema.

<sup>38</sup> In his 1972 essay, “Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d’Est*,” Peter Wollen provides an actual list of the “virtues” and “sins” of counter and Hollywood cinema, respectively. Psychological realism, evident in the “sins” of identification and transparency, and fiction, do not fare well.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Stephen Heath’s “From Brecht to Film: Theses, Problems” and Colin MacCabe’s “The Politics of Separation.” The most influential was Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” whose “full meaning,” as Peter Wollen asserts, “is lost unless it is read as an anti-Hollywood manifesto” (<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/strobe/wollen/e.html>).

1960s as these accounts offer the most potent explanations for why, and how, a full consideration of Nichols has been avoided. This is because what realism means retroactively affects what is meant by “psychology” in the phrase “psychological realism.” For that reason, we will turn to salient arguments in debates over realism in the 1960s to indicate the ways in which such arguments bled into the theorization of psychological realism.

Elsaesser has remarked that at this time “film theory became avant-garde theory” in the United States, going further down the formalist road than the European journals from which it borrowed, like *Screen*, which argued for a return to Brecht’s theses of “non-linearity, anti-illusionism, spectatorial distanciation, and epic modes of narration” (173).<sup>40</sup> *Screen* primarily sought to theorize realism in terms derived from Althusserian notions of “ideology” which cast it as an intentional force which “works to produce subjects from individuals,” ensuring “the reproduction of the social order presented in a determined way” (Browne, 8-9). *Screen* mobilized Brecht—who was seen to formulate methods (mostly for theatrical performers) to evacuate psychological realism from his characters—to oppose “Classical Hollywood films,” which posed “characters in terms of internal determinations linked to individual personalities,” advocating that “heroes take shape in a world which eliminates their existence as individuals” (Gardies, 13). Furthermore, according to this view of Brecht, psychologically realistic acting mistakes physiology for psychology—an error regarded as a bourgeois convention. He implies that the discovery or understanding of psychological conditions is less important than the

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<sup>40</sup> One key proponent of formalism in America was Annette Michelson, the editor of *Artforum* and arbiter of the 1960s American avant-garde sensibility. Here, the attention was not on a European avant-garde, but on American directors like Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton, who sought to entirely disrupt narrative structure in favor of conceptual cinema—perhaps even the dream of an *apolitical* cinema. Still, Michelson’s writings were instrumental in valorizing formalism as *synonymous* with political and derogating Hollywood cinema—especially its characters—as mimetic or emotional. We will return to her arguments in chapter three. Of course, *Artforum*’s views were not unchallenged. Avant-garde filmmaker and theorist Yvonne Rainer complained: “How can we say which type of film will make ‘people’ think, or make them active, and which will not?... What is important is to get things out in the open by whatever means” (84).

transmission of facts illuminated by the science of Marxist history.<sup>41</sup> Brecht's theories which placed the spectator in a skeptical position in front of, and in contemplation of, the on-screen world, were read as advocating elaborate techniques to *prevent* viewer identification. From the actor's perspective, this meant that she ought not aim for psychological realism.<sup>42</sup> The enlistment of *certain* of Brecht's views fostered the mistaken impression that psychological realism was relatively easy to achieve in cinema, if not a fundamental condition of the medium (which differed from theatre—Brecht's metier), and bound psychological realism to illusionism, converting it into a demerit.<sup>43</sup> We will revisit Brecht's attitudes toward politics and psychological realism in our look at *Carnal Knowledge* in chapter three, and at *Angels in America* in chapter six.

It is in this way that, problematically, being anti-illusionist (even to the point of didacticism) became equated with being politically progressive.<sup>44</sup> By 1980, prominent scholars working in this tradition, like Christopher Williams, felt licensed to assume a reader opposed to “depth,” in the cinema and to denigrate the “beloved ‘human’ aspect, the ‘humanity’” of works from Shakespeare to Chaplin, deeming them “simply petty-bourgeois and nothing more” (168-

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<sup>41</sup> For a fuller articulation of the logic behind this point, see Colin MacCabe's Introduction to *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel*.

<sup>42</sup> For an example of the magnitude of Brecht's influence at the time, see George Lellis' *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma, and Contemporary Film Theory*, in which he observes that, “One might well argue that much of the 1970s, politicized writing in English language journals like *Film Quarterly*, *Screen* or *Jump Cut* was directly influenced by changes in *Cahiers du Cinéma*” (4). Lellis illustrates that, while *Cahiers* discussed Brecht prior to the changes in French intellectual thought post-1968, it was not until then that his Marxist, materialist ideas were embraced. Browne states that “in the 1970s the most prominent and decisive editorial voice by which the project of ideological critique of film was advanced in English was that of the British journal *Screen*” (5). *Cahiers*' “principal interlocutor and antagonist is the figure of dominant ideology as instituted by the bourgeois apparatus of cinema” (Browne, 2), and it sought to expose and undo the values which supported and allowed “conventional representation,” defined through the question of how social life is represented at the ideological level, making it “a politics, not a poetics, of representation” (Browne, 2).

<sup>43</sup> While Brecht's theoretical work primarily dwells upon the theatre, he was invested in other media, particularly cinema. He saw theatre and cinema as intimately related. Indeed, he worked in Hollywood for a number of years. For more on Brecht's consideration of the relationship between theatre and cinema, see *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*. Ed. And Trans. Marc Silberman, (London: Methuen, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> In classical cinema theory, realism was frequently counterposed to fantasy, as in Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*. This binary is still active, in, for example, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, eds. Hallam and Marshment.

169). A victim of the academic turn from “humanism,” Chaplin was chastised for giving us close-ups and emotion, which Williams equates with the “need to be ‘human’, i.e. petty-bourgeois” (169). In an almost direct paraphrase of Brecht, Williams declares,

What cinema really needs is external action, not introspective psychology... By concentrating on “external” action alone and reducing everything to processes, no longer recognizing the hero as the mediator, or man as the measure of all things, it demolishes the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel and so lays waste whole stretches of ideology. This external standpoint is appropriate to cinema and makes it important. Film can freely adopt the principles of non-Aristotelian dramaturgy (i.e. one that does not rest on empathy and *mimesis*). (169)<sup>45</sup>

Brecht did not wholly undo the standard depiction of characters’ actions as having causes; he was intent on highlighting those causes as predetermined by class structures, making the character into a recognizable type and a kind of social puppet.<sup>46</sup> Stam observes that, for Brecht, “individual psychology is an appendage of social process,” and is boring to him for that reason (7). Brecht claims that, “In modern society, the motions of the individual psyche are utterly uninteresting” (quoted in Stam, 7). Though he would not deny the fact viewers see human figures on the screen, he would view their actions as having physical, not mental dimensions—sorely limiting the category of the cinematic “human.”

As the preeminent value serving capitalism, Brecht opposed privileging the individual, which he took to require opposition to psychological representations: “What the film really demands is external action and not introspective psychology... Great areas of ideology are destroyed when capitalism concentrates on external action” (50). Our question is whether the two are so easily divisible. Certainly, the individual and capitalism have been long intertwined

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<sup>45</sup> Williams makes the classic mistake of implying that Aristotle argued that drama was valuable for allowing the spectator to purge dangerous emotions. Empathy was not inherently valuable for Aristotle; empathy was useful for the spectator because *withholding* emotion was dangerous, a point Williams would do well to remember given the repressive nature of the 1980s.

<sup>46</sup> For examples of Brecht’s writing on typage, which derives from his theorization of the *verfremdungseffekt* (or alienation-effect) and gestic acting, see “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting,” “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” and “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting.”

in American literature (perhaps the best example of this is Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories). Brecht was thought to advocate a style of character, "typeage," that sought to exorcise the individuality from a character, leaving a human type that could be read as socially relevant without inviting empathy and displaying the spectacle of the personal. It strikes me as odd to postulate that we do not empathize with types of people, or regard them as spectacle. Of course, we can—and do. Building on such theoretical scholarship, Film Studies applauded movies that instructed their spectators to think about social types, typically construed in terms of race, class, and gender. While a great many notions of identity are obviously excluded from this list, we will see that Nichols' investment in the interpersonal provides a space to consider social histories of concepts, such as marriage, silence, communication, and sex. Such concepts are not separate from broader social types, but nor do they reduce to them. It might very well be argued that Brecht simply set up a "straw man" since we *never* have access to the kind of "person" on-screen Brecht sought to avoid, and that it is the nature of cinema to provide the sights and sounds of something only *resembling* a person in a series of images of actions—despite its concreteness in representing *this* face and *this* voice.

While I have indicated that claims were made about realism in scholarship from the 1960s, and ways that such claims implied things about psychological realism, as a specific topic of serious scholarly debate, psychological realism was generally avoided. When it was discussed, it was sheepishly acknowledged as a sticking point. In *Screen's* special issue devoted to Brecht in 1974, René Gardies points out that to hypothesize the absence of the psychological from a character is "absurd and would negate the very nature of the psychological, which is inherent in all behaviour" (Browne, 13). We can begin to see that, despite much of the rhetoric, the notion of Hollywood's version of realism as illusionism and Brechtian devotees' version of realism as

social mirror were discursive ideals based upon *more* or *less* psychological realism, not its presence or absence as nefarious stylistic. Nichols advances this view by agreeing that there is a great deal of ideological power being negotiated when it comes to the representation of any event, and psychological events should be no exception.

Nowell-Smith blames cinema studies of the 1970s for “thoughtlessly cast[ing] aside” the need to attend to classical theories of aesthetics, which supposedly “dealt in concepts that were ‘indeterminate’ and could not be brought within a rational schema” (16). In the binaries offered by theorists of 1960s European political cinema, such as surface/depth and reality/illusion, concepts like psychological realism, emotion (its expression on-screen and in the spectator), performance, the interplay of the individual on-screen character and a character type, etc. might indeed seem indeterminate. This aversion neglected the affective power cinema wielded for shaping America’s social landscape. Accordingly, not all American scholars were as devoted to the politics of breaking realistic conventions, and by the mid-1970s, significant American scholarship on cinema departed from the models provided by *Cahiers* and *Screen*.

Denying cinema access to psychological categories of belief, desire, and intention does not aid a project seeking to comment on the doings of men and women as politically effectual in society. Predictably, Cinema Studies has since backed away from paradigmatic treatments of Hollywood and cynicism about the political reproof of narrative causality. Dana Polan has convincingly argued that “the model of conventional texts is a myth,” that, in fact, “all texts dominate” (89). Polan even reminds us that Brecht was a “social realist,” and shows Brecht was invested in pushing the boundaries of art, and particularly realism (as realism is proof of a constantly changing attitude toward the world). According to Polan, Brecht’s realism is a “form of knowledge, a picturing of reality” which demonstrates a difference between the world as is

and the world as possibility. Furthermore, “The function of distantiation techniques is not so much to remind the spectators that they are watching a play or a film (since they already are aware of that) but to break down the socially unquestioning way that people watch spectacle” (Polan, 95-96). In fact, Polan reads Brecht’s theory of art as one that relies initially on identification, “insofar as Brecht’s political art includes the presence of the familiar world and yet presents a more attractive world” (98). More recently, Williams returned to the topic of realism with a very different take, no longer celebrating the “Toutvabienest anti-illusionism” he previously championed: “Realism is not a singular or univocal style... Nor can it meaningfully be divided into two distinct, antagonistic entities—illusionistic realism on one side and formal and intellectual consciousness-raising anti-realism on the other” (“After the Classic,” 217). Here, he enables us to continue thinking about realism as an open term involving a series of questions rather than dismissing it as a dogma of Hollywood. Thus he sees realism as an appropriate venue for working through types of skepticism. Williams goes on to advocate a theory of realism which adequately accounts for *beliefs* in psychology (particularly emotion, a point of importance for chapter three).

In his 1971 book, *Films and Feelings*, Raymond Durnat laments the trend against a critical appreciation for the depiction of interpersonal relationships in favor of the supposed objectivity of “cerebral notations”—a dismissal he attributes to “the same root as the rejection of actor for director” (155). He blames this move explicitly on the introduction of academia into the cinematic mix, where “academic criticism” is based on the “idioms” of anti-humanism and emotion. Durnat argues that “academic criticism” overcomplicates issues of form when it neglects the “simple empathy-sympathy” dynamic that is fundamental to the spectator’s

experience in which “people look at people” (173).<sup>47</sup> Five years later, in *The World in a Frame*, Leo Braudy, writing mostly on American film (though still in relation to European cinema), observes that, “The one aspect of serious art that has been firmly denied to films is the ability to create a complex character” (183). This is relevant to what he perceives to be the mark of contemporary American cinema: “In the films of the 1970s, character, and therefore acting as well, has taken on the central importance in film” (200).

For Braudy, a film’s necessary engagement with exteriors, with characters’ visible and audible actions, allows it to “add what is impossible in the group situation of the stage or the omniscient world of the novel: a sense of the mystery inside a character, the strange core of connection with the face and body the audience comes to know so well, the sense of an individuality that can never be totally expressed in words or action” (193). But Braudy sees urgency to the topic beyond the noting of an aesthetic evolution: “Unlike the films of the 1940s and 1950s, the films of the 1960s and 1970s [we can assume he refers to American films] do not tell us that the society preserves individualism, but that it warps and distorts it” (175).

Describing a move away from genre formulas, traditional heroics, and toward the everyday, he goes on to imply that the advent of the soundtrack, and so character’s verbal language, subtends this phenomenon: “It is difficult not to conclude that the progress of films from the 1930s to the 1960s has involved a growing repulsion from and fascination with the body, especially in its interaction with the mind” (217). Braudy eventually declaims that “The most striking efforts made by films today are to explore human character and personal relations in ways prevented or

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<sup>47</sup> While I have created a paradigmatic vision of French and British criticism by focusing on the influence of *Cahiers* and *Screen*, it would be remiss of me not to point out an important exception in Jean Mitry. Durgnat’s objection to the isolation of cinema’s elements into style and content—“‘style’ is just as emotional, just as fundamental, just as much a part of the film’s ‘content’ and ‘soul’ as the characters, the psychology and the events in the plot”—is reminiscent of Mitry’s assertions about film as a primitively emotional medium of expression (197).



warped by the methods of the past. Innovations in form and directorial control are less interesting than innovations in content and acting” (258). Concluding his book, he contends that

the historical frame of the changes has always been the increasing humanization of the images we see on the screen, as the characters and the stories move closer and closer to what we consider to be our own lives... Without the opening up of films in the 1960s, the discovery that the old fantasy selves were no longer useful and new explorations of character were needed, the political atmosphere of the late 1960s would have been very different, if it would have existed at all. (258)

Braudy directly connects American politics of the 1960s with the contemporaneous changes in the depiction and status of cinematic characters. But how does my positioning of Nichols as a contemporary Hollywood *auteur* interested in psychological realism illustrate the drive towards “the increasing humanization of the images we see on-screen”? What sort of representation of behavior qualifies as *psychologically* realistic? What theory of character, psychology, and humanness allows Nichols to achieve such an effect?<sup>48</sup> Do I mean that Nichols’ films are interested in the operations of the human mind? In the representation of those operations?<sup>49</sup> This strikes me as a poor set of questions; it is unclear that asserting whether a character is psychologically *realistic* or not makes good sense. Even madness is psychologically realistic, and so, to imply there can be a psychologically *unrealistic* character is mistaken.<sup>50</sup> A surrealist masterpiece like *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel, 1929), that would evade being labeled psychologically realistic by anyone’s standards, gives us fictional human characters doing things

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<sup>48</sup> Since it is partly the project of this dissertation to decipher what we can, and cannot, mean by “psychology” in relation to a cinematic character, I want to make clear that I use the term here in something of a layman’s sense. I mean it to encompass such intensional propositional attitudes that we describe in phrases like, “she utters,” “he feels,” “I intend,” etc.

<sup>49</sup> Consciousness is obviously an issue here, for one might be tempted to say that images such as brain scans represent the mind. I believe this is a confused claim—though not necessarily false—as it is unclear what the correlation is between areas of the brain which “light up” and *conscious* experience.

<sup>50</sup> The evaluation of a performer’s skill seems relevant here, as we often recognize psychologically unrealistic actions in terms of a failure of convincingness, or “bad acting.” When we call a character inconsistent or implausible, we are often addressing the writing, acting, directing, costuming, etc. that goes into the character’s creation, signaling a breakdown in the perception of the character.

on-screen. Thus, questions about characters' minds are more helpfully posed in terms of what we can and cannot know about their *actions*.

Speaking of the plays of great writers (e.g. Racine, Shakespeare, Moliere), Bazin asserts that, "[w]hat is specifically theatrical about these tragedies is not their action so much as the human, that is to say the verbal, priority given to their dramatic structure" (106). Bazin, writing on behalf of a largely visual medium, suggests that it is the borrowing of this verbal quality ("which refuses to let itself be captured in the window of the screen") that inspires some to rank theater aesthetically higher than the visual cinema (107). In "Theatre and Film" (1969), Sontag concurs with Bazin: "The history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models." She complains that films, such as Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964), are labeled theatrical for their "talkiness," a charge that connotes artifice, inauthenticity, and an anti-cinematic sensibility, "a sensibility [thought to be] both pretentious and reactionary which [is] out of step with the democratic and more mundane sensibility of modern life" (103). However, she continues with an uncharacteristically personal claim: "My own view is that films with complex or formal dialogue, films in which the camera is static or in which the action stays indoors, are not necessarily theatrical" (106). Sontag's assertions indicate that, by 1969, "talky" films had achieved a sort of avant-garde status, returning from their exile as anti-cinematic.

Bazin's equation of the verbal with the human suggests that to find the limits of the verbal is to find the limits of the cinematic human. If Bazin seems to be moving too fast, I think we can parse it out like this: unlike the photograph's relationship to its source, the source of the sound recording is not the object which made it, but noise or words—a consequence of an action, such as the playing of an instrument. If we are, then, thinking about the verbal in cinema, we are thinking about the portrayal of human actions. Thinking about actions requires us to consider

concepts related to agency, such as the beliefs and desires which inspire the action, or the motivations and intentions made legible by its being done. Perhaps this logic sheds light on why Nichols' films so often hinge upon characters speaking and hearing each other, and why (as we will see) listening to Nichols' characters is so often crucial to the spectator understanding them. A body can be photographed in an instant, not necessarily appearing to be doing anything; but for a vocal utterance to be legible, duration must be captured, and capturing duration is frequently cited as a feature basic to cinema (even if it shares that feature with other sound recording technologies).

Nichols' films ask us to think about the process whereby what we are hearing and looking at becomes who we are hearing and looking at. Caught between the dictates of social conformity and the desire for self-direction, his heroes struggle to act, and one of the key through-lines of this dissertation tracks Nichols' engagement with boundaries of self-presentation and performance. His films consistently require the spectator to think about a character's action as performed in a rather theatrical sense: done for the benefit of others, with the expectation that they will acknowledge the action in an effort to negotiate social pressures. But his films also invite the spectator to think of these actions as performed in the etymological sense, as the doing of the action, its form and context. In this respect, his films dwell—as does his comedy with May—on the nature of utterances. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that Nichols burst onto the cinematic scene with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a highly reflexive story about a garrulous academic couple, George (Richard Burton) and Martha (Elizabeth Taylor), who have a secret, something that is talked around, alluded to, and, finally, confronted, without ever being stated. The couple “performs” a series of improvised episodes for their guests, inviting the spectator to consider the boundaries of conversation and dialogue, of cinematic performance and

self-presentation. Adapting Edward Albee's play, Nichols added a line for Martha: "Truth and illusion, you don't know the difference." In the end, the film asks how real the child is—to George, to Martha, and to us. Nichols returns again and again to campus settings, binding questions of characters' ontologies to their epistemic quests.

Although the following chapters will closely attend to these issues in specific works, in order to give a sense of his corpus' preoccupation with these issues, I will briefly describe some films which, unfortunately, I will *not* be analyzing in any detail in the following chapters.

Between *The Graduate* and *Carnal Knowledge* (the subjects of chapters two and three, respectively), Nichols made the surrealist and visually stunning *Catch-22* (1970), the twenty million dollar adaptation of Joseph Heller's satirical novel—and Nichols' commentary on the Vietnam War. (With this film, Nichols was the first director to earn a one million dollar paycheck.) The hero, Yossarian (Alan Arkin), is a bombardier in a seemingly endless war tired of working for a military-industrial complex, caught in a linguistic loop hole. The titular "catch-22" is named in the first scene, as Yossarian pleads to be sent home as mentally unfit to fly: "Let me get this straight. In order to be grounded, I've got to be crazy. And I must be crazy to keep flying. But if I ask to be grounded, that means I'm not crazy anymore, and I have to keep flying."

Nichols followed *Carnal Knowledge* with the campy treatise on language acquisition and humanness, *The Day of the Dolphin*. It tells the story of a scientist, Dr. Jake Terrell (George C. Scott), who teaches English to a dolphin, Fa. *Day of the Dolphin* offers its viewer long takes of a beautifully lit Fa swimming in his aquarium, the frame of which visually echoes the cinema frame, and much attention is paid to the recording of the dolphin's speech.<sup>51</sup> Fa is thus cast as

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<sup>51</sup> Aquariums are a favorite visual trope of Nichols. For example, an aquarium serves as a visual metaphor for the feelings of containment Benjamin Braddock suffers in *The Graduate*. Aquariums receive the most contemplation in *Closer*; characters meet, and deceive, each other in the prominently featured London aquarium. Also, *The Day of the Dolphin* surely alludes to a Nichols and May sketch about talking dolphins, "Dolphins."

cinematic, but he is also a performer; Jake rehearses him to perform dialogue and actions to prove to the scientific community his dolphin-mindedness. After systematically working through issues of language acquisition (Did Fa already *have* a voice in order to acquire a new one, or did he acquire one in order to get fish? Can Fa teach another dolphin to speak?) and psychoanalytic stages (Fa hankers after his mother figure, Jake's girlfriend), Jake and Fa come to know and love each other. Released in 1973, at the height of Watergate anxiety, things go sour for Fa and Pa (as Fa calls Jake) when the U.S. government learns of the tape recordings of Fa's abilities, and decides to employ Fa to plant bombs on Soviet submarines (which is, ironically, not related to Fa's ability to speak). In the end, Pa is forced to command Fa to return to the sea, allowing Fa to demonstrate his "humanity," when he does not *want* to listen to, or understand, Pa's language.

In *Working Girl* (1988), the voice of Staten Island native Tess (Melanie Griffith) goes unheard in the corporate world of 1980s Manhattan. In order to get her scheme—which will save the company by acquiring a radio station—heard, she must acquire the upper class language of her boss, Katherine (Sigourney Weaver); so she conducts her own Eliza Doolittle transformation by dressing herself up in Katherine's finery and by listening to cassettes of Katherine's speech. *Biloxi Blues* is about a writer (Matthew Broderick) articulating his memory of training for WWII, which ends before he is deployed; the bookish hero is clearly not a soldier at heart, and so, his attempts at military success and male camaraderie are more an effort of performing than training. In *Regarding Henry*, the protagonist must re-learn to speak after suffering a near-fatal stroke. *Primary Colors* illustrates (and parodies) campaign politics through the consistent metaphor of performance—particularly as it transpires in television commercials and news pundits. The central conflict is precipitated by the manipulation of the recorded voice

of the main character, Jack Stanton (John Travolta). *Wolf*'s protagonist is a book editor; one of *Closer*'s is a novelist. While dying of cancer, renowned professor of John Donne's metaphysical poetry, Vivian Bearing (Emma Thompson), tells her story largely in monologue in *Wit*.

### **The Aesthetics of Omission<sup>52</sup>**

"The construction of a plot we call invention, but that of a character we dignify with the name of creation... [Characters] have individuality without reality, because individuality is a thing acquired in the mind by the congeries of its impressions."

George Santayana

Bearing in mind his films' attachment to issues of language and performance, and in an effort to fully understand Nichols' participation and position in American culture, this dissertation will have cause to reference ideas formulated by American intellectuals such as William James,<sup>53</sup> J.L. Austin, and Susan Sontag. I will also rely on the work of media scholars such as James Naremore, Jacob Smith, and Virginia Wright Wexman, as well as on the theories of improvisational performance developed by Viola Spolin. However, most relevant will be the work of Stanley Cavell.<sup>54</sup> It is no coincidence that Cavell writes extensively on cinema (and largely on American film), or that he takes a theoretical approach to Nichols' *The Graduate* when other scholars treat it like a punching bag. Interested as he is in language, performance, and the category of the human in cinema, Cavell's philosophy finds application in Nichols' films

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<sup>52</sup> I borrow this phrase from Braudy, who uses it to denote the sense of the unknown rendered by the visible and audible cinematic character.

<sup>53</sup> The "most influential American philosopher of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Blackburn), William James defines the "social self" as "'the recognition' we get from others, that, in this potentially plural way, 'we are in part constituted by others'" (Goodman, 92). Russell Goodman observes that "James expands his discussion of the social self to include not only the 'images' people have of us, but the behavior that is responsible for those images" (92). Goodman clarifies that James is not simply inventing a version of behaviorism here: "[H]is claims concern the introspected *feelings* of these 'bodily activities' [behavior], rather than the activities" (94). We will delve further into James' look at "how much our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame" in chapter two by looking at his work on the emotions (quoted in Goodman, 109).

<sup>54</sup> Cavell is often credited as the modern philosopher most intent upon recovering specific lines of American thought, particularly the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. For example, see Giovanni Borradori's *The American Philosopher*. She cites Cavell, along with Richard Rorty, as working to correct common philosophical histories which elide (or miscast) important American traditions of inquiry.

in a variety of ways. Although this will become evident in the following chapters, I would like to point out Cavell's compatibility with issues we have already seen surface in Nichols' work, and to lay the groundwork for more. Through Cavell, I will argue that to deny the existence of the character's inner life misses something important: the spectator's *response* to the character's behavior as indicative of a mind. The presence of a character's "inner life" exists only if the viewer acknowledges it. But is she obligated to acknowledge it? Is it her responsibility? This is a question Nichols poses again and again, and in each case the viewer is obliged to answer "yes."

Cavell's work provides inroads to responding to the long and well-pedigreed school of thought that holds that psychology cannot be represented.<sup>55</sup> Nichols once said, "If the picture's any good, then it means that you guess about the characters as you do about people you know" (Gelmis, 288). Cavell is not only Nichols' contemporary (and himself historically avoided by cinema studies); he shares Nichols' interest in aesthetic performance, and in the potential knowledge to be found in an exploration of how we use ordinary language, be it that of English or cinema. A secondary aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the current, and growing, interest in Cavell's work on film.<sup>56</sup> For example, I generate new insights into his writings on ordinary language philosophy by looking at the case of silence as utterance in the next chapter,

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*.

<sup>56</sup> For example, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* by Malcolm Turvey (2008), *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007) by David Rodowick, *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (2005), ed. by Jerry Goodenough and Rupert Read, and *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective* (2000) by William Rothman and Marian Keane. Although Cavell himself has always made clear that cinema offers an avenue for considering a range of questions already properly deemed "philosophical," much of the work engaging Cavell currently is part of the trendy ambition to "connect" the disciplines of film and philosophy. I hope to illustrate the value of applying Cavell's work for enriching our understanding of specific films, while also utilizing Nichols' work to clarify Cavell's arguments. An important part of my strategy for doing this is to connect his work on other subjects, particularly *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), to his theses on film. Although *The World Viewed* was published in 1971, its "final, or immediate, stimulus to consecutive writing came in early 1968 when I read some essays by André Bazin" (xxiii), the same year of Nichols' largest success with *The Graduate*. It was published only two years after *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where Cavell already devoted large sections of text to films (such as Fellini's), with particular attention to expressivity, performance, and intention.

and I revise conventional understanding of his writings on cinematic performance in the last chapter.

As we saw, critics in *Cahiers* and *Screen* created a schema that paralleled the character-as-individual with social individuals and the character-as-type with social groups. Cavell, however, argues that it is impossible for any fictional on-screen human to avoid confronting the notion of a type:

The idea of a type...is raised as a way of grasping the particular ways in which the human being is fictionalized—which is to say, molded—by film. The creation of a fictional presence (like the presence of nature) is not an achievement of the medium of film (as it is an achievement of novelists and playwrights and actors on a stage), but is given by the medium itself. (WV, 209-210).

In Cavell's philosophy of language, the individual comes to self-knowledge by recognizing her place as a speaker in the context of a linguistic community: "individual identity is not something which can be achieved and maintained in the absence of participation in a community of individuals" (Mulhall, 72). If anything, as we will see, *not* saying, *not* expressing or doing, hence not attempting to participate in one's community, will bring the harshest narrative penalties in Nichols' corpus.

Similarly, Nichols describes a style of character-building that creates *both* an individual and a type. He describes a film and a performance as "great" according to the same logic: they ask questions of the spectator which are both individuated and applicable to the spectator's community. Recently, he said

When you're talking about inside and outside, I've always thought that great actors, and therefore, great plays or films, are inside and outside at the same time. The very greatest actor is both living it and also *simultaneously* saying to you about the character, 'do you know anybody like this? Do you notice this about these people? About such a person? Not *these* people, but such a person?' And it's a very difficult thing to do unless you can do it, and it goes with greatness that they are both inhabiting someone and showing them. It's not for nothing that many of the greatest actors started as comics; say I who started as a comedian with Elaine May, Nichols and May, we were about making fun of people... Well first of all,



we were not making fun of people, we were in fact making fun of ourselves. Everyone always thought, ‘I know someone just like that’ and we were thinking, ‘Well, that’s me. I was the schmuck in the back seat of the car. Who do you think it could have been?’ (*The Graduate* DVD Commentary)

While it is a sign of greatness, and so, presumably difficult to achieve, Nichols sees no contradiction in suggesting a common ground for the perception of characters as both types and individuals. He applauds work that encourages the attribution of psychological attitudes *and* social identity to a character. This is reminiscent of Santayana, who maintained that “all [humans] are equally fit to be types” (114).

Lee Hill observes, “[Nichols’] work, as seen as much as one can, as a whole, has been about *individuals* trying to go about the business of living with as much dignity, good humour and hope as they can muster. The world appears to conspire against these efforts. It is in this gap between reality and desire that Nichols finds a brand of humour and tragedy that is uniquely his” (my italics, [www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)). This dissertation hopes to show that in Nichols’ films, “outer” variance and “inner” constancy, as well as the spectatorial perception of outer and inner, are necessary if a character is to accomplish its task of creating meaning and of guiding us through its world and relating thought, action and feeling to that world (and for us to apply it, metaphorically, to our own).

In “More of *The World Viewed*,” Cavell extends his approach to studying performance to the evaluation of directors: “Good directors know how to mean everything they do. Great directors mean more—more completely, more subtly, more specifically—and they discover how to do everything they mean. The gestures of bad directors are empty—they speak, as it were, nonsense” (WV, 188). Cavell began his philosophical career with an interest in theories of action, an interest which extends into theories of mind and language, and which came to guide his treatment of the subject of performance in film and theatre. Cavell’s work on cinematic

performance is perhaps his best known, due in no small part to its place in anthologies like Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism* reader and *Movie Acting: The Film Reader*. Unfortunately, such anthologies only include the portions of his work that consider performance from early sections of his first book on cinema, *The World Viewed* [WV]. Cavell actually elaborates this concept of performance throughout that work, and, indeed, the book concludes in a neglected look at the ontology of the actor in its final chapter. Published in 1971, in *The World Viewed*, Cavell is in large part reacting to the contemporaneous critical reaction to Hollywood cinema I described above. He views "the absolute responsibility of the artist for the actions and assertions in his work" as "an instance of the human being's absolute responsibility for the intentions and consequences of his actions" (188). He builds on this point to clarify his discussion of human on-screen performances in *The World Viewed*, where he did not mean his analysis to be interpreted as commenting only on issues of the actor's (or world's) presence and/or absence.<sup>57</sup> He explains:

My impatience with the idea that photographs and paintings never really project or represent reality (when, that is, they obviously do) expresses my sense that, as elsewhere, a fake skepticism is being used to deny that human responsibility. We may need freedom from this responsibility, but the denial of its claims is no route to that freedom, except within the bounds of comedy or religion. Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied while reality does not exist—even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes. (188-189).

Cavell's language here strikes me as clearly referring to a passage in the final pages of *The World Viewed* where he comes "back to the idea of acting on film" to comment on the non-theatrical sense of "actors" (153):

Earlier, I objected to calling the subjects of film 'actors' at all. But obviously they are actors the way any human being is. The ontological fact that actions move within a dark and

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<sup>57</sup> Cavell had been read as "simply" Bazinian in this respect, and, therefore not contributing new insights (Rothman 51). In "More of *The World Viewed*," he owns that he could have been clearer, especially about the relationship between his and Bazin's and Erwin Panofsky's treatment of presence and "reality itself" (183-184).

shifting circle of intention and consequence, that their limits are our own, that the individual significance of an act (like that of a word) arises in its being this one rather than every other that might have been said or done here and now, that their fate (like the fate of words) is to be taken out of our control—that is the natural vision of film. (153)

He connects being present to a world whose existence cannot be verified but must be accepted to our perception of “actors,” that is, humans, on-screen because we see that they act, and that their actions are subject to the same criteria of intention and consequence as our own. We might see him as expanding Bazin’s assertion that in the theatre speech acts constitute the human, for the cinema, to include all actions as fundamental to our perception of humans and a dramatic structure. In this way, the rejection of realist fiction is not (or, at least, not just) a rejection of capitalist values and unthinking spectators, but a means of refusing stories centered on human actions—those that invoke psychological concepts like intention and which extend into accounts of responsibility. In a point to which we will return in chapter six, Cavell ends *The World Viewed* by suggesting that it is the paradoxical modern desire of humans to “act without performing” (a desire which, by definition, cannot be satisfied), a phrase I take to relate to a fantasy in which our actions are not subject to others’ interpretations and have only our intended consequences (153).

In his engagement with skepticism, Cavell connects the problem of knowing other minds with the problem of defining the human—as we have seen, a timely question for the 1960s—but which remains relevant today as movements for and against life-support, corporations, euthanasia, homosexual marriage rights, the female sex slave trade, torture, artificial intelligence, athletic enhancement, and animal rights all rhetorically predicate themselves upon a shifting definition of humanness. Cavell looks to American history to point out two cases in which defining humanness was or remains contentious: slavery and abortion. Given this history, and the very real possibility of failing to see humans as human, Cavell calls into question the validity

of running with the idea that the category of human is basically obvious or uncomplicated: “in the case of a human being, it is not yet obvious whether we know what it is to know what a human being is—what sort of behavior, for example, would manifest that knowledge?” (Mulhall, 129) For Cavell, our knowledge of others *as* human fluctuates, succeeds and fails. It is here that the cinematic character (which is distinct from a simple filmed human) proves such a useful and important metaphor within Cavell’s work.

In his essay on performed characters, “The Avoidance of Love,”<sup>58</sup> Cavell asks, “What has discouraged attention from investigations of character?” (268). He looks askance at the critical avoidance of discussing characters, and offers this summation:

I think that one reason a critic may shun direct contact with characters is that he has been made to believe or assume, by some philosophy or other, that characters are not people, that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters, and in particular that psychology is either not appropriate to the study of these fictional beings or that psychology is the province of psychologists and not to be ventured from the armchairs of literary studies. (268)

Cavell rebuts the worry of non-psychologists that they may feel unauthorized to discuss characters as endowed with psychologies by asking, “[W]hat is the relevant psychology? Of course, to account for the behavior of characters one is going to apply predicates like ‘is in pain,’ ‘is ironic,’ ‘is jealous,’ ‘is thinking of...’ to them. But does that require psychological expertise? No more than to apply these predicates to one’s acquaintances” (268).

He goes on to argue that this schema holds in relation to fictional characters as it does for other people, and points out that “calling the existence [of characters] ‘fictional’ is incoherent (if understandable) when used as an explanation of their existence, or as a denial of their existence. It is, rather, the name of a problem: *What* is the existence of a character... what kind of (grammatical) entity is this?” (332) Cavell asserts that, “It is an incontestable fact that in a

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<sup>58</sup> In this essay, Cavell restricts his discussion to dramatic characters, but makes it clear in “More of *The World Viewed*” that his later thinking on cinematic characters stems from this piece.

motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human *something* is, and something unlike anything else we know” (emphasis in original, 26). This is usually taken as part of a commonplace theoretical commitment to delineating medium specificity, which, in this case, takes the form of a comparison between the stage and screen actor’s art on the basis of physical and temporal presence. Given that Cavell is an ordinary language philosopher whose views are firmly rooted in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I think we would be remiss indeed to assume that he is only talking about a visual spectral presence. In this respect, I will draw on Cavell’s work in order to better understand what Nichols’ films do with dialogue, and, in the process, depart from standard readings of Cavell’s claims.

In his exegesis of Cavell’s philosophy, Stephen Mulhall relates Cavell’s writings on the notion of the cinematic human and the concept of identification. Identification relies upon our perception of characters as sharing some degree of humanness with us, and since the justification of claims about others’ minds cannot be based in the employment of our senses, “I must do more than simply identify what is before my eyes, I must also identify *with* the creature I see” (Mulhall, 131). We are now in a better position to ascertain what Cavell really meant by the “human *something*,” or, at least, to understand what he means is more complicated than it may initially have appeared. Cavell writes, “If it makes sense to speak of seeing human beings as human beings, then it makes sense to imagine that a human being may lack the capacity to see human beings as human beings” (*Claim of Reason*, 378). Elucidating Cavell, Mulhall writes that, “The concept of reading [another’s behavior] captures the immediacy of our relation to the other’s mind in so far as it brings with it the idea of seeing: I do not infer from my perceptions of the other’s behaviour that she possesses a mind, I *see* her behavior as expressive of mind” (127-128). What Mulhall and Cavell point out is that identification is a process intrinsic to the

recognition of humanness, which opposes its often-pejorative use in cinema studies to denote a passive psychic state for the spectator of Hollywood cinema. Cavell labels this phenomenon, which stems from the need to distinguish human from non-human, “‘empathic projection’, on the understanding that the phrase is no more than a label for *something* that must be the basis of my claims to read the other” (Mulhall, 131). That this italicized *something* becomes the space upon which we can project our ability to recognize humanness, the space whereby it is possible for us to believe we are perceiving a human, is significant for understanding Cavell’s schematization of the on-screen human.

Cavell does not deny the validity of objections to the idea that characters simply “are” like people because they share a degree of perceivable embodiment; nor does he seek to uncover how psychologies might be correctly said to be somehow “in” the image. There is no need for a fantasy of pure expressiveness.<sup>59</sup> Rather, Cavell claims that to not perceive character’s actions as expressive is to deny expressivity itself, and that we can, based upon our own experience of our bodies and efforts to communicate, agree that to deny expressivity is wrongheaded. If we do not perceive characters as human, it is not their humanity that is denied, but our own.

Cavell objects to a traditional view of skepticism which considers only a first-person view to force us to choose between the existence or non-existence of other minds.<sup>60</sup> What is

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<sup>59</sup> Karen Hanson notes that Cavell’s claim that the attribution of existence is essentially relational accords with the view of American philosopher C.S. Peirce, who claims that “*reality* means a certain kind of non-dependence upon thought... while *existence* means reaction with the environment, and so is a dynamic character... *exist* in its strict philosophical sense [means] ‘react with the other like things in the environment’” (quoted in Hanson, 196). Thus, “human existence depends on thought, ours and others’, and ours of others’, others’ of ours” (Hanson, 196).

<sup>60</sup> For Cavell, Descartes’ Cogito does not obtain without acknowledging others and being acknowledged—it does not make good sense to say one exists if there is no occasion to say it, no one to whom to say it, no one to hear it. The act of asserting it presupposes someone to hear it, someone willing to hear it, and to attend to it as meant. In Cavell’s corpus, this interdependent view of articulation and proof of existence finds its first full reading in his work on the remarriage comedy, and we will find it present in *The Graduate*, itself a 1960s version of remarriage comedy. Cavell argues that we can learn of this concept of acknowledgment via its fictional operations, since characters’ words and actions make claims on us and elicit responses from us. This amounts to saying we respond to characters as we do other people (whether or not it is to the same degree is another question for another time). While we might

missing, for him, are our *responses* to others' expressive behavior—thus, in our close readings of Nichols' films, we will often restrain our analysis to thinking about the spectator's experience of the text. For Cavell, perceiving expressive behavior in others, perceiving criteria, makes a claim upon the perceiver to acknowledge or refuse the perceived. Cavell believes we can develop criteria for expressive behavior (which does not tell us what the use of such criteria are, much less whether the behavior corresponds to another's inner mental state), but there are no criteria for determining or detecting the presence or absence of our responsibility to acknowledge expressive behavior. It is thus not entirely up to us to decide upon whose bodies we will confer our concepts of humanity; rather, we first have to accept a body as one capable of giving life to my criteria: "My condition is not exactly that I have to put the other's life there in her behaviour, and not exactly that I have to leave it there either: I have to respond to it, or refuse to respond—I have to acknowledge it" (Mulhall, 113).

Cavell's attention to our responses is reminiscent of Santayana's claims about expression: "In all expression we may thus distinguish two terms: the first is the object actually presented, the word, the image, the expressive thing; the second is the object suggested, the further thought, emotion, or image evoked, the thing expressed" (124). Santayana goes on to clarify that "the thing expressed" does not inhere in "the expressive thing;" expression is not a property of the word or image, but "depends upon the union of two terms, one of which must be furnished by the imagination; and a mind cannot furnish what it does not possess. The expressiveness of everything accordingly increases with the intelligence of the observer" (125).<sup>61</sup> Meaning, here,

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complain that the lines between psychology, mind, human and character are blurred by his desire to take seriously characters' actions, that is, in part, the point.

<sup>61</sup> Santayana sheds light on one way that "common speech" sometimes confuses the use of these terms, "regarding (very unpsychologically) the thought as the source of the image, not the image as the source of the thought. People call the words the expression of the thought: whereas for the observer, the hearer (and generally for the speaker, too), the words are the datum and the thought is their expressiveness—that which they suggest" (179).

is a function of the interaction between work and spectator. Our choice to attribute a mind (or state of mind) to a character depends upon our understanding of what it is to express and what modes of expression we take to be available to the cinematic character.

As we will see, Nichols' films function reflexively with regard to their characters' actions, pointing to their own portrayal and design. As articulated above, cinematic characters are constituted by actions, a fact which invokes questions about the limits of those actions. Considering the theories of action under which Nichols' cinema operates is to think about a theory of mind: in what way are the characters beliefs and desires made available for the spectator's interpretation? This is precisely the subject of chapters two and three, which considers the possibility of a cinematic character's vocal and facial *inactivity*—the microphone and close-up allowing a range of expressions unavailable to other art forms. We will look at two of Nichols's best films, both of which were derided by critics who failed to recognize Nichols' commentary on his protagonists' ability to express: *The Graduate* in chapter two and *Carnal Knowledge* in chapter three.

The former looks at Ben's silences as a space between communication and confusion: is he self-presenting? Or is he uttering? Or is he dumbstruck? To what extent can *we* say that he is doing any, or all, of these things? *Carnal Knowledge* demands analogous considerations of its spectator. Its main character, male chauvinist Jonathan (Jack Nicholson), suffers from both emotional and sexual impotence, and his story is told in facial close-ups. Apprehending the movie's view on facial expression is crucial to understanding its sexual politics—especially urgent in 1971. These films reward the spectator for actively doing the work of acknowledging, and furthermore, they indict those characters who refuse to locate humanity in other characters' expressive ambiguities. In these analyses, we will see that Nichols does trade in broad



“political” types, such as “man,” “woman,” and “youth,” but *through* the window of a psychologically complex character. That is, we come to see how such political identities are internalized as motivations, intentions, emotions, desires (or lack thereof, as in Jonathan’s case).

Chapter four looks back to Nichols’ origin as an improvisational performer with Elaine May in the nation’s first improvisational theater. We consider the similarities and differences between their live theatrical performances (and the theory of improvisation supporting it) with their successes on radio, television, and recorded albums. Their ground-breaking comedy relies on the listener’s willingness to grasp, and to mock, conventions of ordinary language; rather than tell jokes with punch lines, they open up a path for sharp social observation by calling attention to the shared knowledge of how people talk. Nichols and May produced copious amounts of comedy routines for the radio, and then for albums. Looked at this way, Nichols’ career is founded on portraying language use as aesthetic object, and his experience as a performer is rooted in reproducing, representing, and manipulating the “space between” words, a basis that I will show extends into his cinematic work.

Their routines impacted the stylistics of American cinematic dialogue. New Hollywood needed new dialogue it seems, and chapter five looks at their influence on Nichols’ own films. By beginning with *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which is not just the beginning of Nichols’ corpus, but the beginning of New Hollywood, we will learn that Nichols’ films’ advanced Nichols and May’s ear for social commentary on their most popular topics: American middle-class attitudes toward sex, gender, marriage, and romantic love. Nichols said in 1966, with only the highly verbal *Virginia Woolf?* under his film director’s belt, that, “[t]he words of a play are only the top of a large iceberg, and since there is so much beneath the surface, I think it’s important to be accurate about the portion that shows,” and supposes that the spectator finds the

conclusion of *Virginia Woolf?* to be moving “by virtue of *not* being explicitly stated” (*Playboy*, 68-69). Looking at *Virginia Woolf*’s attitude toward a couple’s on-screen communication also lays the groundwork for reading Nichols’ later film, *The Birdcage*, which reflects changing cultural definitions of marriage and updates Cavell’s arguments about the comedy of remarriage.

Finally, chapter six accounts for the stylistic phases in Nichols’ career by examining his special relationship with Meryl Streep (who has made more films with Nichols than any other director). Together, they made four films, two of which reflect on cinematic performance: *Postcards From the Edge* and *Angels in America*. Attending to Bazin’s writings on a tradition of American directors such as William Wyler and George Cukor, as well as to the manner in which Streep’s stardom has been constructed paradoxically (the persona of having no persona), this chapter considers Nichols’ changing stylistics against the backdrop of the American social history that popularized he and Streep’s collaborations.

If it seems that we will often be reading Nichols’ corpus with various structuring absences in mind, this is not a coincidence. Nichols says he and May initially became known from their days at Second City for performing what they called “People Scenes.” He explains that their scenes were about individuals’ behavior and nothing else:

It’s what has always interested me: the things that go on between people, especially the unstated, less than immediately visible things that go on between people. And there’s something about a group of people looking at something, all apprehending something unspoken that is very exciting to me. It’s what I love in the theatre at its best, and it’s what I love in movies. It’s like you describe the space around something and the thing in the middle that is not referred to is apparent as a result. It’s what they say about Morandi, that he paints the space between the bottles. (Rose, 1998)

In this statement of method (to which we will return), Nichols professes to being fascinated with figuring out why, and how, what is avoided *is* articulated, or at least acknowledged, through the very act of avoidance. He even describes the existence of the unsayable as the *raison d’etre* of

performance: “Because the essence of [theater and movies] is that there are things that cannot be spoken. That’s why you act the whole thing out” (Rose, 2005). Nichols has echoed this idea specifically as his love for *cinema*, taking the notion of a structuring absence to its limit: “a lot of people are sitting in the dark sharing something that can’t be put into words. And since all of life is basically not mentioning the main thing—that we’re going to die—we’re used to the idea of something bigger than anything going on but unspoken” (McGuigan, 64).

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## Chapter Two: The Sound of Silence in *The Graduate*

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You find ways to express the underneath without words; sometimes it's the opposite of the words, or a tangent of the words...unexpressed undercurrents that are palpable. – Mike Nichols

[A]s the prestige of language falls, that of silence rises. – Susan Sontag

Following his adoration as half of Nichols and May, and his string of unqualified successes on stage, and then on-screen with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), the reception of *The Graduate* (1967) marks the beginning of the shift in the critical estimation of Mike Nichols.<sup>62</sup> Not coincidentally, *The Graduate* is Nichols' biggest financial success. In a decade full of cinematic watersheds, it was, at the time, "the most profitable movie that had ever been released" (Scwartz, 1).<sup>63</sup> It remains popular to this day, lodged in the American Film Institute's "100 Greatest Films" list at number seven, and it would be impossible to compile a list of all the music videos, commercials, films, sitcoms, etc. that have paid homage to *The Graduate*. Histories of American cinema, such as Jon Lewis' *American Film* and John Belton's *American Cinema/American Culture*, cite the film, along with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), as instigating a renaissance in Hollywood filmmaking known as "New Hollywood."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> I will focus on the critical reception as a film director in this chapter, but it is also true that 1967-1968 saw several theater critics react violently to Nichols' continued success. In 1968, Nichols became one of the few people to ever receive a Tony Award and Oscar as Best Director in the same year (for *Plaza Suite* and *The Graduate*), a fact that seemed to have overexposed his celebrity. William Goldman wrote a sarcastic piece calling him a "culture hero" that "does not do much to hide the flawless side of his nature" (267). Goldman relates that Nichols' string of theatrical hits and style (particularly evident in *The Little Foxes* [1967]) made him "the most successful new figure of the sixties," an emergence comparable only to Kazan's in the 1950s (409). But Goldman is disturbed by the amount of Nichols' success. He ends this way: "Nichols wins alone. This doesn't really matter. What counts is that there is a new culture hero in the land. And we have made him. He reflects us: our time, our taste, our needs, our wants. And what we want is Nichols. And what Nichols is, is brilliant. Brilliant and trivial and self-serving and frigid. And all ours" (268).

<sup>63</sup> *The Graduate* premiered at the end of 1967, but was seen mostly in the winter/spring of 1968. There is some disagreement about its status as the highest earner, as opposed to *The Sound of Music* [Robert Wise, 1965], but what seems clear is that it broke attendance records (Monaco, 184 and Cook, 12). It played for two years (Harris, 418).

<sup>64</sup> Arthur Penn also directed Nichols and May's career-defining Broadway show, *Mike and Elaine on Broadway* (1960).

Belton and Lewis focus on the film's financial take as demonstrating a cultural moment—and a youth movement—interested in depicting previously un-depicted sexual relationships on-screen. With the arrival stateside of films like *La Dolce Vita* (Frederico Fellini) and *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni) in 1960 and *Jules and Jim* (François Truffaut) in 1962, sexuality and emotional complexity were no longer the exclusive purview of literature and theater. In 1960s America, the “foreign film” became increasingly synonymous with the “art film,” in part precipitated by the influx of quality cinema exhibited for the first time in film festivals (the New York Film Festival, for example, began in 1966). Dudley Andrew writes: “Unquestionably, the ‘events of 1968’ mark a key moment in cultural history because they were directed at institutions. In film culture... contemporary criticism ordained a new canon of acceptable works” (128). However, with hindsight, we can suppose there was something unacceptable about *The Graduate*, for, despite its inclusion as part of American cinema's history, cinema studies has not seen fit to closely analyze the text itself.<sup>65</sup>

In this chapter, I examine *The Graduate*'s form and content in the social and historical context of the American 1960s in order to better understand its position as the avant-garde of New Hollywood. I begin by looking at the film's reception by contemporaneous critics who initially praised the film before turning on it, charging it with duping the American public by trussing up the same old Hollywood peplum, and evading the most pressing social and political issues of the day. The critics derided the film for borrowing European filmmaking techniques, and for reviving a theatrical sensibility at odds with a properly cinematic nature. I argue that in order to cast the film in such a derogatory light, critics neglected the film's most important moment: the long, final, ambiguous shot of Ben (Dustin Hoffman) and Elaine (Katherine Ross)

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<sup>65</sup> I, regretfully, am eliding what occurs in the classroom as part of the disciplinary history of cinema studies. *The Graduate* may well be taught and analyzed there.

sitting on a municipal bus after fighting off the older generation. For many critics of the day, the film effectively halts after Ben succeeds in convincing Elaine to abandon her new husband. Yet, I suspect the audience members who returned again and again to this film did not fail to see the last chilling moments. In fact, the power of the concluding shot to retroactively impact the entirety of the film is crucial to any adequate account of it. In an effort to make sense of it, we must pay close attention to the fact that this ending is dialogue-free. My reading highlights the film's aural complexities in an effort to combat its negative critical reputation, and to discern why youths gravitated toward it. Tracking silence's role in the film allows us to see it in a specifically American context (not just as a symptom of the influence of European cinema in the 1960s), and to form a response to the charge that the film's long takes and attention to language are theatrical, and not legitimately cinematic. Most importantly, it is only by attending to the film's sounds of silence that we can understand the ambiguity of the film's conclusion.

As artists like Lenny Bruce and Bob Dylan were finding their unique voices—and effecting cinema through documentaries like *Don't Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) and *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (John Magnuson, 1967)—the eloquent voices of Bruce, Sen. Robert Kennedy and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were silenced. King's death incited major race riots across the country. Police brutality at the August Democratic National Convention in Chicago provided media with footage of the consequences of citizens exercising their rights, rendering too obvious the treatment of dissenters. Looking at *The Graduate*'s position in the history of American culture brings to light the fact that we can see (or, rather, hear) in it a study of the efficacy of the voice in the political and social realms, but this approach also demonstrates that the film invites us to re-think how a voice can resound philosophically and aesthetically.

Ben's struggle is not so much a clash between competing interests—his own and adults'—but rather a struggle to be *heard*. As evidence, I will demonstrate the importance of the role played by silence in the film, which is to say, to the performance of silence—a complicated layer entirely neglected by extant criticism.<sup>66</sup> I will show that it is only by attending to the film's use of silence that we begin to comprehend the political value of the text. Ben is frequently silent, and, as with any character's (in)action, this silence is addressed both to other characters and to the spectator on distinct registers. Attending to the presence of silence in *The Graduate* not only clarifies the film's reception in the late 1960s, but further indicates ways it reflected and contributed to this volatile period of American history. My reading will, in turn, shed some light on the attention being paid to silence, and communication in general, in American culture of the late 1960s.

*The Graduate* begins with the title character, Benjamin Braddock, staring pensively ahead: sitting on board an airplane, then standing still as he slowly glides along an airport's moving sidewalk to the rock/folk tune "The Sound of Silence," performed by Simon and Garfunkel. There is, perhaps, no cinematic moment more in counterpoint with the cultural revolution in America in 1968, the year of *The Graduate*'s major exhibition. History was unfolding rapidly as groups (e.g. African-Americans, students, dissidents) who had only recently decried their lack of a social voice began to shout. Internationally, Paris and Prague glimpsed major structural changes in political regimes, while, farther away, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. The United States' commitment of soldiers to South Vietnam swelled massively—a fact that made the war—and conscription—too urgent to be ignored any longer by the populace.

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<sup>66</sup> Silence has been one of Hollywood's biggest formal taboos since its inception. In *Silent Film Sound*, Rick Altman demonstrates that silent cinema was never actually silent. That we say a fully-scored picture has "wall-to-wall" sound, reminiscent of carpet floor covering, suggests that Hollywood's efforts to prevent silence from rising up are a form of anti-realism, a covering of reality.

Photographs returning from the ravaged land, like those by Eddie Adams, further compelled Americans to confront the actions of the soldiers representing them.

Historian Arthur Marwick classifies the 1960s a “mini-renaissance” whose emphasis on individual expression transformed “artistic standards and values, and ideas about society and the individual’s relations with it” (6). He summarizes the most high-profile features of the period:

black civil rights, youth culture and trend-setting by young people; idealism, protest, and rebellion; the triumph of popular music based on Afro-American models and the emergence of this music as a universal language, with the Beatles as the heroes of the age; the search for inspiration in the religions of the Orient; massive changes in personal relationships and sexual behaviour; a general audacity and frankness in books and in the media, and in ordinary behaviour; relaxation in censorship; the new feminism; gay liberation; the emergence of ‘the underground’ and ‘the counter-culture’; optimism and genuine faith in the drawing of a better world.<sup>67</sup> (1)

To his list we must add the Vietnam War and the partisanship that tore through America with the organization of anti-war protests. Marwick points out that the 1960s are not just of interest to the history of minority groups who were chipping away at the racist, sexist, bourgeois culture (from the Black Panthers to the Situationists to the counterculture proponents of be-ins): “the full significance of the sixties lies not in the activities of minorities but in what happened to the majority, and *how* it happened” (Marwick, 15).

The character of Ben illustrates a popular conception of this “majority”: the heterosexual son of white, upper-middle class suburbanites. (That he is played by Dustin Hoffman, and often perceived as Jewish, is an issue to which we will return.) Anxious and unsure of his future, he wants nothing more than to be left alone in his room; not knowing what to do, he avoids doing anything. (His parents want him to go to “graduate school”—to learn to be a graduate?) But at home, Ben finds himself in a sea of the controlling older generation who are not invested in

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<sup>67</sup> The late 1950s saw the rise of “the Beats,” popularized by figures like William Burroughs, Alan Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac, who were fundamental to the emergence of a notion of “counterculture,” and its association with mind-altering drugs and Buddhism.

hearing about his desires. The elders prefer to project their own onto him—and whether it be a choice of libation or the sexual advances of the wife of his father’s business partner, Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), he accepts (despite their physical intimacy, we never learn her first name, or, indeed, the first name of any adult character). Eventually, Ben meets Mrs. Robinson’s daughter, Elaine (Katherine Ross), who, in the words of one critic at the time, is “the classy embodiment of a college man’s most extravagant fantasies” (Brackman, 35). Ben realizes she is a better match for him than her mother— not because they are the same age, but because they are able to converse, which he desperately wants, but is unable, to do with Mrs. Robinson. Not keen on being thrown over for her daughter, Mrs. Robinson attempts to squelch Ben and Elaine’s relationship by having her daughter marry another man. Arriving just past the knick of time, Ben nevertheless convinces Elaine to defy her parents and run away with him. Together they fight off the wedding party, jump on a passing bus, and ride away together, silently realizing what they have done.

As the nation was being pulled in many directions, what do we make of the fact that *The Graduate* appealed to the American public’s cinematic cravings; that Ben became a lightning rod for a generation of anti-authoritarian cinema-going youth? What was *The Graduate*, and its politics, for them (and for us, now)? As a top-grosser made within Hollywood, the film confuses the boundaries between “mainstream” culture and its others by *not* looking at a minority group or a fringe issue, but by examining the situation of a character built to be an emblem of an average modern, American youth. Critics sought to disabuse *The Graduate*’s fans of their passion by taking the film to task for not confronting the problems facing a particular minority group or a social issue they deemed worthy, such as the threat of conscription, drugs, or sexuality. (While Ben’s affair is an adulterous one, it is not difficult to see it, too, as a marker of suburban middle-

classiness.) How are we, then, to understand the film's extraordinary popularity? Just as Ben tries to defy the expectations placed on him by "the establishment," is *The Graduate* that impossible thing: a genuinely popular countercultural text produced by Hollywood? Or does it, in its own tacit ways, reaffirm conventional fantasies? Had the counterculture become, paradoxically, dominant?

We might surmise, given the numbers of youth who embraced *The Graduate*, and the feelings of intimacy it engendered in them, that it did not avoid urgent social issues, but presented a story sufficiently abstracted to allow issues to be projected onto Ben (thus, ironically, aligning the spectator with the adults of the film who consistently project their desires onto Ben). We learn almost no specific information about Ben. We are told he went to a "big Eastern college" and was an award-winning student, but we never find out his area of study. The film does not make explicit why he and Elaine become close, or what business their fathers run together. Ben cannot articulate why he needs to rebel against anyone over thirty, and, as an audience, we do not demand it of him. When Mr. Robinson (Murray Hamilton) confronts Ben for sleeping with his wife, and then his daughter, he asks, "Is there something I've said that's caused this contempt, or is it just the things I stand for that you despise?" Without mentioning what precisely Mr. Robinson might stand for, the film is confident that we take his meaning; Mr. Robinson functions metonymically for patriarchy, upper middle classness, whiteness, age: in short, the establishment. That the middle-aged are the antagonists in a coming of age tale might already alert the canny spectator that the story may not end in happy delirium.

*The Graduate* is in many ways a simple film; it has no subplots and few special effects. It is composed of ten scenes rendered in lengthy takes, and (at the time of release) had no major

star performers to recommend it. Upon its release, the film's unusual and striking visual compositions received much attention. Richard Jameson claims:

Students of film history and film style can cite milestones till the cows come home, but for the millions who never gave a thought to matters like camera placement or shot duration or the focal length of lenses, no other film in going-on-seven-decades had so decisively or deliciously made so many people notice the kinds of selection and design that can go into making the movie experience. (12)

Visually, the film borrows from expressionist film history, and, accordingly, much of its imagery contributes to the spectator's understanding of Ben's interior life. Ben sees his parents' world in black and white terms; it is colorless, simple, glossy, and, to him, unappealing. Many of the film's interiors, such as his parents' and the Robinsons' homes, appear in sleek blacks and whites—a feature that gained import after color film, which had finally become standard in the 1960s due to significant advances in color film stock (the separate Oscars for color and black-and-white cinematography were done away with in 1967).<sup>68</sup> Ben's parents also wear mostly black and white, while Mrs. Robinson dresses in predatory animal prints. Filmed in Panavision, the Pabstian angles, overlap edits, surface reflections, use of rack focus, masking shots, telephoto close-ups shot from yards away, etc. all deserve analysis, but space prohibits that here. Its monochromatic backgrounds (not just white, black, or gray, but even its shots of water) invoke ideas related to silence, such as emptiness or darkness, an idea highlighted by the opening lyrics “The Sounds of Silence”: “Hello, Darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again...”

The story of Ben's maturation is the story of his anxiety with speaking, and his inability to articulate what he wants to say links his desire for change with his desire to speak. His desires are sutured together, as is our perspective with Ben's. Ben's strained efforts to speak are not indicative of an essential quality of his personality; after all, one of the few details we learn about him is that he was a champion debater. His silence points to the existence of something beyond

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<sup>68</sup> For detail on these advances, see Monaco, 67-84.



his power to say. And although members of the older generation fail to acknowledge his silence as an “utterance,” as saying *something*, we, as spectators, do not. The film’s narrative trajectory relies on our desire—based on just these silent moments—for Ben to successfully rebel.

To look at the act of utterance is to look at the constitution of character, for it is through actions that the character comes to be. *The Graduate* challenges its spectator to contemplate the limit of what can constitute a character’s utterance by exhibiting the limit case of silence. (Let me be clear: I am talking about an action attributed to the character, not the actor. The register on which the actor performs an act or delivers a line is a discussion for another time—specifically, chapters four and six.) The film presents silence as a place where *how* the spectator knows merges with *what* she knows. In a film, the representation of silence is also its performance. Unlike the visual image on the screen, with the aural image, there is no voluptuous suggestion of more just beyond the frame’s edge. The film reflects on the cinematic presentation of characters’ utterances, opening up further questions of what counts as “realistic” speech in film, as well as how we understand—or hear—the relationship between a character and her utterances.<sup>69</sup> In this way, the film asks what it is that characters *do* when they utter, which is also a question of what characters *are*—for the spectator.

### **The Critical Reception of, and Confusion about, *The Graduate***

*The Graduate* premiered to positive reviews—even raves—(though there were exceptions, such as *Time* magazine’s dismissive piece). According to *The New Yorker* columnist Jacob Brackman, most critics were “wild about [*The Graduate*],” including Stanley Kauffman,

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<sup>69</sup> If there is a term regarding the aural that connotes what “illusionism” or “transparency” has for discussions of cinematic images’ potential for reflexivity, I suspect it must be “clarity.” This term would indicate the fidelity of the sound to our knowledge of its source. Is it a coincidence that we also use this term to refer to arguments that we find intelligible? We say that a phone line is “clear” if what we hear “really” sounds like our experience of a friend’s unmediated voice. This raises another problem of understanding the aural in visual terms, since the spectator typically will not have any experience of an actor’s unmediated voice.

who calls it a “milestone in American film history” (34). In his final column for the *New York Times* (he was run out of critical town by his peers for failing to see *Bonnie and Clyde*’s brilliance), Bosley Crowther calls *The Graduate* one of the year’s best films and “one of the best seriocomic social satires we’ve had from Hollywood since Preston Sturges was making them” (quoted in Harris, 380). In a most insightful review, a young Roger Ebert lauds the film as “the funniest American comedy of the year... because it has a point of view. That is to say, it is against something” (quoted in Harris, 381).

Then, as 1968 wore on, the movie became, says Brackman, “a cultural phenomenon—a nearly mandatory movie experience” (34). The film’s popularity compelled critics to return to the film to re-consider their early notices, for, surely, nothing so popular with “the masses” could have *deserved* critical praise. Writing in July of 1968 (over six months after the film’s release), Brackman writes: “the film seems to be asking what it means to be a promising young man in America today. What does it mean to be twenty-one, with a high-quality education behind you and a brilliant future ahead of you?” (36). He goes on to say that that *The Graduate*’s set-up—“What is Benjamin going to do with himself?”—“is fine material for a story, because what was once a predicament confined to the sons of a tiny elite has become a mass predicament in middle-class America” (36). Writing with the conviction that his readers understand the extant generation divide, Brackman believes that if Ben were not in such a predicament he would “not even [be] recognizable as a youth,” for it would be “preposterous” for Ben to share his parents’ values (36-37).

Brackman claims that, “*The Graduate*, although it is terrific fun to watch, begins to fall apart under reflection” (38). He motivates his twenty-six page reading—which remains the

film's most in-depth critical treatment—by detailing the film's financial accomplishments.<sup>70</sup> He quotes Joseph Levine (president of Embassy Pictures, which released the movie), who, certain the “receipts still haven't peaked,” said, “It's absolutely incredible. There's no way to describe it. It's like an explosion” (34). Connecting the dots, Brackman concludes:

*The Graduate* seems to be telling us that the public has been underrated. Due weight having been given to such factors as economic achievement, popularity at different age and social levels, and critical reception by mass and elite media, it is clearly the biggest success in the history of movies. Whatever is authentic or meretricious in *The Graduate* must reflect what is authentic or meretricious in our sentiment about its themes, and perhaps even in America's current conceptions of itself. (34)

Is *The Graduate*, Brackman goes on to ask, a source of pride or shame; is it earning its winnings or picking Americans' pockets? His subsequent polemic is as interested in elucidating the meaning of the money as the meaning of the movie—an interest gradually shared by other critics.

Although ambivalent about the value of the text, Brackman describes *The Graduate* as a phenomenon instrumental for giving American audiences license to feel the right to claim a cinematic culture: “Though we all identify European movies by naming their directors, film buffs who refer to American movies that way have seemed a little pedantic... But *The Graduate* is, definitively, the Mike Nichols movie. In fact, it has given everybody the chance to be a movie buff; that is, to talk about the *director*” (41). The critic for the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote: “[Nichols]... has [hereby] announced his candidacy for the upper chamber of filmmakers now occupied by Fellini, Truffaut, Antonioni, and others of their caliber” (quoted in Brackman, 41). Similarly, another wrote: “Everybody asks why the Americans don't make movies the way

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<sup>70</sup> This bit of gossip seems to perfectly encapsulate the shift in critical attitudes toward Nichols: In 1967, *The New Yorker* film critic Penelope Gilliat (screenwriter of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* [John Schlesinger, 1971] and ex-wife of John Osborne) dated him, and by 1968, the magazine published Brackman's lengthy diatribe (Harris, 334). Incidentally, Gilliat was one of the first critics to “get” *Bonnie and Clyde*. Mark Harris describes how *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* were regarded companion pieces, “allied as indictments of the status quo” (393).

Europeans do, right? Okay, buddies, here's European moviemaking done right in the heart of American movieville" (quoted in Brackman, 41). The irony that Europeans built the notion of the *auteur* from Hollywood directors aside, Brackman's observation helps us understand the importance of *The Graduate*'s reception to Nichols' reputation. Tracing America's insecurity about its culture back to the early nineteenth century "when Continental literati scoffed, 'Who ever read an American book?'," Brackman argues that, "[a]t least since the end of the Second World War... American entertainment has been forced back into the shadow of European art" (42). Thus, desperate for our own "film genius," Brackman places that mantle—"an immense task, granted"—upon Nichols (42). *The Graduate* and Nichols, were seen, to paraphrase John Kennedy's 1963 inaugural address, as the "last best hope" for a respectable *American* film culture, which Brackman paradoxically measured by European standards.

Of course, Brackman only places Nichols upon this pedestal to knock him off. He is uncomfortable with the idea of any American *auteur*, for despite his admiration for the individual *auteurs* of Europe, auteurism smacks of elitism inappropriate to a truly American artist. Was Nichols, Brackman wonders, influenced by the French New Wave or did he steal from it? Is *The Graduate* original, homage, pastiche or derivative dross? It is clear that, for Brackman (and his critical contemporaries), whatever the film is, and whoever Nichols is, must be established through a comparison to European films and their *auteurs*.

Indeed, *The Graduate* pays explicit homage to European New Wave cinema, such as the cameo appearance of Eddra Gale (who played Saraghina in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* [1963]) as Elaine's bus-mate.<sup>71</sup> Ben and Elaine's conversation in his red Alfa Romeo (an allusion to the

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<sup>71</sup> *8 1/2* meant a lot to Nichols, as did Seraghina, who inspired Nichols to talk about the importance of accuracy and detail in character types: "When [Fellini is] on the button about Seraghina, I *know* he knew Seraghina and I know he re-created her accurately. I don't mean literally, but accurately. And when he got her accurately, I *remembered* her too, though I never met her" (Gelmis, 290).

car in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* [1963]), resembles a wonderful scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961) where two potential lovers talk in a car and all we hear is rain. Conceptually, *The Graduate* acknowledges Ingmar Bergman's films from that period: *The Silence* (1963) also begins with an extended close-up of one of its protagonists travelling (on a train rather than a plane). It, too, delves into the impossibility of real spoken communication (through characters refusing to listen to one another, characters with different native tongues, characters ignoring each other), and even shares an oedipally tinged relationship, here between an actual mother and son. Even bleaker is Bergman's *Persona* (1966), a film Nichols admits to watching obsessively before filming *The Graduate*. It examines the act of utterance further than *The Graduate* through its two heroines, one of whom is an actress that goes mute (arguably of her own volition). And the title of *The Graduate*'s theme song, "The Sound of Silence," is also the English title of a play by Jean Cocteau, *Le Bell Indifférent*, adapted for the screen in 1957 by Cocteau and Jacques Demy.<sup>72</sup>

With the release of *The Graduate*, Andrew Sarris sardonically refers to Nichols as "Michelangelo Nichols," a nickname intended to suggest his bastardization of European art cinema for the American masses (*Confessions*, 327). Sarris does not look kindly on the film's relationship to European cinema, accusing it of purloining its most interesting material. Sarris attributes the existence of *The Graduate* specifically to the genealogy of *8½*, *Jules and Jim*, and *Eclipse* (Antonioni, 1962), whose "chic tendencies... allow their narratives to be eroded by lyrical essays on their own feelings" (*Politics*, 186). He admits that his critical sensibility during the 1960s became divided into "two branches, the historical—American cinema—and the other prophetic—the European innovators" (*Politics*, 184). As an American film, *The Graduate* could

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<sup>72</sup> Nichols' *Angels in America* (2003), which we will look at in chapter six, is replete with references to Cocteau's work.

only be classical/historical or derivative; innovation and prophecy were beyond its reach, and its position was worsened for daring to be sincere *and* refer to the European avant-garde.

In their piece for *Film Quarterly*, published in the spring of 1968, Stephen Farber and Estelle Changas begin: “Mike Nichols’ name is so magical today that even if *The Graduate* had been the worst movie of the year, people would be buzzing reverently about it” (37). As it happens, they do not think it is the worst movie, but they certainly do not rave about it—generally because they find it implausible. They are confused because “[Ben] is supposed to be a champion college debater, but he can hardly form a sentence” (37). They complain that, even though “Nothing is going on in his head... audiences cluck over him and rush to give him credit for understanding anxieties that are actually beyond his grasp” (38). They blast “audiences eager to believe that all young people are sensitive and alienated and that all old people are sell-outs or monsters,” for permitting “Hoffman’s mannerisms and Paul Simon’s poetry to convince them of a depth in Ben that the part, *as written*, simply does not contain” (my italics, 38). Farber and Changas demonstrate the failure of 1960s critics to attend to the film as performed, which is important for recognizing its silences as meaningful—regardless of how and whether they were indicated on the page of the shooting script.

Farber and Changas’ dissatisfaction evinces a desire for a “counter-cultural” text to offer a solution, not just an indictment. Like other critics, they mistake the film’s popularity for the incitation of warm, positive feelings. *The Graduate* does not show a youth finding a successful way to step outside his society—instead, it offers a cynical, dystopic cliff towards which disenchanting youths gravitated. Farber and Changas cite, and mock, Nichols’ statement that Ben and Elaine are “not to be envied at the film’s conclusion” (41). Ultimately, Farber and Changas find the film “hollow” and wonder if Nichols has any talent, saying “we’re not going to find out

as long as an evasive gimmicky hoax like *The Graduate* is trumpeted as a milestone in American film history” (41). Critic John Simon calls Ben and Elaine “just as specious in their heroism” as Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) and Clyde (Warren Beatty), and “seethed at its ‘oversimplification, overelaboration, inconsistency, eclecticism, obviousness, pretentiousness’ as well as its ‘rock bottom’ music” (Harris, 380-392).

Many critics took the film’s success in a capitalist market to undermine the possibility that the film itself could maintain an anti-capitalist thrust, an opinion that compelled critics to literally re-write the text. Thus, they saw it as one with a decidedly happy ending, stopping at the point Ben and Elaine lock the older generation into the church and flee. Critics were inexplicably (and, really, inexcusably) blind and deaf to the film’s final images, and so, its narrative arc. Sarris believes that the film journeys to an “idealism reconfirmed” (*Confessions*, 327); another asserts that “Benjamin’s long search for himself arrives at its payoff” (Brackman, 40). Kauffman writes, “For once, a happy ending makes *us* feel happy” (quoted in Brackman, 39). Following along, Brackman assumes the ending to be cheerful, and so, is free to claim that the film fails to earn that satisfaction by leaning too heavily on Hollywood conventions of young love and Ross’ prettiness as explanatory projections. He finds the ending “deeply illogical” (39), which, he thinks, undermines any advances the film manages to make up to that point with what he sarcastically calls a “*healthy* American quality”: “However unnatural what led up to it may have been, they will have a proper wedding night!” (38). “Nichols cannot,” Brackman bemoans, “let us leave the theater feeling that nothing has changed, so he gives us what he thinks we want” (39).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> This view persists in much of the scholarship that mentions the film; for example, Edward Rielly writes in his book on American culture in the 1960s that, “the film ends with the young lovers heading off for a life of love and truth apart from the corruption of their elders” (187).

Influential critic Pauline Kael rails against what she sees as *The Graduate*'s conventional appeals to the spectator to emotionally identify; specifically, she condemns the simplicity of "the high school and college students identifying with... Dustin Hoffman's Benjamin" (125). She classifies the film as particularly American, precisely because of its character-driven appeal, and compares it to a "television commercial" (Harris, 380). Kael is uncomfortable with the affective power of the film, for, by inviting emotions (and laughs in particular), Nichols "lets the audience direct him," which she calls "demagoguery in the arts" (127). Worried by an analyst who tells her that his patients talk about "characters in movies like *The Graduate* with as much personal involvement as about their immediate problems (125)," Kael gripes that "this way of reacting to movies as psychodrama used to be considered a pre-literate way of reacting but that now those considered 'post-literate' are reacting like pre-literates" (125). In her schematic, cinematic literacy is constituted in the very moment one works through the desire to perceive a character, in this case, Ben, as human.

Throughout her writing, *The Graduate* is often Kael's example of a film that she finds overrated, significant only for exposing a specific moral and political moment in American cinema. Kael believes that "to talk about a movie like *The Graduate* in terms of movie technique is really a bad joke. Technique at this level is not of any aesthetic importance; it's not the ability to achieve what you're after but the skill to find something acceptable," and so, one must talk about "a film like this in terms of what audiences enjoy it for" (*Going Steady*, 97). For Kael, *The Graduate* exemplifies movies people "fall for," and which become "cultural and psychological equivalents of watching a political convention" (*Going Steady*, 124). She claims that it panders to an educated youth, who ironically, likes the same old "trash." She says,

The small triumph of *The Graduate* was to have domesticated alienation and the difficulty of communication, by making what Benjamin is alienated from a middle-class



comic strip and making it absurdly evident that he has nothing to communicate... “The Graduate” isn’t a *bad* movie, it’s entertaining... What’s surprising is that so many people take it so seriously. (126)

Kael is correct to identify “the difficulty of communication” and Ben’s trouble communicating as major concerns of the film. She is wrong, however, to think that these topics are not to be taken seriously.

Kael resents the spectator who identifies with Ben, who perceives him as a “real” human. Writing in 1971, Stanley Cavell wonders what, exactly, the cinematic spectator is identifying *with*, and claims that Ben jars with the traditional Hollywood balance of audience identification by “soliciting an investment of feeling in every inflection... out of all proportion to any feeling of his own” (78). He says this investment pays off during the film’s conclusion, as,

the film finds ways to acknowledge indebtedness to, and thereby invoke the power of, several huge moments in the history of films about young love. Sustaining himself in flight—speeding when he can, running when he can’t, and in between gliding on new currents of psychic resourcefulness—Hoffman takes upon himself the Belmondo figure created in *Breathless* and lightened in *That Man From Rio*: a real modern hero, equal to his demand for happiness. (78)

Here, not comparing Nichols to European directors, but Ben to characters from European (French) films, Cavell resists the idea that *The Graduate* (or *Breathless* [Jean-Luc Godard, 1960]) ends happily, and states merely that Ben deserves happiness. Cavell suggests that Ben is a character seeking to learn about himself, and that the limits of his ability to act are his primary dilemma (and the main tension needing resolution for the film to conclude).

Cavell is right to observe that the generational conflict in *The Graduate* is a catalyst for the narrative trajectory in which Ben will explore his desires and abilities. He exclaims that “Mike Nichols’ and Dustin Hoffman’s graduate is a miraculous appearance of the myth of youth

itself” (78).<sup>74</sup> Cavell’s description is reminiscent of Northrop Frye’s history of comedy, which is, in large part, predicated upon mythical oppositions of age and youth. Frye suggests that comedies’ happy endings are *usually* generated by the late discovery of information and the conformation of society to the desires of the hero, the hero having generally worked toward “redeeming what is at once society and a bride” (185). Adhering to these myths would suggest Ben is triumphant, winning bride and conquering social restrictions. However, the film, unlike its critics, does not assume that a male who has won a bride and arguably independent social status has also achieved a happy ending.

The character of Ben is not inconsistent; it *matters* that he is a champion debater who cannot form a sentence, who has reached a stage of inarticulateness. Insofar as rebellion is an effort to achieve a political or social voice (one cannot consent to being governed without a voice), and to get that voice heard, Ben’s struggle speaks to potential activists. If we stop reading the film after the showdown at the church and do not look at—and listen to—the couple’s long, silent drive to nowhere, we do not experience the complete film. This ending of *The Graduate* revises Ben’s entire quest to win Elaine, which is the form his rebellion takes, and cannot be properly understood if the spectator is not—and has not been—attending to the film’s silences.

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<sup>74</sup> Cavell extends the myth of youth to a modern notion of romance. He writes that “[s]o far as we can grant that [Ben and Elaine will remain together], the film reinstates the myth of modern marriage, which is the modern myth of romance” (79). Critics noted similarities between *The Graduate* and classic Hollywood romantic comedies that would be foundational to Cavell’s development in *Pursuits of Happiness* of the “comedy of remarriage” genre, such as *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), where the hero also snatches the bride at the altar (Brackman, 40). Beyond the coupling, separation, and re-coupling of Ben and Elaine, *The Graduate* has much in common with the generic features Cavell notes, such as the presence of a “green space” (a device derivative of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies), a location lovers go to work out their problems. In *The Graduate* the University of California at Berkeley occupies this space, a point we will return to later.

## The Resound of Silence in the 1960s

Cavell draws on the fact that the film maintains an emphasis on Ben's perspective (barring one significant moment on his date with Elaine), to conjecture that, "[i]t may be that what we are meant to be given is a series of projections from the graduate's point of view" (77). Speaking of the montage that occurs after Ben begins his affair with Mrs. Robinson, Cavell writes:

This is clearly going on in the well-realized passage radiating his new experience of his body, shown in punning cuts between the hotel room and his parent's house and the swimming pool: the progress of his first habitual exploration of one woman, the way his body has become marked and charted with the knowledge of hers, enclosing him within a new skin of mood and gesture and odor and boredom and bristle which he may feel at his neck as he lies in bed at home, in his mouth as he takes to smoking in his room, in his shoulders and groin and legs as he floats on the Abercrombie and Fitch rubber raft, in his hands and nose and teeth as he drinks beer from a punched can. (77)

Cavell's infatuation with the expressive nature of Ben's body attests to the film's fascination with Ben's expressive possibilities. Cavell continues: "But the primacy of his private life, which wants to be the subject of the film, is also denied by the film" (77). Cavell is right to say that the film *wants* to represent Ben's "private life," but is wrong to suggest his private life is "denied by the film." We cannot assume a character's silence merely displaces our attention onto his body's expressiveness. What the film denies is the spectator's expectation of her Hollywood-given right to perceive a character's actions as unproblematically revealing a character's "private life." Though Ben's interiority cannot be taken as self-evident, the true subject of the film is *our wanting* it to represent Ben's "private life."

As I quoted in the previous section, Cavell posits that the spectator's affective experience is out of proportion with Ben's; yet, in this passage, Cavell describes the figure of Ben as highly expressive. Is Cavell contradicting himself? For how can Ben be expressive without expressing *something*? Can there be a contentless expression? Is Ben's the empty performance of a poser?

Is there value to expressing qua expressing? Cavell's reading raises the question of *which* actions we take to be expressive. Cavell's analysis appears in his book *The World Viewed* (though its earliest incarnation is in a lecture series in May, 1968), which sustains a consistent emphasis on the relationships between character, performance, and the "sound of the human voice"—particularly in terms of its opposite—silence (147).<sup>75</sup> Cavell's previous work, *Must We Mean What We Say?*,<sup>76</sup> argues that, since learning the appropriate contexts for using words is part of learning the language, people must *mean* what they say. That is, we can justifiably surmise meaning from the *way* sentences are used, beyond their literal meaning.<sup>77</sup> This chapter will taxonomize the divergent silences present throughout *The Graduate* to consider how far we can apply Cavell's theory to cinema: must Ben mean what he does not say?<sup>78</sup>

Cavell suggests that one reason for the success of *The Graduate* is its undeniably witty dialogue. For Cavell, witty dialogue is among "the best film dialogue" because it provides "natural occasions on which silence is broken, and in which words do not go beyond their moment of saying; hence occasions on which silence naturally asserts itself. For the world is

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<sup>75</sup> *The World Viewed* concludes with the chapter, "The Acknowledgment of Silence," in which Cavell turns (again) to the topic of the human voice to note: "I think this issue now underlies all the explorations in film to which I have alluded" (147). William Rothman and Marian Keane's reading of Cavell helps account for his fascination with dialogue along similar lines: "In exploring the 'silence of the voice,' movies are exploring the limits of ordinary language, which is what modern philosophy, as Cavell understands and practices it, is exploring as well" (234).

<sup>76</sup> This book, which contains his seminal readings of *Endgame* and *King Lear*, devotes many pages to the subject of performance and performed characters. Indeed, in the preface of the 2002 edition, Cavell tells us he wrote it concomitantly to *The World Viewed* and advises they be understood in tandem.

<sup>77</sup> For example, he notes that we say "The boy was responsible for breaking the window" but would not say "The boy was responsible for finishing his homework in good time" (3-6). Similarly, we know someone must mean there is something peculiar about my clothes if they ask, "Do you dress the way you do voluntarily?" (9).

<sup>78</sup> Cavell uses the example of a horn to claim that it matters little that on-screen characters' utterances are *recorded*: when we hear a horn, we know we are hearing a horn. We might correct him to say we hear the *sound* of the horn, and so, he is mistaken to apply his reasoning to human onscreen performance because the character is never a possible referent. A sound performed by an onscreen human character can be read on two registers: the character's and the performer's. When we hear Ben talk, we can be aware that Hoffman is "playing" his voice, performing Ben with it. This awareness brings with it an awareness of Hoffman and that he has a voice which is *not* Ben's. It is necessary to maintain this distinction, for it is not just a question of the spectator being asked to attend simultaneously to the actor and character, but is a question of hearing characters' utterances as *meant*. It is also necessary to focus on utterances as constituted by (and constituting) the character if we are to allow the possibility that silence may be an utterance.

silent to us; the silence is merely forever broken” (150). We can surmise that, at least for Cavell, filmic silence can be taken as both representational and as realistic. But if the world is sometimes silent, it is not obvious that silence is meaningful. It becomes meaningful in those cases when we expect the silence to be broken and it is not—as in the case of a character *not* uttering.

### **Character, Dialogue and the Theatrical**

The characters’ dialogue was primary in the production of *The Graduate*, often serving as the impetus or catalyst for other artistic choices, including Nichols’ style of direction and the creation of characters’ behavior. Recently, Nichols has recalled his “key memory” of rehearsing *The Graduate*. Bancroft was struggling to find the character, and she approached him, asking him for his advice. He says,

She asked ‘Do you like my character[ization]?’ And I said, ‘No, she’s much too sweet.’ Annie said, ‘Oh, really. What’s she like?’ And I said, ‘Well I can’t tell you what she’s like, but I can tell you what she *sounds* like. She sounds like this, [snapping] “Benjamin, will you drive me home, please?”’ She said, ‘Oh. Oh, I can do that. I know what that is. That’s anger.’ (*The Graduate* DVD)

Nichols also tells of Bancroft’s character being grounded in her reading of the line, “I guess so” after Ben supposes she “lost interest” in art. For Nichols, the way she uttered that line “was everything;” it revealed that “[s]he just hates herself for having gone for the money, and she’s punishing herself with everything she does.”

Nichols had great difficulty casting Ben.<sup>79</sup> Eventually, he remembered seeing Hoffman as a handicapped, cross-dressing German in *Harry Noon and Night* and decided to test him.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> In an interview with the *New York Times* in 1967, Nichols complained: “It’s the hardest thing I ever tried to cast... These people are so far removed from stock characters” (Bart). When Hoffman worried that he was not the type to play a Californian suburbanite, Nichols said, “Maybe he’s Jewish *inside*” (Kashner, 425).

Similarly, Dustin Hoffman's vocalization grew out of Nichols' direction. Nichols demonstrated for him his own habit of whimpering (Gelmis, 291). The film's writer, and Nichols' frequent collaborator, Buck Henry,<sup>81</sup> remembers that, "[Hoffman] does a lot of Nichols in the film. The "hmm" is a Nichols habit, which he didn't appropriate so much as I think Mike gave it to him. And a lot of the sort of disaffected readings are the way Nichols talks sometimes. Maybe in the present-day world he does it a few too many times, but it's not like anything else" (Schwartz, 4).

The dialogue, as delivered in the film, also played no small part in the film's success.

Henry remembers going to see it in a theater for the first time:

I had heard it was a success, but I went to a theater to see it on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. I was amazed, even a little appalled, at the fact that not only was the theater filled with people, but it was filled with people who had already seen it and knew the lines! So I was sitting, I think, on the steps, because it was an overflow crowd, and all the key lines, the gag lines, were being spoken about ten seconds before they came up! So it was bizarre, to sit there and hear 500 or 600 people saying "plastics" all at once...I realized what a success it was because people had seen it a number of times, which was before the tradition of kids seeing hit films over and over again really had started. (Schwartz, 3)

Henry also connects the film's central concern with alienation to the film's dialogue and visual technique—especially Nichols' use of long takes:

Characters are allowed to sit there and stand there and walk there, so that you can assess their mood and begin to feel the way the character feels—since the theme from the beginning was, what is it like to live under water? What's the feeling like? What's the alienated feeling that, if not all of us, a large percentage of us feel when we're 18, 19, 20 years old and have to talk to adults who live in a different world that we don't understand and really don't want to, and that everything comes through a kind of barrier? So, the little guy in the fish tank is sort of a theme for the way the hero and the way ostensibly we feel, that feeling of being isolated from social behavior that's accepted. And also then it gives the excuse for the peculiar dialogue that's seventy or eighty percent of the time just a little off what people really say. It's not deconstructed so much as—I don't know what the word is. It's like, it's almost like it's translated. (Schwartz, 3)

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<sup>80</sup> Significantly, for this role, Hoffman was compared to stonefaced Buster Keaton in Walter Kerr's career-making rave (Harris, 272). Keaton starred in Beckett's *Film* (Alan Schneider, 1965).

<sup>81</sup> Guild technicalities allow Calder Willingham to share screenwriting credit, although Nichols rejected his script outright. Nichols wanted a story "about a man who is fighting, doing anything not to be sucked into the middle class" and Willingham could not deliver.

Henry's words invite us to think about how to classify utterances in *The Graduate*. His idea that the film's dialogue is "translated," suggests it undergoes some sort of transformation. The film's editor, Sam O'Steen, who recalls people exclaiming that they saw the film twenty-five times (68), has said he cut the film for reactions—not for the lines (65). Seeing how a line was heard by another character was more important than seeing how it was said. That characters in *The Graduate* are never quite able to grasp the meaning of other characters' utterances bears out his account, which also speaks indirectly to the importance of silence as a case for such indeterminacy, and for attending to the performance of utterances, to *how* words are uttered.<sup>82</sup>

The verbosity, long takes, and often static camera of Nichols' first film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, provoked strong charges of theatricality.<sup>83</sup> *The Graduate* did little to dispel this reproach. For example, the scene in which Ben wants to talk to Mrs. Robinson before having sex has no visible cut for over six minutes. In his review of *The Graduate*, Sarris' scant praise for the film is reserved for elements that might still be regarded as less than cinematic (that is, distinctively visual), saying that, "Nichols is at his best in getting new readings out of old lines" (*Confessions*, 261). However, it is unclear that dialogue—and silence—is present in the same way in cinema and in theater. In the 1960s, Anglo-American theater was undergoing its own radical transformations due to the production of work by writers such as Samuel Beckett, John

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<sup>82</sup> That *The Graduate* brings together concern for the relationships between cinematic performance, characters, and sound is affirmed by one of the more brilliant meditations on these subjects' relationships, Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007). This film makes direct reference to *The Graduate* when an aging bellhop, played by a little person, calls him "Mr. Gladstone." This is the alias Ben used at the Taft Hotel during his affair with Mrs. Robinson and, when he goes with Elaine, a bellhop walks by, also played by a little person, calling him by his alias.

<sup>83</sup> For example, Sarris laments that "Nichols has actually committed all the classic errors of the sophisticated stage director let loose on the unsophisticated movies" (*Confessions*, 261). For more evidence, see Kael's essay, "Filmed Theater" (*Going Steady*, 228-236). Cinephiles, such as Sarris, were not the only ones complaining about Nichols' transition to directing films. In an open letter published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1967, critic Walter Kerr and playwright Edmund Wilson pinned their hopes for American theater on Nichols.

Osborne, and Harold Pinter, who were invested in the cross-pollination of theater and cinema.<sup>84</sup>

In this light, the opposition of theater and film appears somewhat tautologous. Both Beckett and Pinter already had extensive experience in both cinema and theater. Beckett wrote the reflexive film, *Film*, starring Buster Keaton in 1965. Pinter wrote screenplays throughout the 1960s, such as *The Servant* (Joseph Losey, 1963) and *The Pumpkin Eater* (Jack Clayton, 1964), which starred Anne Bancroft. Questions of silence were particularly relevant for these writers, and it was becoming an important theme in “high-brow” American art more broadly, evident in works such as John Cage’s *4’33”* (a musical piece in which the performer does not play a note, turning the environmental sounds the audience hears for four minutes and thirty-three seconds into a composition).

Beckett’s views on language came to dominate American theater at the same time Nichols took over as its star director (as I chronicled in the introduction, in 1966, Nichols had four concurrent hits on and off Broadway). As Nichols moved from being the most successful director of American theater to the most successful director in Hollywood, he was coming from a theatrical atmosphere of modern alienation stemming from Beckett’s work—which is entrenched in philosophizing about silence, communication, and the act of utterance.<sup>85</sup> Beckett’s short play *Krapp’s Last Tape* premiered on Broadway in 1968, sharing the bill with *The Zoo Story*, written by Edward Albee, the author of *Virginia Woolf?*. *Krapp’s* is explicitly about hearing *recorded* utterances—it theatricalizes listening to words (here, one’s own past words, perhaps). *Krapp’s* director, Alan Schneider (who had directed *Film*), also directed the original Broadway

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<sup>84</sup> The provocative British theater critic Kenneth Tynan was particularly instrumental in changing the state of Anglo-American theater by first valorizing the works of John Osborne and Samuel Beckett. In 1966, Tynan (who was something of an eccentric recluse) named Nichols on the list of his very few “close friends” which appeared in the *New York Times*.

<sup>85</sup> This is dissimilar to the attitude toward alienation in Europe, which was preoccupied with another important theatrical theorist and dramatist, Bertolt Brecht.



production of *Virginia Woolf?* (1962) of which Nichols was a great fan. As will become clear in our examination of Nichols and May's comedy in chapter four, Beckett's plays, *Act Without Words I* and *II*, and *Endgame*, are also relevant to Nichols' art, as is his extensive work on radio, such as the play, *Words and Music* (which is reminiscent of a Nichols and May album, *Improvisations to Music*). Although his landmark *Waiting for Godot* opened in 1956, Beckett's cultural recognition was strongest in the late 1960s, culminating in a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

Nichols worked on—and with—plays by Beckett since he performed in *Waiting for Godot* during his youth in Chicago. In 1988, he directed a production of *Godot* for Lincoln Center Theater produced by Beckett's own producer, Gregory Mosher. Avowing "I've wanted to [direct] *Godot* since I first read it, in the 50's, when it was first published in the Grove Press edition" Nichols consulted with the reclusive Beckett on the production, and the latter wrote variations for Nichols' production and even gave Nichols special dispensation to tamper with his text should he so desire (Gussow, 1988). Nichols did make a few changes; he justified them by saying, "Beckett's *Godot* isn't placed in America; mine is" (Gussow, 1988). Mel Gussow, a friend of Beckett's and a critic for the *New York Times*, said it was the biggest theatrical event of the year, and had been anticipated for years in the American theater community (Gussow, 1988).

Nichols has also later worked with Pinter. The friends collaborated on the film *Wit* (2001), which Nichols directed and in which Pinter performed.<sup>86</sup> Pinter's dramas tend to feature ambivalent characters struggling over, and through, words and silences. Pinter burst on the theatrical scene in New York in 1967 with *The Homecoming* (which returned to Broadway in 2007). Pinter's experimental play, *Silence*, was produced in New York in 1970. In it, as in *The*

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<sup>86</sup> The pair also developed *Remains of the Day*, which Nichols was to direct from a script by Pinter. Eventually, Nichols decided to produce the film, and handed over directorial reigns to James Ivory, who chose a script by Ruth Praver Jhabvala.

*Graduate*, silence is both a theme and a technique. Initially, critics expressed frustration at Pinter's lack of narrative explanation—a complaint echoed in the critical charges of implausibility hurled at *The Graduate* (e.g., Ben and Elaine's affection for one another). Pinter challenged univocal, comfortable notions of causation and motivation. Discussing his screenplay for *Accident* (Joseph Losey, 1967) in 1966, Pinter said that, "in this film everything happens, nothing is explained. It has been pared down and down, all unnecessary words and actions are eliminated" (quoted in Cima, 46). In "Acting on the Cutting Edge: Pinter and the Syntax of Cinema," Gay Gibson Cima describes Pinter's "tendency to treat the stage as if it were a film screen" in the 1960s (43).

Using silence on-screen and stage, Pinter was invested in allowing the audience a plurality of interpretations, and advanced the art of performing accordingly. Making much of Pinter's use of silence in his study of Pinter's characters, William Free reckons: "The fact that the leg moves and the lips speak is more important than what either say" (5). In plays such as *Oldtimes* (in which the male protagonist is a filmmaker), Pinter, Cima argues, uses cinematic principles to escape overly determining characters' motivations (43). Rooted in Eisenstein's theory of montage, "Pinter often posits situation A, allows for a pause or silence, then presents situation B, at which time the actor must signal that the audience is to create situation C, a synthesis of A and B which does not necessarily exist on stage" (Cima, 48). This "requires that the actor cue the audience to go beyond its initial impression that the scene has stopped during the pauses and silences" (Cimeia, 48). Characters' actions collide to evince a third concept, one locatable for the spectator *in* the silences. Pinter once said, "between my lack of biographical data about [my characters], and the ambiguity of what they say there lies a territory which is not

only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore” (quoted in Cima, 49). The same could be said of Ben.

Another aspect of Pinter’s approach to characters’ motivations is particularly relevant to our discussion: “Instead of directly addressing the object of their desires, the characters in [a Pinter play] drive their action *through* one character to another. This oblique approach to interaction places the spectator at a remove from the third actor, the object of the action at any given moment” (Cima, 47). We could easily say the same of characters in *The Graduate* (and, indeed, many Nichols’ films). For instance, Mrs. Robinson’s desire for Ben is more about her bitterness towards her life choices, sexless marriage, and husband than it is about her attraction to the young man (how else can we explain her unsolicited statements to Ben, such as “I’m an alcoholic, did you know that?”); Ben’s relationships with Mrs. Robinson and Elaine are more about his desire to rebel against his parents than an affinity with either woman.

The relationship between cinema and theater has been a topic of debate since cinema first emerged, and deepened as sound technology developed. Indeed, when Hollywood converted to sound, it harvested directors, such as George Cukor, from Broadway. This debate was rekindled in the 1960s (possibly as a result of the publication of a selection of André Bazin’s writings, translated into English, *What is Cinema?*, which included an examination of the relationship between theater and cinema).<sup>87</sup> In her 1969 essay, “Theater and Film,” Susan Sontag objects to the way that “[t]he history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models” (100). Sontag complains that films from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) to Carl Dreyer’s *Gertrud* (1964) have been derided as “theatrical,” in part due to their “talkiness” which is converted into a sensibility thought anti-cinematic, “a sensibility both

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<sup>87</sup> This volume also includes his famous pronouncement that, “of course, cinema is also a language” (16), a statement that begs the question of what counts as an expression of cinematic language, and accordingly, what does not.

pretentious and reactionary” (103).<sup>88</sup> She explains: “Usually, the success of movie versions of plays is measured by the extent to which the script rearranges and displaces the action and deals less than respectfully with the spoken text” (105).

Sontag, however, offers a different view, advocating “that films with complex or formal dialogue, films in which the camera is static or in which the action stays indoors, are not necessarily theatrical—whether derived from plays or not” (106). Thus, she does not see the “essence” of film in relationship to montage, perspective, or mobile cameras. While she maintains that montage (for her, “the relation of a ‘shot’ to the one that preceded it and the one that comes after it”) is the principle cinematic unit, she denies the claim that there could be a “peculiarly ‘cinematic’ as opposed to ‘theatrical’ mode of linking images,” and “positing otherwise leads to overvaluing discontinuous film syntax” (108-109). Indeed, if cinema is taken to be a visual medium based on juxtaposing images fundamentally conceived in light (a notion still locatable today, particularly with scholars of avant-garde cinema), then sound and silence fall outside the set of concerns aesthetically available to cinema. But cinema gives us silence represented, at a distance that allows for its contemplation; in terms of the spectator’s experience, silence occurs on-screen *and* in the exhibition space (unlike the shared silence occurring in the spectator’s experience of a live play).

Sontag writes in “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1967) that, “‘silence’ never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there is no ‘up’ without ‘down’ or ‘left’ without ‘right’, so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” (11). For this reason, “Silence remains, inescapably, a form of

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<sup>88</sup> It is important to note that the distinction between theater and film, for cinema theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer or Erwin Panofsky, is not just about aesthetic devices. They argue that theater delivers artifice while cinema is committed to representing reality. This reasoning, according to Sontag, advances a definite “political-moral position,” where cinema is offered as the democratic art: “Cinema, at once high art and popular art, is cast as the art of the authentic” (102-103).

speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue” (11).

Sontag comments on the modern trend to expose the workings of language, commending writers such as Beckett and Franz Kafka, as “the power of their language derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare” (29). Like Cavell, she argues that a timely fascination with striving for silence emanates from “the contemporary ambivalence toward language,” which is manifest in artists’ desire to reach “beyond” art’s capacities toward what quickly becomes an anti-art art movement (21). Sontag discerns that “the subliminal idea that it might be possible to out-talk language, or to talk oneself into silence” lies in Beckett (27).<sup>89</sup> She quotes Beckett’s view of what he believes it would behoove modern art to confront: “the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (12).

For Cavell, “Talkies are capable of conveying the reality of the unsayable by showing experience that is beyond the reach of words” (Rothman and Keane, 238). It is through an analysis of Beckett’s *Endgame* that Cavell arrives at this conclusion. Cavell applauds Beckett’s ability to find endpoints of communication, ultimately facing its impossibility. What Cavell’s reading of Beckett indicates, and Sontag’s essay corroborates, is a timely doubt about the possibility of communication. Words were no longer imbued with transparent meaning, but even if authentic communication lay beyond the pale, that does not mean that we should disregard the ways speech is presented.

In this way, *The Graduate* clearly shares concerns with its Anglo-American theatrical context, but rather than just advance a skeptical position on the possibility of communication, *The Graduate* explores the degree to which, by applying these ideas, breaking dialogic

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<sup>89</sup> The desire to “out-talk language” is evident in many Nichols’ films, not least of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I will consider this film in depth in chapter five.

conventions in cinema could be seen as a political act. The ambivalence of *The Graduate*'s ending offers a bleak, and hopeful, position; for despite communication's impossibility, the *act* of speaking, the *performance*, still has value. When Ben enacts his rebellion by pleading for Elaine to run away with him, the fact that he does not scream "I love you" or some such protestation is telling. He can only scream "ELAINE!" because that is all there is to say; rather, it doesn't matter what he says as long as he says *something*.

Colin MacCabe points out that the rejection of representation in favor of performance is "the key to much of the 60s aesthetics... at the core of the most innovative political movement of the decade: situationism... [and] the key term for the most important philosophy of the decade": J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* (76). He continues: "For [Austin], we are our performances" (78), a notion that is reflected in Nichols' emphasis on characters as the "result" of a series of actions—and our attribution of intention to them. Austin defines the "performative utterance" (as an illocutionary statement in opposition to a constative statement) in order to question "an age-old assumption in philosophy—the assumption that to say something, at least in all cases worth considering, i.e. all cases considered, is always and simply to *state* something" (147).<sup>90</sup> For Austin, "performatives" are utterances which perform actions, "cases and senses (only some, Heaven help us!) in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by*

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<sup>90</sup> It is important to note that Austin's "performative" does not require an estranged or absent referent, as might be (mistakenly) assumed (if considered inherent due to the idea of 'performance' in the theatrical sense). Judith Butler explains: "Philosophers rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of 'acts' that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting. For example, John Searle's 'speech acts,' those verbal assurances and promises which seem not only to refer to a speaking relationship, but to constitute a moral bond between speakers, illustrate one of the illocutionary gestures that constitutes the stage of the analytic philosophy of language. Further, 'action theory,' a domain of moral philosophy, seeks to understand what it is 'to do' prior to any claim of what one *ought* to do. Finally, the phenomenological theory of 'acts,' espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and George Herbert Mead, among others, seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs" (154).

saying or *in* saying something we are doing something” (147). Provided felicitous conditions for success, performatives do not “describe” a doing, they actually do it.

Cavell’s theory of utterances is an extension of both his mentor Austin’s and the later Wittgenstein’s efforts to revise philosophy’s tendency to neutralize context when contemplating utterances.<sup>91</sup> If a character in a Pinter play or a Nichols film continues to come into existence and definition by continuing to perform actions—particularly utterances—Cavell makes the case that ordinary language functions similarly. Cavell argues that the precise words we use in a specific context *matter* because we learn our world and our words together (they “abut,” to use his word). It is by looking at their context that we can understand the work of performative utterances. We learn the implications of a word as part of our learning a language (and he makes clear this only applies to one’s native language). As English speakers, for example, we have “undeniable knowledge” about when to use a specific word and at what specific time. Cavell feels justified in applying his theories to characters’ utterances since, in realist fiction, cinematic (and dramatic) characters speak *our* language (English)—not merely a representation of English. In fact, not only are we justified in believing characters mean what they say in just the way that we do, but we could not understand their speech any other way. Still, it is unclear how characters’ silence sits within this theory.

Silence plays a crucial role for Cavell as the background against which dialogue finds meaning. It is what characters break when they cannot help but speak, when words arise that are

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<sup>91</sup> We might say that *The Graduate* invokes Wittgenstein in the narrative’s turning point, Ben’s date with Elaine. He confesses: “I’ve had this feeling ever since I graduated, the compulsion that I have to be rude all the time, do you know what I mean?” She nods, says she does, and he continues: “It’s like I’ve been playing some kind of game, but the rules don’t make any sense to me. They’re being made up by all the wrong people—no, I mean, no one makes them up, they seem to make themselves up.” Ben’s inability to articulate his feeling does not impinge upon their ability to communicate; she understands. He explains his inarticulacy by appealing to a schematic in which no one makes the rules, which is to say that everyone is subject to the rules, inviting a connection to Wittgenstein’s concept of a language game and his suggestion that noises and silence, if expressive, are subject to the rules of our language game (§ 261).

worth breaking it (“the result not of expression but of failed suppression” [159]). In this schema, silence is granted the same status in aesthetic contexts that it has in reality: an omnipresent background against which the urgency to speak is measured. Might we suppose that the lack of a concrete source of anxiety for Ben (for instance, Vietnam) means not that his rebellion is merely the empty trappings of rebelliousness, but rather, that his choice to perform rebellion has merit itself, having the consequence of directing the spectator to examine the context which urged him to rebel? We will return to this question when we consider the film’s final shot.

### **Descending into Los Angeles**

*The Graduate* begins with a tight close-up of Ben’s face, staring ahead as the camera zooms out to reveal he is on an airplane. He, and we, are positioned aurally as we hear “Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent into Los Angeles.”<sup>92</sup> Regarding this opening line, Nichols said “It’s a statement of theme you don’t really hear, even though its perfectly loud and clear. It’s my thesis, but it’s invisible, which is just the way I want it... California is like America in italics, a parody of everything that’s most dangerous to us” (Harris, 312-313). In his chronicle of the film’s reception, *Pictures at a Revolution*, Mark Harris claims that this setting was crucial, that the film’s attack on Los Angeles was understood to be an attack on a specifically American middle class (122).

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<sup>92</sup> In an interview, Buck Henry revealed the initial idea for the film’s opening, which directs the spectator to attend to characters’ utterances as the film’s primary conflict even more strongly: “We started with a sequence that we thought would actually be a thematic statement. Started with the idea that we were going to shoot a huge college graduation— *The Graduate*, right? And there would be this big graduation ceremony in an amphitheater somewhere (I don’t know where we were going to find this place), and there would be thousands of people waiting to hear the valedictorian’s speech. And Dustin would be giving that speech in his cap and gown, and he would be standing there up on the lectern with his speech... And while he [Hoffman] was talking, the wind would begin to blow the words away through the microphone. You wouldn’t hear them until—and he didn’t know what he was saying; he couldn’t find the words, couldn’t find what to say about that moment, that impressive moment. And then he would wake up from this dream in the airplane.... And of course we didn’t need it because it’s apparent what’s happening from the beginning, I think. All those voices coming in, the hideous airplane voices and the ghastly terminal voices, and all that stuff” (Schwartz).



The film then alternates shots of Ben on the airport's moving sidewalk in a gray suit against white walls with shots of his gray suitcase moving along a conveyor belt toward baggage claim. We hear a distant, mechanized voice instructing travelers to "Please hold the handrails and stay to the right"—which Ben is already doing. In this world, conformity is a given; words do not even need to be said—a bleak context for considering language and utterances. The soundtrack to this sequence, "The Sound of Silence," is a reflexive song whose paradoxical lyrics direct the spectator to extend the visual parallel established by the crosscutting, and to contrast the silence of the baggage with Ben's silence, to contemplate the difference between an object and a human character on-screen.

*The Graduate* was the first Hollywood film to use extant pop/rock music as its soundtrack.<sup>93</sup> In "Rock 'n' Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia," David Shumway notes that *The Graduate* marks "the emergence of the rock sound track as a formal feature" (36). In "The Sound of Silence: Film Music and Lament," Reni Celeste positions *The Graduate* as "a dividing point between traditional scoring and contemporary film" (113).<sup>94</sup> This development enjoins the spectator to focus on the soundtrack for at least three reasons: first, because the "The Sound of Silence" had already been a hit (it reached *Billboard*'s top spot in 1966), and invokes its own auditory history for the listener; second, because new Simon and Garfunkel music was also composed for the movie, and given the duo's popularity, elicited attention; and third, because it was pop music that accompanied a non-musical film, and so, was simply different from any other Hollywood film experience. It is difficult to overestimate this development's influence on filmmaking or the experiential difference it provided from previous modes of scoring, for, "unlike classically inflected scores of yore, rock sound tracks are meant to

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<sup>93</sup> American novelist Thomas Pynchon began using popular songs in his work in 1963.

<sup>94</sup> There are notable exceptions within the history of experimental cinema, particularly Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963).

be heard” (Shumway, 36). Beyond creating a lucrative sound track album (“Mrs. Robinson” reached number one in June of 1968) and “arousing a feeling of generational belonging” crucial to the film’s narrative, Shumway argues that *The Graduate*’s music “is meant to be not merely recognized but often to take the foreground and displace the [visual] image as the principal locus of attention” (37).

On the use of “The Sound of Silence” in the film’s opening, Shumway writes: “In this minimalist visual context, the song claims a greater share of the viewer’s attention, and its complex lyrics, while not likely to be comprehended completely, establish the theme of alienation that the narrative will explore. In this instance, the song comments on the narrative” (37). More than *just* commenting on the narrative, the song fulfills a function akin to a theatrical Greek chorus. The visual “silence” of the white background supports Shumway’s claim for an economy of attention, enabling us to listen to the song’s lyrics, but it also allows us to attend more closely to Ben’s face. Nichols’ words speak to this view: “[T]he more I heard ‘Sounds of Silence’ [sic], the more it sounded to me, as it happened, like what the picture was about. I had already thought of the airport scene, with the announcement. But I kept thinking about the song. Then I decided we’d get Simon and Garfunkel. I wanted them because they sounded to me like the voice of Benjamin. Full of feeling and not very articulate” (Gelmis, 285).

### **Mr. Gladstone**

The narrative of *The Graduate* takes place over the summer after Ben has graduated from college. Presumably, he must now enter the work force or return to school—he is nothing more specific than “the graduate,” an educated youth who desires no trajectory other than a future different from his parents’ present. *The Graduate* casts Ben’s view of his own situation as a last

chance for change, an anxiety later heightened by the song “April Come She Will.” This song recounts the passing of a summer romance, relating not only to Ben’s affair with Mrs. Robinson, but to the foreclosure of possibility.

Just as the camera lingered on Ben’s pensive expression while homeward bound, so it does in the next scene as he sits in his room, in front of his aquarium (complete with a proleptic scuba diving figure) and tries to explain to his father that he’s worried about his future. His father, intent on getting him to leave his room and participate in the lavish party he and his wife have thrown in Ben’s honor (without, it seems, inviting anyone Ben’s age), asks him, “What’s the matter?” with no real intention of listening. Ben explains that he’s “worried... about [his] future.” Failing to comprehend, his father asks what he means, to which Ben replies, “I don’t know. I want it to be... different.” While Ben may be physically stagnant, through his pregnant pauses and stillborn utterances, the spectator understands Ben to be contemplating, and to be asking his father for counsel (even as his father refuses to listen).

Ben acquiesces to his father, and goes down to the party, only to be assaulted by the older generation. Seen only in grotesque tight close-ups of talking faces and groping hands, Ben’s desire to escape this claustrophobic atmosphere is justified, heightening the spectator’s growing sympathy for him. In response to the generic questions posed to him—it is clear no one at the party really knows him—Ben simply mewls and sputters. In a canonical moment, Ben is cornered by Mr. Maguire, who leads him outside to “have a word.” Mr. Maguire says to him: “Now, I’m just going to say one word to you. Just one word...Are you listening? Plastics.”<sup>95</sup> Ben remains silent for a few beats until finally responding, “Exactly how do you mean?” This

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<sup>95</sup> “Plastics.” was recently named the 42<sup>nd</sup> greatest American movie quote by the American Film Institute, and is included in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*. It is also an example of Nichols’ hand in the performances and utterances. Hoffman said, “It’s the lines that we learned word for word from rehearsal, but this is Mike Nichols’ cadence.”

exchange is funny because *we* know what Mr. Maguire means and what Ben means by his silence; that he is struggling for a reply only to decide that feigning ignorance is best.<sup>96</sup> We come to this conclusion with him. Ben's joke on this man is *our* joke on him—and silence is needed so we can share Ben's feeling. We identify with him *in* silence (which, here, expresses his attitude of superiority, dismay, repulsion, condescension, helplessness, etc.). Desperate to escape the determinist framework placed on his actions by the older generation, who treat him so perfunctorily, *The Graduate* begins with Ben trying not to act, not to speak, to test (if not thwart) the demands made upon him by the narrative, which requires he *do* something.

Many have summarily read the character of Ben at the beginning of the film as lacking feeling, or as a Hamlet-esque character suffering from akrasia. He is worried about his future, is often lost in thought, is maybe apathetic, possibly even depressed; but it is important to distinguish a lack of feeling from a feeling of indifference. The film ensures that we are aware that Ben was active during his time at university. One partygoer wants to “hear all about that thing you won, that Hopperman award” (Ben tries to correct him—“Halpingham”—to no avail). It is Ben's leaving university that appears to have stunted him into inaction. At the party, an unknown female voice adamantly reads out Ben's accomplishments in a voice-off: “Listen everybody; I want you all to be quiet... Be quiet, please! Captain of the cross-country team, head of the debate club, associate editor of the college newspaper in his junior year, managing editor in his senior year...” Her list is halted when Ben retreats to his bedroom, inside which he tries, again, to find silence, only to be interrupted by Mrs. Robinson.

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<sup>96</sup> This reading attends closely to Hoffman's performance, and allows us to have a better appreciation for the arc he creates between the taut, resentful silences early in the film and the vacant, slack one at the end. In response to the suggestion of a career in “Plastics,” the meaning of his response—“Exactly how do you mean?”—would be different if Hoffman sounded as though Ben was asking in earnest (even out of politeness), as opposed to his actual performance which suggests a career in plastics is so distasteful Ben has no choice but to practically evacuate his body, only managing the vaguest of inquiries.

The spectator recognizes her as the same guest who, significantly, did *not* run up and claw at Ben downstairs, but silently watched him from afar. Like him, she appeared framed by the limbs of other guests, suggesting a connection between the pair. Mrs. Robinson requests that Ben take her home. Wanting to be left alone, Ben tries several ways to resist, only to be defeated each time. When they arrive at the Robinsons' home, she forces Ben to accompany her inside, professing to be afraid of dark houses despite the obviously well-lit interior.

Inside, Mrs. Robinson puts on a sassy, *bassa nova* style record and fixes them drinks before informing him she is an alcoholic. She sits provocatively, and flirtatiously asks Ben what he thinks of her. The spectator realizes what she is up to, as does Ben—culminating in the iconic shot of Ben framed by the arch of her leg as Ben asks, “You’re trying to seduce me. Aren’t you?” Mrs. Robinson denies any nefarious intentions, but, as she protests, she raises the level on her flirtatiousness.<sup>97</sup>

Mrs. Robinson suggests going upstairs to see Elaine’s portrait. Significantly, this is the only activity to which Ben agrees without wrangling. Despite forcing him to unzip her dress, Mrs. Robinson repeatedly, seductively, declares that she is not trying to seduce him—demonstrating at every turn that she does *not* mean her words literally. Desperate to leave as quickly as possible, Ben tries to make a break for it when she coerces him to return, asking him to bring her purse to her. As he does this, she suddenly runs into the room, and closes the door behind herself. Naked, she commands, “Don’t be nervous.” Mrs. Robinson informs Ben she is “available” to him, and the series of rapid cuts that follows—between Ben’s eyes attempting not to look at her body and segments of her body—is not only funny; she is enacting exactly what

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<sup>97</sup> Here, as later in the hotel when he begins to change his mind about intercourse, Mrs. Robinson expertly employs reverse psychology on Ben. In this way, the exchanges strongly resemble a Nichols and May sketch—a fact we will return to in chapter four.

his parents do: demanding he listen without giving him a chance to speak.<sup>98</sup> Ben is saved from articulating a response by the arrival of Mr. Robinson. Ben rushes downstairs, to find an affable Mr. Robinson, who, like his wife, asks Ben, “What’s your drink” only to ignore his request—Ben’s words have no effect—and give him what he is having instead. Mr. Robinson professes to thinking of Ben like a son, yet has trouble remembering his name.

The next scene depicts yet another celebration of Ben: his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party. In the style of a circus ringmaster, Mr. Braddock is trying to bring Ben out into the family’s backyard in his scuba suit—the gift his parents have given him and which Mr. Braddock announces cost “over two hundred bucks.” Before Ben comes out, his father says, “I have a few words to say,” to which a guest retorts, “You always do!” (again, it seems Ben is isolated from his peers as all the guests are his parents’ age). Ben repeatedly implores, “Dad, can we just talk about this for a second?” and “I’d like to discuss this.” Of course, when Ben says he wants to talk, he means that he wants his father to listen. Yet, as before, his utterances are ignored and, as before, Ben kowtows.

Through a masking shot which simulates the limited vision of scuba goggles, we see the adults cheering him on to jump in the pool. But we do not hear them; we hear, as he does, only the sound of his own breathing through the scuba apparatus. The adults appear absurdly animated in their muted state. Our vision is blurred as Ben descends into the pool (with the help of his father who actually pushes him under the water), where he sits. Remaining at the bottom of the pool, not moving, it seems Ben has succeeded in anaesthetizing himself, surrounded by the

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<sup>98</sup> There is much evidence to support a reading of *The Graduate* as an Oedipal scenario. Mrs. Robinson, aside from being one of his mother’s friends, resembles her a great deal. Both women have a similar hairdo and wear similar style clothes. Mrs. Robinson, like his mother, addresses him as “Benjamin” rather than “Ben.” During production, Nichols told Hoffman, “it’s like he’s fucking his mother” (DVD Commentary).

silence he so desired in the initial sequence. But even this attempt is thwarted by the sound of his labored breathing.<sup>99</sup>

Ben's time at the bottom of the pool is one of his most explicit contemplations of his expressive limits: he sits for an extended period, and as the camera zooms back and the water blurs Ben visually, the sound of his breathing anchors him. It does not fade, which gives the impression that Ben is attending to this sound, too. As the camera backs up, we hear Ben's voice beginning a conversation with Mrs. Robinson: "Uh, I don't quite know how to put this..." We do not immediately know if we are hearing his thoughts or his fantasy. It turns out to be an acoustic flash-forward, and, as his words sound, the visual track holds on Ben at the bottom of the pool. Hearing his words over this visual image for some time until the visual track cuts to show Ben speaking into a payphone at the Taft hotel encourages us to perceive the scene to come as motivated by this moment, one in which he realizes that even if he is alone he will not find silence; he must seek another way to find himself.<sup>100</sup>

When asked about his use of sound in this moment, Nichols replied, "It was meant to be that the thing which you are seeing now leads to the one you are hearing. This boy in this diving suit at the bottom of the pool has been caused by this moment to call Mrs. Robinson" (Gelmis, 283). Here, the aural image takes precedence over the visual one. Without attending to the film's sound in this way, Ben's decision to take Mrs. Robinson up on her offer appears unmotivated, if not incomprehensible, given his previous reaction of terror and disgust. Even on the telephone, Ben does not expect her to listen to him, and he introduces himself twice. Thus,

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<sup>99</sup> Speaking particularly of this scene and its audio prelap, Nichols said, "We wanted to make it subjective as much as we could. We wanted the audience to experience it as happening to them, to be Benjamin."

<sup>100</sup> Ben frequently uses telephones, which functions here as the catalyst for the film's plot. As a technological apparatus that allows one to hear someone not present, the telephone calls attention to the cinematic spectator's experience. Hoffman appreciates that not every director has actors present for phone conversations, though Nichols did (*The Graduate* DVD audio commentary).

the event that compels Ben to act, the event that precipitates the entire plot, occurs first on the soundtrack, augmented by the visual and not subject to it.

Both the sound of his breathing and the sound bridge position us to hear *as* Ben does. Ben's voice-off during the sound bridge in this scene is the film's first instance of inverting the traditional relationship between the sound and the sight of a character. In "The Voice in the Cinema," Mary Ann Doane advises against too quickly seeing the traditional realism conferred by granting characters' speech "as an individual property right" (which follows from the reductive name "the talkie," 34). She argues that the use of devices such as the voice-off "*accounts for* lost space" and risks exposing "the material heterogeneity of the cinema" by showing a voice "no longer anchored by a represented body" (40). The inversion of this risk posed by the spectator hearing Ben's voice in conversation while still seeing him in the pool threatens to expose the same heterogeneity in a different way.

After a bit of farcical business in the hotel, where Ben is nervous about booking a room for his first dalliance with Mrs. Robinson—and where he cannot even get a hotel waiter to listen to his request for a drink, though Mrs. Robinson has no such difficulty—Ben and Mrs. Robinson make it to the hotel room where she pragmatically goes about preparing for the business at hand. After almost losing his nerve, and after her suggestion (in another bit of reverse psychology) that, despite his accomplishments, he might be "inadequate in one area," Ben emphatically turns off the lights. Ben's plunging of the film into darkness, and his affair with Mrs. Robinson, bring a return of the song, "The Sound of Silence." The visual track remains black as the lyrics, "Hello darkness, my old friend," play.

As time passes, Ben's newly awakened (and futile) desire to speak to Mrs. Robinson becomes a sticking point in their relationship. The pivotal scene, in which he confronts her,



begins as we hear Ben say in the dark “Will you wait a minute, please?”<sup>101</sup> (The scene change has again been motivated and forecast by his utterance; he had been telling his mother to “Wait a minute!”) In the dark of the hotel room, Ben switches on the light, asking, “Mrs. Robinson, do you think we might say a few *words* to each other this time?” She replies, “I don’t think we have much to say to each other,” and switches the light off. We see only silhouettes of lamps, backlit by a window with light beyond, but which casts none into the room.<sup>102</sup> A fight ensues, and in a sense, this disagreement over speaking and silence is the first real conflict between the characters. Ben wants to “talk about anything, anything at all.” After Ben persists, Mrs. Robinson sarcastically suggests they talk about art. She has nothing to say on the subject, and we learn, she, too, is a graduate; art was her college major. She has accepted silence as a way of life (which is not to say she made peace with it; she is obviously angry), and her hope for a relationship with Ben relies upon sustaining it.

After this exchange with Mrs. Robinson, Ben is unable to disavow the knowledge that he can only interact with her (perhaps with the older generation entirely) if he remains quiet and in the dark. Significantly, Ben and Mrs. Robinson do not disagree so much about the value of talking as about the value of *not* talking. Mrs. Robinson says “I’d rather not [talk].” She would rather he remain a sexual plaything. This is crucial because Mrs. Robinson has been the only character to really talk to Ben up to now, but, retroactively, we understand talking to only have been her method of seduction. Her sin is not that she is having a sexual relationship with Ben while married, but that she has lured him into bed under the false promise that they would talk.

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<sup>101</sup> It is tempting to read the darkness in which this scene occurs as a visual analogue to the “sound of silence,” but articulating it as such runs us into difficulties. Something like the “sight of imperceptibility” is faithful to the idea of the sense without the sensation. Alternatives, such as the “sight of invisibility” or “sight of absence” belie problematic views of the precondition of the onscreen world.

<sup>102</sup> This scene is still another example of how dialogue took precedence in the film’s production. During editing, Nichols felt the scene was too long, and since the visual was only a static silhouette, he was able to excise a “great deal” of the dialogue without altering the image at all.

Initially, she showed more interest in what Ben had to say than his parents had. Treating him like an object by refusing to talk to him (and to listen), she becomes, like his parents, an antagonist.

In talking about not talking, the spectator gets a clue that the generation gap will not remain bridged by the two as Mrs. Robinson very grudgingly agrees to talk—not to listen—until Ben asks personal questions (about her daughter) and she tells him “Don’t talk about Elaine.” Figuring Mrs. Robinson to mean that he is “not good enough for [Elaine]” Ben is angered. Mrs. Robinson reacts quite violently to the possibility that Ben might take Elaine out on a date. She turns on the light and grabs his hair. Ben calls her a “broken down alcoholic,” and almost leaves until both calm down and Ben (having protested a little too much) agrees to stay. The scene ends with Ben saying, “Let’s not talk at all.” Returning to the sound of silence and its visual associate, darkness, Ben and Mrs. Robinson sleep together for the last time. In the next scene, he agrees to take out Elaine at the suggestion of his parents.

Ben’s date with Elaine begins in contrast to his interaction with her mother. Ben speaks tersely to Elaine and takes her to a strip club without consulting her. Humiliated, she confronts him, cries, and runs out. Moved by her sincerity, Ben kisses her on the street and the pair go to a drive-through diner. Here, amidst other youths, they talk. We realize, as they do, that they are perfect for one another, not just because they converse, but because they talk about *not* talking, about the desire to be rude, to act out in order to refuse their parents’ values. Just as they begin to discuss this, the teenagers in the neighboring vehicles turn up their music (Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine”), forcing Ben and Elaine to roll up their windows. This demonstration of their desire to listen to each other suggests that Ben has found the “right” girl, but also forecloses the possibility that we, the spectators, can hear the language

that constitutes their beginning to fall in love. That the spectator only hears the blaring music objectifies Ben's transformation (as well as the transformative moment of realization as a trope of Hollywood romances—here, love at first sound).

To suddenly be denied Ben's perspective is somewhat perplexing for the spectator; but the fact is that their dialogue cannot be represented, it can only be conveyed in silence. Ben has found someone to communicate with, and, from our perspective, to be silent with. For what is salient is beyond words; it is the fact that communication is happening that matters, not the particular words being uttered—and the film tells us what we need to know, which is that their words are doing something for them, and that they are having an effect on the other. It is a fantasy of communication, which, as such, cannot be represented or performed. What we do hear of the dialogue is Elaine admitting she shares Ben's desire not to talk about the same old things. After only one night with Elaine—knowing only that he can talk to her—Ben decides to end his affair with Mrs. Robinson.

The next day, as Ben arrives to pick up Elaine for a second date, Mrs. Robinson intercepts him and attempts to blackmail him into never seeing Elaine again (by threatening “to tell [Elaine] everything”). Ben runs into the house and up to Elaine's room. This time, rather than Mrs. Robinson undressed, he finds Elaine half-dressed. He begins to tell her the truth, but falls silent, unable to confess. Nevertheless, again proving her ability to understand even Ben's silences (and to read his facial expressions), she realizes the truth and tells him to get out.

As Simon and Garfunkel sing “Scarborough Fair,” we see images of Ben despondent, returned to a state of inactivity. At one point, we find Ben motionless before a notepad on which he has seemingly begun to write a letter to Elaine, only to fill the page with scribbles of her name. The film implicitly invites us to compare this to his later primal yell, “Elaine!” While

sending a letter stating just that would be absurd and vague, to shout it is not; recalling a Pinter character's speech, it is all that is required.

### **At Berkeley**

Now that Ben has found something he really wants to do—be with Elaine—he leaves his parents' home to travel back to a university, the University of California at Berkeley (where Elaine is enrolled). In the scene prior to leaving, Ben informs his parents of his intentions to marry Elaine. This is the only moment in the film when his parents *listen* to him. Is it a stretch to think they recognize that he might now become *like* them? The hysterical (in both senses) scream of joy that erupts from his mother confirms his desire is conventional. Hence, if we cheer him on, it is because we recognize him now as a romantic leading man doing what a romantic leading man must do, obviating Mrs. Robinson's sexual role and compelling us to switch our generic expectations towards the imperatives of romantic comedy. Thus, we conform, as spectators, along with him.

At Berkeley, Ben sets about winning over Elaine. He runs to catch up to the bus she is on, sits behind her and simply begins to talk to her. He accompanies her to the zoo, where Ben discovers she is dating a tall, WASPish medical student named Carl (Brian Avery). Later, Elaine confronts Ben. Her mother has said that Ben raped her, though Elaine does not quite seem to believe this story. As Ben begins to relate what actually transpired, Elaine screams, derailing the conversation into silence. Elaine is not offended by Ben telling the truth (which she is already inclined to believe). She screams because Ben is threatening to break their bond by demonstrating that he feels the need to convince her of the truth. She leaves, but returns that night, asking Ben to kiss her. It seems that even though Elaine understands Ben, she still

disallows him the right to speak. Thus, since Elaine now resembles the older generation, Ben reacts in kind: yawning, he proposes they enter the institution of marriage, a classic marker of middle class membership: the only information we have been given about their parents (and so, that against which they are rebelling) is that they are married and their fathers are in “business” together.

It is striking that the institution of Berkeley should be the setting for Ben’s ensuing stream of marriage proposals—this, following the Summer of Love in 1967. And, as the film dwells on the correspondence of the filmic Berkeley to the extra-textual Berkeley, I, too, will dwell on this correspondence over the next several pages in order to discern the film’s use of it. I will sketch the radical political significance of Berkeley, as well as its, perhaps paradoxical, significance as a sign of middle classness. Some critics, myopic to the impending university riots that would sweep the nation, saw the film’s deployment of Berkeley as hackneyed. It was the nation’s largest university, and home to the nuclear weapons program, but most significantly, it provided the original home for the Free Speech Movement (FSM).

At the time of *The Graduate*’s release, Berkeley was still synonymous with the FSM. In 1964, students felt silenced by Berkeley’s administration when it decided to prohibit any activities it deemed “political” from campus. After six students were arrested, thousands gathered, surrounding police cars. They set up a microphone atop one police car and held forth, orating on issues of free speech and individual’s rights. The FSM was formed by student groups of various (sometimes opposed) creeds as a principled response to the university’s administration; not about saying anything in particular, but about the right to say *anything*, particularly. From the moment of its inception to the proliferation of silent sit-ins, to Joan Baez’s songs, the voice—and what using it could do—was at the heart of the discourse claimed by youth. Discussions

surrounding the freedom of expression conjoined with those concerning a student's civil and academic rights like never before.<sup>103</sup>

In 1979, Gloria Steinem wrote, "If you had asked me a decade ago, I certainly would have said the campus was the first place to look for the feminist or any other revolution" (268). She recalls that, "the populist movement to end the war in Vietnam was symbolized by campus protests and mistrust of anyone over thirty" (268).<sup>104</sup> Students rebelled, knowing that to be prevented from voicing dissent is tantamount to robbing the voice of meaning. Students directed their anger at efforts to silence them at the university as an institution, and focused on its increasing corporatization. Mario Savio's seminal speech denounced the view of students as less than human, as raw material.<sup>105</sup> The tension was intensified by the words of university President Dr. Clark Kerr. In a televised speech, he said,

The University is being called upon to educate previously unimagined numbers of students [i.e. the baby boomers]... to merge its activities with industry as never before.... The productions, distribution and consumption of knowledge is said to account for twenty-nine percent of gross national product and knowledge production is growing at about twice the rate of the rest of the economy. What the railroads did for the second half of the last century, and the automobile for the first half of this century, may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry. (*Berkeley in the Sixties*, [Mark Kitchell, 1990])

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<sup>103</sup> It is also difficult to underestimate the change in the constitution of American universities in the 1960s. Searle writes that, "In the early 1950s there were about a million and a quarter college students in the United States. In the fall of 1969 we enrolled over seven million; in the fall of 1970 the figure was even higher" (170). This was due in no small part to the social and legislative changes that opened doors of higher education to women.

<sup>104</sup> Incidentally, Steinem and Nichols dated briefly.

<sup>105</sup> John Searle explains how the corporatization of the university allowed students to link it with government and other institutions. He breaks down the logic: "the identification of the university as a source of evil is a part of a holistic ideology that goes as follows: the structure of power in America is a seamless fabric. Within this fabric the tentacles (mixed metaphors are common in radical rhetoric) of the military-industrial-educational complex spread from the Pentagon through the White House and right down to the dean of students' office... Does the university not do contract research for the federal government? Are not many members of its board of trustees themselves rich businessmen? Does it not have an ROTC program on the very campus? Indeed, do not many of its graduate actually go into—hideous thought—business?" (15). In this last question, and in Savio's famous speech, it is difficult not to hear the echo of "Plastics." which so disgusted Ben.

The media focused on the competing rhetoric: the administration labeled students objects, whereas students were fighting for their right to be labeled humans, a right predicated on being heard.

When Ben first arrives at Berkeley, he is dwarfed by an enormous American flag in the center foreground. He sits beside the flag, and, in a long zoom, the camera pulls back and time lapses as students flock to the campus, giving the impression that the flag calls them forth. When Ben seeks accommodation at a men's dormitory, he is immediately asked if he is an agitator. It is at Berkeley that he can tell Elaine he loves her, and that the spectator can hear their conversations. Ben and Elaine could only, finally, fall in love at Berkeley. His expression of love is connected to the university, to the FSM, to becoming self-aware, and to politics. It is also through Berkeley that *The Graduate* makes its strongest play for political efficacy—and relevance to youth—in 1960s America.

*The Graduate* appeals to Berkeley's history as an icon of revolution and counterculture, but this is only part of the story. The enormity of *The Graduate*'s success codified it immediately. *The Graduate* did more than draw on the counterculture movement that had been brewing for years; it impacted the culture in the years that followed. Indeed, revolutionary activity had lulled between the FSM and *The Graduate*'s release. In *The Campus War: A Sympathetic Look at the University in Agony*, John Searle (the first faculty member to join the FSM at Berkeley) tells us that at Berkeley, the freshman arriving in the fall of 1968 appeared to have enrolled *in order to protest something* (73). We might well wonder, given *The Graduate*'s popularity with youth, whether or not this resurgence was related to Ben's performance of rebellion (as high school students were applying to university). After all, seventy-two percent of *The Graduate*'s audience was under twenty-four, and only four percent over thirty (Monaco,

184). The film, with its hip fashion and music, signaled to its contemporary spectator that it was happening right now, *presently*. Even Katherine Ross' clothes were store bought (or, indeed, were the actress' own). Hence, the spectator may assume Ben would have been a student on the East Coast during the FSM, both removed and impacted, implicated as a student, but not necessarily active. (Harvard's big revolt came in 1969 and Columbia's in 1968 [Searle, 9].)

“The series of student revolts that spread across the United States and Western Europe, beginning at Berkeley in 1964,” Searle declares, “constitutes one of the most remarkable social phenomena of our time” (1). He reminds us that Berkeley in 1964 is an ordinary moment, despite later events, such as “May ‘68” in France, becoming more famous over the years.<sup>106</sup> As he was writing in 1971, the student revolution sparked by the FSM was still threatening to grow (despite that fact's seeming impossibility), and the university was the site of deepest political struggle. As he says,

Now, a survey across the country would reveal that there is hardly a major university in the United States which has not been through at least one sizable student revolt. Sit-ins, strikes, marches, the systematic disruption of classes, bombings of university buildings, the counter-use of police, tear gas, mass arrests, the closure, sometimes for weeks on end, of the university—all have become quite common. In the 1968-69 academic year, I cannot recall a week during which a major student upheaval was not taking place somewhere in the United States. The Cambodian “incursion” of May 1970,<sup>107</sup> sparked major disturbances on approximately seven hundred campuses. Not only are the newspapers full of blow-by-blow accounts of the latest crises, but analysts and scrutinizers of the ‘now generation’ offer us a bewildering variety of explanations, interpretations, and proposals. Some regard current student activism as the rise of a new Nazism, others as the greatest hope for the survival of democracy. (2)

Judging from his rhetoric, Searle is attempting to explicate the phenomenon to an older generation who purport to find radical students' behavior unintelligible. He perceives three overarching themes to student revolts that strongly parallel Ben's evolution: the “search for the

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<sup>106</sup> It is, I believe, no coincidence that Searle is famous in philosophical circles (along with Cavell) for disseminating and advancing the work of J.L. Austin on utterances. His seminal book, *Speech Acts*, was published in 1969.

<sup>107</sup> This was the moment also known as the Kent State shootings. The Ohio National Guard shot and killed four students and seriously wounded nine others.



sacred” (something to care about that is larger than themselves), “the creation of an adversary relationship,” and “the rejection of authority” (6).<sup>108</sup> Even students, “lacking a coherent ideology,” Searle observes, nevertheless form a community intending to pursue goals.

Reminiscent of Ebert’s review, which praised *The Graduate* for being “against something,” students were creating identities out of what they were not: “the ingroup of US *is defined by* our shared hostility to the outgroup of THEM” (Searle, 6). Though Searle’s examination delimits this mentality to the university, “THEM” also referred to industry, government, police, the older generations, the military, etc. Searle’s language indicates the extent to which *The Graduate*’s representation of generational conflict was in the atmosphere: “So much has been written about the young, ‘the now generation,’ ‘the generation gap,’ ‘post-modern youth,’ ‘the second American revolution,’ ‘the counter-culture’... that one hesitates to say anything for fear that the sheer volume of stuff on the topic must surely have exhausted whatever one has to say, if only by random distribution of sentences” (39). His writing also indicates that critics who thought the film carefully avoided confronting topics like drugs or Vietnam missed the point. It was by abstracting from these issues and providing a look at rebellion and a dialectical portrait of the generation divide that *The Graduate* spoke directly to youth, allowing them to project whatever issue most suited them onto the narrative.

Describing precisely Ben’s automaton-like malaise in the film’s opening—and suggesting that its audience in 1968 would have no problem identifying with his dilemma—Searle diagnoses “an empty sense of their own aimlessness” as a common trait among disaffected students (44). He explains that attending an institution of higher education is no longer seen as a privilege for middle class youth in the 1960s, nor as a right: “rather it is not an

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<sup>108</sup> The treatment of causes and revolts as “quasi-religious” aids Searle’s explanation of the thrill of the process, the exhilaration of escaping conformity (30). As he says, “Life offers few feelings as intense as those of having fought and won a holy war” (29).

option or a matter of choice at all. [Students] are in the university because there is simply nowhere else to go [save Vietnam]... From being voluntary members of a limited-purpose community of scholars, they have become compulsory members of what they regard as a campus city-state” (40). Searle states that “we have made the attainment of a university degree a general requirement for full middle-class membership in society. From a system of mass higher education, we are drifting into a situation approaching universal higher education” (40). Viewing the university as a requirement was compounded by the country’s unprecedented period of affluence and a new “permissive” style of upbringing in the 1950s to produce students uninterested in careers and devoid of anxiety about making money to survive. According to Searle, the “declining economic pressure to go out and have a money-making career,” recasts the university from “a transition phase that one passes through on the way to and as a means of achieving some other goal” into “the terminus, the place where one lives, one’s home” (41).

Searle describes the prior generation of students as “frivolous conformists... secure in their identity,” and finds that “the university reinforced their complacency” (161). In contrast, this new kind of student, “wants the university to help him locate or invent an identity, and he is much more concerned with social evils than his parents were. He wants a university which is ‘relevant’... and which is ‘noncoercive’” (162). But the rub lies in this student’s desire to form her identity both from *and* in opposition to the institutional setting of the university. Searle, though, does not regard this paradox as unique in the nation’s history, but gives compelling evidence for ways American universities have always been particularly vulnerable to revolt.

Both the nation and its universities have historically celebrated questions of legitimacy:

A favorite dramatic category of our culture is that of the man or the people against the establishment. The whole liberal and humanist tradition (and I realize how inadequate these labels are) in literature as well as philosophy assumes that established institutions, such as the church and the state, can look after themselves, and that the task of

intellectuals is to protect the individual or class against their depredations. In short, the dominant tradition in our culture is one of being *against* authority. (169)

Speaking to a tradition of America reaching back to the moment it gave birth to itself by rebelling against England, first for religious freedom and then as a response to its refusal to listen (No taxation without representation!), Searle details the extent to which the dramatic role of rebel appeals to Americans. He observes in the student protests a “ritual of confrontation,” a focus on taking action, on doing and performing.<sup>109</sup> Searle describes a student taking on a role, but, in turn, the student denies that it is, in fact, a role.

For Ben and the radical student it is the performance that counts. *The Graduate*'s ending could be construed as a cautionary tale: act *now*, before Elaine is married, or, indeed, before you become a “graduate.” Furthermore, the film's youthful spectators may have sympathized with Ben's mistake: he tried to succeed at the system, but in doing so, he failed to become a radical—hence he graduated without an identity. In the narrative, he is making up for lost time, and despite initially lacking a clear enemy, he nurtures an enmity over the course of the film, not least of all in his interactions with Mrs. Robinson, to arrive at a definition of himself as against “them,” the older generation. It is also at Berkeley that Mr. Robinson appears as patriarch to reclaim what is his, commanding Ben: “Stay away from *my* daughter!” Mr. Robinson then whisks Elaine off to marry Carl, putting Ben on the path to action, donning his role as rebel.

## **ELAINE!**

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<sup>109</sup> Deeply involved in protesting, and usually on the students' side, Searle also provides numerous accounts of students posturing, students who promised to protest even if their demands were met, or students disappointed when television crews did not arrive. He writes: “Many commentators have pointed out the element of role-playing in student revolts... The point to be stressed is that not only does the agent act out a part but also that his perception of reality is dependent on certain dramatic categories for him” (74-75). He continues: “At present there is no more rewarding role for students than that of the rebel. The rebel student leader is one of the most glamorized and romanticized figures in America” (181).

In the final sequence of the film, Ben finally takes a stand and rebels—only to put himself even closer to marriage, and so, to resembling his parents. He travels frantically from Berkeley to Carl’s frat house (which looks like a veritable WASPs nest, or a place in which a group of male eloi from George Pal’s *The Time Machine* [1960] wandered up and settled down) in pursuit of Elaine. From there, he sets off to stop the wedding in Santa Barbara when his trusty Alfa Romeo, graduation gift and sign of upper middle class affluence, runs out of gas. Using the skills he developed at university, Ben runs the final stretch to arrive at the church just a moment too late.<sup>110</sup> From the church’s balcony, glassed in, Ben watches as Elaine and Carl are pronounced married. The glass mutes their words (and recalls the scene involving his bedroom fish tank). But this time, Ben decides to *make* himself heard. He begins to bang on the glass, shouting “ELAINE!” repeatedly. He attracts the attention of the wedding party, and Elaine silently looks up at him. The film’s perspective shifts from his to hers and we see with Elaine: first, Mrs. Robinson, snarling and yelling, then Mr. Robinson furious, and then, Carl, spittingly angry. But we do not hear them. For the spectator, the effect of these perspectival images is very different from watching characters who are mute. Knowing the sound of their voices, and seeing their faces so expressive, they appear not just mute, but de-voiced. We understand this aural perspective as Elaine’s, and her refusal of their utterances signals her maturation.

This sequence works from within its Hollywood parameters (we immediately understand this shot as Elaine’s point-of-view) while also threatening to expose, to return to Mary Ann Doane’s terms, “the material heterogeneity” of the film (40). Like Ben’s earlier audio sound bridge, Elaine’s (and our) perception of muted bodies “cannot be understood outside of a consideration between the relationships established between the diegesis, the visible space of the

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<sup>110</sup> Andrew Sarris writes: “If there were one ‘in’ (or actually ‘out’) shot that characterized the spirit of the sixties, it would be the telephoto turgidity of Dustin Hoffman’s Benjamin running toward the camera to rescue his fair Elaine in *The Graduate*, and not seeming to make any progress” (*Politics and Cinema*, 189).

screen, *and* the acoustical space of the theater” (Doane, 40). The erasure of Carl’s and the Robinsons’ voices shifts focus onto the visual image as Elaine’s aural perspective, but, cyclically, we only understand it to indicate her mental activity *because* the visual images are muted. These shots illustrate the power of the subjective or point-of-view shot to be understood as *extensive* of a character. Unlike the classical cinematic interior monologue, in which the voice serves as “an extension of that body” and “manifests its inner lining” (Doane, 41), here the others’ silent voices display the “inner life” of the character.

We have seen that *The Graduate* offers several ways to consider silence, such as the silence constructed as humorous pause, the silence found in the rests and rhythms of song, the silence produced by scored versus unscored portions of the film, the words of a song about silence, the muted bodies of Carl and Mrs. Robinson at Elaine’s wedding, moments characters regard Ben as silent even when he speaks, moments Ben has nothing to say to his parents, Mrs. Robinson’s silence when she does not want to speak, and moments when dialogue is foreclosed from the spectator (as in Ben and Elaine’s conversation at the drive-in). Early in the film, when Ben refuses to articulate a response to his parents’ queries, his silence constituted an utterance the spectator was positioned to recognize. But his parents were unaware that his silence meant something. Seeing Carl and the Robinsons as muted is a different case of silence-meaning; it is not exactly Carl’s and the Robinsons’ silence, but Elaine’s silencing them that matters. Her moment of epiphany, which we share, signals that even *listening* to one’s antagonists’ utterances—the utterances of conformists—is a threat to truly understanding them. She hears “correctly” when she does not hear at all.

Meanwhile, in what will be their final words to one another, Ben’s continual screaming succeeds in making its claim upon Elaine. She knows she owes him a response and moves

toward him. Since Ben remains unable to articulate a specific question, she can only articulate in kind: “BEN!” Ben runs down to her, and the pair physically fight off the crowd of conformists. (Ben succeeds in mocking the institution of the church by brandishing an aluminum cross to lock his foes inside the building.) The couple, he in his torn clothes and she in her wedding gown, run away from the church and board a bus. They stumble to the back seat, receiving stares from the decidedly older passengers, where they sit, laughing, and then, laughing less. She looks to him for expression, acknowledgement, but he does not return her gaze. Finally, they simply sit, silently staring forward. They have nothing to say.

This scene calls into question the righteousness and efficacy of Ben’s rebellion. We realize Ben’s triumphant gesture, his speaking out, is not only inadequate, but not much of a rebellion at all. The end is tragic, for the couple has done exactly what they set out not to do. Ben’s parents, and, initially, Mr. Robinson, desired they marry. Although the film does not tell us Ben and Elaine will marry (after all, she has just married Carl), Ben’s persistent proposing ensures we are aware it has long been his aim. Still (especially in the context of the Free Love movement), this choice feels like a mistake. Ben’s first utterance in the film (which is, for us, his first desire) is “I want my life to be different.”

And, furthermore, we, the spectators, are implicated for relishing his performance of rebellion, for we could not really avoid knowing that his seemingly radical actions are thinly veiled capitulations. In *Storytelling and Mythmaking*, Frank McConnell views the film’s ending as an ode to the idea of class revolution, about Ben and Elaine’s “escape” from the “restrictions and hypocrisies of the class to which they belong and from a world of soulless, life-denying ‘plastic’” (246). McConnell astutely points out that this is something of a conundrum: “The class to which Ben and Elaine belong, that great middle class which includes everyone, promises

everything, and reimburses nobody for the cost of membership (at least in the bitter version of this film), can absorb an infinite number of antiestablishment gestures, since with the serenity of its own affluence it absorbs any degree of revolutionary 'heroism' into itself, trivializing it in the process" (247).

The song, "Mrs. Robinson," was the only song written expressly for the film, and became, according to McConnell, "virtually the theme song of the year" (247).<sup>111</sup> McConnell focuses on the song's lyrics, especially the mention of Joe DiMaggio as "the public hero *precisely* of Mrs. Robinson's generation," to demonstrate that he "represents all those lost, submerged values which in Ben Braddock's world have been commercialized, transformed symbolically into 'plastic'" (248). McConnell accurately describes the final scene's "ironically, desperately hinted vision of salvation" as instrumental for film: "you run away, and you board a bus whose destination you do not know, enduring the puzzled, mildly frightened stares of the other [older] passengers. And you have, really, no place to go" (248). He asks, "Where do you go after a vision of the end; after an understanding of the inevitable, universal entropy of civilization so complete and so unrelentingly intelligent that it understands and mocks even its own intelligence, even its own most carefully articulated hopes for survival and continuity" (248)? McConnell's question implies that the final scene leads us to a place where we want to know what we cannot know: that the film asks a question to which the only answer could be silence. And, indeed, that is the state of Ben, and Elaine, on the bus. But what do we make of this last instance of Ben's silence? Does Elaine understand what it means? Do we?

There is no sense denying Ben and Elaine *should* speak at the end. He *owes* her silent gaze on the bus a response, and the absence of a response adds to the ending's sense of tragedy.

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<sup>111</sup> Inasmuch as the film seems to be playing with what can and cannot be expressed in language, is it too much to think that when Ben is whistling this song as he speeds to Santa Barbara, which logic defies he know, the film points again to the limits of the sayable?

For all their efforts to reach a place where they can express what they like, Ben and Elaine now have nothing to say—a lack intensified by the long duration of the shot. As the expressions of laughter on Ben’s and Elaine’ faces fade with the horror and dread of what they have done, there is a brief moment in which Ben looks directly at us, and (in my experience this is the case) the spectator is suddenly aware of Dustin Hoffman looking into the camera filming him. The production history backs up this reading: Nichols was especially mean to Hoffman and Ross before they boarded the bus, and he did not tell them he was planning to hold indefinitely.<sup>112</sup> It is possible, then, to thus interpret this moment as seeing a character (not human enough to die) dissipate.

As Ben and Elaine sit on the bus staring bleakly ahead, “The Sound of Silence” begins to play again: “Hello darkness, my old friend/ I’ve come to talk with you again...” Like Ben’s earlier silences, which we have seen *do* something, we must discern whether or not this one *does* anything (and, if so, what). And like the student protests entreating the country to listen, Ben’s earlier silences were performative: he sought attention and acknowledgment. Despite having Elaine to be silent *with*, Ben has instead returned to a state of silence. But his silence no longer means the same thing. As the shot continues to hold, it becomes apparent that this silence is the silence of absence, of a void. Ben’s final silence means something to Elaine, and to us, but this time Ben does not mean it. It is the true silence of having nothing to say. Ben is not mute, nor is he resisting speaking; he is struck dumb. When Ben is silent in response to the offenses and inanity of his parents, Mr. Maguire, Mr. Robinson, his landlord in Berkeley, etc., it is a form of rebellion. In the end, his silence, like McConnell’s picture of the middle class, has evolved to

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<sup>112</sup> Buck Henry recalls that, “Mike didn’t tell [Hoffman and Ross] what he wanted them to do... [Nichols] sat the camera there and he ran it on them, and I don’t know whether it was one, two, or three takes, but they were pretty tired of doing it. And they sat down, and they did their laugh, and then after a while, I think, they’re thinking, “Is he going to say cut? ... They have nothing left to act.” (Schwartz, 16).



conquer and absorb itself. The silence of uttering becomes the silence of the unsayable (he does not lack words, and cannot invent new ones; rather he does not have anything to *mean*, thus he cannot say anything).

If, as some critics thought, the major plot line followed Ben's efforts to extricate himself from an affair with a married woman, then he has not succeeded. Might the ending be, as Brackman thought, simply a dampening of the joy of fighting the older generation with a cross, but still, all things considered, happy? Or, is it happy because they seem to have succeeded in sloughing off their parents' materialistic lifestyles? After all, even if married, he has left his Alfa Romeo on the side of the road and the pair are severing ties to their families, and riding a municipal bus. Or, is it happy because he has successfully rescued Elaine from a loveless marriage?

The ending is darker than these interpretations suggest. Nichols has commented that "In my mind, it's always been that in five miles she's going to say, 'My God, I haven't got any clothes'" (Gelmis, 288). As it stands, Ben and Elaine's dumbness is not so much ambiguous as tragic; Ben has nothing to say, and moreover, is no longer compelled to try. It is only if we can maintain the hope that he might speak soon that we can sustain a belief their silence might not be unhappy. But what would he say? In this way, the film not only makes a mockery of Hollywood convention by having Ben arrive too late to stop Elaine marrying, but also by refusing to end happily at all.

The constant babble of the older generation (Mrs. Robinson, who did not want to talk, is the exception that proves the rule) is conjoined with the threat of making Ben into an object, of "drowning" him in objects, in middle class acquisitions. Nichols himself has said as much:

[*The Graduate*] was about, I thought, when I began to think about it, it was about a person who was in danger. As he was drowning in objects, he was in danger of becoming an object. A person who thought he was an object. (*The Graduate* DVD Commentary)

Connecting Ben's struggle to emerge from materialism to his struggle to emerge from silence, Ben's rebellion is directed at language and class. In the end, he is trapped by both, unable to break the conventions of either. He and Elaine are trapped in a state of capitulation; they have everything they want except the ability they desire most: to speak out and mean it.

In March of 1969, Bob Geller, Director of Education for the American Film Institute, published a polemical response to the critical reception of *The Graduate*. He takes to task the "whole bunches of top banana film critics" who are instigating a "bombardment" of negativity for the film while "legions of college English majors are clinically carving it up into scholarly theses" and "hundreds of thousands of teen-agers across the land are elbowing their way into movie theaters to enshrine 'beautiful Ben' ... just as passionately as their saged siblings of yesteryear immortalized Holden Caulfield in the 1950s" (423).<sup>113</sup> He charges them with mistaking "Ben's diffuseness of thought and action to be scripting and directing faults rather than a clear literary attempt to portray the shattering of sensibilities" (423). On the contrary, Geller seems to understand this cynicism to be part of the zeitgeist, and cites it as precisely the reason for the film's popularity: "What distinguishes Holden, though, from Ben is not a total dissimilarity of evasive actions and oblique gestures but rather the potential for plausible action proclaimed by Holden and denied by Ben" (424).

In this way, Geller extends Ben's inactivity as synecdochal for other modes of rebelling, recommending that "whole tramloads of students ought to be carted off on school time and at

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<sup>113</sup> Editor Sam O'Steen tells us that Nichols, in fact, wanted to direct J.D. Salinger's novel, but was unable to procure the rights, recalling Nichols said, "[*The Graduate*] is as close to *The Catcher in the Rye* as anything I've found" (55). I believe we might also fruitfully compare Ben to the titular hero of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

school expense to stare right back at Ben so that eventually all kinds of things about love and war and pot and escape might come spilling out in classrooms” (424).<sup>114</sup> He finishes his defense of the film by reproducing in full an exemplary high school editorial: “Dear Benjamin” (425). In it, the authors begin: “So you exist, huh? We’re glad” (425). They tell him they share his anxiety about the future, that they stand by him. They write, “[W]e’re glad you didn’t go in for the ‘Understand the universe syndrome’ and instead slid into understanding yourself” (425). The high-schoolers, unlike the critics, do not see Ben as inexpressive or catatonic: “[W]e understand that deadpan look you had most of the time. We have to be deadpan, don’t we, Ben? Because we live within the sounds of silence, and feelings don’t count for much” (425). The letter ends: “And thank you for talking to us” (425).

These youths saw—and heard—what the critics did not. They not only perceived, they felt, the distinction between saying nothing and having nothing to say. Their attachment to Ben challenged a theory of characters’ utterances that attends only to speech. The students know that Ben is not *inactive* in the beginning just because he is not visibly doing anything. They are willing to follow along with Ben and understand that when he does not display or articulate himself to the older generation he is trying to figure things out on his own, to discover a way to make his life “different.” But they also know that they share his confinement “within the sounds of silence,” and that, in the end, to not utter is not to be private: it is to have nothing to say.

*The Graduate* presents a fantasy that appealed to youths raised during an unprecedented period of affluence: while pursuing one’s own personal desires, one might manage to rebel without doing anything more than performing silence. However, this fantasy was forever, and irredeemably, changed when Richard Nixon poached silence for conservative ends, attributing

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<sup>114</sup> Dustin Hoffman even went to Long Island and Washington, D.C. to address “‘bodies of educators’ on the subject of Youth today” (Brackman, 58).

his political victory over George McGovern for the office of president to the “silent majority.” (He coined the term in 1969, but it was instrumental for his re-election in 1972). In one fell swoop, Nixon depicted liberals—those most ardently working for change—as a minority identifiable by their speech, and made conservatives the new “rebels.” He exposed silence as too vague a tool for leftist aims, casting it as a reactionary method of approval and consent.

### **More Sounds of Silence**

I hope it is clear by now that this chapter trained its attention on *The Graduate*, not only because of its importance to American cinematic history, and to show it is not simply the Hollywood confection certain critics have imagined, but because it demonstrates a deep interest in the formal and thematic use of silence. As I mentioned in my introduction, Nichols professes to be fascinated by “the unstated, less than immediately visible things that go on between people” (Rose). In this quote, Nichols describes a method of depicting the fertile space between words. It requires at least two people, which is to say, silence is interpersonal. This interest reappears across Nichols’ corpus, for example, sound and silence figure prominently in Nichols next film *Catch-22* (1970). Foregoing a musical score and omitting extras (who tend to “fill in” aural space with background chatter), *Catch-22* utilizes the multiplicity of interpretations afforded by silence to achieve its surrealistic aims. Editor O’Steen tells us that its “illogical cuts” were linked by sounds (85).

Perhaps Nichols’ other most fervent investigation of silence and speech occurs in *Regarding Henry* (1991). When the spectator first regards the eponymous Henry Turner (Harrison Ford), he embodies a cut-throat, materialistic, upper class business man, an insensitive and predatory admirer of capitalism’s emphasis on competitive individualism. Attempting to be

a father, he delivers a ludicrous speech to his daughter, Rachel (Mikki Allen). He takes her silent protestation to his appalling lecture as complicit, saying to her: “Qui tacit consentire videtur... He who is silent, is understood to consent.” Following this scene, Henry is shot in the head during a hold-up and loses his ability to speak. Rendered mute, he re-learns his language along with new values. By the film’s close, he has renounced capitalism, and, unemployed, has discovered how to be a father and husband. In the final scene, Henry appears at Rachel’s expensive private school to remove her, interrupting the headmistress informing the assembled students, “You are all learning what it means to ask yourself *why* do I push myself; *why* do I struggle to be a harder worker, a better listener. Well, look around you. There are the answers to those questions: competition.”

The students who wrote to “Dear Ben,” and objected to similar pressures, did not just attend to Ben’s utterances. They also articulated the importance of Ben’s “deadpan” face, another way of opening up an examination of characters’ avenues of expression. While *The Graduate* consistently emphasizes characters’ facial expressions via extended close-ups, this technique is intensified in Nichols’ 1971 film, *Carnal Knowledge*, the subject of the next chapter. It begins with male protagonists enrolled in university, whispering to one another in the dark, and struggling to articulate their desires.

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### Chapter Three: *Carnal Knowledge*: Emotion, the Face, and the Crisis of Male “Performance”

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Both its critics and its admirers agree that *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) encapsulates the relationship between the sexes in early 1970s America. A darkly comedic look at the male chauvinist in the midst of second-wave feminism,<sup>115</sup> Mike Nichols’ incendiary masterpiece literally puts facial movement front and center in its depiction of gender. It tells the story of one man’s objectifying lust for the female body from the neck down—largely in a series of facial close-ups. This reflexive, and paradoxical, use of the facial close-up asks the spectator what it means to attribute an inner life to characters based on visible, facial expression, and motivates a deeper look into the question of what counts as a facial expression in screen fiction. In this chapter, I argue that we cannot appreciate *Carnal Knowledge*’s position in American cinema history, its cultural and historical context, or the relationship between the film’s form and content, without examining its close-ups of facial expression.

Like *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *Carnal Knowledge* concludes with a long take of its main character’s immobile face. And, like *The Graduate*, the ambiguity resulting from its reflexive consideration of the limits of its characters’ capacities to express allowed critics to misread it. As we will see, *Carnal Knowledge* not only casts the difference between having nothing to express and expressing nothing as a measure of humanness, but also identifies that difference as a matter of performance and perception.

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<sup>115</sup> While, as Judith Walzer notes, there is no “big-bang” theory of when second-wave feminism began, released in 1971, *Carnal Knowledge* was by no means behind the tide. Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* alerted the nation, in 1963, that not all women find bliss in domesticity. In 1970, Germaine Greer considered the suppression of female desire in *The Female Eunuch*, the same year that Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* made great strides toward understanding the depth of patriarchal attitudes in the history of Western literature. Millett’s essay, “The Balance of Power,” also appeared in 1970, alongside a political cartoon by Jules Feiffer, the writer of *Carnal Knowledge* (and most famous for his leftist *Village Voice* cartoons), in *The Partisan Review*.

Bruce Babington and Peter Williams Evans call *Carnal Knowledge* “the closest to a purely dystopic comedy of the sexes that a cinema committed to optimism has produced” (277). By following über-sexist Jonathan (Jack Nicholson), *Carnal Knowledge* satirically chronicles changing sexual mores in America from the 1940s to the time of the film’s release. From Jonathan’s education on courtship among the tree-lined paths of Amherst College<sup>116</sup> (and the traditional masculine competition to be the first to slough off virginity) to his embittered mid-life impotence, *Carnal Knowledge* pulls no punches in its attempts to look at the advantages and detriments attributable to the maleness, and male chauvinism, of this upper middle class lawyer.

In order to understand the film’s views on men and masculinity in 1971 America, we must consider the film’s indictment of a Hollywood masculine ideal. Jonathan deteriorates into a world of narcissistic, selfish fantasy—eventually only sexually excitable by myths of masculine power. But it is not simply Jonathan’s desire that the film punishes; it is his attachment to the ideal of the emotionally detached man (manifest in Hollywood’s appreciation for Humphrey Bogart’s detectives who put work first, the John Wayne loner, the blank but noble Gary Cooper, etc.). By looking at the case of a misogynist, *Carnal Knowledge* indicates ways that cinema studies has left its attitudes toward men on film uninterrogated (its own form of misandry). This chapter conjugates *Carnal Knowledge*’s representation of male chauvinism with its examination of facial expression in order to arrive at an understanding of the film’s sophisticated take on interpersonal actions, as well as its intervention—through satire—into Hollywood conventions of representing men. In doing so, this chapter rethinks the classic argument that men have enjoyed access to subjectivity in Hollywood history.

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<sup>116</sup> This idyllic campus setting was made all the more nostalgic as campus riots waged nation-wide in the year of the film’s release.

Fuelled by the celebrity of Nichols and Feiffer, and the growing stardom of Nicholson, Candace Bergen, and Ann-Margret, the movie premiered to favorable critical reviews. Sandy is played by Art Garfunkel, whose voice was already famous as half of Simon and Garfunkel, who scored *The Graduate*.<sup>117</sup> However, it was not just the film's star power that helped it capture the nation's attention. The film's title suggests knowledge of the body through sex acts (a reference dating back to its biblical usage), as well as a more modern referent, namely, knowledge about the body: how we perceive others' bodies, our own, and their respective representations.

The film also became a source of legal knowledge concerning the body in American cinema. In January of 1972, the film was seized from an exhibitor in Georgia who was later convicted of distributing obscene material (in a decision later upheld by the state's Supreme Court). In light of the landmark 1973 case, *Miller v. California*, which established the "community standards" test for determining obscenity regarding pornographic material, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the decision in June of 1974. Thus, *Carnal Knowledge* is a pivotal case for Hollywood history's freedom of expression. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the film's favor because, although "ultimate sexual acts" were understood to occur, "the camera does not focus on the bodies of the actors at such times. There is no exhibition whatever of the actors' genitals, lewd or otherwise, during these scenes." Despite not featuring visible sex acts, David Cook describes the film as "epoch-making" in his volume devoted to American cinema of the 1970s: it was the first Hollywood film to exhibit a condom; it spoke frankly about sexual desires, and featured both male and female nudity (324).<sup>118</sup> Due to the attention drawn to actors' bodies

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<sup>117</sup> The film marked the third occasion Nichols worked with Garfunkel; after collaborating on the soundtrack for *The Graduate*, Garfunkel featured prominently in *Catch-22* (1970) as the naïve youth, Captain Nately. Still, *Carnal Knowledge* was Garfunkel's first starring role (and his last until *Bad Timing* [Nicolas Roeg] in 1980).

<sup>118</sup> In one scene, Bobbie (Ann-Margret) lies naked on a bed, looking very much like an American version of Brigitte Bardot's scene at the beginning of Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), in which parts of Bardot's body are isolated for the viewer.

by breaking conventions, the film sported the new X rating, which may have contributed to its decent box office take.<sup>119</sup>

Second-wave feminism was largely focused on disinterring inequities suffered by women as a result of the ways that (previously unexamined) gendered assumptions were ingrained into the social, political, and cultural fabric of the nation, as well as how these unexamined structures impacted the lived experience of its citizens. Often, “men” was taken to be synonymous with oppressive forces. In 1967, *The Partisan Review* published Susan Sontag’s thoughts about the state of the nation. Bringing together the burgeoning sexual and political revolutions in America, she names the white male unwilling to question gender norms and to experiment sexually for perpetuating the Western values for which he is responsible and which had proven to be “the cancer of human history” (203).<sup>120</sup> Sontag perceives that the moves toward androgyny and sexual freedom in England and Europe presented the opportunity for civil rights to be expanded, whereas, in America, where rights are supposed to be guaranteed, the moves produced guilt and anxiety (199).

While fewer writers considered the possibility that men also suffered from gendered expectations, Gloria Steinem does in “The Myth of Masculine Mystique” in 1972. She argues that “[m]en are made to feel [that] they must earn their manhood by suppressing emotion, perpetuating their superiority over women (and, in racist societies, over non-white men as well), and imposing their will on others” (135). Nichols and Steinem were a couple in the 1960s. In a *Newsweek* article on Steinem in May 1965, Nichols gives her his highest praise: “She’s the smartest, funniest, and most serious person I know” (Heilbrun, 126).<sup>121</sup> One year later, *Playboy*

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<sup>119</sup> It was the twelfth highest earner of the year, taking in \$12.1 million (Cook, 99).

<sup>120</sup> As I recount in the introductory chapter, Nichols and Sontag were friends throughout their adult lives.

<sup>121</sup> According to Heilbrun, whom Steinem asked to write her biography, Nichols asked Steinem to marry him. She declined, but later suggested she regretted her decision (118).

*Magazine* (itself evidence of America's increasing appetite for addressing issues of sexuality indivisible from the oppression of women) asked Nichols about the changing role of masculinity, contemporary struggles between the genders, changing masturbation laws, and homosexuality. Eventually, it inquires: "Do you agree with those who view modern man not only as sexless but as loveless, emotionally alienated and spiritually bankrupt?" (74). Although Nichols dodges the question, it seems prescient when we think of *Carnal Knowledge* and it indicates the timeliness of—and anxiety about—the changing status of the American male.<sup>122</sup>

When *Carnal Knowledge* was described purely in terms of the battle of the sexes, Nichols responded, "That's the form at the outside of it, but the concern of it is with the *interior experience* of the object" (my emphasis, Smith, 26). The close-up, with its promise of access to a character's psyche, is perhaps a counter-intuitive formal choice for a story that displays the absurdity of a male character who *just* desires women, who *just* views women as objects of desire. There are no subplots in *Carnal Knowledge*, no hint at problems in Jonathan's professional life. His tragicomic flaw is that he *cannot* look at women otherwise; he refuses to acknowledge the "interior experience" of women, and, as he is the main character, the spectator is required to evaluate his insistent blindness. In judging Jonathan, the spectator must, for consistency, reflexively assess the criteria she uses for perceiving the "interior experience" of an on-screen human object.

Nichols once said,

*Carnal Knowledge* was the only movie I'll ever make that was about only one thing all the time. It was only talking about sex, nothing else. Little bit of sex and the rest talking about it. Right from the beginning I knew I had to find a way to abstract that, to express that it was an essay, a mannerist picture. And it's about manners, [so] that's okay. When

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<sup>122</sup> Dating Steinem and being friends with Sontag, it is hard to imagine Nichols was unaware of the strong feminist avant-garde cinematic movement at this time, particularly in New York where Nichols lived and in whose culture Nichols remained visible through his theatrical work on and off Broadway. For more on this movement, see Lauren Rabinovitz's *Points of Resistance* and Lucy Fischer's *Shot/Countershot*.

I read the script it was so monomaniacal, so much a magnifying glass on this one aspect of the behavior of a particular generation, I just looked for a style to fit that. (Smith, 34)

Earlier in the interview, Nichols recounted his view on style: “I figured out very early in life what I think style is. I thought of it watching a play when I was in college. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that style is beginning something in the manner which will make it necessary for the things that happen later to happen” (Smith, 28). Almost forty years later, what remains most striking about *Carnal Knowledge* is not its frank discussions of sexual desire or its indictment of the objectifying power of the male gaze, but the peculiar formalism with which it raises these issues. *Carnal Knowledge* is almost entirely composed of close-ups of its characters’ faces, usually set against monochromatic or unfocused backgrounds; of extraordinary length, they often last well over a minute. The frontality of these shots directly addresses the spectator; characters appear to look right at us. We are not afforded the fantasy of sharing a character’s visual perspective.

If we take Nichols at his word, our task is to connect the film’s stylistics, its long takes and facial close-ups, to the characters’ frank discussions of sexual matters: how do whispers, speech, and facial expressions lead to *this* story with *this* ending? How are close-ups about sex or sexual difference, and why was this form so provocative as to be considered “obscene”? What is it about the film’s dialogue, facial close-ups, direct address, its disruption of the compositional rule of thirds, etc. that make it necessary for Jonathan to be impotent and alone? Was the Supreme Court right, after viewing *Carnal Knowledge*, to decapitate the on-screen “body,” to define it from the neck down and as a source of potentially lewd acts? To answer these questions, we need to look at the representation of sexual difference on-screen, paying close attention to the movement of the face in close-up, and to the relation of the face and voice to the sexed—and sexual—body in America in the early 1970s.

Nichols' description of the film as "mannerist" reminds us that close-ups are not a naturalistic way of viewing other human faces.<sup>123</sup> Certainly the close-ups of *Carnal Knowledge*, which allow us to stare at a face for so long are not a socially accepted form of looking in America. Strikingly filmed by cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno,<sup>124</sup> the film favors static compositions that reinforce our attention to their primary component, the face. But, just as mannerist art preferred to comment on other art rather than, say, nature, *Carnal Knowledge* references Hollywood's history of representing characters as men and women in particular ways, focusing on the history of masculine facial expression in Hollywood cinema. Predictably coming from Nichols and Feiffer, *Carnal Knowledge's* method is best described as satirical. Geoff King writes that, "[t]he 1960s and 1970s were marked by the production of a number of prominent and biting black comedies and satires, usually understood as manifestations of a period of heightened social conflict and a questioning of established values and institutions" (95). He cites Nichols' *Catch-22* and *The Graduate* as excellent examples. However, by satirizing the relationships between men and women in America, *Carnal Knowledge* confronts the deepest questioning of established values of the time. Northrop Frye says of satire: "Its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (quoted in King, 94). As we will see, Jonathan's behavior is presented as increasingly grotesque, and the film culminates in an event which forces the spectator to recognize it as such.

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<sup>123</sup> Nichols' *Wit* (2001) returns to extended facial close-ups to tell the story of a scholar of John Donne, often taken as a model mannerist poet. We might also call *Carnal Knowledge* a "comedy of manners;" it fits Christopher Faulkner's definition as it "takes as its subject the amorous intrigues of a sophisticated social milieu" and "is distinguished by dialogue notable for its witty repartee" (306-307).

<sup>124</sup> Rotunno was Luchino Visconti's frequent cinematographer (notably on *Il Gattopardo* [*The Leopard*, 1963]). He also collaborated with Federico Fellini and with Vittorio De Sica in 1970 on *I, Girasoli* (*The Sunflower*).

When Nichols intimated that *Carnal Knowledge*'s concern is the "interior experience of the object," he did not parse the film into form and content. In addition, his comments on the film's style give us reason to think that "carnal knowledge" refers just as much to the film's form as its narrative. Thus, I turn to the film's simultaneous presentation of issues of emotion, facial expression, and the close-up shot not as a departure from the importance of gender, sexual difference, and sexual relations, but to consider the relation between the film's form and content in an effort to more accurately understand the film's subject. The extended duration of *Carnal Knowledge*'s close-ups calls attention to their presentation of expressing in time, indeed, as a way of experiencing time for the characters and for the spectators. As we will see, the movement of characters' faces is crucial to understanding the film—a feature underscored by the film's invitation to compare its close-ups to "talking heads"-style comics, such as those which Feiffer produced. The film's images of emotional time, or temporal emotion, enjoin the spectator to contemplate emotional expression as an activity, a constant performing. This places the masculine valorization of a "stoic" or "stone" face in a very different light.<sup>125</sup>

The film's visual style also foregoes a typical shot/reverse shot editing schema. In fact, Nichols did not even shoot reverses (Smith, 34). This is not to say that he did not shoot *reaction* shots, however. William Rothman writes that, "[w]ithin the frame of the reaction shot, the subject views the spectacle of the world, expresses a private reaction, and prepares the next venture into the public world" (74). *Carnal Knowledge* frequently lapses into lengthy shots of characters reacting to other characters' actions, while denying us the visual image of the actions to which they are reacting. Thus *Carnal Knowledge*'s meditations on the reactive face blur the lines between acting and reacting, and emphasize a character's psyche through acts of expression

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<sup>125</sup> As far as the case of Buster Keaton, often called "stone face," I concur with David Cook, who writes "[Keaton's] 'great stone face' was actually capable of suggesting a vast range of emotion, and there was little that he could not express with his body" (182).



and self-presentation in relation to other characters; such shots become spaces to work out gender and emotion on the same plane, with the same tools.

Nichols' instruction to look at characters' interior experiences suggests we ought to attempt to find who *feels*, not just who *expresses*, emotion. Dissembling is rife in *Carnal Knowledge*. But, more problematically, in a visual and aural medium that can only give us access to either concept through expression, can we differentiate between them? There is no doubt that Hollywood's representations of men have functioned as regulatory mechanisms for the social category "American men" by providing standards against which to appraise feelings and evaluate the susceptibility to particular emotional expressions (and perhaps even the emotions themselves). In 1975, the year after *Carnal Knowledge*'s vindication by the Supreme Court, writers like Jack Nichols objected to the history of Western thinking's twinned associations of masculinity with rationality and femininity with emotionality.<sup>126</sup> It was also the year Laura Mulvey's landmark "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published, which argued men had been represented in Hollywood as privileged with desire. *Carnal Knowledge* is a "man's film" that indicts men qua "men," men, as Mulvey might say, as desiring automata.

In an essay written in 1972 to accompany his television series *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger observes that, all too often in the history of Western art, "*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. ... Thus [woman is]. ... an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (quoted in Fischer, 1989). Who has access to emoting in this binary? Is the

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<sup>126</sup> For a broader historical account of Western belief in males as more rational and less emotional than females, see, for example, *Be a Man!: Males in Modern Society* (second edition) by Peter Stearns. Stearns also points to a broader social attitude: "Males are assumed to be completely sexual animals... an assumption that, at the very least, needs testing, especially since pre-nineteenth-century Western culture assumed that women, not men, were the insatiable sexual aggressors, with men as vulnerable creatures in need of protection" (7). In his more recent book, *American Cool*, he tracks American emotional culture "to the solidification of a cool culture in the 1960s (2)," a cultural shift to which, I believe, *Carnal Knowledge* responds. Unfortunately, this attitude is still alive and well, and perhaps most obvious in the appeal Hollywood's marketing makes to gender identities. For instance, the tagline for Ed Harris' western, *Appaloosa* (2008), reads simply "Feelings get you killed."

emotional expression *just* appearance? Is it an action? Working from the fact that female characters in Hollywood have enjoyed greater freedom where the expression of emotion is concerned, Molly Haskell writes in 1973 that in the golden age of Hollywood “[men] didn’t have the luxury—or perhaps the *burden*—of emotional and occupational freedom” (359). She says “we can only assume Gary Cooper would have been permanently demystified had he been caught with his psyche unzipped” (360). It is in this context that she addresses *Carnal Knowledge*: “Indeed, *Carnal Knowledge* might stand as the *quintessential* ‘now’ film in its distortion (by simultaneously magnifying and degrading it) of the sex principle (male erection-and-single-orgasm sex) as the only bond between men and women” (my emphasis, 360). The paragraphs Haskell devotes to *Carnal Knowledge* remain the film’s most in-depth scholarly treatment.<sup>127</sup> Throughout her book, Haskell objects to the representations of women in Hollywood as inadequately corresponding to the complexity of American women’s lives, particularly regarding their sex drives. Hollywood men’s inability to emote is not a problem of correspondence for Haskell, but simply a given. For Haskell, men are not emotional; the bond between men and women is, then, de facto, sexual.

In Haskell’s terms, to label *Carnal Knowledge* the “quintessential ‘now’ film” is a devastating charge. She claims: “From a woman’s point of view [she wrongly assumes only and all women are feminists], the ten years from, say, 1962 or 1963 to 1973 have been the most disheartening in screen history” (323). She believes that the film is not simply about misogyny, but misogynist, even if that “misogyny is furtive” (38). Haskell finds the film’s representation of women, with the exception of the Susan (Candace Bergen), “in terms of (generally ugly or

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<sup>127</sup> In 2008, Elaine Bapis published on *Carnal Knowledge*. With factual errors about the film’s stars, camera movements, and promotional material, compounded by inexplicable, even racist, assumptions about characters, it does not behoove us to attend to Bapis’ reading. However, it does demonstrate the perpetuation of misguided notions which suppose the film to *be* chauvinist, rather than *about* chauvinism.

castrating) sexual fantasies” offensive. She believes that “Ann-Margaret’s splendid and original characterization of a woman increasingly demoralized by marriage,<sup>128</sup> letting herself go, inch by added inch into catatonia,” is an “image that purports to indict the men but that insidiously defends them” (360). Her reasoning is that “Nicholson[’s character] is a bad but charming boy, whose ‘bad’ness, when it is not an asset, is a product of wicked society and evil women, while his charm is all his own” (360). Haskell writes that, because of his charm, he is a “‘neat guy’ [who] scores with the men if not with the women” (360). However, Jonathan is not charming. By the end of the film, he is a social pariah, isolated and repugnant. Even, if Haskell were right and Jonathan were charming, why does she find it so uninteresting for a film to comment upon society as “wicked” by enforcing bigotry? Furthermore, there are no “evil women” in the film—only actions from Jonathan which illustrate *his* antagonistic attitude towards women.

Haskell takes *Carnal Knowledge* to task for its formal inventiveness, too. She writes: “[j]ust as sexual achievement is often a matter of showing off for other men... so is filmmaking, and *Carnal Knowledge* is and remains closer to the locker room than to the bedroom (360-361). Leo Braudy expresses a similar charge: “[I]ured by the discontinuities of verbal wit, [Nichols] attempts to hold his films together with visual tricks, but the result is a shambles of incompatible tones” (60). Braudy, who praises European filmmakers in the 1960s for “their emphasis on the actor and through the actor on the human face” (250), writes that *Carnal Knowledge* “slides imperceptibly into exaggeration and stereotyping until the viewer feels betrayed” (60). He describes the film as “*mere* satire,” and accuses Nichols of “[having] trouble sorting out the human from the satiric in [his] characters” (60). Neither Braudy nor Haskell consider the possibility that the film’s stylistics are indivisible from the film’s claims about gender, that the

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<sup>128</sup> Haskell is mistaken here. We do not see the pair married.

film is commenting on the uses and abuses of Hollywood's tradition of severing heads (to paraphrase Béla Balázs' description of the close-up) from bodies.<sup>129</sup>

Nichols himself addressed the charges that the film was sexist in 1976:

Some people seem to have difficulty with implicit content. Certain men, like those in the film, treat women as sex objects, making the women unhappy and cheating themselves. There were a few dedicated women's libbers who accused the movie of advocating what it portrayed, perhaps missing the point because it was not explicitly stated in words. (Flatley, 25)

But we need not take Nichols' word for it, as my reading will show. Still, given the large amount of attention representations of gender in Hollywood cinema have received in cinema studies since its inception, not coincidentally, around the time of the film's release, perhaps attitudes such as Haskell's and Braudy's explain the film's absence from such discussions. Steve Neale writes that feminist film criticism throughout the 1970s was "[m]otivated politically by the development of the Women's Movement, and concerned therefore with the political and ideological implications of the representations of women offered by the cinema," and that "a number of these books and articles [took] as their basis Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'" (253). Neale's aim is not to quarrel with feminist film studies' claims about the representation of women, but to point out that, while considerable effort has gone into theorizing femininity on-screen, "[m]asculinity, as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known" (264).<sup>130</sup>

Mulvey's essay interrogates the "socially established interpretation of sexual difference," and so, places considerable weight on the representation of the human body (833). Speaking

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<sup>129</sup> D.W. Griffith is generally credited with filming the first facial close-up, of Lillian Gish. For more on this history, see Roberta Pearson's *Eloquent Gestures*.

<sup>130</sup> Neale's essay was published in 1983, though his concerns remain relevant. For more on masculinity and Hollywood cinema, see Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's anthology, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema* (1993), *The Trouble With Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema* (2004) edited by Phil Powries et al, and *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* by Philippa Gates (2006).

paradigmatically, she claims Hollywood cinema employs this perception of on-screen figures as either male or female as an interpretive strategy, controlling the spectator's gaze, and so, she argues, the spectator's erotic desire. In order to paper over the potentially threatening version of difference the female body poses to male spectators, Mulvey argues that Hollywood films visually govern the image of women by creating a viewing position of power for the spectator by aligning his gaze with male characters' gazes (who, she says, stand in for the camera).

Like Berger, Mulvey situates looking in the cinema "solely in relation to a structure of activity/passivity in which the look is male and active and the object of the look female and passive" (Neale, 260). Thus, for Mulvey, Hollywood cinema predominately features male characters who desire, characters who gaze at female characters *as* bodies. This kind of looking at the female body is not the kind of looking inherent to reading and interpreting, but an erotic looking that limits the female body to its existence as image, connoting only "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 837).

Mulvey takes as given that, for a Hollywood male protagonist, desiring a beautiful woman is a *fact* of existence, a narrative motor that needs no explaining, contextualizing, or arguing.<sup>131</sup> Connecting Haskell's and Mulvey's claims suggest not only that the typical Hollywood female character is meant "to-be-looked-at," but also bears the "burden" of emotional expressivity. This leads us to suppose that emotional expressions are "to-be-looked-at," which helps explain the classic leading man's reputation as stoic, reluctant to express (and it must be reluctance, we cannot believe he is simply vapid).<sup>132</sup> Neale argues that the image of

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<sup>131</sup> This type of assumed desire is a common trope of Hollywood films. It is the basic premise of Hollywood's most commercially successful film to date: *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Other examples are *Cleopatra* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1934), *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), and *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960).

<sup>132</sup> Of course, men's faces in Hollywood films are integral to its telling of stories. Perhaps the need to negotiate between inviting the spectator's look and not presenting the male body as spectacle contributed to the fact that Hollywood frequently made stars of men who were not considered conventionally attractive, such as Humphrey

masculinity often associated with Hollywood cinema is “marked not only by emotional reticence, but also by silence, a reticence with language” (257).<sup>133</sup> His explication here of the classic leading man as the “strong, silent type,” highlights the fact that “strong” does not just connote the ability to lift heavy objects, but suggests a prized ability to *not* express emotionally, an “emotional strength,” which, paradoxically, means to not emote. (Might we suppose a subtle connection of masculine potency and non-expressiveness from the fact that we frequently call under-expressive performances “wooden,” “rigid,” or “stiff”?) In this light, the female face in classical Hollywood *was* active—and typically more so than male’s faces. Facial expressions are things to be looked at as well, but, in this case, the stakes in looking are inverted. Mulvey, Haskell and Neale suggest that it has been Hollywood’s *modus operandi* for a man’s face to resist moving, to not draw attention to itself, since the male body is not (supposed) to-be-looked-at.

The burgeoning field of cinema studies in the early 1970s (for which Mulvey’s essay played a significant role) attended to the on-screen body as a site in which to locate signs of sexual liberation or gender roles, but was less interested in it as a locus of emotional expressivity (a fact I take to contribute to *Carnal Knowledge*’s ensuing critical neglect). The nation’s critics,

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Bogart and Spencer Tracy. Or, to take an instance of Mulvey’s, if he is moved, Tom Brown (Gary Cooper) covers his face with his hat in *Morocco* (Sternberg, 1930), presumably in an effort to retain his status as masculine. This gesture functions to align our gaze with Dietrich’s character; we understand him with, and through, her. My claims about the range of emotional expression granted women in Hollywood is problematized by cases such as Greta Garbo and Dietrich, whose European and exotically beautiful faces were not only coded to attract sexual desire, but were subject to the admiring gazes of both sexes. Neither woman was prone to facial contortions in the manner of the more histrionic American stars, such as Lillian Gish, Bette Davis, and Katherine Hepburn. Michaela Krutzen has claimed, in the case of Greta Garbo, that “facial expression would only ‘distract from the face itself’” as erotic/aesthetic object (Fischer, 2008, 379). Gish, Davis, and Hepburn were noted more for their skill than their beauty.

<sup>133</sup> Neale links this trope of masculine ineptitude at using language to “narcissism and to the construction of an ideal ego. The acquisition of language is a process profoundly challenging to the narcissism of early childhood” (257). This connection could be seen to reinforce Mulvey’s assertions about the representation of men in Hollywood as fundamentally narcissistic, based on the notion the male spectator identifies with the image of a human male figure in a power-grabbing move which reassures him his gaze is active (a fantasy that also ensures his position not passive). Neale, though, amends Mulvey’s nomination of the gaze as essentially narcissistic, arguing that a spectator with a socially constructed gender need not identify with an on-screen representation of that gender.

too, were trying to come to terms with the cinema's attitude toward gender. Andrew Sarris, writing in 1973, recalls asking himself "to define the cinema [of the 1960s] in three words." His answer is "Girls! Girls! Girls!" (195)—a sentiment that sounds like the slideshow Jonathan creates of his female "conquests." Sarris refers here to European New Wave cinema, those films most valorized by film critics and the political left. Aided by hindsight, Sarris writes that, "even by 1960 none of us dreamed that the day would ever come when our favorite actresses would bare their breasts on the screen as they had hitherto bared their souls. We didn't even dare hope for such a bounty from our sex goddesses" (193). There is no hint that men might present themselves as desirable, much less the expectation they might "bare" anything, whether their souls or bodies. European films such as *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Blow-Up* (1966), and *Contempt*, presented themselves as sexually liberated, despite consistently offering up to the spectator sexist presentations of the female body as object of desire.

The few Hollywood texts reprieved by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*, and by writers like Pauline Kael and Sarris (such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* [John Ford, 1939] and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [John Ford, 1962]), effectively positioned films with an appeal to traditional masculinity atop the Hollywood canon, relegating films that explored emotional issues to the bottom of the list as "women's films" or "weepies." Emotional expressions, as performed by Hollywood actors, were labeled "transparent," a pejorative description (in a field which privileges the complexity of vision and visibility) and one which obfuscates the work of seeing them. Hollywood was cast more explicitly as emotional, passive—and so, feminine—in essays like Peter Wollen's "Vent d'Est."<sup>134</sup> But this binary is false; emotions are actions,

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<sup>134</sup> George Lellis chronicles the intimate relationship the influential *Cahiers* critics shared with Brecht's ideology of distanciation and reflexivity, making clear that, in a significant way, these critics saw an opposition between reason and feeling (prioritizing the former). Setting the concepts of passivity, emotion, and feeling in opposition to concepts like reason and rationality dates back to the roots of Western philosophy. Stanley Cavell recently voiced

namely *reactions*. As Dana Polan points out, as spectators of *any* cinema, we are positioned to react (though that is not all we might do).

Cinema scholars in the early 1970s were busy questioning the value of emotionally engaging the spectator and of individuating characters. Many of these scholars attached to certain theories of playwright Bertolt Brecht, who advocated a highly reflexive style of production and whose notion of character “typeage” is anathema to the individualism of emotion.<sup>135</sup> Jerome Kagan explains that, since ancient Greece, emotions have been regarded as the domain of the individual (10). In the close-up, the character’s face occupies the world of the screen, and her experience becomes the sole visual source of narrative information; and so, the close-up relies on a fascination with the character as individual.<sup>136</sup> For Brecht, both “great individual emotions” and a “rich inner life” are associated with exception and privileged minorities, threatening his vision of class and collectivity. A great deal of what Brecht wants to expose is the understanding of postures, gestures, languages, accents, etc.—in short, ways of being—as essentially socially constructed. His mistake was in assuming that the emotional experiences provoked in individuals, and the salience of those selected to express, are not socially circumscribed.

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his resentment that philosophers so often suggest that “feeling and passion always interfere with reason, philosophy’s aegis.” He continues: “The positivist revolution made this explicit—regarding all non-scientific assertions, that is to say religious, ethical, aesthetic assertions, as expressions of feeling and therefore not cognitive, not rational... The idea that passion and reason are antithetical to one another seems to me a libel on human nature and conduct” (2005, 17).

<sup>135</sup> Thomas Elsaesser remarks that “film theory became avant-garde theory” in the United States, going further down the formalist road than the European journals from which it borrowed, like *Screen*, which argued for a return to Brecht’s theses of non-linearity, anti-illusionism, of spectatorial distanciation, and epic modes of narration” (173). For an example of the magnitude of Brecht’s influence at the time, see Peter Wollen’s “Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent D’est*.” For a chronicle, see George Lellis’ *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma, and Contemporary Film Theory*. Lellis illustrates that, while *Cahiers* discussed Brecht previous to the changes in French intellectual thought post-1968, it was not until then that his Marxist, materialist ideas were embraced. For an excellent analysis, see Dana Polan’s *The Political Language of the Avant-Garde*.

<sup>136</sup> For more on the history of Western thinking about emotion, see Jerome Kagan’s *What Is Emotion?* and *What is an Emotion?*, edited by Robert Solomon. According to Kagan, Western philosophical theories arose from social anxiety about “each individual’s ability to restrain actions accompanying emotions [which] might disrupt the community” (10).



Robert Stam makes clear that the aim of reflexivity shared by those who take up Brecht's theories is "the substitution of distanced reflection for suspenseful and empathetic involvement." Stam describes how "Brecht saw cinema, in fact, as a potential means of shattering the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel by focusing on external action." The extraordinary duration of *Carnal Knowledge*'s facial close-ups certainly accomplish the work of directing the spectator to attend to external action, in this case, the character's and actor's facial expression. Rather than avoid issues of emotion or feeling, *Carnal Knowledge* reasons about what we can (and cannot) know about emotions, the "interior experience" we could perhaps call feelings and their expressions. The duration of the close-ups highlights the movement of facial expression; facial expression here is *expressing*, an ongoing activity. Moreover, if we believe certain behaviors are emotionally expressive and, at the same time, appropriate for the representation of particular genders, what becomes of emotion on film? Is what counts as an expressive face different for male and female characters?

If, as Robert Warshaw does, we take Hollywood cinema to be American cinema, then understanding masculinity to entail an aversion to expressing should not surprise us. From its earliest days, American masculinity advised against facial animation, situating men as socially surveilled, objects to-be-looked-at, and with a responsibility to control perceiving gazes by suspending facial movement. C. Dallett Hemphill informs us that, unlike the class system in Europe, for men in early America, "[s]tatus was a function of one's personal behavior, as an individual, and thus required self-discipline. Self-discipline entailed, above all, control of physical drives and emotions, hence focus on the body and face" (39). Hemphill connects the rise of middle-class capitalist culture to a "revolution in gender relations" which dealt heavily in the "management of emotion" specific to each sex (34-35). In particular, America focused on

greater expressive self-control for men, a talent which would supposedly increase a man's ability to socially and professionally climb. Thus, refraining from emotional expression (not from experiencing emotion) subtended the rise of American capitalism: "Self-control could also serve as the sign (as well as the means)," Hemphill recounts, "of one's [man's] successful self-madness" (34).

Contrary to Peter Berger's pronouncement about the depiction of the sexes in art, the advice to men was "to cultivate *appearances*, even, when necessary, to dissimulate" and "to conceal one's actual feelings" (my italics, 36-37). The most popular of the social-conduct literature, Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son*, confided that "the general rule is to have a real reserve with almost everyone, and a seeming reserve with almost no one" (37). Undoing "the traditional pieties that one's outward appearance should match one's inner state," performance was embedded at the level of a man's interpersonal relationships as he was told to suppress (if not repress) emotional expression if he wanted to do his gender justice, be socially acceptable, and succeed in the professional sphere (39).<sup>137</sup> While there were clearly expressive limits imposed on both sexes, Hemphill points out that "[m]en had to suppress the expression not only of anger, but also of every other emotion, including distress and joy, and they were free to do so on the grounds that it was simply imprudent to display every thought and feeling... the period's

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<sup>137</sup> Hemphill cites several books which focus on men's behavior *qua* appearance, telling men to cultivate a "convincing performance" (38). Prominent politicians, such as John Adams, also advised similarly, paying special attention to the "Muscles of [the] face" (38). Women, Hemphill tells us, "were not *allowed* the same degree of emotional dissimulation" (my italics, 41). Hemphill does not valorize women's access to sincerity, but suggests that this was, in fact, a burden. Since the marriage market was the space in which they had to worry most about self-presenting, the expressions appropriate to women—such as blushing and looking disapprovingly at the speaker of a ribald comment—were her tools to deter unwanted advances, and to lure others. These expressions (also meant to help men control their passions) were never to be feigned, for they were proof of her virtue and propriety: "More than any other quality, a woman's face was to show her modesty" (42). For both sexes, those expressions which were deemed acceptable needed to be appropriately moderate. "[A] number of authors," Hemphill tells us, "condemned... 'immoderate laughs'" for distorting the face was thought to be unpleasant, and therefore, to be avoided (38). However, the crime was worse for women since, in the words of one male author, "[p]assion [as in the case of anger] is a prodigious enemy to beauty" (44).

strongest advice to mask one's feelings was directed to men alone. More than women, men were implored to keep their faces as calm and *unmoved* as possible" (my italics, 44).

*Carnal Knowledge* concludes with a scene in which Jonathan's facial expression is almost devoid of perceptible movement. It is not a freeze frame; but rather, it is Nicholson's frozen expression that renders this scene ambiguous. It has been an aim of naturalistic performance to inspire the conviction in the spectator that a character has an "interior life." But, if any facial arrangement counts as an expression, and if we take expressing to be intentional, can a character ever not have an "interior life"? *Carnal Knowledge* reflexively comments upon Hollywood's—and America's—regulation of men's expression by directing us to consider what is at stake in the cinematic representation of facial expression.

### **A Reading of the Film**

Although Feiffer originally sent Nichols *Carnal Knowledge* as a play (the pair had been friends since the days of Nichols and May), Nichols immediately saw it as a film. Nichols and Feiffer worked closely on the script, awakening Feiffer to the excitement of writing "dialogue for characters who spoke differently and could be identified from one another by the way they spoke" (Bishop Interview). Feiffer remembers: "[Nichols] made me defend, from the first scene, every line. Why does [the character] say this? Why does [the character] reply this?"

*Carnal Knowledge* begins with a male voice whispering the question, "Would you rather love or be loved?" to another in the dark. The voices demonstrate characters privileged with desire enjoying their privilege. Their pillow talk, simultaneously homoerotic and sexist, continues to parse out various aims—breasts, legs, love, sex, and the space between all four. Jonathan wants "big tits. A hundred different ways." Sandy, sensitive only by comparison, says

“I want a companion.” His reason? “The other stuff I can get on the outside,” he says. The initial question is posed by Jonathan, and refuses the possibility of a mutually loving relationship, establishing this characters’ perspective on relationships as one of power, narcissism, and competition for subjectivity.

Aside from the title credits, these are the first utterances, and images, of *Carnal Knowledge*. The visual track is darkness, continuing Nichols’ interest in the relationships between dialogue, silence, and darkness found in *The Graduate* and its theme song, “The Sound of Silence.” Jonathan and Sandy discuss their criteria for finding a girl, which they describe in terms of ownership and property. The opening question, voiced in the second-person, positions us, as spectators who listen, in the position of overhearing their conversation (a third-person position), and the lack of visual perspective denies the alternation of first and third person for which a typical shot/reverse-shot editing pattern allows.

Though both men are virgins, in the opening dialogue, Jonathan describes falling for a girl until she let him “feel her up.” Still, he continues seeing her for a while “because she let [him] feel her up,” demonstrating the contradictory courtship rules of the late 1940s or early 1950s (the film does not specify a year). We later learn the first voice is Jonathan, the dominant friend to the other voice, Sandy, who amends his statements according to Jonathan’s assertions. We learn that Jonathan would rather love (Sandy, of course, accedes). Jonathan’s paradoxical approach to loving women dooms him from the start: he wants to love a woman, and he wants to have sex with women, but he finds those desires irreconcilable. We, as spectators, do not share in the intimacy of this “pillow talk,” primarily due to the overtly sexist opinions underlying the boys’ musings.

When the story begins, Jonathan and Sandy are both virgins, desperate to lose “it”—presumably, a campy, nostalgic attitude following the sexual revolution and “free love” slogans of the late 1960s. This isolation of the audible word is broken by the image of an isolated face—Susan’s. The boys’ dialogue seems to conjure Susan’s beautiful floating face, who walks out of the dark and past the boys as the camera backs up to reveal we are at a college mixer, replete with saddle shoes and sweater vests.<sup>138</sup> The mise-en-scène of this scene, like so many shots to come of life on campus, invokes the *movies* of the 1940s and early 1950s, such as *Knute Rockne—All American* (Lloyd Bacon, 1940), *Good News* (Charles Walters, 1947) or *The Affairs of Dobie Gillis* (Don Weis, 1953).<sup>139</sup>

As Susan walks past the pair, Jonathan assumes property rights only to relinquish them, making the magnanimous move to Sandy: “She’s yours. I’m giving her to you.” The spectator recognizes the voices of these men from the first scene. Jonathan informs Sandy that “There’s a way to talk to girls,” implying that he believes there is a way to talk to men that is different than how he talks to women (presumably, the opening conversation *about* women). He also advises Sandy perform for her: “Tell her about your unhappy childhood but don’t make it like an act.”

Sandy sets out to convincingly dissemble, but, as he nears his target, he stalls, stuck about three feet in front of her before detouring to pretend to spy something interesting outside the window and returning to Jonathan. Roger Ebert writes of this moment: “With the perception and economy that mark their entire film, Nichols and his writer, Jules Feiffer, have established the theme of *Carnal Knowledge* in this handful of shots: the film will be about men who are incapable of reaching, touching or deeply knowing women” (1). We witness this hilarious scene

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<sup>138</sup> We soon find out Susan is from neighboring Smith College, a possible inside joke as Gloria Steinem attended Smith. She delivered a provocative commencement speech titled, “The Politics of Women,” there in 1971, the same year she founded *Ms.* magazine. Nichols shot *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) at Smith—reportedly at Steinem’s suggestion (Stern, 146).

<sup>139</sup> For more examples, see *The Movies Go to College* by Wiley Lee Umphlett.

in a long shot without cutting, emphasizing the interpersonal space that gapes between Sandy and Susan, the space he needs to speak across, but cannot.

Sandy attempts again, but just as he is about to retreat for the second time, she speaks. She says: "I hate mixers. It's such a phony way to meet people." Since she does not suggest a better way, we can at least appreciate that Susan is trying by speaking. Susan bemoans how hard it is to "meet people" because "everyone puts on an act" and "you never know who you're meeting: them or the act." Sandy is dumbstruck all over again by Susan's rather unconventional opening gambit. He starts to walk away, but she stops him by speaking again, inviting this exchange:

Susan: I think people only like to think they're putting on an act. But it's not an act, it's really them. If they think it's an act they feel better because they think they can always change it.

Sandy: You mean they're kidding themselves 'cause it's not really an act?

Susan: Yes it is an act, but *they are* the act. The act *is them*.

Sandy: But they're all so real.

Susan: No.

Sandy: You mean I'm not real?

Susan: No.

Sandy: I'm an act?

Susan: It's alright; I'm an act, too.

Susan forces Sandy to admit he acts like a different person in different contexts. "So, which one is you?", she inquires. Defeated, Sandy remarks, "You ought to be a lawyer," to which Susan responds, "I'm going to be a lawyer." Sandy, overwhelmed, exclaims: "A lady lawyer!" This scene conjoins the performance of gender and courtship with sexual possibility and self-presentation. Knowing other people is immediately posed as a problem once the visual track begins, a problem connected to sexual difference (the two men had no trouble interacting in the intimate space of total darkness). Moreover, it is a problem that must be acknowledged and accepted for conversation to continue.

Susan objectifies Sandy's personality, his self-presentation—not unlike we do when watching characters at the cinema. The characters are engaged in precisely the same activity as we, the spectators: attending to the characters' performed actions in an effort to infer who they are. The spectator sympathizes with Susan because, like her, we are amused by Sandy. She exposes Sandy's self-presentation *as* a performance, and instructs him to reconsider his assumptions about gender and social interaction. Susan's willingness to break social convention and speak first (and coupled with her professional ambition) suggest that she also sees gender as "an act" rather than essential—a lesson Jonathan dearly needs to learn, but does not. The shot's deep focus highlights Jonathan's presence, framed by a doorway in the background, watching but unable to hear. This scene (like many to follow) foregoes a typical shot/reverse-shot editing sequence, which has the effect of drawing our attention to the space between the characters, to dialogue as an exchange, and to the space across which characters read and interpret each other's actions. The phrase "shot/reverse shot" tends to imply that the first one determines the second, whereas that is often not the case for Nichols' characters—certainly not in this case which breaks the convention of (and so, audience's expectations for) reverse shots.

Susan's avowal that she is "an act" foregrounds to us, as spectators, that she is a character constituted by actions. She is, literally, an act—a series of them. She is also "acted," in the sense that she is performed by Bergen. Susan's speech describes identity (who "Susan" is for us and for Sandy) as the result of performing, a context-specific activity intended to elicit a certain response, but nevertheless, dependent upon its interpretation by an audience. Through Susan, who is clearly the intelligent voice of insight and the one capable of speech, the film argues for a middle ground between two senses of "perform," between its theatrical sense and its broader etymological usage connoting "to do" (an action). Susan does not argue that the actions of

“everyone” who “puts on an act” are meaningless or contentless by dint of being performative.<sup>140</sup> Rather, her words highlight that actions are, in context, reactions—and still intentional. The “act” we perform is, according to Susan, a conscious play between possible realities, one based on the narrative we tell ourselves about who we are, and another based on the narrative we seek to inspire others to create about us about the way we can be. Just like Ben’s silences in *The Graduate*, we understand what is meant by the former action by our own and other characters’ reactions. From Susan’s (and our) third-person perspective, what Sandy does *is* who he is, though what he now does is predicated upon her address. But Susan also indicates the importance of accepting one’s own (second-person) position as addressed. If who one is speaking *to* has an effect on one’s self-presentation—here, Sandy hitting on Susan—then Susan also recognizes that his actions affect *her*, that her performance is contingent upon his. Thus, performance means something to Susan, for she knows that people make choices every day by acting differently in different contexts. No matter how consistent is the narrative you tell yourself, others may perceive an “act”—though, of course, it is no less real for that reason, but rather, is an unavoidable function of interacting with others.

I am laboring on this scene because this speech serves as something like a compass, or even a thesis, for the film. And since the narrative culminates in Jonathan’s isolation, it is essential to understanding the film’s view on interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal actions exist both at the level of the individual, and through the individual’s responses to the other, at the

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<sup>140</sup> In many ways, *Carnal Knowledge* here foreshadows Judith Butler’s seminal elucidation of the ties between gender and performance. She looks at “constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*” (155). In this way, an important simultaneity is at work in which acts are “both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (155). However, *Carnal Knowledge* goes further by explicitly arguing these performances remain intentional. The idea that “everyone puts on an act,” to say that an action is performed, that it was done *by someone*, as opposed to simply done, reveals a belief that the action was intended. Although “performed” simply denotes the completion of an action, to say that an action was performed *by someone* carries an explicitly theatrical connotation. Thus, performance here is not code for a shifting self, but operates upon assumptions of self-presentation, selection, and self-control.



level of the social. It is, in fact, *through* such responses that the individual accesses the social realm.

Sandy and Susan begin dating, although Sandy is initially uninterested in courting her if Jonathan does not approve (i.e. also desire her). Susan, clearly uninterested in Sandy sexually, enjoys spending time with him because “[he’s] the only boy [she] knows [she] can talk to.” She even tells him that if she is with a boy she really likes, she does not show how bright she is. (Sandy, of course, does not realize the joke is on him.) Jonathan, who measures relationships in physical terms, mocks Sandy for failing to make quicker progress toward the sex act. Unlike Sandy, Jonathan cannot imagine taking the woman’s desires into account, and so, bursts into laughter at the idea of waiting for clearer signals from Susan. Jonathan is positioned in the *mise-en-scène* to suggest that he is Sandy’s “ideal ego,” or, at least, that Sandy views him as such. As Sandy ritually prepares his face to be seen by shaving, the camera is placed at an angle to suggest that, when he looks in the mirror, he sees Jonathan showering, his toned and tanned body floating in the mirror’s fog like a cartoon conscience. Jonathan informs Sandy of the rules by which he should abide when courting Susan (for example, he should kiss her on the second date). This scene incarnates Mulvey’s argument that, “[a] male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of his gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (quoted in Neale, 256). Sandy, who idolizes Jonathan’s bravado and “knowledge” about how to achieve satisfaction with women, gazes in the mirror and sees Jonathan.

Sandy soon confesses that he thinks he is in love with Susan. Jonathan wonders how if he has not “gotten in yet.” Sandy declaims: “That’s not everything... She tells me thoughts I didn’t even know I had until she tells them to me! It’s unbelievable. I can talk to her.” He tells

Jonathan he even plans to start reading her favorite books (starting with *The Fountainhead* and *Jean-Christophe*). Susan and Sandy talk about one another's aspirations, while she resists having sex with him. Attempting to keep pace with Jonathan's rules, Sandy guilts Susan into a giving him a hand job, an event which upends Jonathan's competitive nature. He wants to be the first to "go all the way" with a girl, and he interprets Susan's action as a sign of her potential willingness. Jonathan is excited by Susan's attitude, as he is able to funnel it into his sexist terms, believing that a girl who makes her own choices (i.e. unconventional choices) will be easier to persuade to choose to go to bed. After Sandy tells Jonathan of her "scandalous" willingness to please, Jonathan secretly seeks a date with her.

If Susan and Sandy are able to converse, Jonathan and Susan's date is a stark contrast. In an almost surreal sequence, when Jonathan picks Susan up for their date, they rapidly fire questions at each other without answering: "How do you like Smith?" "Where did you go to high school?" "What are you doing with your summer?" They only operate in the first-person, disregarding conventions of ordinary language exchange and only addressing each other in the second-person, making claims upon the other while trying to avoid being positioned in the third-person themselves. Of course, even replying to a question with a question is still a reply, putting oneself in a second-person position. Their distaste for the "codes" of courtship becomes the subject of their conversation over drinks. In an effort to woo Susan, Jonathan tries a meta-courting tactic: "Most girls I talk to, it's like we're spies in foreign countries and we're speaking in code. Everything means something else. Like I say, 'Would you like to take a walk?' And it means something else. And she says, 'I can't, I've got a French test tomorrow.' And it means something else." Susan calls him out for playing into these rules, and he calls her "sharp," which she recognizes also "means something else." Jonathan claims to detest the "codes"—which

Susan sharply points out *is, itself, code*. The pair bemoan the obfuscated relationship between words and referents, only to self-consciously propagate it.

The dialogue's distrust of signs extends to the visual image. We next see Susan dancing, first with one man and then the other, though the cuts which replace one man with another are matched so well as to visually disorient the spectator.<sup>141</sup> Then the film jump cuts to an extended frontal close-up of Susan's face laughing. We hear the voices of Jonathan and Sandy, and so, understand them to be to her left and right, as the direction of her gaze suggests. The trio reminisce about their childhood struggles to understand words, from misreading "mised" to sound like "myzled" to mistaken auditions in church hymns, such as "Round John Virgin" ('round yon virgin) and "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear" (gladly, the cross I'd bear). Although Susan offers up her own anecdotes, much of the scene is comprised of the men competing to make her spasm with laughter. They enjoy these stories of misunderstanding phrases, and the possibility that the sounds and sights of words are untrustworthy. They share memories of when words meant something other than their speaker intended—when the expression and that which was expressed were comically incompatible.

In this scene, Susan is dressed in black against a black background. The shot, which lasts for a minute and forty seconds, compels the spectator to contemplate her emotional expression, particularly her facial expression, as primarily a visual object (her laughter, though, does occupy a "gray area between spoken and gestured" [Smith, 26]). Rather than the close-up serving to guide the spectator through the narrative by momentarily directing his attention or by giving the protagonists' faces in romantic, "beauty shots," here, the close-up not only tells the story, it *is* the story. Unlike the traditional close-up shot (or, rather, the close-up shot traditionally conceived), Susan's laughing face does not elicit a laugh from us, confusing typical expectations of a close-

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<sup>141</sup> Feiffer recalls that Nichols replaced a dialogue-heavy scene with this one.

up as a site of spectatorial empathy.<sup>142</sup> In direct address (neither Sandy or Jonathan's perspective), her face appears odd and her animatedness absurd.

Rather than allowing the spectator the fantasy of sharing the simultaneous first and third person perspective of a shot/reverse-shot pattern, we are positioned objectively to see the character's *reactions*, her *being* responsive to other characters, but not other characters' responses to her. We will see that, throughout the film, the visual track will isolate characters' reactions. For example, later, as Sandy and Jonathan play tennis, we watch Cindy (Cynthia Neal) and Bobbie as they sit watching on a bench, seduced and humiliated, respectively. There are, at most, four characters in any scene (not counting extras), and when there are more than two, we typically just see two of them, never the four together. This way, we are never focused on the interactions of a group, but always the characters' interpersonal actions.

After a few weeks, Jonathan, alerted to the possibility of losing Susan to Sandy (or vice versa), pulls the "unhappy childhood" act with Susan, and convincingly dissembles concern for issues other than sex—even feigning the ultimate Cold War era rebellion by confessing he "might be a communist." Susan gravely comes clean: "I might be a communist, too." They have sexual intercourse in a dark barn; Jonathan's back, dressed in a dark coat, blocks portions of Susan's face, but, even segmented, her expression is isolated for our view. It seems that the

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<sup>142</sup> There is precedent in early American cinema for this. Short films, such as *Facial Expression of Lonely Haskell* (Biograph, 1897) and *Laughing Gas* (Edwin Porter, 1909) were popular and evince a cultural appetite for cinematic representations of the laughing face. Jacob Smith has highlighted the importance of recorded laughter to the success of radio, the phonograph and early cinema, arguing that, "that the performance of the laugh has helped bridge the gap between listener and prerecorded media texts, and it has served as an indication of authentic human presence in the media" (7). He informs us that the earliest sound recordings that sold well were of people laughing—particularly of Sallie Strembler, "the laughing girl" (the marketing photos of Strembler in close-up with mouth open wide, ecstatic, strongly resemble the visual of Susan laughing). Smith demonstrates that, since the beginning of these media, and "[i]throughout these different media contexts, the laugh has been presented as the ultimate expression of the human—often as the result of its connection to discourses about race, class, and gender—and its mechanical reproduction has served as a lightning rod for anxieties concerning the social dimensions of mass media performance and consumption" (17).

Supreme Court ruling, based on the fact that, “the camera does not focus on the bodies of the actors” during sex scenes, implies the court’s definition of “bodies” does not include the face.

As time wears on, Jonathan pressures Susan to drop Sandy; she refuses on the grounds that Sandy is “helpless” and Jonathan “stronger.” Jonathan grows resentful of the bond Sandy and Susan seem to share, and implores her: “Why can’t you be more with me like you are with Sandy?” Eventually, Jonathan delivers his “final ultimatum,” and demands Susan “tell [him his] thoughts” like she does with Sandy. Amidst a throng of students, he demands she face him in order to do so: “Look at me! Now, tell me my goddamn thoughts!” But she cannot. The film has already told us, through Susan, that how one acts is determined by who one is with, so the fact that he would ask such a question not only goes against Susan’s beliefs, but once again demonstrates Jonathan’s inability to see others on their own terms. He sees everything from a first-person perspective, whereas Susan, at least in her speech at the mixer, advocates a more second-person position which encompasses the need not only to act but also to react in order to acknowledge and communicate with other people. What Jonathan really wants to know is his own thoughts. Here, the film defines expression not as an inconsequential physical act, but as an expression of mind.

At one point, Jonathan berates Susan for leading Sandy on (he is confident she will choose him) until she cuts him short by announcing, “I feel like nothing.” Remembering her initial speech to Sandy, the spectator understands this to be the case *because* she is with Jonathan; his view of women does not allow her subjectivity. What act can she perform when she is viewed as either a lack or as no-thing, an uninstantiated variable, or a schema without content?

True to his word, Jonathan later phones Susan to break it off. The disjunction of voice and body, and the elision of visual interpersonal space by cross-cutting between their dorms, allows Jonathan to tell her: “I don’t feel anything anymore.” Susan acknowledges they need to part ways, and we see her face clearly, tears streaming down it. A cut to Jonathan reveals him in the dark, almost in silhouette. We cannot see his face during this emotional event. The scene then cuts to a close-up of Jonathan’s face, seemingly catatonic; his expression is set, frozen in its refusal to express. As spectators, we surmise he is broken-hearted, but there is no visible evidence of this. We hear Susan and Sandy packing for a camping trip, and though the shot/scene lasts for fifty seconds, the camera remains still on Jonathan’s impassive face.

Not sensitive like Sandy, Jonathan cannot cope with his feelings. He cannot articulate them to Susan, since he is intent on repressing them in order to *not* be like sensitive Sandy, but a man in the more socially acceptable sense. His efforts to be manly are (if not the reason) the cause for Susan to select Sandy. Trapped in a self-defeating cycle, he shuts down.

Now the film turns stylistically, too; it takes on a stricter “talking heads” visual format. Jonathan’s frozen expression is followed by the first of three whiteouts in the film, which, we learn, signal the passing of years. We next meet Jonathan leering at a buxom figure skater in New York’s central park ice rink. Clad in clinging white, this Marilyn Monroe-cum-Sonja Henie skates against the white ice, displaying her body in figure skating poses. Jonathan makes predictably lecherous remarks, and the film cuts to reveal him talking to Sandy, now married to Susan, fingering his wedding ring as he asks Jonathan for details of his sex life in the city.

In what will remain the film’s dominant stylistic until its end, the scene cuts to a medium close-up of Jonathan, appearing to directly address us from the screen,<sup>143</sup> though we know him to be addressing Sandy within the film’s diegesis. Jonathan launches into a monologue about how

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<sup>143</sup> Clearly, Nicholson stared directly into the camera during this shot’s production.

the girls are “after either your money or your balls, or your money and your balls. The women today are hung better than the men.” The film cuts to a direct address close-up of Jonathan, the framing of which is most explicitly like that of Feiffer’s “talking heads” comic strips. He delivers a monologue revealing his anxiety about changing social mores: “It’s not as easy getting laid as it used to be. I don’t think I’ve fucked more than a dozen new girls a year now. Maybe I’m too much of a perfectionist...” He goes on to describe one promising girl’s anatomy in detail (he would have settled for her if she just had “two more inches here.” The film gives us sequences of characters speaking in similarly framed close-ups consistently from this point on. For example, the following scene is of Sandy, in close-up and static composition, clinically articulating the credits and debits of having a stable home life. His cold speech ends: “It’s not glamorous or anything. There are other things besides glamour.”

Next, we meet glamorous Bobbie, a model and actress, in a 360 degree rotating shot. Every bit as buxom as the skater,<sup>144</sup> she and Jonathan are on a date, performing courtship to one another: she as a coy vixen shy about her age, and he the eager boy, willing to learn (somewhat reminiscent of *The Graduate*’s sexual relationship between Ben and Mrs. Robinson). She asks him: “Do you like to be mothered?” He replies “I’d like to be smothered... by you,” and declares to her: “I’d marry you in a minute.” The two enter into a relationship, and, after some time passes, Bobbie suggests they “shack up.” It is significant that when Bobbie asks this question, she teasingly addresses him as “Sam,” and Jonathan answers in a Bogartesque accent, an allusion to the character Bogart played (Sam Spade) in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941).

Jonathan, naked from the shower, is caught unawares, and his hemming and hawing exposes more than just his body. His reticent accession to Bobbie’s proposal reveals his self-presentation during their first date as dissimulation. Bobbie calls him “a real prick.” She later teasingly calls

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<sup>144</sup> Ann-Margret wore a fake chest for this scene.

him “a dildo”—a fake prick, suggestive of the impotency problem we learn Jonathan was suffering from before meeting Bobbie.

Despite the fact that her job as a model and actress was part of what he found attractive about her in the first place (he crowed to Sandy that “She’s the girl in the airline commercial!”), in the next scene, Jonathan tells Bobbie he does not want her to work (money will later be an issue, too). Bobbie is incapable of being domestic, though, and sinks into a depression. The posters and photographs of a radiant and smiling Bobbie adorning the walls of their apartment, and beside the bed, serve as a visual counterpoint to her current countenance. After Jonathan strips her of her livelihood, work (he will not even let her “canvass for Kennedy”), and self-esteem, she wants to get married (for security on all fronts). She knows he is attracted to others (even suggesting Sandy), and they fight viciously; he rails on her sexual experience—exactly why he was initially attracted to her.

The contradictions in Jonathan’s behavior toward Bobbie, combined with his cruel treatment of her when she has caused no offence, prevent the spectator from seeing the film as siding with Jonathan. He is clearly the villain, the cause of his and others’ problems. Bobbie tries to explain to Jonathan the source of her misery: “I sleep all day because I can’t stand my life: sleeping all day!” Unable to think outside of proprietary terms, he mistakes her desire to be acknowledged by him as a desire to own him. He yells, “You can’t have me. I’m taken by me!” Again, Jonathan betrays an essentialist view of selfhood. Irrationally, he wants to own Bobbie and be rid of her, telling her “I’d almost marry you if you’d leave me.”

In the middle of their fight, Sandy shows up with Cindy, a woman Jonathan set him up with, and a woman in control of her sexual desires—much to Jonathan and Sandy’s fascination. Now the “swinging sixties,” the men conquer their fear that Cindy is too “masculine” for



knowing what she wants, and decide to try and swap partners. Not a pawn, Cindy refuses the notion. Sandy, meanwhile, finds that Bobbie has attempted suicide. After the second whiteout, the narrative flashes forward to contemporary 1971.

### **Ice Skaters and Frozen Faces**

As the years stretch on, Jonathan's view of women grows ever more inhumane—and defensive. That he does not view women as individuals, but as a social type available for his abuse manifests in his own “home movie,” “Ballbusters on Parade,” a slide show of the women with whom he has been sexually involved. He exhibits his work to Sandy and his date, an eighteen-year-old hippie/druggie named Jennifer (Carol Kane). Jonathan comments on the bodies and sexual proclivities of the women in the most demeaning way. During the slide show, the spectator's point of view shifts to that of the characters', so that the projected images of the women's bodies become the film, forcing the spectator to confront the coldness of these images as Sandy and Jennifer do.

Jonathan's acrimony towards the women who appear on his screen disgusts Sandy and Jennifer, who cries. Jonathan is perplexed by her reaction. He asks her, “What are you crying for? It's not a Lassie movie,” implying he would have more empathy for the abuse of an animal than women. Jonathan's dehumanization comes in many forms throughout his narration: from objectification (“This was something I went with...”) to racism (“This was my Jap in the sack...”). We even meet a “sixteen year old [he] gave twenty bucks to one night in the village.”

“Ballbusters on Parade” reveals to Sandy that Jonathan slept with Susan. The penultimate scene reunites the pair one last time for a walk in the contemporary, modern urban landscape of skyscrapers. Pot-bellied and balding, Sandy professes not to care about Jonathan's

betrayal, because he has found his “love teacher” in Jennifer. “In a lot of ways, she’s older than me,” he earnestly confides to Jonathan. It turns out Sandy, too, had been suffering from impotence. Jonathan refuses to see Jennifer as anything more than “a nice piece of ass,” frustrating Sandy’s protests of sincerity. Finally fed up with fighting for Jonathan’s approval of who he sleeps with, Sandy ends their friendship.

In the film’s final scene, Jonathan patronizes a prostitute, Louise (Rita Moreno). When she opens her door to him, he sighs: “Women.” We understand they have met before when she responds, “All ballbusters, right?” As he enters her apartment, he continues: “When you think of some of the things he has to dip into, any guy with a conscience has a right to turn soft. Am I right, Louise?” When she agrees—“You’re always right, lover.”—any suspicion we had she is a prostitute turns into certainty. They continue their misogynistic verbal exchange until discussion of the financial transaction arises, and, suddenly, Jonathan bursts out in anger. Louise, it turns out, has flubbed a line, exposing the fact that their entire sexist interaction has been carefully rehearsed to elicit a sexual performance from Jonathan. Stepping into the role of ersatz writer and director, Jonathan corrects Louise before they begin again—a move that reflects not just on performance, but *cinematic* performance, where multiple takes are possible.

As Louise gets back into the character of adoring subjugate, the film cuts to a frontal close-up of her face. She looks directly at us (via the camera); we share Jonathan’s position—an alignment that is disturbing. As he lays back, he asks her what kind of man he is, her cue to deliver this speech, in a direct address close-up:

A real man; a kind man. Not weak kind the way so many men are. I mean the kindness that comes from enormous strength, from an inner power so strong that every act no matter what is more proof of that power. That’s what women resent; that’s why they try to cut you down. Because your knowledge of yourself is so right, so true, that it exposes the lies which they, every scheming one of them, live by. It takes a true woman to understand the purest form of love is to love a man who denies himself to her. A man

who inspires worship because he has no need for any woman, because he has himself. And who is better, more beautiful, more powerful, more perfect—you're getting hard—more strong, more masculine, more extraordinary, more robust—it's rising, it's rising—virile, domineering, more irresistible? It's up...

Louise delivers this monologue in a seemingly endless shot as the camera tracks down,<sup>145</sup> maintaining the proximity to Louise's face as she performs her submission to Jonathan, and us. The moving background to Louise's face heightens the impression of movement in her face, it draws our focus to her face, and draws out its movements. In contrast, when the film cuts to Jonathan's immobile facial expression against a static background, the impression of stillness is reinforced. Jonathan incarnates Mulvey's and Neale's descriptions of the Hollywood man here: he desires, objectifies women, and his expression is impassive.

Jonathan's frozen expression dissolves into the final white-out, followed by the image of the figure skater, dancing on the ice. This series of shots recalls the first time we saw Jonathan's expression frozen, after his break-up with Susan, which precipitated the first white-out and the vision of the figure skater. This repetition instructs the spectator to connect Jonathan's current state of impotence (cured only by a grotesque performance of fantastic chauvinism) with the moment he first refrained from expressing (his hurt and anger to Susan and Sandy). If we remember Jonathan's decision in the film's opening that he "would rather be in love," he clearly failed. Is this image of the figure skater Jonathan's fantasy? Did his pleasure, and Louise's speech, call forth this vision, the woman with the perfect body he can still desire, having never met her?

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<sup>145</sup> The effect of this shot was created by filming in a descending elevator, the back of which was removed.

## Tête-à-tête

Jonathan's commentary to "Ballbusters on Parade," and the speech he writes for Louise, are so blunt and repulsive, I find it difficult to agree with critics, such as Haskell, who find him to be "a bad but charming boy" (360). If this is a charming man, what are the standards for manhood (and villainy)? Roger Ebert, on the other hand, believes "*Carnal Knowledge* is clearly Mike Nichols' best film," because "[i]t sets out to tell us certain things about these few characters and their sexual crucifixions, and it succeeds" (1). He excuses the film from laying blame on the men in a more explicit fashion because, "[*Carnal Knowledge*] chooses the tragedy form" (1), tragedy that results because "[the characters] can't break through their patterns of treating each other as objects" (1). Ernest Callenbach's review for *Film Quarterly* responds more to popular and critical responses to the film than to the text itself. It begins:

*Carnal Knowledge* seems to draw an unusual number of attacks for wrong reasons. The film is a cartoon, so it is damned for not displaying deep psychological insight. It is straight-line cynical Feiffer, so it is attacked for not being profound sociopolitical analysis 'like the strips.' It is a work of some self-critical courage by two men who have lived the era they are satirizing, so it is put down for being facile. (Said Nichols once, about his satirical skits with Elaine May: 'We just take things we've done ourselves, and *exaggerate* them a little.') It is modest and reticent in cinematic style, so it is attacked for pseudo-Italian flamboyance. Its concern, like that of all serious satire, is not merely with the foibles and follies of one era, but with anguishing tendencies in the human psyche and condition, so it is charged with being superficial. (56)

Callenbach shares Haskell's sense that *Carnal Knowledge* captures the era; he calls it "a very superior article of journalism," and states that "Feiffer and Nichols, with perfect homing instinct, have produced a freezing cartoon about the sexual chauvinism which is America's *machismo*" (56-57).

Callenbach's description of the film as "freezing" speaks to the film's coldness toward its characters, but also to the significance of movement *as a question* for the film. He writes: "[n]or is the film devoid of a level of mystery: those huge, amber-lit close-ups, which have been

complained of as witless directorial mistakes, surely have a direct stylistic origin in the repetitious panels of Feiffer strips—but they also remind us of the biological creatures who are going through these matings and mismatings, and of the pity and anguish of our carnality” (56).<sup>146</sup>

Like Callenbach, the critic for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, who called the teaming of Feiffer and Nichols, “a nearly ideal collaboration of directorial and writing talents,” noted that the film “evoke[s] the form of Feiffer’s cartoons. It is, in effect, a series of slightly mad dialogues between two people—seen a lot of the time individually in close-ups from which all extraneous background detail has been eliminated—that almost always lead to new plateaus of psychic misunderstanding and emotional hurt” (1).<sup>147</sup> The critical attention to the compositional similarity of *Carnal Knowledge*’s close-ups to Feiffer’s cartoon panels indicates one of the film’s strategies to direct the spectator to consider how *movement* matters.

Of course, characters in comic strips do not perform; they express the writer’s artistry. The voiced and embodied characters of cinema are *performed* in the sense that an actor does things to create it, and in the sense we infer a character through our perception of the completed actions. Unlike the painting or comic strip, which gives the face the iconic status of an object, the cinematic face is different. As it exists in movement, because it moves, *it* can express. Through its reflexive attention to the performance of movement, *Carnal Knowledge* reunites the head with the body, reminding us that it is gazed upon, too. The question of what-is-expressed now becomes a question of performing an action, or, more correctly, *our* recognition of that

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<sup>146</sup> Even the U.S. Supreme Court a review which described Sandy as “the nice but troubled guy straight out of those early Feiffer cartoons” in its decision.

<sup>147</sup> Feiffer’s presence as a social satirist emerged alongside that of Nichols and May in the late 1950s. In addition to his cartoons, Feiffer wrote the play, and then screenplay, of the satire *Little Murders* (Alan Arkin, 1971).

performance as expressive. Two questions immediately appear: what is an expression and what is a performance of an expression in this sense?

In the final scene, how are we to interpret the ambiguity of Jonathan's frozen face, evacuated of everything (except perhaps, given the narrative context, desire)? The film has intertwined facial expression with gender performance, suggesting that a masculine face is a stoic one, but now exposes the stoic face as an impotent face. Stoicism is a refusal of expression without an explicit reason. Refusing to express is not impotence; the inability to express is. But if we can describe any face on-screen as expressive (even a bored or pensive face), then there is no possibility of an inexpressive face on-screen. If that is true, and we are forced to admit that Jonathan's face *is* expressive, then we must also admit that Haskell's reading has merit. If he is miserable, and the film ends tragically, Haskell could argue we are positioned to pity him. Similarly, if he is contented by Louise, then he goes unpunished. *Can* we, then, consider his face as non-expressive, as impassive? To answer this question we must consider what counts as an expressive face on-screen by looking at the representation of facial expression in cinema against a broader history of representing the human face.

### **Facing Expressivity**

In the earliest scholarly work devoted to the study of cinema, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, Hugo Muensterberg declares that "To picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay" (99). Muensterberg's excitement about the cinema, and particularly the close-up, is grounded in his notion that the new medium will render inner, mental states and phenomena visible, and hopefully, legible. He says, "even memory, attention, and imagination do not tell the whole story of our inner mind. The core of man lies in his feelings and emotions.

As soon as the photoplay moves along its own way, the expression of feelings and emotions will come to the foreground” (“Why We Go to the Movies,” 179).

Muensterberg lauds the close-up’s potential—through duration—to represent interiority, particularly emotional interiority: “The value of these formal changes [of the pictorial presentation] for the expression of the emotions may become remarkable. The characteristic features of many an attitude and feeling which cannot be expressed without words today will then be aroused in the mind of the spectator” (108). Here, the distinction between emotion and its expression, inner and outer, is almost lost. For Muensterberg, the expression seen by the spectator on-screen is inseparable from her experience of it: visual perception and consciousness are “fused.” He says,

The visual perception of the various forms of expression of these emotions fuses in our minds with the conscious awareness of the emotion expressed; we feel as if we were directly seeing and observing the emotion itself. . . . It is obvious that for this leading group of emotions the relation of the pictures to the feelings of the persons in the play and to the feelings of the spectator is exactly the same. (105)

In effect, his argument prefigures recent scholarship on mirror neurons.<sup>148</sup> Muensterberg’s excitement does not extend to photographs of facial expression, and so, we can assume that the empathy he describes as primitive to the spectator’s experience is predicated upon the image’s capacity to capture expressive movement. Influential theorist Béla Balázs, in his 1924 book *Der*

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<sup>148</sup> Current psychology has moved away from the mind as its primary object and now focuses on the brain, leaving cinema as a privileged place for us to work out questions of our minds and the minds of others. Still, many studies operate under the assumption that we do not reserve one mode of perception for the behavior of others on film and of others present to us in “flesh and blood” (to use the phrase Bazin claims was invented to denote liveness, partly in response to cinema). The current interest with what are being called “mirror neurons” goes some way toward justifying this view, suggesting that we feel and act, on some primitive level in the brain, what we perceive in others’ actions—even on film. While such new science is compelling, it tells me nothing about *my conscious* experience of being emotional. Kagan notes: “A brain state and a subjective interpretation of a change in feeling that originated in a brain state are distinct phenomena” (5). It also strikes me as dangerous to create pathways for treating a spectator’s response as “natural” or biological rather than culturally or historically determined. Moreover, simply stating that we *do* perceive an emotional expression as inextricably correlated to our individual notions of what constitutes an emotional experience (conscious and corporeal), threatens to eradicate the space of the interpersonal that emotional expression requires in order to be understood as communicative, as expressive. For more, see *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions* by Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia.

*Sichtbare Mensch (The Visible Man)*, echoes Muensterberg's appreciation for the cinema's capacity, claiming it returns to us the impoverished face, long exiled by the dominance of the printing press. Similar to Muensterberg's proclamation above, Balázs claims that, through the close-up, "we have the impression of directly seeing the emotion itself" (105).<sup>149</sup>

Both Muensterberg and Balázs neglect to address that the emotions expressed on-screen are *performed*. The faces they write about are those of actors acting—which is to say, of *characters'* facial expressions. The performer is not a mediator, but a creator. It would be wrong to say that the actor "mediates" because he does not stand between the spectator and the object; the character's face only seems to be the object, and it is this *seeming*—this "act," as Susan might say—that, ultimately, *is* the object. *Carnal Knowledge* reinstates the significance of performance to understanding our perception of facial expression. By directly addressing the spectator and by holding the shot for such extreme durations, *Carnal Knowledge* exacts the spectator's awareness of the characters' expressions *as* performed. It reminds us that we cannot *know*, but can only *interpret* characters' faces. It also highlights the dissembling of its characters; for instance, we are aware that Susan, laughing during her long close-up, is concealing from Sandy her affair with Jonathan.

In order to indicate the importance of three key developments in the history of representing facial expression—the desire to capture "authenticity," the presence of movement, and the introduction of actors into the process of representing facial expression (proximity typically precluded theatrical spectators from attending closely to the face as representative device)—I will look briefly at the evolution of theorizing about emotional expression, whose emphasis shifted from conceptualizing an emotion as something *had* to something *seen*. After

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<sup>149</sup> In "The Face in Close-up," Jacques Aumont tracks the endurance of this view in cinema studies from Sergei Eisenstein to Béla Balázs to Gilles Deleuze, suggesting that the cumulative effect is that the face and the close-up became interchangeable.



surveying this history of perceiving emotional facial expression we will be better situated to appreciate the view advanced by *Carnal Knowledge*—particularly as a response to its place as inheritor of American/Hollywood tradition and to the influx of Brechtian-inspired European cinema to American in the 1960s. It is partly the contention of this section to argue that this is the result of symbiosis rather than coincidence—that an explanation of the visual auscultation demanded by emotional expression is subject to the contemporary media available to the artist/thinkers. I will begin with a brief look at the work of painter Charles Le Brun before analyzing what I show is the first study of facial expression on film, Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*. While Muensterberg celebrates a curious blur between the image and the spectator, expression and emotion, Darwin seeks to scientifically theorize by looking at expression more critically. Published in 1872, his text anticipates the serial photography of Marey and Muybridge, and suggests a modern desire to see the expressive face—the *moving, performing* face—may have been significant to cinema’s emergence. Darwin’s project is to ask *why* an expression is what it is, in evolutionary terms; yet his use of photographic evidence provides an interesting place to begin asking why expression functions as it does for the filmic spectator.

Muensterberg studied emotion at Harvard in America’s first psychology department.<sup>150</sup> He was imported from Germany by William James, whose seminal “What is an Emotion?” was, in part, a response to Darwin’s book. *The Expression of Emotion* is not only one of the first scientific works completed on the subject of emotional expression, but one of the first scientific books ever to supply photographs as evidence. What did filmic media provide that enabled these

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<sup>150</sup> William James instituted America’s first psychology program at Harvard University, along with Muensterberg, in 1892 as professor of experimental psychology. James taught his first formal course in physiological psychology in 1875-76, just three years after Darwin’s text was published. Together, their experiments consistently focused on emotion and often incorporated filmic evidence.

scholars to revolutionize the study of emotion, an area of philosophical and scientific inquiry largely ignored since Descartes?

Darwin felt indebted to the recent development of instantaneous photography for capturing the ephemeral movements of facial muscles. He begins his book by referencing Le Brun's lectures as "the best known ancient work" on the subject (7), but he believed that the "naked eye was incapable of recording the kind of detail" necessary; nor could an artist's sketch, because of the inherent "limitations and biases." Darwin says: "Painters can hardly portray suspicion, jealousy, envy, etc., except by the aid of accessories which tell the tale; and poets use such vague and fanciful expressions as 'green-eyed jealousy'" (83). The appearance and significance of analyzing photographs is evidence of Darwin's yen for (to use his word) immediacy. Like Muybridge and Marey, Darwin's excitement about capturing movement through photographs was not primarily aesthetic. He confesses that he hopes to glean information from the "great masters in painting and sculpture, who are such close observers," but finds that, in "works of art, beauty is the chief object; and strongly contracted facial muscles destroy beauty" (21-22). Darwin aspires to determine what could be detected by the eye, and found photography to be the best way to go about this. He believed that theorizing expression as a visual object would help explain the evolution of expression, and possibly speak to emotion as purposive, which is to say, eugenically explicable.

Le Brun's seminal lecture, "Sur l'Expression Generale et Particuliere," was delivered to the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1668. What made it seminal is that no artist before him succeeded in isolating the importance of addressing what happens during an expressive *movement*. In her analysis of Le Brun's work, Jennifer Montagu comprehensively demonstrates that the representation of facial expression in the history of art has hardly been

viewed as a simple or given procedure. She contextualizes Le Brun's work by pointing out that, "still in the seventeenth century, when facility in perspective and spatial construction, and the accurate proportion of bodies could be taken for granted in a competently trained artist, ability to render human expression was considered a quality worthy of remark" (1). Because expressions are essentially movements—communicative movements—viewers' attempts to decode still images were far from reliable, given some faces' natural propensity toward frowning, grinning, etc. Montagu summarizes the painter's dilemma for representing facial expression as movement using the example of a pendulum:

if [the artist] wishes to show a pendulum in motion he should choose any position other than the vertical, for that is the one position at which it could be at rest; similarly, if he wants to show a body in movement, he should select a moment which the observer recognizes as one that cannot last. In the case of facial expression this would mean avoiding the moment when it is at its apex, yet this is the moment at which it could be most surely recognized. (3)

Here, the predicament of the painter in the pre-filmic era trying to produce resemblances to natural phenomena is that he must rely on an intellectual, rather than emotional, experience to communicate emotion through the symbols and patterns which are his tools. Thus, the emotion depicted is an expression of the artist, not the face itself. The painter's own observations provide the sole measure of authenticity, a source of anxiety for Le Brun, as he desired to depict expressions that were often "too complex or fleeting to be easily analyzed in nature" (7). He sketched numerous series of facial features, testing his theories under the rubric of realism he himself defined. He favored the face because he thought, following Descartes, that "if the passions were controlled from the brain, then the face, being the nearest part of the body to the brain, should be the most accurate index of the mind, and of all the features the eyebrows [are] closest to the seat of the soul" (18). Le Brun's corpus is filled with drawings of anatomical observation, musculature, and even dissected heads— all in the service of authentically

representing facial expression. And although his obsession with accuracy was not unique, the merit of Le Brun's lectures lies in deriving from scientific study a systematic theory on the origins and physiological workings of the passions. His work intends to isolate the importance of *moving* from one expression to the next, and his obsession with representing the anatomical musculature of the face is explicable both as science and as art. Scientifically, his attempts sought to further an understanding of how emotion functions; aesthetically, his attempts sought to further an understanding of how to enrich the viewers' experience by recreating expressions as "authentically" as possible. Both aims were contingent upon the capture of movement.

Heinrich Wölfflin, the "most important art historian in the twentieth century" (Mallgrave and Ikonou, 40), became famous for his *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, which "owes its inspiration to the contemporary infatuation with psychological aesthetics" (39). He believed we could understand representations of others' emotions only because we had experience of them ourselves. Wölfflin's tripartite "anthropopathic theory" is this: every emotion has an expression, the physical manifestation of the mental act. Then, when we witness the artistic imitation of the expression, we also experience the emotion. Finally, we unconsciously transfer our emotional response back to the object. There is no private language in a model where emotion is practically contagious.<sup>151</sup> By extension, "forms become meaningful to us only because we recognize in them the expression of a sentient soul. Instinctively, we animate each object" (42). Yet, art could not express the range of human content, as that is the privilege of the human form. What, then, would become of this rationale once a medium emerged that *could* capture this range?

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<sup>151</sup> This view of emotion is similar in many ways to Hume's, and allows Wölfflin to describe sympathy in moral terms, as the basis of ideal social relationships.

## The Moving Face

Predictably, photography would alter the possibilities for analyzing and representing facial expression. Capable of recording greater accuracy of detail than even the human eye, as well as the entire range of human behavior, subtler and subtler emotions could be regarded and understood as expressive. Photography's ability to select a wider range of expressive events lessened the artist/photographer's dependence on peak instants to signal an emotional experience over time—but it did not do away with it entirely. Photography's promise of accuracy also appealed to scientists. Photographic close-ups of human faces constitute the majority of Darwin's evidence in *The Expression of Emotion* (along with full body shots of infants and sketches of animals). However, Darwin does not simply inspect photographs of various expressions, but *imagines* the movements *between* photographs by looking first at a subject in a “relaxed” state and then at the same subject in an emotionally “excited” state. He then takes his *imagined* data as evidence. These photographs were reproduced for the reader in the body of the text. He is intent on isolating the characteristic movement of expression, thereby delineating them for analysis. Beyond this, Darwin's impulse to look at expression as evolutionarily relevant suggests that he viewed emotional expression as purposive, which emphasizes the role of emotions as objects to be seen, rather than as mere byproducts of the soul.

Darwin's evidence also adds a new layer of complexity to the study of representations of emotional expression in the presence of the actor. Although the scientist could now assuage worries about the painter's ability to render the observed face authentically, as film satisfied such aspirations for realism, the photograph of an actor's performance of an emotional expression was regarded as “immediate” (as opposed to the work of the photographer)—despite being doubly mediated.

Perhaps Darwin's desire to utilize photography's new brand of realism, as well as to extend its capacities to capture movement should come as no surprise, for even the etymology of the word "emotion" suggests movement: From the Latin "e" (out) and "movere" (movement), the Oxford English Dictionary defines emotion as a "moving out, migration, a transference from one place to another." Allan Langdale describes Muensterberg as "the first film theorist to seriously argue for the film medium as a model of the workings of the human mind." I want to argue that Darwin did this, too. Darwin implicitly draws a parallel between the face and its emotional expression, and a photograph and its object: an expression imprints upon the face as an object does on a photographic plate, but, unlike a photograph, it is doomed to remain fleeting. In fact the etymology of the word "face" also suggests an affinity with the cinematic screen: its roots connote "to shine" and "to appear" (OED).

Darwin's text evinces a desire to see the face in a way that only the filmic close-up could satisfy.<sup>152</sup> Darwin helps explain this in evolutionary terms: "Of all parts of the body, the face is most considered and regarded, as is natural from its being the chief seat of expression and the source of the voice. It is also the chief seat of beauty and ugliness, and throughout the world is the most ornamented. The face, therefore, will have been subjected during many generations to much closer and more earnest self-attention than any other part of the body" (326). Beyond *The Expression of Emotion's* attention to the visual perception of emotion in the face, Darwin's

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<sup>152</sup> Darwin's study demonstrates that the photographic close-up as a device to capture facial expression (not just as a photographic portrait) was not an invention (or convention) of Hollywood cinema, but had already captivated early modern culture. The first commercially successful photographers, such as Julia Margaret Cameron (a friend of Darwin) and Oscar Rejlander, were most attentive to the face and capturing emotion (it is Rejlander who supplies Darwin with the bulk of his material and whose picture of a screaming infant went on to sell 300,000 copies). The photographers Darwin commissioned often "acted" as subjects themselves (or used their wives). Rejlander was Darwin's primary photographer, and he, as Beaumont Newhall points out, "was, at heart, an actor" (74). Many of the photographs used are of people "renowned" as actors (Darwin himself refers to them as actors and frequently offers his evaluations of their talents). Darwin also collected commercial photographs whose origin was unknown, and even used photographs from a French physiologist who "froze" expressions on his patients long enough to photograph them by hooking them up to electrical currents.

interest in emotional expression also tends toward the emotive subject's eyes—also seen anew for the first time with photography (especially given taboos for staring and close proximity in Western culture). He observes that, “When our minds are much affected, so are the movements of our bodies... From the continued use of the eyes, these organs are especially liable to be acted on through association under various states of the mind” (38).

Darwin's use of photography allows him to shift from isolating and addressing the “reality” of emotion to its observation. For Darwin, expressions do not exist independently of observation. Noted theorist of expression Paul Ekman<sup>153</sup> claims that Darwin's treatment of expression as a thing-to-be-seen was a reaction to Charles Bell's influential treatise on emotion that posited expressions as proof of humans' humanity, and thus of God's existence (and not their descendancy from apes). This is perhaps one reason Darwin's text is about the expression of emotion in man *and animals*. It is common for him to provide examples of both, though he does include chapters on the special expressions of animals (such as the wagging of a dog's tail) and the special expressions of man (in which he claims the expression unique to man is blushing). Bell, and other creationists (like Le Brun), valued emotional expressions *as* communication. While Darwin was not able to completely remove physiognomy and communication from his model, his study privileges the visible, outer expression of an emotion over inner phenomena, because it is in such behavior that he sees evidence of a regard for survival. Darwin's ambivalence to discuss emotional expression as a means of communication is rare amongst theorists of emotion, but I believe it to be significant for film studies. His implicit

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<sup>153</sup> As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, Ekman was a classmate of Nichols at the University of Chicago. He also edited the definitive edition of *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*.

distinction between expression as performance and communication shifts the theoretical emphasis from a subject having the emotion to another subject seeing the emotion.<sup>154</sup>

Darwin's rationale that the spectator experiences the emotion she sees expressed, then cyclically transfers that emotion back onto the object as her interpretation of what the expression expresses, is reminiscent of Wölfflin's logic. Although Darwin prefers the term, "sympathy," to "empathy," (which distances him from the notion of a spectator's experience as imperative and is faithful to his view of emotional expression as strictly observable), it still poses a threat to the scientific observer. Unlike Le Brun, Darwin seems to suspect movement and duration may be responsible for this potentially deleterious effect on the scientific observer (who has a responsibility to remain unmoved):

The study of Expression is difficult, owing to the movements being often extremely slight, and of a fleeting nature. A difference may be clearly perceived, and yet it may be impossible, at least I have found it so, to state in what the difference consists. When we witness any deep emotion, our sympathy is so strongly excited, that close observation is forgotten or rendered almost impossible... Our imagination is another and still more serious source of error; for if from the nature of circumstances we expect to see any expression, we readily imagine its presence. (19)

Darwin attributes sympathy (and hence, emotion) on the part of the spectator to duration here by claiming that it is through seeing the movement of expression that sympathy is fostered—which, I must point out, is the "all-important emotion" he describes in *The Descent of Man* (published only a year previously) which made us social and moral beings and which distinguishes us from the "lower animals."

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<sup>154</sup> In 1888, acting theorist William Archer published the influential *Masks or Faces?* which strongly echoes Darwin's text by challenging classic questions about the visual perception of emotion on stage. James Naremore cites Archer's work, which took Diderot's famous paradox (which stated that for an actor to move an audience, he must remain unmoved) to task, as seminal for this reason. Archer argues that, "If an actor can convincingly represent emotion, the critic, as a critic, need not inquire whether he experiences or mechanically simulates it. But criticism is one thing, the psychology of art another; and to this the question at issue belongs" (79). The danger here is not *that* we represent ourselves as surface in art, or that we derive pleasure from allowing our desire to access the "interior" of a character to overwhelm our knowledge that such access is beyond the limits of possibility, but whether or not we should worry about it. Significantly, since *Carnal Knowledge*'s most insistent close-up is of Susan laughing, the gesture of the laugh is absent from influential turn-of-the-century acting manuals (Smith, 27).



Unlike James' "What is an Emotion?", Darwin asked "Why does an emotion look like it does?" which brings with it its own theory of "what" emotion is. As Robert Solomon points out, despite the multiple contemporary approaches in psychology and philosophy of new theories (for example, those of Antonio Damasio, Nico Frijda, and Stanley Schachter and J.E. Singer), the "roots remain Darwin and James" (57). Darwin's work stands to gain import as scientific attention to the brain increases. Inspired by Darwin's text, James argues that "the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion" (Solomon, 67). Put simply, the experience of the expression constitutes the emotion. For Darwin and James, a stimulus sparks the experience which generates an expression—an expression with evolutionary use-value. Hence, expressing becomes a form of communication, making legibility its most salient quality.

Darwin emphasized that expressions occur as movements, and if James is also right and the expression is the emotion, then, transitively, filmic records (whether serial photography or cinema) capable of capturing expression *should be* the emotion. As we saw above, the sentiment that cinema's moving pictures give us the emotion itself is precisely the cause of celebration for Muensterberg and Balázs. This wish was already evident in Darwin's desire to arrive at claims that explain expression as a product of human evolution, and in Le Brun's desire to see expression as universal in order to accurately depict human experience in the abstract and to gain greater control over the viewer (in some sense, moving toward seeing the viewer as able to be universally affected).

The realism afforded by photographs of actors' expressions suited Darwin's ambition to theorize expressions as things to be seen, but his work fails to consider the actor's face as another mode of representation. This is a problem because it displaces the responsibility for the

expression's legibility from the artist (Le Brun) or from a juxtaposition of still images (Darwin or Feiffer) to the skill and desire of the performer. The use of actors or subjects replicating expressions as scientific evidence suggests Darwin took the art of acting quite seriously—or, perhaps, that it is commonplace to perform expression. As professional expressers, it makes commonsense that Darwin turned to actors for his study. However, his use of actors also suggests he was concerned with expression *qua* expression. That is, he measures a photographed expression's success, not on notions of expressive "truth" or "authenticity" based on descriptions of a subject's conscious experience, but on the descriptive consistency it elicits from viewers. Darwin even went so far as to evaluate actors' abilities based on their muscular movements—claiming one boy is particularly skilled (which means his expressions demonstrate a higher degree of legibility based upon his survey of viewers) because of the "horse-shoe shape" his eyebrows make (a formation not every face can make). In other words, he does not test people's ability to "correctly" identify expression, but tests the expression's ability to excite agreement.<sup>155</sup> In this way, Darwin's methodology resembles Susan's take on self-presentation: no matter how consistent the narrative you tell yourself is, others perceive an "act;" so you express yourself to-be-seen differently in various context-specific ways, but the question of an "interior experience" is left to others to acknowledge.

In *Carnal Knowledge's* long takes, the performer/face has control, not the hand of the artist. The film relies on Nicholson's remarkable skill to express the inability to express. By freezing his face (in just *that* way), Jonathan *performs* inexpressivity. Because emotional

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<sup>155</sup> Darwin's view that an emotional expression can be considered "true" by eliciting a certain amount of accord among its spectators is most evident in his use of photographs of galvanized patients. He recounts showing a number of people a photograph of a man in "his usual passive condition" and another of the same man "naturally smiling": "The latter was instantly recognized by every one to whom it was shown as true to nature. [Dr. Duchenne] has also given, as an example of an unnatural or false smile, another photograph of the same old man, with the corners of his mouth strongly retracted by the galvanization of the great zygomatic muscles. That the expression is not natural is clear, for I showed this photograph to twenty-four persons, of whom three could not in the least tell what was meant...(202)."

expressions (and experiences) occur in time, duration is necessary for their representation. Nichols' actors have vast swaths of time to perform, and their faces take precedence in the shots' compositions. Since the cinematic actor does not perform static actions, expressive legibility for the spectator is a matter of attributing intention. It is a fact of intentional actions that they do not demonstrate intentionality. We, as perceivers of the on-screen action, must judge them so. A represented action whose intentionality we *know* for certain (if possible) would be overly determined, and no longer possessed of verisimilitude. But what is essential for allowing the question of intentionality is *movement*; the actor must *act*, perform something: this is what is refused in Jonathan's final, frozen face. The face no longer seems to be intended by an unseen hand. The cinematic actor, of course, is still the artist constituting the face, and the visual confluence of expressive face and artist's face makes a compelling case that the expression we see is the one we are meant to see.

According to Jerome Kagan, a person's judgment of her emotional status "depends on the person's current state, the immediate context, and the event chosen for comparison" (22). His claim holds true for our perception of an emotional expression on-screen as well (where the expression is our only source of data): we read a detected change in expression as a symptom of a change in a corresponding emotional state. This does not, however, mean that we regarded the initial state as un-emotional, but, rather, that we constantly perceive and read expressions over time.<sup>156</sup> By representing *expressing*, cinema avoids the pitfalls of representing *expressions*, and allows for a richer concept of expressivity, one which more readily allows the spectator to grasp a character's potentially complex reaction to her context and move beyond a semantic concept of

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<sup>156</sup> Kagan argues that no English word can capture the lived experience of emotion, which are "blends" of states we are usually able to name, and that "[b]lends are coherent states, and not additive combinations of elementary states" (8-9). He writes that, "[e]motions are like the weather. There is always some form of weather, but we award special status to the infrequent, distinct arrangements of humidity, temperature, and wind velocity called hurricanes, blizzards, and thunderstorms" (22).

emotions as singular nouns. Cinematic expressions do not represent things; they are verbs that represent functions. If Jonathan is literally and figuratively “unmoved” in the film’s final close-up, then it appears as a noun to us, it makes no claim as time wears on it—leaving us, chillingly, unmoved as well. The result is that Jonathan’s face sinks into a death mask, evacuated of subjectivity—even if we understand him to desire Louise’s submissive performance. By not moving, it offers us nothing new to react to. If we recall Susan’s speech to Sandy at the Amherst mixer, to not react is to be taken out of context—it is to be an object isolated outside the realm of the interpersonal and society.

This scene exposes the difference of performing body as one of knowledge. There is a difference in Sandy and Susan, self-presenting at the college mixer, and Jonathan’s knowledge that Louise is presenting herself, through her body, to him as submissive. Unlike the former case, in which, as Susan points out, you can never be sure who you’re meeting (“them or the act”), Jonathan *knows*. In this way, Louise’s actions do not create a context in which he must react, or at least, a context which he does not control.

Jonathan’s insistence on his own masculine power manifests in his desire to experience others without concern for others’ experience of him. He is literally the desirous male character Mulvey describes as endemic to Hollywood (though the film denies *us* a position of perceptual fantasy that is the real subject of her essay). His egoism leads him to ignore the demands of performing—unlike sensitive Sandy, who is constantly aware of his actions around others, of what he thinks he should be doing and, who, most tellingly, allows Jonathan to rehearse and direct his movements. Eventually, though, we realize Jonathan’s resistance to perform is not his privilege, but his tragic flaw: to not perform is to have nothing to express. This fate is reinforced by Jonathan’s increasing impotency until in the end, he literally has nothing to express.

The spectator knows Jonathan sees women as less than human, as only objects of potential pleasure, as *having nothing* to express. The alignment of our gaze with his as we, together, stare at Louise shocks the spectator into an awareness of the difference between our own gaze and his. Knowing she is “only” performing, we perceive Louise’s rather blank expression as she recites her lines as carefully controlled; she is just speaking lines she has been told to say and (presumably) does not endorse in order to conduct her business. Her composure aims to express *nothing*—so that she can play her role, and become exactly what he wants her to be, an object. When the film (finally) cuts back to Jonathan, miserable, alone, impotent and tragic, we understand that it is not Louise but he who has nothing to express, and the film dissolves to white. Perhaps if he had heard Susan’s philosophy at the mixer, he would have been warned that his refusal to acknowledge the “interior experience” of another (to return to Nichols’ term) would result in the loss of his own inner experience.

Contrasting these two cases of expression—expressing nothing and having nothing to express—provides a way of understanding the theory of perceiving facial expression posited by *Carnal Knowledge*. It casts all expression, even expressing nothing, as performative. Representations of facial expression become something to be interpreted and treated, as making claims and demanding acknowledgement. As they were for Darwin, expressions are performative, things to be seen. Darwin was not negligent when he employed actors; nor was he duped by their performative faces. *Carnal Knowledge* demonstrates that the difference between having nothing to express and expressing nothing is the difference between seeing an object and a human, a difference it morally evaluates by casting Jonathan’s fate as tragic. Seen from this angle, *Carnal Knowledge* recalls that when Darwin theorized the significance of movement to facial expression, he did not indicate the possibility of a non-expressive face. Darwin’s primary

methodology was to begin with photos of “relaxed” faces, faces that were presumed to not be expressing. More accurately, they were judged to express nothing in particular. Darwin tried to analyze the movement from expressing nothing to express something. Surely in labeling these faces relaxed, he is not suggesting they had nothing to express—indeed, the fact we can perceive potential expressions in them makes them admissible as evidence and comparable to their emotionally “excited” states.<sup>157</sup> Darwin’s purpose was to illuminate emotional expression as evolutionarily valuable, a product of the development of human history. Just as Mulvey’s essay argued that Hollywood decides, by allocating desire, who belongs to the category of the human (as subject), so, too, does Darwin’s work. Like *Carnal Knowledge*, his view suggests that a face with nothing to express would *ipso facto* be inhuman.

The two cases *Carnal Knowledge* gives us—expressing nothing and having nothing to express—ask what it might look like to *not* consider facial expression as emotionally expressive. For Darwin and *Carnal Knowledge*, to *not* be-looked-at is to lack subjectivity. Unlike the ideal of the reluctant-to-express classic leading man, eliciting perception is not a sign of femininity, but humanity. *Carnal Knowledge* suggests that the successful representation of facial expression does not seek ideals of authenticity or certainty, but rather needs acknowledging by the spectator.<sup>158</sup> Reflecting our own position as spectators, the characters spend the majority of the film sitting, facing front, looking at us, enjoining us to acknowledge them, which we do. But if we refuse to acknowledge (the performance of actors as) characters as people endowed with minds, it is not an indictment of the film, but of ourselves, of our perceptual blindness. If we

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<sup>157</sup> The fact that we do not have a word that signifies a void of emotional experience reinforces this view. “Apathy” is often adjudicated as such, but feeling indifferent, bored, or even nothing is still to feel something, and not an emotional void. To not feel is, in fact, to not exist, and so, to deny the feelings of others is to deny their existence.

<sup>158</sup> This departs from the Hollywood tradition of realism which fosters the belief that the illusion is real. It also differs from the Brechtian model which attempts to avoid the issue of the legibility of characters’ emotional expression. Brecht’s desire to create situations in which the spectator sees characters who do not express *themselves* (as opposed to the actor or playwright) does not escape the problem; it denies it.

cannot tell the difference between having nothing to express and expressing nothing, we run the risk of objectifying the one who is expressing—even if it is nothing—which makes us no better than Jonathan himself.

Jonathan's refusal to react to others, to acknowledge women, and finally even Sandy, leads directly to his impotence, his body's failure to react. Louise's speech makes us cringe, and we expect some sort of reaction on Jonathan's face, but in this final close-up of impotent Jonathan, his body and his face are united in their failure: both have stopped working, stopped moving; both fail to express. The chauvinist who "has no need for any woman" has a paradoxical identity, for without women, he ceases to exist. Similarly, a cinematic expression which does not move does not just cease to be cinematic; it ceases to express. When the film cuts from Louise's face to Jonathan's, our cathartic desire leads us to expect a legible expression, but his impassive face renders us—chillingly—emotionally impotent. Without movement on-screen, there is no expression of emotion. For it to have an effect on us, and other characters, it must be an activity.

Just as Louise's performance is exposed as a performance, reflexively, *we* are reminded that we are watching performances by Nicholson and Moreno. Thus, the film places us in the position of Jonathan—the one who pays to see a certain performance, a performance we believe will give us pleasure—and one to which we might believe we are not beholden to react, to acknowledge as human. If Louise's performance is not performative in the sense of self-presentation which Susan defined to Sandy, but is instead caused by Jonathan's desire and money, the film challenges us to consider our willingness to believe the actions we see performed before us are intended, as well as *our* desires and role in the creation of characters' performances.

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## Chapter Four: Listening to Nichols and May

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“Acting is Doing” – Viola Spolin

In the previous two chapters, we considered to what degree *The Graduate* (1967) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) require their spectators to hold characters accountable not just for their actions, but for their inactions. In our readings of both films, humorous dialogue (e.g., “Plastics”) was important. This stylistic element would have (I presume) been especially notable, even expected, by contemporary audiences looking for traces of Nichols’ celebrity as half of comedy duo, Nichols and May, who were famous for their improvised routines. In the next chapter, we will examine Nichols’ cinematic debut, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), as well as *The Birdcage* (1996). Both films explicitly engage (and adapt) the style of dialogue Nichols and May propagated. In this chapter, we look both backward and forward by considering the concepts of performance, speech acts, and improvisation in the comedy of Nichols and May.

Returning to Nichols’ own roots as an improvisational performer is not just a gesture meant to contribute to the aspect of this thesis that is an auteur study. Nichols’ work with comic genius Elaine May is the most important location for thinking about at how the style of dialogue which derives from improvisational performance techniques was disseminated throughout American culture. We will look first at Nichols and May’s beginnings in improvisational theater to examine the manner in which improvisation creates scenes out of its actors’ use of language, and how this creation differs from traditional theater by dismissing (or supplanting) the role of the writer. Then, by tracing Nichols and May’s history from live performances to their work on radio and on recordings, the question of the relationship between improvised language and the representation of improvised language arises. Finally, by analyzing specific sketches, we will

acquire an account of Nichols and May's reception as politically avant-garde, as well as insight into their aesthetic form.

Edmund Wilson wrote in 1961 that the effect of hearing his first Nichols and May record was that “people... sound immediately afterwards as if they were having Nichols and May conversations” (35). If Nichols and May elucidated something real about language use at the time, their influence is still felt decades later (and after Nichols' impact on American cinema). James Naremore, trying to articulate the “contemporary” style of cinematic dialogue (which he believes tempers the “naturalistic” with “a *feeling* of improvisational comedy”) in his seminal book *Acting in the Cinema*, labels it the style “made famous in the early work of Mike Nichols and Elaine May” (my italics, 281). Virginia Wright Wexman observes that the signals that mark dialogue in films as modern derive from the improvisational tradition begun in America by Viola Spolin and her son, Paul Sills, who began the improvisational theater The Compass—which Nichols and May were responsible for bringing to national attention (and which evolved into the famed Second City Theater). She writes that Nichols and May were “perhaps the most brilliant improvisers from the early days of the group... [they] excelled at first line/last line” (188).<sup>159</sup> According to Tony Hendra, despite never being part of the Second City Theater proper, Nichols and May “were the first proponents” of what became known as the Second City style (57). Wright Wexman writes that “[w]here a Method performance seeks emotional ‘truth,’ the Second City performance aims for acute social observation” (187).<sup>160</sup> As we will see, Nichols and May became synonymous with this form.

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<sup>159</sup> Although Nichols and May were never actually members of Second City (for Wexman, “Second City” refers to the evolution of improvisational theaters begun by Sills and Shepherd, including The Compass), their influence is still evident as that specific (and still popular) routine was originally May's invention (Coleman, 106).

<sup>160</sup> Improvisation was employed in The Method school of acting, but only as a training tool, a way to uncover characters' subtext and “inner life” in scripted dramas. Coleman points out that Stanislavsky's Method was in the air during the 1930s as Spolin devised her practice, potentially molding her theories in relation (though his works were not all published in English until 1961). Spolin distinguishes her theories from the Method by noting that “[the

In “The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation,” Wright Wexman writes that “our belief in the reality of the character is strengthened by the naturalness of [improvised] dialogue” (30).<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Janet Coleman writes that the improvisational style of performance derived from *The Compass* has often been credited by actors and playwrights alike for “helping them [to] achieve the lifelike dialogue that is the broad arrow of the contemporary [American] style” (34). If the impression of spontaneity is a marker of realistic performances (those that currently strike us as seeming to act like we believe people act), improvisational theater went farther toward this ideal by *actually* having performers behave spontaneously. The theory underpinning *The Compass*’s improvisational style allowed for scenarios to solicit all sorts of affects, not just laughter. However, Nichols and May’s succeeded by operating almost entirely within the comic mode. By examining the evolution of Nichols and May’s style and its relationship to the American social milieu, we will ask: why was Nichols and May so effective, and why did they arrive at this time?

### **They Know From Funny: Representing Action**

Wright Wexman describes improvisation in terms of “textual indeterminacy,” with “roots in modernist movements such as Dadaism, aleatory music, and experimental fiction” (“Rhetoric,” 33). I believe we can be even more specific and look to the confluence of an aesthetic movement in America that emerged in the 1950s, that invited improvisational theater. Whether the depiction of spontaneity was thrilling in the context of the Cold War because the Bomb could happen “anytime,” or whether the representation of spontaneity satisfied a fantasy

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Method’s] work is in the head [and] in the past” (Coleman, 31). Coleman puts it thusly: “The objective of Method work... is building a character, while Spolin’s aim is the emergence of character” (31-32). Improvisation in the Method can be a solo enterprise, which, it cannot be for Spolin: “Without the other player, there is no game” (47).<sup>161</sup> By “naturalness,” I take her to mean something like the conventions of ordinary language as imagined by ordinary language philosophers, and opposed to the creatively crafted poetic or literary styles associated with art. I worry, though, that in scholarship such as this we malign people’s capacity to be spontaneously eloquent; people do, and often, make clever, witty remarks and jokes.

that the aleatory could be wrestled to the ground, there was a call for (the sense of) spontaneity and action in the arts. This is perhaps best exemplified by Jackson Pollock's "action paintings" and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Daniel Belgrad's book *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* details the emergence and trenchant presence of this sensibility in the works of these artists alongside others thinkers, like poet William Carlos Williams and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, as well as the larger movements of bebop jazz, Beat prosody, and other kinetic arts which "stood in direct opposition to the bureaucratic, rationalistic ethos of corporate liberalism" (Kercher, 6). Incredibly, given its title, Belgrad's study does not include The Compass improvisation theater—"the first of its kind in the nation" (Coleman, xi)—or Nichols and May.<sup>162</sup>

Nichols and May emerged in America in the 1950s in the context of the larger modernist aesthetic move whereby the arts, to borrow Susan Sontag's phrase, sought to "lay themselves bare" (29). But in order to recognize the commentaries of modernist artists (such as Kafka, Beckett, and Joyce) on their respective arts (that is, what "counts" as art within each aesthetic tradition), they must be recognized as *having* a medium. Eric Bentley asserted that the actor's art is the art of *commedia dell'arte*, meaning the art of improvisational performance (Corrigan, 208). By breaking the "fourth wall," improvisation raises questions about what "counts" as a performance, and what we call the actor's art. What is the actor's medium? The body? How do we know when a body is doing what we call acting (in the theatrical sense)? Traditional theater is often called the actor's medium, and is grounded in the belief that the actor's art consists of

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<sup>162</sup> We should also include John Cassavetes' work as evidence of the cultural interest in improvisation. Often called the father of independent American cinema, his first film, *Shadows* (1959), made heavy use of improvisation to achieve its dramatic form. See George Kouvaros, Homa King, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik.

interpreting a script in performance,<sup>163</sup> and if this is so, then improvisational performance threatens its audience with a theater without acting. Further questions arise: what sort of knowledge do we need to have in order to know that we are watching a performance; that those on stage imagine themselves as fictional beings? That there was once a script, or that the people stand on something we might properly call a stage? What is the sort of action that lets us know we're watching a performance? What is a character here?

I will recount below how Spolin's theories of improvisational theater offered an idea of acting that replaces the art of seeming and interpreting one of doing. Then, we will be positioned to better understand Nichols and May's career trajectory, from their start in *The Compass* their Broadway show and their television, radio, and album successes.<sup>164</sup> It was their radio and album performances that garnered them their reputation as powerful and original artists. Comics, such as Steve Martin, have been outspoken about the influence of Nichols and May's albums, professing to have listened to them repeatedly, for "[t]hey were like music... I had never actually heard someone deliver irony just in the tone of their voice... There was something in the tone that was very, very new... What really distinguished them from what had come before is that they were still, that it was verbal... You could supply images and characters in your head" ("Take Two"). The irony to which Martin refers is not to be found in Nichols and May's characters' voices; that is, they do not perform characters who know things the other does not. Rather, they include us, as listeners, with them, as "in the know," to share their contempt for the absurd or weak-willed men and women they present.

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<sup>163</sup> I mean "interpreting" necessarily broadly. It might be argued that actors perform unscripted actions in scripted theater all the time—subtle emotions, sighs, laughs, etc. However, if we allow that to be included in our definition of improvisation, then why not include all of the actor's unscripted actions, such as her intonations and the speed of her gait? I think we should reserve "improvised" as a designation for theater which allows actors freedom to react to each other in an un-predetermined way, it requires a greater space of possibility than the limited freedom given the theatrical actor.

<sup>164</sup> Obviously, radio is a medium serving many purposes, not least of all journalism and music; however, I use "radio" here to mean a medium of fictional storytelling.

In his *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media*, Jacob Smith writes of the importance of attending to sound recording in order to properly understand performance styles: “Just as twentieth-century acting has been discussed in relation to the cinematic camera and the development of the close-up, we should consider acting in relation to the closely held microphone, which had an influence on acting just as it did on styles of popular singing and public speaking” (82). Later, Smith claims that “given the importance of the voice and vocal training... radio and the microphone need to be considered as equally important factors [as the cinematic close-up] in the development of modern acting styles” (95).<sup>165</sup> He claims “[t]he microphone’s ability to faithfully capture and disperse subtleties of vocal timbre and inflection opened up the possibility of new forms of performance that exploited the increased semantic significance of those aspects of the voice” (82). In short, sound recording offered the power to represent ordinary language use, and created a “frame” for representing human speech. Gone was the clunkiness of replicating accents, timing, and idiom in novels or the worries of audibility in the theatre. Since this is a written document, I cannot adequately convey one aspect of the recorded albums for which Nichols and May are best known: how Nichols and May’s voices, while never sounding the same from sketch to sketch, nevertheless bears their signature. Their characters’ voices are measured against an imagined “original,” and thus marked by repetition and absence. Their work raises questions parallel to those well-known to Film Studies scholars concerning a photograph and its referent: what is the relationship between a recorded aural image and the original sound, which, unlike a photographed object, is always already a performed thing (in the sense that it is *done*)? With an aural recording, the salient question becomes what is the

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<sup>165</sup> Smith makes the case that Media Studies has yet to properly appreciate the cultural significance of radio. For instance, Smith cites a national survey conducted in 1946, “the year that American movie attendance reached an all-time high” (95). Respondents were given a choice to give up going to the movies or listening to the radio: “84% chose to forgo movies, 11% to give up radio, and 5% were unable to decide” (95).



relationship between a performance and its representation, a question that prefigures Nichols' reputation as an actor's director (which we will contemplate in chapter six).

### **Where Performance Suddenly Meets Writing**

Nichols and May became household names in the late 1950s. They met at the University of Chicago, which he attended and where she sat in on classes. Nichols had joined a theatrical group, *Tonight at 8:30*, and one night he remembers seeing a girl glaring at him during the show, reflecting Nichols' own feelings about the terrible production. This turned out to be May. Each had heard of the other because they both had, in Nichols' words, "big reputations on campus as being dangerous-to-vicious depending on the stimulus" (Sweet, 74). At *The Compass Theater* they hit it off, preferring each other's to anyone else's company. Nichols took a break from the burgeoning troupe in Chicago and headed east to study acting under Lee Strasberg in New York. According to Coleman, he parlayed his vast knowledge of classical music and Chicago radio experience into a job as "chief announcer for America's first all-classical FM station," which generated local celebrity and allowed him to support himself (55). However, he soon realized that he preferred improvisational techniques to Strasberg's.

May was one of *The Compass'* original players (along with names like Edward Asner, Zohra Lampert, Sheldon Patinkin, and Severn Darden). She had studied under Maria Ouspenskaya (who, among other things, taught Strasberg Stanislavsky's Method). Her father, Jack Berlin, had led his own travelling Yiddish theatrical company, in which May performed as a child. She remembers "playing little boys who...were all named Benny" (Rice, 61). She also appeared, with her father, on a radio parody of Fanny Brice's famous "The Baby Snooks Show," playing a child named "Noodnik" (Coleman, 38). Her father died when she was ten. Having

started school late (due to the travelling theater), she nevertheless dropped out at fourteen (“The only thing she ever liked to do in school, she has said, was diagram sentences” [Rice, 61]).

The Compass officially opened on July 15, 1955, the result of a collaboration of David Shepherd and Sills. By developing its material through improvisational methods, it was, at that time, unique in the world (Sweet, xv). As Sills says, “This was the first improvisation theater. People say it happened in Zurich back when or something. I don’t know. But I think as a theater with a place on the street and a continuous history, it started with The Compass back on 55<sup>th</sup> Street” (Sweet, 13). The Compass was not just arguably the first stable improvisational theater, but also, by building on Spolin’s theories, the first self-conscious one. As Spolin once said, “The commedia dell’arte improvised. The socialist political theaters in Europe improvised. They didn’t *read* it anywhere. They were working on what was happening in the streets” (Coleman, 23). Spolin highlights a move from doing improvisation to the confluence of doing and theorizing about improvisation, of her development of improvisation as a self-aware enterprise—a view that we will see in the next chapter can be seen as participating in an American history of ideas. In *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of the Second City and The Compass Players*, Jeffrey Sweet asserts that, as a classic ideal, theater tells stories of a shared community by telling stories of individuals, and that this lends theater a “democratic spirit,” one that “is rarely felt in the theater, but [that] is felt in improvisational theater more often than elsewhere” (xxxvi). I want to briefly sketch the main aspects of Spolin’s theory of improvisation that Sills brought to The Compass in order to get a better sense of Nichols’ roots, as well as the American improvisational theater’s aims and aesthetic sensibility. Two major aims driving this section are to discern what improvisation does with language that became so influential, and to figure out why it lends itself to the comedy of Nichols and May.

## All Part of the Game

The most glaring difference between traditional and improvised theater is the omission of the writer (or, at least, making the actor *into* the writer). Nichols has said that what he found interesting about Compass is that “[t]here wasn’t even exactly a positive aim. There was the negative aim of doing something without a playwright... you had a group of people who were not actors, really, and didn’t have a lot of theatrical experience, but who were very intelligent and, in some cases, highly educated” (Sweet, 75). Although Spolin resided in California during this time, she periodically visited The Compass, conducting intense workshops with the players (Coleman, 94-95). Spolin believes, “Acting is doing.” She writes, in the introduction to *Notes on Improvisation*, that “The final revision of [my] book could only take place after I came to Chicago, observed [Sills’] work with [The Compass], and sensed his vision of where it could go” (xiviii). If Spolin owes The Compass a debt of gratitude, it is arguably Nichols and May to whom she owes the most as they were not only integral to the success of specific scenarios, but its most successful players. It was Nichols and May who created a market for Spolin’s book, and for *The Second City*.

Drawing on the work of sociologist Neva Boyd (a woman whose belief in “the constructive potential of play” motivated her to lead “immigrants’ children... in traditional games to help them adjust to the society in which they lived” [Sweet, xvii]), Spolin began to develop her ideas about improvisation in 1938 when she became the supervisor of drama for the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal.<sup>166</sup> There, she organized a number of

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<sup>166</sup> Spolin first utilized audience suggestion in 1939, that same year she wrote that “the most dramatic material lives within our everyday lives” (Coleman, 107). Sweet reprints a review of a show from Spolin’s theater group from that year, in which the writer reeled from his experience: “I certainly saw something! There were about 150 people in the cast—Italians, Greeks, Mexicans, Negroes, and I don’t know what other racial strains. They were of all ages and of both sexes. What they were doing was not exactly a ‘play.’ ... The important thing about it was that it was conceived, written and played by the people themselves” (xviii). The reviewer goes on to extol both the form and content of the performance, exclaiming “You knew it was [the interior of a poor man’s home], not from the

improvisational theater groups, and devised a series of “games” in which play was “the catalyst for self-expression and self-realization” (Sweet, xvii).<sup>167</sup> These were not “games” in the sense that students/actors might “win,” but rather a way of resolving a given “theater problem” by working *together*, creating a performance *solely* by reacting to each other. Spolin’s text is most directly aimed at instructors of improvisational theater, warning them to be on their guard against premeditation, or “indicating.”

Spolin uses the term “indicate” to indict her actors for *appearing* to perform, rather than *to do*.<sup>168</sup> This is a matter of credibility, to be sure, but it also speaks to her desire for performers to be “present” in the moment of the event on stage. Her methods seek to offer a theater to the spectator which exists in the overlap between the use of language in conventionally scripted plays and in “real” life. She teaches that the goal of an activity must not be “superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it... When the goal appears easily and naturally... the performance... will be no different from the process that achieved the result” (12). When two players begin a game, neither should start, or “initiate,” the action, but should wait to react. One of the most important skills an actor can take from learning the games is “that How a problem [necessary to any future scene] is solved must grow out of the stage relationships... Pre-planning how to do something throws the players into ‘performance’ [that is, not an authentic “doing,” which the spectator may sense] and/or playwriting, making the development of improvisers

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scenery—because there wasn’t any—but from what the people said” and “Looking for a job wasn’t an imagined situation for them. It was the grimmest of realities” (xviii). In 1940, despite Hollywood’s historical practice of ripping stories from headlines, another critic was bowled over by the idea that this mode could literally realize the notion: “Today’s news is tomorrow’s play” (Sweet, xix).

<sup>167</sup> Lawrence Epstein points out that the theatrical theories and originalities of Spolin (who was, like Nichols, born to Russian-Jewish immigrants), which emphasized spontaneity and group-formation are consonant with “a Jewish sensibility”: evolving ever new survival strategies for dealing with a potentially hostile broader society outside the group (181).

<sup>168</sup> As spectators, we might think of this phenomenon as “bad acting;” we think we see the *actor* reacting instead of the *character*.

impossible and preventing the player in the formal theater from spontaneous stage behavior” (35).

By revealing the process of getting “into” character before the spectator, Spolin’s aim was to heighten the spectator’s awareness of the actor’s art and delight in sharing a reality with the actor prior to the actor’s invention of an alternate one. Allowing the character to arise on stage as the product of the actor’s performance sidesteps the “problem” of psychological realism posed by the strength of Brecht and Stanislavsky’s names. A character emerges which is not the expression of the writer or director, but the product of actorly interaction, of each actor’s attunement to the other within the bounds of intelligibility provided by the dictates of ordinary language (even humorous utterances rely on the parameters of the ordinary).<sup>169</sup>

Spolin’s games form the core of her method; she writes: “Any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem that needs solving within it—an objective point in which each individual must become involved... There must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played” (5). The games are designed to create a What, Where, and Who (these elements could come, if not from the teacher/director, then from the audience). The main task is to figure out the How *together*, to confront a problem and to solve it. (There are no exercises for creating a When; that rhythm results from the actor’s interactions.) Thus, Spolin’s theory privileges the core of the actor’s form: that which can never be adequately scripted, the way an actor performs (which is what other actors react to). Inflection, rhythm, manner of walk, etc., the *how* with which an actor delivers the character, create a context for the lines (even through the lines).

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<sup>169</sup> Of course, all statements can be said to do something in the sense that they convey information and speakers can usually expect a response. The thinking is that improv performers, speaking spontaneously, create sketches out of ordinary language and gesture. I do not deny that skilled performers can create a stylized dialogue. It is even said that Nichols and May, performing on Broadway, did an entire sketch in iambic pentameter at the audience’s behest.

The games are designed to be as simple as possible, encouraging the neophyte performer to always be aware of a problem, a desire to act, and to perform a strong action—all within an intense—and primary—awareness of other performers. For instance, in “Contact,” players may not begin speaking until they have touched each other in some manner. Coleman reports that a “favorite” exercise of The Compass players was Spolin’s “how-to-do-it” or “teaching” scene, in which one player must instruct a partner how to perform various activities, from asking the boss for a raise to frying a fish (94). It is easy to imagine how such a set-up provides both actors strong actions to perform while also allowing commentary on social manners, morality, and authority by satirizing the “right way” to conduct an activity.

Sills places improvisational theater in an “oral tradition,” as well as a democratic one, as actors begin a scene on equal footing (Sweet, 20-21). Sills believes theater should deepen a society’s consciousness of itself, and can do so by allowing actors to feel “liberated and free to self-explore” in a “space where work can be freely done, in which a person is free to become,” strongly echoing Freudian visions of the therapeutic space and the talking cure that occurs within it. Sills does not believe this space can be achieved in solitude; it can only be created with, through, another: “That’s what this work is about: the finding of the self in a free space created through mutuality” (Sweet, 17-18).<sup>170</sup>

In this way, Spolin claimed that her games blur the line between the senses of acting: the doing and the mimetic.<sup>171</sup> Lee Strasberg criticized Spolin’s games on just this point, asserting that, “People [in her games] don’t play, they behave” (Coleman, 27). Spolin, on the other hand,

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<sup>170</sup> For this reason, Sills exclaims his devotion to Nichols’ old family friend, Martin Buber, extolling Buber’s emphasis on mutuality as the only path for knowing a self (much less one’s self). Buber’s work, such as *Between Man and Man* and *Ich und Du (I and Thou)*, is, according to Sills, in perfect harmony with his mother’s.

<sup>171</sup> Sills speaks often of attending to just this relationship, making it clear he privileges the sense of doing as the key to successful theater (Hendra, 63). Sills never forgets that the techniques learned during improvisation (particularly its focus on remaining present to the characters’ present) are relevant to performing scripted material, as it rarely advocates identical repetition for each performance. The words and blocking may remain the same, but that does not entail that the actor’s performance will.

believed that if actors recognize that they are humans on stage performing with other humans, it will undo the absurdity of the mind-set that actors are “schizophrenics who have changed their own personalities for the sake of a role in a play” (236).<sup>172</sup> Indeed, Spolin believed that anyone can learn to express herself on stage, and, in turn, can carry that awareness of self and others into the world.

It is the interactions of the actors that delineates a space within which *both* actors can learn to invent characters, by working together. A game teaches performers to treat the creation of a scene (which comes later, and is not a game) like a social contract; once one steps onto the space of the stage with another, one has promised to respond to the actions/claims made by the other. The “scene” is not authored by one person or even both people, but by their interactions. Spolin states that “[t]he material and substance of scene improvisation are not the work of any one person or any one writer but come out of the cohesion of player acting upon player” (19).<sup>173</sup> Each actor *must* listen to the other.<sup>174</sup> We might well sum up Spolin’s approach to performance this way: acting is reacting. The reason that games are the groundwork for an actor in Spolin’s theory, is that they train her “to be present to the moment” (iv). It is clear that “the moment” refers to the actions of the other actor, and so, Spolin does not allow for the possibility of solo improvisational performances; improvisation is about individuals being on stage together. Performers create characters as an activity—while performing the activity of creating characters. For Spolin, performing is a kind of writing for the actor, and, indeed, the basis of theatrical expression is the actor’s need for self-expression (7). Consequently, she recommends that “[a]

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<sup>172</sup> This is a popular notion that worked its way into many stories about actors. Nichols refers to George Cukor’s *A Double Life* (1947) as exemplary of this notion (Probst, 80).

<sup>173</sup> While Spolin emphasized the need for social interaction, she worried over its self-destructive nature, too: “Having thus to look to others to tell us where we are, who we are, and what is happening results in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing” (7).

<sup>174</sup> “Listen” was a technical term for Spolin. It, not seeing, denoted the direction to attend to another actor’s actions.

healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently” (9) and “[a] group should never be used to induce conformity but, as in a game, should be a spur to action” (10). In this way, a game does not determine rules as much as parameters, and incites players to act *because* one is part of a group.

### **The Compass Theater**

Sills and Shepherd began their collaborations with Tonight at 8:30, a student-run troupe at the University of Chicago (despite the fact that Sills had already graduated from the University of Chicago and Shepherd was never enrolled there). Coleman points out, “A vanguard theater does not ordinarily emerge from the theater department of an American university” (13). However, the University of Chicago in the 1950s was not an ordinary university, and much attention was paid to the burgeoning theater’s literacy and intelligence (Sweet, 8; Coleman, 3-12). As I mentioned in the introduction, it was while enrolled at the University of Chicago during the revolutionary presidency of Robert Hutchins,<sup>175</sup> that Nichols met Sills and began his career as a theatrical performer and director (moving away from his gig as a radio host). In a production of *Antigone*, Nichols’ friend Susan Sontag played Ismene (Coleman, 16).

Armed with an inheritance, and degrees from Harvard and Columbia, socialist Shepherd dreamed of satisfying his desires for a theater that was both American and populist by creating a theater based on his devotion to the work of Brecht and his admiration for *commedia* (Kercher, 122, Sweet, 1-10). Frustrated that the only respectable theater in America, i.e. theater on the East Coast, was concerned only with mimicking mainstream European traditions, Shepherd took his

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<sup>175</sup> Given this chapter’s attention to language and dialogue, it is worth noting that, at the time, the University of Chicago was staffed by such luminaries as Bruno Bettelheim and Rudolf Carnap, and employed teaching fellows like Erving Goffman and Philip Roth. The university was committed to teaching through dialogue, not lecture (Coleman, 5).



revolutionary ambitions west to Chicago. He wanted an affordable theater (“Our top price will be less than a dollar and the house will drink and smoke during the performance”), to “break the three-act form” and “[to not] use any sets or special lighting or curtains, and the casts will be small” (Sweet, xxii). But perhaps his visions were on the way to realization when he wondered, “As we develop a new kind of play and audience, we may have to develop an entirely new style of acting” (Sweet, xxii). Shepherd’s desire not to deny the fact of an audience was a desire to engage social issues, and met its match in Sills, who was eager to put his knowledge of his mother’s improvisational theories into practice. Sills was also becoming a devotee of Brecht through the new writings of Eric Bentley.<sup>176</sup> Sills is now widely acknowledged as—to borrow Sweet’s words—“one of the most important and influential directors in theater” (11).<sup>177</sup> The pair soon realized this improvisation was the method best suited to their aims, and so, re-tooled themselves to create an exclusively improvisational theater. They found an off-campus space, and renamed themselves The Compass, reflecting the group’s commitment to vanguard theater and to pointing in the direction of social attitudes.

It is important to remember that improvised material has no obligation to be funny or brief—associations common today. Typical evenings at The Compass mixed scenarios (typically around 40-45 minutes long) culled from previously improvised material (from which key plot points were repeated) with “live” improvisations, such as incorporating audience

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<sup>176</sup> I must point out that Sills’ and Shepherd’s take on Brecht’s work differs from later interpretations which regard Brecht’s theories as advocating not just a reflexive style, but as an attempt to eschew the psychological from theater. Their view, although more complicated, is more faithful to the complexity of Brecht’s various writings, which were just being published in English for the first time. We might also see Bentley’s hand in the affinity of Sills and Shepherd for the comedic mode. He once wrote, “To my mind, Brecht’s theory of theater *is* a theory of comedy,” due to its emphasis on a requisite distance between actor and character created through performance (Coleman, 37). Whereas Brecht advocated that his actors *also* occupy the place of audience by judging and distancing themselves from their roles, Shepherd and Sills tried, as Sweet puts it, “to extend this democratic impulse, attempting to break down the distinction between audience and performers by making the audience performers” (xxxvi).

<sup>177</sup> Tony Hendra reinforces this rank, writing that, while Sills has never sought fame or fortune, he is nevertheless “one of the half dozen most important figures in modern American theater” (57).

suggestions or current political events into the drama.<sup>178</sup> Most of the scenario-plays were directed by Sills, Shepherd, and May (Sweet, xxiv). While short pieces like the “Living Newspaper” appeared multiple nights, one day a week was reserved solely for audience-directed improvisations (Kercher, 125). Bringing together the journalistic and the theatrical, the social critique that changed each night, that could tackle not just the news of *the* day, but the news of *that* day, meant that the performance was not just one of live bodies, but of live issues.

As *The Compass* evolved, it moved away from Shepherd’s explicitly Marxist revolutionary ambitions towards Sills’ more social concerns. Sills told a reporter in 1955 that, “*Compass*, if carried to its logical conclusion, is a sort of ‘do it yourself’ movement. I’d like to see neighborhoods all over the city form groups like this. It’s a search for a community” (Sweet, xxvi). He highlights May’s writings as helping him meet his ambitions, citing topics like blind dates, Hollywood, Joe McCarthy, attitudes toward marijuana, confidence-building courses, etc. as specifically American. Steven Kercher notes that the fact that *Compass* Players freely “uttered obscenities and the undisguised names of national politicians confirmed that their enterprise was boldly out of step with the rest of 1950s cold war America” (127). Coleman echoes this sense: “material on topics of the moment—urban renewal, academic pretensions, the middle-class identity crisis—now came pouring out. Because it was improvised, there was no language censorship” (107). Thus, the *Compass* garnered a reputation for finding dark humor within social commentary. One of the group’s most successful, and perhaps exemplary, scenarios was May’s invention: “*Georgina’s First Date*.” It follows a wallflower teenage girl asked on a date as a practical joke by one of her school’s popular boys. With an overzealous sister and mother, Georgina becomes, in May’s words, “so absorbed in her own effort to have

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<sup>178</sup> Longer scenarios at *The Compass* were based upon a broad outline of a narrative arc in the form of notes tacked up backstage. These notes were not descriptions of actions, but of characters’ intentions and motivations—mental actions which demarcate the beginnings and endings of scenes.

‘personality’ that she is unaware of what she is being used for” (Kercher, 126). After being raped and humiliated, she returns home to tell her mother, who is waiting with bated breath, that she had a wonderful time.

Shepherd also saw their success as contingent, not just upon their social commentary, but upon the actor’s artistry, and, again, looks to May—and Nichols: “take the first Nichols and May record, *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*. I mean, that’s it as far as I’m concerned. There’s more crystallized character work on that record than anything else you can listen to” (Sweet, 7). Although the original Compass Theater only survived for just over a year, its intense performances made a huge impact. Shepherd went on to found different Compass Theaters in other cities (such as St. Louis, where Nichols and May appeared briefly), but, perhaps more importantly, *new* theaters that were invested in improvisational performance began to appear—not least of all was Sills’ The Second City in Chicago.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> According to Hendra, “[n]o other single enterprise produced so many of [the Boomer generation’s] funny and talented men and women as the axis created by Paul Sills and David Shepherd between the years 1955 and 1960” (73). Sweet observes that “[t]he late ‘50s and early ‘60s saw a remarkable explosion of social satire with the appearance of Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Jules Feiffer, Joseph Heller, and others,” noting that each was guided by methods related to improvisation (xlii). He suggests that this kinship explains why these artists, and those of The Compass, collaborated so frequently. Sweet praises The Compass/Second City for dealing with the moral and social implications of the Vietnam crisis as early as 1961, and with some chagrin notes the change in the satirical targets of improvisation theater: “Whereas The Compass and early Second City people were more likely to tackle Ibsen, Pirandello, or Hemingway, today’s [1978] Second City is more apt to take on *Jaws* [and] *Let’s Make a Deal*” (xliii). The names are too many to print here, but here is a *brief* list: Alan Arkin, Alan Alda, Barbara Harris, Paul Mazursky, Diana Sands, Anne Meara, Joan Rivers, Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Harold Ramis, Fred Willard. If we look at the off-shoot companies, such as Elaine May’s Third Ear, names like Gene Hackman, George Segal, Buck Henry, Rob Reiner, Valerie Harper, Linda Lavin, Godfrey Cambridge, and Diana Sands appear. There are important distinctions to be made between The Compass Theater and The Second City Theater. One is that The Compass was collaborative; every member had a voice. Sills called the shots at Second City (Hendra, 61). Another major change was the addition of scene introductions (though connections between scenes were to be avoided)—a presentational element that was added at Nichols’ (who acted as consultant) suggestion (Bernard Sahlins, 36). One of Second City’s first members, Roger Bowen, recalled: “Compass seemed to have a theme—how society molds people into the shape it wants them to take. Now this is interesting because it characterizes society as an intelligent force with direction. Whereas the kind of picture you got of society at Second City a couple of years later was that society was a blind, meaningless, unintelligent automaton and people would just get lost in it. Second City was about alienation” (Hendra, 72). A branch of Second City was also established called Playwrights at Second City. Its first show was *The Explainers*, an adaptation of Jules Feiffer cartoons. One of these, “Passionella,” was later reworked into the Broadway musical *The Apple Tree*, directed by Nichols in 1966 (and revived by Nichols in 2006). At one point, playing in Los Angeles, Playwrights attracted actor Paul Mazursky, who founded LA’s troupe Third City and went on to have a successful career as a director in Hollywood. Arkin, a student of Spolin’s, directed

## The Sudden Rise

Nichols' and May's collaborations became an attraction, and they soon realized they had an act and went to New York. There they auditioned for agent Jack Rollins, who had never been exposed to improvised performances before. He was blown away by the pair: "I knew they had something odd and wonderful, but I didn't know whether to laugh or cry" (Markel, 99). Rollins was amazed by their ability to create on the spot. They began landing television commercials, such as animated Jax Beer ads (which isolated their performances in their voice-overs) or (my favorite) General Electric Refrigerator ads, where they would improvise a scene, and then, in Rollins' words, "like... sculptor[s]," remove elements until they were satisfied. Hence, in what would become Nichols and May's standard practice, improvisation was first a method of divining material, not (necessarily) the product set before an audience. A sketch would still change each time it was performed. "When we repeat an improvisation," May once explained, "it's not by rote but by recreation of the original impulse" (Nachman, 345).

Perhaps, then, we should not call the bulk of Nichols and May's oeuvre "improvisations" but "sculptures." Clearly, theirs was not the purest practice of Spolin's theories, but I would argue the term improvisation remains accurate, for even if the conclusion of a sketch was agreed upon prior to a performance, or even if they pre-planned events, the *what* might happen, they did not pre-plan the *how* it would happen, and so, the sketches remain properly called improvisations. What was said, when events were reached, each's reactions to the other, the duration of the sketch—these aspects were never predetermined.

The duo then appeared at various clubs before landing a gig at the Village Vanguard opening for Mort Sahl. Sahl, a Jewish political comic, was influential on a generation of other

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Feiffer's *Little Murders*. An improvisational offshoot of Second City also operated in New York's Greenwich Village from 1962-1966. One of its members left to establish the successful improvisational company, The Committee, in San Francisco.

comics, particularly other Jewish ones.<sup>180</sup> He was particularly interested in “the rhetoric and logic of all kinds of official utterances, political or cultural” (Hendra, 35). Sahl himself declared: “One of the great tools comedians don’t use is the English language” (quoted in Hendra, 35). Nichols and May did not suffer from this problem. Indeed, language was their primary tool. At one point, they did a twenty minute improv in a nightclub inspired by Plato’s dialogues (Rice, 58). In his examination of the history of American Jewish comedy, Lawrence Epstein looks at the verbal nature of Nichols and May’s comedy, situating it at the intersection of “an expansive linguistic tradition that prized and rewarded quick-thinking and a quicker tongue” and a Yiddish culture that broadly valued “both self-mockery and the mockery of the powerful” (xiii).

Sketches exemplifying this abound, but one of their most famous is a routine called “Mother and Son,” which occurs over the telephone (where two speakers have *only* the other’s language with which to interact). Even when the pair performed this sketch on television, as on stage, they never faced each other, but sat on stools facing forward. Nichols plays a man phoning home to his mother (denoted Jewish by her accent and grammatical inversions). The son, a busy scientist at NASA, cannot offer a satisfactory excuse as to why he has not called earlier. After much back-and-forth, the mother exclaims: “I sat by the phone all day Friday, all day Saturday, and all day Sunday. Your father said to me, ‘Phyllis, eat something. You’ll faint.’ I said, ‘No, Harry. No. I don’t want my mouth to be full when my son calls me.’” Eventually, the son swears that he is sorry, but the mother responds: “Someday, someday, Arthur, you’ll get married, and you’ll have children of your own, and, honey, when you do, I only pray that they make you suffer. That’s a mother’s prayer.” Repeating how awful he feels, she says, “Oh,

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<sup>180</sup> For more on Sahl’s influence, see Epstein. For more on the history of Jewish influences on American comedy, see Kercher’s *Revel With a Cause*, Carl Hill’s *The Soul of Wit*, or Robert Warshow’s “Hope and Wisdom.” Kercher recounts several comics who remark upon how “their Jewish consciousness contributed greatly to their identities as cultural renegades and facilitated the ironic distance necessary for their sharp and caustic humor” (2). Wittgenstein once wrote simply that “[t]ragedy is something un-Jewish” (1e).

honey, if I could believe that, I'd be the happiest mother in the world." Epstein notes that this routine is reminiscent of George Jessel's monologues, but that "Nichols and May took the immigrant comic piece and transformed it by putting the mother onstage... Not only does [the mother] have a voice, but the focus is on her" (181-182). Epstein argues this could be seen positively and negatively: positively, it reflects "an increase in the power and influence of women in society," while negatively it is a sign of the "changing perceptions of Jewish mothers from warm and kind (like Molly Goldberg) into hectoring and intrusive" (182). Epstein believes Nichols and May suggest that the changes might be connected, that the "warm Jewish mother was deprived by marriage and family expectations from finding her true self, turning bitter and needy in the process" (182).

For Epstein, Nichols and May's influence does not stop there. He argues that, "[b]y performing this exchange on Broadway and on television, Nichols and May transformed a typical Jewish routine and made it apply to a contemporary American situation: the increasing tension between young people and their parents, a tension that by the end of the decade would develop into a widespread social phenomenon" (182).<sup>181</sup> (Nowhere, of course, would that phenomenon be more obvious than in Nichols' *The Graduate* [1967].) Epstein's point is that Nichols and May, along with Jewish comics of the 1960s like Lenny Bruce, Joan Rivers, Shelley Berman, and later Woody Allen, were integral in "making Jews the heroes of the alienated," rendering Jewishness "more acceptable, even more attractive" than it previously had been (190).<sup>182</sup> In fact, Epstein locates the 1960s as *the* pivotal era for Jewishness in America: "Little

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<sup>181</sup> Shepherd echoes this statement when he recalled *The Compass*' early reputation: "It you want to see your parents under attack, go to *Compass*. Especially if they're Jewish" (Sweet, 5).

<sup>182</sup> Woody Allen was deeply inspired by Nichols and May and began his career by seeking the chance to write material for them (they, of course, do not employ writers). Their agent Rollins persuaded Allen to perform himself, and, by 1963, he was considered the "heir apparent" to Nichols and May (Kercher, 478). By the time Allen's *Annie Hall* was released in 1979, "*Time* estimated that whereas Jews made up only 3 percent of the American population, fully 80 percent of professional comedians were Jewish" (Epstein, x). In her 1931 influential study, Constance

did the Jewish comedians before the 1960s know it, but American audiences would ultimately joyfully accept overtly Jewish types, language, and humor, and Jewish comedy would reconfigure the very shape of American humor” (xxii). We will see in the next chapter how in Nichols’ *The Birdcage* (1996), Jewishness comes to stand in for immigrancy writ large, as well as being a marker of comic difference.

One of the most accurate descriptions of Nichols and May’s performance style during their Broadway show days suggested that their art existed “somewhere between Ruth Draper and the Marx Brothers” (Nachman, 341). We might also position Nichols and May within an arc that extends from the Marx Brothers’ comic type—“the free soul who doesn’t so much criticize all social mores as mock and ignore them”—to Woody Allen’s urban and neurotic social creature, living all too intensely within his cultural moment (Epstein, xvi). The Marx Brothers made a spectacle out of elaborate verbal games, misfires, puns, and double entendres. Nichols and May did not deal with this level of linguistic nonsense; they never aimed at jokes with punch lines; instead, their style of improvisation allowed them distance from social and aesthetic conventions of performing, but they used that distance to comment on their culture’s attitudes, not to ignore them.

After opening for Sahl, Nichols and May were offered a contract at The Blue Angel, where they developed their first following, and enough attention to secure a few guest spots on that new medium, television. According to one interviewer, “a single, unheralded television appearance [on *Omnibus*] in January, 1958, rocketed them to stardom” (Markel, 99). In a skit they called “Teenagers,” the pair appear as teenagers attempting to “neck” in a car while keeping their cigarettes lit. The scene is really about the girl “torn between a desire to keep her date and

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Rourke barely touches on Jewish influences, perhaps because, as Epstein points out, Jews “mostly entered [America] with large numbers ... just when mass media developed” (xiv).

her virtue [which] is both hilarious and painful” (Markel, 98). The boy, an early version of *Carnal Knowledge*’s Jonathan, is interested only in sex and counters her protestations that boys don’t like girls “like that”: “You’re going to say that I won’t respect you, right? Well, let me tell you right here and now that I’d respect you like *crazy*.” Their second sketch became, perhaps, their most well-known, in which a man valiantly confronts a Bell Telephone operator about the dime lost inside the phone. The day after their appearance, “[t]he C.B.S. switchboard was promptly swamped with calls demanding to know their names. The next morning they awakened to find themselves blanketed by nightclub, television and movie offers. Their guest fee was upped to \$5,000, or \$4,864 more than they had been making the night before” (Markel, 99). Three years later, they would be making \$30,000 per television appearance. Despite never improvising a sketch’s subject matter on the spot, the press made much of the fact that Nichols and May generated their own material through improvisational techniques, that they never wrote anything down—a fact that unnerved television producers (Markel, 99; *Person to Person* interview).

A few months after arriving in New York, the pair were famous enough to guest on the comic TV game show *What’s My Line?* to promote their Broadway revue, *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*. The host said: “They have become *so* famous, and properly so, in these short months where they’ve gone straight up into the top of the clouds.” Nichols commented on their ascent up the ladder to *The New Yorker*: “We were nothing, and suddenly we have money, a career, and a psychoanalyst apiece” (*Person to Person* interview). Both cop to being serious about their treatment—perhaps a reason that psychoanalysts, and their patients, are the most recurrent topic in their routines. Nichols confesses to having lived the high life for a brief period after their initial success, but he decided quickly to keep to a “few close friends,” which included



British critic Kenneth Tynan, composer Leonard Bernstein, and photographer Richard Avedon (Markel, 99).<sup>183</sup>

### **An Evening With Nichols and May**

*An Evening with Nichols and May* premiered on Broadway in 1959 to raves. Arthur Penn guided the staging of the show as director; he was devoted to the pair's efforts to break the attitude of sex-as-vice ("Take Two"). Penn declared that it is "from these kinds of artists that genuine social change takes place" ("Take Two"). He was amazed that Nichols and May were able to draw a young crowd to Broadway. Jules Feiffer was less astonished, since "Teenagers" was, according to him, the first time a performance addressed having sex as adolescents ("Take Two"). A 1961 interview calling them "America's Newest Comedy Stars" likened the out-of-town tryouts for their Broadway show to a coming hurricane. In the first sketch, the audience sees a blank stage, and hears a husband telephoning from the wings, informing his wife his train was late again and making sure his martini awaits him at home. Then, Nichols and May enter from opposite wings of the stage, arms outstretched in greeting, she with a martini and he with a briefcase, before stopping short in their tracks. "I'm terribly sorry," the male character says, "I must be in the wrong house." According to the press (and this writer is representative), it is this type of "one-minute commentary on 20<sup>th</sup> Century suburbia" that "blew the roof off" the theater and led to "equally heady hosannas" on Broadway (Markel, 33).

The press also focused on Nichols and May's amazing ability to appear "in sync" with one another, frequently labeling it "uncanny" or implying that they shared a mind—modeling the most mystical of Spolin's aims. However, it was also apparent that the pair had their own strengths. Nichols is usually depicted as the on-stage "master of ceremonies," (he did, in fact,

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<sup>183</sup> Among many accomplishments of Tynan's, he was the first critic to champion Lenny Bruce.

introduce each new sketch), as well as the organized businessman. May, on the other hand, is a “tornado of assorted talents” (Markel, 33), “the teams’ virtuoso actor” (Rice, 47), capable of a remarkable array of characters and voices she delivers in an evening. In *An Evening*, they performed scathing takes on a wide range of issues such as “female civic-mindedness, industrial bureaucracy, modern child-rearing... Christmas, the Presidential election,” and more, including “almost anyone’s literary output”:

Their evaluation of the novels of Fyoder Dostoevski takes just ten seconds; May laughs hilariously for nine and a half seconds, Nichols says, “Unhappy woman!” and the lights go out. The painstakingly documentary nature of almost any Nichols and May scene that runs much longer than ten seconds tends to provoke a kind of laughter that, while voluminous, is distinctly uneasy. (Rice, 54)

In an in-depth profile, *The New Yorker* writer, Robert Rice reports that, “[s]ome people even find Nichols and May too precise to be funny at all, among them a number of ardent admirers who look upon the team less as entertainers than as important social critics,” before going on to cite a well-known (but unnamed) “social critic” who “recently asserted being moved by just three broadcasts”: the radio announcements of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death, and the television performance of “Teenagers” on *Omnibus* (55).

The tent poles of *An Evening* were the two act-closers. While many scenes changed or evolved, the first act always ended with “Pirandello” and the second act with a lengthy improvisation based on audience suggestion (typically May’s exercise where audience members would supply a first and last line).<sup>184</sup> “Pirandello,” which, according to Rice, “may be their definitive statement,” lasted around twenty minutes: “It uses that skeptical Italian playwright’s system of questioning the integrity of all human relationships to demonstrate that two small children who play at being their parents and apparently become their parents really are two

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<sup>184</sup> Nichols tells us that this take on Luigi Pirandello’s work was “suggested by Edna Millay’s *Aria da Capo*,” which is about “the idea of the game that gets away from you [and which] is a central theatrical idea” (*Playboy*, 70).

actors playing a scene in which children become their parents—or, rather, *really* are Mike Nichols and Elaine May playing two actors playing a scene in which children become their parents” (Rice, 55).<sup>185</sup> “Pirandello” reflexively exploits the major conceit of improvisation—not needing an author—and alludes to Pirandello’s most famous work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (which, of course, was written by one author).

### **Language, Live**

The final event of *An Evening*, the original improvisation, elicited much excitement and brought the experience of spontaneously improvised theater to a wide audience. Nichols and May turned to May’s exercise in which audience members were asked to provide a first line and a last line. Edmund Wilson describes it as the moment of “virtuosity,” and cops to going four times, and recounts them tackling “Plato, Aristotle, Beowulf, and Chaucer” (of course, he recounts that every sketch altered with every performance, not just the finale) (36). Nichols told him of having to take on the New English Bible: “If your eye gives you trouble, take it out and throw it away” (36). It was widely hailed a triumph and brought critics back again and again, who, not knowing what to make of this unique experience, valorized it—vaguely—for being “more live” than scripted theater.

Since scripted theater can be performed to seem as though the characters are suddenly happening upon their words, I want to seriously consider the critics’ intuitions about how Nichols and May deal with language in the hopes of being clearer. The final scene of their Broadway show displayed front and center for the spectator the actor’s art of “getting into” character, but unlike scripted theater, Nichols’ and May’s utterances exist in their present *and*

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<sup>185</sup> For Nichols’ own lengthy description of this sketch (and its humor), which he calls one of their best, see Sweet, 79.

their characters' present. Their utterances constituted the scene, functioning as actions, not unlike the class of utterances J.L. Austin would dub "performatives" a few years later in *How to Do Things With Words* (1962). What Austin found most exciting about these utterances was that they did not involve worrying about a sentence's truth and falsity in reference to an objective world, but rather, were cases where "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (6).<sup>186</sup> Spolin's emphasis on each utterance as an action (like a throw of the ball) suggests that improvisation is the art which reflects on this type of language use.<sup>187</sup> Improvisation presents characters' (ordinary) language *as* a series of Austinian performatives, where the linguistic action does something, and it is only by saying it that the action is done (and a scene comes into being). Still, while the form of exchanging utterances is Austinian in this sense, we cannot forget that the players' utterances remain in a fictional context. One can say "I do" in the context of a wedding scene and not marry one's scene-mate. Bearing this in mind, improvisers' utterances occupy a middle ground between Austin's genuinely communicative actions and traditional theatrical fictions. The language spoken by the actors which constitutes (the verbal element of) the improvised scene is understood by the spectator to be performed in both the fictional/theatrical sense and in the sense that it has just occurred to the actor to say (like our linguistic interactions in life), and so, intended and received as genuinely communicative in order for the scene to continue. Until one player says, "I do," her scene-mate does not know how the scene will play out. Because there is no predetermined response, when one actor speaks, the

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<sup>186</sup> There is, of course, much to say in terms of how all utterances are actions, but, though relevant, that is a discussion for another time. Austin clarifies that for the cases he details, in order for the action which is both the object and form of the utterance to successfully occur, it must be uttered in the appropriate context.

<sup>187</sup> I believe this quality is compounded by improvisation's dismissal of a script. Doing away with the writer, and existing entirely of action on stage, there is no speculating what an unseen author intended, or comparing different performances of the same character, no imagining what appeared on the page and comparing line deliveries (except in one's head).

other must truly listen in order to formulate an appropriate response, and respond according to the dictates of ordinary language; otherwise, the scene will not be intelligible.<sup>188</sup>

In a theatrical event the spectator believes to have been scripted, the thrill of an unexpected (or seemingly unexpected) moment is great, but we should not confuse that kind of spontaneity with what we call improvisation. At improvised performances, as in *The Compass* or *An Evening*, we, as spectators, understand the spontaneity to be intended, and so, it presents the very picture of human freedom. It gives the performer *carte blanche*, a more autonomous position than she has in life or in scripted drama. The premise of improvisation is that the performer is free to act in any way she chooses (the only prohibition is on not acting). An important point to remember about Spolin's theory is that it inherently seeks neither the comedic nor the aleatory (nor allied concepts like suddenness, or like "accidental" or "chance"). Many of her earlier scenarios were serious, as, occasionally, were those at *The Compass*. Spolin's ultimate dream was nothing less than a world of "accessible intuition" (of absolute freedom to act) where people were not subject to "a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effect and position," a poor substitute for personal freedom (8). Thus, she sought techniques that encouraged people to act spontaneously, believing this to be the best method of accessing intuition. Spolin wrote that, "Acting can be taught to the 'average' as well as the 'talented' ... It requires an environment in which experiencing can take place, a person free to experience, and an activity that brings about spontaneity" (4). Spolin defines spontaneity as a moment when "you don't think, you *act*" (370)<sup>189</sup> and as "the moment of personal freedom when

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<sup>188</sup> I exclude the possibility of absurdist improvisation as successful. Improvised language does not lean toward the poetics of fiction, since it needs to abide by the rules of ordinary language so that other performers (and the audience) can immediately follow.

<sup>189</sup> When questioned about improvisational theater's emphasis on spontaneity in relationship to André Bazin's assertion that "the artistic impulse springs from the artist's desire for immortality," Sills admits it is a paradox that interests him, and offers the view that most exciting contemporary art has a transient quality to it (Sweet, 21).

we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it, and act accordingly” (4). For her, people/actors should slough off repressive inhibitions and embrace being present to their own lives: “Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings” (4). Thus, by working spontaneously, improvisation is a form of therapy for the performer. While more oblique, this is relevant to the spectator, too, as “[t]he response of an audience is spontaneous”—especially in comedy where a laugh cannot be forced, but must erupt (39).

Spolin’s views here echo a tradition of thinking in the history of moral philosophy. For example, explaining Immanuel Kant’s views, John Rawls writes: “Freedom is not contingency or lack of determinism. The problem is to avoid predeterminism; that can only be done, it seems, by absolute spontaneity” (280). For Kant, it is in spontaneity that we might find freedom—that value on which America most fervently placed its flag. While Kant is interested in a freedom that allows pure reason, Spolin (like Rawls) pushes the idea that freedom is not the presence of possibility or contingency, but the freedom to act (recognizable where an action and its “opposite” are possible [Rawls, 280]).<sup>190</sup> In a way, this freedom is related to what Nichols says makes for a good improvisation (which may delimit the actor’s freedom if not the spectator’s perception of it): “if we’re improvising a scene and you choose a position, if I want to make a scene with you, I’ve got to take the opposite position. If I agree with you, we don’t have a scene” (Sweet, 75). What an improvisation can do is to open up a space for possibilities in order to play with expectations by doing the opposite of what might be predictable (which places a

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<sup>190</sup> I do not take Spolin or Rawls to include the possibility that the opposite of acting is not acting, but doing something that would yield diametrically opposed results. Certainly, for Spolin, a performer who does nothing has ceased to be a performer and ended the scene.

burden on the performer to be aware of both possibilities at once); this also typically, and immediately, creates the necessary tension for a scene to be interesting.

### **Nothing Goes Unheard: Nichols and May on Record**

As we saw in the case of the skit “Pirandello” (and will see again in a moment in a sketch called “Adultery”), Nichols and May made no attempt to deny that part of the thrill of their performance style was to see two actors undergo countless transformations, building (and razing) numerous characters within one performance. (In this respect, Nichols and May foreshadow the performance style of certain actors in *Angels in America*.) Similarly, when they turned to recording albums, they offered their listeners several individual characters, who became more crystallized when heard in relation to surrounding characters, when listeners attended to similarity, incongruity, pitch, rhythm, tone, etc. *between* characters’ voices.

Nichols and May released their first album, *Improvisations to Music*, in 1958.<sup>191</sup> Its title introduces their method to its listeners, and given that improvisation was a term most associated with jazz music in America, serves to situate them in dialogue with American tradition. On *Improvisations to Music*, the sketches are timed to background musical compositions, inviting the listener to consider their recorded, rhythmically-timed vocal performances as music. The sketches are structured like duets, where each partner has a verse before the voices join and overlap in an aural climax. In the best of these, “Bach to Bach,” Nichols and May play a modern couple, post-coital, pontificating about music, the middle class, and abusing psychoanalytic jargon by lamenting the difficulty of “resolving” in a world where “the woman’s role is ambivalent” and in which “there is no relating; there is proximity, but no relating.” The

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<sup>191</sup> Spolin devotes a chapter to radio performance: “Here the actor works on the problem of showing an audience only through the voice, and must be able to select those things which will allow the audience to see the story ‘through the ears’” (180).

humorous subtext is created by our impression of their pedantry, their use of psychoanalytic terms, and empty cultural references. She says that a “whole world” opened when she read *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and although she is unspecific, he knows “exactly what she means!”. By the end, they agree they have “adjusted so rapidly” to one another, and we realize that this is how a modern, rigorously psychoanalyzed, couple, who were earlier complaining in bed about the “ambivalence” of the world, enters into a relationship.

A recording of selected numbers from their revue, *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*, was released in 1960. It rose to number ten on the charts in 1961, and remained there for thirty-two weeks (Coleman, 270). Nichols and May were also appearing weekly on NBC’s very popular Monitor Radio Show. It was estimated that, by 1961, the duo had already taped more than six hundred spots for Monitor, about three hundred of which were aired (Rice, 57). In their radio and television appearances, they mocked everything from the House Un-American Activities Committee to the arms race with the Russians to integration (“it’s a moral issue... which is so much more interesting than a real issue”).<sup>192</sup>

In their television appearances, the pair frequently appeared sitting on stools, each in medium close-up, facing the camera (and us at home) in long takes that never broke up their scene, never detracted from their faces or the words issuing from them by providing a new visual perspective. Furthermore, split screens tended to be used so as to divide our attention equally between the two, and to allow us maximal freedom in attending to this scene as a scene *between* the two, not alternating images of them in the way a shot/reverse shot might suggest, nor ping-ponging back and forth as though they were on stage. For instance, the “Mother and Son” routine quoted above, which originally aired on the popular *Jack Paar Show*, lasted over five

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<sup>192</sup> Desilu Studios offered Nichols and May a contract to do a sitcom for television in the early 1960s, but they refused (Young, 146). Clearly, after using television early in their career, they preferred to create their work aurally on albums and radio.



minutes with no cuts or camera movement; the pair faced forward (seeming to look at us). In another appearance, the pair delivered their routine as voice-over while an animated screen appeared with only two sets of eyes, each of which, as the scene went on, became linked to a voice. While visually arresting, the emphasis is really on words (and, presumably, they were prohibited from showing a couple sharing a bed).

Nichols and May's contempt for 1950s America, exemplified for them in its vapid clichés—the cocktail conversations, the pseudo-intellectualism, the attention to keeping up with the Joneses—appears directly in their albums' content, but what of their form?<sup>193</sup> If the Broadway show located them in *any* space, the radio appearances and albums situated them in *no* space. Typically, there is no aural reverberation that creates an impression of spatiality. Nichols and May use no laugh tracks; listeners are not controlled by the sound of canned laughter. While such stylistics abstract the work from immediately obvious contexts, it also creates an intimacy with the voices.

Space prohibits going into all the ways that their on-air work also reflects on middle-class American lifestyles in the 1950s, but I do want to point out one consistent strategy for mocking gender roles the pair used, as it is relevant to traditions of radio and cinema. Nichols' voice typically sounds nasal, and rather high, which is unconventional for leading men's voices; and while he is gifted with accents, May demonstrates a greater vocal range, all but unrecognizable between some tracks. However, when playing women being hit on by their bosses—usually nurses and secretaries—May keeps to the lower registers of her already low voice, sounding the very epitome of what is characteristically called sultry. Her mockery of the

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<sup>193</sup> It would seem that the post-war, newly capacious middle class worked almost like an improvisation: if you perform certain actions in relation to your neighbors, then you were playing along properly. I am tempted to offer this as one way of seeing the reputation the 1950s has acquired as coldly materialistic. However, I am not certain that any period enjoys a more “real” referent, or could not be said to be just as “performative.”

notion of a sexy female voice strongly echoes that of Hollywood's Great Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Lauren Bacall.<sup>194</sup> Amy Lawrence writes of these, and other, female Hollywood stars who were "fetishized for their low voices" (88), arguing that such fetishization trumps these voices' ability to communicate, or rather, "communicates the body as *object*, bypassing any attempts at female subjectivity or female control of signification" (149).<sup>195</sup> The humor of all these sketches is that May's sexy females are never listened to by men, for instance, the doctor, who, immaturely, petulantly, continues to profess his love (even during surgery, and at the patient's demise). Conversely, "Sexy Voice," sets up the listener's expectations for an "attractive" sounding woman only to be greeted by May's delivery of a gravelly, shrieking voice (as she performs the role of wife).

### **Sickniks**

While the New York theatrical critics heaped praise upon *An Evening with Nichols and May*, the comic duo's albums and radio appearances brought them to national attention. Jules Feiffer said, "It never got smarter, it never got wittier. In fact, the first thing to go was the wit after Nichols and May" ("Take Two"). Arthur Penn points out that their style of humor allowed itself to be appreciated on multiple levels—with both "mob and snob appeal" ("Take Two"). However, Nichols and May's anti-institutional stance, dissatisfaction with gender roles, and sexual content got them dubbed "sick" by the mainstream media, most notably *Time* magazine's 1959 cover story. *Time* went as far as to coin the term "Sickniks" to refer to the group of Nichols and May, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman (who was at The Compass with

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<sup>194</sup> In her autobiography, Bacall recounts her training to keep her voice low to avoid being considered unattractive on screen *and* in her life.

<sup>195</sup> We might do well to note that, unlike traditional theater that standardizes voices through training, radio and cinema valued unique voices, voices which suggested a personality, from Cary Grant's lilt to Humphrey Bogart's sideways mutterings, from Dietrich sultriness to Jean Arthur's alto.

Nichols and May), Jonathan Winters, and Tom Lehrer.<sup>196</sup> Appearances on shows like *That Was the Week That Was*, where they mocked figures such as Roy Cohn (a figure who will return in Nichols' *Angels in America*), marked the pair as caustic and liberal, even on a satirical program. Nichols and May, though, were considered the “high brow” of the Sickniks (the implication, of course, is that since nothing is wrong with society, to criticize it or to challenge its mores could not be other than mad, misguided, or perverted).

The offended public objected in particular to the pair's willingness to discuss sex, as we saw with the post-coital couple in “Bach to Bach.” Nichols and May's comedic eye was drawn in many directions, but they utilized almost any issue as a lens for looking at gender relations. Rice tells us that Nichols and May are better known for their sketches that “deal accurately and candidly with what one man who has worked with them calls ‘the secrets of the family’—the appalling (to them, at least) relationships that habitually exist between mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, or, in short, males and females” (47).

When understanding why Nichols and May shocked the public, we cannot underestimate the combination of May's sharp tongue, beauty, and obviously quick, well-informed mind. This appeared in stark contrast to the comic stylistics of Lucille Ball, Doris Day, and Gracie Allen. John Limon writes of May's inarguable beauty, which combined with her wit to produce significant anxiety in society, since she was a “laughing medusa” (56-57).<sup>197</sup>

In his examination of the explosion of humor contemporaneous with the “Baby Boomer” generation, Tony Hendra observes that “From a historical point of view, Boomer humor dealt for

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<sup>196</sup> Wylie Sypher points out that laughing at “obscene” jokes, the actions of the flesh, divides humans from other animals, who are “never self-conscious about any fleshly act whatever” (28). This fact reveals to Sypher that obscenity “is a threshold over which [the human] enters into the human condition” (28). What is “dirty” is just as definitive as the “sinful” or “evil.” In this sense, characters possessed of “sick” humor indicate a marker of humanity for the listener.

<sup>197</sup> The sexism May faced is strongly evident in press interviews, which never fail to detail her beauty while implying her intelligence intimidates men. This aspect of Nichols and May's reception has perhaps been the most critically attended to; for more, see Limon, Nachman, and Coleman.

the first time with subjects that had hitherto been completely off-limits in popular comedy” (2). Attacking attitudes towards notions of race and relationships between the sexes meant that “[s]tereotypes were no longer familiar cartoons but disturbing caricatures. Titillation was not the object of this comedy—but rather the sexual attitudes that made titillation necessary” (3). Increasingly, due to figures like Lenny Bruce, the public looked to comics for cues on political issues. Indeed, it was a rare outlet for hearing accounts and opinions on matters that differed from the government mouthpieces. Hendra claims that “Boomer humor was born in an era of anti-intellectualism [particularly as led by Senator Joseph McCarthy]... Boomer humor was thus from its birth political by the mere fact of being intelligent” (4-5). In a radio appearance doing the routine “Politician,” Nichols and May mock the increasing demand for politicians to be entertainers, their own reputation as political comics, and the contemporary need for politicians to be pseudo-comedians. Nichols plays a generic politician looking for a good speech writer, and so, considers getting Sahl, “the guy who wrote the Marx Brothers,”<sup>198</sup> or Carl Reiner—all while his wife keeps telling him to nail the jokes.

The targets of Nichols and May’s jabs were often those concerned with the spoken word, such as in Nichols’ parody of Tennessee Williams, in which he plays a Southern playwright, Alabama Glass, author of *Pork Makes Me Sick*, about a man brought to suicide when he is “unjustly accused of not bein’ a homosexual.” Many sketches were especially contemptuous of clichéd language, instances of language that are not the invention of the speaker, and thus, can be taken as less *meant*, at best as lazy and at worst as insincere, such as “I can’t stand to see you this way” or “Darling, I’m so ashamed” (Rice, 47). For example, in one of their funniest stage pieces

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<sup>198</sup> That guy was Sidney Joseph Perelman. In “The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor” Stephen Whitfield describes him as “a Marx Brothers scriptwriter and *New Yorker* luminary with so freakish a command of English that, more than anyone else, he invested American humor with a linguistic turn. No wonder that the comic work in which he most re-Joyced was *Ulysses*” (10).

(which later appeared on the LP), “Adultery,” an affair is seen through the lens of a couple from three national cultures: American, English, and French, with Nichols and May putting on elaborate accents for each couple. The American couple is aroused by (and seeks satisfaction in) the overwhelming guilt, and the Brits by the indirectness of the interaction. The French couple, it turns out, planned to have a threesome, but “forgot to tell zee ‘usband,” thus rendering it a non-affair since they plan to apologize to the husband—for not inviting him.

Still, Nichols and May received widespread devotion, perhaps because their comedy was often taken impersonally. Nichols tells us that both he and May agreed that,

If you were in the audience and I did you exactly, you would say, ‘I know somebody just like that.’ That was always the reaction. Elaine’s mother always thought it was my mother we were doing, and vice versa. If you have a group of middle-aged Jewish ladies and you do the mother sketch, they all say, ‘I know a woman just like that.’ (Sweet, 87)

This is another way of saying that people come to self-awareness through awareness of others, of moving out of the personal in order to find it. This sort of thinking indicates, too, reasons why Nichols and May could get away with political humor, even if labeled sick, and still enjoy such commercial success.

In her book *Ordinary Pleasures: Couples, Conversation, and Comedy*, Kay Young looks briefly at Nichols and May’s album work. She believes that the team “got away” with scenes with sexual content, precisely *because* they only dealt in language: Nichols and May’s “routines ooze with a directness in language about sexual desire and fulfillment made wholly indirect through the absence of their bodies’ interaction” (150). While I object to Young’s observation for too readily adopting the notion that recorded voices are somehow less corporeal than other traces of bodies, she is right to say that “[w]hat Nichols and May make, then, is a comedy built on the joke that doubles their frame of reference, in their play between the stated and the implied scene they create” (151). Nichols and May’s comedy does often rest on *our* understanding of a

difference between the stated and the implied (the irony created by the difference of knowledge between what we know the characters know and what we know we know about the characters), but this is the result of playing *within* ordinary language, not the absence of their bodies (though surely had there been a visual track accompanying several sketches, they would have been dubbed “sicker” still).<sup>199</sup>

When *The New Yorker* profiled Nichols and May, the piece began by addressing this quality as the crux of their reputation:

One surprising development in the entertainment business during the last half-dozen years has been the ascent of a generation of young comedians whose public attitude is indignation and whose subject matter is man’s inhumanity to man—of which, if their work is a reflection of their state of mind, they consider themselves to be outstanding victims. Gone is the time when being jocose about Bing Crosby’s toupee, Jayne Mansfield’s structure, or the outcome of the daily double at Hialeah was fashionable; the new comedy covers a bleak political-psychological-sociological-cultural range that reaches from the way public affairs are conducted in Washington to the way private ones are conducted in Westchester. Of the members of the group of suffering entertainers—though it may be disrespectful to use the word “group” to describe people who spend much of their time being disrespectful to groups—the two who have devised the most striking way of making their pain laughable are the team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May. (47)

Foregoing structured jokes, and with the emphasis already mentioned on historic gender roles, “[Nichols and May] unburden themselves most naturally and most often,” according to Rice, “by turning everyday events into melodramas, by turning melodramas into everyday events” (57).

These everyday events range from going to the dentist to cooking dinner, from running into old friends you don’t remember to annoying seatmates on public transportation. It is not just their subject matter that draws upon the quotidian; the speech acts that constitute these sketches draw

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<sup>199</sup> I described above how their television appearances often focused attention on their voices, and prevented them from “acting out” the events in their sketches. Those that didn’t, such as “Teenagers,” was, as I detailed, taken to be far more provocative. On stage, the pair did not heighten the visual elements of their stories through set pieces, and (staying true to Spolin’s instruction) instead, mimed interacting with objects—a feature I will return to later.

upon conventions of ordinary language, representing them as a means of achieving (simultaneously) realism and comedy.

Thomas Doherty describes Nichols and May's comedy as "neurotically gendered tag team" (2). There is no doubt that the bulk of Nichols and May's work on Monitor consists of characters talking. The pleasure is in the mirroring of *how* people talk. Thus, the topics need no consistent themes. From the extraordinary way people speculate about celebrities' career decisions and love lives ("Anna Mae Wong") to elderly people's attitudes toward marriage ("Willya or Woncha") to trying avocados ("On the Train"), the topics rarely matter; the listener is not going to learn anything about Anna Mae Wong or avocados. Instead, she is going to learn about what sort of people say just these sorts of things about Anna Mae Wong in just this way (in this case, two people enact unwitting racism by wondering what happened to her career and whether she can stage a comeback by appearing with—and falling for—Sessue Hayakawa). "Anna Mae Wong" illustrates Nichols and May's tendency to steer clear of impersonating famous people.<sup>200</sup> Celebrities are a prevalent topic, but the sketches are not about famous people, but about how "average" people talk about celebrities, such as "I Love Your Work," and "Disc Jockey" (in which host Jack Ego's interview with burgeoning starlet Barbara Musk becomes a name-dropping competition involving Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer, and God).

Whether live at *An Evening* or on the LP adaptation of the show, scenes, such as "Adultery," clearly privilege Nichols and May's vocal performance. This attention is reinforced by the show's visual sparseness, which prompted *The New Yorker* to label them "[a] pair of

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<sup>200</sup> When appearing on Monitor Radio, Nichols and May did occasionally perform as well-known persons. However, as in the case of "False Teeth," where the pair play an aged George and Martha Washington, the humor does not result from biographical interest, but from thinking of *this* couple as like any other old married curmudgeons.

hilarious mimes” (Goings on About Town section).<sup>201</sup> Appearing on a blank stage, May and Nichols’ create the space their characters need as they need it (one could not give form to a character in a vacuum). The lack of visual text provided by a Nichols and May album (which is not to say these sketches are not visual, but that such visuals would be supplied by each listener’s imagination) de-centers notions of visible, politicized identities by creating so many different types of men and women in such short periods of time solely by saying different things with different sounding voices—not by changing their visible bodily appearance through costumes, masks, make-up, or by using props (like actors in *Commedia* did).

Indeed, Nichols and May’s final scene is a track entitled “Nichols and May at Work,” and ostensibly lets the listener hear the pair at work in the studio recording a sketch. In it, Nichols informs May he has an idea; he will approach her as a son to his mother. It turns out Nichols’ idea is to play a teenage jock who confesses his deepest desire to be a nurse (a male nurse being a source of some humor in the 1950s). They try it, and then, try to repeat this premise with differences (such as making the mother Jewish). The track consists mostly of their hysterical laughter. May clearly does not expect the son to harbor nursing ambitions, and Nichols, in turn, does not expect May’s reaction of sincere and profound pride. At one point, May threatens to kill Nichols if his laughter is audible over her lines because she swears she will never get through it again. The listener realizes just how the scenes are composed. Indeed, the Nichols and May fan will recognize this sketch, having heard it on Monitor, and understand the importance of

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<sup>201</sup> Mime treats space paradoxically; it emphasizes space as absent, yet, at the same time, present to us, as actors and audience members. I am tempted to suggest that Nichols and May’s use of theatrical “space” is analogous to the “ordinary,” the shared experience we all bring to the stage/world and which we can draw on together. The blank stage becomes a visual analog for the “ordinary” in Wittgenstein’s sense, as that is precisely that which we know (is there), but we don’t know how we know it, or what it is precisely. We *know* the space is there—we can point at the stage—but we do not know what that space contains (or will contain). Nichols later directed Gilda Radner and Whoopi Goldberg in their one-woman Broadway shows, *Gilda Live* (1979) (a filmed version was released in 1981) and *Whoopi Goldberg* (1984) (which brought Goldberg to national attention). Both shows involve significant amounts of mime.



editing for them. With “Sexy Voice,” or the multiple intra-sketch characters of “Adultery,” or “Nichols and May at Work,” Nichols and May demonstrate both how improvisation works—how they sculpt scenes from a premise by tossing and catching different balls—and the importance of their art’s recorded nature.

### **Between Doing and Performing**

Earlier, we looked at Spolin’s theoretical writings to more fully understand Nichols and May’s career as improvisers, but we have yet to consider how the shift from live performances to mass-reproduced recorded scenes affects our idea of their social commentary. So, before we end our look at Nichols and May and return to our examination of Nichols’ cinematic work, and now that we have seen how Nichols and May disseminated improvisational theater to America, I would like to return once more to the basis of Spolin’s theory in an effort to better understand precisely what we can take Nichols and May’s legacy to be—and how Nichols’ cinematic career builds on it.

For Spolin, improvisation follows from one central metaphor: “The art consists purely of players tossing the ball to each other” (Coleman, 27). The “ball” (also referred to as the “point of concentration,” or “focus” in later editions) comes to signify the inseparability of communication and performance between performers. Spolin writes that, “*the techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating*” (14). For her, acting is not about whatever human behavior is about, but whatever communicative human behavior is about, about what communicative behavior is. Sills also describes the form of improvisation in terms of communication: “True improvisation is a *dialogue* between people. Not just on the level of what the scene is about, but also a dialogue from the being—something that has never been said

before that now comes up, some statement of reality between people. In a dialogue, something happens to the participants... a discovery. As I say, you can't make this discovery alone. There is always the other" (quoted in Hendra, 44).

Nichols and May always maintained parity. Neither was the other's "straight man," neither was going to have the upper hand (at least, not consistently). In what became, perhaps, their most well-known piece, "The Lost Dime," Nichols plays a man who dials the operator to complain that he has been robbed of his dime by a pay phone. Kercher sees it as no coincidence that this scene became exemplary of their work, for it "commented on the rigid bureaucracy of the phone company, yet what really drove it was the way May's character reduced her male customer into a pathetic, pouting child. Here as in several other popular Compass scenes, the male character became a victim, comically infantilized and 'emasculated' by May" (130).<sup>202</sup> But it is not just its content that makes it an exemplary Nichols and May sketch; so does its form, the back-and-forth of their utterances. Nichols complains to the operator, so she must find a way to refuse his claim. He must then find a new way to lodge his grievance, she to rebuke this, and so on. Similarly, in one of my favorites, "British Ennui," the sketch begins with Nichols playing a bored, posh Englishman. As his wife, May continuously indulges him by suggesting new activities, each of which he finds a way of declining. This is how the ball is tossed to and fro, and how that tossing constitutes a scene.

In words remarkably similar to Spolin's, Wittgenstein wrote: "In a conversation: One person throws a ball; the other does not know: whether he is supposed to throw it back, or throw it to a third person, or leave it on the ground, or pick it up and put it in his pocket, etc." (1948, 74e). I find his "etc." significant for relating it to Spolin's text, for it suggests the infinite ways

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<sup>202</sup> The Compass' Severn Darden later starred in *The President's Analyst* (Theodore Flicker, 1967), which also casts "the phone company" as the ultimate symbol of bureaucracy.

the ball can be thrown and received (or not received). This space of possibility is crucial for Spolin's players to exchange utterances in a spontaneous way. Taking into account both Spolin's and Wittgenstein's similar descriptions of language use, despite the different contexts for that use, means that utterances exchanged by Nichols and May during an improvisation are neither referential in the way ordinary language is when spoken by "real" people (again, the context of the stage is crucial), but nor are they simply fictional. Improvised language occupies a middle-ground, a skewed vision of both these things, which perhaps suggests a reason Nichols and May drew upon it for their ends.

In an interview, Nichols comments on the need for a strong premise if an improvisation is to succeed, referencing Aristotle's assertion that *both* tragedy and comedy are rooted in improvisation (Probst, 113). If tragedy gives us what *must* happen, then comedy gives us surprise, chance, contingency, and "all the changes in fortune that fall outside the necessities of tragic myth, and can present 'character' for its own sake" (Sypher, 33). This also hints at a reason improvisational performance likes comedy, why it tends to elicit laughter from its audience members; the performers are free to express, to pursue possibilities.

Connecting Spolin's and Wittgenstein's ballistic metaphors shows us that the *form* of improvisation is based on (ordinary) language-use. For Wittgenstein, words have functions within the contexts of what he terms "language games." Hanna Fenichel Pitkin explains that Wittgenstein's view of the role of utterances in a game is "not making a true or false assertion about facts. Rather it changes the status, the relationships, of the players. Uttering such an expression is like making a move in the game, and the expression is just a device by means of which the move is made" (37). However, in the aesthetic and performative context of improvisation, utterances are not just devices for making moves; they *are* the moves. For

Wittgenstein, our knowledge of ourselves and our world comes to us through our language (and vice versa). He calls this knowledge “ordinary,” which is meant to delineate the knowledge we have as speakers of a natural language despite not knowing we have it (or how we got it). It becomes, for him, the aegis of philosophy to figure that out, to ask what exactly we mean when we say certain things: in short, to describe and to examine ordinary language and its contexts—which is precisely what Nichols and May do.

Unlike the novelist, playwright, or poet who typically works alone, free to pursue signature styles, Nichols and May work together through conventions of ordinary language. Improvisation destroys all possibilities save one each time an action occurs. In every sketch, Nichols and May demonstrate that they know how ordinary language works only to mock it. Even for Nichols and May characters who speak a special class of English, such as the academics in “Dr. Wasserman and Professor Cole” or the rich of “British Ennui,” the humor lies in the difference located between their English and what we know to be ordinary English. In this way, they represent ordinary language use in absentia for the spectator. An improvisation becomes a dramatization of speakers coming to *these* words, creating a reality. Wittgenstein said as much with his ball metaphor, which implies that language-use (and so, language) occurs interpersonally. And Sills seems to have had this in mind when he called improvisation, “a kind of confrontation with an unknown. What’s between [the players] is unknown, unspoken, unsomething,” and that “[t]heater is concerned with reality. Now, reality is not to be defined as what is real for you alone. Reality is shared. And reality of the moment can occur only with spontaneity” (Sweet, 17).

Earlier I described the final sketch of *An Evening*, where audience members were asked to participate. The audience’s clamoring to make suggestions could be viewed as a way of

enacting power over the performers, of setting constraints, of testing them, of limiting their freedom, enslaving them, and reducing their spontaneity—while (narcissistically) creating scenes of greater “interest” or relevance to the audience. Spectators become (literal) dictators, dictating objectives, styles, and tasks, to the performer. Now, in this light, we can clearly see why Nichols and May’s triumph might also be thrilling for the audience. They seem to emerge victorious over the obstacle of ordinary language, creatively extricating themselves from its ropes, inventing a “how” to do the task which surpasses what the spectator imagines possible, reveling in the supremacy of ordinary language and manners to transform meaning. Audience participation means, too, that the evening’s most spontaneous of improvisations still fail to offer true spontaneity, the sort that determines its own constitution.

Wittgenstein also indicates a flaw in Spolin’s dream of a world of accessible intuition and spontaneity. The improvised scene occurs in (and largely as) language; thus, it must remain outside the realm of absolute spontaneity. Hence, there is no rupture between live spontaneity and its semblance (recorded cases), though they are different in degree. So, while Nichols and May could never achieve the sort of spontaneity Spolin (somewhat mystically) desires (language operates within the realm of inhibition, is part of that realm, not outside it), they are even farther from that ideal when mass reproduced—which is how most of the nation experienced their comedy. In terms of our appreciation of them, this is not necessarily bad. Knowing that a performer can say *anything*, and chooses to say *this* thing at *this* time allows us to see each choice as intentional.

If the point of improvisation is finding pleasure in spontaneity, of seeing a scene created before you, of seeing the performer create a character (and without being asked to suspend disbelief as if in a classical drama she is still also the performer), then what is the pleasure of its

imitation on a Nichols and May album? Or, as we will ask in the next chapter, in a Nichols film? Listeners and spectators can never know (that is, without having someone trustworthy *tell* them) that the performer/characters' actions that appear on-screen were unplanned during the recording or filmmaking process. Can spontaneity even be imitated? In our discussion of *The Graduate* in chapter two, we decided that, at the theater, we share silence with the characters, while at the cinema, we do not. The same could be said of spontaneity.

Etymologically, “improvisation” denotes the unforeseen, unexpected. For Spolin’s ideal improvisations, audience and performer alike begin in a state of not knowing. As spectators, the drama of seeing the drama crafted before us in real time relies on *knowing* (having been told) that we are seeing an improvised show. Otherwise, we are free to imagine a script, and so, the actor’s *choices* in performing a character in just this way. During improvisation, unconstrained by a script, the actor is free to fully inhabit/create a persona, and so, the infinite domain of possibility is only ever delimited by the actions of another performer. The form of the performance is not understood to convey a writer or director’s wishes; the performance exists fully on stage, in the present before the spectator. Since the actor’s art is one of activity, always occurring in the present, improvisation is the style of performance that best seeks to match form to content. By presenting actors/characters doing things on stage in both a mimetic and literal sense, improvisation relieves us of any nagging voice that we are being duped by this impression of characters “in the moment,” of presentness to us (that the theater thrives on), while still mirroring and commenting on the real.<sup>203</sup>

I have shown that Nichols and May’s art functions through their meticulous representation of the minutiae of ordinary linguistic interactions—whether they portray children,

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<sup>203</sup> Nichols’ Broadway musical adaptation of Monty Python’s *The Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, 1975), *Spamalot* (2005), plays with the theater’s “presence” to the spectator by culminating in the “finding” of the Holy Grail underneath the seat of an audience member.

mothers, lovers, or phone company personnel. May once said that, “comedy is almost entirely the doing of something in detail, step by tiny step,” and describes how creating a fuller and fuller picture of an event teeters on absurdity, but can result in a story that is both humorous and “closer to life” than broad dramas (Probst, 135). When an interviewer asked how she knows something is funny, May responded, “Somebody asked George Bernard Shaw that, and he said, ‘When I laugh’—this is not a direct quote. I wish I had said that. And now I have” (Probst, 134). But, from her own perspective as a comic, she said, “The nice thing is to make an audience laugh and laugh and laugh, and shudder later” (Rice, 67). While “when we laugh” may not be a helpful definition of the comic mode, or a useful description of how it functions, it is often turned to as a criterion for recognizing comedy.

When thinking about humor, Wittgenstein returns to the metaphor of throwing a ball: “What is it like for people not to have a sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It’s as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket” (1949, 83e). Here, humor fails when one person fails to do something public with the ball thrown to them (and, one suspects, if it is not returned fast enough; a propos, Sills called Nichols and May “the world’s fastest humans” [“Liner,” Sahlins, 2]).

Nichols asserts that “a laugh is just a very loud Yes” (I take him not to mean that a spectator must agree with specific comedic content to get the joke; one can laugh at a joke’s delivery, for example) (Probst, 125). For him, the expression of laughter reflects a judgment, at least that something is funny (not necessarily that the laughter signifies consciousness of why it is funny), and his view of laughter as a “yes” concurs with Wittgenstein’s view of humor: that

two people have to find it funny or communication hasn't happened. The laugh, then, is an entry point for the individual's engagement with the comic text, and, by extension the comic artist—at times within and at times without, the subject's control. This resonates with Austin because the meaning of the thing, its being funny, derives from its context. It can only *come* to mean after it is acknowledged by the other and responded to; only then can it *count* as *done*, as funny. For Nichols and May, via Spolin, there are no monologues in improvisation, no “talking to oneself.” As the actor's art, then, it is interpersonal; it requires more than one artist.

By analogizing the form of Nichols and May's scenes to Austin's cases of performative utterances, I do not mean to distract from their nature as fiction. Indeed, if their reception indicates anything, it is that they were taken to produce fictions so realist as to be almost documentary: revealing how people *really* talk. The perception of truth and falsity returns for fans of Nichols and May, who waited for their insights, their truths; and, in this sense, Nichols and May's work differs from the model of performative utterances, for the perception of truth and falsity still operates for the audience. Nichols and May's humor utilizes (and through this utilization, points toward) the “ordinary,” to represent—and simultaneously mock—how we talk (and think) about relationships between genders, classes, generations, political ideologies, etc. Nichols and May used spontaneity as an instrument to depict how seemingly organic conversations are fraught with normative rules and ideology, and how the unwitting implicature, of guilt, racism, sexism, mockery, etc., falls to those who—to our smug ears—should know better (and usually think they do). But if we find the representation of such verbal affects at once hilarious and realistic, perhaps it is because we suspect that they are embedded in our everyday use of English. Nichols and May prove that there is no such thing as *one* “conversational” tone or “natural” style of communication, and yet, their humor rests on the fact that we, as listeners



(and presumably *not* every type of person they portray), *can* recognize the aspects of an utterance as humorous; we can form an understanding of who a character is by our knowledge (external to the text) of what *type* of person talks *like* this, says *these* sorts of things, in *this* way. Thus, they locate, and re-essentialize, identity in the voice.

So often depicting two people talking past one another (“The Lost Dime,” “About that Moustache,” “Mother and Son”), Nichols and May do not just raise doubts about the ability of language to communicate, but, by making grammar perspicuous and playing with implied meanings, their sketches resonate with the contemporary move in Anglo-American philosophy to pursue the study of ordinary language, as both method and subject. According to Stanley Cavell, who builds on the work of Wittgenstein and Austin, ordinary language philosophers seek wisdom by asking what someone means when they use a particular word or expression. Making distinctions across different usages and parsing out the stated and implicit, Cavell writes that one can learn, “[w]hat people had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were *really* saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world” (*Must We Mean What We Say*, 40).

Nichols and May also ask what people mean when they say particular things, but with more attention to how doing this philosophical work reveals something about types of people (not just about how English speakers speak, and so, demonstrate beliefs). For instance, on *Improvisations to Music*, what does a boss *really* mean when he tells his female employee that “GAA&P...is a family... that’s the way we like the girls to feel” (“Cocktail Piano”) or when a guy eagerly asks his date: “Did you enjoy your meal?” in *that* way (“Tango”). Indeed, Cavell’s examples of language frequently sound like they are lifted from a Nichols and May sketch, such

as when he cites one person asking another if she “made a gift voluntarily” or if she “meant to wear that today.” If we laugh, as Cavell rightly points out we might, it is because we *know* that someone uttering a phrase in just this way at a certain time does not mean the words literally.<sup>204</sup> Cavell’s examples are, since he is building a philosophical argument (in print), relatively transparent. Nichols and May trade more subtly in the juxtaposition of the stated and implied. On the radio and on albums, Nichols and May are free to isolate *just* this aspect of language use: the intonation, inflection, speed, and subtext—in short, that which lends meaning to the utterance, defines its context—become the tools with which they write.

I suggest that Nichols and May’s aims and effects comport with those of particular philosophers of language as a way of describing what we are doing as attentive and laughing listeners. But by suggesting that Nichols and May are doing philosophy of ordinary language, and, that if we are attentive and laughing listeners, that so are we, I do not mean to suggest that Nichols and May’s *characters* are doing anything like ordinary language philosophy. If there is a tragic aspect to Nichols and May’s comedy it is that none of the characters they portrayed could ever hear themselves, and so, could never learn from the other. The parity between characters (and players) was real; there was no consistent wise one, no fool. As we watched them playing ball, the humor was about *us* receiving their exchange: and then questioning what must we do with it. Put it in our pocket? Shudder later? If we caught and returned Nichols and May’s balls, even by laughing, it was because we were willing to find the humor in the ordinary, which is really sick.

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<sup>204</sup> Cavell writes: “My point about such statements, then, is that they are sensibly questioned only where there is some special reason for supposing what I say about what I (we) say to be wrong; only here is the request for evidence competent. If I am wrong about what he does (they do), that may be no great surprise; but if I am wrong about what I (we) do, that is liable, where it is not comic, to be tragic” (14). Of the “comical,” Freud writes: “The comical appears primarily as an *unintentional* discovery in the social relations of human beings” (my italics, 302).

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## Chapter Five: New Hollywood's Comedy of Remarriage

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“We must know other games, college-type types like us. That can't be the limit of our vocabulary!”

— George, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In the previous chapter, we studied Nichols and May's rise to stardom and how their comedy disseminated a new awareness of improvisational performance techniques, altering how we hear characters' recorded dialogue. In this chapter, we turn our attention back to Nichols' career as a cinema director. In *High Comedy in American Movies*, Steve Vineberg comments in his reading of *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (Paul Mazursky, 1969) that, “[t]his argument over sex is one of the funniest marital squabbles ever put on the screen, and you can hear in the banter the influence of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, who practically invented the revue-style humor that writers and directors like Mazursky shepherded into the movies in the late sixties and early seventies” (124). Nichols and May separated after she wrote a play both for and about Nichols: *A Matter of Position* (1962). She also directed, and they both starred; but the play flopped.<sup>205</sup>

Nichols soon heard his calling to direct plays: “It didn't feel like a transition. I was coming home in every way... it was as if I'd been getting ready for it all my life without knowing it” (Sweet, 84). When asked about creating scenes with May, Nichols said that, “by and large I would shape them and Elaine would fill them... What she's interested in is character and the moment. What I'm interested in is moving on and giving it a shape” (Sweet, 82-83).

Rehearsing his first Broadway show, Neil Simon's play, *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), he recalls

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<sup>205</sup> May went on to perform and write for stage and screen, and to direct the films *A New Leaf* (1971), *The Sunshine Kid* (1972), *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) (which makes brilliant use of improvised scenes), and the unfairly maligned *Ishtar* (1987). She co-wrote *Heaven Can Wait* with Warren Beatty (Beatty and Buck Henry, 1978), and contributed to the screenplays of films such as *Such Good Friends* (Otto Preminger, 1971), *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981), and *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982).

thinking: “This is what I want to do, this is what I’m meant to do, I finally know what my work is” (Probst, 113).<sup>206</sup>

In our readings of *The Graduate* (1967) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), we have already seen examples of how Nichols’ cinematic work delves into the same territory Nichols and May skewered: American middle-class attitudes toward sex, gender, marriage, and romantic love. Nichols and May publicly reunited in 1996 for *The Birdcage*; he directed her screenplay (based on the French cult classic film *La Cage aux Folles* [Edouard Molinaro, 1978]). *Birdcage* reflects cultural challenges to traditional ideals of masculinity as well as the rising visibility of self-identifying homosexual citizens.<sup>207</sup> Un-credited, May contributed rewrites in 1994 for Nichols’ horror-comedy *Wolf*, the story of a male New York book editor suffering from (or enjoying) a bout of lycanthropy. And, in 1998, they collaborated on *Primary Colors*, whose narrative crisis is predicated upon the manipulation of presidential candidate Jack Stanton’s (John Travolta) voice on the radio. The film follows his campaign while his lesbian campaign manager, Libby Holden (Kathy Bates), traces the attack back to his opponent, who is desperately trying to cover up his own homosexual scandal. Libby commits suicide, and becomes the movie’s moral compass, when confronted with the fact that Jack will use the information of his opponent’s sexuality to get elected himself. Both films deal prominently with ambivalent attitudes toward masculinity in America in the 1990s. Later I will focus attention on *Birdcage*, but before we analyze that film, I want to argue that, despite the fact that scholars have failed to note

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<sup>206</sup> As I described in the introduction, Nichols worked closely with Simon on the script, making substantive revisions.

<sup>207</sup> I assume the term “homosexual” implies sexual desire—desire with an object-choice—and use “gay” as an area in which to discuss the construction of a specific cultural identity lacking a necessary link to sexuality. The 1990s saw a critical trend toward thinking of a person’s sexuality both in terms of what someone does (with another) and that such actions determine what that person is with regards to social legibility. See Judith Butler.

consistency in Nichols' corpus, he announced his agenda in his first film: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966).<sup>208</sup>

Just because Nichols was half of Nichols and May does not mean his movies must propagate style of comedy associated with the duo—but they do. If we look at Nichols' cinematic oeuvre, it is clear he carried forward with him Nichols and May's care for social commentary through linguistic play. He elected to eschew filming improvised performances, preferring to adapt his movies from novels and dramatic literature. However, Nichols' films maintain an interest in the tenets of improvisational theater, but rather than enacting them before the spectator, Nichols utilizes cinema's spatial and temporal remove from the spectator to ruminate on the methods of improvisation, particularly Viola Spolin's linguistic theater "games."<sup>209</sup> Unlike Nichols and May's live improvisations before an audience, cinema cannot provide the spectator with "proof" of a performance's spontaneity (i.e., by incorporating audience suggestion to formulate it in front of them).

As we saw in the last chapter, Spolin's theory of improvisation is founded on the process of two players' mutuality—tossing "the ball" back and forth. In this chapter, we will look closely at two of Nichols' films, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Birdcage*, both of which feature couples who self-consciously perform for another couple. Through these dramatizations of improvisation games, Nichols invites us to think about the relationship between ordinary conversation—albeit by some pretty theatrical people—and what we might properly call improvising by following these characters in their homes. Spolin asks, "How much

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<sup>208</sup> Nichols and May starred as this play's protagonists, George and Martha, in a 1980 production.

<sup>209</sup> See the chapter four for information on Nichols' history with Spolin's teachings, and a discussion of her theories. Virginia Wright Wexman cites Robert Altman for most successfully bringing the performance style rooted in *The Compass/Second City* (and especially Nichols and May) to the screen. Interestingly, in 1975, Nichols said "Robert Altman is doing what I would have expected me to be doing" (Sweet, 86). Wexman describes the mark of such improvisational effects on Altman's films as "ungrammatical sentences, broken-off phrases, unclear diction, and overlapping dialogue" (190).



more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself?” Her wish for what we know to be inseparable from how we know it emphasizes process, method—the action of learning—and is presented in *Birdcage*’s and *Virginia Woolf*’s depiction of its protagonists’ epiphanies, which take the form of performative utterances (in the sense J.L. Austin meant in which the uttering of a particular phrase in the right conditions *is* the doing of an action).

If we examine these films with Nichols’ background in improvisation in mind, key features surface that deserve attention because they enrich our experience of both the text and its historical context. In particular, the form of the dialogue in *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage* concurs with the nature of Spolin’s teachings, and so, we will extend our thinking about recorded dialogue from Nichols and May’s albums into its cinematic incarnation. Nichols once said, “Movie acting was invented less than 100 years ago — movie acting with sound. You know how Harold Bloom says that Shakespeare invented us? It’s a fascinating idea, and you can go quite far with it. You could say that it’s in talking movies that inner life begins to appear” (McGrath, 2). Leo Braudy makes a similar claim: “From the first days of sound [in American cinema] there has been a thematic preoccupation with the paradox of the actor’s body—its physical presence and its metaphysical absence, its visibility and its invisibility, body and mind, action and meditation” (215). Like Nichols, Braudy marks the advent of characters’ utterances as introducing perennial philosophical dilemmas regarding the representation of the human into cinema,<sup>210</sup> but he also marks the 1960s as a key moment: “[i]t is difficult not to conclude that the progress of films from the 1930s to the 1960s has involved a growing repulsion from and fascination with the body, especially in its interaction with the mind” (217). Although he does

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<sup>210</sup> We are never justified in believing we know what an actor’s voice “really” sounds like based on listening to a character she creates. Knowing the voice of a star—as author of multiple characters across films—is a different matter.

not offer a sufficient account of the changes he believes occur in the 1960s, taken together, Braudy's observations suggest that cinemagoers' experiences paralleled contemporary Anglo-American philosophers who looked to language for a chance at understanding mind. I hope that by beginning with *Virginia Woolf*, which is not just the beginning of Nichols' corpus, but the beginning of New Hollywood, I will show how Nichols' films' changed Hollywood's ideas about characters' language use. I will then illustrate how altering our ideas about on-screen communication precipitated his later film, *Birdcage*, which reflects changing cultural definitions of marriage.

### **Ornery Language Games: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

*Virginia Woolf* was released in 1966. Despite little attention to the text itself by scholars, it is considered a lynchpin in the countercultural cinematic movement that led the transition to what has come to be called "New Hollywood": a position that lends its aesthetic content considerable weight with regard to American cinema history.<sup>211</sup> At the time, its stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, were the most famous couple in the world. Adapted by Ernest Lehman from the 1962 play by Edward Albee, *Virginia Woolf* follows a night in the life of George (Richard Burton), a history professor, and Martha (Elizabeth Taylor), his wife, the daughter of the president of the university. George and Martha have an apparently embittered marriage, and on this night things "snap" and they declare "total war" on each other. Yet, despite George and Martha's constant bickering, we ought to see *Virginia Woolf* as a dark romantic comedy. Although their ferocious wordplay suggests malicious intentions, it is also proof that they are a good match. The story occurs mostly in George and Martha's home in the fictional town of New Carthage, where they host a recently hired biology professor, Nick

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<sup>211</sup> See, for example, John Belton, p. 285-287.

(George Segal), and his wife, Honey (Sandy Dennis).<sup>212</sup> The young couple becomes instrumental to George and Martha's infighting. The narrative develops through a series of verbal "games" orchestrated by George and Martha to hurt each other and their guests. Martha repeatedly attacks George's lack of ambition, belaboring Nick's status as a biology professor to incite internecine rivalries; she makes sexual advances toward the ambitious Nick, who does not resist since he wants to "plow a few pertinent wives" in order to ascend the university ladder. Over the course of the night, and as the couples become increasingly drunk, secrets are—or appear to be—uncovered. However, the film maintains a veil of ambiguity, and never allows the spectator to be certain about the facts of George's and Martha's pasts. While we suspect their stories might be based in some truth, we cannot help but wonder, at the same time, whether they are (or to what extent they are) invented to inspire particular reactions in each other (and their guests). The evening culminates in the revelation that the son George and Martha claimed to have is a product of their imaginations.

Assuming a story about an aging, bitter academic couple is insufficiently interesting, critics struggled to interpret the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as an allegory of something else, though they failed to reach an agreement; and when the film was released, critics did not fare much better. The difficulty of its ambiguous language prompted many to see it as a puzzle to be solved. Andrew Sarris eventually gave up, proclaiming instead that the film is "best when it doesn't Mean anything, but simply Is" (*Confessions of a Cultist*, 26). Such a struggle for interpretation suggests that both the film's content and its reception were to a large extent "about" language and the difficulty of communication.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> For the reader's (and writer's) ease, I use Nick's name as it appears in Albee's script, although no one utters it in the film.

<sup>213</sup> This is even reflected in the film's production history, and demonstrates Nichols' genius for creating a mood on set instrumental for achieving his desired effect. Set photographer Bob Willoughby recalls that "Albee's dialogue

Although it was his first foray into Hollywood, Nichols chose to direct the film (he even put *The Graduate* on hold to do so), and kept his adaptation largely faithful to its theatrical source. (Taylor also wanted him to direct, and had the clout to ensure he did.) He felt he had a special understanding of his source, and “lucky to get a chance to protect it” (Gelmis, 275). Leonard Leff chronicles the process of adapting the play into film, documenting the efforts of studio boss Jack Warner and screenwriter Ernest Lehman prior to Nichols’ involvement to “open up” Albee’s play, to “have less talk and more action,” to decrease the profanity, and to increase the clarity (by showing the son to be not only real, but to have hanged himself in the living room closet in a flashback) (1981, 454). Despite having given Hollywood “the talkie,” Warner did not want *Virginia Woolf* to be all talk. However, once Nichols came on board, things changed; “[t]o him Albee’s text was sacrosanct” (1981, 453). Warner had told Lehman to remove the film’s profanity, yet he was savvy enough to realize that the play’s “notoriety was strongly tied to its language” (Leff, 1981, 465). Nichols worked with Lehman on the script for two months prior to shooting, demanding he discard previous drafts by returning the action to George and Martha’s home and by doing away with “explanatory” flashbacks (Bottoms, 51).

Nichols demanded “virtually total artistic control,” and, through a process of seven drafts, Nichols “permanently restored most of Albee’s dialogue” (1980, 44). Leff asserts that, “[t]he final decision not to observe Production Code guidelines was made for Warner by Mike Nichols” (1981, 464). In fact, “what [Nichols] wanted, Warner gave him,” though Nichols did not

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was so acid, so bitter, that a number of crew members said, no thanks, and left the first week. I had never seen this happen before, nor have I since” (226). However, Nichols tells us he thinks the play is “seated in the words” and that it is “a laugh pretty much every twenty seconds” (DVD Commentary).

reciprocate; he refused to shoot back-up scenes for those with strong language in case the Production Code objected (1980, 44). And object they did.<sup>214</sup>

The film's graphic and sexual language, including words never before heard on American screens, challenged what was "sayable" on screen and made the movie a cultural milestone. The eleven "goddamns," five "sons of bitches," seven "bastards," a "screw you," "hump the hostess," "up yours," and an assortment of insults involving body parts thrown in for good measure, made *Virginia Woolf* the first film to successfully challenge the Motion Picture Production Code established by Will Hays in 1934 (Belton, 285). Initially, the Code refused to approve it, but after a series of threats to release the film regardless of the Code's approval—compounded by Nichols' refusal to change anything, and his calculated resistance to shooting back-up scenes—*Virginia Woolf* was granted a Code seal as an exemption from its standard strictures based on the belief that it was a "superior picture." Besides, "[d]isguising profanity with clean but suggestive phrases," Nichols stated publically, "is really dirtier" (quoted in Bottoms, 54). Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, the organization that upheld the Code, called *Virginia Woolf* "a flaming arrow into the haystack [of tradition]," and tells us that it was this film that spurred him to develop the ratings system (the Code would be dismantled only two years later, and replaced by the MPAA ratings system).<sup>215</sup> Having essentially defeated the Code, it changed the course of Hollywood cinema, and arguably inaugurated the period called "New Hollywood."

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<sup>214</sup> Jeff provides an intricately detailed account of the Code's struggle with *Virginia Woolf*. He explains that while earlier films, such as *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), had attempted to fight the Code, it was only *Virginia Woolf* that had the mettle, and Nichols the backbone, to vanquish it.

<sup>215</sup> Nichols' tells an amusing anecdote about how he eventually won the influential Catholic Legion of Decency's approval. He asked his friend Jacqueline Kennedy, renowned-Catholic President Kennedy's wife, to sit behind the board and repeat "How Jack would have loved this" (Harris, 183). The Legion decided it could be considered a "think film."

It was not just the film's language that was considered provocative. According to John Belton, the film's sexual themes both reflected the trend toward mature content evidenced by the growing popularity of non-Hollywood films in America in the 1960s, and initiated the presence of such content in Hollywood (287). Despite the new injunction that no one under eighteen be admitted to the theater, *Virginia Woolf* was a critical and commercial smash. It grossed more than \$14.5 million and was nominated for thirteen Academy Awards.<sup>216</sup> It remains admired; in 2007, the American Film Institute ranked it number 67 of the 100 Greatest Films.

*Virginia Woolf* introduces Nichols' attachment to close-ups and long takes (a stylistic device we have returned to repeatedly in this dissertation). Nichols rehearsed for three weeks with the cast, blocking on the actual set, before shooting the film in sequence, establishing his identity as an actor's director (a crucial quality of his auteurism, and a subject we will explore in the following chapter). He was so committed to a claustrophobic and documentary feeling that he had the house built with realistic dimensions and walls that did not move. Warped floorboards were put down which prevented conventional studio cameras, and forced thoughtful, hand-held shooting, causing the critic for *Film Quarterly* to extol that the camera work's "supreme virtue is its intelligence" (Bottoms, 53). It is common for one close-up in the film to last well over a minute, and for tens of minutes to elapse before an establishing or three quarter shot interrupts the shot/reverse shot pattern of faces talking. Filmed in black and white, and occurring almost entirely in George and Martha's living room, the visual austerity of *Virginia Woolf* is a counterpoint to the density of its dialogue.<sup>217</sup> Their living room is so cluttered that it

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<sup>216</sup> Indeed, *Virginia Woolf* is notable for being the first film whose entire cast was nominated for an Academy Award. Both Dennis and Taylor won.

<sup>217</sup> Nichols commented on his cinematographic choices in the recent anniversary edition DVD: "I was already in love, from other people's work, with not cutting." On filming in black and white, he said that, "The whole idea of movie as metaphor changed with color. Since this play is such an absolute metaphor, I think it really is helped by a picture that is an *idea* of reality." On the dominance of color films now, Nichols said: "I miss it because [black and white] was a restriction, it was a limit... it's very hard to work without limits" (DVD Commentary).

blurs into a background, a hodge-podge of objects. Similarly, the costumes avoid strong shades, swathing the characters in grays which blur into the background, further highlighting their faces; while the visuals are effective (and often quite beautiful), *Virginia Woolf* is nothing if not verbal.

As in most of Albee's work, in which human communication is the central subject, language and talking are frequently the topic of the characters' exchanges. Nichols' desire to maintain both Albee's rhythm and commentary on language use made *Virginia Woolf* the first picture "intentionally shot with overlapping dialogue" (O'Steen, 39).<sup>218</sup> Nichols hired then-unknown editor Sam O'Steen after established studio editors said they could not shoot characters talking over each other. O'Steen promised he could, and was allowed to sit on the set; he invented a complicated system of coding the soundtrack.<sup>219</sup> Alongside the film's release, Warner Brothers Records released a deluxe, gatefold two-LP record set which included the entire film's dialogue. This was not a common practice.

Nichols' direction of the actors seems to have focused on line readings: "For Richard Burton, I actually did act out scenes and read them because he responds through his ear. When he hears something, he grasps the idea within the sound, within the reading" (Probst, 115). Burton said of Nichols: "I thought I knew everything anybody had to teach me about comedy. From Mike, I learned" (Probst, 116). There is much to say about the richness of all four actors' performances, but we will not be concerned with performance at the level of production. I will focus on the character's actions: their self-consciousness of cinematic performance, of creating a sense of spontaneity, of using language, and, most importantly, of improvisational techniques.

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<sup>218</sup> O'Steen is referring here to a system he invented for the film which allowed dialogue to overlap even when not spoken during the same camera take. He invented a system of dubbing and coding the soundtrack with numbers to match the visual track's code numbers. For his detailed explanation, see p. 44.

<sup>219</sup> O'Steen went on to collaborate with Nichols' on ten films, including *The Graduate*, *Carnal Knowledge*, and *Catch-22*. He also edited for directors such as Sidney Lumet, Alan Pakula, and Roman Polanski, including both *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Chinatown* (1974).

As we will see, the film's narrative consists of episodes in which George and Martha perform scenarios for their guests, Nick (George Segal) and Honey (Sandy Dennis), which they announces are "games." Thus, by "improvised" I am not referring to a style of performance by Taylor or Burton, but to the activity of the characters.<sup>220</sup>

As I see it, it is no stretch to imagine the intellectual Albee connecting the most significant and exciting philosophical and theatrical developments of his day. We know now that Nichols and May's rise to fame brought attention to improvisational performance technique, and how its unscripted use of language created theatrical language which, in performance, functioned as both fiction and spontaneous communication.<sup>221</sup> J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* was published in 1962, the same year the play appeared. In his analysis of the play's production history, Stephen Bottoms also observes a consonance with Austin's philosophy of performatives, and argues that *Virginia Woolf* is "all about performance and performativity" (5).<sup>222</sup> He believes that Albee "plays havoc with the conventional assumption that realistic dramaturgy operates to reveal the 'truth' of the situation depicted and of the characters' motivations. Instead, he refocuses attention on the impact of performative interaction" (6). Bottoms successfully argues that this play, more than most, depends upon its performance. His conclusion is relevant to my reading here, as it focuses on the force of performance, emphasizing the way meanings of this piece are contingent upon the performance of words by the actors *and* the characters—nowhere more stable than in recorded language.

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<sup>220</sup> In choosing to describe the ways George and Martha perform games, and how they use language, I am foregoing the space necessary to detail the many jokes and layers of humor suffusing the film. It is worth nothing, though, that one of the consistencies between Henri Bergson's and Sigmund Freud's theories of comedy is that to tell a joke is to create a stage.

<sup>221</sup> I do not mean to suggest that scripted dialogue is *uncommunicative*, but, to remind ourselves that improvised language is more communicative to performers, who must listen and respond to what has just been said in a different way than when they "know" their scripted lines.

<sup>222</sup> Bottoms also writes that the play "owes a great deal" to the influence of writers like Pirandello, Genet, and Beckett (6). In 1967, Richard Rorty grouped, and named, key developments in Anglo-American philosophical thought in his seminal collection, *The Linguistic Turn*, one year after the film premiered.



## Marriage Games

As the film begins, we watch a couple stumbling away from a party; she laughs loudly and he whispers that it is rude to laugh at two a.m. They arrive home where she begins moving about tidying and turning on lights, setting the stage. She speaks the first really audible lines of the film, which are, not coincidentally, from another film: *Beyond the Forest* (King Vidor, 1949).<sup>223</sup> She—Martha—impeccably impersonates Bette Davis, spitting out “What a dump!”, before berating him—George—to tell her the name of the picture to which the line belongs. When he is not only unable to do so, but clearly uninterested, she starts in on his behavior during the evening: “You didn’t *do* anything. You never *do* anything! All you do is sit around and talk.” Thus, the first real sign of conflict between the two hinges on the difference between doing and talking.

She then informs him that she has invited over guests, whom we later meet, Nick and Honey. Already playing verbal games, George and Martha face each other and repeat the word “guests” five times, tossing it back and forth, as if warming up to play ball—and an iteration of Spolin’s exercise-game “Echo,” in which players repeat one word to each other multiple times. George asks Martha several times who this couple is that she has invited over (a couple her father, the president of the university, has told her to be nice to). When he asks, he insistently refers to them in both the singular and the plural, a suggestion that George’s attitude toward couples is confused and needs correcting. Given that George has already been correcting Martha’s grammar, and will continue to correct or comment on everyone’s grammar—including

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<sup>223</sup> In *Beyond the Forest*, Bette Davis plays a Madame Bovary-esque woman, sexually unsatisfied, bored in her rural setting, and married to a doctor. The resonances between this character and Martha should become obvious throughout the chapter, but Martha’s initial comments establish the connection: “It’s from some Bette Davis picture, some goddamn Warner Brothers epic [*Virginia Woolf* is also a Warner Brothers’ production]... She wears a big fright wig all the time.” This is amusing and reflexive as Taylor is doing the same. Martha continues her description: “She’s a housewife. She buys things... She’s discontent.”

his own (“Good. Better. Best. Bested. How’s that for a declension?”), his confusion is no case of idiom. Later, he mocks the social limits of what can and cannot be said, when Honey, unable to name the restroom, stammers “Where is your, uh...,” George asks Martha to “show Honey to the, uh, euphemism.” Martha, too, is especially attentive to language use; when George resorts to using clichés, she calls him a “phrasemaker,” and ironically uses incorrect grammar when Nick insults her intelligence.

In the films’ early moments, before the guests arrive and it becomes a chamber piece, we see George and Martha alone. This will not happen again until the movie’s end, after the guests leave hours later (screen time and story time are almost identical). They are clearly out of sync, not able to play the same game at the same time. They rapidly alternate personae, always performing some new self. For example, she attempts to make him laugh with the joke-hit of the party, singing “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”<sup>224</sup> (not, strangely, to the tune of “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” but to “Here We Go ‘Round the Mulberry Bush”), but when he does not play along, she quickly turns angry. She then tries seducing him, but he still refuses to play along. She questions him, and he justifies declining to kiss her by pretending to be in danger of becoming so aroused that he would have to take her immediately, despite the guests’ imminent arrival—which makes her laugh. She begins to play along: “Fix me another drink, lover;” but this time, he switches, snarling: “My god, you can swill it down!” She does not react to this new attitude, but tries on yet another; talking in a baby voice, she mews, “I’m thirsty”

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<sup>224</sup> The range of significations the name Virginia Woolf carries are surely important to consider, but is too large to consider here. Suffice it to say that her place at the forefront of literary modernism, of writing stories which are, to a large degree, about their own language and its limits is particularly salient, as is her (often skeptical) exploration of the depiction of characters’ psychologies in, and through, language. Matthew Roudané explores these connections in “*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow.*”

before turning again to declare, “Look, sweetheart, I can drink you under any goddamn table you want.”<sup>225</sup>

It is in this way that the pair seems never to quite be able to be in compatible characters (or moods) at the same time: to be performing in the same scene—the radical changes in voice prosody suggest that they are aware of their changes in self-presentation. They must learn to return “the ball”<sup>226</sup> thrown to them, rather than pocket it and return another. Martha often expresses her frustration at George’s failure to interact by yelling things like “I swear; if you existed I’d divorce you.” And, when describing their son, they disagree over the color of his eyes; each refusing to let the other carry on with the game. It is a clearly failed improvisation; each is not returning the ball; both initiate.

They both know, as we do, that they will be improvising for the guests, and George establishes one rule, the rule that becomes the overarching narrative’s catalyst: “Just don’t start in on the bit about the kid.” While such an ambiguous imperative does not actually inform the spectator that the child about whom they will speak to Nick and Honey is fictional (a second-order fiction, for the spectator), it is a pretty strong clue. Tellingly, she reacts angrily, questioning “The bit?! What bit?”, and asserts: “I’ll talk about any goddamn thing I want to.” Now speaking has become an act of rebellion (either refusing to remain silent on a taboo subject or by refusing the improvisation topic he begins), blurring her earlier distinction between speaking and doing.

As the couples sit down with drinks, language is the topic of conversation. George states that “Martha is a devil with language” and mocks Nick’s pedantic attempt to talk about painting.

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<sup>225</sup> There was much public speculation that George and Martha provided insight into Taylor and Burton’s marriage, which had a reputation for being filled with fights and booze. As we will see, this attention echoes the text’s preoccupation with an inability to distinguish “truth” and “illusion.”

<sup>226</sup> The “ball” is Spolin’s term for the focus that is shared between improvisational players; that which they exchange and which, by exchanging, create a performance. See my discussion in the previous chapter.

At key points, we see Nick and Honey from Martha's perspective in a two shot that is also a close-up; their faces are perceived together, within one frame, heightening our impression of them as a unit, a couple.<sup>227</sup> Despite that, she tries to seduce Nick, compelling George to take out a fake gun (it shoots out an umbrella) and frighten the other three (who believe he is going to kill her). Having succeeded in getting a rise out of George, Martha kisses him and puts his hand on her breast, at which point, he jerks away: "Ah, that's what you're after! Blue games for the guests!" By naming this game (this activity as a game), George draws our attention to the sexual content of their improvisations, exposing the performance as a performance *for* Nick and Honey, and so, undermining its force. Martha resentfully turns her attention back to flirting with Nick, ridiculing George by saying that Nick "doesn't need any props."

Martha decides to change into something more comfortable, and takes Honey upstairs, leaving the men together. George verbally goads and traps Nick, who is generally inarticulate. George assures him that he and Martha are "just walking what's left of [their] wits," and we, for the first time, sense that George is enjoying himself. George asks a series of questions that indicate his distaste for Nick personally and professionally, but all the while, is indirectly (if cryptically) schooling him on marriage: "Yes, well, if you were married to my Martha you would know what it means." Although Nick is confused, George's advice is sound: existing *between* two people, marriages have meanings which are only understood from within that interpersonal space.

Nichols cuts to a shot of Honey on the stairs, overhearing the men's discussion of their marriages, breathing heavily as if waiting in anticipation of her cue to enter, which she then does. It transpires that Martha has indeed told Honey about "the kid," before Martha herself appears,

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<sup>227</sup> Deep focus shots are frequently used so that their faces can be clearly seen together, and hand-held cameras ensure the characters' faces remain central to the frame, even as they move.

framing herself in the doorway in a considerably more revealing outfit, signaling to George she is prepared to begin her game of seducing Nick.

Critics have understood George and Martha's interactions as a series of dissemblings, manipulations, or passive-aggressive efforts to veil the truth. They accuse the characters of speaking without saying what they mean, which places the spectator in a bit of a pickle (though a fun pickle) as to what can be treated as diegetic "fact." One thing that is typically the case in Hollywood character-driven fiction, though, is that characters must mean what they say; different words would mean a different text. I am not denying the importance of subtext and implication, only that we must remember the characters mean that, too. It is part of how we understand dialogue; we understand it to be like our ordinary language, which also implies things. Critics are right that the information we hear about George and Martha's past is never trustworthy (this is information we need in order to estimate whether the actions we see on this night are unusual, and to predict what might happen after the end, and thus to genrify it).

In this way, *Virginia Woolf* calls our attention to the fact that the aural frame of a character often appears less clear than the visual one; as spectators, we cannot disregard implication, reference, intonation, cadence, etc. as part of what is represented. Like Nichols and May's improvised dialogue, *Virginia Woolf's* functions as genuine communication between the characters (they respond—emotionally, rhetorically, etc.—to what was just said) *and* fictional (for the characters, and a second-order fiction for the spectator). For example, we will never know how angry Martha is over George's career path, or whether or not George killed his parents. One *can* accept these stories. George drunkenly tells Nick (with whom he has done nothing but toy) a tale of a boy he once knew who shot his mother, and who did not know the word bourbon and mistakenly ordered "bergin," which caused him further humiliation and to

drive home drunk, killing his father.<sup>228</sup> Later, Martha, still in the context of a game-fight, seems to know this story, as she claims it was part of a novel he once wrote, a novel which he claimed to have been based on himself. Such corroborations do strengthen the impression of diegetic facts existing, however I do not believe the spectator is justified in concluding it must be so. As Martha tells of George's novel, George's anger hints that his novel was, like most fiction, a mixture of truth and invention. Nevertheless, he screams, "The game is over!", confronting the spectator with the notion that this, too, might just be an improvisation. He reinforces this by going on to ask what they will do next, for "[they've] got to have a game":

Now that we're through with Humiliate the Host, for this round anyway, and we don't want to play Hump the Hostess yet ... How about a little round of Get the Guests? ... How are we going to play Get the Guests? ... Ah, yes. Martha in her indiscreet way, told you all about my first novel—true or false that there ever was such a thing...I preferred she hadn't, but that's blood under the bridge. But what Martha didn't do, didn't tell you, what Martha didn't tell us all about was my *second* novel. No, Martha. you didn't know about that. True or False? True or False?

George proceeds to describe a novel which bastardizes particulars Nick earlier gave George, exposing Nick's motivation for marrying Honey (her money and hysterical pregnancy). Other similar games tell of Martha sexually abusing their son, and of their son running away—events we later come to know did not occur (except as fiction to these characters, second-order fiction for the spectator). A real improvisation requires invention; it is fictional, not autobiographical (at least, not explicitly so).

In the following scene, alone in a diner's empty parking lot, Martha and George act out a fight that appears to be a turning point in their marriage—though the heightened and abstract

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<sup>228</sup> This story ends with the boy not having spoken for thirty years, which, if George is telling a story about his own life, suggests much about his desires. George tells this story as a tragedy, so while a spectator might assume George must long for silence after living with Martha, this story begs to differ. George's vocation as professor of history resonates with his understanding of telling stories: that how what is said matters, that what gets said matters, and that truth and falsity are constructed. This could also be a reason he is, to Martha's unending dismay, "*in* the history department" as opposed to "*being* the history department" which might suggest a paradigmatic approach to historicizing).

quality of the exchange makes it easily interpretable as a dramatic (and still cathartic) improvisation game. Martha protests that George has gone too far playing “Get the Guests.” When he violently defends himself, she exclaims, “Boy, you really are having a field day!” When he professes to be tired of the games, she reminds him: “You married me for it!” George retorts: “You’ve moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world.” This is the last straw for Martha, who claims something has “snapped” and that she is done trying to communicate, to “get through.” Her problem is that he’s not up to the challenge, not up to improvising with her: “You can’t come together with nothing, and you’re nothing. I looked at you tonight and you weren’t there.” He is not present in the moment *with* her. The couple declares “total war,” a case of *doing* with words whereby the uttering *is* to perform an action. It is tempting read this scene as a sincere comment on the evening’s games going too far (and so, as the revelation of the characters’ “true” feelings), rather than a game about games; but, in this film, we should resist such an easy route.

Since all utterances within an improvisation game are performatives in an Austinian sense (they *do* something and obligate the other), deploying one of Austin’s canonical examples of a performative—declaring war—within the context of a game is a further reflexive device.<sup>229</sup> We are reminded that, in improvisations, utterances function as “real” actions for the performers (that is, unscripted, more communicative) and as fictional utterances. They function both as narrative actions within the game (here, the game/fight), and as actions constituting the game; they demand one return the ball by responding appropriately (there is also, of course, our perception of Taylor’s and Burton’s actions). It is this utterance which precipitates the final

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<sup>229</sup> As I mentioned earlier, I do not mean to deny that all utterances are actions of some kind; many kinds do things, from conveying basic information to (as we saw in chapter one) meaningful silences. I would be warranted to expect a response from these types of utterances. Austin, though, succeeds in delineating a privileged class of action-utterances where uttering particular words in felicitous contexts *is* to perform a certain action; he describes cases wherein it is *necessary* to have uttered in order to qualify as having performed the action.

events of the film. Martha goes home to bed Nick, and George formulates a plan to “kill” their son. Underneath the malicious performances with which these acts are committed, we see that George enters into the realm of illusion and Martha leaves it; each does what the other has asked of them when they established the parameters of the game.

Martha is a woman sexually and intellectually frustrated; after Nick fails to satisfy her in bed, she speaks to him as representative of all men: “I am the earth mother, and you are all flops.” George is the “one man in [her] whole life who has made her happy.” Notably, as she says this, Martha seems to drop the mask and describe her “true” feelings for George, how she wishes to punish him for making the “mistake” of loving her. Here, and for the only time, her back is turned to Nick and her face obscured for us by a screen door, which, in the logic of this film, signals sincerity. At Nick’s surprise, she asks “Do you always deal in appearances?” She explains her love for the one “[w]ho can keep learning the games as quickly as I can change them.” But her anger at the world turns to self-loathing and manifests itself in her desire to punish George for loving her. It suggests she wants him to end a game—but of course, that would be the end of their marriage. Their marriage is constituted by, as she reflects on it, their mutual and relentless game-playing.

George enters the scene to woo Martha back from Nick, and is delighted to learn that Martha and Nick’s game of “Hump the Hostess” went unconsummated.<sup>230</sup> Martha and George now share a contempt for Nick that unites them; Nick becomes their shared “theater problem,” and they proceed to assault him. He retaliates, saying, “Hell, I don’t know when you people are lying or what.” Martha retorts: “You’re damn right,” and now, for the first time, we see Martha and George in a two shot, close-up. Things quickly turn again when Nick begs Martha to say he

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<sup>230</sup> We may remember, too, that Martha did not plan to sleep with Nick from the beginning. Else why would she hide so many clothes under the covers when preparing for the guests arrival? This bit of business is neglected by critics who vilify her actions as thoroughly premeditated.



was not a failure in bed; and because she takes pity on him and says he was not, George riles up and declares the need for one last game, one he names “Bringing Up Baby.” She protests: “No more games. It’s games I don’t want.” He gets her agitated until she screams “What do you want?” He replies, “An equal battle, that’s all.” She promises he will get it.

The spectator saw that earlier, while George (mistakenly) believed Martha to be having sex with Nick, he devised a plan: to inform her that a telegram arrived announcing the death of their son. He even began rehearsing breaking the news to Martha. Hence, this final improvisation differs from previous games by becoming a *scene*.<sup>231</sup> By this point, we know that she *must* know the last performance will involve the son—that with which George has been most concerned all evening. He began this game at the start of the night when he told her not to say anything “about the kid.” Of course, she did mention the child to the guests, and has presumably been waiting for the ball to return on this game all evening. George wins Martha back from Nick by, finally, encouraging them to improvise *together*. Their performance, which features the longest stretch of overlapping dialogue, involves Martha reminiscing about their son—from birth to death—while George reads a requiem in Latin.<sup>232</sup> When he interrupts her to deliver his news about the telegram; his utterance “kills” the child, and she commences to histrionic grieving.

There are, as I see it, two principal—and irresolvable—ways of interpreting the major improvisational game: either the son is an ongoing, private improvisation or he is the invention of this evening.<sup>233</sup> As Martha collapses in grief, *Virginia Woolf* both literalizes and inverts

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<sup>231</sup> Spolin differentiates “games,” which are exercises in reacting spontaneously from “scenes.” A scene is typically divined through game-playing, but, more importantly, follows a planned narrative arc.

<sup>232</sup> This Catholic ritual takes on added significance when we consider the off-screen celebrity of Taylor, who famously converted to Judaism before her marriage to Eddie Fisher and who played the Jewish character Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* (Robert Thorpe, 1952).

<sup>233</sup> Interestingly, in the scholarship I have read on the play (there is no major analysis of the film), no critic considers the possibility that the son is a new game; all agree that he must have, as Martha says, “been born on a night like this” some 16 years earlier. However, I see no reason that this information is more reliable than any other. This reading is tempting because of Martha’s reaction to George’s “killing” the son. She says, “You can’t do that,” as if

Aristotle's description of the cathartic moment as one of emergent knowledge; unlike the traditional model where the revelation of information leads to a character's (and spectator's) emotional purging, it is through Martha's emotional expression that Nick (and the spectator) realizes the true nature of the son's inexistence. According to Bottoms, Albee has said the play was written in response to Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, combating its notion that people "hide behind false illusions because the truth (if it is knowable at all) is too often painful to bear," which has led critics to take *Virginia Woolf* as an inversion of this dichotomy (12). While such a view is tempting, it would be just as incorrect to say that the characters arrive at truth in the end; this would require believing information given through games to be factual. For the spectator, the child becomes a metaphor for the space created between George and Martha in their games; it is that space that makes a claim on us to interpret, and, by naming it, as their progeny, forces us to consider the function of the activity of game-playing as an object (both intra-couple and inter-couple).

When George gave the rules to "Bringing Up Baby," it was in the form of a question: "Truth and illusion: who knows the difference, eh?" "Bringing Up Baby" directly confronts the spectator with the unreliability of the referents of characters' language. Discarding the binary of true and false (a key accomplishment of Austin's treatment of performatives) highlights the performative aspect of the utterance in terms of how it is made, its intonation, and its interpersonal context. The spectator knows the words are, in some sense, without referent; for example, we know that Martha is "improvising" (or at least lying) as she tearfully describes her son, but that doesn't make her emotion (or the spectator's empathic one) any less sincere. Still, we cannot say that the child is wholly without referent either. If we take the view that the child

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breaking character within "Bringing Up Baby." However, given the pattern of improvisations within improvisations, and the melodramatic nature of this scene, I am unconvinced we can accept any utterance as "true."

has existed as a private game for some time, then while we undergo the epiphany that the child has never physically existed in George and Martha's world, the intensity of her performance of grief prevents us from writing the child off as "just" fake or imaginary. He was, perhaps, all too real to the couple. Her grief is then both seemly and unnecessary. And even if the child is just the major game for the evening, her performance is not about the "truthfulness" of her feelings, but a response that is called for by George's action; she is returning the ball, playing the scene.<sup>234</sup>

Nick sighs, "I think I understand this." He tells us (and himself) that he has finally learned to speak George and Martha's language (otherwise, why else would he have not left earlier?), and so, he and Honey leave unceremoniously. George and Martha are left on their own again, but before they "climb those well-worn stairs," George stands by Martha at the window as the sun rises outside (which is implicitly juxtaposed with the shot of the moon that opens the film). Martha, still sad, asks if George "had to [kill the son]," and he says "Yes. It was time... It will be better. It will be. Maybe." To cheer her up, George sings "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", and Martha admits "I am." What Martha owns as her fear is the anxiety of not knowing what the next improvisation will be. If "the bit about the kid" has been their private game for many years, then her fear of the future, of not knowing what game will come next is well founded (they cannot do without games altogether). Whether the son has existed between them for years or for hours, he was a bond; he occupied that interpersonal space, the space of a game between performers. Martha puts George's earlier game as a question to him in the final moments of the film: "Truth and illusion, George, you don't know the difference?" This time, he replies, "No, but we must carry on as though we did." Unlike the critics who see the ending as

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<sup>234</sup> If we take a third view and are convinced by Martha's performance that her grief is sincere beyond the game of "Bringing Up Baby," then we must also believe that she has gone mad and has confused her role and self. In a way, by bringing actor and role closer (unmediated by a script) this is precisely the sort of confusion that improvisational performance invites, and which *Virginia Woolf* asks us to consider.

the revelation of the “truth” regarding the child which leaves George and Martha to face a new chapter in their lives, seeing the narrative as a consistent series of games suggests that Martha and George end up at the end of the evening, in the morning, in the state of not-knowing that is the condition necessary to beginning any improvisation. Rather than deciding on truth or illusion, their marriage is founded on the middle ground, on skepticism. The next day will bring new improvisations.<sup>235</sup>

### **Bringing Up *Bringing Up Baby***

In a film this self-conscious about performance and film history, I take the name of George and Martha’s final act, “Bringing Up Baby,” to be highly significant. It is the title of Howard Hawks’ 1938 classic starring Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant.<sup>236</sup> It was also the film that first guided Stanley Cavell to formulate the genre he calls the “comedy of remarriage,” consisting of such films as *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), *Adam’s Rib* (George Cukor, 1949), and *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940). His analysis of *Bringing Up Baby* concludes that “the right to happiness, pictured as the legitimacy of marriage, is a topic that our nation wished to turn to *as Hollywood learned to speak*—as though our publicly declared right to pursue happiness was not self-evident after all” (my emphasis, 132). In these films, “the central pair are learning to speak the same language,” Cavell writes; “talking together is fully and plainly being together” (88). We have seen that George and Martha’s marriage is essentially about talking, about learning to play the same

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<sup>235</sup> The feeling of uncertainty infused in the final moments of the film is left with the spectator as the film features no end credits.

<sup>236</sup> One inroad to interpreting *Virginia Woolf* might be to compare its framing by allusions to two of Hollywood’s biggest stars. Martha invokes Bette Davis; George invokes Katherine Hepburn. One could argue that this suggests a move from the fiery, histrionic Davis, who excelled at a *range* of characters (often through remarkable changes in her outward appearance), to Hepburn’s realistic style which achieved depth; she excelled at doing the actions of her characters as though they were her, not calling attention to her creations *as* performed.

talking game (so often the source of Nichols and May's material, remember). Cavell writes that, in *Bringing Up Baby*, "[t]he principals' actions consist of, or have the quality of, a series of games; the female of the pair likes the games whereas the male plays unwillingly; their behavior is a mystery to everyone around them" (111). While the games in *Virginia Woolf* are of a more adult nature than in *Bringing Up Baby*, the "baby" in each is allegorical. The protagonists of the latter film chase after a leopard named "Baby," the existence of which, for the bulk of the film, is a secret that exists between them (and which others doubt). It bonds them, just as George and Martha's baby does.

*Bringing Up Baby* requires that, by the end, the man, David (Cary Grant), like playing games with Susan (Katherine Hepburn)—and this, I believe, could also be said of George.<sup>237</sup> He must, in Cavell's words about David, "come to the essential insight about himself that he was having fun. I would like to say that they achieve purposefulness without purpose. It is because of this purity of action, I believe, that people sometimes find *Bringing Up Baby* the hardest of these films to take" (89). I think we can best understand what Cavell means by a "purer mode of acting" by looking at comments from his earlier work, *Must We Mean What We Say*; not coincidentally, they are thoughts on improvisation and comedy. Cavell finds improvisation interesting in light of the fact that, while its content is not premeditated (except, perhaps, unconsciously), it predetermines the unexpected. It turns the theme of tragedy (that our actions will have consequences beyond our intentions) into "the comedy of making choices whose consequences we accept as the very embodiment of our will and sensibility although we cannot, in principle, see our responsibility in them" (196). Cavell implies that spontaneous actions are less fully intended—which is pleasurable so long as everything turns out alright in the end.

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<sup>237</sup> George is also the name of the dog with which Susan and David spend a great deal of time playing games; in fact, he is responsible for keeping the pair together when he buries archaeologist David's bone (which, in blatant double entendre, Susan helps him rediscover).

Cavell's interpretation echoes Spolin's desire for her games (which we examined in the previous chapter): their emphasis is to be on the process, not on indicating, but on individuals performing together unworried about the aim of the performance beyond its own doing.

Again recalling Spolin's dictates which warn the improvisational actor to avoid premeditation in favor of seeking spontaneity, in his first book on cinema, *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes our pleasure in character-driven films in terms of how actions are represented in them, providing for the viewer fantasies of "pure" action, of freedom from responsibility, accountability and mortality: "To satisfy the wish to act without performing, to let our actions go out of our hands, we must be willing to allow the self to exhibit itself without the self's intervention. The wish for total intelligibility is a terrible one. It means that we are willing to reveal ourselves through the self's betrayal of self" (*World Viewed*, 159). *Virginia Woolf* clearly moves away from *Bringing Up Baby*'s light-hearted games towards an intellectual playfulness. The New York Times review called Nichols' *Virginia Woolf* "the drama of a marriage flooded with more consciousness than the human psyche is at present able to bear. George and Martha's world is too much with them, their selves are much too clear. It is the price to be paid for living in a cosmos of increasing clarity—which includes a clearer view of inevitable futilities" (1). The wider cultural reception of *Virginia Woolf* took the film itself to also be about a failure to come to terms with its own implicit content.

## *Virginia Woolf* as a Closet Case

Both the play and film of *Virginia Woolf* sparked much attention for what were perceived as gender crimes and/or homosexual sympathies.<sup>238</sup> Bottoms tells of an alarming trend in the critical reception of the original stage production. Many critics saw the play as being “for dirty-minded females only” (101). One reviewer wrote:

While I cringed and shuddered at the most soiled and fruitiest language I have yet heard on a stage, the house was echoing with the shrieks and guffaws of the “ladies.” They made such a racket I never did hear any men; perhaps the other men, like myself, were more embarrassed than amused and therefore kept quiet... Ladies you may have it. Whoop, holler, squeal, yip, shriek and gasp deliciously to the content of your dear little hearts. (100)<sup>239</sup>

Addressing critics who find Albee misogynist, John Clum reasons that Albee writes “more about lack of, or loss of, desire than sex... [He] sympathizes with his strong women who are failed by the men they married” (59). In the film, Taylor’s Martha is certainly strong, though some of her best lines were removed, including Nichols’ favorite: “ABSTRUSE! In the sense of recondite! Don’t you tell me words!” (DVD Commentary). Since the play runs over three hours, there was considerable pressure to shorten its duration, but this change could also be seen as a misogynistic move to lower Martha’s intelligence level. It also makes the story fit in line with the tradition of the comedies of remarriage in which the male “educates” the female.

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<sup>238</sup> Albee’s play was voted winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama until the board at Columbia University rescinded the jury’s decision. Ostensibly, their complaint was the play’s shocking language, but it was widely understood to be a homophobic gesture against the play and playwright.

<sup>239</sup> Sarah Kozloff argues that “Films that are ‘talky’ come with the connotations ‘trivial’ and ‘idle’ and, ultimately ‘female.’ Visual images and physical activity, which in the history of cinema came first (as Adam preceded Eve), are associated with masculinity and ‘naturally’ given precedence” (13). She also points out that directors who used literate scripts (e.g., George Cukor, William Wyler, Joseph Mankiewicz) “have historically been underappreciated”—presumably as “theatrical” or not properly cinematic (14). In “Theatre and Film” (1969), Susan Sontag allows a slightly different perspective. She believes that “films with complex or formal dialogue, films in which the camera is static or in which the action stays indoors, are not necessarily theatrical—whether derived from plays or not” (106); we can suppose that after all the prejudice against film dialogue in its early decades, by 1966, a verbose script was respectably avant garde.

The play even inspired Howard Taubman's 1963 homophobic "primer" on how to detect dramas that are "really" about homosexuals (Clum, 142). Nichols spoke out against the frantic American attention to the issue of homosexuality in 1966.<sup>240</sup> He spoke out, too, against those who saw *Virginia Woolf* as a closeted story about unhappy homosexuals because the couple appears to be unable to have a child (if the spectator takes the improvisation as truth), and because the dialogue is bitchy and witty.<sup>241</sup> Mark Harris writes of an essay published in *Time* magazine (which used the word fag liberally in its film reviews) that same year which

spoke for and to much of America when it called homosexuality 'a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life... it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple differences in taste—and above all, no pretense as anything but a pernicious sickness. (208)

The next year, Mike Wallace's documentary *The Homosexuals* (1967) appeared on CBS, the first network program on the topic. In it, Wallace assures the viewer that "[t]he average homosexual, if there be such, is promiscuous. He is not interested in or capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage." Looking back, it would seem that, in the context of the 1960s, *Virginia Woolf* reflects a lack of confidence or satisfaction in institutional regulations of coupledness.

The fact that so many saw the film (and play) as really about homosexuals is, of course, more revealing of their beliefs than Albee's or Nichols'. Clearly, a couple *performing* a

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<sup>240</sup> In 1966, Nichols said that he was tired of homosexuality being an issue (*Playboy*). Still, in 1976, in the "Rites of Friendship" episode of *Family* (which Nichols produced), the titular family's mother says she neither knows a gay person nor has ever thought about the issue. It transpires that the son's best friend comes out after he is arrested when a gay bar is "busted." That it remained illegal for homosexuals to congregate suggests the distance between a liberal view and the nation's praxis—a problem all too entrenched in the study of cinema and academics. The gay character wins the mother's tolerance after giving a teary speech explaining that he is still the same person, indeed, still *a* person, explaining that he is "still allergic to strawberries, still able to sing harmony," etc.

<sup>241</sup> Tellingly, screenwriter Ernest Lehman refused to consider Bette Davis for the role of Martha (Albee's choice) because she was known as a gay icon—perhaps a case of protesting too much (Bottoms, 104). Bottoms points out that casting the most famous married couple in the world emphasized George and Martha's heterosexuality. Nichols' cinematic idol, Ingmar Bergman, attempted to produce an all-male version for the European premiere in 1963. For more concerning *Virginia Woolf*'s reception as homosexually-themed, see Bottoms and Clum.



marriage *must* be homosexual, else why the need for all this hoopla and innuendo, double entendre and indirectness? What must a couple be that desires acknowledgment *as* a couple from another couple? Nichols claimed that if he had wanted to make a film about homosexuals he would have done so.<sup>242</sup> He did do so thirty years later.

### **Out of the Closet and into *The Birdcage***

The film announced as Nichols and May's reunion, *Birdcage*, is the story of three couples: a gay couple whose son wants to marry the daughter of parents whose religious and political views condemn homosexuality.<sup>243</sup> In Northrop Frye's description of the paradigmatic comedy, a young man seeks to win or wed (whichever comes first) a young woman, and must overcome the obstacles posed by the fathers in order to do so.<sup>244</sup> *Birdcage* disturbs this model by displacing the problem needing resolution onto the stability the traditional comedy assumes prior to beginning; since one elder married couple (necessarily heterosexual) does not acknowledge the validity of the other couple *as* a couple, the gay individuals must overcome the daughter's parents disapproval to prove their status as a couple.

While the film still concludes happily with the wedding of the young lovers (who are marginalized throughout), it is the narrative's juxtaposition of elder couples that is the focus of the ceremony, and which functions rhetorically to comment on the situation of gay male

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<sup>242</sup> Nichols and May performed a scene in which a man sought to plan his male partner's funeral on television and in Chicago. Nichols recalls that, "they said that if we ever did it again, they'd close the club and throw us out" (Sweet, 82).

<sup>243</sup> It is difficult to overstate the extent to which *The Birdcage* was groundbreaking; it demonstrated money could be made with sympathetic and comedic gay figures and precipitated the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres, and her character, a year later.

<sup>244</sup> In "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide," Lucy Fischer examines theories of comedy, including Frye's, which draw on texts with problematic gender politics in order to formulate theories which often perpetuate those politics, at least by implication.

Americans in the 1990s.<sup>245</sup> The early 1990s was the period in which the mainstream media attended to the issue of gay marriage for the first time, and, predictably, the steadily increasing visibility of homosexual couples—and the placing of gay marriage atop the agenda of desired rights—impacted cinematic representations of heterosexual marriage.<sup>246</sup>

If Nichols was timely with *Virginia Woolf* in 1966, he was even more contemporary in 1996. In the same year of the film's release (and reflecting the very real threat homosexuals posed to a traditional definition of marriage), the federal government passed the first Constitutional amendment to *remove* rights since Prohibition by enacting the “Defense of Marriage Act” (a measure which denied the possibility of the recognition of legal marriages between same-sex partners).<sup>247</sup> At the time, no state had legalized gay marriage, which was cast as a religious and moral issue in the media. The political right prophesied that its legalization would spell doom for the nation by fundamentally undermining marriage and the formation of the family. Since the issue was not simply one of a citizen's selfhood, but of a relationship between individuals (unlike the cases of race and sexual difference, one cannot be homosexual in isolation), this was not just another case of the personal as political (as was typically suggested by leftists placing it in a history of civil rights), but the interpersonal as political. After DOMA,

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<sup>245</sup> I am not unwittingly failing to include other alternate sexualities. Over the century, self-identifying homosexuals were the most vocal proponents of the movement that led to demand same-sex marriage rights, just as homosexuality was the consistent target of conservative voices. To speak of a broader queer movement would be in danger of skewing history.

<sup>246</sup> The 1960s anxiety sparked by the perception of “homosexuals” enjoying the bitterness of marriage in *Virginia Woolf* and the fights against gay marriage in the 1990s (both within the *Birdcage* and in its historical context) were less directed at homosexual behaviors than the notion of homosexual marriage—often regarded as a limit case of the wider cultural move that began in the 1960s away from institutionalized marriage as the only acceptable form of coupling. It was not until 2003 that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that laws banning sodomy were an unconstitutional violation of privacy. See Wright Wexman, Steve Neale, and my own “What a Difference a Gay Makes: Marriage in the 1990s Romantic Comedy” for more on how changes in courtship and coupling practices, such as cohabitation outside of marriage, affected cinematic representations of heterosexual romantic relationships. For more on American cultural attitudes towards homosexuals in the 1990s, see Dawidoff.

<sup>247</sup> DoMA significantly curtailed the movement for marriage equality and recognition of gays and lesbians as a legitimate minority until the media profiled the murder of Matthew Shepard two years later.

the *couple* guarantees *individual* citizenship (particularly salient for a government built on granting individual rights).

In this context *Birdcage* became the first gay-themed film to be a blockbuster hit,<sup>248</sup> marking the return of Nichols the social commentator who can also draw a crowd. As we will see, the film has strong ties to *Virginia Woolf*, a connection reflected in Nichols' feelings about the film's success: "My reaction, instantaneously, was, 'Fuck you, bastards. You thought I couldn't do this anymore. Well, look at this!'" (Nachman, 353). As I wrote in the introduction, following *Birdcage*, we have the return of the stylish, elitist Nichols in the guise of films like *Wit* (2001), *Angels in America* (2003), and *Closer* (2004).

*Birdcage* is undeniably a farce (that classically underappreciated genre by cinema), a genre in which timing is crucial, and *Birdcage* comes complete with, among other things, mistaken identities, people getting caught in curtains, people failing to show up for occasions, and the wrong person showing up at the wrong time—who is, of course, really the right person at the right time. But, like *Virginia Woolf*, *Birdcage* offers us only the semblance of spontaneity. Nonetheless it continues Nichols and May's history of fashioning comedy out of American attitudes toward Jewishness, gender, and taboo sexual themes: in this case, homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, improvisational performance is a major concern of the film at the level of both form and content. Nichols has been open about his use of improvisation during rehearsal and filming, though, while shooting, he instituted the rule that "the actors would do the written script [which included material improvised during rehearsals] until [he] was satisfied, and then they

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<sup>248</sup> It earned \$187 million worldwide and was the seventh highest grossing American film of 1996 (*Shooting\**, vi). This is notable, too, for the film was rated 'R' despite having no violence and little strong language. It is also worth noting that, true to Nichols' history, the performers of *The Birdcage* were more celebrated than its director. It won the Outstanding Performance by a Cast award from the Screen Actor's Guild—its highest honor.

would get a chance to improvise it” (*Shooting Script*, xii). Still, he confirms that the majority of some scenes in the finished product were improvised before the camera (xii).

As we noted above, in a media based in reproduction, for an improvisational performance to be properly called improvisational, the spectator must somehow *know* that the events were unscripted. In the theater, this knowledge is typically gained by telling the spectator it is improvised, and then allowing the spectator to witness the evolution of the scene on stage (and perhaps further evinced by inviting audience participation). We might praise the filmmakers, then, for seamlessly integrating the scripted and unscripted. Robin Williams and Nathan Lane were called upon to both improvise and to “reinvent” the scripted moment to give us the impression of spontaneity. Here, the actor works to create the illusion of spontaneity; it is the actor’s *tool*, rather than just the unavoidable product of interacting with other actors.

*Birdcage* opens with a helicopter shot swooping over the sea into Miami, positioning us to enact, via the camera, the archetypal immigrant’s trip to America over water, particularly as, during the 1990s, Miami drew national attention to immigration.<sup>249</sup> We arrive at the eponymous nightclub, owned by Armand Goldman (Robin Williams) and his partner, Albert (Nathan Lane). Following Nichols’ habit of announcing his theme in the first aural images of a film,<sup>250</sup> a troupe of drag queens performs to the anthem, “We Are Family” as we tour the club with Armand in a long take (it’s a busy night, enhanced by a table of Kennedys). We then meet Albert in the throes of lovable diva mode, locked in his boudoir, undergoing what we suspect is a fairly routine breakdown. Like Martha, Albert’s first lines allude to a female character from cinema history, this time it is Moira Shearer’s heroine in *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric

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<sup>249</sup> Immigration to Miami was a high-profile issue and provoked several federal debates and policy changes, including the 1995 decision which stated that any Cuban immigrant who made it to shore in Miami could remain legally.

<sup>250</sup> So far, we have seen this is the case with *The Graduate*, *Carnal Knowledge*, and will be the case in *Postcards From the Edge* (1990), and *Angels in America* (2003) in chapter six.

Pressburger, 1948). He declaims: “Victoria Page will not dance the dance of the red shoes tonight.” Professing to be unable to go on due to an assortment of grievances, we learn Albert’s anxiety stems from the suspicion that Armand is stepping out during the evening’s show.

Like Anthony John (Ronald Coleman) in George Cukor’s *A Double Life* (1947), Albert frequently confuses his offstage and onstage personae, referencing himself as female.<sup>251</sup> In this way, Albert plays with “truth and illusion” through Starrina, who is also a comic performer; she tells jokes and sings comic songs (written for the film by Stephen Sondheim). His gender camping often takes the form of doting on the couple’s Guatemalan houseboy, Agador Spartacus (Hank Azaria), and is reminiscent of the Jewish mothers in Nichols and May’s sketches. Eventually, Albert agrees to go on as Starrina, which allows him to use the full range of expressivity afforded by the typical male voice, including those pitches culturally deemed “feminine.”<sup>252</sup> Onstage, his first duty is to welcome a (necessarily heterosexual) couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. (What better way could there be to reaffirm one’s marriage than by going to a gay bar?)

Backstage, or rather, upstairs at their home, Armand does appear to be having an affair. He meets a man, and pours him wine on their rooftop terrace, poolside. We soon realize, however, that this man, Val (Dan Futterman), is Armand’s son. Knowing Albert “would get hysterical,” Val asked to meet Armand alone to tell him that he wants to get married.<sup>253</sup> The film cuts to Val’s fiancée, Barbara (Calista Flockhart), breaking the news to her politically

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<sup>251</sup> Nichols mentions this film when talking about a character overtaking an actor in 1978 (Sweet, 80).

<sup>252</sup> Edmund Shaftesbury, in his seminal *Lessons in the Art of Acting* (1889) and *Lessons in Voice Culture* (1891), based his prescriptions for actors’ vocalizations on his perception of cultural codes associated with the pitch of the voice; in particular, the lower pitches connote profundity. While every voice can sound low in the context of that voice, since the male voice is typically able to achieve registers lower than females’ we can surmise the implicit content here.

<sup>253</sup> Having been raised by Albert and Armand—Val says “I’m the only guy in my fraternity who doesn’t come from a broken home”—it is strange that Val calls Armand “Dad,” but Albert by his first name. Or worse, when Albert has a cake made to celebrate Val’s homecoming, he requests the icing inscription to refer to him as “Auntie Albert.”

conservative parents, Kevin and Louise Keeley (Gene Hackman and Dianne Wiest). In true Nichols and May style, Mrs. Keeley's first question is "who are his people?" Knowing that she cannot say that Val's parents are homosexual men—and that this is knowledge whose source the film need not explain—Barbara lies, saying that Val's farther is a "cultural attaché," which elicits an immediate response from her father: "Not the ones who funded the Mapplethorpe exhibit!" Kevin is a senator, a representative of the American people, and that this is his response signals that homophobia is *the* primary anxiety for this conservative family (and a preoccupation that saves Barbara from having to lie about Val and Armand's Jewish ethnicity), an impression reinforced when we discover that Kevin has founded the "Coalition for Moral Order" with Senator Eli Jackson.

We see one of Senator Keeley's television appearances. He vociferously debates on the subject of same-sex marriage by exchanging platitudes with his opponent (again reminiscent of Nichols and May's comedy, e.g. "Dr. Wasserman and Professor Cole"), though neither ideologue allows the other to speak, and so, the show is simply cacophony. Kevin and Louise watch from home. She says, "It's a wonderful program," and he agrees: "[i]t's the most intelligent show on television." After watching himself snarl phrases like "Morality is political" as though they were self-explanatory, a phone call informs the Keeleys that Jackson has just been found dead in the bed of an underage African-American hooker. This is an anti-conservative trifecta of sorts, given that the reputation of the conservative party in 1990s America was largely racist.<sup>254</sup> Kevin yells, "I'm ruined," and the couple begins a rant that paints them as hypocritical in light of the views regarding privacy and morality he advocated on television.

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<sup>254</sup> This reputation was not unfounded. The most senior conservative Senators, such as Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms, were vocally racist. For example, Thurmond opposed legalizing interracial marriage in his home state of South Carolina in 1998—another case of interpersonal politics, though marriages had long been performed between individuals of different races regardless of the lawbooks.

Louise figures that Barbara's wedding can repair the damage Jackson's scandal has done to her husband's career: "A white wedding is family and morality and tradition!" She convinces Kevin by explaining that the event will be a contrast: "It's love and optimism versus cynicism and sex!", parroting the social conservative saw that to be right and proper includes the refusal to be sexual. So, with the farcical clash of cultures set, the Keeley family decides to meet their daughter's fiancé and family (whom they are told are heterosexual), leaving snowy New Hampshire for sunny Miami—where they are shocked by the sexually free and ethnically diverse population.

Meanwhile, Val has asked Armand to pass as straight, and, believing Albert's behavior so effete as to be unpassable, he requests Armand ship Albert off for a few days. Despite Armand's initial refusal because he "knows who [he is]," guilty over having given Val a difficult childhood by virtue of knowing who he is, he agrees. Albert soon realizes what is going on and, touchingly, hilariously, histrionically, exits. Armand goes after him, and hatches a new plan: to present Albert as a straight uncle by relying on their performance-related skills. He says, "Of course you can pass as an uncle. You're a great performer. I'm a great director."

The scenes that follow, until the dinner, are essentially versions of the basic "How To" game which was a favorite of The Compass players. Armand attempts to teach Albert "how to act like a man": how to spread mustard like a man, how to walk like a man, how to shake hands like a man, etc. Hence, Armand's direction of Albert is both inside and out, but always revolves around the Spolinian ideal of acting as doing; "Uncle Al" will appear if Albert does things as a straight man does them. But what is most interesting about these scenes is how often the pair (and Armand is doing some learning here, too) realize that in order to perform an action appropriately, they must learn to re-hear their own voices, to say something to themselves as

“men.” For instance, even if you pierce the toast spreading mustard, a “man says to himself” that he “can always get more toast.” In *Making History Matter*, Robert Dawidoff writes: “It is necessary for the gay to imagine the society in relation to the self. To be gay and to have the closet in you is to have to know more about society than society knows about itself” (85). This has implications for language use as well; Dawidoff emphasizes that it is the *performance* of language that becomes paramount: “The [American] homosexual had to discover that one’s native language was not one’s own. It could not be trusted as an instrument of desire or assertion of self-definition... One had to rely on interpretation and tone; for gay people, inflection was required” (85).<sup>255</sup>

### **Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner**

The film plays with an essentialist view of sexual orientation, and the sort of body language assumed to betray one’s sexual identity. Val and Armand deem Albert “even more obvious” when he wears his conservative suit (albeit with magenta socks, for, as he explains, “one does want a hint of color”). Val threatens the tools of the performer’s expressivity, as he orders Armand, also a performer attempting to pass in this case: “Don’t walk if you don’t have to. Don’t gesture! Don’t talk... unless you have to.” But the characters’ homosexuality is not an essential fact; after all, the premise of the film (a gay man having a son) results from Armand having slept with Katherine (Christine Baranski) (and the two flirt when we see them together).<sup>256</sup> It is, though, offered as something that cannot avoid being acknowledged. Like the

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<sup>255</sup> Among others, Wylie Sypher sees the “double occasion” of dual/incompatible meanings as fundamental to the nature of comedy. This is a connection that strikes me as fruitful, but that space prohibits examining here.

<sup>256</sup> The case can easily be made that the film suggests we think of the characters’ sexuality as something else they perform, in common with Judith Butler’s recommendation (she also relies on Austin’s notion of performatives).



nature of improvised performances for a spectator, gay identity exists as knowledge: it must be *said*.

Aside from the efforts to make Albert passable, Val and Armand arrange for Val's biological mother, Katherine (whom Val has not seen in his twenty years), to participate, but when she is delayed Albert steps up as "Mrs. Goldman"—not knowing Val and Armand have decided to also pass as gentiles by adopting the sound-alike "Coleman." The Keeleys arrive in Miami, shocked at the scantily clad men and women populating its streets. Kevin takes to Albert/Mrs. Coleman, objecting to Armand's attempts to quell the political topics before she can speak. The humor here emerges because Kevin has been shutting Louise up all evening, reminiscent of Nichols' description of spectator's reactions to *An Evening*, where they failed to recognize themselves in the improvised types on stage.<sup>257</sup>

Albert wins Armand back, and thwarts him from performing marriage with Katherine, by posing as Mrs. Coleman. Albert/Mrs. Coleman and Senator Keeley launch into a series of debates on contemporary social issues (prayer in schools, gays in the military, abortion, drugs, AIDS). Albert/Mrs. Coleman espouses many attitudes, some even more damningly conservative than the Senator's, which prompts Val to explain the opinions of his "mother" as satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift—another reflexive remark in the context of this moment.<sup>258</sup> The dinner scene also puts into relief the fact that, for actions to count as "improvised," they must be intentionally performed as such—a knowledge that the Keeleys cannot acquire and share with Armand and Albert until they are told. Although the Keeleys participate in the conversation, presumably without planning what to say, it is Albert who is improvising.

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<sup>257</sup> In his extemporizing, Albert/Mrs. Coleman claims to be from Grover's Corners, the setting of Thornton Wilder's classic American play *Our Town*, and which comments on the trenchant heteronormative trajectories toward marriage for American youths. Wilder calls for a bare stage, and utilizes actor's mime techniques for a set, so, perhaps it, too, reminds us of *An Evening*.

<sup>258</sup> May has expressed her admiration for Swift before, stating "that's the way you have to go" (Rice, 67).

After disasters with the food and several near-outings, the group becomes a family (complete with singing around the piano), which is, of course, when Katherine arrives pronouncing herself Mrs. Goldman. This forces Armand and Albert to come out of the closet. Albert de-wigs and Armand, who has been angry and distressed by Albert's performance as Mrs. Coleman, now lays claim to him (albeit in objectionably gendered terms): "This is my wife." Albert's convincing spontaneous performance as Mrs. Coleman perfectly demonstrates his insight into heterosexual conventions, especially linguistic ones (since his costume is relatively unconvincing—his wig even goes askew at one point; it is Mrs. Coleman's *talking* that matters). At first, Mr. Keeley is too preoccupied with the revelation of their Jewishness to comprehend that they are also both men, comically protracting the moment of realization that their statement has made a claim on him to respond.

The Keeleys attempt to flee, but the paparazzi, pursuing the Jackson story, have found them. They want nothing less than to compound the scandal by being seen exiting the home of homosexuals. So, Albert and Armand dress the Keeleys up as drag queens, ensuring their safe passage out of iniquity. The Keeleys immediately perform characters suitable to their drag personae, and even improvise with patrons of The Birdcage as they sneak out. Albert and Armand teach the Keeleys to go into the closet, to pass, in order to negotiate a hostile society. Apparently, this lesson proves sufficient to change the Keeleys' minds about Armand and Albert, for Barbara and Val are wed in the next scene. Although Barbara and Val stand up, it is really the two older couples that are "joined together" in a ceremony led by both a priest and a rabbi. The visual rhetoric of having the two couples, one on each side of the aisle, demands the spectator consider what is denied the homosexual couple, and, juxtaposes with the earlier scene of the couple's legal union: sitting on a bench, by the sea, with no one around, they signed

palimony papers and held hands—a non-social event. Yet, despite this moment, Armand still locks Albert away when the Keeleys arrive. And while Albert says that he does not care about who owns what, he clearly cares about who Armand presents as his companion to other couples. Albert and Armand come to find out they are married because another couple comes to acknowledge them as such. It is knowing the acknowledging gaze that repairs Albert and Armand's relationship.

*Birdcage* climaxes with Albert and Armand's coming out, identifying themselves as homosexuals, demonstrating that—despite its seemingly constative nature—uttering this content in this context *is* an action. Indeed, in the context of America in the 1990s, it is *the* social and political action. But in order to end, the film also had to teach Kevin a lesson or two. He had been marked as un-self-aware since he was unable to recognize his own language as stale and specious on television. Because he is an American senator, elected by citizens such as Armand and Albert, this fault must be resolved.<sup>259</sup> Dawidoff discusses the consistent intellectual history of American thinkers, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Jefferson to Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Adams, who advocated self-knowledge above all other values, who believed it “necessary to pursue one's individuality in a way that did not separate one from the common” and, indeed, that one owed it to one's self to better the world and to see others as one's self (17). In this sense, America's treatment of the act of coming out as homosexual (a proclamation of self-knowledge, which is regarded by others as an act of self-awareness, even self-discovery) is ironic; in this case, self-knowledge is dangerous.

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<sup>259</sup> There is no shortage of potential living correlates for the character of Senator Keeley. Perhaps most obviously, the Senate majority leader at the time, Trent Lott, reveled in declaiming homosexuality both a sin and an illness.

## Comedies of Remarriage, Squared

Like Nick and Honey, the Keeleys are not punished for their confusion or preconceptions. The culprit is the social framework that demands secrecy and requires characters to perform. And, like *Virginia Woolf*, *Birdcage* tells the story of a couple reunited through playing improvisational games, and I think we can profit from viewing it, too, in the tradition of Hollywood remarriage comedies. Cavell makes the case that remarriage comedies are not only highly entertaining and much-loved classics of American cinema, but that they are thoughtful entries in the nation's intellectual history. He labels these films comedies of remarriage, because the primary concern of each narrative is "not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*" (2). This insight allows Cavell to engage the syntax of a genre, and argue that such works reveal anxiety about the state of marriage during decades of their production (the 1930s and 1940s) in which divorce posed a new, and real threat. One of the legacies of these films, for Cavell, is that they imagine marriage to be not simply synonymous with love, but with becoming human (a notion uttered explicitly by characters in several works in the genre). He describes the protagonists' journey as

the progress from narcissism<sup>260</sup> and incestuous privacy to objectivity and the acknowledgment of otherness as the path and goal of human happiness; and since this happiness is expressed as marriage, we understand it as simultaneously an individual and a social achievement. Or, rather, we understand it as the final condition for individual and for social happiness, namely the achieving of one's adult self and the creation of the social. (102)

Cavell interprets marriage as the *creator* of the social and the mature individual, an institution which defines their relationship as intrinsically reciprocal.

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<sup>260</sup> Interestingly, the films Cavell engages were produced as the sexual theories of Sigmund Freud were gaining popular ground in the United States. Freud often described the roots of homosexual desire in narcissistic terms. If Cavell's description of the social role of marriage is correct, this connection reinforces why homosexuals would necessarily be denied access to it.

Besides having this fundamental feature of remarriage comedies in common, I want to briefly describe other consistent aspects before addressing an important way *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage* differ from the classic members of the genre. Since the men in remarriage comedies tend to instruct and guide the women toward the “right” romantic partner (typically himself), Cavell argues that, “an essential goal of the narrative is the education of the woman, where her education turns out to mean her acknowledgment of her desire, and this in turn will be conceived of as her creation, her emergence, at any rate, as an autonomous human being” (Cavell, 84). The classic comedies of remarriage have the misogynistic and patronizing consistency of having the woman call the man, albeit sarcastically, “professor.” This trope begins with a scene in *It Happened One Night* where Peter Warne (Clark Gable) instructs Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) how to properly dunk a doughnut. It is hard not to be reminded of this scene when watching Armand tutor Albert on how to spread mustard. In 1968, Mary Ellman cited “the student” as a prominent feminine stereotype in literature. She includes Martha in this category, but as a new instance, “the wife in [*Virginia Woolf*] abuses her husband-the-professor,” and so, she tests her given role’s injunction to comply (122). In this light, Martha mocks George by utilizing a tongue-in-cheek literalization of the trope of calling the man “professor.” Still, coming less than thirty years after *Bringing Up Baby*, *Virginia Woolf* remains complicit with Hawks’ film’s desire to tame and “educate” the woman.

Being so concerned with performance, *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage* fittingly amend the role of the male “professor” by placing George and Armand in the role of director. Even when Armand spends time teaching Albert how to act like a man, they are both aware it is strictly performative; the knowledge conferred is on the right way to perform, not the right way to be. Armand is, of course, the director of Albert’s routines within the diegesis, but he is also the one

who declares the need for theater games and is the director of them; he decides when to rehearse for the Keeleys and how much (we also see him leading literal rehearsals for the cabaret show). In *Virginia Woolf*, George clearly “directs” the scene “Bringing Up Baby,” but he is also constantly organizing the evening, and naming the games (in this sense, he is also still a professor, doing the evening’s history)<sup>261</sup>: “Get the Guests, Humiliate the Host, Peel the Label, Snap the Dragons” and more.

There is another level at which these narratives concern education, and this is between the couples. *Birdcage* concludes with the revelation that Albert and Armand (as a couple) must teach the Keeleys how to be a couple: by educating the Keeleys in the art of drag, and how to closet themselves from society’s prying eyes (in the guise of the paparazzi’s cameras). This enables the Keeleys to undergo a process of self-discovery and to seek acknowledgment of themselves as a couple from Albert and Armand (and the children). Likewise, to quote Nichols about *Virginia Woolf*, “Nick and Honey appear to be close, a happy young couple, and George and Martha appear to be enemies, but of course it’s the other way around” (DVD Commentary). Through George and Martha, Nick and Honey learn from the secrets of their marriage, and leave with the knowledge they must confront the previously unquestioned “truths” of their relationship.

Nichols’ two films repeat another typical device of the remarriage comedy: having the couple travel to a (seemingly) Utopian space to work things out. Cavell calls this locale, deriving it from Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, a “green space” (which is usually

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<sup>261</sup> Albee’s major grievance with the adaptation was the loss of historic-political commentary that his three hour-long play contained. Undoubtedly, Albee’s text entails more commentary on the confrontation of traditional humanistic values with modern technology.

Connecticut).<sup>262</sup> In the dark comedy of *Virginia Woolf*, George and Martha escape the peaceful campus, set in New Carthage, to have their showdown in the empty parking lot outside the diner (the one exterior location Nichols added to adapt the play into a film).<sup>263</sup> In *Birdcage*, the Keeleys go to Miami, and Albert and Armand sign palimony papers by the sea, in a space the film does not even define. Even though the characters in *Birdcage* seek this space, Nichols erodes the notion that such a space exists. Their problems either infiltrate this space, or are not worked through; there is no outside to ideology here.

Cavell analyzes the frequent arguments and quarrels of the couples in comedies of remarriage as “[s]o essential... to the genre of remarriage that it may be taken above all to pose the problem: What does a happy marriage *sound* like?” (86). Nichols’ two films pose this question, too. As we have seen, talking certainly dominates both films, and the fact that the couples begin singing frequently further calls attention to their voices. George and Martha singing “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is a leitmotif, and Albert and Armand sing whenever the occasion presents itself. Also, the wittiness of Nichols’ films’ language is often the result of its ambiguity, of saying one thing and meaning another (which threatens the notion of representational language)—there is perhaps no stronger example than George and Martha’s “child.” Like Nichols and May’s comedy, the diegetic games, and their humorousness for us, rely on playing with how ordinary language is used (these are no jokes with punch lines).

Cavell sees the narrative of *Bringing Up Baby* as a process of David and Susan approaching linguistic fluency, arguing that, “[i]n [comedies of remarriage] talking together is

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<sup>262</sup> I pointed out resonances with the comedy of remarriage in chapter one with *The Graduate*. Ben and Elaine meet, *talk*, break up, move to a green space (UC Berkeley), and reunite.

<sup>263</sup> Nichols contributed to the draft of the screenplay which introduced the road house (Leff, 1981, 462). Ancient Carthage was conquered by Romans, suggesting we consider what is overtaking this culture. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin invokes Gustav Flaubert’s statement: “Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage” (256).

fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life, and I would like to say that in these films the central pair are learning to speak the same language” (PH, 88).<sup>264</sup> However, and this is the major development, while in *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage*, couples also need to learn to speak the same language (evidenced by playing the same game) together, it is not enough. Nichols, rather than saying communication occurs because two people are using language, demonstrates that language is shared because communication is occurring—and so, another couple is required to listen to the protagonists communicate.<sup>265</sup> Nichols offers us a picture of language (not just its use) that is not just *interpersonal*, but inter-couple. They must do so in front of another couple. They must perform their games, and receive acknowledgment by an audience who can validate their performance, their language use, their togetherness.

Echoing Sills’ description of improvisation as a search for community, Cavell observes that “since improvisation requires shared conventions, [it] supposes that you can create a living community at a moment’s notice” (MWMWWS, 204). This is precisely what is *not* done in *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage*—though improvisation games are the central couple’s method for creating community. The films are not improvisations, but *about* improvisation. Unlike Nichols and May’s live improvisations, in which the audience could participate (and control) the scene, acceptance or rejection is the only option open to the Keeleys, to Nick and Honey, and to us. Like on screen improvisation, which can only *perform* spontaneity, homosexual couples can only *perform* marriage. It is only the Keeleys descending on Albert and Armand that compels them to perform a married couple, and so, come to see themselves as married. Why else would this

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<sup>264</sup> Cavell is, as is typical, drawing on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. In it, Wittgenstein wrote, “I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, a language game” (4e). Discussing ways pieces of a language signal or function, Wittgenstein intended language-games to highlight “the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form” (10e). Wittgenstein also wrote that “to imagine a language means to imagine a life-form” (7e).

<sup>265</sup> This is a view of language and communication which has found a strong voice in philosopher Donald Davidson.



couple, having raised a child together, not yet have made legal arrangements conjoining their lives? It is on this night that Armand claims Albert (in either an attempt to be legible to the Keeleys or an offensive bit of gender humor) as his “wife.” It is only by the recognition of this other couple that they (can) come to see themselves as married, to acknowledge what was, prior to their acknowledging of it.

### **American Couples**

Cavell believes that the comedies of remarriage are among the best films Hollywood ever produced, and I believe his admiration results from their concern with cinematic characters’ language use, performance, and how cinema’s aesthetic nature bestows upon ordinary language a special distance from which to consider its existence in our own lives. On *Bringing Up Baby*, Cavell describes a sentiment that reverberates in Nichols’ films: “It is as though you know you are married when you come to see that you cannot divorce, that is, when you find that your lives simply will not disentangle. If your love is lucky, this knowledge will be greeted with laughter” (127). *Birdcage* and *Virginia Woolf* are clearly comedies of remarriage; however, their stories do not follow those who come to understand that they should get married *again*, but those who come to understand (through the acknowledgment of others) what they were *already* doing.

Another reason Cavell values the remarriage comedies is what he perceives as their participation in an American intellectual tradition valuing self-awareness extending back to Emerson and Thoreau.<sup>266</sup> *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage* wear their nationalism explicitly on their sleeves in other ways. *Birdcage* depicts Miami as the home of freedom which the Keeleys must be reminded is the “real” America. As we know, Spolin’s improvisational theory grew out of her desire to help immigrants assimilate into American culture, just as Nichols and May’s (and

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<sup>266</sup> Cavell returns to comedies of remarriage in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*.

Sills') focus on Jewishness and gender were timely looks at negotiating difficult and changing attitudes in American culture.<sup>267</sup> Agador's constant presence, whether mocking or tending to Albert and Armand, provides a background suggesting of America's immigrant culture (where communicating via spoken language is not a given), and heightens *Birdcage's* value in achieving a successful linguistic interaction—and with Agador's accent and lisp, communication is not easy. Nichols, after all, arrived in America not knowing English, but clearly worked to become its master by the time of Nichols and May.

It is hard to ignore that George and Martha are named after the nation's first First Couple, who also remained childless.<sup>268</sup> It is George's status as a professor of history (we hardly see him more pleased than when he says, "I am preoccupied with history") that he uses to attack Nick's position as scientist: "the ants [meaning the people-cum-clones who doggedly believe scientific theory] will take over the world... I know something about history. I know when I'm being threatened!" Later, after Nick can only reply angrily "Up yours," George takes on the voice of the founding father: "You take the trouble to construct a civilization, to build a society based on the principles of, uh, of principle. You make government and art and you realize that they are, must be, both the same.... What does the trumpet sound? The new generation? Up yours." This, George's last tirade against Nick, resonates with the principles of individualism and

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<sup>267</sup> Nichols clearly conceives of immigration in aural terms. He recently told the *New York Times*: "I'll tell you the most extreme example of immigrant's ear in all of Western civilization. My grandfather, Gustav Landauer, was quite a well-known writer in Germany. He was also very political, and he was part of the two-week provisional Weimar government after the kaiser fell. When the government fell, he was taken to the police station and beaten to death. His best friend, who was also in the government, escaped, made his way to Sante Fe, changed his name to B. Traven and wrote *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. That's the ur-immigrant story" (McGrath, 1).

<sup>268</sup> Albee has intimated that he named Nick after Nikita Krushchev, which would suggest a Cold War allegory between American and Soviet spirits (Cohn, 148). Also, there is historical work showing that Washington selected a series of his favorite soldiers to share his bed. Similarly, the work done chronicling that Jamestown, America's premier settlement, allowed two males a commitment ceremony (in a church), to share a home, and to adopt children as their own, see *Sexual Revolution in Early America* by Richard Godbeer and *Gay Roots and Gay Roots Volume 2*.

representation trenchant in American discourse—it is thus significant that this biologist, accused by George of “wanting to make everyone the same,” goes unnamed.<sup>269</sup>

While the game-playing structure might have precedent in Hollywood cinema through instances like *Bringing Up Baby*, characters like the foul-mouthed George and Martha, and openly gay Albert and Armand, do not. At the time, spectators of *Virginia Woolf* and *Birdcage* could not confidently predict the characters’ fates, and this aleatory quality reinforces the sense of spontaneity upon which improvisational performance relies. The impression that anything might happen is reminiscent of Paul Sills’ assertions about the importance of allowing the improvisational actor freedom, to “go into the possibilities of human development” (Sweet, 17). For Sills (as for Spolin), improvisation can function as therapy for the performer, an enactment of the talking cure. Sills describes this aspect of his theory in terms of American ideals of self-discovery; quoting Samuel Adams, he speaks of the importance of feeling liberated and free to self-explore lest people move toward cynicism, denial, apathy, or other reactionary behaviors (Sweet, 17).

That both couples are re-joined by a climactic performative utterance demonstrates not just a case of an utterance constituting an action, but of a story in which such an utterance expresses knowledge about one’s self (perhaps even to one’s self) and, at the same time, makes a claim on others. *Birdcage*’s “coming out” performative best exemplifies this as related to an American mythos, because, since coming out is a proclamation of self-knowledge, staying in the closet is both demanded and prohibited by a society which prizes self-knowledge. Dawidoff believes that, “The closet begins with the suppression of self in the awareness of how others

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<sup>269</sup> When thinking about George and Martha as national progenitors, it is tempting to see the shocking dissolution of their son, the patriotic heir apparent, as a metaphor for the trauma of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963. Certainly, Nick and Honey (and us, to the extent we identify with them as guests in this house) are stupefied by the son’s “death,” and struggle to make sense of the impact.

view the self” (87). To see *Virginia Woolf* as a closeted film requires seeing the film as a self, one with awareness of its being viewed. Perhaps its reflexivity, its tale of coming to knowledge, even invites this displaced projection.

Nick and Honey learn that George and Martha’s language is fictional (within the diegesis, it lacks a referent), but that they must still acknowledge it. We learn the same lesson; we must acknowledge them as communicating, or face denying our own criteria for recognizing language. Moreover, it is the *unspoken*—made metaphor by the non-existent child—that succeeds not just in reuniting the pair, but in proving to Nick and Honey that they share an interpersonal bond, that they are a couple, and so, deserve the rights of individuals; for, as we learned in the last chapter from Spolin and Wittgenstein, to have language one must have someone to speak *to*, and to use language demonstrates a mind (and there are no minds without individuals and no individuals without minds).

Just as many critics and spectators have been tempted to delimit the meaning of George and Martha’s word games, Cavell writes that the “critical problem in approaching these characters [in *Bringing up Baby*], or the problem in describing them can be put thusly: If we “do not note the other side of their words and actions, then we shall never understand them... But if we do note the other side of their words and actions, we shall lose our experience of them as individuals, we shall not see their exercises of consciousness” (118-119). Thus, our difficulty in objectivizing or subjectivizing characters “is a way of defining the epistemological problem of other minds” (119). *Virginia Woolf* challenges Cavell’s assumption that we can listen to characters’ dialogue as though it were the ordinary language of other people. True, both groups speak English, and both rely on syntax and context to communicate. Still, as we learned in the last chapter through our look at Nichols and May, characters’ language in mass-reproduced

media is language *represented*, nothing is left unsaid (which does not mean there is no implicit meaning). Cavell argues that when we learn to speak a language, we learn the appropriate contexts for constructing utterances in particular ways, and so, people must mean what they say. However, we should not take from this that people say everything they mean to say; this ability is the privilege of fictional creatures (a quality Cavell does not address). We would be wrong to say that George and Martha *neglected* to tell Nick and Honey earlier that they do not have a biological child. If something goes unsaid, it is not Nichols' failure as a director to name it; it is his intentional—and favorite—method of depiction through absence.

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## Chapter Six: Nichols and The Streep Paradox

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“Nobody’s in [Nichols’] league with actors.”—Orson Welles

In the introduction, I named Nichols a cinematic actor’s director. I extrapolated this claim not only from his previous experience as a performer and theater director, but also his consistent use of highly verbal scripts, close-ups, and long takes, which may grant the actor more freedom and control than a heavily-edited movie. More important for us, as spectators of his films, is his emphasis on character (which is, of course, inseparable from all other elements of the film, but especially the work of the actor). In the chapters that followed, I have analyzed Nichols’ films by attending to the constitution of their populations, and have been interested in how they bring together divergent senses of performance: the theatrical (in which actors create fictions for spectators), the metafictional/diegetic (in which characters self-consciously self-present for other characters), and the etymological (in which people do things). For example, I stressed the theatrical doings of actors, such as Nicholson’s blank stare, the diegetic doings of characters, such as Benjamin Braddock’s silences, and the way that the improvisation of Nichols and May highlights the simultaneity of actors’ and characters’ doings. In this final chapter, I will look at Nichols’ most reflexive films about performance, which broadens my scope to include both the diegetic representation of cinematic performance and Nichols’ own relationship with actor Meryl Streep. Throughout the bulk of this dissertation, I have dwelled on (or taken my cues from) Nichols’ early career. By focusing on his films with Streep, this chapter will bring together Nichols’ interest in thinking about performance with an account of the stylistic shifts in Nichols’ latter decades.



Lee Hill writes:

In spite of a puzzling lack of sustained critical study, Nichols has continued to influence a new generation of film directors. Sam Mendes, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, Steven Soderbergh, Whit Stillman and the Coen Brothers have all rescued irony from the tarpit that has become post-modernism. Anyone seriously wanting to learn about film acting would be remiss not to watch at least one Nichols' film.<sup>270</sup>

Even if, as Hill points out, Nichols has not received much love from critics and scholars over the years, the same could not be said of the actors who appear in his films. They have racked up countless Academy Award nominations, and sometimes have been surprising choices (such as Melanie Griffith, Candace Bergen, and Ann-Margret). Steven Spielberg once observed that, “[Nichols] tends to get actors to give him their finest hours” (Lahr, 278), and well-respected talents have indeed delivered some of their best work for Nichols, such as Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl* (1988), Emma Thompson in *Wit* (2001), and Jack Nicholson in *Carnal Knowledge* (1971).

Nichols does not mince words when it comes to his own authority during filming, but he also openly privileges the actor's artistry:

I am very demanding of the crew because it seems to me that the crew is performing a difficult but controllable task, and that the actor is the special person in the situation, more special than anyone, including the director... The actor is to be nourished, and the actor's fears, it has always seemed to me, are very real. (Probst, 115)<sup>271</sup>

Nichols rehearses extensively before every picture. After performing for Nichols in *Catch-22*

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<sup>270</sup> Others refer to Nichols as an actor's director, too: for example, editor Sam O'Steen (36) and critic Gavin Smith (27). Nichols' contemporaries John Cassavetes, Sidney Pollack, and Sidney Lumet followed similar trajectories as Nichols. Both Lumet and Pollack studied acting with Sanford Meisner. Cassavetes taught Strasberg's Method in New York City before an improvisatory exercise inspired his first film. While all four gained reputations as actor's directors, and returned to acting post-directorial success, Nichols' initial success as a performer is unparalleled.

<sup>271</sup> We should not confuse his treatment of actors with a general treatment of staff or his standards of professionalism. He fired his assistant director from *Virginia Woolf?* by hanging a noose from the rafters (Willoughby, 229), and the director of photography on *Day of the Dolphin* told him during filming that it was “too late” to apologize for his behavior (Lahr, 257). He is also prone to misanthropic statements in interviews, such as this one: “The most useful thing is if your enemy doesn't know he's your enemy... Never let people see what you want, because they will never let you have it. Never let anybody see what you feel, because it gives them too much power” (Lahr, 253). It was widely rumored in 2006, that Streep's arch-bitch Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) was based upon Nichols

(1970), Orson Welles proclaimed that, “Nobody’s in his league with actors” (Gelmis, 266). Emma Thompson, star of *Primary Colors*, *Wit*, and *Angels in America* (2003), takes his rehearsal process, where he “talks about the state of the world and the human condition,” very seriously (McGuigan, 64). Similarly, Julia Roberts has said, “[Nichols’] rehearsal process was like a school of human behavior,” (Jensen, 33). Dustin Hoffman said in 2007 that, “I’ve made whatever it is, 30 odd movies since [*The Graduate*], and I can’t remember another experience that comes close to matching what we were able to learn in rehearsal... and the care even just in the shooting day” (*The Graduate* DVD Commentary). It has been said that, with his actors, Nichols “does not instruct but suggests a human quality or impulse” (McGuigan, 64); still, in 1988, Nichols, along with his University of Chicago classmates, Brian Sills and George Morrison, founded The New Actor’s Workshop in New York City, a two-year acting conservatory founded upon a combination of performance improvisation and Stanislavsky-based training, where Nichols still teaches a master-class.

The notion of a cinematic “actor’s director” brings with it peculiar connotations; it is not obviously an insult or compliment, yet it feels related to an evaluative stance, suggesting something about the sort of films to expect from such a filmmaker. We know not to posit, for example, that Jean-Luc Godard is an actor’s director, although he uses actors centrally in his films (and presumably worked closely with them). Is it because he is not prone to realism? The relatively realistic *auteur* Alfred Hitchcock famously recommended his actors be treated like “cattle,” while the anti-realist Robert Bresson called his actors “models.”<sup>272</sup> Alongside our investigation into Nichols and Streep’s partnership, this chapter seeks to better understand what we mean by the term “actor’s director.” Is it a back-handed intimation that the director is too

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<sup>272</sup> For more on the complexity of Bresson’s use of this term, see Doug Tomlinson’s “Performance in the Films of Robert Bresson: The Aesthetics of Denial.”

“theatrical,” and thus not properly “cinematic”? Is it a means of recuperating the artistry proper to the actor back under the rubric of the director’s work in order to avoid having to bifurcate notions of authorship? Or is it a description of a certain mode of cinematic storytelling, in the tradition of, say, Erich Von Stroheim, George Cukor, or Jean Renoir?

In his essay on the relationship of the theater and cinema, André Bazin says, “It is no chance matter that some of the best filmmakers are also the best stage directors” (WC, 123). He describes an American cinematic tradition in which we might clearly place Nichols: “The importance of depth of focus and the fixed camera in the films of Orson Welles and William Wyler springs from a reluctance to fragment things arbitrarily and a desire instead to show an image that is uniformly understandable and that compels the spectator make his own choice” (“William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing” [Wyler], 92). Here, what might be called “theatrical” is presented as allowing more choice for the spectator, not just regarding where to place her attention, but a freedom from manipulative framing or editing syntax. Nichols has been open about his devotion to another American director who favors long takes and deep focus, George Stevens, calling *A Place in the Sun* (1951) his Bible.<sup>273</sup> Similarly, Bazin does not call the films of Wyler or of Jean Cocteau (to whom we will later return) “theatrical” in a pejorative sense, but rather says they are “evidence of a development of cinematographic intelligence” (*What is Cinema?, Vol. I* [WC], 69). In words we might well apply to Nichols, Bazin praises Wyler as an actor’s director particularly, because, in his films, “the action is expressed first by the actor. Like a director in the theater, Wyler conceives of his job of enhancing the action as beginning with the actor” (“Wyler,” 18).

Bazin admits that, in order to appreciate Wyler’s realistic aesthetic style, he had to “pretend first that it was an absence of style” because Wyler’s “one and only concern is to make

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<sup>273</sup> See Jensen, Gelmis and *The Graduate* DVD Commentary.

the viewer understand the action as precisely and fully as possible” (“Wyler,” 17). We will later also have reason to compare Nichols to Cukor, a classic American “actors’ director” who is often taken to operate in a style in which “nothing calls attention to itself” (Phillips, 66). Cukor once wrote that, “In my case, directorial style must be largely the absence of style” (Battle, 210). I laid out in the introduction that after Nichols’ break from directing films in the 1970s, he returned with an altered style which perplexed critics who embraced the overt stylistics of his early work. Bazin, though, argues that Wyler, by refusing to sublimate the novelistic or theatrical from his films, paradoxically makes “all the more apparent the cinematic phenomenon in its utmost purity” (“Wyler,” 18). We might well be reminded of Nichols’ preferred method, which I quoted in the introduction: “It’s like you describe the space around something and the thing in the middle that is not referred to is apparent as a result. It’s what they say about [Giorgio] Morandi, that he paints the space between the bottles” (Rose, 1998).

As we now know, Nichols burst onto the cinematic scene in America in 1966 with *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Graduate* (1967), effecting changes basic to the emergence of New Hollywood. After *Carnal Knowledge*, *Catch-22*, and *The Day of the Dolphin* (1973), Nichols directed his most underappreciated film, the gender satire, *The Fortune* in 1975. He believed it to be his best work, and when it flopped, he stopped making movies and returned to the New York theater scene.<sup>274</sup> Then, in 1983, he directed *Silkwood*. While this film was generally well-received, stylistically, it is more conventional than his earlier work. It shares his earlier work’s deliberate pacing, long takes, deep focus shots, pensive music, etc, but the takes are not *as* long; there is simply more cutting and fewer close-ups. As I detailed in the

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<sup>274</sup> There, he directed some important plays, such as David Rabe’s treatise on the Vietnam War, *Streamers*, and the Trevor Griffiths play *Comedians*, about a working class school for aspiring comedians.

introduction, the two decades of critical reception following *Silkwood* consist of critics frequently attacking him for “selling out.”<sup>275</sup>

*Silkwood* began his revolutionary partnership with Streep.<sup>276</sup> She has chosen to work with Nichols more than any other director, and it was Streep who, in fact, drew Nichols back to movie-making. Streep biographer Iain Johnstone tells us that Nichols was “anxious to work with Streep” (80), and also, that “No director has had a greater influence on Streep than Mike Nichols” (165). Nichols himself proclaims that, “Meryl’s got to be one of those phenomenon, like [Greta] Garbo, that happen once in a generation” (PE, 123-124).

In this chapter, we will look at the four films Nichols and Streep made together: *Silkwood*, *Heartburn* (1986), *Postcards From the Edge* (1990), and *Angels in America*.<sup>277</sup> We will look briefly at the first two before concentrating on the latter which are, I will show, reflexive of cinematic performance and character. Their reflexivity does not merely expose their characters’ constructedness (i.e. that Streep exists and was acting during filming), but actively invites us to think about the function and design of performance in the constitution of cinematic humans—which is, as we will see, also a large component of Streep’s star persona. Using the tools of expressivity and communication, the actor does things which are then inferred by the minds of spectators following a narrative as a character. Reflexive performances make us aware of the way acting works, asking us to think about experience, the structure of actions, and the nature of expressivity.

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<sup>275</sup> See the introduction for a more detailed history of how Nichols was charged with being apolitical or overly entertaining during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>276</sup> Nichols has only worked as often with one other actor, Jack Nicholson. *Carnal Knowledge* established Nicholson’s enduring persona as a male chauvinist, which he extended to other films, such as *Terms of Endearment* (James Brooks, 1983) and *Heartburn* in the 1980s, before films like *Wolf* (Nichols, 1994) address shifts in 1990s cultural ideas of masculinity. Their relationship also merits a study.

<sup>277</sup> That *Angels* was produced by the HBO cable television network makes it not as technically “cinematic” as other films I have addressed in this chapter. However, *Angels* utilized cast and crew established in cinema (most of whom Nichols had worked with before), a budget of over \$60 million, and was even released in a handful of theatres following its initial airing.

It seems particularly easy to confuse issues in an art form in which the artist and the instruments of the artist converge. As Streep says, “We *are* the violin, we are the piano, the architect’s paper, the sculpture. It’s our own bodies, and it’s very hard not to [confuse the actor and the performance]” (Tichler and Kaplan [TK], 303). Streep has staked her career on refusing to be typed, a move that can be construed as a challenge to the classical Hollywood star system. Unlike the terms “Humphrey Bogart” or “Katherine Hepburn,” “Streep” is obscure; it lacks a clear referent. We will explore the paradox of the persona of having no persona, for it is precisely this reason that is cited when she is publicized as the most widely acclaimed actress of her generation.<sup>278</sup> It might, then, occur to us to imagine Streep to be emblematic of a popular version of postmodernism: the star without stardom. I am not yet ready to dismiss Streep’s complexity so easily, and so, I will look at how her projects with Nichols comment on her career and provide insight into changes in American social history and notions of individuality.

On the one hand, besides the depth and emotional complexity with which she imbues the characters she invents, Streep seems to represent that old bourgeois self many of us still wish we had access to: if she can determine so many other selves, surely she is free herself. Who else but a master of her own agency could depict so many others’? However, on the other hand, she seems to offer a fantasmatic space apart from selfhood, presenting a model of constant change. Throughout this dissertation, I have frequently turned to Stanley Cavell’s work, yet I have so far avoided his most well-known claims about cinematic performance: that Hollywood stars create awe-inducing “individualities,” unique and consistent personae (understood by the spectator as ways of being). Rebutting the breadth of Cavell’s assertion, Noel Carroll writes that, “there are film stars who transform themselves from role to role—chameleons who do not imprint their own personality or being on their character: Laurence Olivier from yesteryear comes to mind,

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<sup>278</sup> Indeed, as Ken Burns puts it: “Some say she is the greatest actress of a generation. Others say of all time” (1).

while today one thinks of Meryl Streep” (56).<sup>279</sup> Even when stars like Bogart and Hepburn selected slightly unpredictable roles, as in *The African Queen* (John Huston, 1951), their performances were more chatoyant than chameleonic. Carroll accurately describes Streep’s reputation; unlike the highly visible presences of classic stars, Streep is often thought to “disappear” into her roles. But is she the exception that proves the rule?<sup>280</sup> Obviously, she is visible on screen, so what subtends the cultural impetus to agree otherwise? As we will see, Carroll’s use of the term “chameleon” as metaphor to describe Streep’s persona is ubiquitous in her critical reception. Hence, part of the aim of this chapter, and part of the value of her and Nichols’ films together, is to open up a space in which to analyze her reputation and its picture of selfhood.

When asked how she selects projects, Streep recognizes that, “[a play or film] is always seen in the context of its time... That’s how we receive it as an audience” (292). She follows this by pointing out that, “[t]he time in which you live calls for certain kinds of voices to be heard” (TK, 292), suggesting her concern for plot, theme, and the “politics” of theater and cinema. Raymond Durnat posits something similar: “the stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself... The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars” (137-8). Marcia Landy “regard[s] the genealogy of star images as integrally tied not only to social history but also to considerations of relations between politics and aesthetics” (xii). What is it, then, about the last three decades of America’s social history, its politics and aesthetics, that cried out for Streep’s voice?

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<sup>279</sup> Grant tells us of a traditional view that privileges Hollywood’s genre system, and so, takes the notion of a cinematic actor’s “core self” to be a welcome by-product, the result of a genre system that repeated types of roles, and so, typecast actors in them. I want to point out that the idea that we, as spectators, are aware of a consistent persona is not the same thing as typecasting. A star can play different sorts of character types while still being herself highly visible.

<sup>280</sup> There are, of course, many actors that disappear into their roles, but they have historically been deemed “character actors,” rather than “stars.” I doubt anyone would deny that Streep is a star. Rudolf Arnheim’s “In Praise of Character Actors” is a place to look for more on this distinction.

## The Avoidance of Streep

Prior to working with Streep, Nichols had already begun challenging Hollywood stardom as far back as *Virginia Woolf* when he cast Elizabeth Taylor, at the time the world's most famous (and famously beautiful) actress, completely against type. The nation was shocked and Taylor earned the highest praise of her career and an Academy Award (Gussow, 95). Nichols is awed by Taylor's "understanding of *film* acting" (*Virginia Woolf* DVD Commentary), and defines a film actor by Taylor's example: "She's a *film* actress. By that I mean you can see in her face what she's thinking. She has a very good instinct for the *causes* of a character's behavior" (first emphasis mine, *Playboy*, 71). He describes filming a scene, "and I'd see it the next day and it was like fifty percent better. There were all these things that you couldn't see six feet away, but they were there" (*Virginia Woolf* Commentary). Similarly, Streep's magic is not just changing her visible exterior. Nichols recently posited: "This is what Garbo was such a master of: actual thoughts that had not occurred before that particular take. And you can see this taking tremendous leaps with [Marlon] Brando and [Montgomery] Clift and then with Streep" (McGrath, 2009).

Nichols' valorization of Streep's manner of showing the process of thinking invokes complex terms related to depicting mindedness and to psychological realism. As I sketched in the introduction, several key theorists in the 1970s aligned psychologically realistic acting with passivity-inducing illusionism, calling it "transparent" and counterposing it to the political aims of epic theater as delineated by Bertolt Brecht.<sup>281</sup> James Naremore posits that "the typical

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<sup>281</sup> "Transparent" also the term used to describe classical Hollywood filmmaking style, and is especially pejorative for writers who believed so strongly that cinema is, primitively, a visual medium. For more on the history of this opposition, see the introduction. Transparent acting does not, or, at least should not imply a lack of skill, since actors are never the character they are playing (even if autobiographical).



dramatic film regards acting as an artful imitation of unmediated behavior in the world” (18). Defined this way, naturalistic acting is seen as relying on the spectator’s sensitivity to her social contemporary (and normative) behavior, and, as I articulated in the introduction, has frequently been theorized in opposition to Brechtian styles of acting, which purport to educate, rather than deceive, the spectator by illuminating their conditions of production. This binary allows for the view that, “naturalistic representation narrows the instrumental range of performance; by concealing the fact that actors produce *signs*, it disguises the workings of ideology” (Naremore, 49). Obviously, such disguising is itself ideological, and unable to “hide” some more “real” ideology lurking behind it. And since any style is equally present to the spectator, the notion that naturalism parades around in extra-ideological drag with the power to stand between the spectator and ideology has always seemed suspect to me. As I also indicated in the introduction, another difficulty with this binary is that the concept of “psychological realism” has been associated with naturalistic styles, partly because the impression of character psychology brings with it the idea of the individual (a disagreeably bourgeois idea for many Brechtian devotees). This view leads to the assumption that non-naturalistic modes avoid featuring characters with individual psychologies. In this chapter, I distinguish between naturalism and realism (or psychological realism), since a film’s capacity for depicting characters with legible emotions, motivations, and intentions, in short, with rich psychologies, is compatible with both naturalism and Brechtian styles. Even Brecht sometimes intimated that living within ideology is a psychological phenomenon, which is why we should not conflate naturalistic performance styles with psychological realism, nor should we simply set them both in opposition to a Brechtian or alienating style.<sup>282</sup> In fact, at the same time that Streep emerged on the cinematic scene, Annette

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<sup>282</sup> Granted, Brecht wrote enough polemics to justify various interpretations. On one hand he frequently calls “introspective psychology” bourgeois (50), creates charts opposing socially responsible “epic theater” from

Kuhn and Mark Nash observed that Brecht's ideals are endemic to Hollywood, for, "the star system [is] a space within cinema where the contradictions of naturalistic presentation are both manifested and contained, and where a dislocation analogous to epic acting, separating actor and role, is manifested" (quoted in Kouvaros, 166). However, if Streep is a different sort of star, it is unclear she participates in this system.

At the moment, I am less interested in how we *should* read Streep's persona than in how people *have* done so. Given her penchant for a particular three-note whimper, frenetic hand movements, hair-touching, and the like, it strikes me that the public has willingly participated in the preservation of Streep's projected subjectivity. Rare indeed is the tabloid story about Streep, and this is surely not out of respect (or some integrity on their part to not invent scenarios) but the lack of a market. Streep is thus free to create pictures while remaining "absent." Before we look closely at Nichols' and Streep's collaborations (and since it is partly the work she completed before Nichols that inspired his return to cinema), I think a brief biography of her is in order.

Streep graduated Vassar in 1971 (where she was taught by Jean Arthur), and from the prestigious Yale Drama School in 1975. By 1978 she had won a Tony (for Tennessee Williams' *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*), an Emmy (for *Holocaust*), and was nominated for an Oscar (for *The Deer Hunter* [Michael Cimino, 1978]).<sup>283</sup> She won the latter in 1979 for her turn as Joanna, a depressed mother who leaves her husband and child in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton,

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"dramatic theater" in psychological terms (37), declares that "[m]ankind's highest decisions are in fact fought out... in the 'external' world, not inside people's heads" (196). On the other hand, we can read much of writing generously and emphasize his view that particular modes of realism can lay bare ways ideology has been internalized psychologically, —so long as they do not endorse the notion of an "eternal human" way of being (see "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" and "The Popular and the Realistic").

<sup>283</sup> At Vassar, Streep majored in costume design, an interest she has not lost. Echoing the terminology of Erving Goffman, and conveying a certain middle-class bias, she admits: "I'm sort of a notorious pain in the butt for any costume designer because I have so many opinions about how my people should present...I feel very strongly that we make decisions about what we're giving to the world or what we're withholding from the world by virtue of what we put on our bodies and what we choose to say and not say" (Johnstone, 191).

1979), a role Streep altered considerably from its scripted origin. Most significantly, she wrote Joanna's effectively restrained and unrepentant courtroom monologue, convincing director Benton to allow the character to be more complicated than the cruel caricature originally envisioned. As Cavell notes in *Pursuits of Happiness*, "the force of Streep's performance" emends the history of female characters by giving us an idea of what may happen if Nora were to return (however briefly) at the end of *A Doll's House*. Molly Haskell calls the courtroom scene "a quintessential Streep moment," because it is atypical for female characters in Hollywood; Joanna has uncommon depth, sexuality, and intelligence.

Significantly, Streep's first leading film role was Anna, an actress playing a repressed woman in Victorian England, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Karel Reisz, 1981), an adaptation of the 1969 novel by John Fowles. At screenwriter Harold Pinter's request, Nichols had been hired to direct, but relinquished the project due to a scheduling conflict (Pfaff and Emerson [PE], 61).<sup>284</sup> During the course of filming, it becomes more and more difficult for Anna (and the spectator) to separate herself from her role. Pinter had no reservations about Streep playing the British woman: "Meryl's superb. She is quite a remarkable actress with vivacious and singular vibrations" (PE, 64). *Time's* Richard Corliss declared that "With this performance, Streep... provides new life to a cinema starved for shining stars" (PE, 65). David Denby wrote that she "presents a persona that is practically a movie in itself" (PE, 65).

Streep next won the coveted role of Sophie Zawistoski, a Polish concentration camp survivor, in Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982). Not only did she win another Academy Award, but this performance is widely regarded as one of the finest by any actress in cinematic

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<sup>284</sup> Later, Nichols was working with Pinter on *The Remains of the Day* (1993), before again having to give up the project. He chose to remain as producer and selected James Ivory as director. Ivory decided to replace Streep with British actress Emma Thompson, which is rumored to have angered Streep, and to account for the fact she and Nichols did not make another film together for a decade.

history, and cemented her status as an actress of unparalleled talent. Her third leading role was in *Silkwood*. Since this period in the early 1980s, Streep has never been off the screen for long, and never stopped pushing the boundaries for representations of women in Hollywood. She went on to invent interesting (and often ambiguous) characters in such films as David Hare's *Plenty* (1984),<sup>285</sup> *Out of Africa* (Sidney Pollack, 1985), *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood, 1995), and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O'Connor, 1998).

In their comprehensive compilation of the first decade of Streep's critical reception in, Eugene Pfaff and Mark Emerson demonstrate that Streep had already absorbed America's attitudes toward cinematic performance and was "widely acknowledged as the most admired actress of her generation" (PE, 122). They note that, "Her picture has appeared on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Rolling Stone*; scores of magazines tout her as 'the finest actress of her generation' and 'the Woman of the '80s.'"<sup>286</sup> Typically, even when certain stars are celebrated for their dramatic range, as Streep is, discussions of their stardom necessarily fall back into positive descriptions of their personae (seen as similarity across roles and based on data from biographical or publicity sources). Haskell, who has written most deeply about Streep, concludes that while Streep can be both beautiful and plain, she has succeeded in sidestepping the question of looks altogether—no small achievement—by exchanging the lure of youth and beauty for "the virtue of talent and will power... for the 'aura' of longevity and endurance" (50). Now, over three decades into her career, critics have exhausted the range of superlatives in describing her talent. From her expert turns in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) and *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) to the recent *Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley, 2008), and

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<sup>285</sup> Hare, who also wrote the screenplay for *The Hours*, directed Nichols' only film performance in *The Designated Mourner* (1997).

<sup>286</sup> This feat is all the more remarkable in light of her decision to only make films in Los Angeles in the 1980s so that she could maintain her presence at home until her youngest child reached adolescence.

blockbusters like *Mamma Mia* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008), and her celebrated impersonation of Julia Child in *Julia and Julie* (Nora Ephron, 2009), Streep's stardom has never been more secure.<sup>287</sup>

She has been nominated for more Oscars than any other performer, besting Katherine Hepburn's twelve nominations with her current fifteen. Indeed, Streep has often been compared to Hepburn, another actress known for crafting a feminist persona out of her atypical beauty, bearing, and intelligence. Pfaff and Emerson write that "[Streep] has given unparalleled dimension to women's roles, extending them beyond stereotypes into intricate, sensitive performances" (4). In a more recent profile, Christine Spines points out that "she made her way without ever playing a single pliant girlfriend or damsel-in-distress" (33). "No one could accuse Meryl Streep of playing to the galleries or pandering to the lascivious appetites of a male audience," writes Haskell, who celebrates Streep's success at "playing women who are outside the normal range of audience sympathy" (43).<sup>288</sup> Haskell makes much of Streep's insistence on playing women who are both intelligent and sexually complicated, and cites Streep characters such as Lindy Chamberlain in *A Cry in the Dark* (Fred Schipisi, 1988) as evidence that Streep has "delighted in playing unconventional, even unpleasant women, and who has made a fetish out of not giving the public what it wants and expects from a star" (44). This is decidedly not like Hepburn, who maintained a very strong persona across her films (and even pandered to the more conservative era's taste in *The Philadelphia Story* [Cukor, 1940] by playing a character berated for the sophisticated qualities audiences expressed dislike for in Hepburn).

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<sup>287</sup> Indeed, the boffo success of *The Devil Wears Prada*'s (David Frankel, 2006) and the earnings of *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2006), which made it both the highest grossing musical and British film ever, have inspired distributors to create a "Streep slot" for a Streep film every summer. She has enjoyed a similar position in the winter for "serious" films for years (Spines, 32).

<sup>288</sup> Interestingly, in her review of *Out of Africa*, Haskell calls Streep "un-chameleonlike," a fact which prevented her from successfully playing Blixen (Isak Dinesen): "There's a fundamental temperamental clash: Streep's ego (and genius) as an actress is to submit completely to another character; Dinesen's was to assert, rule, behave outrageously, in order to become, completely, herself" (PE, 115). It seems Streep is such a chameleon that even when she fails, she must be evaluated in those terms; she can even become, momentarily, *not* a chameleon.

Streep has her detractors, of course. Andrew Sarris, who (as Haskell puts it) prefers his “women with a sense of abandon,” objects to Streep’s work as “technical” (50). Likewise, Pauline Kael finds Streep overly calculated. Streep’s critical nemesis, Kael charges Streep with insufficient naturalism, and for not falling in step with traditional stardom’s recommended style of personification. Streep once responded by deriding Kael’s “[desire] to believe that the person that she sees [on the screen] *is* that person” (Hollinger, 93). Haskell summarizes decades of Kael enmity toward Streep: “Kael... wrote cruelly that [Streep] acted only from the neck up, that by focusing everything on an accent or a toss of the head, she in effect, decorporealized herself” (Haskell, 2008, 34). Although it is not taken to suggest Streep’s consistencies, critics have noted the fact that Streep is constantly touching her hair, fluttering her hands, twitching her head, etc. (Hollinger, 91). For this reason, Haskell calls Streep’s cinematic work “busy in the extreme. [One even hears] the sound of wheels clicking as her mind calculates its next move in compiling a ‘brilliant’ performance” (47), perhaps referring to Hepburn’s famous pronouncement that Streep is her “least favorite modern actress.” (Berg, 176). Hepburn complained that she could see “the wheels turning inside [Streep’s] head”: “click, click, click” (Berg, 176). Reinforcing Nichols’ recognition of Streep’s special skill for representing thinking, Haskell argues that with a Streep performance “we feel the thinking process” (48), that “to the extent that [Streep] has deflected attention from the body to the head, it’s never been just in the interest of accents or gimmicks: it’s because the lady *thinks*. Her characters often have more than one idea in their heads at a time” (2008, 34).

However, despite such praises, Haskell is ultimately bothered that we spectators do not have access to the “real” Streep, accusing her of “hiding in the spotlight” (47). It seems that Streep’s efforts to concoct characters different from one another, and different from whatever we

might imagine “Streep” to be, inspire as much anxiety as adoration. “The aura of the old stars radiated out of a sense of self, a core identity projected into every role,” Haskell writes, “[h]owever varied the performances of Bette Davis, say, or Katherine Hepburn, or Margaret Sullavan, we always felt we were in the presence of something knowable, familiar, constant” (45-46).<sup>289</sup> According to Haskell, even though Davis stretched the bounds of type farther than others, “she was always Bette Davis... who makes us respond to the fire within,” whereas “Streep, chameleon-like, undercuts this response... Instead of merging with her roles, [she] metamorphoses, changing herself completely, tying up all the loose ends so that she is perfectly hidden, an exemplary preceptor of the middlebrow injunction against ‘playing oneself’” (46). Pfaff and Emerson, too, sum up their book by naming her a “chameleon”; throwing up their hands, they claim the term reveals her unknowability (PE, 122).<sup>290</sup>

The metaphor of the chameleon is mobilized, as by Carroll, to assert that Streep is something like an anti-star; yet, the metaphor is ambiguous. If this metaphor alleges that she is a cipher of character, it simultaneously writes off her very real presence, though perhaps her minimal presence provides just the doubt necessary to say we know a character. Critics typically use the chameleon tag, as Haskell does, to communicate Streep’s unique ability to metamorphose into different characters. It also implies a desire to hold onto the existence of a core self—the

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<sup>289</sup> Haskell singles Streep out among her Hollywood contemporaries, claiming that actresses such as Diane Keaton, Susan Sarandon, and Glenn Close maintain “core personalities... around which signature adjectives cluster [which is] integral to our moviegoing fantasies, to the unconscious transaction whereby stars become extensions of ourselves” (2008, 36-38). It seems to me that Streep somehow escapes adjectives; she works in adverbs, privileging the work of creating individualized characters, each of whom perform their tasks differently.

<sup>290</sup> In *The Actress: Hollywood Acting and the Female Star*, Karen Hollinger begins her look at contemporary female Hollywood stardom with Streep. Hollinger’s take on Streep’s career is problematic for a number of reasons. Perhaps most egregiously, she explicitly refuses to grant any significance to Streep’s comedic roles. Hollinger sets out to formulate a workable persona for Streep (despite her reputation in the industry as “the only woman in Hollywood who could do any script” [94]), and argues that Streep’s latter decades *have* given us a consistent type: mother. As evidence, Hollinger cites *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Marvin’s Room* (Jerry Zaks, 1996), *The Hours*, and *One True Thing* (Carl Franklin, 1998). Aside from that fact that in the former film, Streep does not even play a mother (but a sister), I do not believe that anyone who has seen these films is likely to perceive a type. As we all already know, the world is full of very different kinds of mothers, a fact these films exhibit plainly.

idea being that Streep hides within each character somewhere, out of the range of our perception. Chameleons alter their skin color based on their context; lacking a “true” (that is, constant) exterior appearance, they use their physical mutability for protection. Dubbing Streep a chameleon suggests that watching her might be exciting, yet disturbing, for the chameleon metaphor emphasizes visuality in a medium often taken to be primarily visual, and implies that it is not an exterior appearance that she lacks (the camera can never lie), but a “true” self, a personality-referent. We might well surmise that Streep’s lack of star persona—her “unwillingness to reveal, or surrender, the self,” as Haskell calls her “essence”—is fundamental to our desire to keep watching her: that it is precisely her withholding that involves us, that inspires us to want to understand what makes the characters she embodies do the things they do; to wonder how they are different or similar from us. Streep is aware of the phenomenon: “What [the public responded to] fed into what I wanted for myself—which was not to be typed” (quoted in Hollinger, 73).<sup>291</sup> She claims that “the great worth [of acting] is giving voice to characters that have no voice” (Hollinger, 73-74). So, let us now turn to the characters she and Nichols voiced together.

### *Silkwood*

As I mentioned above, Nichols abandoned cinema for seven years before he was pulled back, and with a changed aesthetic. Regarding his decision to make *Silkwood*, Nichols said:

For me, it was a reawakening. And part of that was the miracle of Meryl. She's stunning. I remember Kurt Russell said to me one day, ‘Are you always this light on your feet with the camera?’ And I realized I was different, that before the long break, I had stopped and

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<sup>291</sup> When asked about a role in which she felt she was unsuccessful, Streep singled out Brooke in *Still of the Night* (Robert Benton, 1982): “The noir femme fatale is essentially a type, and I was bored by her. There was so much attention to lighting and how my hair looked and being sleek and gorgeous, but what do I do? What do I convey? What’s the person about? What’s the inner life? It’s not about the inner life, dear. It’s all about being misconstrued. You think the woman’s this, but she’s not. But what is she? No one cares. She looks great” (Tichler, 297).



figured out how to shoot every scene, endlessly sometimes. But it had become part of me, like grammar becomes part of us. It was the beginning of me exploring a more fluid, less conscious approach to movies.” (Jensen, 1)

Nichols directly credits Streep’s artistry for the stylistic changes in his own. Streep praises Nichols’ preparation level: “A lot of directors are still dealing with the text when you’re on the set. Mike has done all that beforehand, so when you get on the set you feel it’s a secure world where all the architecture is in place. You can jump as hard as you want and the floor won’t give way” (McGrath, 2009). She also echoes Nichols’ sense of cinematic freedom, asserting that film acting allows more freedom of movement than stage acting. “There are more surprises allowed in film,” she says, and, unlike in the theater where other actors and technicians need you to do the same thing night after night, “[y]ou can change staging” (TK, 298). Clearly, a Nichols and Streep production is not governed by a will to reproduce a particular text that exists prior to filming. Nichols is literally willing to follow where Streep wants to go, to share authorship.

Those who claim that Nichols’ “later work ruffles no feathers” (Lahr, 283) fail to take into account Nichols’ knack for being relevant to volatile contemporary American social debates—a timeliness evident in films like *Working Girl*, *The Birdcage* (1996), and *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007). *Silkwood* operates in this vein. It is based on the true story of Karen Silkwood, a worker at a Kerr-McGee nuclear power plant who was mysteriously killed in a car accident while challenging the company’s policies (most crucially, there may have been evidence of the company tampering with photographic evidence of flaws in nuclear materials). As the title suggests, the movie considers the value of an individual.

Karen suffers increasingly from radiation poisoning as she investigates the threat of potential nuclear disaster—which cannot be distinguished from corporate greed. The film portrays Karen as a willful, sexual, fun-loving, smart-ass who lives with her lover, Drew (Kurt

Russell) and lesbian friend, Dolly (Cher)—both of whom also work at Kerr-McGee (a “scandalous” ménage, according to critics). Dolly was leaps and bounds ahead of previous attempts to offer a sympathetic homosexual figure on screen—leading the efforts to increase the visibility of homosexual Americans in the early 1980s. Haskell contends that, “[i]n the annals of female camaraderie, there is no moment more touching than [Streep’s] scene on the front porch with Cher, when the two fight and then teasingly make up” (49).

As Karen awakens to the possibility of a corporate cover-up, we watch her, roused by a purpose, alienate those close to her—particularly men who are unable to comprehend a woman of intelligence and initiative. Her commitment to opposing Kerr-McGee’s negligence even costs her custody of her children. She gets involved in the worker’s union (while remaining quite the individual) and takes her information to the federal government (and has an affair in Washington), only to die before she can hand over the documents that would prove misconduct.

Even before its release, the film was celebrated by anti-nuclear groups, unionists, and feminists. Predictably, it was also denounced by pro-nuclear groups. Widespread attempts to halt the development of nuclear technology have decreased since the 1980s, but *Silkwood*’s scenes of Karen’s sleuthing in the offices of Kerr-McGee now seem as much about the onset of the personal computer in the workplace as nuclear technology; her rebellion is against the technological-managerial class *as* the new bourgeois class. It sustains a smart commentary on gender roles of the time, too, particularly in blue-collar Oklahoma, the workplace, and in public education. *Silkwood* pushes the envelope for representing a woman with a complicated sexuality, without stepping into clichéd territory (one scene, in which Karen receives oral sex in the kitchen, received much attention).

Rather than impressing film critics' tired eyes with new stylistics and/or targeting cinematic aesthetic traditions (and the power structures they, for those in the know, reveal), Nichols began to target cultural-political consciousness, using film pragmatically to effect change.<sup>292</sup> In this respect, *Silkwood* is a success. And while the visual track may not be as stark as *Carnal Knowledge*'s extended frontal close-ups, most critics found the film to be one of the year's best (PE, 94-97). Reminiscent of a 1930s "social problem" film, *Silkwood* tells its story through one woman's experience, avoiding the polemicism of other anti-nuclear movies.<sup>293</sup> Vincent Canby, film critic of the *New York Times*, praised Nichols: "*Silkwood* may be the most serious work Mr. Nichols has yet done in films... Perhaps for the first time in a popular movie has America's petrochemical-nuclear landscape been dramatized, and with such anger and compassion" (PE, 86-87).

Nichols' direction is particularly strong, doing what he says he does best—articulating his message through implication. It is clear that Karen hates her job at Kerr-McGee. Her frustration at the company's wrongdoings is inseparable from her frustration at her own complicity and failures (as she, for example, loses custody of her children to their father). She tries to figure out why she is working there, and is excited to discover not only that she may not be relegated to working there forever (that she might be good at something else), but that she might discover a reason to justify leaving. As Karen's body becomes more and more poisoned (and Streep's subtle physicality cannot be underestimated here), it is clear to us that she is dying of cancer at the hands of the corrupt corporations who are in the pockets of the nation's government bureaucracy; yet she frequently celebrates America. Whether it is the nuclear plant,

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<sup>292</sup> We should not underestimate the excellent work of cinematographer Miroslav Ondříček or the haunting, pastoral score by Georges Delerue.

<sup>293</sup> Streep is highly politically active, supporting causes from women's rights to education reform., but she has been especially involved in nuclear disarmament (Hollinger, 85). The real *Silkwood*'s father sued Kerr-McGee; the U.S. Supreme Court the case ruled in his favor, awarding him \$10 million.

with its large, alien contraptions, or Washington, D.C., Karen's environment draws our attention, powerfully contextualizing her, and threatening to overwhelm her figure (creating a fatalistic sensibility akin to film noir).<sup>294</sup> From her insistence on watching parades or taking photos in front of the Washington memorial, the grim realities of her situation are measured against the backdrop of her patriotism, enabling an implicit dialectic by which the spectator can judge her behavior and consider the function of the socio-political institutions she admires.

Haskell calls Karen one of Streep's greatest heroines, and describes her, as do several other critics, as "gum-chewing," a commonality that speaks to Karen's working class identity, I believe also demonstrates the impact Streep endows seemingly natural gestures (that she blows and pops a bubble with her gum in one scene may also resonate in a story about our terror of nuclear explosions) (2008, 40). Other critics, such as Roger Ebert, who devoted a paragraph to the small, seemingly habitual gesture of Karen shaking her watch, waxed lyrical about Streep's detail-filled performance. Perhaps in a story about personal liability and corporate responsibility, even small actions which appear unintended take on added weight, and this development in her technique is an aspect we will return to later.

Though a handful of critics wanted a more journalistic film, *Silkwood* inaugurated what Streep and Nichols would become known for. John Simon praised it: "Rather than illustrate a thesis or engage in political grandstanding, Nichols and the cast have created a whole way of life" (PE, 95). Streep's performance was widely regarded with awe. Kael was even impressed by the moment Streep/Karen mocks a sexist co-worker by flashing a breast. Much was made over her appearance: her short hair, her deterioration as her body is hollowed out. It inspired the critic for *The New Yorker* to hail that, "[m]ore than any other actress today, Streep is a master at

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<sup>294</sup> See Paul Schrader's "Notes on Film Noir" for more on film noir's depiction of protagonists within urban landscapes.

making dramatic physical changes” (PE, 95). Still, critics did not fail to note the abundance of humor that Streep always finds and brings out in a role, calling her performance “as funny as it is moving” (PE, 95).<sup>295</sup> It would seem that Streep’s elaborate gestures, her humor, and her physical transformation all serve to both deepen the characterization of Karen, and call attention to Streep’s own work. We might surmise, then, that her style, at least here, when working with Nichols, is something other than a typical naturalist performance, which might explain why, despite her multiple Oscar nominations (and she was nominated for *Silkwood*), she has not won another since working with Nichols.

What the critics’ attention to Streep’s physical gestures and her chameleon image fail to capture is the significance of her vocal performances. As we have seen, since his days on radio, Nichols has been consistently concerned with the sound of people. Thus, I take it to be important that Karen is killed *singing*; *Silkwood* ends with the silencing of her voice. The best scene of Nichols and Streep’s next project, *Heartburn*, also features her singing. *Heartburn* is an adaptation of a novel/memoir, this time by Nora Ephron, who also wrote the screenplay for *Silkwood*.<sup>296</sup> Though Streep’s theatrical career in New York began in comedies, and we have seen it noted that Streep brings humor to any role, the story of *Heartburn*—in which she plays Jewish writer Rachel opposite Jack Nicholson’s philandering Mark—is her first official

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<sup>295</sup> The fact that Streep finds humor in supposedly serious roles is a trait that has not dissipated over time, and often befuddles critics, such as a reviewer of *Doubt* who notes that funny approach stands apart from her naturalistic colleagues (Johnstone, 210).

<sup>296</sup> *Heartburn* is based on Ephron’s marriage and divorce from Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein. Ephron, the daughter of screenwriters (they wrote such films as *Carousel* [Henry King, 1956] and *Desk Set* [Walter Lang, 1957]) worked as a journalist before writing for television and film. She has since enjoyed a successful career as a writer and director of such films as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), and *Julie and Julia* (2009), which also stars Streep.

comedy.<sup>297</sup> The film did not repeat the success of *Silkwood*; the largest critical objection was that the movie was not sympathetic enough to Mark, that it did not explain why he had an affair.

Nevertheless, Nichols' direction of Streep's performance received praise, particularly her gestures: "a querulous eyebrow or subtle grimace, simultaneously inhabiting and commenting on her role" (PE, 118). The scene in which she sings received much positive attention is the one in which Rachel tells Mark that she is pregnant. The newly married couple, amidst the rubble of a home being renovated, sits on the edge of a bed with a box of pizza and sings all the songs they can think of with "baby" in the title. The impression of spontaneity achieved by Streep and Nicholson (the scene was largely improvised), and the pathos of the scene (it is simultaneously joyous and tragic), were enough for some critics to value the film itself. Of working with Streep, Nicholson said, "She's my idol... There's nobody out there that far in the movies. Nobody" (Johnstone, 92-93).

### ***Postcards From the Edge***

Streep and Nichols' third film together, *Postcards from the Edge*, is another comedy, but this time it was critically and commercially successful.<sup>298</sup> It is Nichols' most explicitly reflexive film, and points toward both Streep's and Nichols' reputations by following a Hollywood actress who plays characters totally unlike herself (and who gives especially aural performances), and an "actor's director." Harkening back to Nichols and May routines of children and their passive-aggressive, overbearing mothers, *Postcards*' follows recovering drug addict and actress Suzanne's (Streep) relationship with her mother, the aging Hollywood musical star—and

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<sup>297</sup> Those who work with Streep, from Cher and Ephron to Robert DeNiro, frequently cite her wit and humor as her most vivid qualities. See PE, 90, 91, 103, 116.

<sup>298</sup> Streep was nominated for an Academy Award for her largely comedic performance—a rare feat—though she maintains the psychological depth associated with melodramatic characters.

alcoholic—Doris Mann (Shirley MacLaine).<sup>299</sup> Nichols adapted *Postcards* from the rehab-to-riches novel/memoir by Carrie Fisher (who also wrote the screenplay), who had a highly publicized history with drugs and whose mother, Debbie Reynolds, was a legend of the Hollywood musical having starred as Kathy Selden in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelley, 1952) and Tammy in *Tammy and the Bachelor* (Joseph Pevney, 1957). Although she has appeared in many films, Fisher remains best known for playing Princess Leia in George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) franchise. Fisher, Nichols' friend, sent the galleys of her book to him, and he saw a potential film, although not as written. The book dwells on Suzanne's drug recovery, and the difficulties of dealing with men—whether they are agents or dates—in Los Angeles. Nichols wanted to draw on Fisher's life, but to focus on her relationship with her mother, which he knew of first-hand (Johnstone, 100). In fact, in the first screenplay draft, Suzanne and her mother did not even share a scene (Johnstone, 101).<sup>300</sup> The movie, however, intertwines Suzanne's attempts to become a working actor again with her relationship to her mother.

*Postcards* begins with a shot of the ocean. The camera zooms out and pans left to reveal women moving through a line of people to board a plane home from some tropical country. One woman, named Vicki, is summarily removed from line, beaten and interrogated by soldiers. Vicki, we surmise, is some sort of spy and fights back, declaring, "All you've got is money. And there isn't enough mommy in the world to further a cause like yours... Fuck!" As Vicki and her captors realize she misspoke ("mommy" vs. "money"), they burst into laughter. Vicki collapses into the soldiers' arms, laughing, before looking straight into the camera and apologizing. As the camera tracks back, we learn we have been watching the filming of a scene for a movie starring

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<sup>299</sup> The wonderful and prolific Hollywood character actor, Mary Wickes, also features in Suzanne's family tree by playing her grandmother.

<sup>300</sup> Nichols' declined Debbie Reynolds' offer to play "herself" (Johnstone, 101).

the woman playing Vicki, Suzanne Vale. The director, Lowell (Gene Hackman) compassionately takes the blame, saying it is “[his] fault for trying to do it without any cuts.” His remark directs our attention to the almost three minute long duration of the opening shot, one that does not just establish that this film will be about making movies, but functions as an inside joke by alluding to Nichols’ own penchant for shots of extended duration. Suzanne also complains about “having to say all those words”—another allusion to Nichols’ movies, which privilege spoken words (such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Wit*, and, as we shall see, *Angels in America*). Suzanne takes a short break, and Lowell hears her taking drugs; when she returns, he tells her: “You fuck up my movie... I’ll kill you before you kill yourself, and I’ll do a better job cause you’re so out of it, you’ll probably even botch that up.”

As *Postcards*’ opening titles appear on the screen, the ocean reappears, but this time, the camera zooms back and pans right to reveal a lavish home, and Suzanne comatose in bed after a drug overdose. Lowell’s prediction seems to have come true. This cinematographic “mirroring” provides a visual metaphor for the story’s investment in contrasting fiction and reality, cinematic acting and “acting in real life,” suggesting that we can compare them, but, as the ocean appears identical in each shot, we may never truly distinguish between them. Suzanne ends up in a rehabilitation clinic where she participates in therapeutic role-playing exercises, and where she learns that she must think about the relation between her self and her actions: “the behavior might be [suicidal],” she initially protests, “but I was certainly not.”

After she is released, Suzanne and her mother visit her agent, Marty Wiener (played by Borscht Belt comedian Gary Morton), who informs her that no insurance company will cover her while she films a new movie unless she moves back home with her mother (who must pledge to be responsible for her). Suzanne and Doris constantly talk over one another (their long scenes of



overlapping dialogue provides much of the film's humor and adds to the film's litany of Nicholsian devices, e.g., in *Virginia Woolf*?). Doris recounts the trials and tribulations of having a meeting while Louis B. Mayer was on the toilet (a story Nichols borrowed from Fisher's step-mother, Elizabeth Taylor, who reports it happened to her), while Suzanne protests the idea of living with her mother. Their bickering culminates when Doris attributes Suzanne's self-deprecating humor to her "generation," and Suzanne, who resents being so reduced, retorts that "[she does not] have a generation." Marty promptly tells her to get one. Thus, while Doris openly claims her membership to the generation of classic Hollywood stars, Suzanne, like Streep, does not lay claim to an identifiable group of cinematic actors purporting to share a stylistic. Their familial conflict is also a professional one. We will see that Suzanne's quest to successfully perform (which is also Lowell's quest) becomes both the film's aesthetic and its subject. When Suzanne, as Vicki, misspeaks, both *Postcards* and the diegetic film grind to a halt, and it will only be when that mistake has been repaired—when she learns to successfully create a character—that Lowell's film will be finished, and that *Postcards* can end.

Suzanne agrees to move back home with Doris, who has planned an elaborate surprise party for the occasion, much to Suzanne's dismay and Doris tells her to "sing one of your old songs from my act." Unlike the traditional star Doris, who performs by *being* herself, "Suzanne was in the business of *seeming*—of entertaining people with her ways of seeming real" (my italics, Fisher, 112). Like so many other of Nichols' protagonists, Suzanne must play a role despite her frustration at its demands (we might remember the party poor Ben was thrown by his parents in *The Graduate*). Following Suzanne's meek delivery of Ray Charles' "You Don't Know Me," the crowd of party-goers (whom Doris has chosen, like Ben's parents) clamor for Doris to sing. After a bit of mock-protestation that it is her "daughter's night," she belts out a

piano-thumping, leg-baring number about her career, “I’m Still Here,” which thrills the diegetic crowd but only affirms the demise of her stardom to the film’s spectator by protesting too much.<sup>301</sup> The star of such films as *That Marvelous Mrs. Markham*, Doris is ever the diva, unable to conceive of herself as anything but a star of the old-fashioned variety; she never stops entertaining. When she speaks, even alone with Suzanne, she mugs to an imagined audience, and when fighting with Suzanne, Doris asks, “How would you like to have Joan Crawford for a mother? Or Lana Turner?”

Suzanne begins working on an action film playing a sexy cop, and directed by Simon Asquith (Simon Callow). *Postcards* implicitly contrasts Simon with Lowell, the director of the film Suzanne threatens to ruin in the opening scene. As we will see, Lowell is the “good” director, the one who cares deeply about his film and his actors (and the fact that the long opening take is both in Lowell’s and Nichols’ movie encourages us to draw a parallel between them), while Simon is the “bad” director. On her first day of shooting (a pun made explicit as Suzanne, as the cop, is often seen “shooting” back at the camera), Suzanne arrives on set and is informed there will be no rehearsals. As she is being tied to a cactus and told there are live snakes in the shot, Simon swoops down from a crane and blurts out, “Hello darling! Great day for it! You look glorious! Big kiss!” before ascending away.

Like the opening scene, which wrongfoots the spectator by not signaling itself as a diegetic movie set, *Postcards* utilizes reflexive devices, but is careful to reflect on the process of fictional filmmaking; it never fully exposes *itself* as constructed. For example, we watch an entire scene play out between Suzanne and Jack—her love interest who is “giving her his best

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<sup>301</sup> In another level of reflexivity, the film refers to MacLaine’s own legendary career during this song, whose original words have been changed to allude to her public espousal of reincarnation: “I’m feeling transcendental. Am I here?” Though maybe less explicit, what better way to allude to Streep’s lack of recognizable persona than to sing “You Don’t Know Me”?

lines”—as they walk along a suburban street only to see the houses suddenly carted away, revealing a parking lot. However, this disruption of the *mise-en-scène* does not interrupt the characters’ actions or disorient us in a particularly threatening way, and although spectators might be tempted to think that it gives us the “real parking lot” behind the set, the comedic timing of the “revelation” feels so meant that it thwarts our ability to determine if the parking lot we see is “real” or another set for *this* film. Thus, *Postcards*’ reflexivity is not in the service of positing an extant “truth” by attempting to convince the spectator that revealing cinematic spaces as constructed or fictional will provide her access to “reality.”

On her second day of shooting, Suzanne is met by the “holy trinity” of producers, each of whom complain about her first day’s performance. *Postcards* satirizes the advice given by those who do not understand the craft of acting; the producers offer such vague statements as “You’re holding back.” and “Enjoy it more.” One goes so far as to share the secret that, “in comedy, it’s a rule: inflections go up at the end of a line,” which Suzanne immediately derides by asking “That’s a comedy rule?” as her voice rises. Suzanne then overhears Simon and the costume designer discussing her body, worrying that if she lies down “her tits are gonna move off into her armpits.” By the time Suzanne arrives on set, she angrily confronts Simon. Simon, who has pompously told her to “just have fun with it,” excitedly responds to her fury: “But this is it! That’s it! That’s her! That’s the character; that’s the quality I’ve been looking for, now what you’re doing!” Suzanne screams, “But Simon, this is not relaxed! This is incredibly upset!” Simon then leads her back to her mark, telling her it will all be all right if she will “just be [herself].” Suzanne is unable to perform her next scene, which calls for her to dangle from a ledge and in which she should, in fact, be incredibly upset. While *Postcards*’ revelation of *mise-en-scène* as *mise-en-scène* is typically amusing, this scene reverses the trend by showing

the creation of a set. Suzanne lies flat on the set of a building, arms extended over head to appear as though she is holding onto a ledge set piece. However, the rear projection screen is blank, so the illusion does not work for us. Later on, when she returns to filming this scene, the spectator sees the *mise-en-scène* constructed (the rear projection is activated to provide the street scene “below” Suzanne). Despite rendering the illusion obvious, when Suzanne, upset, can only mutter a half-hearted, “Help,” before throwing her hands up in exasperation and letting go of the ledge, her movement shatters the cinematic illusion and provides one of the film’s biggest laughs.

This scene is possibly a dig at the Method school of acting which recommends its actors use their own affective experiences to achieve realism in their performances. Insensitive director Simon was invented for the film (like all the filmmaking scenarios), and the casting of Simon Callow is significant.<sup>302</sup> Callow is also a scholar of stage and screen acting in his own right. He notes the historical importance of performances, such as Marlon Brando’s in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), associated with the Method (as developed by Strasberg, and despite the fact that Brando did not study with him, but with Stella Adler), but derides its effectiveness, suggesting that Brando’s style strives to appear merely like “not acting.” *Postcards* was Callow’s first appearance in Hollywood film, which he describes as “ideal” (SA, 302). According to Callow, Nichols called him the day after seeing him in Alan Bennett’s play *Single Spies*, and “vow[ed] to never make another *film* without [him] in it (my italics, SA, 302). Callow admits that, “it was a Chinese box of a Pirandellian puzzle, this part” (SA, 304), but heralds

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<sup>302</sup> Callow’s theoretical (and biographical) examinations of acting, *Being an Actor* (1986) [BA] and *Shooting the Actor* (2003) [SA] testifies not only to his learnedness and training, but also to the energy and insight that acting requires. Originally trained in the Stanislavski method, the theatrical method which has had more influence on stage and screen acting than any other in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Callow summates that, “Stanislavsky is based squarely on the concept of Action: that everything in a play is done *in order* to achieve a want of some kind” (BA, 19). The performer prepares by formulating reasons the character’s actions in an effort to depict intentionality to the spectator.

Nichols' ability to trust his actors, which "radiates its way out to the actors, empowering and liberating them." Callow finds this perfectly predictable as "the man is, after all, one of the most brilliant performers in the history of comedy, and his conversation is a form of directing by example, so perfect is his phrasing and timing" (SA, 303-304). Furthermore, Callow contrasts Nichols with directors, such as Milos Foreman, who announce "there shall be *no acting*" on their sets (SA, 16). He writes that, "[t]o approach a character with the negative thought that one mustn't act is impossible" (SA, 67), for to deny the actor the possibility of acting is to deny her existence.

Suzanne's "Help!" scene also alludes to Denis Diderot's famous paradox, which holds that in order for an actor to move her audience, she must remain unmoved herself (assuming that an actor who gives herself over to the inner life of a character produces unstable and inconsistent performances, often inappropriately calculated for the arena of the performance). For Diderot, "the great actor undermines the belief that we can distinguish between being and acting" (Kouvaros, 73). Suzanne is indeed in need of help; having attempted suicide, she feels unloved by her mother, struggles to resist the lure of drugs, and has just had her professional life excoriated by those criticizing her talent and physical appearance. However, she is unable to deliver a convincing imitation of helplessness, or rather, she *does* deliver a gesture of helplessness (throwing her hands up and whimpering), but it is not the *right* gesture of helplessness. This substitution of Suzanne's gesture for the metafictional character's is analogous to the substitution of parking lot for suburban houses, except here, the difference is located in our perception of the action's motivation.

## Existing Through Sound

After discovering that her agent has absconded with all of her money, Suzanne has it out with her mother, confessing her years of resentment for Doris' bad parenting. Doris, predictably, refuses to take the blame and the two yell at each other in rather clichéd dialogue. That this mother-daughter showdown occurs on the stairs of their house calls to mind Thomas Elsaesser's observation of this trope in the history of Hollywood family melodramas, such as *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), films which also feature mothers and daughters who perform for a living, who compete for the affections of men, audiences, and each other (Grant, 386). Upset by this showdown, Suzanne swallows (and vomits) pills before heading to a looping session for Lowell's film, where her story of finding herself—of figuring out how to separate from her mother, and be the actress she wants to be—can finally be resolved.

That Suzanne works through her problems in this space resonates with Fisher's novel: "Suzanne identified herself in her voice. She was as close as she ever got to being whoever she was when she was talking. She existed through sound" (172). Significantly, the ingénue Fisher's mother Debbie Reynolds played in *Singin' in the Rain* offers her voice up as that of a beautiful, but vocally unfortunate, star, and whose future career is threatened when that star tries to force her to continue doing it. However, for the musical's ballads, Reynolds' own voice was replaced by another, and it seems that the sins of the mother have been visited upon Suzanne/Fisher, who must reconcile the disruption of her own voice and image.

Suzanne arrives at the looping session to be confronted by Lowell and her flubbed "mommy" line. She sets out to dub the line, to repair the appearance of unity between her character's mind and body (which, in this case, requires Suzanne to diminish the aural traces of

her own psyche and, though still her with her own voice, to speak words proper to the character). After she successfully replaces “mommy” with “money” (now a commentary on Suzanne’s transitioning identity from daughter to working actress), she watches the playback, and, abashed, begins to cry—both pleased and frightened by the idea of no longer having her “mommy” hang-ups to blame for her actions. Lowell notices the tears and attempts to console her. He asks her: “You’ve gone back and fixed the past, what could possibly be the matter?” Lowell’s question reminds us that we, as spectators, typically assume we are seeing an actor’s best takes—unlike at the theater where visible mistakes can be integrated, ignored, or papered over, but never undone. But it is not just being granted the fantasy of repeating one’s actions, of changing the consequences of the past, which compels Suzanne’s tears. Lowell’s counsel is reminiscent of psychoanalysis, and inspires Suzanne to realize her responsibility for her own choices, as well as her feelings about her mother.<sup>303</sup> She tries to tell him what it was like growing up in Hollywood with a star-mother, confessing to him: “I just can’t feel my life.” Lowell tells her to grow up and reject the cycle of parental abuse, to live her own life. When she responds positively, he accuses her of liking his advice “because it sounds a little like movie dialogue.” She admits that is her pathology: “I don’t want life to imitate art, I want life to *be* art.”

This scene makes the aural constitution of a cinematic character perspicuous, for despite her convincingly rebellious facial expression in the shot, her verbal slip renders it unusable—since it is a realist film being made. And in realist film, the aim is to create a figure that is convincingly human, who is present to the events of the narrative; the flawed visual image can remain, but not the flawed aural one. If we see the version with “mommy” in it, we know Suzanne is *not* acting, that she has failed at her task. Contradicting Simon’s advice (and the

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<sup>303</sup> While I hesitate to affix the biographical to the textual, we might recall that Nichols originally set out to become a psychoanalyst at the University of Chicago (Gussow, 96).

Method's notion of drawing on the actor's own life experiences), being herself equals failing to perform. Unlike the filming of Simon's movie, the exposure of the mechanics of filmmaking in the looping session does not underscore the artifice of cinematic acting for the spectator, but convinces us that a successful performance is an art, a result of an actor *acting*, being in another way than her "real" self. By reuniting body and voice, Suzanne creates the image of a moment, of a present in which Vicki is present, and reminds us of the pretense of acting, of its inauthenticity.

After Suzanne corrects "the past," Lowell informs her that he has another job for her, relying again on her vocal talents by casting her as a Patsy Cline type figure. This unexpected windfall for Suzanne is complemented by the long shot that follows in which we see her embrace Lowell in front of her revised performance. She whispers to him, "Thank you, God." That the actor's director, Lowell, creates the role for her (we do not learn of a writer) and becomes "God" for her is faithful to *Postcards*' overarching metaphor of cinematic acting as living. The final scene begins with Suzanne in costume, having her country-western style hair and makeup touched up. The shot pans over to Lowell in the director's chair and her mother Doris amidst the crowd of crew members. Suzanne takes to the soundstage and a clapboard displays the title of the film, *Blue Rodeo*.<sup>304</sup> She starts, in a strong Southern accent, to sing a song (and there is no dubbing here) called "I'm Checkin' Out." The refrain—"I'm checkin' out of this heartbreak hotel"—may at first suggest the exchange of heartbreak for happiness, but as the song ends, Lowell says, "Cut. Print." We then see another clapboard, upside down, but here the title of the film is not *Blue Rodeo*, but *Postcards From the Edge*, with Mike Nichols listed as director and

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<sup>304</sup> Blue Rodeo is actually the name of the band that accompanies Streep during the scene.



Michael Ballhaus as cinematographer.<sup>305</sup> Thus, the film ends as it begins: Suzanne is making a movie for Lowell. In the light of this framing device, and given the equation of Lowell with God, the lyrics take on funereal connotations. If Suzanne's initial, failed performance for Lowell resulted in a failed suicide attempt, she now seems to be a success in both respects.<sup>306</sup> Unlike Suzanne's suicide as the opening credits rolled, she now has an adoring audience to witness her act of self-effacement as this country western singer. After the clapboard sounds the end of the film, and the final credits roll, logic would dictate Suzanne could not persist, but "God" grants Suzanne an afterlife, for she begins a lively, gospel reprise of "I'm Checkin' Out." Perhaps, though, this scene is an appropriate ending for a film about Streep's talent for portraying living, thinking beings, for what signals a character's mortality more than the prospect of death?

### **The Voice of Streep**

Reminding us that an actor need not be more identical to her character than singer to song, the country-western singer Suzanne plays in *Blue Rodeo* hardly resembles the Suzanne we have come to know. In this sense, *Postcards*' diverges from many Hollywood classics like *Show People* (King Vidor, 1928), *Morning Glory* (Lowell Sherman, 1933), *Stage Door* (Gregory LaCava, 1937), and *Singin' in the Rain* which offer representations of actors learning what it means to successfully perform. In each of these films, the actor successfully performs when acting "like herself," that is, when closing the gap between character and actor. *Postcards* contrasts Suzanne's triumphant transformation with Doris' stardom, which it labels old-fashioned. In the end, Doris is resigned to watching from the sidelines in the end, making way

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<sup>305</sup> Ballhaus is also Martin Scorsese's frequent collaborator, and was cinematographer for fifteen of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films, another director known for exploring the work of performing.

<sup>306</sup> Shel Silverstein, poet and children's author, was nominated for an Oscar for writing this song for the film. Suicide is a frequent subject in Silverstein's work.

for Suzanne to sing. Jean-Louis Comolli describes how, as spectators of classical Hollywood, we know that, “it is [the actor] and it is not, always and at the same time; we believe in it and we do not, at the same time” (Kouvaros, 74). Nevertheless, Doris (like the narratives of these classic films) encourages her audience not to worry about this distinction and to enjoy a seamlessness between actor and character; she reinforces the epistemological desire to know the “real” star by attending to the presence of the star’s persona. Suzanne’s character choices encourage her audience to believe that it simply cannot *know* the difference.

Leo Braudy writes that, “the film actor... works on his self-image, carries it from part to part, constantly projecting the same thing—‘himself’” (423).<sup>307</sup> André Bazin considered the classical Hollywood star system’s promise of the presence of a star in relation (if not opposition) to Italian neorealism, which, by essentializing particular qualities (usually an actor’s class background) purported to heighten a fictional films’ realism by employing “real” people who were “really like” the characters of the story.<sup>308</sup> Bazin further applauds neorealism’s documentary-like perspective on the grounds that its employment of “real people” as actors guarantees authenticity: “In these films, the very concept of actor, performance, character has no longer any meaning. An actorless cinema? Undoubtedly” (*What is Cinema, Vol. II [WCII]*, 56). Hence, both the classic star system and neorealism require versions of believing the actors play themselves, that the characters are “really like” the actors playing them; both rely on the assumption that a spectator perceives a “core” personality. A major difference between the ideals of these two casting systems relies on essentialism and the spectator’s knowledge. Bazin’s

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<sup>307</sup> This resonates with Strasberg’s declaration that, in the Method, the “actor *performs himself*” (Bartow, 8). Besides blurring the line between documentary and fiction, this fusion of the actor and her role may explain the Method’s adoption by Hollywood, whose star system, after all, classically invited such equation.

<sup>308</sup> We should wonder at the assumption that an actor who grew up, say middle class, understands her classness—and how to depict it—better than others. I fear it assumes a level of self-awareness most people do not demonstrate (or the class system might have changed long ago).

theorization of the effects of neorealism involve the spectator having knowledge of the actor's background so that she can essentialize the person through that knowledge, and then perceive an overlay of types on screen. The Hollywood star system, on the other hand, revels in the individualities created by the star; unlike audience members who guard their social differences, stars stake their fortune on being unique (which, if they ascend to stardom, ironically becomes a type). I am reminded again of *Singin' in the Rain*'s scenes of film spectators who boo the actor who plays a villain or believe that the on-screen couple are in love off-screen.

Streep appears to take neither of these roads; the spectator knows little of her "authentic" experience and she, according to Carroll, does not present the spectator with a consistent individuality. Streep's avoidance of being typed could be seen to offer the spectator the fantasy of a self beyond the realm of representation, or, conversely, of a refusal of the idea of a core self altogether. In the last chapter, I quoted Nichols saying that "Movie acting was invented less than 100 years ago — movie acting with sound. You know how Harold Bloom says that Shakespeare invented us? It's a fascinating idea, and you can go quite far with it. You could say that it's in talking movies that inner life begins to appear" (McGrath, 2). I paired Nichols' thought with a similar claim from Leo Braudy, who offered the view that American cinema's preoccupation with "the paradox of the actor's body—its physical presence and its metaphysical absence, its visibility and its invisibility, body and mind, action and meditation" is predicated on the advent of sound (215). James Naremore, too, notes that, "since 1927 [regarded as the year "talkies" emerged] all forms of actorly expression—gestures, movements, facial grimaces, and especially voices—have been rendered in the tones of everyday conversation, more or less conforming to the usage of the movie audience" (47). As we saw in *Postcards*'s climactic looping scene, the technological synchronization of aural to visual image does not simply augment the drama of the

visual or the naturalism of the performance. While much has been written about the spectral visual presence of an on-screen human, the looping scene reminds us of the aural absence of the performer, too.

Bazin's notion that there are no "wings" at the cinema (referring to how the theatrical spectator may choose to remind herself that a character walks off-stage while the frame of the screen is harder to attend to) is at least as accurate in the case of the spectator's aural experience, which surrounds her. He thinks it is the verbal quality ("which refuses to let itself be captured in the window of the screen") that inspires some to rank theater aesthetically higher than the visual cinema (WC, 107). Speaking of the plays of great writers (Racine, Shakespeare, Moliere), Bazin asserts that, "[w]hat is specifically theatrical about these tragedies is not their action so much as the human, that is to say the *verbal*, priority given to their dramatic structure" (my italics, WC, 106). For Bazin, the dramatic element is that which exists in theater and cinema, and which can be transposed between them. It should not surprise us, then, that Streep, who draws such attention to her characters' verbal lives, has been so valorized for creating deeply vivacious, robust characters.

Streep has been more celebrated for her linguistic talents than any other skill, and more than any other actor. Streep does not simply pronounce scripted words differently with each character; every Streep character speaks with a different linguistic melody, rhythm, intonation, pitch, etc. She is known for performing more recognizable accents and dialects than any other cinematic performer in history.<sup>309</sup> Although Streep never repeats a hairstyle and her costuming is always thoughtful (typically, she works with legendary costume designer Ann Roth), her characters are more readily distinguishable aurally than visually. She has served spectators' ears through articulating flawless accents, from Irish (*Dancing at Lughnasa*) to New Zealander (*A*

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<sup>309</sup> For more on Streep's reputation for performing accents, see Hollinger, 90.

*Cry in the Dark*) to period Danish (*Out of Africa* [Sidney Pollack, 1985]). Her American characters are also aurally diverse, from her upstate New York mother in *One True Thing* to the breathy drawl of her character in *She-Devil* (Susan Seidelman, 1989). In *Sophie's Choice*, Streep not only delivered her English dialogue in a staggering Polish accent, she spent months actually learning Polish, so that Sophie could grow out of that form of life. In the scenes in which she speaks to her German Nazi captor, her German dialogue has an impeccable Polish accent. She tells us that, “[she] wanted to feel that [she] could live inside the language” (TK, 293).

Johnstone informs us that, “Streep wanted her character to *think* in Polish and let her diction and expression come from that” (xii). Besides vocal prosody, her performances are replete with effects designed to give the impression of a character coming to her words in the moment; she employs ungrammatical phrases, frequently corrects herself, stops sentences short, mumbles, pauses, verbally trips over her words, etc.<sup>310</sup>

Michel Chion states that American actors attend to vocal accents especially, citing Streep as an example (172-173). Chion claims that, “[i]n France, hardly any actors modify their voices” (173). On a similar note, British actress Diana Rigg once professed that, since the written text is so important due to England’s superior writers, British actors undergo a great deal more vocal training than Americans, resulting in robust voices unable to compete with the American actor’s “capacity for subtext” (Probst, 69). Since “the viewer cannot predict what voice... Streep might have in the newest film,” Chion argues, “the audience becomes aware of the voice as an entity distinct from the body, even when it comes from the very center of the image” (173).

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<sup>310</sup> Classic Hollywood American actresses like Bette Davis and Katherine Hepburn typically steered clear of accents. Davis was never able to tame her clipped rhythm, while Hepburn struggled mightily with her distinctive New England tones (as her attempt at a poor Appalachian faith-healer in *Spitfire* [John Cromwell, 1934] exemplifies). Performers like Garbo and Ingrid Bergman liberally applied their Swedish accents to English-speaking characters. Sometimes narrative explanation was offered, though the spectator was typically aware of their Swedish origins.

Streep, though, has grown weary of the attention to her voice. In a discussion with Nichols and the cast of *Angels in America*, an interviewer asked Emma Thompson, “was it intimidating to do all those characters in front of the queen of accents?” (Ansen and Peyser [AP], 1). Streep immediately protested, and although she professed to appreciate the reputation that built up around her vocal prowess she copped to hating such praise: “It’s like saying, ‘I really like you because of your feet’”—at which point, Nichols chimed in to remark, “[t]hat’s a very good simile” (AP, 1). Given that feet are the classic objects of fetishization, perhaps Streep suggests that isolating her vocal performance disavows its relation to other aspects of her performance style, and, more importantly, the knowledge of its product (the character). She may also be objecting to the focus on her voice as a way of disavowing the fact that voices (or any sounds) are not properties of on-screen objects and, that multiple voices can “belong” to one body while still remaining “of” that body.

Just like Debbie Reynolds’ performance in *Singin’ in the Rain* attested (at the level of narrative and production), *Postcard*’s looping scene confronts the spectator with this potential trauma. Suzanne’s realization, “I just can’t feel my life,” is also an expression of dissociation (which according to Johnstone is the line that made Streep want to do the film [98]). With this climactic scene and its story of an actress who plays characters unlike herself, I do not think it is a coincidence that *Postcards* is the one film which critics and audiences think may provide a glimpse of the “true” Streep (DVD Commentary; TK, 294). Streep has said that, “Suzanne is very insecure and doesn’t feel authentically herself. She’s more like the *vernacular* me than any character that I’ve played. Her insecurities are mine” (my italics, Johnstone, 98). It led one interviewer to ask her whether people ever see “her,” or, because she is always acting, only see a

character. Streep replied, “I would say you always see me” (TK, 294). To that we should add that we always hear her.

Through his comedy team with Elaine May, Nichols’ career is also rooted in vocal characterizations. Indeed, he has stated that his two favorite acted moments in the history of film are when Garbo in *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936) exclaims, “He’s the youngest and handsomest man at the table” [Marguerite (Garbo) is speaking and catches herself mid-sentence with a little laugh], and when Meryl Streep in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* falls down, and then giggles” (Murray, 1). By showing characters with such intense feelings that they will not be contained, these virtuosic moments are not just emotionally resonant; Streep and Garbo, by indicating spontaneity, call attention to their characters’ thought processes. It is as if the actions surprise even the characters. Combining Bazin’s association of the verbal and human elements with Aristotle’s view that humanness starts with laughter and the fact that other animals are never embarrassed about what their bodies do, what could be more human than being embarrassed about one’s laughter?

*Camille*’s director, George Cukor, is widely regarded as Hollywood’s quintessential “actor’s director.”<sup>311</sup> *Postcards* alludes to another Cukor film. Suzanne detects that Jack is being less than sincere and calls him out: “Didn’t Jimmy Stewart say that in a movie once?” He did, and the film was Cukor’s *The Philadelphia Story*,<sup>312</sup> the story of a woman berated for her (apparently justifiably) proud self-presentation. Just as Nichols’ films feature characters who

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<sup>311</sup> Gene Phillips’ book, *George Cukor*, chronicles Cukor’s extensive career and widely celebrated reputation for his films’ actors’ performances.

<sup>312</sup> Nichols once said that “[o]ne of [his] favorite lines in any movie is in *The Philadelphia Story*: ‘The time to make up your mind about people is never’ (Smith, 29). This coincides with Nichols’ belief (and advice to actors) that one of their principal tasks is to “make the case” for their character regardless of their own judgments. Jules Feiffer once said that, “If movies hadn’t changed so radically, what Mike would have been, perhaps should have been, is the successor to a director like George Cukor—working in romantic comedy with urbane wit and style. But those times changed (Lahr, 282-283). *Postcards* also refers to the work of Jean Renoir, known for his poetic realism, through posters conspicuously placed in the mise-en-scène.

“perform” at some point, so Cukor’s protagonists are typically compelled to “perform” within the narrative—most often to (attempt to) capitulate to gender expectations while breaking down class barriers. Naremore discusses Hollywood’s penchant for protagonists who struggle to self-present in this manner, who “act persons who are acting”—a feature he deems “metaperformance” (72). Closely reading *Camille*, he concludes:

Thus, we could say that realist acting amounts to an effort at sustaining opposing attitudes toward the self, on the one hand trying to create the illusion of unified, individualized personality, but on the other suggesting that character is subject to division or dissolution into a variety of social roles. (72)

For Naremore, a realist performance style relies on the possibility of performing *unintentional* actions: those which bubbles up from below and break through the surface of expressive coherence. If realist acting, then, entertains us with a self split, the figure is triangulated by our perception of an actor’s artistry. In *Postcards*, Streep performs a character struggling to convincingly self-present and a character working to convincingly perform a character (in the diegetic films); thus, the film contrasts self-presentation and cinematic performance. Streep, it seems to me, adds a third layer to the on-screen figure in the form of her own commentary running alongside Suzanne. Streep is adept at just that style of performance that I quoted Nichols as valorizing in the introduction; he thinks that great actors both live their parts and simultaneously observe them. They are “inside and outside at the same time” (*The Graduate* DVD Commentary).

Here, Nichols claims that to perform a character in a realist manner is not at odds with simultaneously commenting on the character (and the type of person the character intimates). This would seem to veer closely to the Brechtian-inspired formulations of politically “progressive” stylistics I described in the introduction as hostile to Hollywood’s traditional style of realist performance, which was thought could lull the spectator into a passive and unaware



state. However, Nichols, like *Postcards* and *Camille*, indicates that, this sort of cinematic acting never implied that notions like potentiality and contradiction were at odds with a workable notion of realism and personal identity.

### ***Angels in America: Characters Cracking Open***

Streep and Nichols' fourth, and final, project together is *Angels in America*, which further comments on Streep's chameleonic reputation and destabilizes the spectator's perception of her identity. *Angels* is set in 1985, and based on the Pulitzer Prize winning play which premiered on Broadway in 1993 [though it was first performed in 1990].<sup>313</sup> In the afterword to the source play, author Tony Kushner relates his Brechtian and Marxist views, asserting that, "[a]nyone interested in exploring alternatives to Individualism and the political economy it serves, capitalism, has to be willing to ask hard questions about the ego, both as abstraction and as exemplified in oneself" (138). He also concludes that, "Marx was right: The smallest divisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. And also plays" (158).<sup>314</sup> *Angels* is set in the 1980s, which witnessed AIDS, a rise in corporatism, globalization, and an increased attention to identity politics.<sup>315</sup> Kushner's claims return us to my introductory chapter, where I laid out Nichols' interest in

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<sup>313</sup> Several critics claimed that due to its apocalyptic tone and representation of millennial anxiety and national trauma, *Angels* "speaks to us more urgently than ever in the new [era] ushered in by 9/11" (Frank Rich, 1). Also, see McGrath. Indeed, this is the thrust of Deborah Geis' article on the adaptation of the play to film. I would not dispute that that day impacted the nation's self-consciousness, or that *Angels* is not relevant to that change. However, I do not count myself among the "us" for which an enemy external to the nation renders *Angels* more urgent, symbolic, meaningful, or affecting than the knowledge of the years of epidemic and AIDS-related deaths of over twenty million Americans prior to its broadcast.

<sup>314</sup> *Angels* extends this notion in complicated ways through its metaphorically charged corporealizations of social institutions, from government to law to religion to medicine. As Roy, pleading with Joe to manipulate Washington politicians' influence on judges, sputters: "This is gastric juices churning! This is enzymes and acids! This is intestinal, is what this is: bowel movement and blood red meat. This stinks. This is politics, Joe. This is the game of being alive."

<sup>315</sup> By "identity politics," I mean a contemporary politics which sought inclusion for certain previously defined categories of people along pre-established criteria, typically derived from definitions of race, class, and gender, but which eventually included markers connoting sexuality.

cinematic humans and in their behavior as expressive of the social, of the interpersonal as behavioral—and for behavior as the space of the interpersonal—calling attention to the phenomenon of expressivity, its role in communication, and, ultimately, the possibility of knowing other people. *Angels* demands that we think about the confluence of these concerns, as well as others we have highlighted in subsequent chapters, such as the relation of stage and screen performance, to the use of silence, the influence of the 1960s social movements on more recent identity politics, representations of American masculinity, Jewishness, and the depiction of male homosexuality in American cinema. For these reasons, it seems fitting to conclude with a look at this film.

Streep hails *Angels* as “the crowning achievement of [Nichols’] career...” (Goldfarb and Giles [GG], 1). We might say the same of Streep’s performance in it, for it best demonstrates her chameleonic persona by allowing her to play four characters within a single text. She plays more roles than any other actor in the film: depicting a male rabbi, a Mormon mother (Hannah), an angel (more specifically, the angelic delegate from Australia), and a “real” historical figure, Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>316</sup> In a speech at the American Film Institute ceremony bestowing Streep with a Life Achievement Award, Nichols said

When a great actor occurs, it changes several generations because human behavior is redefined. For other actors, Meryl is not only a life-giving force for those lucky enough to work with her since it immediately increases one’s talent a thousand percent simply to look at her in a scene, but she also defines what is possible for an actor as an artist, as a

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<sup>316</sup> Commolli’s essay, “Historical Fiction—a Body Too Much” presents the special difficulties in thinking about stars’ depictions of historical persons. He recognizes the importance of doubt/misrecognition of actor as character: “The ‘I know very well’ irresistibly calls for the ‘but all the same,’ includes it as its value, its intensity” (Kouvaros, 167). Though, it seems (unbeknownst to us) that even fictional characters may be performed as though based on real ones, for Streep has intimated that “the rabbi embodied my father... I did go to Williamsburg and had some kreplach, you know, ‘to prepare’” (Johnstone, 173). Streep’s lineage consists of Spanish Jews who adopted the Dutch word “Streep” (meaning a straight line) as immigrants. She also formed her rabbi by listening to “tapes of people from different parts of Latvia and [listening] to them speaking about their lives... He’s a wonderful character. It was no work to do that. It was just me” (Tichler, 306). It is tempting to posit relationships between these characters based on the fact that they are all played by Streep (and may even lead us to call her performance something like a collage). I will not consider this approach to interpreting the text here.

parent, as a citizen. Meryl creates, has created, and continues to create a series of unique human beings each with a soul, sometimes, as we've seen as many as four people at a time.

Perhaps because she plays more characters than in *Angels* than any other actor, or simply because she is Meryl Streep, she was often treated as the film's lead actress.<sup>317</sup> Her performance is nothing if not virtuosic. Her rabbi is probably her most extreme demonstration of chameleonic ability, and she consistently toes the line between tragic and comedic. Playing multiple characters, all with different physicality and accents, allows us to further reflect on Streep's reputation as a shape-shifter (which may have ironically dampened the disruptiveness of the technique, as the audience has come to expect such changes from Streep).

*Angels* takes a hard look at America at the end of the Twentieth Century, centering around the condition of gay men during the onset of the worst epidemic America has ever known: AIDS.<sup>318</sup> Gay men were first and most affected by AIDS.<sup>319</sup> Kushner's play was radical in its subject matter, yet managed to reach a wide audience. The play swept the Tony Awards of 1993 and 1994 (its presentation in two parts qualified it both years), and critics raved: "Some visionary playwrights want to change the world. Some want to revolutionize the theater. Tony Kushner... has the promise to do both." (Rich, 1). Susan Sontag deemed it "a marvelous play,

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<sup>317</sup> She, for example, reaped awards as a lead rather than supporting actress despite not having noticeably more screen time than other actresses. This may be attributed, too, to the fact that the previous year was a banner one for Streep with her fascinating turns in *Adaptation*, (Spike Jonze, 2002) and *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002). But it was for *Angels* that she won an Emmy and Golden Globe, propelling her into the most commercially successful period of her career.

<sup>318</sup> Space prohibits this piece serving as a comparative study of the film and play, not because the similarities and differences are not interesting or potentially significant, but because it is a topic best left for its own paper. I do want to point out that both Nichols and Robert Altman immediately saw the cinematic nature of the play. As Altman says, "the scenes are written like film scenes, so he's written it like a movie and put it on a stage" (Geis and Kruger, 228). The play was passed around to directors like Robert Altman and Paul Hogan before Nichols came on board. Altman gave several interviews about his plans for the project. For one, see "On Filming *Angels*: An Interview" in *Approaching the Millennium*. HBO's broadcast was the most watched cable film/event of the year, and *Angels* was nominated for 21 Emmys, winning 11 (in all the major categories, losing only to other nominees in the same category). It also dominated the Golden Globes.

<sup>319</sup> In both the film and its historical reception, the term "gay" denotes homosexual; they were used interchangeably, and I will follow suit. We might, of course, prefer to distinguish between the ideas of sexuality as property, basis of identity, and desire for an object choice.

which has made more of an impression on everybody than any play by an American in many, many years” (177).<sup>320</sup> Harold Bloom immediately included it, as the final entry, in his canon in 1994. John Clum called *Angels* “a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture... Characters thought dead miraculously appear. The real and the dream merge. Seemingly disparate actions are analogous. Comedy and tragedy alternate and, at times, coalesce” (Johnstone, 169).

As Clum’s comments suggest, Kushner’s “gay fantasia on national themes,” is not just a celebrated text; it is also a deep one. In many respects, the inspiration for *Angels* is Walter Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.<sup>321</sup> At one point, Streep’s Hannah lets rip a scream that is at once perfectly terrifying and perfectly amusing, conveying Klee’s angel’s monstrousness and heavenliness. David Savran observes that Klee’s “well-intentioned angel of history” is not unlike Benjamin himself, writing in Europe in 1940, “between the past, which is to say ‘catastrophe,’ [which, for Benjamin, signifies human history] and an unknown and terrifying future” (17). We can extend this, too, to Kushner’s

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<sup>320</sup> Sontag was an important public voice for AIDS in the 1980s. Her “The Way We Live Now,” was one of the first fiction piece to address the disease in 1986. It is composed of telephonic conversations, gossip, and hearsay in which the reader is inundated with names of everyone but the dying man, evoking the fear that was not just the result of unthinkable death, but induced by confusion about the disease itself. For more on this subject, see William Haver’s *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*. In 1991, Nichols founded *Friends Indeed* (with *Carnal Knowledge* actress Cynthia O’Neal), an AIDS care organization. *Postcards*’ longest shot (and remember that in the opening scene Nichols owns long takes as a marker of his style, his voice), Suzanne confronts a woman about whether she slept with Jack. The woman’s immediate response is, “I thought you were from some sort of celebrity AIDS notification service.” This reference to AIDS was rather progressive for commercial cinema. In an interview for *The Advocate*, Nichols was asked why Hollywood had yet to make a film about AIDS. He replied, “In Hollywood it takes ten or fifteen years” (Greco, 68). *Longtime Companion* (Norman René) was the first film to reach a wide audience dealing with the subject in 1990 (and also featured Mary-Louise Parker, who stars in *Angels*). HBO’s groundbreaking *And the Band Played On* (Roger Spottiswoode) did not air until 1993.

<sup>321</sup> Here is the thrust Benjamin’s description of Klee’s painting: “A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, and his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” (“Theses,” 257-258)

situation as a self-identifying gay writer living in New York City as AIDS descended. The two-part play was trimmed slightly to create an almost six hour TV miniseries which Nichols directed. While I ultimately want to look at this operatic text through the window of Streep and the performance-related concepts she invokes, it is something of a mosaic; hence, I will try to provide a sketch of complicated political issues raised by the film while still bearing in mind our larger attempt to elucidate the historical position of Streep and Nichols' films.

In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag writes of the apocalyptic atmosphere during the advent of AIDS in the 1980s. Though she states that no sort of person would go untouched by the disease, it was, at that time, primarily regarded as a source of panic for male urban homosexuals and the social liberals who loved them. Intravenous drug users and those in need of blood transfusions were also at risk, but popular attention—and blame—gravitated towards male homosexuals (a sentiment still with us; it remains illegal for people who so identify to donate blood.) This was in no small part a result of very loud and influential political and religious leaders, such as televangelist Jerry Falwell and Senator Jesse Helms, who envisioned AIDS as proof that God was finally seeing to the task of exterminating the most perverse group of Americans, and thus morally cleansing the nation by punishing it for beginning to wonder if homosexuals should count as citizens. President Ronald Reagan's communications director, Pat Buchanan, decreed AIDS to be "nature's revenge on gay men." Thus, the nation's response to the disease shed a bright light on the political importance of identity politics; it showed that laying claim to a particular identity could cost you the right to life.

The government's disdain required gay men to fight to be acknowledged as citizens, and AIDS was quickly placed in the service of socio-political conservatives preaching "against all that is called, for short (and inaccurately), the 1960s" (Sontag, 151). After our look at *The*

*Graduate* in chapter one, perhaps we should not be surprised to learn that silence was again politicized. Activist groups began to advertize the slogan “Silence=Death,” partly a form of attacking Reagan, who committed one of history’s most meaningful silences (and toyed with the line between epidemic and genocide) by refusing to even mention AIDS in public until 1986, after five years and tens of thousands of American deaths, much less devoting any resources to stemming and researching the disease.

Sontag relates that AIDS created the paradox of a victim who was also guilty (99). Paradox or not, it gave new urgency to the gay liberation movement that had begun in the late 1960s and created a new sense of identity among homosexual men. She compares the cultural discourse surrounding AIDS to that of cancer: “For several generations now, the generic idea of death has been a death from cancer, and a cancer death is experienced as a generic defeat. Now the generic rebuke to life and to hope is AIDS” (112). Sontag sees the replacement not just of cancer’s broad applicability with AIDS’ specificity, but of the view of those afflicted. Cancer patients were individuals, each of whom felt “a betrayal by one’s body;” they asked, “Why me?” (112). AIDS, however, created a “community of pariahs,” who were all too certain how they got it—and since it was assumed to be not just a result of sex, but of promiscuity, of anal intercourse, in short, of “perversity,” acquiring it was judged especially harshly (114). In fact, Sontag tells us, “[t]he illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, and friends” (113). Thus, AIDS was understood to be a consequence of illicit actions, precipitating a change in attitudes toward sex; for those who recognized the danger, it meant a distrust of one’s basic desires.

The potential imbrications of sexual and suicidal desires, in turn, affected ideas of personal experience—and cinematic actors depict human experiences. Bazin argued that the

cinematic actor is forever reacting to his environment: “the screen man is no longer the focus of the drama, but will eventually become the center of the universe” (106). As I quoted in the introduction, Nichols has avowed that, “A director creates behavior” (*Playboy*, 72) and that his favorite question to ask is “what is this *really* like?” (Rose, 1998). *Angels* indicates ways we can connect these shifts in American thinking about desire, the consequences of desire, economics, and selfhood to the contemporaneous culture that embraced Streep’s manner of depicting human agency.

### **“I’m Not Good With Bodies”**

*Angels* follows two central couples, Prior Walter (Justin Kirk)<sup>322</sup> and Louis (Ben Shenkman) and Joe (Patrick Wilson) and Harper (Mary Louise Parker). Suffering from AIDS in the 1980s in New York, Prior is chosen by jealous and disorganized angels who have been abandoned by God to “preach stasis.” Louis, an articulate, intellectual “word processor” for the Department of Justice, capable of expounding about politics for minutes on end, is unjust to Prior, and abandons Prior after he falls ill, unable to withstand the horrors of seeing his lover deteriorate. Louis repents: “I’m not good with bodies.” Arguably, this, Louis’ transgression, is the one judged most harshly by the film. In the end, when Louis asks to be taken back by Prior, he is refused.

Prior’s best friend, Belize (Jeffrey Wright), is an African-American nurse who is the most compassionate character in the film; he is an AIDS nurse who is assigned to care for the monstrous Roy Cohn (Al Pacino). The historical Cohn was one of “the first public victims of the

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<sup>322</sup> David Savran points out that, “Prior’s very name designates his temporal dislocation, the fact that is he at once too soon and belated, both that which anticipates and that which provides an epilogue (to the Walter family, if nothing else, since he seems to mark the end of the line). Prior Walter also serves as the queer commemoration of the Walter that came before—Walter Benjamin—whose revolutionary principles he both embodies and displaces insofar as he marks both the presence and absence of Walter Benjamin in this text” (18).

AIDS virus, an object lesson to the gay male community of the perils of internalized self-hatred” (Freedman, 93). *Angels*’ Cohn is haunted by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, whose death was caused by his machinations (and of which he is proud). He functions as representative of a socially conservative politics eager to let countless die if power can be had. Belize claims to be Cohn’s “negation,” and grants him forgiveness (“where love and justice meet”). Cohn has as an employee, Joe, a Republican who has ghost-written some of the most conservative legislation of the time. Joe and his wife Harper are Mormons who have left Salt Lake and moved to New York. Struggling to maintain his faith’s requirements, Joe is a closeted homosexual, and his dissembling disturbs Harper; hence, she is addicted to “little blue pills.” Eventually, Joe leaves Harper for Louis, though the relationship between the guilt-ridden liberal and the nonchalant reactionary cannot last. Joe’s mother, Hannah, rushes to New York after Joe “comes out” to her, where she meets Prior and forms an unlikely bond with him. This broad sketch indicates the interweaving of the film’s plot lines, comingling which is reinforced by the repetition of actors across roles.

On stage, “doubling” actors is common (historically stemming from budgetary concerns), and is more easily camouflaged as the body is not seen in the close-up detail cinema affords. In the case of *Angels*, “doubling” is misleading, not only because the actors often play more than two characters, but also because of the term’s implicit ties to the device’s theatrical history, which might underestimate its cinematic distinctiveness. Jeffrey Wright also plays the angelic delegate from Europe and Harper’s tour guide to her hallucinations, Mr. Lies. Emma Thompson plays a homeless woman, Prior’s nurse Emily, and the Angel (the “Continental Principality of America”). Kirk not only plays Prior, but a leatherman in the park (which may be



Louis' guilt-ridden projection), and Shenkman, besides Louis, plays the angelic delegate from Oceania. Streep has said:

The fact that people doubled and tripled in more than one part was one of the things that really had an impact on me when I saw the play, and I knew that there was something in that, that they weren't just saving money on the cast. There was some clue in there on how to read the whole play, some secret or something about what Tony Kushner feels about our common humanity. (GG, 2)

Similarly, Tony Kushner thinks that, "One of the smartest things Mike did was to not resist the essential gestures of the play—like the doubling [of roles by actors]" (GG, 2).<sup>323</sup>

In an attempt to point toward the device's complexity, and since some actors play more than two characters, I will refer to it as "overlapping" rather than "doubling" (this term also avoids the connotation of duplicity). In the history of American cinema, this use of performers in multiple roles is rather rare, and invites us to reconsider not only the relation between stage and film performance, but between the presence of the actor and the illusion of character.<sup>324</sup> From Strasberg to Uta Hagen, the most pervasive theorists of cinematic acting, particularly in America, encourage aesthetic realism through techniques thought to heighten the illusion of seamlessness, for the spectator, between actor and character. *Angels*, though, undermines our ability to evaluate performances as naturalistic—indeed we can never really be sure whether or not much of what we see is simply the result of Prior's fevered dreams. Harper's hallucination, Mr. Lies, seems portrayed over-the-top, while Belize is portrayed in a realist mode. Shenkman's Louis is done in realist style. Who can say what is naturalism for an Angel?

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<sup>323</sup> Incidentally, Kushner himself appears in the film. When Louis asks the rabbi about forgiveness after his grandmother's funeral, the two rabbis sitting with her are played by Kushner and author Maurice Sendak (who also collaborated on the book *Brundibar* with Kushner).

<sup>324</sup> The technique of using an actor in multiple roles is perhaps most associated with virtuosic comedic performances, such as the Monty Python corpus, or the work of comedic stars like Peter Sellers (Nichols has reportedly worked on a remake of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* [Robert Hamer, 1949] with Elaine May for years, though it has never gone into production). In *Shot/Counter-shot*, Lucy Fischer points out a particular use of this device in women's melodramas made by Hollywood during World War II in which female identical twins are played by the same actress. United through their oppositeness, Fischer shows how the sisters' complementarity (for example, as good and evil) reveals larger social attitudes (stemming from assumptions of woman's "duality").

The formal redundancy of repeating actors focuses our awareness on the specific actions making up *this* character—that the actor is talking in this way *instead of* that, moving her hands this way *instead of* that, walking this way *instead of* that.<sup>325</sup> Of course, we are greatly aided by narrative context and differences in costume, make-up, accents, gait, etc. The technique simultaneously deepens our awareness of both the formal constitution of character *and* the actor’s work. We cannot reference Streep’s performance in this film as we would another. And although the rabbi is a caricature, the caricature is convincing.<sup>326</sup> Similarly, her Ethel Rosenberg, a ghost returned from the dead seeking vengeance, could not be accurately described as realistic. While Hannah is perhaps the most naturalistic figure, she is also the funniest. Like the film (and real people), each of Streep’s characters is both funny and tragic.

At first glance, it may seem obvious that Nichols’ decision to overlap roles suggests a potential multiplicity with regard to identity that could supplant the impression of a single autonomous subject. Such a subject would be problematic for the avowedly socialist Kushner, as he could be charged with retaining ties to the kind of self-centeredness said to underpin American capitalism. One question we might immediately ask of Nichols’ adaptation is whether the technique of overlapping works the same on screen as it does on stage. Beyond the fact that some characters are supernatural, that some are based on historical figures, and that some are simply highly strung, we might still say of them that they are portrayed in a psychologically

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<sup>325</sup> We might think, too, of a film like Luis Bunuel’s *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) or Todd Haynes *I’m Not There* (2007). By having one character played by multiple actors, these films invert the relationship of *Angels’* actors and characters. Here, rather than look for differences effected by one body, we infer consistency across several. In 2009, Nichols, lamenting the constraints of Hollywood’s increasing obsession with speed and profits, admitted that, “[i]t’s painful and hard to remember now how long and how carefully we worked... It can be done [now], of course, but it’s just much harder — unless you’re Buñuel, and I think about him pretty much every day. You have to look for a way to free yourself, and he had the best conceivable way: he just jumped to the surreal” (McGrath, 1). Discussing his life in the 1980s and 1990s and spending “part of every week going off to a memorial service,” Nichols also confessed, “I, all my life, have thought about death most of every day” (Greco, 68). We might well be reminded of his childhood flight from Nazi Germany, but also of his attachment to creating through a structuring absence.

<sup>326</sup> Apparently, it was possible to imagine meeting such a rabbi. Anecdotes about Kushner and the crew’s unawareness that Streep was on set when in costume as the rabbi abound.

realistic manner. They are all emotional, rational figures; we are never really confused as to any character's motivation for her actions, and those motivations are typically legible to other characters. As I described above, psychological realism is not (and not at odds with) a naturalistic or Brechtian style of performance. Typically, though, the Brechtian or reflexive mode allegedly urges the spectator to consider her own historical situation (as opposed to the nefarious illusion of a "transparent" character). Alternately, it has been argued that the presentation of psychologically realistic characters, who are thus necessarily individuals to some extent, obscures attention to broad social issues.<sup>327</sup> *Angels'* overlapping of roles and performance styles serves as a place to investigate tensions between social and individual responsibilities, and social and individual histories.

*Angels'* source play wears its Brechtianism on its sleeve, prohibiting blackouts that prevent the spectator from seeing scene changes, and recommending that "[t]he moments of magic... are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do" (5).<sup>328</sup> Kushner's stage directions are reflected in the film's spectacular, but less-than convincing, animated digital effects. After the success of *Virginia Woolf* in 1966, Nichols visited Berlin "where he saturated himself in the Berliner Ensemble," and "mused over Brechtian theory," which he said, "has nothing to do with theater as magic, rather with theater as bread" (Gussow, 99). Sontag asked publicly: "How ambitious is Mike willing to be? He's one of the few people in this country who could direct [Bertolt] Brecht properly" (Gussow, 98). *Angels* demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of Brecht than the film scholarship I addressed in the introduction, which drew strict binaries between Hollywood (and its style of performance) and "political cinema." Brecht advocated

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<sup>327</sup> See, for example, Peter Wollen's essay on Godard's *Vent d'Est*.

<sup>328</sup> The first day of filming *Angels*, Kushner asked Streep to star in his new translation of Brecht's *Mother Courage* (the production premiered in 2006).

social commentary, combining ethics and politics. While he attended greatly to economic inequity, and hoped social commentary could shed light on those issues, it was not for him the only means of encouraging self-awareness. The fact that, for Brecht, living within an ideology is a psychological condition is not lost on *Angels*.

### **A Whole Kind of a Person**

We might think that overlapping roles in *Angels* attempts to illustrate that its characters' highly politicized identities are matters of performance.<sup>329</sup> Prior screams, "I am a gay man and I am used to pressure!" to the approaching Angel. Belize lectures as a representative of African-Americans; Louis does the same as a Jewish-American. Clearly, *Angels* calls the essentiality of identity into question by overlapping roles; beginning with Streep's male rabbi, the film announces the idea that gender and ethnicity can be performed (at the level of casting, not the diegetic level like the above examples). But what does it mean to say such categories are performed? That a gap exists between a reality and fiction, bridged by actions we can think of as theatrical? Or that they are simply the results of doings, completed like any action? Of course, it can be both. We have emphasized the importance of understanding actions in Nichols' films in both senses throughout this dissertation, from Benjamin Braddock's silences in *The Graduate* to Susan's facial expressions in *Carnal Knowledge* to George and Martha's utterances in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* *Angels* also gives us scenes of interpersonal actions (rare is the scene with more than two people—which makes the ending, where Hannah, Prior, Belize and Louis congregate, stand out all the more). *Angels*, though, is not just asking us to think about the body's codedness and corresponding legibility; it pairs thinking about identity as performance

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<sup>329</sup> This was a timely notion, given that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* was published in 1990. It offers a view of gender and sexuality based on acts, which extends to thinking about such categories as culturally-guided performances.

with a sense of individual accountability. Bringing both senses of performance together suggests that these characters' actions are still intended—they mean their Jewishness, gayness, African-Americanness, etc. (This is the root of the incessant fighting between Belize and Louis; Belize perceives Louis to be pitting the Jewish experience against the African-American one.)

The challenge of seeing the on screen body as both individual and of a kind is established from the film's opening. *Angels* begins with a Jewish funeral ceremony, a scene commemorating the mortality of the body, but not the soul. After confessing he does not know the deceased, the rabbi says he does know this:

She was not a person, but a whole kind of a person. The ones that crossed the ocean, that brought with us to America the villages of Russia, Lithuania. And how we struggled. And how we fought for the family, for the Jewish home. Descendants of this immigrant woman: you do not grow up in America. You and their children and their children with the goyish names, you do not live *in* America. No such place exists! Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, because she carries that old world on her back, across the ocean on a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Ave.... or in Flatbush. You can never make that crossing that she did, for such great voyages in this world do not anymore exist. But every day of your lives the miles that voyage from that place to this one you cross. Every day! You understand me? In you, that journey is.

Here, the American's body is collective, both past and present. The rabbi explains the collective Jewish identity as temporal, transitory, changing, a "journey" and "voyage," not a static property. When the rabbi declares that, "No such place [as America] exists," his voice echoes as a voice-over across a montage of "real" photographs of immigrants arriving in New York. The black-and-white photographs function as icons of the women who carried the old world on their backs, but this montage also complicates his words. As records of reality, the photographs show, beyond a doubt, that "such a place" *does* exist—we are seeing it. The use of photographs in this scene does (at least) three things: it establishes dialectics as the film's ruling principle; it informs us *people* matter, and that we must attend to their representation, for they *are* history; and it tells us that film's indexical nature will be questioned.

Jonathan Freedman writes of Kushner's "epic-comic-tragic-fantastic drama" that, "[n]o other text since *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in *A la recherche* has given such sustained and sympathetic attention" to "the place where figurations of the Jew meet figurations of the sexual other, the deviant, the queer" (91). Freedman informs us that, in the history of Western literature, the Jew has long been an emblem of alterity, and that this scene establishes that "the archetype for the transformation of identity, which is the mark of queer experience and survival in the play, is the wandering, rootless, shape-shifting Jew who never finds a home" (92). Who better to play the rabbi, then, than shape-shifting Streep?

Freedman, though, is worried about the play's assimilationist conclusion (which is retained by the film), for the "fate of the Jew, like that of the queer, is to be eternally other even in the utopian land that proclaims itself a haven for all aliens. [Yet, at] the end of the play, Prior proclaims, 'We will be citizens,' underlining his own alienness even in the quest to overcome it" (Freedman, 92). For Freedman, the text's "vision of utopian identity" fails to do justice to its muse, Benjamin's "Theses," by relinquishing valuable modes of difference in favor of assimilation, rather than "a utopian ... politics inspired by but not limited to the definitionless difference culturally inscribed by the figure of the Jew" (92). Freedman sees a combination of a Christian theme that stresses rebirth with a Shakespearean one that stresses "regeneration through the creation of a new, redeemed community" (97-98). I believe that Freedman underestimates the disruption of overlapping roles and overestimates the film's conclusion, which does end positively, but with those left standing debating about political issues (such as the state of Israel) with no clear resolution. Progress here is just as messy as it is for Benjamin.

The rabbi's speech on Jewish identity also resonates with Sontag's description of the effect of AIDS which "imposes on an act whose ideal is an experience of pure presentness (and a

creation of the future) a relation to the past to be ignored at one's peril. Sex no longer withdraws its partners, if only for a moment, from the social. It cannot be considered just a coupling; it is a chain, a chain of transmission, from the past" (160-161). We might also hear echoes of Sontag's classic assertions in "Notes on Camp": "Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture... The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony" (290). *Angels* is peppered with campy quotes, particularly from Prior, who, when moved by Hannah's kindness, quotes Blanche's final line from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and sings "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" from *My Fair Lady* when afraid of the Angel's approach. Camp, though, is not just Prior's tool for negotiating a hostile world; references contribute to the surrealist flavor of some scenes, such as when Prior dances with Louis in his bedroom, which opens up into a Busby Berkeley style set. It is at once "fabulous," a fever dream and a "dance of death." I would like to turn, though, to the film's most avowedly surrealist scene, which is also crucial to understanding its commentary on cinematic performance, characters, and bodies.

### **Cocteau in the Land of Oz**

Mostly bed-ridden, Prior is visited by the Angel's heralds who are his eponymous ancestors, two Prior Walters (Michael Gambon and Simon Callow) prior to him by many generations who inform him he is a prophet and to expect an angel. When the angel arrives,<sup>330</sup> she explains to Prior that the movement of humans is responsible for great suffering in heaven. Human progress—migration, science, forward motion, imagination, exploration—causes quakes in heaven. She testifies that, "Our maker, our master grew weary of us, our songs, our

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<sup>330</sup> The angel is described as hermaphrodite and having eight vaginas. Since the role is played by Emma Thompson and appears female in the film, I will refer to the angel with the feminine pronoun to ease discussion.

fornications. Seeking something new, God split the world in two, and made you, human beings... Uni-genitaled. Female, male. In creating you, our Father-lover unleashed his sleeping creation's potential for change. In you the virus of time began!" Fascinated by the movements of humans, God began to neglect his angels until, on April 18, 1906 (the day of the great San Francisco earthquake), "He left." The Angel charges Prior with the responsibility of saving heaven by preaching "stasis" to the world.

*Angels* confronts the angel's jealousy of human movement at the formal level, engaging cinema's ability to represent duration, change, movement, and the projected present of something past—which extends into thinking about the ways in which the concept of death is written into the medium. In the scene I would like to examine, Harper is having a valium-induced hallucination, while Prior has fallen asleep reading a book titled *Cocteau* (the well-known biography by Francis Steigmuller is seen in close-up).<sup>331</sup> Prior walks through a hallway lit by chandeliers held by arms, past mantles held up by moving heads—an homage to and reincarnation of Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête* (1946). The scene also makes many allusions to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), a film told through the doubling of actors.<sup>332</sup> Reality and fantasy remain relatively discrete in *The Wizard of Oz*, though, whereas the dead, hallucinatory and heavenly appear to many as real in *Angels*. As a parallel text, *The Wizard of Oz*'s ultimate commendation of rugged individualism (after all, we always had the power to get home, we just had to learn it ourselves) undergoes a severe revision in Prior's advice to the

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<sup>331</sup> Janet Coleman informs us that Nichols has been an avowed fan of Cocteau's work since he began his career performing at the University of Chicago and *The Compass* (53).

<sup>332</sup> Nichols once told an interviewer that he thinks there are two movies that "tell us pretty much what movies are": *The Wizard of Oz* (which he saw when he first arrived to America), which he describes as a fantastic and adventurous search for knowledge, and *Casablanca*, which he believes has its flaws but is a basic "story of giving up what you love for something more important" (McGuigan, 64). In another kind of overlap, *The Wizard of Oz* is also referenced in Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*.



angels. He rejects his appointed mission and tells them that if God ever dares to return to “sue the bastard.”

Adorned in drag make-up and satin robe, Prior studies himself in a mirror, bemoaning his large hands, shouting “Beast!” before seeing Harper’s approach reflected in the mirror. She is Beauty in a diaphanous, flowing gown, which contrasts with Harper’s usual clothes as much as Prior’s drag get-up. Seeing one another first through mirrors, Prior and Harper are positioned as spectators of each other. One is hallucinating, the other dreaming, but their visions are mysteriously embodied in the same time and space.<sup>333</sup> Indeed, the pair are confused that they can exist in each other’s fantasy worlds:

Harper: I don't understand this. If I didn't ever see you before, and I don't think I did, then I don't think you should be here in this hallucination because in my experience the mind—which is where hallucinations come from—shouldn't be able to make anything up that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions. Am I making sense right now?

Prior: Given the circumstances, yes.

Harper: So when we think we've escaped the unbearable ordinariness and, well, untruthfulness of our lives it's really only the same old ordinariness and falseness rearranged into the appearance of novelty and truth. Nothing unknown is knowable.

That they exist in a dreamlike world reminiscent of Cocteau’s film marks this space as cinematic.

It is in this domain that, although Prior does not mention his illness, Harper knows and comments on it. In response to Prior’s amazement, she says, “Oh that happens. This is the very

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<sup>333</sup> *Angels* perhaps also alludes to the work of Achim von Arnim. William Calin describes this sort of “‘modern’ situation” in the novels of von Arnim, in which “two characters who never communicate when awake do so in their common dreams. Truth and insight are derived from each person’s dreams and from the unconscious” (59). In the story “Die Majoratsherren” (1820), a boy dreams of the beautiful Esther, locked inside the Jewish ghetto, who comes to him in a series of “performances” in his dreams; in the first she wears a gown covered with eyes and “becomes his death angel” (Hoermann, 117). Nichols once said, “[a] movie is a dream. And so any moment in a movie is about whom this particular moment is happening to, whose experience any moment is given” (Smith, 28). It is helpful to connect it to his later writing: “I think that metaphor is in trouble... We need metaphor as we need stories... If we have, as de Tocqueville predicted, become pure market forces then we need to do CPR on metaphor pretty fast. Dr. [Martin Luther] King knew that an improved reality begins with a dream. In dreams begin responsibilities” (Huffingtonpost.com).

threshold of revelation. Sometimes you can see things like how sick you are. Do you see anything about me?” Just as Beauty and the Beast could see each other’s inner goodness, Harper tells Prior: “I see something else about you. Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part entirely free of disease. I can see that.” He sees that she is “amazingly unhappy” and reveals that her husband is “a big homo.” Like the story of *La Belle et La Bête*, and drag performance, this scene speaks to the problem of knowing other people visually, by attending to their body. The scene gives us a moment in which interpreting “truths” about others is possible, but magical—exceptional and inexplicable. After Harper leaves, Prior observes, “People come and go so strangely here,” alluding again to *The Wizard of Oz* and reinforcing the space of the scene as cinematic. It is also in this space that the first sign of the Angel’s coming appears: Prior hears a glorious voice command “Look up” and he looks up to see a feather fall from the ceiling of the Roman Pantheon (a space which is both a place of worship and a tomb).

In this scene, Prior and Harper perceive each other’s inner states or qualia; the space between Harper and Prior—the “threshold of revelation” of consciousness—is a space whereby each can “see” *into* the body, straight into the not-body of the person (not *beyond*, the percepts are immanent, not transcendent). It is the dream-like cinematic space (i.e. for spectator and on screen figure): the idea of the interself. If this scene exceeds our ability to understand how they see one another’s “inner self,” what is our own logic of perception that allows us to believe we do so at the cinema? “Nothing unknown is knowable”—they tell each other what they already know, but perhaps have difficulty bringing to consciousness. Each of them dreaming, Prior and Harper demonstrate deeply internalized ideologies of perception. There is little more politicized knowledge in *Angels* than knowing one is healthy or that your husband is “a big homo.”

Cocteau is central to Bazin's comparison of the cinematic and theatrical in his look at films adapted from theatrical sources. Cocteau succeeds in communicating the "dramatic essence" of a play cinematically (*WC*, 93), and in doing so provides Bazin with evidence that distinguishing between theater and cinema based on notions of the actors' presence or absence is misguided, for "it is no longer as certain as it was that there is no middle stage between presence and absence. It is likewise at the ontological level that the effectiveness of the cinema has its source" (*WC*, 97).<sup>334</sup> By comparing the screen to a mirror with a delayed reflection—making temporal dislocation the issue of putting the actor before the spectator—Bazin decides that "[i]t is false to say that the screen is incapable of putting us 'in the presence of' the actor" (*WC*, 97). Still, at the movies, we know we are not in danger of ever being seen by the actor (in neither place are we typically in danger of being acknowledged by the characters), and although drama exists in both arts, Bazin distinguishes between theater and cinema by claiming that in the former it "proceeds from the actor, in the cinema it goes from the décor to man" (*WC*, 102). Bazin imagines a proactive stage actor who is "at once [the play's] cause and its subject," while on screen, the actor is essentially reacting to her context (*WC*, 106). If the cinematic actor is always already situated within a context, what are the implications for our understanding of the art form? How is a spectator to understand multiple actors and characters in relation to one another? Is each actor "décor" for the other? The meeting of the minds and bodies of Prior and Harper—revealed in conversation—plays with the possibility of seeing others as pure objects, as totally knowable.

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<sup>334</sup> Bazin is implicitly responding to classic view that as spectators in the theater, we are in the presence of a character, while the cinema gives us the presence of the actors, see for example, Siegfried Kracauer and Rudolph Arnheim. Benjamin's view falls in line here, too; but for him, neither the actor's performance in the studio or its reproduction count as art ("Work of Art," 110).

It could be argued that overlapping roles functions to highlight the physical presence of the actors who overlap. In an effort to account for the custom of many actors playing one role over time in the theater, and the way the spectator of cinema is faced so strongly with the appearance of the actor's body, Cavell writes that, "[f]or the stage, an actor works himself into a role; for the screen, a performer takes the role onto himself" (*The World Viewed* [WV], 27). He believes the stage actor works to meet the demands of a part, whereas "[t]he screen performer explores his role like an attic and takes stock of his physical and temperamental endowment" (WV, 28). We might, at first, take Cavell to be overemphasizing the importance of the actor's physical body and to be devaluing the work screen actors do to alter that physicality (accents, make-up, gait, etc.). However, I hear in Cavell's wording an allusion to the occasion of Sherlock Holmes' first appearance, in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, in which he educates Watson on his views of mind and memory: "You see, I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose" (9).<sup>335</sup> Furniture, for Holmes, consists of beliefs, concepts, memories, etc. that he wants to constitute as himself; Cavell, then, recommends that cinematic actors imagine their roles as minds first, and that it is from the mental that they create the stock which will convey the physical nature of the character. In this light, Cavell not only aligns the cinematic actor's artistry with a burgeoning literary modernism, but suggests that the film actor understands his body to communicate a mind, and that the on screen actor's body conveys mental attitudes. Streep makes a similar point about her own technique. She recalls learning, through reading sonnets, "that a thought is a breath and a breath is a thought... You have to make the breath last through the entire thought" (TK, 291).

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<sup>335</sup> Although the science-loving Holmes uses the word "brain," I think it is clear that the object to which he refers is more generally known as the mind.

Likewise, McGinn claims: “The screen actor is working with her mind, primarily; the body functions as a kind of necessary intrusion on this intimacy with the audience” (96). He believes cinema is inherently intimate, a nature that gives heightened power to the screen actor whose naturalism arises from the fact that,

If [the screen actor’s] mind is in the right place, her body will communicate what it needs to... she must act as if her body were the stuff of her soul. She must, in other words, overcome the mind-body dualism that is our human lot. The essential point is that the body should be recognized to enter a new state of being once it reaches the screen. (97)

McGinn, clearly writing in and about a contemporary, post-Streep Hollywood, indicates the body as little more than a speed bump along the road to the mind, but perhaps the body felt a little more “intrusive” at the height of the AIDS confusion. His words parallel the Angel’s leitmotif. Before she makes love to both Prior and Hannah (the only two pleasurable sex scenes in a film so concerned with sex) she repeats insistently: “The body is the garden of the soul.” Here, bodies are construed as places to visit, to grow things, and in which to play. The body is the space of possible activities, and once active, can affect (and play well with) others.

Repeating its actors is not the only means by which *Angels* destabilizes its characters’ bodies, as a clear source of identity. As in the scene between Prior and Harper, the trope of AIDS’ power to transform the body through disease also challenges corporeal identity.<sup>336</sup> For example, when Roy Cohn is being diagnosed by his doctor, the frame is intermittently and suddenly occupied by shots of magnified cells, a very different representation of his body than him sitting in his chair, and one which challenges the relationship between body and identity. Similarly, when Louis takes Joe home with him from the park, he explains to Joe what sex is by breaking bodies down into minerals, molecules and smells. Much attention is paid to Prior’s body, too. Besides his lesions, he undergoes several physical exams which scrutinize his nude

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<sup>336</sup> We might think back to Prior’s perception of himself as a “beast,” or even connect this thematic to Nichols’ 1994 film *Wolf*, about a man with a case of lycanthropy.

body, he has difficulty breathing, walking, etc. Joe and Harper also appear naked; Joe strips himself (“flays himself” in Mormon parlance) to prove his love to Louis, and Harper forces Joe to look at her naked figure to prove his lack of desire for her.

Cocteau’s surrealistic oeuvre is full of angelic references, and Prior and Harper’s shared dream scene is particularly reminiscent of his notion in *Orpheus*: “Mirrors are the doors through which death comes and goes. Look at yourself in a mirror all your life, and you’ll see death at work.” Like Karen Silkwood’s and Camille’s, the garden of Prior’s soul is withering, reminding us that “AIDS is progressive, a disease of time” (Sontag, 109). But, as Hannah tells Prior: there is “nothing more human than that,” pointing to a way of thinking about AIDS as metaphor for the human condition. Just as one who looks in a mirror and sees death in the body of the living, this scene, which reflexively introduces the problem of seeing death in the body of the living (e.g. Prior’s changing body), of seeing stasis in motion, culminates in the introduction of the angel, the Continental Principality of America. *Angels* links corporeal identity, death, and movement with an American national mythos.

Unfortunately, while Cocteau’s Orpheus enjoyed his own death in *Orpheus* (after all, one cannot look in the mirror and see someone else’s death), AIDS is presented as a shared death.<sup>337</sup>

In the 1980s, “homosexual” and “gay” referred as much to who someone was, what they were, as to what they did; it was common to say that men had sex with men *because* they were

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<sup>337</sup> Cocteau is widely acknowledged as a queer filmmaker, and, in a topic that I hope to explore elsewhere, *Angels* belongs in a tradition of queer American cinema which began in the 1960s (just as the first aggressive moves were made for the acknowledgment of gay and lesbian citizenship). Walter Metz pinpoints the start of this cinematic movement in New York City with works such as Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, 1963) and *Blond Cobra* (Ken Jacobs, 1963). *Scorpio Rising* and *Blond Cobra* both explore connections between cinematic images, male homosexuality, and death. From its prescient first moments, when it presents visual images of a graveyard juxtaposed with aural ones telling us, “This is New York City. The city of opportunity... enjoy the benefits of democracy” to its characters’ debates over whether God has abandoned man or is just ill, I believe the case can be made that *Blond Cobra* has especial influence on *Angels*. Also, beyond contemplating “an existential despair that germinates from the inability of its subjects to find a satisfying sexual and interpersonal expression in the midst of a repressive culture,” *Blond Cobra* (like the Berkeleyesque scene *Angels*) works in a camp mode to create a sense of “the decay of beauty toward death” in homophobic culture (Metz, 247-248).

homosexual. *Angels* raises the question very early of whether homosexuality is an essential identity, and one immediately legible to others. When Louis and Joe first meet, their exchange becomes confused over whether or not Louis can more accurately detect Joe's homosexuality or his Republicanism—calling out that what we might deem Streep's chameleonic “camouflaging” is usually derogated as “passing” when “real” people do it. Roy orders his doctor not to divulge his AIDS status because people might think he's gay (despite the fact everyone knows he sleeps with men, which further comments on the visibility of gayness). As Roy says,

Where does an individual so identified [as homosexual] fit into the food chain, the pecking order? Not ideology or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout... A homosexual is somebody who knows nobody and who nobody knows, who has zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?

Thus, homosexuals are those that lay claim to a politicized identity, who take political responsibility for their actions by speaking about them. Even rhetoric about the transmission of AIDS was cast in terms of responsibility. AIDS was given *by* someone to another; the disease was not the culprit, the carrier was. Having sex was communicating *yourself*, your body, *to* someone.

### **Angels Un-American**

Prior eventually journeys to heaven, which in the film's world, looks a great deal like the underworld of *Orpheus*. When he confronts the angelic committee, he rejects stasis in favor of future possibilities and presents this position precisely on the grounds of humanness and attachment to the body:

But still. Still bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help myself. I do. I've lived through such terrible times and there are people who live through much worse. But you see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children— they live. Death usually has to take life away. I don't know if that's just the

animal. I don't know if it's not braver to die, but I recognize the habit, the addiction to being alive. So we live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough. It's so inadequate. But still bless me anyway. I want more life. And if [God] comes back, take him to court. He walked out on us, he ought to pay.

Prior wins the right to return to dying, and through Prior, *Angels*' ultimate mandate is to embrace movement, change, progress—one it acknowledges as fraught with contradiction and tension. It is important to bear in mind that when God deserted the world, he left San Francisco, an American city whose location on the Western coast signifies the nation's belief in progress and manifest destiny. Prior cannot be shaken from his desire for "more life" (the Hebrew word for "blessing," means "more life"), for more time degenerating in his body.

In the film's final moments, as Prior approaches the camera, and us, he seems to take on the mantle of prophet (though not appointed by heaven): "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all. And the dead will be commemorated, and we'll struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come." Prior's assertion points out that citizenship (like sexuality in this text) is not a property; it must be fought for and won: enacted. The paradoxical principle underlying AIDS, offered by *Angels*, is that AIDS emerged just gays as acquired some meager social visibility by claiming an identity as gay citizens. Thus, surviving becomes an act or political rebellion (and America is a nation founded by rebelling).

Prior is not alone in this scene; Louis, Belize, and Hannah are with him, suggesting a new, multicultural queer family. Critics (writing about the play, but whose claims remain relevant to the film) have objected to this ending, arguing that its attachment to notions of progress and modernity sink into an uninteresting espousal of liberal pluralism. I believe such views fail to appreciate that these characters are not isolated from, or merely tolerating, one



another, but actively, vociferously debating political issues with each other. Janet Reinart asserts that, “While for Brecht socialism figured as a horizon of concrete possibility, for Kushner, in an age in which the grand narrative of Marxism is bankrupt, the leap catapults him into identity politics and a relative detachment from economic and social structural change. Backing off of Marx, however, produces a kind of liberal pluralism or benign tolerance, a promise but no program” (242).<sup>338</sup> But Reinart’s criticism of *Angels* is, in fact, its point: *Angels* does not consider the human as *just* a product of histories of economic and social force (which threaten its humanity). It grapples with an American mindset unwilling to forgo the possibility of action; rather than consider the structure and the human’s place *within* it, it seeks to place the human at the center of theory, reclaiming the possibility of change arising from people: Prior intends to become a proper citizen.

Harper also addresses the spectator in a direct address final speech. Aboard an American Airlines flight, she talks of her vision in which the souls of the dead rise up to patch the hole in the ozone layer before taking on the role of the Angel of History, telling us that, “In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead.” David Savran notes that *Angels* follows Benjamin in suturing the Jewish notion of Messianic time to the Marxist concept of revolution, and so, reimagines “proletariat revolution not as the culmination of a conflict between classes, or between traditional institutions and new forms of production, but as a ‘blast[ing] open’ of ‘the continuum of history’” (16). *Angels* puts this point in the mouth of Ethel Rosenberg. She says “History is about to crack wide open,” echoing Benjamin’s description of nature’s immutability as the “cracking open of natural teleology” (*The Arcades Project*, W7, 4). Thus, given our noetic eye on performance in this look at *Angels*, I want to focus on Kushner’s emphasis on action: that “we” do history. Presenting characters as a

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<sup>338</sup> Others, such as Savran and Freedman, echo this assertion.

problem of demarcation (between illusion and reality, character and actor, individual and type, male and female, etc.) culminates in the film's end, when Prior includes us, as spectators, with himself and the other characters as a "we." Is he referring to those dying of AIDS?

Homosexuals denied equal rights? Individuals subject to history? This ambiguity is reminiscent of the "we" that calls the storm blowing Klee's Angel of History away from the pile of detritus (that is, history, which he is looking back on) progress.

In conversation with Kushner, Sontag's vision of America stems from a belief that "Americans are very devoted to the idea of hope," which she perceives at work in *Angels* (Vorlicky, 174). She says:

This is a society built on the notion of a new life, the second chance, the frontier, start all over again, be reborn, you can always change yourself, if you want it to be so you can make it so—all those ideas of improvement and self-remaking, which usually involve breaking away from one's own individual history or past, or some collective history or identity such as the country or culture you came from. (Vorlicky, 172)

Skeptical, Sontag admits that, "in some sense the basis of all action is a degree of optimism" (Vorlicky, 173). *Angels* encourages us to see performance in light of its specifically American appeal, as an art designed to capitalize on exploring the "frontier" of the self's cultural malleability, its possibility for change. "If you don't know where you're going, can you move?", Kushner asked in an interview, adding, "You can't stay back. The fundamental question is: Are we made by history or do we make history—and the answer is yes" (Leonard, 1). Since cinematic actors constitute characters through actions, they create the impression of a life, a personal history, through actions. The film's final conundrum, uttered by Streep/Hannah before Prior blesses us,<sup>339</sup> offers no answer: "You can't live in the world without an idea of the world."

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<sup>339</sup> Hannah has, in this scene, undergone a makeover and resembles the "real" Streep at this time much more than she did in the dowdy Mormon costume.

Not unlike the overlap of roles, this conundrum is a place where self and ideology, theory and action merge.

From its focus on AIDS as a gay man's disease in the 1980s to the opening scene's arrangement of Jewish-Americans' bodies as both individual and collective, past and present to Prior and Harper's perception of each other's inner truths to Prior's round trip to heaven, *Angels* conjures images of modernity in order to comment on the cinematic representation of history, action, and selfhood. I would like to return to thinking about how overlapping roles fits in with this aim, as well as the insistent Americanness of the film, and how these ideas help us think about Streep's own reputation for transforming herself across roles. In an essay chiefly concerned with performance, Cavell takes a moment to reflect on the tragic connections between American capitalism's demand that its people always want more and the fact that America (which he calls "*the anti-Marxist country*") was *discovered*, that its "present is continuously ridiculed by the fantastic promise of its origin and its possibility," eventually noting that, "Since it had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal" ("The Avoidance of Love," 344-345). Cavell's elucidation of America as mortal coincides with *Angels*' diagnosis that it is ill, encouraging us to connect the film's messianic and Benjaminian themes to deeper national, and civic resonances in Prior's character. Cavell's observations also suggest a way to interpret *Angels*' manifesto to reject the instructions of the Angel, the "Continental Principality of America": if America "feels" mortal and yet, as the rabbi tells us, is non-existent, it has the metaphysical status of a character. It is not eternal, like the Angel, but mutable, like Prior.

The Angels beseech Prior to "preach stasis," because they blame human efforts to achieve "progress" for God's abandonment of heaven and his angels (who copulated ceaselessly until he left, requiring they stop playing and start working). Similarly, William Calin writes that,

“[m]odernity is made manifest in a number of cultural conditions, including the development of technology, the media, propaganda, advertising, and, ideologically, the myth of progress accompanied by the rejection of tradition” (131). “Modernity began,” according to Martin Jay, “when the world could no longer be construed as a meaningful and legible text written by God,” thereby challenging the idea of the ultimate textual authority, and “[a]s God increasingly became a mysterious *Deus absconditus*...the nascent modern subject, withdrawn from a no longer transparently meaningful cosmos, came to rely on the fragile reed of experience, however defined, as the only bridge from interior to exterior reality” (263-264). However, Jay also suggests that in the period *Angels* represents—which is also the context of Streep’s emergence—the concept of experience changed: in the “mantras of identity politics,” begun in the 1960s but particularly stark in the 1980s and 1990s, “experience is often taken to be a non-fungible commodity” (6). Hence, past assumptions that “experience involve[s] an integrated, coherent, and more or less autonomous subject, possessed of consciousness and the ability to act in the world,” persist, and rather than rethink the concept of experience, in “contemporary identity politics...group subjects replaced individual ones” (264).<sup>340</sup> Politicized identities bore markers of certain kinds of experience, which suggested a particular sort of consciousness and a proclivity for certain kinds of actions.

*Angels* is clearly invested in the perception of individual bodies as members of a collective identity (bearing a history)—as best exemplified in Belize and Louis’ extensive

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<sup>340</sup> Dubbed the “decade of greed,” the 1980s also gave rise to a corporatism that affected the value of individuals, this time not in opposition to the group, but to that of the corporation (in many ways legally as a person, “corporation” is etymologically rooted in the body). Jay writes of the concept of experience’s “pride of place” in American intellectual history by “at least one of its most powerful intellectual movements”: pragmatism, a movement coincident with cinema (268). He situates pragmatism’s origins as a reaction to liberal ideology of Lockean individual property rights and the emergence of a corporate-based liberalism (270).

debates on the identity politics of race and ethnicity.<sup>341</sup> But having actors play multiple roles also suggests that *Angels* is invested in the mutability of bodies, and so, of the collective identities predicated upon them—an aim which reflects on realist styles of cinematic acting, and which plays dangerously in a capitalist context by presenting images of bodies that belie Locke’s assumption that individuals own their bodies. McGinn writes that, “If we thought that for every body there was a unique mind, fixed and invariable, then acting would be an impossible project. Acting requires the notion of multiple minds expressed by a single body” (95). Since no one can possess a single identity without others (for instance, one cannot just be gendered and not raced, too), the terms of identity politics require not just an idea of a shared experience (or at least the projection of a shared experience by those excluded from a specific identity), but of multiple experiences. This point is made explicit in the film as the Angel repeatedly refers to herself as “I I I,” a repetition that forces the spectator to consider the possibility of multiple sources of experience and the seeming paradox of a pluralistic self (whether supernatural or not).<sup>342</sup>

## Reverence for Life

*Angels* comports with Nichols’ and Streep’s previous challenges to the classical star system, again reflecting on Streep’s star persona. In *Angels*, Streep says “I I I” in a different way: her performance of four selves housed in one body (and who are never dominated by the presence of “Streep”). Bestowing each character with depth and continually demonstrating a

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<sup>341</sup> The film also adds a line not in the original play regarding the identity politics of gender. Hannah insists to Prior that, “Being a woman is harder [than being a homosexual male].”

<sup>342</sup> Though I have not seen this allusion remarked on, I believe the text refers to Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Lessing’s heroine is fascinated by “the roles we play, the way we play parts” (138). This character, who struggles to reconcile her identities as a woman, Marxist, communist, writer, lover, mother, activist with her growing cynicism (and possible madness) culminates in a relationship with a man that could “work” in the sense that they share similar internal contradictions (and an understanding of them). The borders between the mental and social break down, and climaxes in her attempt to understand her ego and that of her boyfriend’s, by repeatedly writing of the “I, I, I, I”. This device begins on p. 496 and its use on p. 537-539 is especially relevant.

thinking process, she suggests the possibility of retaining an individual self while being immanently connected to other people. Overlapping roles in *Angels* highlights the specific actions of each character (the spectator never forgets the intra-textual history of the on-screen body), and furthermore, resonates with the film's larger emphasis on remaining present, to want "more life." Nichols believes that performance styles which aim to depict characters "in the moment"—which we might well connect with Streep's talent for characters who appear thinking, thoroughly present to their contexts—demonstrate a "reverence for life," adding "of course, movies love that" (VW Commentary).

In conventional stardom, the strong presence of the star, best exemplified by a Hepburn or a Bogart or an Eastwood, can dampen the impression of the on-screen character's "I." We still understand the on-screen figure's actions to be motivated by the narrative, but less so than in a Streep film. Without offering the sense of a "core personality" across characters (either across films or within *Angels*), we do not expect a Streep character to behave a particular way; there is no guessing what he or she might do, as may be the case in a Bogart or Hepburn picture.<sup>343</sup> This is, I believe, related to what Nichols meant when I earlier quoted him as saying: "This is what Garbo was such a master of: actual thoughts that had not occurred before that particular take. And you can see this taking tremendous leaps with Brando and Clift and then with Streep" (McGrath, 2009). Even Hepburn's objections to Streep—that she could see her thinking—foregrounds how Streep's characters are constantly weighing their choices, pondering their actions, their responsibility, accountability, morality (which is not at all unlike what we are doing as spectators of the story). In this regard, Streep's presentation of characters' mental activities is not in the service of escapist illusionism, and if it appears natural—people do think, after all—

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<sup>343</sup> This is not, of course, to deny that there are films which provide exceptions to Hepburn's and Bogart's personae, though they still worked in relation to them.

that does not prevent its being an object of contemplation for the spectator. Streep's depth and complexity of character is like a long take, both theatrical and cinematic, giving the spectator freedom to choose where to place her attention, how to evaluate, interpret and categorize what she sees, just as Bazin said of Wyler and Welles and we might say of Nichols.

In his forward to the recent book *Actors at Work*, Nichols articulates his view of performance through an anecdote from his experience with Streep on *Angels*: "I asked Meryl, 'How the hell did you ever think of making Ethel Rosenberg funny?' She said, 'Well, you never know what you're going to do till you do it.' I don't know a better lesson in acting" (x). "One thing is clear," Nichols divulges of actors, "they do not know how they do it and they don't want to know" (ix).<sup>344</sup> Nichols clarifies that

this doesn't mean there's nothing to be learned from great actors. There are things they can tell you. The other actor is everything. In connecting with the others on the stage with you, you are halfway there, and as Phil[lip Seymour] Hoffman points out, if you are looking Meryl Streep or Vanessa Redgrave in the eye, you are more than halfway there. (x)

Nichols directed Streep and Hoffman in 2001 for his acclaimed production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* for Public Theater in Central Park.<sup>345</sup> In chapter four, we saw that Nichols emphasis on mutuality and interaction has roots in practices endemic to improvisational theater, and, over the decades, Streep has frequently reinforced the view that an actor must start blank (the state of an improvisational performer when a scene begins). She echoes Nichols here, too, repeatedly declaring that the other actor is "everything" (TK, 301-302).

Streep points out that, from the performer's perspective, the director is

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<sup>344</sup> Nichols provides another anecdote which suggests not just that actors do not want to know, but that they cannot: "I once congratulated the great French actor Marcel Dalio on a brilliant take in a movie I was directing [*Catch-22*], and he said, 'Well, I was saying to the makeup man, "If you are an actor, you have to pray every day for a small miracle, because you can't make it come"' (x).

<sup>345</sup> Like *Postcards* and *Angels*, *The Seagull* is a funny, tragic, and reflexive text about acting and the figure of the actress.

not in there. No matter how much they want to be, they're not in that encounter. They can change the sort of question that you're asking of the other person in the scene. Mike Nichols is the most brilliant at that. He reads what it is that the encounter is. He reads what you're asking—not literally, but what you're asking. (TK, 302)

When trying to remember Nichols' specific advice over the years, Streep struggles, because she tries to incorporate it without fixating on it (for fear it will preoccupy her in the scene). She says: "Actors want to know [the advice given], and then they don't want to know it" (TK, 302). Here, Streep's language, like Nichols' above, recalls Marx's famous definition of ideology: "They do not know it, but they are doing it" (Zizek, 28). Streep and Nichols suggest that this theory of performance embodies the *form* of the process of ideology; ritually enacting how it works. For Marx, the inescapable ideological context threatens a subject's humanity. Elizabeth Anscombe echoes this idea by proposing that if we cannot properly articulate our intentions, we cannot be said to be properly human, for lacking the capacity to mean something means lacking the capacity to be ethical (and the necessary mindedness).

The fact that Streep fills all her performances with actions not clearly required for the narrative to move forward (which is not to say that they do not contribute to the narrative, for our perception of *these* characters, and their actions, would be altered if they were omitted) takes on a new significance in this light. Nichols claims that, "[y]ou can never explain or describe what makes a great performance"; he says, "It's little details" that count (Murray). Like the laugh that is one of Nichols' favorite cinematic moments, or her nervous tics and whimpers, hair touching and fluttering hands, Streep is known for her detailed characters, characters who do not necessarily intend each of their actions—even the presence of verbal accents is not something we would say the character *means* to do. Of course, as spectators, we perceive such actions as meant by Streep as part of her effort to constitute each character.



Promoting *Postcards* in 1990, Nichols was asked about Streep's reputation for transformation, and recalls that, "[w]hen we were shooting *Silkwood*, I saw a screening of *Sophie's Choice* and I was stunned because I thought we were filming the real Meryl, but the person on the screen in *Sophie's Choice* was also the real Meryl. I will never get used to it" (Spitz, 1). Nichols does not suggest that Streep's ability to appear her "real" self while performing other characters marks a resistance to singularity in favor of group identities; rather, she has multiple "real" selves. Streep, though, attributes her accomplishments to Nichols; saying that "[he] makes the soup and pours all the ingredients in. I'm just one of them." When asked about her method, Streep repeatedly refuses the question, claiming not to have one, that "[t]he best actors start blank" (Spitz, 1). This may remind us of Nichols' background in improvisation, where actors literally start blank, that is, without a script or knowledge of the events to come. In fact, Streep has expressed her devotion to improvisation, exclaiming "[t]hat [the impression of spontaneity] is the only thing that's worth looking at... So you get all ready before the first reading and then... forget it" (Hollinger, 92). If this is not exactly a method, it is certainly an approach. Even more in line with Nichols' performance background—and investment in the interpersonal—is her declaration: "I don't feel I exist until I'm with someone else in a scene" (Hollinger, 92).

Streep's polymorphous performance in *Angels* reflects her larger chameleonic status in another way by having her function as a structuring absence. Like Prior, she seems not to seek divination in the heavens. Streep takes risks, makes it seem like anything is possible; a mass of potentiality, she personifies the sort of American optimism described above. Unlike the scene between Prior and Harper, which suggests the cinema allows us the fantasy of accessing another mind, of treating another as object, scenes with stars tend to counteract it by their highly visible

presence, complicating the on-screen body's "inner life" which is narratively determined as the character's. Given the public's desire lack of knowledge about Streep's own life (or her resistance to being objectified), she appears to us to possess more subjectivity than other stars. At the same time, this allows us to view her characters objectively; that is, we may know them more fully than other stars' characters. She may go as far as any actor can go toward disappearing behind her characters while remaining a star, and disavowing her presence as Streep might be fun, but the fact remains that—despite the ubiquitous critical insistence that she is chameleonic—we *are* still aware that we are watching Meryl Streep. She *is* undoubtedly a star. Even calling her a chameleon suggests that there *is* a core, something underlying and consistent; after all, it is only the exterior of a chameleon that changes. However, unlike the majestic Garbo, Streep does not solicit awe in the guise of uniqueness; she seems just as subject to society as we are, just as mired in ideology.

The idea that stardom relies on the fantastic presence of a consistent, and core, self—operative in beliefs like Cavell's that Hollywood stars offer up individualities, ways of being—suggests that the Hollywood star system models the old injunction to be true to oneself. Streep has avowed that, "[she knows] how to pretend to the point of belief" (TK, 289). Streep's ability to inhabit other selves, ever-new points of view by "pretending to the point of belief" models a modern idea of a way of being as clearly as the consistent star personae of yore: by positing that one is always becoming who one is. Perhaps she co-opts becoming as a brand of individuality, a sign of her genius which awes us.

Streep is celebrated precisely because she removes an authorial signature. On the other hand, Nichols' decision to vary his style and subject matter—to find ways of suiting his style to the subject matter—has resulted in his critical derogation. I do not want to argue that we should

open the door to bestowing the mantle of authorship to all directors, but perhaps we should not only look for them in terms of, say, one overarching visual style or generic consistency. Nichols has been a filmmaker at the forefront of liberal opinion, engaging in the salient social and political issues of the day through films that are provocative, witty, visually interesting, literate, and entertaining for over forty years. Just as his films of the 1960s and 1970s, his work in the 1980s and 1990s remains as relevant to the concomitant changes in thinking about identity and the place of the individual as defined through interpersonal stories. Looking back over his long career, Nichols recently declared: “If you want to be a legend, God help you, it’s so easy. You just do one thing. You can be the master of suspense, say. But if you want to be as invisible as is practical, then it’s fun to do a lot of different things” (McGrath, 2009).

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## Conclusion: Of Middle Brows and Middle Grounds

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In 1997, Nichols performed the role of Jack in *The Designated Mourner*, David Hare's film adaptation of Wallace Shawn's play. While Nichols originated the role on stage in London a year earlier, Jack is Nichols' only cinematic performance, and I believe his decision to play the part is revealing. The film consists of a series of long monologues in which the three characters—Jack, his wife, Judy (Miranda Richardson), and her father, Howard (David de Keyser)—sit and speak in direct address. Editing allows subtle changes to occur in the mise-en-scène, but the film chiefly retains its theatrical flavor. In a way, it is almost like a skeletal version of a Nichols' film; all that is left are the long takes, facial close-ups, and a dense script featuring characters talking over one another, mocking language use even as they use it. Significantly, Hare's film, a tragedy, does *not* share Nichols' affinity for portraying characters interacting.

Howard is a fairly important “highbrow” (to use the film's term), and Judy, having grown up in his social circle, is comfortable there. Jack, on the other hand, stands apart from the intellectual crowd, and struggles to understand his own ambivalence. In this world, the highbrows (“anyone who can read John Donne,” as Jack puts it at one point) are being systematically executed, until eventually, it is only Jack who is left to be the fellow designated to mourn—designated because even though he is not one of them, he is still the only one left to remember them. Throughout the film, Jack claims to envy and despise the highbrows. Nevertheless, in the end, and without denying his antipathy, he still feels a responsibility to them. He mourns them; but immediately afterwards, he goes outside to affirm the “unbelievable physical pleasure...of an early evening breeze.”



Throughout this dissertation, I have consistently located Nichols at the (and *as* the) origin of New Hollywood. However, *The Designated Mourner* reminds us that we may also see his position at the cusp of old and new in another way. We have noted that he has at least as much in common with “old Hollywood” directors, like George Cukor, William Wyler, George Stevens, and Howard Hawks, as he does with those that followed his emergence: the “film school generation” of Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, etc., that admired him.

Still, Nichols was the “only star director of the moment” (Gussow, 95) in the late 1960s, a time when cinema, and the concept of a cinematic director, was being revolutionized in the public’s mind. He thus defined new American *auteurism* even as the doors he opened would soon close on him. As film styles became more explicitly political (verging on the didactic) or even antihumanist, Nichols quickly fell behind from the forefront of progressive cinema. William Calin ascribes much of the academic antihumanist postmodernism to the student revolts of the 1960s—which is ironic given that this was the cultural event in which *The Graduate* (1967) so palpably participated (143). Nichols seems never to have sought to replicate the high modernism of his “personal pantheon of film directors...like Bunuel, Renoir, Bergman, Fellini, Welles,” but neither did he try to duplicate the blockbuster formulae that arose in the latter 1970s as part of the New Hollywood system (Gelmis, 266). Nor did he ever give up his attachment to psychological depth in favor of the wave of postmodernist irony (and frequent cynicism) exemplified by filmmakers such as the Coen brothers, Marc Forster, Spike Jonze, David O. Russell, and Steven Soderbergh, all of whom cite Nichols as influential.

Instead, Nichols sustained his interest in characters and what goes on between them. Just as Jack takes to task those who luxuriate in the intellectualization of high modernist pleasures rather than conceiving of art as being in dialogue with its contemporary issues of social justice

and social responsibility, we have learned that—despite critical vituperations and misapprehensions—Nichols was not at all apolitical. Nichols’ films—from their long takes and facial close-ups to their mechanically reproduced silences and use of stars—make their points cinematically. In order to comprehend the narratives of Nichols’ films, the spectator must attend to the language of film. Indeed, Nichols turned the nation’s youth on to film language, compelling them to close read the editing, cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound of *The Graduate*, a fact which made the advent of the new *auteurs* of the 1970s “not only necessary but inevitable” (Lewis, 279). By putting film form in the service of portraying characters’ motivations and intentions, he made film fun to think about, and this may be his most lasting influence on American film culture.

Seeing Nichols as an outsider—not despite but because of his mammoth early successes in theater and cinema—perhaps resonates with his biography, first as a Jewish child growing up in Nazi Berlin, and then as an immigrant, growing up brainy, poor, and hairless. Whatever his motivation, Nichols’ films consistently follow outsiders, from the oddly Jewish Benjamin Braddock, the women of *Silkwood* (1983) and *Working Girl* (1988), the homosexuals of *The Birdcage* (1996), to the convergence of these categories in *Angels in America* (2003). When he tells the story of someone with power and privilege, as he does in *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), he is on the side of those injured by that power. David Desser observes that Nichols’ characters all share one thing: “[s]ome critical part of their makeup, a segment that can be neither changed nor ignored, forces them to function outside the conventional flow of middle-class, white, straight, Christian American life” (291).

As time has passed, the most respected, or at least noted, films of Nichols’ corpus remain his early work: *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), *The Graduate*, and *Carnal Knowledge*.

While I hope that *Angels in America* and a film I was not able to discuss, *Wit* (2001), soon join this coterie, there was a particular burden, it seemed to me, to address Nichols' early works. They are the ones named in histories of American cinema as watersheds. Since I was partly motivated to write this dissertation by the fact that everyone agrees Nichols' films are "important," but no one seems to think that they are important enough to write specifically about, part of my methodological burden was to refrain from imposing their reputations on the texts, but rather, to allow them to speak for themselves. Besides learning about (and from) the films, I hoped to gain a fuller picture of their social historical appeal than the broad strokes extant historical chronicles provided.

In this way, rather than beginning with claims about Nichols' achievements in speaking to political issues or in addressing social types, my primary method has been to closely read the films, and then to understand the social historical responses to them. Surely not *any* film with taboo language would have cracked the Production Code in 1966, for example. And there must have been *something* about *The Graduate* that struck a rebellious chord with a coddled generation. How can we know what the reception of a film means until we understand the claims the film makes—and how it makes them—upon its spectator?

One thing that we discovered is that if *The Graduate* tells us anything, it is that successful communication is not constituted by the lack of disagreement. Ben needs someone else to speak his same silent language (and whether or not he finds that someone in Elaine is still up for debate). He needs someone to acknowledge that he is expressing himself. Nichols' characters must learn to be responsible for making their expressions legible to others, and for responding to the expressions of others. The metaphor of Viola Spolin's ball, which must be tossed mutually back and forth between two people to create a scene, is applicable across Nichols' films—and it

is also relevant to the relationship of the film and the spectator. As we judge other characters for not listening to or seeing Ben's actions, the film's conclusion turns that judgment back on us: if Ben's expressions fail because no one is there (save us) to read them, when do ours succeed?

It is not just the silences of *The Graduate* which display Nichols' capacity for grounding his films in a tension between violating and conforming to expressive regulations (tensions which bring together the films' formal and narrative aspects). In *Carnal Knowledge*, Jonathan's villainy is exhibited by his stoicism; Nichols and May mocked men who over-emote (such as the doctor who dramatically professes his love during surgery). In *Virginia Woolf*, George and Martha must learn to control their histrionics, just as Albert and Armand must learn to own theirs in *The Birdcage*. And, the legend of Streep, which states that she expresses everything but herself (or rather that such withholding is her expression of self), demands the spectator negotiate the impression of the nation's most celebrated female film star with her status as a chameleon.

Thus, Nichols' cinema is about the ethics of spectators watching and listening to people. The spectator of a Nichols film is invited to consider social and philosophical questions about her own actions in interpersonal contexts: what power or what responsibility does she have to self-present? Nichols' genius is that he accomplishes this *as* he entertains us, *as* we experience a witty and engaging story with its own specific issues. It is through his pleasurable style that he impels the spectator to consider what it means to express: how it can be that a concept which seems to be the province of the self—*my* expression, *my* expressing—actually requires someone else to acknowledge it, for it to apply (even if that "other person" is oneself as in cases of self-reflection). Or, as is the case in *Virginia Woolf* and *The Birdcage*, it might require the acknowledgement of a couple, since marriage requires two people engaged in expression.

To think about authorship is also to consider a person's actions: to ask questions about responsibility, intention, and accountability. My broadest argument in this dissertation has been for the serious study of Nichols' films. Since I saw it as my job to make the case for his cinema, it was necessary that I organize his films around central concepts. But I mourn the differences, complexities, and nuances lost. Like a successful classic Hollywood studio director, Nichols enjoyed the freedom to try his hand at different styles, themes, and genres. He began his cinematic career as a pivotal director in the history of mainstream American cinema, and his subsequent films reflect significant developments in American culture, braiding together changes in cinema, such as the aesthetic innovations of the European New Wave cinemas; in philosophy, such as the theories of language espoused by J.L. Austin and Stanley Cavell, and in theater, such as Spolin's theory of improvisational drama.

Part of my purpose was also to understand why Nichols' corpus has not been analyzed by scholars of film. Now, after elucidating the many ways Nichols self-consciously engages our ideas about cinematic dialogue, character, facial expression, and performance, I believe his interest in the on-screen human figure to underlie his neglect. We can appreciate that this interest allowed him to bridge the old and new, since Hollywood film remained a character-driven cinema. To think about Nichols is to deliberate about what a cinematic character is by considering both what it does and how it does it. This is also, then, to think about a concept fundamental to American cinema, and one that provides a window through which to consider how this notion has been posited—and how it has changed—over almost fifty years.

### Conclusion Bibliography

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