

# Film review

## “Goodbye Columbus”

anon.

1969

When you see “Goodbye, Columbus,” you think how amazing—that this crew of film makers could take such familiar material and make it so fresh.

Throughout the whole movie, right from the opening shots of a swimming pool, I was plagued by the notion that director Larry Peerce was somehow capitalizing on “The Graduate,” but by the end -I had relaxed and decided “So what?” if Peerce could make a better movie than Nichols’, or even one of equal quality, the more power to him.

After all, “The Graduate” wasn’t that good. During the time of its release in late 1967, there was lots of talk about how well “The Graduate” spoke to the new, affluent generation about responsibility and values. Almost two years have passed since then, and does anyone remember “The Graduate” as anything more than a pleasant little movie?

This is in no way to be taken as a hint that “Goodbye, Columbus” is calculated plagiarism. Though the central theme of both pictures is similar—that of a perplexed young man trying to break away from the false morality and crass materialism of his parent’s generation—each achieves its aim in highly distinct and diverse manners.

Based upon the novella by Philip Roth, “Columbus” focuses on what I’m tempted to call the nouveau riche subculture in America. The Patimkin family is so familiar that you’d swear you know them from somewhere. Mr. Patimkin looks like the type that might have struggled up from the slums into a nice house in Pleasantville or Meadowdale or someplace equally anonymous—hard as nails in his business role, but showering love on his family in the form of food, gifts, and clothing.

To this suburban wilderness comes Neil—sensitive, but poor, his talents confine him to a job in the public library. Neil finds himself attracted to the Patim-kin affluence, yet repelled by their surface materialism, but he’s too infatuated with their elder daughter, Brenda, for anything else to matter. She, in turn, is drawn to him because he refuses to cater to her self-centered whims.

Invited for a two-week visit to the Patimkin’s house, Neil slips into Brenda’s room every night to make love. Horrified to learn that she is employing no method of birth control, he prevails upon her to be fitted for a diaphragm. It is the discovery of this diaphragm by Brenda’s parents that eventually brings the affair to a distraught conclusion.

Larry Peerce’s direction has never impressed me as being anything more than pedestrian. His handling of actors is good, but he’s one of those young directors who emigrated from television, bringing with him all the limitations of that medium and a whole different, ill-suited way of looking at things.

His previous movies look like TV programs: all shot in useless close-up, never taking advantage of the scope or depth that the motion picture medium provides. But his work in this film is spirited and attentive and alive: “Goodbye, Columbus” seems to burst the bounds of the medium. Probably more important, and without ever forcing the situation, Peerce has captured all the essences of Jewishness that are so vital and telling here, and it always rings true.

Some may remember that the scenarist, Arnold Schulman, wrote that wonderful little carnal comedy of last year, “The Night They Raided Minsky’s,” and his talents in this production are an inspired contribution. Roth writes

great movie dialogue, and Schulman has fashioned a witty, literate screenplay from the book, one that's ripe with truth and pathos and real people.

It's always difficult in a movie to judge who should get the credit, who the blame. In this case there is so much that is genuinely refreshing, funny, and touching that it is simply a matter of trying to judge who should get the most credit.

Who, for example, thought of placing that horrid lamp with the word "Moxie" printed on it over the Patimkin's basement bar? Was it Roth or Peerce or Schulman that conceived that hysterical, maniac dinner scene at the Patimkin's with everyone wolfing down their food and burping and reaching across the table and Mrs. Patimkin screaming for the maid?

Was it Peerce or Schulman or the editor, Ralph Rosenblum, that decided upon that quick, perfectly-timed cut from Neil and Brenda making love in an attic to a huge slab of rare roast beef on a dinner table, a classic example of how film technique can be a source of wit in itself. And what about the wedding of Brenda's brother, Ron, to a totally forgettable girl from Ohio—a scene so artfully staged that it hardly seems staged.

Or the way Ron looks down at his feet with forced modesty whenever he speaks, or hangs his jock strap out to dry in the family bathroom, or sits transfixed listening to his Mantovani and Andre Kostelanetz records. It's all so perfectly detailed, so right and familiar, that we gasp with recognition as we laugh.

It's unfortunate that "Goodbye, Columbus" isn't all as perfect as we'd like. For one thing it becomes obvious under repeated viewings that the ending, which Peerce and Schulman seem to consider the meat of their film, is too abrupt and weak: when Neil leaves Brenda, it happens so quickly that we're not exactly sure what has taken place between the characters or why or how to react to this except with confusion.

But this flaw is rendered almost insignificant by the film's virtues, which are many. Richard Benjamin, who came to this movie by way of Broadway and television, endows his Neil with remarkable intelligence and wit, and his work in this film is just too strong to quarrel with.

As Brenda, Ali McGraw matches Benjamin with equal intelligence, considerable aplomb, and a vulnerability that makes us think she really might escape her bourgeois doom.

Physically she's right for the part: behind thermoplastically revised Semitic nose and the contact lenses is a clean-scrubbed, all-American, Radcliffe college girl, the kind that might have played well in an Andy Hardy movie or a Vincente Minnelli musical of the 1940s. Her only real defect in the role is when she is asked to be emotional, and she just can't pull it off convincingly.

But both Benjamin and Miss McGraw, along with a polished supporting cast, contribute a great amount of charm, humor, and passion to a truly memorable movie, one that tries to be true and largely succeeds.

# fifth Estate

anon.  
Film review  
“Goodbye Columbus”  
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/81-june-12-25-1969/film-review>  
Fifth Estate #81, June 12-25, 1969

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**