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Dustin Hoffman: “As Artistic As Possible”

By Daniel Smith-Rowsey

#### A NEW ANTI-STAR

For its first forty-six years, Time, America’s newsweekly of record, invariably presented cover drawings of important people or events. The very first Time cover photograph, dated February 7, 1969, featured not a world leader, astronaut, or international conflict, but Dustin Hoffman and Mia Farrow: “The Young Actors: Stars and Anti-Stars.” The article talked about how their recent movies have spun “a new myth of lost innocence, of the individual against the wicked system.” And the magazine aligned the meaning of the actors with the meanings of the films:

The new young actors themselves represent the death of many movie myths – among them, the one of the movie star. The big press buildup, the house in Beverly Hills baroque, the ostentation and the seven-picture commitment are giving way to a stubborn kind of performer who is as suspicious of the Hollywood system as a student rebel is of the university trustees.

Time explained that “anti-stars” like Hoffman were in fact a response to recent

changes in the culture:

As comedy grew steadily blacker and as audiences grew steadily younger, hipper and more draftable, the old concepts began to erode. The invulnerables like Peck and Holden and Wayne seemed lost in a country full of people whose destinies were not in their own hands. The nation of cities needed new images, and suddenly Hoffman became an archetype. (Kanfer, Cocks, and Winfrey 51)

America's discontent now had a genuine Hollywood face, a star image.

In July of the same year, the cover of Life trumpeted: "Dusty and the Duke: A Choice of Heroes." At the peak of a summer of bitter Vietnam discontent, Woodstock, and a manned trip to the moon, Life chose to use a cover story to compare Dustin Hoffman and John Wayne, then appearing onscreen in Midnight Cowboy and True Grit, respectively. Throughout the piece, Wayne is the "he-man," Hoffman the "everyman." Wayne's image is "strong, decisive, moral, and nearly always a winner." Hoffman's "characters [...] are conspicuously short on these traditional qualities. His people are uncertain, alienated, complex, and, by any familiar standard, losers." Wayne's old-Hollywood performance wisdom gets aired – "I don't act, I react" – near a caption that reads "Every role Dustin Hoffman has played so far has been unique." In direct contrast to Wayne, Hoffman reveals that he's still seeing an analyst, it's not "particularly courageous for an actor to speak out politically" as he (Hoffman) had about McCarthy, and an actor shouldn't do at fifty what he

did at thirty. Wayne blames irresponsible professors for current student unrest, while Hoffman says, “The youth outburst in this country is a good thing. The kids are angry because the American leaders have made mistakes and refuse to admit it.” (Graves 7) Again and again during the 1960s, and unlike today, journalists referred to a younger generation with new values; here, Life positioned Hoffman as an innovative, incorruptible avatar. (This Wayne-Hoffman competition arguably continued until that year’s Oscars, where Wayne’s performance beat Hoffman’s, but Hoffman’s film won Best Picture.)

For contemporary mainstream sources, Dustin Hoffman represented the 1960s’ break from the past. Hoffman symbolized both radical transformation and a certain familiarity, both of which the studio system was quick to incorporate. Marsha Kinder suggested as much when she wrote that films of “the new American humanistic realism” – she named only The Graduate (1967), Midnight Cowboy (1969), Easy Rider (1969), and Five Easy Pieces (1970) – “render suspect their own ‘revolutionary’ perspectives by easing back into the values they appear to be questioning” partly because “the value of several of them depends largely upon performances, such as Dustin Hoffman’s in Midnight Cowboy”. (Kinder 221) Kinder suggests that star performance transforms, or obviates, any sort of true challenge to the system, like the more avant-garde films she details.

This essay examines contemporary media sources to determine how Hoffman was understood and contextualized during the 1960s, particularly in the discourse surrounding his two major films of the period, The Graduate and Midnight Cowboy. Hoffman was not

simply a great actor whose talent would have assured his stardom at any time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hoffman's star image was also mobilized to represent the rebellious spirit of contemporary young adults. This essay asks: what was gained and lost when Dustin Hoffman became a, perhaps the, representative of the "anti-star" movement? How did Hoffman, on and offscreen, both give voice to and stifle the most radical aspects of the counterculture? Many historians have credited young auteur directors with the "New Hollywood" or "Hollywood Renaissance" flowering of creativity that happened at this time; how did a non-directing actor like Hoffman influence it, for better and worse? One reason that these questions merit attention is that, to a considerable degree, Hoffman established the paradigm of formal "ordinariness" and thematic alienation for the 1970s "anti-stars" – like Jack Nicholson, Elliott Gould, Gene Hackman, Al Pacino, and Robert DeNiro, to name a few – that succeeded him. And we are still living with their standards of quality and authenticity.

While the term "anti-star" may have been new, the concept was old, as Hoffman well knew. Hoffman asked, "Wasn't Bogart, even Tracy, off the conventional line – for their time? Isn't the anti-hero simply the alienated man?" (Michaelson 48) The apparent difference had to do with studio disarray, the attendant rising power of stars (exemplified by talent agency MCA's takeover of Universal Pictures), and the more antiestablishment attitudes of the 1960s. It seemed that people were enjoying star-actors with the same amount of simple voyeuristic pleasure with which they enjoyed stars of the past, but with

their guilt (about star worship, and corporate art) vitiated by their knowledge of these stars' "authenticity" and their "real" actor chops. The press flattered people who were apparently smart and tasteful enough to see Hoffman as successfully both subverting and playing the Hollywood game.

Gilles Deleuze implicitly agreed with Time's judgement regarding men "whose destinies were not in their own hands." Deleuze wrote that much American cinema of the late 60s and early 70s exemplified the same "crisis of the action-image" – the gap between perception and action – that dominated Italian neo-realism, but the difference in America was that the gap/crisis was a traumatic event which always led to the same conclusion: the hero's realization of his utter powerlessness. (Deleuze 19-20) Thomas Elsaesser agreed, and seemed almost to be speaking of Hoffman when he wrote,

What the heroes bring to such films is an almost physical sense of inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness: stances which are not only interpretable psychologically, but speak of a radical scepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive: themselves the unacknowledged, because firmly underpinning architecture of the classical Hollywood action genres. (Elsaesser 282)

Time and Life and other contemporary sources aligned this alienation with the young student protestors. But as with so many protestors, alienation, as presented by Hollywood, was never a direct challenge to America's capitalist system. Hoffman spearheaded the new

authenticity even as his status as a rising star curtailed its most radical impulses. In this, he shared – and, crucially, established – many of the traits of the films that were eventually named as part of the Hollywood Renaissance.

Alexander Horwath wrote that the era's most celebrated films “pushed back the boundaries” of industry possibilities. Yet at the same time, the movies were “internalizing these boundaries” by cinematic allegory. (Horwath 12) Like its characters, politically, aesthetically, and economically, it failed to develop viable alternatives. Elsaesser found that the Hollywood Renaissance films rehearsed their own futility profilmically, either with a despairing shrug, or a fatalist laugh. Hoffman turned out to be an expert at both.

The Life article was actually something of a re-tread. Fifteen years before, John Wayne had already been used as a counter-point to an emergent wave of “torn T-shirt types” – Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift, who personified rebellion, not only on the filmic level, even in the very titles of the films – *The Wild One*, *Rebel Without a Cause* – but also on the extra-filmic level, with their antiestablishment lifestyles and adherence to a new more “authentic” style of acting dubbed the Method. (Cohan 33) So, was Hoffman's star image no more than a reiteration of a bygone cycle of films and actors – one might also include Elvis Presley and Sidney Poitier here – that gave America the word “teenager,” that articulated postwar adolescent angst? Were Time and Life and others wrong in 1969 to hail a new sort of anti-star?

One difference might be that Brando, Dean, Clift, Presley, and Poitier were never

seen or marketed as ugly or even ordinary-looking. Hoffman met this requirement; he did not have matinee-idol looks, a point that comes up in contemporary periodicals again and again. Of course he was not the first (he was wise to note Bogart and Tracy), but he may have been the first to be filmed with non-bright color stock, generous crowd shots, eye-level split focus, and other aspects of contemporary realism. Hoffman's formal "ordinariness" is inevitably tied to his ethnicity; he's an everyman because of his non-WASP – read: ethnic – appearance.

The Graduate and Midnight Cowboy were Hoffman's two major films of the time, and they were both hailed as formal and thematic challenges to the old Hollywood, with more in common than most critics realized. Both films feature a surfeit of folk-pop music as supposed internal monologue. Both use camera "tricks," such as rack focus pulls, four-frame nudity flashes, and discordant memory flashes. Both have extreme long shots of their leads, seen from 45° up, alone and lost in a crowd. And both films end with Hoffman and friend/lover on a bus, heading into an uncertain future. This was the time when Ken Kesey had announced to potential acid-trippers "you're either on the bus or off the bus," and busing was becoming the new and most contentious battlefield in civil rights (already some school districts were mandating it). Hoffman's one-two punch of mordant musings on the American Dream was right in step with the most celebrated transgressions of the time.

## THE GRADUATE

During the mid-1960s, Hollywood casting agents and producers were mining the New York stage for new talent. This fact, often neglected in film histories, was at least as powerful an antecedent to the Hollywood Renaissance as, say, the evanescence of censorship. The New York dramatic stage of the 1960s privileged the work and style of Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee above all others. The "best" actors would be the ones that had proved themselves in this sort of grey, American-Dream-questioning, pessimistic material. These actors would almost certainly have at least acquainted themselves with Stanislavsky's Method – in very reductive terms, the recourse to "sense memory," by which one recalls a childhood trauma to find the emotional truth of a given scene or character. One of these actors, who piled up gushing accolades for his Broadway roles, was Dustin Hoffman. One of the audience members for his show at the end of 1966 – called Eh? – was Mike Nichols, then piling up his own gushing accolades for the film based on the American-Dream-questioning play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. Somehow Nichols saw access to existential disaffection in an excellent Jewish performer doing (for Eh?) a sort of Buster Keaton impression.

It is reasonable for historians to treat Mike Nichols' casting of Hoffman as the lead in The Graduate as the opening of the floodgates, the moment that empowered an unexpected phenomenon (the film's blockbuster success) which in turn led to a surfeit of lead roles for men whom in years past would have been relegated to character roles. What is not reasonable is for historians to treat Nichols as a genius, or alternatively, as James

Marshall at Sutter's Mill in 1848, discovering gold in a virgin wilderness. Nichols' decision was based at least partly on increasing cultural validity of ethnicity and alienation. Nichols well knew that American audiences had warmed to lead unknowns in recent European films, and he perhaps needed some sort of "zest" lest the film seem unbearably pat or smarmy. If anything, Nichols' decision was almost a defensive manoeuvre, a way to stay in front of market trends.

Of course, Nichols could have gone many ways with the title role of The Graduate. Robert Redford was, according to many writers, the logical choice to play Benjamin Braddock – as one critic had it, Redford wound up playing a "straight surfer that year in Barefoot in the Park anyway." (Taylor 57) And Redford did test to play Benjamin for Nichols. Even in 1967, Hoffman told a journalist that "I thought I was wrong for the part. The character suggested to me a young, conventional, squarejawed, Time Magazine Man of the Year type." (Williams C3) Four years later, he told another reporter that after finishing Charles Webb's novel, he put it next to his copy of Time's Man of the Year for 1966 – "25 and Under," with just that sort of clean-cut WASPy caricature on the cover. Even if this story is apocryphal, it is instructive, because the Time "25 and Under" cover represented a sort of saturation point for the then-obsessively covered story of the Generation Gap that had people shouting "don't trust anyone over 30." Auditions for The Graduate took place a few weeks after the issue of Time. Hoffman supposedly told Nichols: "Clearly, the character, the graduate, 'Ben Braddock,' wasn't Jewish." Nichols replied: "No, but he's

Jewish inside.” (E. Wilson 19) Nichols’ bold statement predicted that a Dylan-like Jew (whose internal thoughts were articulated in song by a sort of Dylan-lite, Paul Simon) would represent student alienation as well – perhaps better – than the Robert Redford type now officially minted by Time. Nichols’ decision to turn Braddock’s nervous alienation in a “Jewish inside” direction was either brilliantly attuned to the zeitgeist, borderline anti-Semitic, or perhaps both.

Describing Ben Braddock, Hoffman told Newsweek, “The whole character is one moment out of my life, me at 21 years old in a drugstore trying to ask for prophylactics, sweating, and walking out as soon as the druggist’s wife started to wait on me.” (“I Plummeted to Stardom,” Newsweek, January 22, 1968) Nichols had told Hoffman to keep using that. Hoffman was apparently far more respectful of Mike Nichols than some of his theatre directors. “In New York I blow my top when things aren’t going right,” Hoffman reportedly told Nichols. “But here I go to the other extreme.” Nichols told him to go ahead and tell him to go to hell, but Hoffman internalized instead – particularly as the filming went badly. The results “delighted” Nichols. He told Life: “On screen, Dusty appears to be simply living his life without pretending.” (“A Homely Non-Hero...,” Life, November 24, 1967) However mannered Hoffman may have been, Nichols valorized his naturalistic acting style – hey everyone, here is the everyman, it’s like we just started filming a guy on the street (who happened to have acting talent).

Life began the positioning of Hoffman as a subversive yet authentic star-actor, even an anti-hero. The headline said, “A homely non-hero, Dustin Hoffman gets an unlikely role in Mike Nichols’ The Graduate.” The sub-headline read, “A swarthy Pinocchio makes a wooden role real.” The article read:

If Dustin Hoffman’s face were his fortune, he’d be committed to a life of poverty. With a

schnoz that looks like a directional signal, skittish black-beady eyes and a raggedy hair-cap, he stands a slight 5-foot-6, weighs a mere 131 pounds and slouches like a puppet dangling from a string...Nichols gambled that Dusty's talents would triumph over his appearance. He has won his gamble...Dusty is one of the few new leading men in

Hollywood who look like people rather than profiles in celluloid.  
("A Homely Non-Hero..." Life, November 24, 1967)

While Life demonstrated classic anti-Semitic coding, Nichols and Levine and Hoffman were all complicit – in order to codify a new ordinary-man star as a daring casting choice.

For critics, the performative significance of Dustin Hoffman in The Graduate was not one of technique. No review (in the twenty-plus researched sources) ever used the word "innovative" or "revolutionary" or even "Method." The significance was one of persona – read to say that talent was more important than looks. America had learned this before, but based on the press, it seemed to be re-learning it all over again. Or as Mel Gussow had it in September of 1968, "He's given hope to hordes of homely men." (Gussow 35) Hoffman himself said: "I am the boy next door, only the boy next door is not supposed to have pimples." (Michaelson 47) This disruption, this challenge, was surely as much as any one film could ever change Hollywood.

Nor did writers ever name Hoffman as Jewish. The everyman persona was the crucial keystone of reviews even while its ethnic origins remained unmentionable. Many critics agreed with Life's assessment of casting unconventionality, like one who said, "Dustin Hoffman is not exactly your average Hollywooden romantic lead. For one thing,

he looks like the original Thurber model for the male animal – he’s 5 feet 5 inches, about 130 pounds, has definitely beady, brown eyes, a more than adequate chin; and a nose, my friends, what a nose.” (Williams C3) For another, “Dustin Hoffman may not be everybody’s conception of the graduate, visually or intellectually (there are moments when both the ladies seemed daft to give him a second thought).” (Champlin C1) But then they rushed to say that the movie surprisingly worked. One said, “With deadpan style, Dustin Hoffman moulds an original character and never falls back on to stereotype.” (Austen B2) One critic summed up the prevailing sentiment: “America is after all a nation full of men to whom girls like Katherine Ross never paid any attention in high school, and of women who long to prove that, unlike those other girls, those beautiful nasty girls, they have great stores of love to give to a deserving young man, however short, if he be only as charming as Dustin Hoffman.” (Kempton 78) Gussow’s article ended by predicting that “rejected producers will start asking for a Dustin Hoffman... ‘But there’ll come a day,’ predicts the original Dustin Hoffman, ‘when a face like mine will not be able to get work. Ten years from now, they’ll say, ‘I’ll give half my kingdom for a walking surfboard.’” But for the next ten years – watch out.” As things turned out, this was quite prescient.

Later historians gave Hoffman the credit for a persona revolution. “Hoffman heralded the arrival of the non-traditional leading man in movies. He perfectly captured the fear, clumsiness, and ambivalence of Benjamin.” (King C5) More to the point: “With The Graduate’s success in 1967, life for Hoffman changed for ever, as it did for Al Pacino and

a host of other ethnic actors, ushering in an era of unconventional leads and outstanding film-making.” (Dawson P1) Even as early as 1971, the Los Angeles Times said that Hoffman had “changed a nation’s aesthetic tastes.” (Haber 21) Perhaps more to the point, in a time of social ferment, Hollywood had proved itself pluralistic and inclusive, with headlines like “He’s the kind of person you pass without seeing – even though he’s Hollywood’s hottest property.” (Oppenheimer 10)

Many in the press positioned the film and Hoffman as a force of the counterculture, or at least youth rebellion. Said one, “Dustin Hoffman, a major talent find, brings off a weird characterization as the hapless fellow battling his environment...in style as well as content, the film is a clarion call to youth.” (“The Graduate,” Cue, December 23, 1967) From another: “With Mr. Hoffman’s stolid, deadpanned performance, he gets a wonderfully compassionate sense of the ironic and pathetic immaturity of a mere baccalaureate scholar turned loose in an immature society. He is a character very much reminiscent of Holden Caulfield.” (Crowther D2) And a third: “Dustin Hoffman makes a splendid debut as this anti-hero...his blank, mute desperation as these flutter-brained adults smother him with praise, jobs, and jollity must go to the heart of any young man who finds the older generation foreign, foolish, and futile in the face of his own alienation.” (Mannes 61) A year later, Newsweek said that Hoffman had come “to be regarded as the very soul, catatonic and rebellious at the same time, of contemporary American youth.” (“Beware the Baron,” Newsweek, December 16, 1968) Newsweek’s parsing was accurate: at once,

Hoffman symbolized, even performed, the revolutionary potential and fatalist viscosity of the new generation.

Of course, The Graduate was hardly as subversive as, say, The Battle of Algiers (1966). David Brinkley, Renata Adler, Hollis Alpert, and many other writers quite rightly took the Nichols film to task at the time. But marketing like the *Life* article encouraged people to “get it” – to position the joke, the film, and the off-beatness of Hoffman as a way to “freak the squares.” Adopting Hoffman as a cultural symbol became a way for a potent generation to prove it knew better than their parents. When it came to Hoffmans, baby boomers’ tastes probably ran closer to Dustin than Abbie. Clever alienation resounded louder than liberal activism.

Like a lot of the movement films to come, The Graduate picks up on the restlessness of novels like Jack Kerouac’s On the Road by emphasizing Benjamin Braddock’s frantic driving all over California, particularly in the second half of the film. Wherever Hoffman goes, he looks lost, whether drifting around the U.C. Berkeley campus or running down a sidewalk in Santa Barbara. The film eventually demonizes Mrs. Robinson while her daughter’s best trait seems to be the fact that Benjamin barely knows her. The film, led by Hoffman’s performance, is a mostly light-hearted, perhaps even satirical, characterization of disillusionment, but still aligns well with the more whimsical Beat novels and Bob Dylan songs to present an unrooted, disaffected narcissism that never tries too hard to understand women. And critics and audiences wanted more.

By the end of 1968, The Graduate had earned about \$40 million (on a budget of about \$3 million), making it the third-highest-grossing film of all time. Hoffman was telling anyone who would listen that he wanted to play Malamud's Raskolnikov, Brecht's Arturo Ui, Catch-22's Milo, Holden Caulfield, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and especially Adolf Hitler. (He would never wind up playing any of these roles.) He also said that he was almost done with acting, and ready to direct. (He never has.) In September of 1968, he said, "Now I can articulate the feelings of those who aren't in a position to talk." (Chapman 33) Indeed, as long as the marginalized could have their story presented in a classically made Hollywood film with a straight white male in the lead. Hoffman was just enough, including the "forgotten" while still preserving Hollywood's basic institutional priorities.

#### MIDNIGHT COWBOY

The story of how Hoffman went from The Graduate to Midnight Cowboy is frequently misremembered – did he commit to playing Ratso Rizzo before or after the Nichols film became a hit? The answer is both. Director John Schlesinger and producer Monte Hellman had seen Hoffman onstage before The Graduate, and told him he'd be great in the role of Ratso Rizzo. Hoffman had told them he'd do it, but signed nothing. By March of 1968, The Graduate was a phenomenon, yet the person who needed re-convincing was not Hoffman but Schlesinger. (Of course, now the production would have to pay Hoffman a lot more – \$250,000, more than ten times what he'd earned on The

Graduate.) Schlesinger said he couldn't visualize Hoffman in the role anymore. Hoffman met the director in Times Square, dressed and looking for all the world like the most indigent sort of bum. Schlesinger apparently said, "Oh, you'll do quite well." On March 11, 1968, Hoffman signed the contract to play Ratso Rizzo, promising to lose weight and stay out of the sun. (Biskind 314) *The Method* won.

Hoffman later recalled that Mike Nichols, upon hearing about the casting of Rizzo, told him: "I made you a star, and you're going to throw it all away? You're a leading man and now you're going to play this? The Graduate was so clean, and this is so dirty." That was the point for Hoffman, and he made sure that the media knew it. He said, "I had become troubled, to say the least, by the reviews that I had read of The Graduate." He did not like being called Nichols' creation, and he did not like "a kind of disguised anti-Semitism...I was determined to show them, in big letters, THEM, that I was an actor. Revenge is always a good motive in creativity." (Biskind 315) This interview from 2005 is the first time anyone in the mainstream press talking about Hoffman (namely, himself) mentions the word "anti-Semitism." During the 1960s, in many, many, press interviews, Hoffman at least appeared to be happy to represent the "ordinary" (and thus, not explicitly Jewish) man.

How much did Hoffman's infamous ego matter? One of his biographers explained Hoffman's on-set approach this way:

Throughout his career, Dustin has been an advocate of his own theories of

movie-making. He was unafraid to speak his piece with directors or provide input into writers' screenplays, preferring to control the situation; that way, the character was really his. Some directors have complained about Dustin's infringement on their own creativity, but the vast majority of directors encouraged it. In interjecting his own ideas into a specific character or scene, Hoffman was following not only the example of other actors but also his own intuition, since he seemed to know his own ability best. (Lenburg 27)

Industry history tells us that actors (who weren't also directors/producers) in previous eras could not exercise such agency. Hoffman, accounts suggest, broke the mold even while he signalled a new alienated everyman mold for other actors to use. He declared, "I will no longer accept anything unless the character is rich, the story important, and the director acceptable." (Oppenheimer 10) He said to another source, "Art has never been for the masses, but now people seem to see what's good. The least I can do is try to make what I do as artistic as possible." (Lenburg 78) Some scholars ask if stars weren't merely in the right place at the right time. That may be, but Hoffman was canny about making his time and place suit his abilities and taste quite rightly.

Unlike most of the more famous roles of the Hollywood Renaissance, Hoffman's Ratso Rizzo (and arguably, the lead, Jon Voight's Joe Buck) was, at least, genuinely lower-class. To some degree, then, Midnight Cowboy expanded everyman alienation beyond the middle-class. Yet Rizzo was still being played by someone who just appeared on the cover

of Time, someone who worked toward institutional solutions. That February 1969 Time article noted:

The anti-star attitude itself threatens to become a new pose or convention in which the Hollywood swimming pool is replaced by the interesting East Side pad, the Valley ranch by a Martha's Vineyard retreat, the antic table-hopping by frantic political activism. (Kanfer, Cocks, and Winfrey 53)

This last part referenced Hoffman's campaigning for Eugene McCarthy in the 1968 election. In a year when activist parties proliferated, Hoffman found himself supporting the safe Democrat. This was Hoffman's level of deviance. When push came to shove, he flattered the earnest liberal, not the embittered radical. And so would his roles and his films.

In May, Midnight Cowboy, and Hoffman's role in it, were greeted with thunderous applause. One found Hoffman "able to turn scrounging into a gallant, Robin-Hoodish activity." (Simon 31) Another spoke of a "totally surprising tenderness." (Alpert C1) Another said, "Hoffman gives an excellent performance; he has both the limping walk and the Brooklyn accent down pat. What is more he has in his face the ineffable sadness of the character." (Gertner 3) And: "Dustin Hoffman is wonderful. His portrayal of a dying, down-and-out city con is perfectly realized [...] yet there is nothing depressing about Ratso. He has a kind of tawdry panache." ("Midnight Cowboy," Glamour, August 1969) And: "Ratso's crippled pathos and sleazy humour are not exploited for their obvious

entertainment value, but contained superbly as contributive factors in the character development of Joe Buck.” (Gow 16) The alienated everyman had now triumphed at drama.

As Hoffman had surmised, critics could not stop comparing Ratso to Benjamin. The star image of “Dustin Hoffman” had been so radically shifted as to force a reconfiguration of meaning. One critic began a review by saying, “Midnight Cowboy seems to be this summer’s The Graduate; the kids who loved Dustin Hoffman sweet and clean are just as happy to love him dirty and sweet.” (Simon 31) Another: “Dustin Hoffman, as the ratty Ratso Rizzo, turns in a tour de force performance that will surprise no one who saw him Off-Broadway in *Journey of the Fifth Horse*, but may unnerve the fans who knew him only as the clean-cut nebbish of The Graduate. His performance is anti-romantic, detailed, and for a young man with matinee idol pretensions, highly courageous: his makeup is truly repulsive, from the ever growing limp to the bad teeth to the overall greasiness. Some of his teenybopper fans may never get over it.” (Weaver B-3) Another, from an absolute rave: “Dustin Hoffman, on the other hand, brings to bear on his role a talent of astounding power and versatility. The contrast with his part in The Graduate is total, for here, instead of a youth just out of college, he is a healthless, scrounging worm from a lower-depths level of society. And he gives it not only its proper loathsome aspects, but a heart as well. It is a performance that, like Voight’s, sticks in the mind as if embossed.” (Winsten 72) Finally: “By following up the glamorous Graduate with the

dreagiest drop-out imaginable, Dustin Hoffman has achieved his aim of not becoming the Andy Hardy of the '60s and '70s. With a dragging limp, a perpetually preserved five o'clock shadow, a fungus-like fever of expression, and a way of smoking a squashed cigarette as if he were inhaling oxygen underwater, Hoffman will not only preserve all his old following of adoring females but should add a few more masochistic maidens to his fan base." (Sarris 12) Hoffman, as the only actor working in Hollywood in 1969 who could point to a phalanx of reviews like these, surely provided a model to all the other young actors then emerging – like Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman, Elliott Gould, and many more.

Andrew Sarris' comment about "masochistic maidens" is telling. Later historians (but no critic at the time) would credit Midnight Cowboy, Easy Rider, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, all released during the summer of 1969, with the inauguration of the buddy film genre, and/or the road movie, where the two leads, echoing Sal and Dean (of On the Road), would look for answers on the road and find everything but. The restless alienation and grungy appearance were inevitably attenuated with exclusion or dismissal of females. (Homosexuality was generally suppressed.) The New Hollywood built its reputation on the backs of women, and Hoffman represented that as well as anyone, on- and offscreen. Hoffman said in 1969's Life cover story that "film acting [seems] to me to be more of a female profession. The director, who has all the creative power, really uses the actor. I don't know many actors who enjoy the work of acting." (Graves 8) But perhaps this failure to countenance women is part and parcel of the lionization of "character." Claire

Johnston found that historical Hollywood male stereotyping went against the notion of character, but dominant ideology kept women eternal and unchanging. (Johnston 184)

Hoffman's tastes were the press's version of antiestablishment – even when they weren't. Hoffman refused to find fault with actors that do commercials, even though he hadn't:

Get what you can! Certainly. But at the same time shrewdness, quite apart from any kind of artistic integrity thing, tells me that I will have more longevity, and more respect, the straighter I play it. (J. Wilson 23)

Already his positioning as an artist was merely a careful business decision. Hoffman made it clear to older Hollywood producers that they didn't have to fear any kind of radical agitation from him. The same article said:

...his manager thinks that the fans want him back as he was in *The Graduate* – more or less. Hoffman may, in fact, have a better instinct about this. The film industry is in a state of some confusion about the box office success of movies without stars, such as *The Graduate*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *If...* What these films have are the new faces of good young actors rather than the expensive presence of familiar stars, who come to each new role trailing clouds of old associations from previous appearances. To be durable now it may be necessary to positively avoid acquiring any of the old “star quality” – to become Promethean in aspect, in fact to take on

character roles. (J. Wilson 22)

This was written next to a photo of Hoffman inside a star-shaped frame – apparently without irony, even in an article that calls Hoffman “small, too small certainly for hero or lover.” The validation of character roles is validation for the Method and Stanislavsky, who once said that a character actor is the only kind of actor he respects (and scholars like Rudolf Arnheim agreed). Again, we learn that talent outshines looks. But what would happen when the “clouds of old associations from previous appearances” started building around these new everyman stars? Hoffman had already told Mel Gussow that he was ready for that day of the return of the “walking surfboard” – to some extent, he was almost precipitating it.

## CONCLUSION

Hoffman remained a challenge to the old ways for quite some time. One typical long article, in the July 1970 issue of *Esquire*, summarized his newly minted star image well:

The publicist was upset by the very idea of Dustin Hoffman. “The most unlikely star ever to come down the pike,” he would write in an exclusive to Rona Barrett. “Clark Gable must be turning in his grave.” Or, “Dusty’s new bride will just have to learn to live with her husband’s hordes of lady fans, although why the girls go so strong for the five-foot-six-inch actor has old Hollywood hands shaking their heads.” [...] In fact, Dustin read those

releases and groaned a little, for surely that unlikely-star routine is dead by now. [...] Dustin Hoffman is, after all, an authentic star [...] Contemporary stars differ from the stars of the past in that their star quality is involuntary: when the spotlight first hits them they are nearly always doing something else. [...] Hoffman (had) had to rent a tuxedo for (*The Graduate*'s) opening. It was (the) first brick in the construction of Dusty's anti-star image. (Kempton 42)

Once again, Hoffman is positioned as unlikely, even doing something else. In this way we are assigned complicity – we people that “get it” are more responsible for his star status than we were for other stars'. We maintain a shared interest in keeping his (anti)stardom alive. We are repeatedly placed on the side of Hoffman, the David vs. the entrenched Goliath of the old system. And we're winning.

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