

Pop Culture Pools: Anthropocentrism and Tapered Wilderness in Swimming Pools

The 1967 film *The Graduate* chronicles Benjamin's relationship with a pool. The first few glimpses are distant—through a window or in the background of a shot Benjamin enters then quickly leaves. Through a montage that conflates Mrs. Robinson and the inflatable pool raft, the pool ultimately reveals itself as an illustration of Ben's sexual prowess. Now floating leisurely above the surface, barely dressed, Ben comfortably controls his secret sex life. Contrast that disrobed champion of the water with his earlier pool experience: covered from head to toe in a wetsuit, lurking at the pool bottom, Ben initially rejects contact with sexuality. In virginity, he is subject to the potentiality of sex. Treading water next to Ben's leisure craft, his parents later involve themselves in his sex life, and the reins he had held on his secret affair are broken. The ultimatum his mother presents—take Elaine out or have the whole Robinson family over for dinner—horrifies Ben, prompting him to slide from the raft back beneath the surface while wearing a diving mask, marking his loss of control.

But the pool in *The Graduate* is more than just a symbol of Benjamin's sexual competence. Ben's wet-suited dip in his parents' pool illustrates the very genesis of the pool, that only from an otherness, an intellectual division between human and non-human, does the swimming pool emerge. Only in the perception of water as wild is there a motivation to tame and cultivate. We find life's genesis, sustenance, and possible destruction in water, but a pool's ideal water, alternatively, is docile. The treasured liquid requires maintenance. Cubic concrete guards the element from escaping. Chlorine kills and deters colonies of bacteria and algal blooms, and a pool cover shields the surface from the corruption of downed branches through fall and winter. The filter system traps insects—little non-human swimmers—and little human non-swimmers are kept from drowning by mandated fences. The swimming pool grooms water's ferocity to

submission. By sterilization and containment, pools are made safe for the gentle strokes of early morning laps, laps which, by the way, are only conceivable in the pool's finitude.

H.D.'s "The Pool" grapples with the strange interaction between the poem's speaker and a pool. The two agents are simultaneously divided and conglomerated thanks to H.D.'s investigative attitude towards anthropocentrism. The poem, in full, follows:

Are you alive?

I touch you.

You quiver like a sea-fish.

I cover you with my net.

What are you—banded one?

Positing the chance that the addressee is dead—"Are you alive?"—further questions its organic identity—was it ever alive? The confusion/conflation between life and non-life effects a "biomorphosis" of non-life. (Where anthropomorphosis gives human characteristics to non-humans, biomorphosis gives living characteristics to non-living things.) The presumably living speaker personifies the possibly nonliving addressee, distorting and invalidating those distinctions as they relate to the latter.

After intensifying the foreignness between the two objects by the curiosity of a question mark, the second line shatters the distance. The grammatical regularity of a three-word subject-verb-object sentence, compounded by the primal sensuality of a "touch," as well as the intimate simplicity of pronouns "I" and "you" together manifest a clean and arational contact. The interaction between two objects—the human speaker and the pool addressee—reveals similarity between them, while simultaneously reestablishing the distance described by the first line: physical proximity contrasts intellectual distance.

The experience's harmonious inclusivity of usually exclusive opposites, proximity and distance, is morphed to include sameness and strangeness once we locate the pool as the facilitator of the experience between speaker and object. If the pool reflects and distorts the speaker's visage, is the interaction one between speaker and reflection or speaker and pool? "The Pool" depicts a singularity between sameness and strangeness, acknowledging the similarity between the pool and the speaker (the speaker literally sees herself in it) but constantly reminds the audience of mutual disturbances within each party. A small "quiver" in the image as the speaker makes contact with the pool alerts her that this stranger is unlike her despite the sameness her initial vision suggested. Then in detaining the image with her "net," the speaker attempts control over that which she does not understand: the physics behind light and refraction, or perhaps her identity. In the final line, the grammatically unnecessary em dash creates space that is counteracted by the contained quantifiability of "banded one." The end of the poem leaves the speaker with more curiosity than she began with.

The speaker is so troubled by the pool in "The Pool" because she realizes the contradictory intellectual space it occupies. Is it wild or tame, nature or culture? In *The Springboard in the Pond*, Thomas A.P. van Leeuwen describes the act of swimming as a "game played by man, Eros, and Thanatos" attributing the attached thrill to lust for danger (3). A pool, then, is a curated wilderness, pruned and maintained just like a mowed lawn, a weeded garden or a regulated park. Swimming in wild water comes with dangers: currents, jagged objects, animals, unknown depths—so we contain, calm, and claim the water. The thrill of dangerous wilderness, though, is characterized as a "return to the former blissful state of intrauterine experience" where our first, unconscious moments were spent suspended in amniotic fluid, weightless in our mothers' wombs (16). Within the thrill of conquering water we also seek the comfortable feeling

of protection a fetus enjoys *in utero*, so that the processes involved in pool swimming attempt to conquer non-human nature in two ways: by containing the wild water and by unconsciously, instinctually, replicating the warm security of the gestation period. We allow danger in order to ultimately feel the euphoria of protection.

That paradox is visible in several pop culture incarnations of the pool. With regard to the previously mentioned pool in *The Graduate*, the paradox is evident. Besides the obvious Oedipal implications of Ben's sexual involvement with his peer's mother (whom he never fails to refer to as "Mrs. Robinson"), Ben's interactions with the pool detail a battle for dominance over it, while protective objects keep him from contact with that which is to be feared. First, guarded by the scuba gear, he is inundated and defeated, sunken on the pool floor. The use of that protective gear implies danger and guards against it. The raft Ben later floats on acts similarly, both implying and satisfying the hydrophobia of a sunbather.

The Graduate is not alone among pop culture pools. In 2006's *Little Children*, the main romance blossoms through the development of Sarah and Brad's interactions at the community pool. The pool deck enables the adultery that happens elsewhere. Sarah, Brad, her daughter, and his son have little screen time actually using the pool. Rather, they lie away from it, exemplifying the behavior Sarah and Brad exhibit towards each other in that place—as the parents of playmates, not as sexual partners. Their distance from the pool suggests an unwillingness to publicly address their infidelity. For Ronnie, however, submersion into the pool directly facilitates his deviant sexuality, behavior he has already been stigmatized and convicted for. An unsheathed expression of his sexual attraction, his dip in the community pool provides close observation of the barely clothed prepubescent bodies he craves. The ordeal's placement in a public space highlights the transparency of Ronnie's brand of deviance. The *Little Children*

pool works similarly to the raft or the scuba suit in *The Graduate*—the danger of being found out brings Brad, Sarah, and Ronnie to a place where they can participate in their respective questionable activities safely.

Swedish director Tomas Anderson's *Let the Right One In* (2008) features another uterine swimming pool. The film develops a relationship between a young, outcast human named Oskar and a young-looking vampire, Eli, who shares Oskar's loneliness and befriends him. The after school fitness program, which Oskar attends hoping to prepare himself to defend against the bigger boys who frequently bully him, leads him to the school pool for water aerobics. The pool is then a means of defense, a path towards autonomy, charged by the desire to assert dominance and alter the current order of things. Once the bullies arrive, the pool becomes a locus of danger. While the older boy brings a knife with him and sets up an impossible challenge that seems it could only result in Oskar's eye being gouged out, the image of the older boy gripping Oskar by the hair and holding him beneath the water suggests that the real threat to Oskar is drowning.

The pool then assumes the role of a fortress, as Oskar and the audience remain under the surface of the pool during the film's violent climax. The pool becomes a shield, an ideology even, saving the audience and Oskar from participation in the brutal activity that liberates him. Eli, a supernatural being, swiftly defeats those attempting to harm Oskar, and Oskar remains unaware that the situation has shifted. These events draw a relationship of stewardship: a superhuman participates in a type of speciesism by actively deciding one human life over three others while the one being saved has no ability to perceive the situation. And in this case, we retreat from the idea that humans are the ones who are stewards to the earth and zoom out to consider that something could be stewarding us. The protagonist remains fetal and submerged where no sound or sight of Eli's measures may corrupt him.

Lana Del Rey's music video "Blue Jeans," offers another interpretation of corruption and innocence as far as pools' communication of those concepts. The reverb guitar arpeggio introduces a tattooed smoker as the song's subject before we even get to the first lyrics. The featured man's allure is largely due to his lack of effort—he is just in "blue jeans" and a "white shirt" after all (Del Rey). Then consider that the video is monochromatic and we are dealing with a post-hoc fading of the colors that were once so striking they needed to be sung. The song alludes to the abuse and destruction of a girl in over her head in lust for danger, a girl mindlessly devoted to the boy she loves "'til the end of time" (Del Rey). Further, her constant plea that he "remember" her implies her fear that she may fall indistinguishably among "those bitches before" (Del Rey).

The essential image adding to the feared deception is the tattooed guy's conflation with the alligators also swimming in the pool. This visual analogy finds the lover and the alligator in identical positions of dominance in their respective frames. Their conflation draws from qualities of each—the alligator becomes an object of sexual desire as the singer later swims through the pool water with them, and the tattooed man becomes a reptilian predator. At the end of the video, the predatory characteristic originating from the alligator finds a home in the tattooed guy's hands as they pull the singer to drown beneath the pool's surface.

The placement of the music video's drama around and inside a pool gives texture to the devotion Del Rey offers to the vicious powers of the objects around her. The pool serves to confine Lana and the man/alligator nexus to a confined space, making their phenomenology inevitable and obvious, since the matter between two objects in water offers waves and ripples as visual evidence of interaction and movement. The frame depicting Del Rey first entering the pool is separated into halves. The dry, light, crowded top perfectly opposes the wet, dark, vacant

bottom. Here we look towards her from the eyes of the alligator; the dark pool water is right here, and we are inside it, and it mediates between her and us. Just as Del Rey describes her lover as both “cancer” and her “favorite sweater” in the same verse, and just as the pool’s uncharted darkness contrasts with the realities of man-madness, both the pool and the boy attract the singer for their simultaneous danger and promise of embracement (Del Rey).

The song “Buzzcut Season” by singer-songwriter Lorde explores a variation of the themes presented in Del Rey’s music video. Lorde’s pool is a harmonious oasis of pleasure, “a hologram” apart from the “explosions on TV” that do not regularly threaten the leisured lives of affluent Westerners, who “live beside the pool where everything is good” (Lorde). Lorde’s criticism implies a distance between the thrill seeking poolside sunbathers and the actual danger, which is framed within a television screen. That distance allows for an intellectual separation of the safe, distracted lives of citizens of Western capitalism from those of people who may experience genocide or squalor, for example. More generally, the pool indicates “everything is good” by its sanitary, abiotic, chemical purity (Lorde). The pool Lorde describes is akin to a pool found at a beach or on a cruise ship. The option to swim in dirty, “natural” water is trumped when we can swim in a chlorinated utopia. We saw that it was free of dirt, and we saw that it was good. Just as the fetus *in utero* has only mediated contact with the world outside of its mother, so it seems increasingly preferable to experience only the most bleached of floors, the most sanitized of handshakes, the most pasteurized of eggs, and the most chlorine-shocked of pools.

The contradictions of the pool experience illustrated by these pop culture references point to a larger societal understanding of pools. Just like golf, with its tapered greens, and hiking, with its planned and designed walking paths, swimming is now termed an “outdoor activity” usually even in an indoor pool. We are encouraged to “get out in nature” or to “get some fresh air.”

Georgia Dullea of *The New York Times* describes the increasing preference for pools to appear more like amorphous, naturally occurring ponds than the strictly rectangular forms of their ancestors. This trend seeks to aesthetically collapse the separation inherent in the history of pool construction, since swimming in non-man-made bodies of water necessitated that construction. Some pools are surrounded by artificial stone and become secluded waterfall scenes. Some, such as infinity pools, become near-Escherian extensions of the rest of creation. These disguised pools' attempted indistinguishability merely perpetuates the strict separation that seeks to control the uncertainties of "wild" water—depth, strength of current, and biological predators, parasites, and pathogens. Pools frame just the pleasant aspects of water, an assured weightlessness and a refreshing cooling effect, and illustrate the anthropocentric pride of mastering it all.

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