Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Albee 1962/Nichols 1966)

Swerving to Avoid a Porcupine

Haskell Wexler, whose work on this film won an Oscar for Best Cinematography, Black-and-White (a separate category from 1939 to 1967), tips his hand during the opening title sequence that his photography will be stylized throughout the film by beginning out of focus the shot that will carry his credit as Director of Photography and then he expertly rack focuses back onto the main characters Martha (Elizabeth Taylor) and George (Richard Burton) who we have been following during the opening sequence. A telling moment occurs prior to Wexler’s rack focus that shoots George and Martha from an extreme high angle as they walk home across campus from Martha’s father’s, the University President’s, party and under a street lamp. The composition of the shot reveals the couple “under the spotlight” between a road and a path, at a kind of “crossroads,” which in fact is where their marriage is for the audience to scrutinize this evening.
Unpacking a Title

An often-reliable heuristic method for opening up the meaning of a work is to grapple with its title as I did with *Not I* and as I will with my analysis of *Dutchman*. Edward Albee’s title contains two literary references: one elicits the name of the Twentieth Century’s most notable female authors and the other detourns a hit song “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” by Frank Churchill and Ann Ronell from the soundtrack of Disney’s hugely popular eight minute animated film, *Three Little Pigs* (Burt Gillet, 1933).
Students who are veterans of Women’s Studies courses instantly recognize the name of the author of the 1929 proto-feminist manifesto “A Room of One's Own” which argues financial independence is necessary for creative and intellectual work, and that a woman with a “room of one’s own” is capable of reaching the heights of artistic achievement. Others have been acquainted with Virginia Woolf through the 2002 film The Hours (Daldry). Early in the film version of Albee’s play a copy of Woolf’s brilliant stream-of-consciousness novel To the Lighthouse (1927) is legibly placed right above the bar, underscoring the significance of the author’s presence in the play.
Martha twice recalls a joke from her father’s party that in the retelling consists only of her reprisin part of the chorus from the Churchill/Ronell Disney song, substituting the author’s name for “The Big Bad Wolf.” In fact, since Mike Nichols was unable to secure the rights to the Disney song, Elizabeth Taylor sings her pun to the melody of the public domain folk song, “Here We Go Round The Mulberry Bush.”

Using Art

In each retelling Martha seems to take ownership of the joke/song and is disappointed George didn’t demonstrably approve of the joke at her father’s party. In the film Nick (George Segal) also barley manages a smile when Martha regales the guests with the song as an icebreaker, but Honey enthusiastically agrees it was “so funny,” while joining Martha in the singing. There may be a gendered barb aimed at men in Martha’s song. By singing, “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” she is taunting men with the question: “Who’s afraid of intelligent, successful, feminists?” George will take up Martha’s songs at the end of Act One, turning the song against Martha purely as a loud distraction from her stinging attack on his lack of initiative by using it as soundtrack for a forced dance number with Honey, and again at the end of the play when he hears Martha affirm that indeed she is afraid of such a figure. The songwriter wannabe (MARTHA: “You’ll be a songwriter yet”) will take up the Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme “Georgie Porgie” in order to tease George about his pouting by similarly rewriting the line “Georgie Porgie, Pudding and Pie” into “Poor Georgie Porgie, put upon pie!” Other evidence of her songwriting propensity appears when she is delighted with her rhyme of George’s novel about his “past” that Daddy has made his “last! Hey I rhymed!” and her descent into her monosyllabic song that opens Act Three, “Clink. Clink. Clink.” and even her confusing “microphone” for Nick’s “microscope.” Her greatest “song” of course is entitled “Snap!” In order to grasp the puzzle at the center of this play, i.e., the mutual creation of their fictional son, it is necessary to consider both George and Martha as artists who use art to express themselves. The role played by George’s autobiographical novel is much clearer than these few hints at Martha’s aspirations. Her references such as the nursery rhyme detournments are typically from the popular, as witnessed in her first conversation with George as she impersonates Bette Davis from some film whose title she can’t recall (Beyond the Forest Vidor 1949). Upon entering their house, Martha delivers the line “What a dump!” and won’t let it go until she finally gets George’s attention, drops the Bette Davis routine about a bored housewife dependent on Joseph Cotton, and to George’s dawning realization, “Oh,” she reveals, “She’s discontent.” Of course George knows the ambitious Martha is frustrated and discontent, but it is now clear this is what she has been trying to communicate by referencing this popular “Warner Brothers’ epic” from the past.
It is worth recalling at the time of the play, 1962 (and the film 1966 for that matter), women’s roles were largely confined to the home, glimpsed through Honey’s relating her typical conversations in a college town, “You must be Mrs. So and So, Doctor So and So’s wife. It really wasn’t very nice at all.” Many women had limited ways to forge an identity, since the traditional employment source—he’s a doctor—was typically denied them, therefore motherhood looms large as the outlet for identity formation. While Martha insists she’s “been to college like everyone else,” it was Miss Muff’s finishing school for young ladies designed to prepare her to be a wife and mother. As revealed at the end of the play, both George and Martha are physically incapable of reproducing and so the two would-be artists create an imaginary child and each “parent” use the “beanbag” as both a sporting weapon against the other while expressing their identities through him. Martha’s son is the attractive golden boy with hair of fleece who runs away from home while George’s version complains about this older woman.
“always coming at” him, fiddling about. Although largely cut from Ernest Lehman’s screenplay adaptation, Albee makes it quite clear that Martha is significantly older (eight years) than George. Whether for reasons of credibility on Nichols’ part or vanity on Elizabeth Taylor’s end, this age difference is played down and the age of the “son” is lowered from 21 in the play to 16 in the film, making Martha younger still. However, there are enough lines left in to imply the motherly role Martha plays with George: “Make your Mommy a dwink.”

The implication that George is that boy who has been institutionalized after the sedative wears off and the traumatic realization that he has killed both his parents sinks in is buffeted by the image of George leaving the house and sitting on the backyard swing having a smoke. This is where he will start his monologue about the young boy; it almost seems like a prayer, yet he’s citing his novel. But we find out from Martha (an unreliable narrator), that the plot of George’s novel did actually happen to him.

Another significant, highly legible book title is placed on the set as a clue to George and Martha’s relationship, and that placement is the responsibility of the Set Designer or Set Decorator who are in charge of all items visible within the indoor or outdoor set such as furniture, wall hangings, etc. Those responsible for Art Design (often the Art Department and/or Production Design) create the overall “look” of the film. Just above George’s head in the bookcase behind the couple’s bed, amongst a slew of unreadable book spines, is Gunter Grass’ novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) in large, bold black letters. Just as the presence of *To the Lighthouse* (and the play’s title) encourages us to ponder the significance of Woolf’s novel in terms of Albee’s play, so the visibility of this work by Gunter Grass requires unpacking. Against the backdrop of the Nazi takeover of the German town Danzig, the novel tells the story of the eternal child, Oskar Matzerath, who uses his drumming and piercing scream to keep the cruel world around him at bay, and includes a sex scene between Oskar and a grown woman. Taken with George’s stated fear of Nazi-like eugenics (“You’re the one going to change our chromozones”) and his story about the boy with whom he identifies who ordered Bergen (conjuring the Nazi death camp Bergen-Belsen), the institutionalized Oskar who refuses to grow up yet paired with a much older woman serves as a perfect literary surrogate for George.
Further evidence of stylized set design is the large multi-pointed star light that hangs in the vestibule of George and Martha’s house. This significant prop is first noticeable above Martha’s head early in Act One when George turns around from making a drink to reveal she has been obscured behind her husband as she continues her questioning from upstairs: “Why didn’t you want to kiss me?” Martha’s many performances and illusions can be attributed to her desperate quest for an identity in the male-dominated world of mid-Twentieth Century academia that obscures the wives, the Mrs. So-and-Sos who stand behind their Dr. So-and-So husbands. This is not to say that George is above performing either as witnessed by his return from “Daddy’s greenhouse” with his snapdragons. George first quotes Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named Desire* with his “Flores para los muertos” announcing his “civilized” Latinate murder of Sonny Jim, and then he impersonates a love-sick hick: “I brung dese flowers for ya.” Martha wittily complements the playacting by curtseying as a Southern Belle as she writes and delivers her characters’ lines: “Rosemary! Pansies! Violence! My wedding bouquet!”—all performed under the star spotlight.
George is further shown as the premiere performer after his brilliant rendition of “Get the Guests.” During the recitation of his spontaneous “second novel,” the camera often zooms in on George as he weaves the biographical material gleaned from a loose-lipped Nick into a heart-breaking revelation of Honey’s deepest, darkest, hysterical pregnancy secret. Like most zooms in, they serve the purpose of functional emphasis. Exiting the dance floor of the tavern, George (and to a lesser extent Martha) is internally framed by the circular window in the door, stylistically creating a kind of celebratory iris around the star of the moment.
The set of the house contains an aboriginal mask that is featured prominently at the end of Act One as George throws open the door causing the door chimes to ring out. The camera remains on the door framing the mask to its right encouraging us to ponder a connection between the most recent emotionally charged events and the mask. The mask, representing the façade presented to the outside world, is featured in an earlier scene when Martha makes her entrance in her “Sunday chapel dress.” George walks out on the lies and the games represented by the mask, while Martha, appearing in her “get up,” is closely associated with its illusion of a sinister grinning face.
The masquerade is mainly a public affair, except for the mutual illusion of their fictive son. Most of the barbs and insults George and Martha trade would carry little venom or not attempted at all when alone. It is the public humiliation factor that Martha in particular counts on. A distinction can be made here between this terrorist strategy of public violence, or propaganda by the deed, from the private infliction of torture. The spectacular aerial destruction of New York’s Twin Towers for example, covered by nearly every TV network in the world, is preeminently public, and relies on an audience for its terroristic intent, while the secret torture of alleged terrorists at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and other secret American prisons around the world is a national secret not qualifying as terrorism.

**Spatial relationships**

The importance of the presence of others and clues to who most exploits this terrorist strategy are revealed through Nichols’ use of spatial relationships, a technique often arranged as “blocking” on stage. Examples abound of George being squeezed between Martha and Nick or...
otherwise ganged up on by Nick and Honey as Martha’s proxies. Early in Act One for example Martha blatantly reaches over and begins massaging Nick’s knee while playing one of her trump cards, her father/President of the University: “Daddy knows how to run things.” Nick is attracted to Martha in part due to her immediate connection to the University’s corridors of power: “You didn't chase me ... out of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you?” George is caught between them in the background forced to watch. Honey is also present, but she is not the target of Martha’s terrorism.

It is essential for the group power dynamic that Honey soon joins George as the threatened, undesired partner. They will team up to concoct the crazy “Crazy Billy” story in retaliation for the adulterous behavior of their respective spouses. George is certainly not interested in dancing with “Twinkle Toes,” (on the back porch while Nick plays “Hump the Hostess” upstairs with Martha, Honey tugs on George’s sweater as he dismisses her with: “Don’t bother me.”) He does mock Martha’s explicit come-ons to Nick by insincerely asking Honey “You wanna dance Angel Boobs?” and condescendingly explaining “It’s a familiar dance Monkey Nipples, they both know it.” Honey will sit this one out with “Ol’ Sourpuss” as the rejected couple is forced to watch, enveloped by Nick and Martha’s carnal display. It is worth noting that the Motion Picture Association of America Rating System was instituted because of this film and was issued an “M” rating, for Mature Audiences Only (along with Antonioni’s Blowup 1966).
Martha’s slip of the tongue regarding the imaginary child is unleashed as a weapon, a disarming secret revealed, although George publicly warned her to not “start in on the bit.” Martha impudently rises to the challenge: “I’ll talk about any Goddamn thing I want.” The betraying of this secret regarding their bizarre “pregnancy” is chiastically matched by the traumatically revealed secret of Nick and Honey’s bizarre “pregnancy.” George is caught off guard by the strangers’ new knowledge. They are seen as teaming up against him in an over George’s shoulder shot with Honey holding the power. A reaction shot again shows George squeezed, this time by Martha’s public weapons.
Although not his forte, George reluctantly recruits the public to his side as when he makes the speech verifying his “chromosomological partnership in the...creation of” their “blond-eyed, blue-haired...son,” and his appeal to Nick and Honey regarding the castrating effects of being married to the daughter of the president of the university, as we learn later Martha’s father forbids the publication of George’s novel. As George delivers his appeal, he leans in between Nick and Honey creating a spatial relationship whereby he attempts to garner their support, but it falls on deaf ears as neither Honey nor Nick react sympathetically; they remain appreciative of Daddy’s hospitality.

One more observation regarding the insightful and clever production design that won Oscars for Richard Sylbert and George James Hopkins (Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White): although only visible at a glance as George drives the guests home, they pass
and then end up stopping at the Red Basket cocktail lounge because Honey “loves dancing.” In a film whose title originates in part from a nursery rhyme involving a big bad wolf, to have found an on-location tavern (151 College Highway, Southampton, Massachusetts) that conjures up the basket toting, wolf-imperiled Little Red Riding Hood is a stroke of great luck and/or genius.

To take it one step further, Honey can be cast as the naïve and trusting Little Red who is about to be nearly destroyed by the wolf-like tandem of Martha, with her open adulterous sensuality towards Nick, and George, with his vicious “Get the Guests” game. Following the close-up of George’s foot on the brake we see an overhead “God shot” of Honey spinning vertigo fashion which conjures up her recent vulnerability and nausea from her forced dance with George, and then the camera, no longer a God shot, pulls back to reveal the chessboard pattern of the floor depicting her as a pawn soon to be taken from Nick in George’s game. Although Honey does not “die” according to the conventional use of the God shot, she is certainly a victim in waiting as the trust she felt with Nick will soon be spectacularly betrayed.
Wexler has already used stylized angles in his filming of the drunken male bonding in the backyard. As George successfully draws out Nick in order to “get the goods” on him regarding Honey’s money and false pregnancy, he moves to the subject of Nick’s “historical inevitability” plan of “plowing pertinent wives” as a path toward academic success. Drunken Nick is shot from an extreme high angle as we view him literally flat on his back, while the reaction shot from Nick’s perspective of George is taken from an extreme low angle conferring the power George currently holds. Later at the Red Basket when Martha literally takes the stage and pounds out a rhythmic excoriation of George’s failed novel, she is shot with a similar low angle positioning of the camera, including the supplicant Nick worshipping at her altar. As the initiator of all formal games and the one who insists on running the show, George will overtake Martha’s physical space on that stage, and after strangling her to make her “desist,” he chances upon his “Get the Guests” tactic which he launches from that very stage.
Fig. 16 Extreme low angles depict Martha atop her altar and George attempting to upstage her
A major tactic in the on-going “game” George plays with Martha is his demonizing, his animalizing of Martha, cuing her up to be loud and playing her like a record as we see in two stylized shots at the Red Basket. From the tavern’s jukebox George ironically chooses “The Anvil Chorus” for Nick’s and Martha’s ancient “dance.” This oft-parodied *Coro di zingari* (gypsy chorus) from Verdi’s *Il trovatore* (1853) features gypsies hammering their anvils as they sing of wine, work, and their women. The loud and lusty chorus is, as Martha puts it, “Very funny George.” Wexler places his camera behind George in front of the jukebox so all we see is his reflection on the machines glass, the Master Puppeteer in charge. Over Martha’s protests George first turns up the music while claiming he can’t hear her, and right before he is sure Martha will repeat her protest even louder, he turns the ‘REJECT’ knob and ensures that all is quiet except for the baited Martha who predictably falls in George’s trap. In fact the next shot shows Martha screaming in profile, trapped within the jukebox glass.
George has successfully set this little trap twice before, first when he accuses Martha of braying like an ass all night at the party and then stands up to underscore her loud denial by sarcastically agreeing: “You do not bray;” and second when he insults her as some “subhuman monster,” gauging just the right moment to open the door in full view and hearing of their guests as Martha screams “FUCK YOU!” —in the film: “SCREW YOU!”
The play and film open with Martha loudly cackling with George attempting to shush her, which prompts Martha, in keeping with her monosyllabic barbs, to call her husband a “cluck.” As far back as Homer’s telling of the dangerous Sirens whose voices must be silenced and Sophocles’ depiction of Oedipus suppressing the feminized Sphinx and her incessant riddle, Western patriarchal culture depicts women as Medusas whose shrill laughter must be stopped.

“GEORGE: Martha, in my mind you're buried in cement right up to the neck. No, up to the nose, it's much quieter.” This silencing of women is a commonplace of popular culture and a key complaint in most feminist texts. During her famous “snap” speech, Martha insists she is “not a monster” and she is “going to howl it out.” There is an etymological connection between the English words “monster” and “demonstrate” in that both words derive from the same Latin base _monere_, to warn. Despite her denials (“I am not!”), Martha _demonstrates_ by outwardly...
expressing her sexual desire for both her husband (Give your Mommy a great big sloppy kiss!) and Nick (“You’re right at the meat of things!”), as well as her disappointment with her husband and Nick (“I am the Earth Mother and you’re all flops.”) Taken alongside the bait-Martha-into-becoming-loud trap, George’s accusation that Martha brays (like a donkey) is of a larger project to characterize her as an animalistic monster. During the course of the play, George calls Martha a Cyclops, hyena, subhuman monster, hopped-up Arab, cocker spaniel, a producer of “jungle sounds . . . animal noises,” a vampire (“You can’t quit just when there’s enough blood running out of your mouth”), a devil (with words), etc. During the early scene in the bedroom between the couple, several times Martha is shown sharing the frame with an odd, full page photograph seemingly clipped from a magazine and placed on the wall of some monstrous looking figure, not unlike the character Death from Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957).
The film also conspires to imply she is a caged tigress or lioness. During her “so I married the S.O.B.” rant that nearly concludes Act I, Wexler’s camera trains itself in a tight close-up on Martha as she paces back and forth through the living room like one of those caged big wild cats at the zoo who incessantly moves to and fro inside its too-small cage. Later at the Red Basket George menacingly raises a chair at Martha in Lion tamer fashion.
Martha fits nicely the popular definition of the “Dragon Lady,” a seductive, domineering female (“My arm has gotten tired whipping you.”), who first appeared in many newspapers as the Asian villaness in the cartoon strip *Terry and the Pirates* by Milton Caniff (1934-1973). Just as there is an instructive etymological link between monster and demonstrate, so is there a connection between dragon and Dracula. The father of the noted vampire was named "Dracul" which in Romanian means "dragon" or "devil. Both hoard money and battle valiant knights. It is notable that many mythological dragons, from Tiamat to Donkey’s wife in *Shrek*, are female. It is brilliantly ironic that George follows Martha’s acts of “snapping” him into non-existence and cuckoldry with Nick by returning with a handful of snap*dragons* with which he proceeds to pelt and thereby slay her under the star spotlight. Just as he takes her clever Woolf song and uses it against her at the end of Act One and Three, so here, in classic *ju-jitsu* fashion, he appropriates her snap action and visits it upon her dragon head with sword like stems provided by her father.
Snap went the dragon.

Walpurgisnacht
There are references to the Faust myth throughout the play and film, most notably Albee’s titling the Second Act Walpurgisnacht after the Witching Hour as he invokes Goethe’s name for a scene in Part One of his Faust (1808). George reads a long passage from a book while Martha and Nick cavort on the couch. Although unidentified in the script, the passage is unmistakably out of Oswald Spengler’s The Rise and fall of the (Faustian) West. “And the West, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must … eventually . . . fall.” As we learn, George’s rigidly moral, i.e., monogamous, marriage has endured many of Martha’s crippling alliances. The play, in the end, is about the saving of this marriage by slaying the dragon who threatens it. Martha’s Mephistophelian temptation of Nick is signaled stylistically in a graphic match set up by a hand-held close-up of Nick’s hand grabbing the cigarette lighter and tracking it as he lights Martha’s
cigarette in response to George’s bitter refusal to do so. Nick’s stepping up to “fill in” for George as his surrogate is part of the larger adulterous bargain in which the young Biology Professor will find himself imbricated (GEORGE: You don’t want any scandal around here, do you?”). The respective roles are inverted in the Second Act when George attempts to “get the goods” on Nick by “drawing [him] out” with comradeship and liquor. In a near identical graphically matched hand-held close-up, this time of George’s hand grabbing Nick’s glass in order to fill it up with bourbon and tracking it as he pours from the bottle and returns, we hear George’s voiceover: “Tell me about your wife’s money.” Although Nick refuses at first, he soon relents, spills the beans, and pays dearly for giving into George’s temptation.

Fig. 23 Two near identical sequences form a **graphic match** indicating devilish bargains.
The hand-held camera used throughout the film is usually reserved for capturing violence; however, its first deployment shows Martha plopping down on the bed next to George resulting in the play’s and film’s only intimate moment of contentment between the viciously contentious couple (“GEORGE: Hi Honey. MARTHA: Hi.”). Given the violence that will be depicted by the hand-held throughout the rest of the film, perhaps the potential for violence even tinges this moment of sweetness that nonetheless soon turns sour (“MARTHA: George, why didn’t you want to kiss me?”). It is more apt to state that use of the hand-held camera primarily captures intimacy that happens to be violent. This scene is crucial for interpreting the piece as a whole when deciding the motivation for George’s killing the imaginary child and what will happen the “next day.” This moment of tenderness shows, albeit briefly, the couple’s loving side.
When George pulls Honey up from her living room chair and turns Martha’s song against his wife in order to drown her out, we learn from Haskell Wexler’s DVD audio commentary that he took turns spinning around with Richard Burton and Sandy Dennis attached to him with a rope while holding the camera in order to film the violent dance that ends Act One. In subsequent scenes, where there is physical violence, we watch hand-held camera footage with its jittery reframing documentary feel often inserted between stationary master shots.
Wexler spins around with the actors tied to him by means of a rope while holding the camera.
Jittery reframing documentary feel of hand-held physical violence stylistically expresses violence.

A purely stylized use of the camera is the canted frame; the resulting image calls attention to itself and reminds the audience it is watching a film. The **canted frame** is achieved by tilting the camera on its axis resulting in a framed shot at an oblique angle. A canted frame usually depicts a world askew or off-kilter. Spike Lee makes the canted frame his global image pattern in his *Do The Right Thing* (1989) by consistently framing his ticking time-bomb character Radio Raheem and his POV in this manner.
Wexler cants his frame on two notable occasions. Once Martha momentarily takes command of the stage from George and picks a contemporary rock (1966) instrumental with an abbreviated drum solo ("Virginia Woolf Rock" from Alex North’s Soundtrack), Martha simultaneously berates George about his “memory book,” while dancing suggestively with the “direct threat” Nick. The first shot of Nick alone in the frame is canted as he delivers the line: “I don’t think he trusts me.” While not directly coded as seen from George’s point of view, this shot and several others reveal George’s perspective: as Nick and Martha conspire, his world is quickly going awry. Later in Act Three when George and Martha conspire against the “houseboy/stud,” Nick claims: “Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.” The canted frame afforded George and Martha as they deliver their perplexing following lines: “MARTHA: You're damned right! GEORGE: You're not supposed to,” reflects both Nick’s confused perspective and the audience’s for whom he and Honey are surrogates.
The Languorous Fall of the House of George

After Martha nearly runs over George after having picked up Nick and Honey as they attempt to walk home from the Red Basket cocktail lounge, the camera stays on George’s face as the film employs a languorous lap dissolve slowly giving way to the couple’s house very much after the technique Greg Toland uses in the slow to recall Jedediah Leland flashback sequence from Citizen Kane (Welles 1941). As explained earlier, the lap dissolve editing technique typically allows the two images to overlap briefly, however this sequence transpires for so long, an unusually strong connection is forged between the two co-existing images. This sequence conjures Edgar Allen Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher (1839) with George inhabiting the role of Roderick Usher (whose story contains The Mad Trist, a novel involving Sir Ethelred who slays a dragon that dies with a piercing shriek as will Martha’s Dragon Lady persona). George’s quest for calm (“Very quiet now,”) suggests Usher’s hyperesthesia and his insistence on the façade of a sane marriage. The effect of this slow and deliberate lap dissolve fuses his face with the façade of his house. Once George’s face has completely faded from the screen we can discern the movement of Martha’s and Nick’s silhouettes from his bedroom window underscoring the Fall of the House of George. Despite his outward nonchalance regarding Martha’s blatant sleeping with other men, inside it hurts very much. Burton’s forced “Ha-Ha” laugh at the bottom of the stairs for Martha’s benefit transforms once he is outside on the other side of the front door into the adult male cry of a wounded animal—further proof of his love for his wife, and of Richard Burton’s brilliant acting.
Taking It Outside

One might argue, as Albee has, that by taking outside some of the “action” of the play such as George drawing out Nick into the backyard, or the dancing episode via station wagon rides to and from the Red Basket, that Mike Nichols dilutes the claustrophobia Albee created in his original play script—an entrapment that is experienced by George and Martha every day, and by Nick and Honey and the audience this privileged night. Such a claim certainly has validity in terms of stagecraft, but in terms of cinema, Nichols, a theater man with unassailable floorboard roots, understands filmic power resides in vistas and spaces, the moon seen between tree branches, and cars racing. Sharing that claustrophobia in the theater with the actors creates a kind of therapeutic psychodrama. When transferred directly to the screen it could run the risk of a stuftifyingly dead experience, as do most filmed plays that do not take into consideration the limits and the magic of cinema. Other than the perfunctory exterior footage of the opening title sequence, the first bona fide cinematic break with the play script occurs when George exits the living room to allow Martha to tell the boxing match story. It is a shock to those who know the original script to discover that we follow George down the hallway as he abandons the scene of Martha’s monologue. He momentarily steps into the bathroom, thinks better of it and continues down the hall and into a utility room whose doorway internally frames him as he snaps on a naked bulb hanging above his head as if having one of his “eureka” moments. As he releases the chain, the bulb swings back and forth to either side of his head creating a moving shadow show across Burton’s face, adding to the sinister “serial killer” persona Nichols has been creating with Alex North’s sustained single note musical sting. This clandestine George knocks over old cigar boxes filled with X-Mass cards, nuts and washers, and pencils in order to unveil what appears to be a high-powered rifle hidden under a blanket. Affording George this sole intimacy with the camera, as he returns to the living room we get his point of view shot as he approaches Martha, Nick, and Honey, bolsters the argument that Nichols presents George’s version of the play with sympathy and the power of the subjective camera on the side of George. During the entire sequence, from his exit on his line: “You tell them Martha. You’re good at it,” to his return with
the rifle, however, Martha’s narration of the story dominates the soundtrack as a voiceover. The moment George shuts the utility room door her voice gains a slight echo effect but her volume is never attenuated, and at one point George’s sole intimacy is blasted with a close-up of Martha, cigarette in hand, imitating her “roundhouse right” right in George’s jaw, “Pow!”
George’s filmic intimacy is blasted with a close-up of Martha imitating her roundhouse right. “Pow!”

Not only does the siren’s voice share the filmic space with the would-be assassin’s on-screen time and POV shots, but later Nichol’s affords a similar moment to Martha. After her liquor-ridden attempt at “Hump the Hostess” with Nick, she stands and stares through the fly blown kitchen screen door speaking of George. On her line “who is out somewhere there in the dark,” Nichols cuts to Martha’s POV shot of George’s tree swing gently swaying. There is a poetry to the way Martha reveals through a screen the self-loathing that is the core of her troubled identity: “George, who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy. Yes, I do wish to be happy.” Alicia Hubermann’s similarly veiled revelation is discussed in the *Notorious* chapter.
Driving Into a Large Tree

During George’s backyard Bergen chronicle “of the “grandest day of [his] youth” which seems to be also a recitation from his unpublished novel about the boy who, “swerving to avoid a porcupine, drove into a large tree,” the camera slowly zooms or pushes in toward George and the large tree behind him. The camera subtly moves in until the tree and George’s head and shoulders take up the entire frame. The movement not only mimics the trajectory of the fatal car crash, but taken with the special audio effect of the cricket soundtrack, the monologue becomes even more riveting and perplexing because at this point the audience senses the importance of the speech but does not know how to integrate it into the crazy events thus far. “It gets pretty bouncy around here sometimes.”
When I was a boy in prep school

swerving to avoid a porcupine, drove into a large tree
The filmmakers repeat this subtle push in at the very end of the film. George has rid the marriage of what has clearly become a burdensome fiction, an imaginary son created to fill a void, particularly in Martha’s life. It has recently become nothing more than a personalized “beanbag,” tossed about as much as a weapon as a toy. The couple is now truly alone. “Just . . . us?” As George gently sings “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf? Virginia Woolf? Virginia Woolf?” and Martha repeatedly answers him “I am George, I am,” there is a final push-in that terminates on the entwined hands of the now reunited married couple. In a sort of graphic match tribute to Haskell Wexler’s focus through at the beginning of the film, the push-in ends with a rack focus off the hands and through the window to refocus on the dawning of the new day and the backyard tree and swing. Here we have Nichols’ cinematic equivalent of Albee’s ambivalent ending, each resisting certain closure. In answer to the “what happens the next day” question, there is ample evidence that variously George and Martha:

1) divorce given the physical and mental brutality visited on each other this night resulting in the cataclysmic exorcism of Sonny Jim the “friendly ghost, “
2) resort back to versions of their old role-playing selves, George on his kid’s swing, Mommy Martha swinging with the next available “undergraduate” male, or
3) greet the new day having rediscovered their love for each other now unencumbered by the “bag and baggage” of their fantasy world.
Fig. 33 the push-in ends with a rack focus off the hands and through the window to refocus on the dawning of the new day and the backyard tree and swing.
Although too young to have witnessed Arthur Hill as the original George and the legendary Uta Hagen as Martha directed by Alan Schneider, the great director in America of Beckett and others, I have had the privilege of being in the audience for the other Broadway productions of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: Ben Gazzara and Colleen Dewhurst in the unfunny 1976 revival directed by Edward Albee with the stated intention of restoring the humor to the play, and for Kathleen Turner as Martha who, for reasons that must be physiological (arthritis?), did not snap her fingers during the “Snap” speech. Bill Irwin, the accomplished movement artist, as George must not have snapped during his snap rejoinder out of sympathy to Turner in the 2005 production, rather each slapped their palms together instead! Though Richard Burton did not win his nomination in the Best Actor category, his performance is unsurpassed. A favorite moment not in the original script: Once Martha and Honey exit, Burton’s George finishes his drink, lost in his thoughts. He looks down into his empty glass, pauses, then with shoulders shrugged, eyebrows raised and forehead furrowed, makes a face that says “why not, I’ll have another.”
Elizabeth Taylor’s Martha equals her on- and off-stage husband, winning the Oscar in her category as Best Actress. A favorite moment not in the original script: at the beginning of Act Three, prior to her “Clink” song, Taylor’s Martha tries to stop the directional signal she left blinking on the family’s station wagon after picking up Nick and Honey and returning home from The Red Basket, first by placing her hand over the light until she drunkenly realizes she must go around to the driver’s side, open the door and shut it off from the console. After staggering over to the driver’s side she is unable to steady herself and focus enough to open the door, until she resumes her routine activity by taking a deep sip from her drink and then is quite able to open it.
Out damn light!

Martha gets her groove back

Of course there is no way of knowing precisely who came up with these cherished moments not in the original script. Actor, director, key grip? They are delightfully executed nonetheless.