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Jeff Dunlop  
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### Quiz Show

Quiz Show, produced and directed by Robert Redford, stars John Turturro as Herbie Stempel, Rob Morrow as Richard Goodwin and Ralph Fiennes as Charles Van Doren. Because this film satisfies on a multitude of levels, and because it is likely to be equally fascinating after many sittings, I rate Quiz Show with four stars. ✓

It is necessary to discuss first the fact that Redford, an American filmmaker and an American film superstar of over two decades of movies, approaches "Quiz Show" with a notably European style. As director/writer Paul Schrader once noted, "American movies are based on the assumption that life presents you with problems, while European films are based on the conviction that life confronts you with dilemmas -- and while problems are something you solve, dilemmas cannot be solved, they're merely probed or investigated." True to this claim, by the end of the film nothing has been solved, although nearly every angle and motivation has been probed. ✓

However, this is not to state that the film lacks a plot. Quite to the contrary, the film's events (based on the personal experiences of the real-life Richard Goodwin as described in a book he later wrote) are shown in chronological order, with a logical procession leading to a clear conflict amongst the antagonists in a subcommittee hearing room in Washington D.C. The ending is where Redford completely departs from classical Hollywood, though, as there is no sense of a resolution, just a sense that something too ✓

large to be contained (entertainment for mass consumption) has been given an even-freer reign.

On a thematic level, Quiz Show is clearly about the beginning of the cynicism of the American psyche. A decade removed from the victory of World War II and still dazzled by post-war consumerism (note the plethora of appliances in lower-class Herbie's kitchen), Americans streamed to their television sets for a nightly ritual of consumer-oriented entertainment. That the shows were broadcast live, and that the people in the box (Ozzie and Harriet, Lucy, Herbert Stempel) looked like regular folks helped to prolong the fantasy. It wasn't until Americans began to see that not all was as it appeared through the various scandals of the fifties and later that optimism was replaced piece by piece with cynicism.

The gift of a television set to Van Doren's father at the birthday party was especially ironic. It is this television set that the father turns off when the pressure of watching his son becomes too intense. Just a moment after the set is turned off, Van Doren misses the obviously easy question on the king of Belgium. Just as the public continues to be swindled through television, so does Dad, who unwittingly denies himself proof of the lies by the timing of when he chooses to stop watching.

Richard Goodwin clearly represents the American ideal in this film. In fact, I think Redford purposely uses Goodwin's Massachusetts accent (which comes and goes, apparently at the director's instruction) in a couple scenes to invoke memories of John Kennedy, and with these images Goodwin is connected with Kennedy's ideals, particularly the one of youthful integrity. It is through Goodwin's

eyes that most of the plot proceeds as he investigates Stempel's claim that Twenty-One <sup>is</sup> rigged. In fact, Goodwin's eyes play a key role in no fewer than four scenes. The first instance is in the poker game with Van Doren, in which Goodwin is intent on piercing Van Doren's veneer. Later, we see his study and reaction of Greenwich Village artist's aborted 'dive' on an old Twenty-One tape. (This scene was fascinating. Where on first-watch a scene can look perfectly innocent and natural, repeated views on tape can show with perfect clarity the actual motives of those taped.) Third, Goodwin again watches Van Doren closely during Van Doren's own dive, where he spots an unlikely and unexpected smile. Lastly, as all the contestants testify in congress under a portrait of 'Honest' Abe Lincoln, the lies (which are as disheartening to the viewer as the scandals were to 1950's America) are broadcast through the shocked eyes of Goodwin.

Redford's direction in Quiz Show is distinctly formalist, the realistic plot notwithstanding. He uses angles, lighting, colors, trick camera shots and composition freely to amplify different aspects of a particular scene. When Dan Enright notes that "Only the three of us need know" about Van Doren's receipt of questions in advance, Redford switches into a closed, elevated shot from behind Enright and Freedman, with only Van Doren facing towards the camera. The triangle leaves the impression that this tiny group alone holds a huge secret. During both Stempel's and Van Doren's dives, Redford uses a trick shot from behind the contestant's head that keeps the apparent distance of the contestant from the camera constant while causing the apparent distance of the background to

move and grow (I believe Hitchcock invented this shot). Redford uses this to show the disoriented feeling the contestants were feeling under the huge pressure of the decision they each faced. ✓

The colors in Stempel's house sharply contrasted with the colors found in network executive offices, professor's homes and subcommittee hearing rooms. In the former, Stempel frequently wears a brown suit or slacks, and his house has a lot of green furniture. Clearly, Stempel has little taste in clothing or decoration. But nearly everyone else in the movie is wearing a blue suit, and is found with rich dark wood paneling throughout their offices and homes. One thing I found annoying was that everyone, including the protagonist, appeared to have deep purple lips when filmed in the blue/brown dominant scenes. ✓ (!)

The most satisfying aspect of the film, to me, was its presentation of the family as a stabilizing aspect of every person's life. When Stempel is a little unstable and loses his ethics when he joins the television circus, Toby, his wife, provides sanity, humility and a good dose of ethics. She fumes when Herbie promises to change their lives, and is livid when she discovers he received answers like everyone else. Completely disgusted with Herbie's claim he was only deceiving the 'saps' watching on television, she seethes, "I was one of those saps!" Van Doren's family in Connecticut, especially his father, is an even stronger influence. And, when Goodwin has disclosed the end of the road to Enright, Goodwin tells him in complete sincerity, "Go home and talk to your family." ✓

Overall, everything that's good with America is presented with much of what's bad, and where the average man can see ethics when looking in from the outside, no one apparently can see clearly when thousands of dollars are waved in his face. Goodwin denies to Van Doren that he would sell out for money, and we the audience want to believe him. But that kind of conviction is rare.

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Excellent essay.  
Very well-written and a pleasure  
to read.  
Makes good, solid observations which  
added to my appreciation of the movie (Redford  
is a better director than actor!).  
You are perceptive; and express yourself well.  
A model of the critique genre.

A+.