

Is this the real thing?

American Beauty, directed by Sam Mendes, written by Alan Ball

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To a certain extent much of what I believe to be the misplaced critical praise for this film, as well as its generally favorable reception by the public, is as understandable as it is somewhat accidental. In the wake of the Columbine shooting and other anti-social or irrational acts of violence, there is a widespread hunger for explanations, or even simply representations, of the American malaise. In the face of political parties and mass media and institutions that studiously ignore everything that gnaws away at the population, it is natural that large numbers of people should seek out some other sphere in which their disquiet might be reflected and perhaps addressed. Popular film is one such sphere. To the extent that there is official political debate in America, much of it currently takes place through films.

American Beauty, in my view, however, is fool's gold. I would suggest that those who respond enthusiastically to the film are either settling for far too little or, in their impatience for substantive material, are engaging in wishful thinking and largely inventing the film they *would like* to see made.

Lester Burnham is a middle aged magazine writer on the verge of losing his job. He lives in an immaculate suburb with his real estate agent wife Carolyn, who considers her husband a failure and won't allow him to touch her, and his teenage daughter Jane, who has little use for Lester either. Their new neighbors are a marine colonel, his unhappy wife and their strange son, Ricky, who goes about recording everything in his life on videotape.

Lester develops an obsession for Jane's friend Angela and throws caution to the wind. He quits his job, blackmailing his employer into paying a year's severance, and sets about changing the conditions of his life. His little rebellion helps propel his wife into an affair with a local real estate big shot and his daughter into the arms of the neighbor's son, and sets in motion a series of events that lead to his own death.

The chief difficulty with *American Beauty* is that relatively little thought, or perhaps only thought of a superficial character, has gone into its creation. While it is telling that a popular film, as well as its audience, should take as a given the dysfunctional character of American society and family life, this does not guarantee the artistic or intellectual success of the work. One must actually provide at least a hint of the source of the social illness and tell a compelling story. In the end, the filmmakers, director Sam Mendes and screenwriter Alan Ball, do neither.

As a supposed exercise in social commentary, *American Beauty* proves to be composed largely of limp and hardly earth-shattering

criticisms of materialism and the American Dream and, when one examines them, the sort of banalities that currently make up much of the content of afternoon talk shows and works of popular psychology. Nor does the film hold up as a drama. It resorts too often to stereotypes, borrows lazily from other films and contains many, many implausibilities.

As far as the last point goes, it is hard to know where to begin. In the film's first, pre-credit sequence, Jane speaks to someone off-camera (Ricky, as we later find out) musing out loud about the desirability of having her father bumped off. First of all, on the face of it, there isn't the slightest reason for her to want her father dead. He hasn't been doing anything malicious to her. His relative neglect of his daughter and lust for her friend, unacted upon at this point, are hardly sufficient grounds to set in motion a murder plot. If they were, there would be corpses piled high in every street in America. In any event, the sequence is entirely a red herring. It doesn't play any significant role in the unfolding of the narrative and has no consequences.

And it has little directly to do with what one supposes is the dramatic or thematic center of the film, Lester's mad attraction for Angela. A mad attraction that is raised in an overdone and, frankly, embarrassing manner early on and then, for an entire third or so of the film, more or less dropped. When Angela reappears, one thinks, "Oh yes, I'd forgotten about her."

And what are we to make of Lester's rebellion? He smokes marijuana, buys a new car, pumps iron, gets a job in a fast-food restaurant and tells his wife to shut up. This is to set a very low price on "breaking free" (Incidentally, why is everything blamed on poor Carolyn?) Most absurd, Lester's dramatic change of attitude and lifestyle doesn't produce the slightest change in the family's living arrangements or the circumstances of its daily activity. Everything goes on as before, Lester simply spends more time in the garage working on his weight-lifting. The story essentially goes into a holding pattern, because Lester's continued presence in the house and an uninterrupted pattern to the family's existence are required by the contrived denouement.

And then there is Ricky, the neighbors' son. He's first presented to us a menacing figure, lurking in the shadows as he films Jane and her family. Next he introduces himself to her at school. He stares unwaveringly and speaks in a monotone. He also wears a woolen cap on an apparently warm day. So we know he is off-kilter. Then it turns out that he really isn't. He's only been victimized by his military father. No serious explanation is ever

provided for his obsession with the video equipment. How has the relationship with his father, the only salient fact we learn about his past, helped produce this? He's not so alienated, after all, that he can't quite rapidly begin an apparently warm and meaningful relationship with Jane.

How and why does this sensitive soul, so apparently out of touch with immediate reality and in tune with the more essential beauty of things that lies hidden behind appearances, have the presence of mind, and the deviousness, to make a living selling drugs? The various components of the character don't cohere. They are external to each other and introduced largely for effect.

One could go on. Is it likely that pouting, sneering Jane would be a cheerleader and a dedicated one at that? (Although this is dropped, of course, as soon as it has served its purpose of introducing Lester and us to Angela in a revealing outfit.) And why is someone like Jane—who willfully chooses the school outcast, thereby spitting in the face of public opinion—investigating breast implants? Everything is simply thrown in, without thought.

The clichés too are tedious. Why must the marine colonel be ramrod stiff and a repressed homosexual? This seems too familiar and too easy. There must be such figures with other, perhaps more highly evolved problems. Is it particularly fresh and original to reveal the apparently promiscuous Angela to be a frightened, over-compensating virgin? Things we've seen before, countless times in other films, are simply shuffled around.

Having offered a supposedly slashing view of crass American materialism and careerism, which one presumes ought to have something to do with the characters' unhappiness, the filmmakers make an about-face and give us, at a critical moment, Lester mooning over an old photograph of his wife and child. He longs for the “old Carolyn” and the “old Jane.” It turns out the family has simply taken a false step somewhere, and needs to return to a more innocent and carefree state. If Lester could only make contact with his inner whatever. We know how this goes from there.

The difficulty with such a muddle is that out of it may emerge something quite at odds with the conscious intentions of the filmmakers. The attitude of the writer and director toward Lester and Angela is not clear. According to Alan Ball, Lester “needs to get back in touch” with the passion for life he's lost along the way, and “Angela is the catalyst for that. But he thinks she's the goal and she's really just the knock on the door. At the risk of sounding incredibly lofty and pretentious, he needs to get back in touch with his spiritual connection to living.”

Putting aside the banality of the conception, where does this leave an audience that is invited and manipulated to lust along with Lester after the youthful Angela? Ball may want us to remember Lester's absent “spiritual connection to living,” but I'm not at all convinced that this is what the majority of the audience will bring away with them from a work that exudes a rather unpleasant prurience. The intellectual confusion and shallowness of the filmmakers have positioned them to encourage, rather than discourage, the worst sort of fantasy life.

Lacking a firmly worked out logic and necessity, the film's narrative presents itself as a series of accidents. There is something quite arbitrary about Lester's death. For it to be tragic his end

would need to arise from the logic of his life. But it doesn't arise from something fateful in his unhappy condition. It arises, indeed, from his rebellion. If he hadn't attempted to change his life, it would never have happened. Where is the moral in that?

The filmmakers tried to come to terms with American life and found it difficult. So they gave up half or a quarter of the way. I don't mean to pick on Ball, a playwright and former writer of situation comedies, but one isn't encouraged by his comment that “a lot of stuff in the script is really instinctive. I didn't think about what the purpose of it was, or that kind of thing.” That “kind of thing,” i.e., coherent thought, as we hardly need be reminded, is in short supply in American filmmaking circles.

In a sense, Lester's shortcoming proves identical to the filmmakers: it is still far easier and more acceptable in America to pursue an affair, do drugs, get in shape, or, for that matter, build up a career as a filmmaker, than to think about all the things that are disturbing or destroying you. That requires some degree of insight into the laws of social life and history, however one materializes them into drama.

None of this criticism is meant to suggest that there are no amusing or insightful moments in the film. There are. Or that there aren't fine performances. There are, by nearly everybody. And the actors—Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch, Wes Bentley, Chris Cooper—obviously feel they are contributing to something out of the ordinary, something with bite. As is nearly always the case, the problem does not lie with the actors or technicians. But all the talent and good will involved don't change the facts of the matter.

American Beauty, in my opinion, is not a critique of what's wrong with America, but a substitute for such a critique. And one must add, considering its source—Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks Pictures—the sanitized, and semi-officially approved substitute.



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