

AN AMERICAN OBSCENITY:

A REVIEW OF THE OSCAR-WINNING *AMERICAN BEAUTY*

NICHOLAS DYKES



American Beauty is about a man in middle age crisis who becomes infatuated with a teenage girl, a friend of his daughter. Interwoven with the main storyline is a subplot concerning the daughter's attraction to 'the boy next door', and further subplots about the male lead's relationship with his wife and daughter; his wife's affair; the suspiciousness of the boy-next-door's father, a Colonel in the Marines, and the ups and downs of the friendship between the two teenage girls.

Since the film gives away its own ending in the first few frames, one is not revealing anything by saying that it concludes with the death of the male lead. Since it is also baldly hinted early on that he will be murdered, much of what little suspense there is revolves around which of three proffered candidates will do the killing.

ART UNIVERSALISES

Although slow-paced and often rather boring, the movie is for the most part well scripted, well acted, well directed and well edited. From a purely technical point of view, it perhaps deserves some of the accolades which have been showered upon it. The problems, and there are

many, largely concern what might be called 'sense of life' issues.

The main theme of the movie is hate: the male lead's hatred of his wife and their lifestyle together; the daughter's hatred of her father; the Colonel's hatred of anything unusual, such as marijuana or homosexuals, and the boyfriend's hatred of anything normal. Underlying the whole film is hatred of the American way of life. The makers of this movie — screenwriter, director, producer — have taken considerable pains to pour derision on traditional American values; such as the work ethic, property, success, romance, marriage, parenthood, sexual love, a structured life, beautiful flowers and, most significantly, hope. In short, the film is a well orchestrated assault on the 'American dream'.

Many might protest that the film is simply a story about some unsuccessful human beings and should not be universalised in this way. That would be a mistake. All art universalises. That is what art is for. It selects to make a point. Ayn Rand drew our attention to the distinction between a painting of a beautiful woman, and a painting of a beautiful woman with a cold sore on her face. *American Beauty* is of the latter variety.

(An analogy is germane here. A painter in the UK not long ago created an image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, out of smeared excrement. It was duly welcomed by the British art establishment, and placed on display in one of Britain's most famous art galleries. *American Beauty* is the film equivalent of that picture, and has been duly acclaimed, in the same fashion, by the US movie 'establishment'.)

AMERICAN WANKER

The smear job on American life is carried out on several different levels. First up is the film's title. An 'American Beauty' is a gorgeous rose of a rich, dark red. In the movie, in sharp contrast, this famous flower is used to symbolise the phoniness of the wife and her marriage; the inappropriate sexual fantasies of her husband and, most

Cultural Notes No. 46

ISSN 0267-677X ISBN 1 85637 492 0

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 2000: Libertarian Alliance; Nicholas Dykes.

Nicholas Dykes writes regularly on philosophical themes for the
Libertarian Alliance.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and
not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee,
Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

significantly, death. In a striking example of the pornography of violence, the blood and brains of the male lead, as they blast onto the clean white interior of his home, are the exact colour of the roses which have been waved at us coyly throughout the movie.

The main agents of this assault on American culture are of course the characters. Superbly acted by Kevin Spacey, the male lead is an ineffectual nobody with a foul temper who gets the story rolling by masturbating in the shower. (This is shown, and called the “high point” of his day). Masturbation is an innocuous form of private relief that need offend nobody. But put up front in a movie it tells us what to expect of the chief male character. In Britain he would be called a ‘wanker’. Indeed, *American Wanker* would have been an apt title for this film. Thus, quite in keeping, the male lead falls open-mouthedly, gormlessly in lust with a high school cheerleader less than half his age, who then becomes the subject of his masturbatory fantasies.

His wife is a career woman manqué who is belatedly trying to bring meaning and success into her life by manically selling real estate under the apparent guidance of a mail order college. Although finely acted, she is a caricature of the success-seeking woman: frenetically busy, frequently hysterical, and driven by rote-learned precepts. Her husband’s auto-eroticism drives her into the arms of her arch rival in business, with whom she conducts the caricature of a love affair.

The young actress who plays her daughter is well cast. The girl is a pouting sourpuss whose only glimmer of a smile comes when she contemplates hiring a hitman to kill her father.

The young woman chosen as her cheerleader friend is equally well cast. Pretty, but no great beauty, she plays a brainless, foul-mouthed liar; a gawky tease whom no sane adult would fall for. (There are overtones of *Lolita* and Maughan’s *Human Bondage* here. Indeed, much of the story seems to have been borrowed, piecemeal and eclectically, from other works: *Psycho*, *A Family Affair* and *Reservoir Dogs* sprang to mind at various points.)

HARDLY SUBTLE

The hero, if there is one, is the boyfriend. A maladjusted voyeur, he spends his time prying on his neighbours and others with a video camera, recording what he calls ‘beauty’. This includes a homeless woman freezing to death, and garbage floating randomly in the breeze. His heroism consists in selling the male lead high-quality, US government marijuana, and in lying to his father in such a way as to bring about the film’s denouement.

His father, a Colonel in the “United States Marine Corps” (repeated more than once, so we get the message) is another well-acted caricature. Insanely rigid, he demands urine samples from his son to check for drugs, and has evidently driven his wife insane as well. She is shown for the most part in a catatonic trance.

The attack on American values is hardly subtle. People who seek structure in their lives — the Colonel is depicted as such a one — are displayed as Nazis, literally. People who seek success in life, the wife and her lover,

are depicted as phonies and gun nuts. Parents are depicted either as insensitive ignoramuses, or as violent abusers: the wife viciously slaps her daughter, without remorse, and the Colonel brutally beats up his son, ‘for his own good’. There is also a strong hint of incest at one point.

TEENAGE REVENGE

The only decent, polite, neighbourly folk in the movie are a homosexual couple who live next door but one. Their presence has very little bearing on the story and seems to have been inserted gratuitously as some sort of politically correct ‘statement’.

As if to disguise momentarily the film’s virtually complete negativity, the male lead occasionally looks at a photograph from happier times and asks ‘where did it all go wrong?’ But the answer given by the movie is that the mess they’re all in is only to be expected: American ‘beauty’ is a sham. Real beauty is to be found in the aimless drifting of a piece of litter — a small white plastic bag, which we are made to watch for minutes on end being blown hither and yon by the wind — and, in death: the psycho boyfriend practically swoons with delight as he gazes at the blood-soaked face of the dead male lead. Black humour it all may be, but there is something profoundly obscene about such a painstaking parody of the pursuit of happiness.

One may perhaps feel some pity for the great suffering that the makers of this film evidently think they endured during their teenage years. For, deep down, that is what this movie seems to be about: teenage revenge perpetrated by aging, adolescent, inner selves. Others of us grow up.

TOOHEY LIVES

The main beneficiaries of *American Beauty* will be overseas. It will have been gleefully received in China, Cuba, North Korea, Serbia, Zimbabwe, and in other such places where real-life dealers in hate, and lovers of bloodshed, pursue the opposite of happiness: political power. “You want the American dream, you poor deluded slaves? Here it is, *American Beauty*, made by the most famous American film maker of our time. So it just *has* to be true!”

Elsworth Toohy is alive and well and living at Dreamworks Productions.

EDITORIAL NOTE

American Beauty (Dreamwork Pictures, 1999) was produced by Stan Wlodkowski and Alan Ball. It won five Oscars: best picture, best director (Sam Mendes), best actor (Kevin Spacey), best original screenplay (Alan Ball), and best cinematography (Conrad L. Hall). It also won six BAFTA’s (the British version of Oscars): for best film, best actor, best actress (Annette Bening), best film music (Thomas Newman), best cinematography, and best editing (Tariq Anwar and Christopher Greenburg).

Elsworth Toohy is the intellectually and politically manipulative villain in *The Fountainhead*, the novel by Ayn Rand (Panther Books, London, 1961).