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Reclaiming *American Beauty*¹

After a brief scene where a teenage girl appears to ask her boyfriend to kill her father, foreshadowing his death in the closing moments of the film, *American Beauty* opens with a montage of a middle aged man's life, including a graphic scene of him masturbating in the shower (an act he describes as the highlight of his day). Through the rest of the film, we watch this man lust after his teenaged daughter's best friend, captured in part through a series of lurid dream sequences where she is often clothed in only strategically placed rose petals. He blackmails his company for increased severance pay by threatening to accuse the consultant who wants to fire him with offering to save his job in exchange for sex. He begins smoking pot, argues with his wife, struggles with his relationship with his daughter, and all the while it seems that the audience is encouraged to cheer him on as he (apparently) regains his independence.

For those unfamiliar with it, *American Beauty* was the academy award winning best picture from 1999. Many Christians, not surprisingly, were disturbed by the wide acclaim this film received. It is not just that the message of the film appears to run counter to what we might expect a Christian to accept, the images themselves, the pictures that flash across the screen, raise challenges: Lester stands half naked in the shower; his wife is shown, in the words of one character, being "nailed" by another man (I know no better words to convey what appears on screen); his daughter stands topless in the window exposing herself to her boyfriend; at the film's climax, Lester almost completely undresses the girl that he has leered at throughout the film; with Lester's death at the end of the film, we see his brain sprayed across the white tile in his

¹ *American Beauty*, 122 min., Dreamworks Pictures, 1999.

kitchen, and the camera dwells for what seems like minutes on the sight of his head resting in a pool of his own blood. It is, in short, hard not to be repulsed, and yet Lester seems to be held out as a kind of everyman hero. The film seems to want to inspire us to do something (though what it is inspiring us to do is a difficult question as I will argue in a moment). How can we, as Christians (or even as human beings), have any reaction but that of revulsion? How should we respond when such a film wins the academy award for best picture?

Hearing my description so far, you might be surprised to learn that I have used this film for several years as a part of my introduction to philosophy classes. I subjected, during my time in graduate school here at Notre Dame, nearly 300 freshmen to viewings of *American Beauty*. How can I justify such a choice? In my time today I want to try to do just that, not just because I need to make a public confession (though there may be some of that), but because I believe there is something important to be said here about what relationship we should take towards our culture, especially when there are aspects of that culture that we deeply disagree with, when we find ourselves faced with the need to be counter-cultural.

First, however, I need to say a bit more about the film and, in particular, what its message is supposed to be. I will come back to the problem of images later. Some of the dramatic arc of the film can be gleaned from my comments above. It is worth filling in some of the gaps, however. Roughly, the film follows the last year of Lester Burnham's life. Lester is unhappy at home, unhappy in his job, unhappy in general. Two events trigger dramatic changes in Lester's life. The first is meeting his teenaged daughter's best friend Angela (the not so subtle play on Angel hardly needs to be pointed out, but I'll do it anyway). The second is meeting the new next-door neighbor's son, Ricky (soon to be Lester's daughter's boyfriend). Fulfilling his lust for Angela becomes one of his driving goals (perhaps his most important goal). Much of what

he does throughout the rest of the film (working out, taking back control over his life) can be understood as a quest to be worthy of Angela (or at least worthy of his vision of her). Ricky provides a different kind of drive for Lester. By not caring much about his work, by inviting Lester to come smoke-out behind the reception hall where Ricky is working, by quitting unceremoniously when caught, Ricky represents the kind of carefree opposition to authority that Lester comes to emulate.

Even with just this beginning description, however, it is important to face a number of apparent inconsistencies. Lester's sexual desire for Angela (and make no mistake, it is hard to argue it is anything more) is not really for Angela, but for the woman (in experience if not in years) who appears in the numerous dream sequences. When, at the end of the film, Lester is moments away from obtaining what he has sought, Angela reveals that despite the worldly image she has tried to cultivate, she is a virgin. In response, he stops, unable or unwilling to continue. In the end, he sees not the image he has lusted after, but the reality of an insecure girl. There is a gap between the image that he seeks, and the reality that he finds. (I do not want to imply that this briefest moment of moral clarity absolves Lester of his sins – more on this in a moment. I only want to observe the lack of fit between Lester's fantasy and the reality that he is finally confronted with.)

A similar inconsistency can be found in Ricky's role. The rebellious loner who is so honest in the face of his boss hides almost all of his life from his overbearing (to but it mildly) father. Ricky does not share his father's homophobic thoughts, yet spews hate to placate his father. The rebellious youth plays the role required to stay at home—at least until the final moments of the film when his father's threats finally become too much. He goes so far as

provide fake urine samples to his father to hide his drug use. Again, what inspires Lester is only a half-truth at best.

But what is it that Ricky and Angela inspire Lester to do? Here again we face interpretative challenges. On the one hand, it seems that the film wants to be an indictment of modern American materialism, the emptiness of dreary suburban lives. In a scene where it looks like Lester and his wife might rekindle the passion in their damaged relationship, she interrupts him because it seems that he is about to spill his beer on the couch. He reacts with a screaming fit, declaring, “it’s just a couch ... this is just stuff and it has become more important to you than living, well honey that’s just nuts.”

Perhaps in a moment of unintended irony, however, this scene comes on the heels of Lester’s own purchase of a new car, trading in his family Toyota for a 1970 red Pontiac Firebird. When his wife enters the house, she finds him playing with a new remote control toy truck. It is hardly the case that Lester is simply rejecting the American obsession with “stuff.” It seems, at best, we can say that Lester is trading in one kind of “stuff” for another, trading in the stayed, mature possessions of his adult life for those that symbolize youth and freedom.

Perhaps this, then, is a better way to think about the goal of Lester’s rebellion, a breaking free not from American materialism but from the responsibilities of middle age and return to the carefree spirit of youth. But this interpretation also encounters difficulties. Lester does not, despite his own words, seek to break free from all responsibility. Immediately after quitting his advertising job, he applies for a position as a cashier/cook at a local burger joint. When asking for the application, the woman at the drive thru informs him that there are no positions as manager, and his response is “Good, I am looking for the least possible amount of responsibility.” If this is really true, one wonders why he takes a job at all. It is, of course,

connected with his idealized image of his youth, but it is hard to imagine that Lester finds greater fulfillment from the daily grind of working in a fast food restaurant than he did working in advertising. If his former job was dehumanizing and dull, it is hard to imagine how flipping burgers before a hot grill is any better. If Lester does take any satisfaction from his new job, it is not the kind of satisfaction that the audience can see as fulfilling him over the long term. He has, at best, stumbled into a new dead end. It is worth emphasizing that he does stumble from one choice to the next without ever engaging in much meaningful reflection about what he is doing or where he is going.

More importantly however, the closing moments of the film reveal that he does not really wish to break free from the bonds of his marriage and his family. In the moments just before his death, just after his disturbing encounter with Angela, he asks Angela if his daughter is happy, and finally turns to a picture of his family, staring longingly into it as a gun is placed to the back of his head and he is killed. In the simultaneously ridiculous and poignant closing montage, where we see Lester's life literally pass before his eyes, it is the image of his wife and his daughter that are the culmination of his reflection (though, strangely, the red firebird shows up again as well). His daughter and wife are younger, more carefree as they appear on screen, but in the end it is not freedom from these responsibilities that he seeks. Despite the fact that his actions have done nothing but damage his relationship with both, they are still the most important parts of his life. In many ways they, and his relationships with them, are the culmination of the montage and his life. Even his wife, whose frustration and anger with Lester grows throughout the film, in the end collapses in his closet, sobbing uncontrollably as she clings to his suits hanging neatly in a row. So, Lester seeks to regain his independence, yet still wants, most of all, to remain tied to his family. He wants to gain control over his life, but every action causes his family life to spin

more and more out of control. Thus, in the end, we have a mass of contradictory motives, desires and outcomes.

One reason I have used *American Beauty* is precisely because of these ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies. Perhaps it is possible, with a good deal of interpretive work, to fit together these various strands and find a comprehensive message to the film, perhaps not. Part of the attraction is the challenge that this task present to students. As one film critic observes “Amid the emphatic and often original stew of vitriol and humor in *American Beauty*, it gets pretty hard to tell whether Mendes and Ball [the director and writer respectively] are actually trying to say something, and if so what that might be” but at the same time this reviewer observes that he himself enjoyed an “impassioned post-screening discussion” of the film.² If *American Beauty* is ultimately successful as a film, it has less to do with its clarity of vision, and more to do with its tendency to provoke strong reactions and thus start conversations.

I use the film as more than just an intellectual exercise, however. The issues raised cut to the heart of central question about happiness, family, love, beauty, and the meaning of our lives. Part of my job is to get student to ask these questions, to take them seriously, and to see the answers as important (even in a paradoxically trivial way such as with settling on an interpretation of a movie). Thus, the themes that the movie addresses are important to its use in the classroom.

Ultimately, then, the reclamation of *American Beauty* does not mean an endorsing of the message of the film, nor a reinterpretation of the film that makes its central message palatable to Christians. It has more to do with starting the kinds of conversations that can lead us to a fuller understanding of human life. Here, then, is I think where we start to see the broader cultural

² Andrew O’Hehir, “American Beauty,” <http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/1999/09/15/beauty>.

challenge for Christians in particular. It is crucial, if we are to affect any meaningful cultural change, if we are to evangelize culture, that we engage in these conversations. When our culture could meaningfully be called a Christian culture, this was not a difficult task for us.

Conversations on such themes have long had a place within Christian intellectual circles (and beyond). The significance of the emergence of a post-Christian culture is that this has been accompanied by a changing of the terms of debate. This does not mean such questions no longer arise, this film is clear evidence that they do, it just means that the cultural markers, the background against which we search for answers, has changed. This does not mean, however, that all hope is lost. If we, as Christians, have it right, then we should not be afraid of engaging a thoughtful exploration of the truth, the truth about love, about the meaning of life and the meaning of our own lives. If we are right, then the arguments should bear it out, and more importantly we should have the courage of our convictions, have faith, that the arguments will bear it out. We, as Christians, can no longer set the terms of debate from the start (ruling out of court certain options, the reading of certain texts, the viewing of certain films) because we no longer have a place of sufficient authority within the culture from which to set the terms of debate. The task before us is thus harder, it is recovery and not maintenance, but if we are right, we should be able to find common cause with any and all who honestly search after meaning and truth. We cannot simply reassert a place of cultural strength, nor is it enough to pull away from the broader culture (if there is a sense in which we are a part of that broader culture, we have some responsibility to it and for it which we should not ignore), we must engage people where they are, and through playing an active role in the debate, have faith that we can move people closer to the truth. Thus, because it raises questions about these central themes we as Christians

have an opportunity to stake a claim to this film, not because we agree with it, but because it is useful for our purposes.

To illustrate, consider again the role of love in *American Beauty*. Lester, if he is redeemed at all (a big if), is not redeemed by his actions over the last year of his life, and certainly not by his refraining from sleeping with Angela, but by his love for his family—and importantly, it can only be this way. If we get the sense that the love and care for his family has disappeared, then we can no longer have any sympathy for Lester, his action become nothing short of mean (instead of being, in a strange way, well intentioned but hopelessly misguided). Lester, time after time, such as with his outburst about the couch I mentioned earlier, appears to be trying to help his family, knowing that they too are unhappy. When his wife storms out after his outburst, he shouts after that he is only trying to help her. Even when his daughter confronts him about his obsession with Angela, and he sharply retorts that she “better watch [herself] ... or [she] will turn into a real bitch just like [her] mother” we get the clear sense, by his reaction immediately after the words leave his mouth, that he recognizes that he has made a mistake and that he is trying to connect, trying to help, even if he (clearly) has no clue how to do so. Thus, whatever we ultimately want to say about the film and its message, it cannot entirely do away with the importance of love and of family, for to do so would be place the characters so far beyond the pale that it becomes impossible to sympathize with them. It cannot give in to simple hedonism, nor to outright nihilism for to do so would be to leave the characters, and the film, in the end unredeemed and more importantly unredeemable. (This is not to assert that this in the message of the film, but it is a truth that can be gleaned from the film regardless of what its intended message might be.)

Thus, it is not surprising that it is in conflicted or outright negative reviews where we find the claim that what the film is peddling is “nihilism at its most fatuous”³ or that the ultimate message is, in the end, inscrutable. For example, one reviewer writes “Perhaps future film scholars can decipher ‘American Beauty’ as a Buddhist allegory of existence, or a critique of heterosexual manhood. For now, it remains a puzzling dream, vivid in detail and overly obvious in symbolism, fueled by half-digested lumps of malice and wonder.”⁴ Without some deeper meaning, there is nothing left to hang onto, and the film’s attraction fades. It is the glowing reviews that find some deeper meaning, even if, as with Janet Maslin of the New York Times, they cannot exactly identify what it is. She closes her review writing “There is a haunting power of Lester’s last narrative note to the viewer: that if you don’t share the film’s piercing vision of what really matters, someday you will” though she herself never clearly articulates what this “piercing vision” might be of. Without some deeper meaning, or at least the conviction that it is there, somewhere beneath the surface, the final triumph collapses into despair, the despair of meaninglessness and the absence of even the chance for redemption. Without redemption, or at least the possibility of it, the holding up of Lester as a kind of hero looks absurd.

Thus, by taking up these central questions of life and love, the film cannot help but rely on something deeper, some meaning to be found in the relationships of the central family, if it is to succeed at all—and yet, even if it fails, it fails for instructive reasons, because of that lack of something more, something capable of redeeming these characters, saving them from their, in Lester’s words, “sad little lives.”

Even if you accept my argument so far, that the film can be recovered and used to good purpose in the kind of deeper exploration that could lead back to foundations that Christian

³ David Edelstein, “A Good Year for the Roses?”, <http://www.slate.com>.

⁴ O’Hehir.

would accept, the problem of images still remains. Do the problems with images not outweigh what we can gain from watching the film? It certainly raises challenges, questions that I do not have time to adequately answer here. Let me simply say this: we have to walk a fine line, not lose our revulsion, but also be capable of getting past that revulsion, not leaving it behind, but being able, in spite of it (because of it?), to engage the questions raised within the contexts in which they are raised. Why is this important? For one thing, the vast majority of 18 year olds within my classes at Notre Dame had already seen the film on their own. Such images have become a part of our culture, and we are no longer in a position to simply avoid them. This is where my students are, this is where our culture is, so we had better meet them there if we are going to have a conversation. This does not mean the film is appropriate for everyone, but it does mean that as Christian intellectuals, we have some responsibility to take up the challenge, to engage the questions raised, for only in this way can we hope to transform the broader culture.

The argument here is not whether *American Beauty* is a great film (or even a good film) but whether we can make use of it to build a kind of intellectual conversation, to make a point about our beliefs, to illustrate claims, to defend a positive picture of the world and the human good. The answer to this, I believe, is clearly yes. We must clearly articulate the positive vision (Catholics in particular have done a poor job of doing on a whole host of issues from contraception to divorce, or at least a poor job of doing in a way that speaks to the wider culture in the modern United States). We have to have the courage of our conviction and believe that if what we believe really is the truth, that rational debate, argument should always be our ally, *even when the conversation begins with images drawn from the worst of human life, we can find our way back to the best- and if we as Christians do not lead, how is it that we can expect anyone to follow*

So, when Roger Ebert, in his review of *American Beauty*, writes:

Is it wrong for a man in his 40s to lust after a teenage girl? Any honest man understands what a complicated question this is. Wrong morally, certainly, and legally. But as every woman knows, men are born with wiring that goes straight from their eyes to their genitals, bypassing the higher centers of thought. They can disapprove of their thoughts, but they cannot stop themselves from having them.⁵

We have every right, and in fact a responsibility, to respond, not by attempts to shout down or silence, but to explain why it is a mistake to claim that there is anything complicated about the question, that if it is wrong morally and legally there is little that can mitigate the choices that Lester makes (he needs redemption, not sympathy or excuses), that claiming this is not dishonest, nor is it a sign, as Ebert goes on to indicate, that one has “stop[ped] dreaming and petrifie[d] inside.”⁶ In fact, we might rightly claim, it is just the opposite. To see it any other way is to give in to a kind of nihilism which we cannot find ultimately satisfying. To see it any other way is to make man just another beast, something less than truly human. The only way to make this claim, however, is to stand up, engage the question, confident that the search for meaning, the search for truth, will bear out our commitments as Christians, or in this case perhaps equally important, our commitments human beings.

⁵ Roger Ebert, “American Beauty,” <http://www.rodgerebert.com>.

⁶ Ebert.