

THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN BEAUTY: A VALUE ANALYSIS

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# THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN BEAUTY: A VALUE ANALYSIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the end though, it remains an astonishment that a movie featuring relations between older men and younger women in the era of Clinton, casual drug taking, homosexuals in the military, teenage sexuality, the post-Columbine obsession with what's really going on in the house next door to you, and the great love that exists in even the most combative of families, not to mention a film whose pivotal moment is a dancing plastic bag, could have been embraced and understood as it has been. - Sam Mendes, Director

Released a few months from the turn of the twentieth century, the Oscar-winning film, *American Beauty* (1999), depicts one of the central cultures in America today, suburbia. Not only does the film illustrate the largest growing segment of U.S. population, it also illuminates the social controversies and crises of contemporary suburban America.

This thesis explores the values, value system and ideographs embedded in the film *American Beauty*, in an attempt to discover the definition of the suburban culture they collectively embody. It will be argued that the values, value system and ideographs revealed are used by viewers to familiarize themselves, rationalize their decisions, and define their culture and attitudes towards the external world. Hence, *American Beauty*

not only critiques contemporary suburbia, it also shapes the way in which we, as human beings and as Americans, understand it.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Decades of research have proven how identifying values and value systems through cultural and rhetorical analyses are vital when attempting to understand how mass media, particularly film, shapes the way humans see the world (Benson, 1985; Blakesley, 2004; Jones, 1993; Rushing & Frentz, 1978; Sandeen, 1997; Sayre, 1994; Snee, 2005). These studies have not only exposed the rhetorical nature of mass mediated forms of communication, they have also illustrated the social impact of this phenomenon. Since there are only a few academic analyses of *American Beauty* in the realms of visual aesthetics (Goodreau, 2006), the crisis of masculinity (Arthur, 2004), the use of communication technologies (O’Gorman, 2004), psychoanalytic analysis (Karlyn, 2004), sexuality and paternalism (Hausmann, 2004), individuation (Hewison, 2003), and escapism (Deneen, 2002), the value analyses of film and mass media aforementioned will serve as the foundation of this thesis.

The following literature review includes value analyses applied to mass-mediated forms of communication as well as public communication. The artifacts examined in the literature include speeches, commercials, television programs, and films, which intend to

link mass media, value, and rhetoric. The first three texts reviewed are all value analyses centered on unraveling intrinsic values. The last four articles represent rhetorical analyses of films. Additionally, McGee's (1980) theory of the ideograph will be examined, as it establishes the theoretical framework of this thesis.

In "A Value Analysis of Brigham Young's Ascension to Latter-day Saint Leadership," Shirley Greenwood Jones (1993) signified the importance of values inherent in public communication. Jones maintained that, "In his rise to power, Brigham Young reassured Mormons by linking his value identification to what was fundamental in their view" (p. 37). Jones argues that the values embedded in Brigham Young's rhetoric, when assuming the leadership of the church, not only reflected, but also created and perpetuated Mormon culture.

Value analyses have also been conducted on mass mediated artifacts. Shay Sayre's (1994) article "Images of Freedom and Equality: A Value Analysis of Hungarian Political Commercials," shows how values in mass communication can contribute to the understanding of a culture. Sayre utilized commercials as windows into the Hungarian culture to examine the national and political values that predominated during the 1990 political transition. Through value analysis, Sayre concluded that "political commercials act not only as a source of historical record, they also provide valuable insights into the communication of cultural values" (p. 108).

Cathy Sandeen's (1997) study focused on television media. Sandeen looked at the values promoted by the popular evening television program, *PM Magazine*. In her

article “Success Defined by Television: The Value System Promoted by PM Magazine,”

Sandeen argues,

Despite these brief nods to individuality, community, and compassion, the value system in PM Magazine painted a picture of a world where personal success...was given priority. In a program that arguably had the potential to show a broad range of diverse voices and values, PM clearly did not. Instead, it focused, like much popular television programming, on a narrow, traditional, and conservative world view. (p. 98)

Sandeen maintained that the value system of personal success functioned as a reinforcement to the existing traditional and conservative power structure within American society. Arguably, this value system also served, symbolically, as a world that viewers were asked to compare and understand themselves within.

Rushing and Frentz (1978) examined the highly popular film *Rocky*. In their analysis, they identified the reciprocity between film and society, specifically societal values. They maintain,

...film often dramatizes symptoms of particular societal needs of an era. By portraying external problems facing the entire country, conflicts among sub-cultural groups, or internal needs shared by a major segment of the public, films give tangible structure to social phenomena. (p. 65)

Rushing and Frentz further posit that films provoke an audience to acknowledge societal problems in a form that is aesthetically appealing. By using characters in a way that is entertaining, eye-catching, and “pathos-evoking” (p. 65), an audience is more likely to identify with societal tribulations than they would by listening to politicians, preachers or community leaders.

Thomas Benson (1985) was also concerned with the rhetoric of film, more specifically, how viewers created meaning. Benson examined Frederick Wiseman's documentary film *Primate* in an attempt to discover how audiences create meaning and turn "facts" into symbols in which to understand their world. Benson argues, "*Primate* invites us to experience a horrified, comic rage at the arrogance, hypocrisy, banality and destructiveness of our fellow humans and ourselves" (p. 207). Throughout the article, Benson maintains that *Primate* looks at the facts of social reality and exposes the structures that underlie them, all the while implicating the audience to the society illustrated as well as creating meaning out of film.

Blakesley (2004) performed a rhetorical analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In his article, Blakesley describes film as cultural expression. He argues that "films reveal not only the predispositions of its makers, but they also serve as the means of initiating cultural critique" (p. 116). Additionally, Blakesley also touches upon the issue of value. He states,

...film rhetoric also focuses our attention on identification to the extent that identification...is an identity of values, beliefs, and even bodies and bodily processes – in cases where we are also clearly divided, where common values or beliefs are arguments or propositions as much as they are a pre-existing basis for acting together. (p. 116)

Lastly, and more recently, Brian Snee (2005) examined the rhetoric of Martin Scorse's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In his analysis, Snee demonstrates how the film, although encumbered with controversial issues, attracted so many viewers by drawing connections between the main character's life and their own. Snee argues in

much the same way as Blakesley (2004), “this analysis has revealed that not only the meanings but especially the actions that the film solicits from the viewer amount to something more than character – viewer identification” (p. 60).

This collection of literature highlights how film, cultural values and rhetoric are all interconnected and interdependent. It is important to note how these texts illuminate the power and influence of rhetoric and film through identification, meaning and values. Rhetorical analyses, as described, illustrate how Western culture feeds off of the values and value systems embedded in films, as well as how audiences identify with these values and internalize the meanings of messages – all boiling down to how we, as humans and as viewers, make sense of the world.

Film, as the literature demonstrates, has the ability to create, change and sustain perceptions, specifically our perceptions of cultural values, which ultimately influence our attitudes and the how we understand the external world. Like these analyses, this thesis exemplifies how the values, value systems and ideographs depicted in the film *American Beauty* are internalized by viewers because of their ability to identify with characters and the society the characters live in. Hence, the following questions will be answered in order to gain the richest understanding of the culture, values and value system depicted in *American Beauty*:

1. What words and images are used to articulate positive values?
2. What words and images are used to articulate negative values?
3. What values are implied in language and images?

4. What is the relationship between positive and negative values?
5. What is the relationship between implied and stated values?
6. What values are not present that might be expected?

This thesis argues that the values, value systems and ideographs revealed are symbolic, representing a world to which viewers should compare and understand themselves. Lastly, it will be argued that *American Beauty* acts as an aperture to expose cultural values, and in due course shapes the ways viewers think and feel about their own world. Hence, a foundation must be established that demonstrates the relationship between the symbolism of values and values systems and an individual's perception of reality.

#### Theoretical Framework

An "ideograph," as explained by McGee (1980), is an infused term or expression that symbolizes value and meaning according to a specific culture. Furthermore, "they signify and 'contain' a unique ideological commitment..." (p. 7). Hasian (2001) explains, "ideographs are key evocative terms that can show us the symbolic allegiances of audiences" (p. 90). Ideographs are used metaphorically in all discourse and are not simply invented, but socially and politically constructed.

McGee argues that ideographs are descriptive of the social human condition and are understood collectively through history and culture. He suggests that "language gets

in the way of thinking” and that our “pure thought” about concepts such as religion, liberty and property are clouded by the existence in history of the ideographs <religion>, <liberty>, and <property>.

McGee explains a key feature of ideographs. He argues that ideographs sidestep argument. He contends,

...Nor is one permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs: Everyone is conditioned to think of “rule of law” as a logical commitment just as one is taught to think that “186,000 miles per second” is an accurate empirical description of the speed of light even though few can work experiments or do the mathematics to prove it. (p. 7)

Since ideographs have multiple value connotations, McGee argues that they are culture bound, and that every member of a society is socialized and conditioned to the expressions of ideographs as a requirement for “belonging” to the society. Thus, ideographs “represent a collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” (p. 15).

Most importantly, McGee (1980) maintains that ideographs have the power to unite and separate humans by conditioning society to disregard “pure thoughts” of words and inherit the “usages” and material ideas that we, through our culture, have learned to accept for the sole purpose of “belonging.” McGee suggests that ideographs act as social controllers over consciousness and “have the capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s reality” (p. 5). As

the following chapters demonstrate, ideographs – the beliefs and values stated and implied in the film *American Beauty* – are necessarily used by viewers to define their culture and attitudes towards the external world, ultimately influencing the way in which we understand it.



## CHAPTER IV

### VALUE ANALYSIS AS RHETORICAL CRITICISM

#### Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*

Released September 11, 1999, at the Toronto International Film Festival as an independent film aimed at an international audience, *American Beauty* became an instant success. In February of 2000, the film was re-released, making its mark as one of the top three grossing films not only in America, but also in France, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Mexico, Spain and the United Kingdom (Woods, 2000).

Since *American Beauty* focuses on an expansive array of cultural issues, it becomes rather difficult to initially interpret what it represents. Accordingly, there are countless interpretations of the film. William Arnold, movie critic from the Seattle Post (1999) states, "On the surface, it's an uncompromisingly bleak look at the hollowness of the American Dream" (p. 1).

Casey McKittrick (2001) summarizes *American Beauty* in the article "I Laughed and Cringed at the Same Time: Shaping Pedophilic Discourse Around American Beauty and Happiness." He states that the film depicts midlife crises, obsessive fascinations,

sexuality, personal success, extramarital affairs and the difficulties and debauchery of many suburban families.

Regardless of individual interpretations, *American Beauty* is a film that takes a widely critical, yet humorous, stance on many of the cultures found in the United States today. Such a film is worthy of an in depth analysis to expose the beliefs, values and value systems it conveys to its viewers.

### Film as a Cultural Text

Societal values and film are indisputably interrelated. As noted by Rushing and Frentz (1978), “film and society reciprocally influence one another” (p. 64). They argue that because film portrays the collective images of a culture by symbolizing trends and serving as an indicator of cultural needs, dramatic media both reflect and create societal events. The “cultural text” approach to mass mediated communication and the interrelation of film and social values establish the foundation of this research.

In the 1980’s and ‘90’s, researchers began to observe film as “texts” that were meant to be “read” by audiences and analysts (Larson, 1992). Larson offers a notable example in his book, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*. Suppose a cultural anthropologist 5000 years from now found a capsule filled with a collection of films from the last decade of the twentieth century. The anthropologist would find a way to view the films and attempt to make conclusions about life in that time. What did people do? What did they believe in? What sorts of values did they have? Mass media, particularly film,

have the capacity to serve as a set of texts that illuminate our culture, just as ancient written texts indicates what cultured was like centuries ago.

## Defining Values

As stated by Sillars and Gronbeck (2001), “every type of criticism – rhetorical, social or cultural – has an interest in matters of value” (p. 185). When attempting to search for values embedded in cultural texts, values must first be defined. Rokeach (1970) defined value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to alternate modes of conduct or end states of existence” (p. 160). Furthermore, values can be understood as common conceptions of the desirable or expressions of predilection to be emulated by others, and, ultimately used by humans to acquaint themselves and rationalize their choices within the world (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001).

Values are conceptualized by humans and etched into linguistic and visual signs, often through the use of ideographs as earlier explained. In addition to written and spoken texts, values can take many other forms. Values can be attached to people, sounds such as music, pictures and images and even nature (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). A major purpose of this study is linking values and ideographs to how a culture defines itself. Thus, a definition of culture must also be considered.

## Defining Culture

A single definition of culture has long been debated. Hence, the communication discipline is left with many distinguished definitions to choose from. When studying how beliefs, values and value systems collectively embody a culture, a researcher must have full knowledge of what culture, subculture and coculture are. Burke and Gusfield (1989) identify culture as “what a group of people share that distinguished them from others” (p 29). Extending upon Burke’s description, Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) define culture as “the beliefs, attitudes, values, myths, ideologies, routines, and other behaviors that define a people and their relationships to others” (p. 201).

Humans can belong to many cultures and nearly always belong to several, if not many cocultures and subcultures. Cocultures are large, dominant components of culture such as feminists. The feminist culture has defining values such as equality and personal success with their own particular literature. Subcultures, however, are the smaller divisions of the dominant culture such as the Amish or the youth. They maintain their own ways of living, however, they must accommodate to a certain extent to maintain a place within larger society (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001).

The American culture cannot have one true definition. Culture is a cognitive construct that is always evolving because it is defined by the things people say and what people do. Beliefs, values, and value systems are the key to determining the definition of a particular culture.

## Methodology

As demonstrated through previous literature, it can be argued that films play an important role in the communication of cultural values. Media not only reflect societal attitudes and values, they also have a great influence on how people of that society, including viewers from other cultures, interpret what is represented as well as contribute to the creation of cultural values. Malcolm Sillars and Bruce Gronbeck (2001) have created a method of isolating value woven into mass mediated forms of communication.

Sillars and Gronbeck, in their book entitled *Communication Criticism: Rhetoric, Social Codes, Cultural Studies* (2001) establish a series of specific markers or questions a critic must ask, to not only identify values, but to also gain the most intense understanding of those values.

The first layer of analysis includes looking at direct statements in a text. The words of a text must be observed in order to identify which articulate positive values and which articulate negative values (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). How a society constructs negative values is as equally important as how they are stated positively. The degree of emphasis placed on the words, either negative or positive, shapes value systems.

Although some statements in a text directly claim value, others are not so straightforward. These belief statements must be analyzed below their surface to discover the values implied. This requires the examination of the silent texts or subtexts of a discourse. Whether directly stated or implied, concrete values must be established.

The markers created by Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) allow values to be identified. Collectively, values form a system. However, a value system is more than a collection of words and images. The relationships that exist among value terms and beliefs unveil the richness of a society's culture (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001).

According to Sillars and Gronbeck (2001), both the number of references to a value and its placement at more or less strategic points in a message indicate its relative emphasis among the values of a system. For this reason, the emphasis of the value system must be considered.

The relationships between values must also be explored. Every value is connected with another value and can take on new meaning depending on the values associated with it (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). The relationship between implied and stated values and positive and negative values must also be observed.

Just as important as the values present in a text are the values absent from the text. When defining a value system, values held by a culture are discovered as well as the beliefs and values that culture doesn't hold. According to Sillars and Gronbeck (2001), exploring the values omitted from a text that were expected to be present is another key factor in defining culture.

With these markers detailed, the first three research questions previously outlined will be answered in order to gain the richest understanding of the values and beliefs of the suburban culture represented in the motion picture film *American Beauty*. Once values have been identified, the last three research questions will be answered in order to

construct the value systems and ideographs that reveal the definition of the suburban culture embodied in the film *American Beauty* – which, ultimately, is used by humans to rationalize their choices and attitudes towards the external world.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS

“...Look closer.” *American Beauty*’s tagline, a phrase representing a film lush with intrinsic value. Through an intense examination of the film, it has become clear that concrete values have been placed within the individual, within the characters. The first section of this chapter will provide a synopsis of the film. The second section identifies value in the main characters – Lester Burnham and his wife, Carolyn, their daughter, Jane and her best friend Angela, the next-door neighbor, Ricky Fitts, and his father Colonel Frank Fitts. This section will also examine the values embedded in scenes involving characters as well as implied value, in both words and images.

The third section of this chapter discusses the values overlooked throughout the film and the importance of their absence. Lastly, this thesis examines the relationships between direct and implied value and positive and negative value and how they form collectively into value systems. The analysis will also explore the use and definitions of the ideographs <American> and <beauty>.



## Synopsis

*American Beauty* encompasses the daily lives of Lester Burnham, his wife Carolyn, and his daughter Jane. The film demonstrates how each of these characters proceeds through a typical day and the problems each of them are experiencing.

The opening sequences of the film depict Lester lying alone in bed. He retires to the bathroom where he masturbates in the shower before he leaves for work. When he arrives at work, he is asked to write a job description so his firm can decide which employees are “expendable.” Later on the same evening, the Burnhams sit down for a family dinner. The atmosphere is dismal and Lester's attempt to make conversation with Jane reluctantly fails. Jane leaves the table and Carolyn glares at Lester. He replies, “Oh what? You’re “Mother of the Year?”

Carolyn, whose is a real estate agent, holds an open house the next morning. One after another, potential buyers reject the house. Eventually, Carolyn breaks down and repetitively strikes herself in the face, sobbing. Jane spends her day outside of her high school smoking cigarettes with her shallow best friend, Angela Hayes.

The Burnham’s neighbors, Ricky and his father, Colonel Frank Fitts, play an important role in the film. Ricky’s mother, Barbara, is cooking breakfast when the doorbell rings. When greeted by Jim and his partner, Jim, an openly gay couple, Frank shows a prejudiced attitude. “How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?” Ricky is also revealed to be the person with the

camcorder, taping Lester and Jane earlier in the film from the darkness of his room and front porch.

Carolyn spends time pruning her roses. Meanwhile, Lester's fantasizes about Angela and also turns in his job description,

My job basically consists of masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and at least once a day retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off and fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell.

After he quits, Lester lands a job at Mr. Smiley's burger joint because he wants "the least possible amount responsibility," and eventually catches Carolyn and her realtor rival, Buddy Kane, having an affair.

The movie segues to the end with Lester's narrating: "Remember those posters that say, 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life?' Well, that's true of every day except one: the day you die." Lester spends his last days working out, smoking weed, and working the drive-thru at Mr. Smiley's. Meanwhile, Jane and Ricky develop a strong relationship and Angela's friendship with Jane begins to wither.

The movie ends with all characters experiencing their own revelations. Lester sits at the kitchen table, unaware that a gun is pointed at the back of his head. He ponders over a joyful image of his family and sums his thoughts up, grinning, "Man oh man. Man oh man oh man." The camera zooms back in to his grin, moves past his head, past the picture, past a vase of roses, to the white tile wall for a moment, until the gun sounds and the wall becomes splattered with his blood.

## Identifying Value and Value Systems

*American Beauty* focuses around the lives of six main characters who live in a well-to-do American suburb. Each is experiencing inner turmoil. Throughout the film, the suburban America that many have come to know is exposed in a shocking form, as each character is forced to deal with his or her own crises, all the while learning one of life's valuable lessons.

### *Value in the Characters*

Lester Burnham plays the protagonist. He lives with his wife, Carolyn and daughter, Jane, in what seems to be the perfect life in the suburbs. Only seconds into the film, we are flying above suburban America, descending slowly toward a tree-lined street. Lester is narrating from beyond the clouds. His first words establish what becomes a mosaic plot of betrayal, insecurity, prejudice, disguise, unconformity, anger,



Figure 5.1 - Lester Burnham

laughter, depression, love, violence, and above all else...beauty. “My name is Lester Burnham, this is my neighborhood, this is my street, this is my life. I’m 42 years old, in less than a year, I’ll be dead. Of course, I don’t know that yet. And in a way, I’m dead *already*.”

Lester is dealing with the all too common mid-life crisis. His marriage with Carolyn has slowly diminished and what relationship he has left with his daughter is tense and awkward. Lester makes it a point throughout the film to regain control over his life. Take for example a scene where Carolyn and Jane are impatiently waiting for him in the car. Carolyn honks the horn, as they are late for work. Rushing to the car, his briefcase suddenly springs open and his papers spill all over the driveway. He drops to his knees and smiles sheepishly. Narrating the scene, Lester explains,

Both my wife and daughter think I’m this gigantic loser, and... they’re right, I *have* lost something. I’m not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn’t always feel this...*sedated*. But you know what, it’s never too late to get it back.

Besides blackmailing the advertising firm where he was employed for over fourteen years, he also has an obsession with his daughter’s teenage friend, Angela. The film is brimming with Lester’s sexual fantasies of Angela that all bear a common symbol, a red rose. In order to regain control over his life and establish his self-identity, Lester embarks on a journey to “look good naked.”

The words used by Lester that articulated positive values throughout the film were happiness, party, blackmail, ordinary guy, get laid, beauty, relax, and look closer. The

words used by Lester that articulated negative value were gigantic loser, sedated, expendable, fascist, weird, hate, unnecessary, responsibility, prisoner, non-existent, marriage, and strange.

Many words were used by other characters throughout the film to describe Lester, none of them projecting positive value. Words used by Jane to describe Lester were lame-o, pathetic, weird, freak, and embarrassing. Carolyn referred to Lester as dramatic, distant, weird, contemptuous, and hostile.

Lester's wife, Carolyn Burnham, is a real estate agent who is striving for personal success. As she says to Lester at a business party, "As you know, my business is selling an image, and part of my job is to live that image...just do me a favor, act *happy* tonight."

Throughout the film, Carolyn is unreserved in her pursuit to protect the false image of a perfect marriage, healthy home, and personal achievement. Although Carolyn seems to be confident of herself, her life, and her home, she is desperately seeking to fill the void that her not so apparent drifting life, marriage, and relationship with her daughter has left behind.



Figure 5.2 – Carolyn Burnham

There are few moments during the film in which Carolyn breaks down. One instance of this is where she closes the drapes of a house she was unable to sell, despite her best efforts, and breaks into a convulsive fit of sobbing. “Shut up! Stop it! Weak! You.... weak, baby! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” Carolyn slaps herself repeatedly in the face until she regains control and walks away with an artificial confidence. Carolyn finds a temporary fix to her failures by having an affair with her real estate archenemy, Buddy Kane, until the affair is exposed to Lester at Mr. Smiley’s drive-thru.

There were very few words used by Carolyn that projected positive value. To be exact, only one word was ever used, however, it was spoken countless times throughout the film. As one might expect, the word was success. On the other hand, many words were used by Carolyn that articulated negative value. These words were mainly the flipside of success such as unemployed, weak, baby, unattractive, screw-up, weird, divorce, ungrateful, and psychotic.

As in the case of Lester, words used by characters in the film to describe Carolyn also projected negative value. Lester described Carolyn as a bloodless, money-grubbing freak, and joyless. Jane also described her mother as freak while Angela, Jane’s best friend, referred to her as a phony.

Jane is Lester and Carolyn’s only child. It becomes quickly apparent that she is unhappy and uncomfortable with her body, specifically the size of her chest. The film depicts Jane as a common teenager. She is a high school cheerleader, smokes cigarettes and marijuana, and hangs out with her girlfriend, Angela. At a basketball game, Jane

says to Angela, “my parents are, you know, trying to take an *active interest* in me...they’re assholes, why can’t they just have their own lives?” Around Angela, Jane shuns her parents, however, deep down she wishes her father was more interested in her



Figure 5.3 – Jane Burnham

than he is in Angela.

Words used by Jane to directly project positive value were role model, boob-job, perfect and normal. Expressions from Jane that referred to negative values were obsessive, psycho, freaks, and weird. Terms that Carolyn used to describe Jane were willful, unattractive, and ungrateful. Lester referred to Jane as angry, insecure, confused, and an employee. Ricky, the next-door neighbor described Jane as beautiful, quite a different perception than the one expressed by her parents.

Angela Hayes is Jane’s best friend, or she seems to be. Angela has a thin body, long blonde hair and an attitude that emits a sexual fervor. Angela is proud of the image she has created for herself, easy, attractive, and nowhere near ordinary. She strives to be extraordinary.

The film projects Angela as cocky and self-absorbed. She makes it evident to all who will listen, that she, on many occasions, has been around the block, so to speak.

Angela is known to boast about her sexual escapades with older men and boasts about

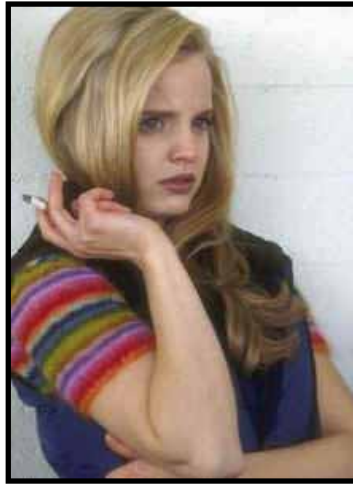


Figure 5.4 – Angela Hayes

how she knows what it's like to be in "the real world." She goes so far as to say to one of her classmates when talking about a man she slept with,

He's a really well known photographer. He shoots for Elle, like on a regular basis. It would have been so *majorly stupid* of me to turn him down...hey, that's how things really are in the real world. You just don't know it because you're a pampered little suburban chic.

Angela only spoke a few words that expressed positive value. These words were friend and model. However, Angela stated many words that projected negative value such as ordinary, weird, psycho, mental boy, mental case, ugly, and strange. Lester



referred to Angela as beautiful while Ricky described Angela to be ugly, boring, and ordinary.

Ricky Fitts is the Burnham's intuitive next-door neighbor. Throughout the film, Jane and Ricky develop a strong relationship by confiding their problems with each other. Jane spoke about being in the middle of her parent's deteriorating marriage and discontent with her body and Ricky revealed his experiences of physical and emotional abuse by his father. Ricky, as well as the rest of the characters, is living in affliction. He sells marijuana for a source of income and uses catering jobs as a cover.

Ricky is known throughout the movie for using his video camera. The walls of his room are all shelved, covered with tapes of footage. When showing Jane the video of "the most beautiful thing he ever saw," Ricky says "that's the day I realized that there's this entire life behind things...and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid, *ever*. Video's a poor excuse, I know, but it

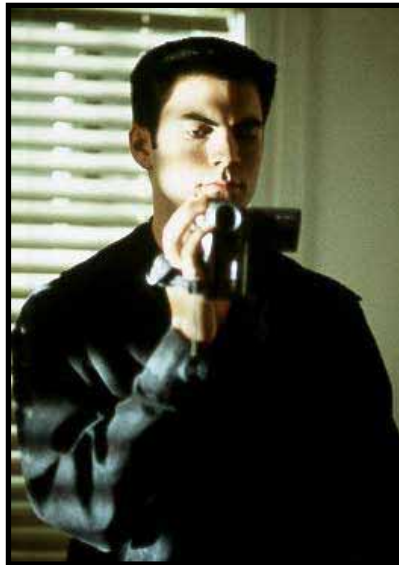


Figure 5.5 – Ricky Fitts

helps me remember, I need to remember.”

Ricky, more than any other character, uses positive value terms. These words are beautiful, beauty, God, life, benevolent force, and curious. Only a few words were spoken by Ricky that projected negative value, such as, afraid and Nazi. Lester refers to Ricky as a hero and a pushover, while Jane describes Ricky as confident. Angela, in contradiction, calls Ricky a freak, psycho boy, weird, and a mental case.

Colonel Frank Fitts is Ricky’s father. In the Marine Corps for an undisclosed term, Frank is very stern and old-fashioned. His wife, Barbara, is inexpressible and never



Figure 5.6 – Colonel Frank Fitts

leaves the house. During the film, Frank repeatedly attacks Ricky physically, too afraid to actually communicate with his son about the values he is trying to instill in him such as structure, discipline, respect and authority.

Words Frank used to project positive value were fight, respect, authority, rules, structure, and discipline. Negative value terms used by Frank were, faggot, shameless, and gay. Ricky used the word denial and good man to describe his father.

In addition to values directly associated and stated directly by the characters of the film, are the values expressed through images and formal elements. These values,

which lie beneath the surface, contribute to the understanding of the value systems portrayed in the film.

### *Value in the Images*

In the same way that values can be stated directly in a positive or negative manner, images can also project positive value and negative value. In conducting the analysis, it was surprising to observe the amount of images that illustrated positive value, nearly three times as much as negative value.

The Burnham's house is located in an undisclosed suburban neighborhood. White picket fences, Mercedes and Toyotas, and rose bushes line the curbed streets. The film



Figure 5.7 – The Burnham's Residence

frames the house as representing one the most important features of the suburban culture – achievement, prosperity, and success.

The Burnham's residence is marked by a conspicuously bright red front door. The door is highly symbolic. The color red represents many values that differ across culture. Western culture associates the color red with aggression, masculinity, courage,

danger (Barbieri, 2006), and more commonly with passion, love and sex as its connection with St. Valentines Day. The front door represents, symbolically what is happening behind it, in the lives of those living in it.

Other evident values portrayed in the images of *American Beauty* are captured in clothing and body language. Carolyn is consistently wearing business suits. Even when she is pruning her rose bushes, she wears professional, “important-looking” clothing. As Lester says, “See the way the handle on those pruning sheers matches her gardening clogs? That’s *not* an accident.” Even when Carolyn preps a listing for an open house, she cleans in a silky red negligee, always projecting the “image of success.”



Figure 5.8 – Carolyn pruning roses

One of the first images of the film is an overhead shot looking down on Lester sleeping in a king-sized bed amidst luxurious bed linens. He is alone and on his stomach. He gropes blindly to shut off the alarm clock and continues to lie in bed. He rolls over and looks up, as if he not thrilled with the prospect of a new day. Later on, Lester is in

his cubicle at work. He slouches in his chair, rolls his eyes, and smiles sarcastically; making it quite clear he has no interest in his job or his career.

A very prominent and reoccurring image in the film is that of family pictures. Scenes in the film emphasized pictures of Jane as a child on an end table next to a vase of red roses and a family photo hanging in a frame on the wall. These photographs also segue into one of the most important scenes woven in the film – the Burnham family eating dinner at the dining room table (Figure 5.9).

This image depicts one of two dinners included in the film. Candles, roses, and champagne decorate the table. The scene captures Jane in the center, surrounded on both sides by candles, directly in front of a vase of roses. The candles are in a descending



Figure 5.9 – Carolyn, Lester and Jane eating dinner

order towards Jane, leading up to each of her parents. Later in the film, at the second dinner, the roses are removed from the table, the champagne is replaced with beer, and

the candles are reversed, placing Jane in what symbolically represents her as the highest center candle, descending down to Lester and Carolyn.

Lester's infatuation with Angela is also contributing to his failing. The first of Lester's fantasies begins when he and Carolyn attend a high school basketball game where Jane and Angela are cheerleaders. At the first sight of Angela, Lester's jaw drops, his eyes become glazed, and his sexual desires race through his mind. The cheerleaders fade away into darkness and Angela takes center court, seconds before cheering and now dancing seductively. Her hands run up and down her body until they stop at the top



Figure 5.10 – Exposed roses

button of her uniform. Slowly, she unbuttons her shirt. Just when her chest should become exposed, roses, as illustration 5.10 details, begin fluttering out.

The second of Lester's many fantasies contains the same type of images. Later on the same evening, Lester is in bed, looking up at his ceiling, which is covered in roses. In the



Figure 5.11 – Bed of Roses

center of the roses is Angela (Figure 5.11). She is naked, barely covered with red rose



Figure 5.12 – Lester fantasizing

petals. As Figure 5.12 illustrates, Lester is silent and smiling blissfully as the rose petals begin to fall from the ceiling onto his face.

As the movie progresses, Lester's fantasies also progress. As he becomes more eager to attain his own personal fulfillment and gain control and power back over his life, his fantasies become more real and even more sexual.

One of Lester's last fantasies involved him waking up in the middle of the night. He walks to the bathroom down the hall. Backlit smoke and fog rush out from the door as it opens.

When the smoke clears, Lester finds Angela in the bathtub. The water is full of red rose petals. In this fantasy, Angela actually speaks to Lester and he submerges his hands beneath the rose filled water to touch her body. Once again, the color red and the



Figure 5.13 – Angela in tub of roses

rose were unreserved in appearance, collectively representing what Lester values as beautiful, perfect, and desirable.

One of the most central, reoccurring images throughout the film is that of Ricky and his camera. Images being taped through his camera are emphasized, specifically the



way they look *through* his camera. When Ricky films live, the audience is shown a graining, raw canvas of the scene through his lens.

Ricky was first depicted filming from his bedroom window after the Burnham's formal dinner. Jane was upset with Lester and they were talking in the kitchen by the window.



Figure 5.14 – Lester and Jane through Ricky's camera

The scene quickly changed from a “real life” view to what Ricky was capturing of the same scene through his lens – Lester mumbling to himself in silence and looks of emptiness and failure.

Another prominent scene is where Jane and Angela are in Jane's room, Jane begging Angela not to sleep with her father. Angela hears a knock at the window. They both proceed to the window where they find the name “Jane” burning in the grass. Across the yard, Ricky is filming from his bedroom. Jane, realizing this says, “Shit, I bet he's filming us right now.” Angela, in her underwear and tank top, begins to dance in front of the window, as if she is a model being photographed. Jane leaves the window

and sits at her vanity where she thinks she's out of sight. Capturing the entire window in his camera, Ricky slowly zooms in to her bedroom, past Angela parading in her panties, to Jane's face that is reflecting off her vanity mirror. Hesitantly, she smiles.

The same image is repeated later on in the film. Jane is in her room, contemplating the fight she witnessed between her parents at dinner. She walks to her window and finds Ricky in his bedroom filming her. She gazes at him and waves. He looks up from his camera for a moment and waves back. Jane stares at him for a few more seconds and then removes her jacket and shirt, leaving only her bra. She lets her



Figure 5.15 – Ricky filming Jane

hair down and Ricky zooms in to the upper half of her body. Reaches her arm behind her back, Jane unsnaps her bra, exposing her breasts. This is the point where Jane comes to terms with her body, finding acceptance within herself and hopefully in Ricky. Commendably, once again, Ricky zooms the camera in to capture only her face, representing what he values as truly beautiful.

These values expressed through images and formal elements provide a richer understanding of the value systems portrayed in the film. However, the association

between the images and words must be examined in order to construct the value system they reciprocally create as well as values ignored entirely by the film.

### *Untouched Value*

Many prominent values have emerged from the film through images and language, both implied and directly stated. However, what was not represented in the film is just as important as what was. For example, Cathy Sandeen (1997) found in her article, “Success Defined by Television: The Value System Promoted by PM Magazine,” that PM Magazine neglected the values of work, discipline and training when referring to success and instead, emphasized optimism, exaggerating the role of luck and good fortune.

Mina Vaughn (1995) in her article, “Organizational Symbols: An Analysis of Their Types and Functions in a Reborn Organization,” revealed that although the values of equality and individualism were integrated into company language, they were absent from organizational culture and play and integral role in defining one organizational culture from another. As observed in these studies, this thesis examines the exclusion itself of certain elements in the film *American Beauty* and how these exclusions create an absence of value – an absence of value that sends a message as clear as those present, about how the suburban culture embodied in the film *American Beauty* defines itself.

One prominent value that was excluded almost entirely from the film was religion or spirituality. Christianity is the largest system of faith in the United States, and the word “God” was only used once throughout the film. Ricky and Jane were walking home from school. A funeral procession proceeded down the street and Ricky asked Jane if she had ever known anyone who died. She said “no” and asked him the same. He replied,

No, but I did see this homeless woman who froze to death once...just lying there on the sidewalk. She looked really sad. [Funeral procession passes] I got that homeless woman on video tape...it was amazing...when you see something like that, its like God is looking right at you, just for a second, and if you’re careful, you can look right back.

Curiously, Jane asked Ricky “and what do you see?” Ricky simply replied, “beauty.”

Although the positive side of Christianity was only referred to once during the film, the malevolent counterpart was mentioned twice, both in sarcasm. Colonel Frank Fitts implied a religious authority while reading the daily newspaper. Ricky asked him, “What’s new in the world dad?” Frank replied, “This country is going straight to Hell.”

Lester also referred to the devil when speaking with Carolyn about his company requiring him to write a job description to keep his position. Carolyn insisted, “There is no decision, you just write the damn thing.” Lester replied, “Well don’t you think its kind of weird and fascist?” Carolyn persevered, “Possibly, but you don’t want to be unemployed.” Lester declared, “Oh well, alright, lets just all sell our souls and work for Satan because it’s more convenient that way!”

Images one might expect to find in a film embodying a suburban culture where 79.8% (Mayer, Kosmin & Keysar, 2001) of the population devotes itself to a form of Christianity, are images such as the cross, crucifixes, pictures of Jesus and Mother Mary, or churches. However, the film completely neglected the ideas of religion and faith. Desks at Lester's office were covered with clippings of comics, newspapers, awards, folders, and files. The Burnham's residence is decorated with contemporary artwork, porcelain vases, family photographs, flowers and chandeliers. Similarly, the Fitts's residence is marked with pictures and maps of the world, traditional paintings, guns shelves, and awards.

Additionally, since *American Beauty* depicts the lives of individuals experiencing elaborate hardships, it might be expected that some characters would turn to prayer in an attempt to bring resolve and reconciliation to their problems. However, there are no scenes that depict these actions or any measures pertaining to religion as an essential value.

In addition to religion and spirituality, diversity is also a value that has been disregarded. People from other ethnicities are not involved with the characters in the film and are not found in the community. Scenes of people walking their dogs down the curbed streets and jogging through suburbia were all white.

Furthermore, in the scene where Lester and Carolyn are at her "important business function," only two African American's were observed out of roughly one

hundred people. Not a single person from any other race, Mexican, Asian, or Indian, was evident at the party or in the film.

The only few places African American's were slightly represented were in Lester's office and in the scene depicting the basketball game. An African American woman was shown working in a cubicle a small distance away from Lester's and many of the high school basketball team members were African American.

Hence, *American Beauty* neglects both values of religion and diversity. These values were not represented positively or negatively; they were just simply not represented. This omission, however, captures an interesting conception of how suburban America is defined in the film. Perhaps this is due to bias in the writing of the script, however, through this analysis, another explanation begs to be revealed.

In the context of this film, the absence of religious values indicates that suburban America's dependence on faith is shifting. Religion is no longer the exclusive influence that unites families at the dinner table, or the only way for an individual to feel that he or she has a purpose. Consequently, *American Beauty* demonstrates how suburban America has set religion aside, diminishing its historical significance in the lives of middle class American's. Furthermore, the absence of minority ethnicities depicted in the film indicates the brute reality of suburban America, a reality that the film indistinctly exposes – that suburban American is primarily reserved for privileged, affluent white folk.

## Evaluation of Values and Value Systems

Value systems form when values and beliefs collectively unite, which is precisely what occurred at the end of the film. However, the gist of the story was intended to illustrate how the ideographs <American> and <beauty> are ill defined by the American suburban culture.

With the use of words such as success, perfection, weird, responsibility, freak, ordinary, and beauty combined with images of crimson roses, photos of happy families, white picket fences, expensive cars, and champagne, one might think *American Beauty* projects a Personal Success value system. However, the relationships of these values, through a deeper examination, offer a starkly different perspective.

*American Beauty* encompasses one over-arching value system. This is the value system of social conformity. The manifestation of values through words, ideographs and images, and their relationships with one another, demonstrate this connection.

The scenes that depict Lester's obsession with Angela represent his lust and yearning to regain his youth, his manhood, and sexuality. Lester's fantasies embody his pursuit to rebel against the norms of suburbia, to break the chains of conformity that we, as humans, depend on to feel as if we "belong." However, Lester has also failed to recognize that in his attempt to re-create his own identity, he has, yet again, become a victim of society's influence – allowing society to define what self-identity means and the ways to go about obtaining it.

Implied in Lester's fantasies, and in the images involving those fantasies, is the assumption that having sex with an underage female will allow him to recapture his youth, his manhood and independence. Implied in these messages, quite bluntly, is the concept that a man's power and control rests in his own ability to have sex with whomever he pleases, even if she is underage, or is "out of his league," so to speak.

Additionally, throughout the film, viewers become aware of Angela's self-centeredness. Lester is the only character who has a relationship with her that ignores her superficiality. Thus, his obsession with Angela subtly implies that beauty is, for many, only skin deep, which is not a novel idea. America's obsession with materialistic beauty has been perpetuated by mass media.

The scenes depicting the Burnham's formal dinners also represent a change in value that is progressive throughout the film. The crimson roses in the center of the table signifying beauty, the champagne flutes representing elegance and celebration, and the candles emphasizing Lester and Carolyn, were all altered by the second family dinner. The beauty was misplaced. Instead of celebrating as a family, they were arguing, verbally aggressive and hostile. Additionally, instead of the scene focusing on Lester and Carolyn, in the midst of their arguing over Lester's successful attempt of black mail, the focus has switched to Jane, who is the innocent bystander in what looks to be an impending divorce.

The characters' innate values also contribute greatly to the formation of the social conformity value system. Carolyn makes a valiant effort to be perceived by others as



strong, independent, and successful. Lester rebels against Carolyn's wishes to be employed and responsible and decides to make drastic changes in his life in order regain his youth – a time when the film made evident that he was actually happy. Women have been historically confined to the home and stripped of their own identities. Carolyn, like many other contemporary women, overcompensates for this and ultimately sacrifices her happiness to fit the image of a powerful, independent woman. Lester, like many men, feels that the only time in his life when he was in control was in his younger years – single, without the responsibility of being a husband and a father.

Unlike Carolyn, Lester refuses to find happiness in his career. His identity is not dependent on his job or how successful he is in it. On the contrary, he chooses to identify himself by how much control he has over his life.

Jane is representative of many young women in suburban American today, young women who are constantly bombarded with images of “perfection,” a word often used in the film. Surfing the Internet, flipping through magazines, and watching television, it is difficult to find an image of a normal, everyday woman. The pressures of these false images influence young women to take any measures necessary to obtain this “perfection” – a perfection that has become the standard.

Colonel Frank Fitts is represented throughout the film as a repressed homosexual. Being taught the conservative values of structure, discipline, respect and authority, Frank is unable to come to terms with his own sexuality, even though the opportunities to do so are provided. Moments of hesitation when with his son displays his fearfulness of

allowing himself to be what he really is. His physical abuse towards Ricky is yet another indication of his frustration with himself and his relationship with his son. All of which are the consequence of society and culture thrusting upon us a system of beliefs and ideologies that we are conditioned to believe such as compulsory heterosexuality and the idea of masculinity and fatherhood.

Lester, Carolyn, and Jane are all absorbed in their own pursuits to fit the mold their culture, the suburban culture, has created around the concepts of what it means to be successful, beautiful and in control on one's life. Even if, as the moral of the story describes, our allegiance to these false ideologies destroys families, deteriorates marriages, and perpetuates a false sense of who we think we are and who we want to become.

The ideograph <American> can be associated with freedom, hard work, prosperity, courage, family and individualism. However, the suburban culture embodied in *American Beauty* neglects individualism and replaces it with conformity. As the film reveals, being an individual in suburban America is "weird" and "strange." Members of the suburban culture are held to standards of conformity and are always victim to the tensions that keep them committed to it. *American Beauty* critiques these tensions, representing the consequences of conformity when we give up our individualism.

The ideograph <beauty> can be associated with vitality, health, happiness, goodness, nature, and attraction, which are all concepts encapsulated in the film in very materialistic ways for the sole purpose of exposing its falsity. <Beauty> as the film

intends to demonstrate, lies in the eyes of the beholder, in the individual and not society's collective manifestation. The film's tagline, "look closer," implies this exact notion. *American Beauty's* story emphasizes beauty in a superficial way as a means to critique this way of thinking and expose its ugliness.

The character, who throughout the entire film embodied the idea of ignoring society's delusional definitions and followed his own "pure thought," was Ricky. Using his camera to zoom in and out on images that captured his curiosity, Ricky allowed himself, and viewers, an opportunity to be removed from the complexities of scenes. Images captured through his lens offer a closer look, beyond our hesitations and strifes to be what everyone else, including the suburban culture, wants and tells us to be.

*American Beauty* depicts suburban American as a culture that is fixated on prosperity, materialism and conformity, and unconcerned with diversity and religion. Although the main character of the film is depicted rebelling against suburban norms, his journey of self-discovery is still tainted by cultural standards.

Furthermore, the values portrayed in the film, the social conformity value system, and the system's falsity is exposed to viewers who involuntarily internalize their meaning. *American Beauty* offers its audience a chance to recognize how they themselves have stepped into the pitfalls of social conformity. The film also presents an opportunity to viewers to evaluate their own lives, including their own values and beliefs, based on those of the characters.

Thus, *American Beauty* allows its audience to openly criticize the characters, from their selfish, materialistic desires to their most bizarre and immoral fantasies, all the while being exposed to the consequences of pledging our allegiance to our cultures collective ideologies of success, happiness, and beauty. Accordingly, through the exposing, internalization and contemplation of these falsities, viewers are then equipped with the capacity to reflect on their own experiences and attitudes towards the external world – their culture and society, and ultimately reshape their perceptions of their own individual realities and the culture they belong to.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Film, like many other forms of mass mediated communication, has the potential to influence an audience about cultural value, and is quite often successful in doing so as shown through previous research. Through value analysis, films can be examined to gain a better understanding of the culture represented through the beliefs, values and value systems discovered.

This thesis embarked on a journey that revealed the values and ideographs that collectively created a social conformity value system in the film *American Beauty*. As the analysis demonstrates, in discovering this values system, a definition of the American suburban culture has been established.

This thesis illustrates how the values, ideographs, and value system depicted in the film *American Beauty* are internalized by viewers through the strategic use of characters who are experiencing common hardships. Furthermore, this thesis argues that the values of success, beauty, happiness and the social conformity value system are symbolic – by representing a world to which viewers compare and understand

themselves. This thesis argues that *American Beauty* functions as an aperture to expose and create cultural values, and consequently shapes and even redefines the ways viewers think and feel about their own world and the culture they belong to.

### Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this thesis is the film itself. Cinematic rhetoric, especially those produced by giant entertainment conglomerates such as DreamWorks Pictures, are always under the influence of Hollywood's perception of the world, and in this case, suburban America. However, the film's overwhelming success and reception in the United States and other countries demonstrate the film's legitimacy. Additionally, as the literature established, film, although produced by large companies, does have the power to reflect cultural values.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Mass media, particularly film, as it has been repeatedly argued, has the capacity to expose, influence, and even create cultural value. It would prove worthy to perform value analyses of recent films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *North Country*, or *In America*. Television programs such as *Roseanne*, *Friends*, or *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* can be analyzed

for the values and value systems they project onto the public eye as these programs have become central to the lives of millions of Americans.

In the end though, it is a true astonishment that a film, embodying such momentous difficulties in the lives of everyday American suburbians, has not only been embraced and understood as it has been, but has also exposed the consequences of accepting suburban culture's ideas of happiness, beauty, and success. The revealing of these falsities, as *American Beauty* demonstrates, allows viewers to recognize how they prohibit us from finding our own meanings, and ultimately, reshapes the way we understand and consider our world.

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