American Beauty or Christian Beauty? Theological Aesthetics in Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty*  
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*American Beauty* is a 1999 film directed by Sam Mendes from a screenplay by Alan Ball. Set in modern American suburbia, the film focuses on Kevin Spacey as Lester Burnham, who narrates posthumously, “My name is Lester Burnham, I’m 42 years old and in less than a year I’ll be dead. But in a way I’m dead already.” Depressed and cynical, Lester is trapped in a loveless marriage with Carolyn (Annette Bening) and estranged from his daughter Jane (Thora Birch). He despises his job as an office drone, which he subsequently quits. The film’s action primarily dwells on his radical changes in behaviour, as he attempts to affirm his existence by smoking marijuana, working out, and asserting himself against his domineering wife. These changes are precipitated by his attraction to his daughter Jane’s friend Angela (Mena Suvari) which rekindles his passion for life. The other Burnham family members are simultaneously experiencing life altering changes. Carolyn has an affair and Jane falls in love with neighbour Ricky Fitts, whose reaction against his militaristic upbringing has propelled his search for beauty in every facet of life. The film culminates in Lester’s murder.

*American Beauty*, viewed through the lens of theological aesthetics, offers insight into ideas of beauty. Theological aesthetics, the analysis of sense-knowledge, beauty, and art in light of divine revelation, has three components: first, a theological investigation into how one comes to know religious truths through sense experience;
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second, a theology of beauty; and third, a theology of art. Theological reflection on the film can enrich an understanding of elements of theological aesthetics, namely, a theology of beauty and a theology of art. *American Beauty* engages the viewer in an exploration of a theology of beauty by asking: Where can we see beauty amid the pain, suffering, and alienation of life? The film offers two related answers to this question. First, the film suggests that true beauty cannot be found in that which traditionally has been considered beautiful. Second, there is a deeper reality associated with beauty. By drawing on the theologies of beauty and art expounded by Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich we can explore *American Beauty’s* theological aesthetics.

Several scenes in the film emphasize the importance of looking beyond the superficial in order to see true beauty. The tagline of the film is “look closer….” The film illustrates this theme by associating traditional indicators of beauty-- symmetry, nature, and physical beauty-- with the negative rather than the positive. For example, when the Burnhams are eating a family dinner, the camera pushes in slowly on a scene that is starkly symmetrical. Each family member is positioned around a large table equidistant from the other. Carolyn and Lester are positioned at opposite ends of the table, while their daughter Jane sits in the middle. While the scene appears to be perfect, in reality the family is miserable, each of them alienated from the others. The three characters are spread out around a large table creating large gaps. These gaps symbolize the isolation and fragmentation within the family behind the picture perfect exterior suggested by the scene’s symmetry. The contrast between reality and expectation is further augmented by the row that occurs at dinner, during which Lester, enraged, throws a platter across the room.
Roses, a traditional symbol of beauty, appear throughout the film, associated primarily with Carolyn. In her garden, she grows magnificent roses, and the title, among other things, is a nod to Carolyn’s rose garden, as ‘American Beauty’ is the name of a popular hybrid rose. Roses are part of the contrived façade the Burnhams display. Rose petals also play a significant part in Lester’s sexual fantasies about Angela. However, when Lester is finally about to act upon his desire for Angela, no rose petals appear in the scene and Lester realizes that his fantasies were unreal and his desire and perhaps his standards of beauty are misdirected.

Angela fulfils prevailing Hollywood criteria for physical beauty. She is thin, blonde and blue-eyed. However, she symbolizes the superficiality of physical beauty. This is evident in a short scene that takes place in Jane’s bedroom. Angela poses in the window in her undergarments, but Ricky looks past her superficial beauty to focus on Jane’s reflection in a mirror. Mendes claims this scene is a microcosm of the film, “once you zoom past the thing you think is beautiful, there you’ll find something that is infinitely more interesting.”

If beauty is not found in physical appearances where and how can one see beauty? Protestant theologian Paul Tillich suggests there is an invisible ultimate reality that underlines the visible world and renders the visible world by comparison “preliminary, transitory, and finite.” Humanity has a deep desire to go beyond the surface of things and become aware of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is not synonymous with God; however, ultimate reality is a part of God. Everything in the world is an expression of ultimate reality. It is not an exact copy and therefore, it reveals as well as hides ultimate reality from us. Only humans are capable of distinguishing between surface and reality.
and the way surface reality conveys ultimate reality. One way of accessing ultimate reality is through a sacramental view of the world. Ultimate reality appears as the holy that is present in all kinds of objects, in things, persons, and events. Everything can become a bearer of sacramental reality. Tillich writes, “Not even the lowest and ugliest is excluded from the quality of holiness, from the power of expressing ultimate reality in the here and now.”

Suggestions of Tillich’s theological aesthetics are evident in *American Beauty*, such as the notion that there is an ultimate truth that underlies visible reality. The idea that by considering visible reality in a particular way, objects can become bearers of this sacramental reality is articulated in the film by Ricky. He shows Jane a video of a plastic bag in the wind, what he describes as the most beautiful thing he has ever seen:

> It's one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing. And there's this electricity in the air. You can almost hear it, right? And this bag was just dancing with me... like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I knew there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. Some times there’s so much beauty in the world I feel like I can’t take it… and my heart is going to cave in.

Ricky sees beauty as the communication of a benevolent force, which he later refers to as God. He is able to see beauty in mundane objects, including the wind-blown plastic bag, as communicative of the divine. This idea resonates with Tillich’s notion that sacramental vision can allow people to see God everywhere. Ricky articulates an understanding of beauty that is the central message of the film and is echoed in Lester’s final voice over: “I could be really pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world.” Alan Ball comments that first the viewer is supposed to think that the
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title, American Beauty, is referring to Angela. The plastic bag, however, is the true title reference.\textsuperscript{viii}

The way people experience great art is important to theological aesthetics and the experience of film as art is a second way in which an analysis of American Beauty is relevant. Theologian Karl Rahner suggests that the experience of art, not just explicitly Christian art, can be a powerful way of doing theology:

One could take the position that what come to expression in a Rembrandt painting or a Bruckner symphony is so inspired and borne of divine revelation, by grace and by God’s self-communication, that they communicate something about what the human really is in the eyes of God which cannot be completely translated into verbal theology.\textsuperscript{ix}

For Rahner, art and theology intersect because genuine art and theology are both self-expressions in response to the self-communicating God. At the core of what it means to be human is a radical openness to God, who is continually communicating himself to humanity through grace and through Christ. Good art and theology are self-expressions borne by God’s self-communication. For Rahner, one does not need to be a Christian in order to respond to God or to be aware that one’s actions are a response to God. Responding to God’s call requires an affirmation of life.\textsuperscript{x} Great art is therefore that which is true to the human experience, rooted in God’s ever-communicated love. American Beauty is a film about people searching for meaning in life. The film centers on Lester’s experience of awakening from his sedated existence and affirming life. This film successfully captures and explores a facet of human experience. According to Rahner’s categories, American Beauty can be exemplary of great art and therefore great theology as well.
Rahner divides art into verbal and non-verbal forms and claims that both forms have unique communicative powers. For Rahner, non-verbal art has a special ability to communicate that which cannot be sufficiently expressed in words. Verbal explanations are sometimes inadequate in expressing religious experiences, due to the limits language places on human experience. As a result, visual arts and music have the ability to communicate human experiences in a different modality. They can create different conditions for individuals to transcend themselves and the limitations of language. Verbal arts such as poetry, literature, and drama are also an effective way of doing theology, as these media allow an awareness of the depth of human experience. They can create opportunities for individuals to transcend themselves and are unlimited by language.

Analysis of the film’s dénouement underscores the idea that non-verbal art is a remarkably powerful way of doing theology. In what is inarguably the most dramatic scene of the film, there is little dialogue. Mendes’ choice to leave the film’s climax devoid of verbal content suggests that like Rahner, he sees non-verbal art as particularly powerful. The non-verbal elements are left to convey the story, such as the acting, music, images, and other elements within the frame such as the angle, perspective, and editing. Since there is no dialogue, the audience must follow visual and musical clues to access the scene and derive meaning from it. Film, as art, is therefore in a unique position because the interplay of the verbal and non-verbal come together to create meaning and tell the story. The artistic elements of American Beauty: plot, dialogue, music, and cinematography, combine to make the film a masterpiece.
Jane and Ricky have just heard the shot that kills Lester. The soundtrack is a non-diegetic musical theme in a haunting minor melody that has appeared at various points in the film to signify profundity in contrast with the whimsical themes that underscore satirical and comical moments. A high-angled, medium shot shows Jane and Ricky descending the stairs in the Burnham’s house. The hand-held camera gives the audience the impression of traveling downstairs. Implicit in this technique is the audience’s involvement, as one is meant to experience the scene with Ricky and Jane, creating a stronger involvement in the events of the scene and a corresponding emotional resonance.

The tone is natural, but the colour scheme is grey and dark, foreshadowing the impending tragedy. In the next shot, the reverse shot shows the subjects. It is a low-angle full shot that becomes a medium shot as the characters move closer to the camera. The camera is still and the only movement is Ricky and Jane approaching the bottom of the stairs. They look frightened and horrified. This is an artfully crafted descent towards the hellish scene below.

From Ricky’s point of view, there is a close up of a blurred hand opening door, revealing the corner of the kitchen table covered in blood. A reverse shot shows Ricky and Jane entering the room. They freeze. From Jane’s perspective we see the shot of bloody table once more and pan down to the blood dripping on to the floor. These shots continue to connect the viewer to Ricky and Jane’s perspective of the event.

In an eye-level, medium shot, the camera pulls back as Ricky moves toward the body, keeping him centered. There is a close-up of the back of Lester’s mangled head resting in a pool of blood. Ricky’s face moves down so it is
centered in the frame at eye level. The shot continues with close-ups of Ricky’s perspective. Drops of blood running down Lester’s forehead and the pool of blood in which his head rests holds a reflection of his face. The dramatic lighting, dark rich colours, and the emotional intensity presented in the shot is reminiscent of the chiaroscuro technique popularized by artists such as Caravaggio and Rembrandt.

In a close up of Ricky, his smiling face turns serious and as he speaks the one word of dialogue in the scene, “Wow.” The final shot returns to Lester’s head on the table. The camera fades out.

This, the most important part of the story, is told through non-verbal media, reflecting Rahner’s stance that great art is that which touches the depths of the human experience, these non-verbal art forms effectively engage the audience in the emotional intensity of encountering the ultimate human experience--death. Various shots, such as the handheld camera shot taken from the perspective of Ricky and Jane, suggest that we are experiencing the scene alongside these characters. This shot brings the audience into the film itself, fostering a deeper emotional connection. This scene depicts Ricky’s and Jane’s, and by extension the audience’s, close encounter with death.

Ricky’s smile in response to Lester’s dead body mirrors the look of ultimate enlightenment and serenity found on Lester’s lifeless face. While at first glance, Ricky’s response may appear to be inappropriate, when understood in the context of the film, Ricky and Lester’s response to death epitomizes and conveys the central theme of the film—that beauty can be found in every facet of life, even the ugliest or the lowest, because beauty is not that which is the most physically appealing but rather that which is communicative of a deeper reality. American Beauty exemplifies Rahner’s discussion of
the unique potential of non-verbal art to offer access to theological truth by creating deep emotional resonance.

The scene that follows Ricky and Jane’s encounter with Lester’s death is followed by Lester’s account of his experience of dying. This final voiceover articulates and reinforces what has been visually conveyed in the previous scene. Here Lester says: “I could be really pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world.”

Analysis of the final scene of American Beauty shows how film, as art, is therefore in a unique position because the interplay of the verbal and non-verbal merge to create meaning and to tell the story. The artistic elements of American Beauty--plot, dialogue, music, and cinematography--combine to make the film a masterpiece.

Beauty can be tremendously powerful. American Beauty echoes Dostoyevsky’s claim that beauty is salvific. Beauty liberates Ricky, Jane, and Lester enabling them to transcend their mundane and painful lives. It celebrates transcendent beauty and satirizes superficial beauty, reversing a trend in contemporary western culture that values the young, clean, and outwardly beautiful, while the ugly, old, and disabled are often hidden away, ignored or neglected. The discussion of beauty in the film seeks to restore beauty to the status of transcendental in the popular imagination.

Christianity’s wisdom regarding aesthetics has important messages for a culture looking to retrieve a deeper notion of beauty. Resonances between Christian theological aesthetics and the aesthetics presented in American Beauty suggest the relevance of Christian theological aesthetics in reversing the superficial aesthetical ideals of contemporary western culture.
Bibliography


Notes

7. *American Beauty*
8. *American Beauty*
9. *American Beauty: Look Closer... a behind the scene featurette*