

American Beauty (1999): See to it that no one takes you captive through empty philosophy, according to the elemental spirits of the universe.

Mark Banks (United Kingdom)

Opinion of film: Not Recommended

Some seven years ago a full-size film poster of *American Beauty* adorned my wall. At the time I admired Lester's cynicism and wit, I too thought that Angela was a suitable object of desire, and the seductive direction and cinematography furthered my respect for filmmakers communicating an anti-materialistic message that also hinted at the existence of a larger spiritual force behind life's mysteries. This time in my life was also one in which I was taking drugs, was sexually promiscuous and was seeing the 'beauty' in the world. It was a time when I was highly insecure, and a risk to both myself and others.

I'd like to be able to say that *American Beauty* helped me along on my journey to finding Jesus, but upon reflection I believe it was far more of a hindrance than it was a help. The anti-materialistic stance the film takes is indeed admirable; the scene in which Lester and Carolyn's potential moment of passion is brought to a halt due to Carolyn's concern for her Italian-silk upholstered sofa was one scene in particular that won my admiration. The message that society is living behind a superficial façade was also one that resonated with me. And finally, Lester's posthumous speech at the end of the film, in which he reaches a state of peace, gratitude and understanding, was one that appealed to my own yearnings. Yet it was not for another five years until I returned to practising my Catholic faith that I really did start to experience any degree of genuine peace, gratitude or understanding for the true beauty in the world. And in the time up until that point, participation in the behaviours that *American Beauty* addresses with gross irresponsibility and dishonesty ensured that confusion, anxiety, frustration and anger continued to beleaguer me.

For whilst there is great truth in the fact that peace and happiness are not to be found in material possessions or pursuing fantasies of sleeping with teenage girls. And whilst there is certainly truth in there being an "entire life behind things" and an "incredibly benevolent force" as Ricky puts it. It is not true that that force wants you "to know there was no reason to be afraid - ever". From Genesis to Revelation the Lord teaches us that we should not be afraid of man and that we should not be afraid to place our trust in God. But He does not teach us not ever to be afraid. In fact quite the opposite is true. We are taught to be afraid of God's judgement on us for the sins we commit; to be afraid of opening our lives up to the evil that exists in the world. Jesus specifically tells us "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). The contempt for this truth leads the film to the point where having engaged in sexual fantasies involving a minor, having taken illegal drugs, blackmailed his boss, shown no regard for the welfare of either his wife or his teenage daughter, used countless expletives and engaged in regular masturbation, Lester is simply able to stand up and say "It's okay. Everything is okay", and to Angela "You have nothing to be sorry about". The film hints at the fact that these are not positive things, but it goes nowhere near acknowledging how disturbing they really are, the real damage that they can do and the need to repent, confess, and where possible make reparation for them. Instead, Lester makes a token gesture of asking Angela as to the welfare of his daughter, not acknowledging that the mere fact he has to ask this question in the first place, and furthermore indirectly, should give him the answer to his question. And despite the fact that Jane is in a sexual relationship with a drug dealer, has a mother that doesn't care about her, and has a father that five minutes ago was prepared to have sex with a schoolgirl until he found out she was a virgin, we the audience are told via Angela that Jane is "really happy".

And it is in this conclusion that the dark and troublesome nature of the film becomes truly apparent. Jane and Ricky are portrayed as the enlightened characters of the film, the victim and the poet respectively, it is with their experiences and observances that we are called to empathise and identify. When Ricky throws the accusation that Jane is ugly back to Angela, instead saying that it is she that is the ugly, boring and ordinary one, the audience is clearly called to agree with Ricky's assessment. Yet Ricky is the one that executes a carefully calculated drug-dealing business; he boasts that his drugs are highly-potent, that he has managed so far to put away over forty-thousand dollars from his dealings, and he informs us that one of his clients is a nurse in a paediatrician's office. It is Ricky that is much more likely to destroy lives and create suffering and misery to a degree that is far uglier than anything Angela is able to bring about.

Equally worrying is the beauty that Ricky sees in death. In Saint Paul's letter to the Romans we are reminded that "sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin" (5:12). Therefore to see beauty in the outcome of sin is not a healthy thing. And not only is it not a healthy thing, it is a dangerous thing, because it begins to equate the state of life – which is true beauty as created by God – with the state of death, which was not created by God. This is why as Christians we believe in the ascension of Jesus into heaven (Mark 16:19), and as Catholics we also believe Mary ascended body and soul into heaven¹. These are the only two people ever to have walked this earth without sin.

Two other particularly dishonest and misleading aspects of *American Beauty* are the filmmakers' graphic depiction of Lester's fantasies regarding Angela – as other commentators on the film have pointed out this is more likely to encourage paedophilia and the objectification of women than it is to discourage such attitudes. And the depiction of the gay neighbours as the most balanced couple in the film, when the reality is that several respected studies show that homosexual people are at an increased risk of mental health problems compared to heterosexual people². Therefore in a film that focuses on dysfunctional suburban life it is irresponsible to paint a picture that doesn't account for this without making it clear as to why such a depiction has been chosen.

The message that seeking out beauty in the world is the only thing capable of bringing us peace is admirable. The ways by which *American Beauty* infers we go about doing that and where that beauty is to be found, is not admirable. The author of The Wisdom of Solomon tells us "For all people... supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circles of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them; for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their creator" (13:1-5). And so whilst God's creations may well indeed be beautiful, it is God Himself that is truly beautiful; God's Humility, God's Mercy, God's Wisdom, God's Word, God's Church, God's Love, God's Forgiveness and God's Sacrifice of His one and only son - Our Lord Jesus Christ.

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¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church #966

² See for example: Fergusson, D.M.; Horwood, L.J.; Beautrais, A.L. (1999): Is sexual orientation related to mental health problems and suicidality in young people? Arch. Gen. Psychiat. 56, 876- 880.