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“American Beauty: Video-America”

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Last week, Sam Mendes’s first movie won five Academy Awards. Its surprising reception by the public reflects, according to several critics, a growing interest on depicting the margins of a suburban, middle-class America whose lifestyle conceals a distorted image of the American Dream, brought on by TV-consumerism. However, the very title of this film seems to tell us that in the midst of modern American life there remains profound and transcendent beauty. Does it?

The beauty this movie evokes is associated (through denotation) with the red roses that pervade many scenes. Nevertheless, at the connotative level, these flowers constitute a multifold signifier, since they are both related to the aestheticized image of the desirable Lolita-cum-Angela-Hayes, and to the false chastity of the adulterous woman (Carolyn Burnham). The red petals distinguish the first level of “diegetic reality” from the protagonist’s (Lester Burnham) delusional escapades, transfiguring and deifying his daughter Jane’s school friend. Bunches of luxurious red roses decorate the Burnhams’ house and constitute Carolyn’s trademark when she prepares the grandiose open-house show. Besides, the color red tinges the scene at the end, underlining, together with the sound of the shot, the off-stage death.

Strangely enough, when we see the sedated Lester looking out through the French window at his sophisticated wife who is cutting perfect roses in the front yard, we are told by the protagonist’s voice off screen – “She wasn’t always like this. She used to be happy”. So, at least for one viewer (Lester), the outward happiness of this suburban successful middle-class woman is faked joy. Notice that later on, Lester will also ask his bewildered wife: “How did you become so joyless?” The “American Beauty Rose” may be withering away.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In this Dream Works production, the

beholder's eye shares at times the candid camera's perspective and focus. The film's surface splits itself in several fragments, thus multiplying its narrative layers in an often over-emphasized *mise-en-abîme*. Metafilmic irony touches the diegetic core of the movie as it comments upon and giggles at its elusive surfaces.

Perception is from the very beginning the means of identity recognition and assertion, though we should perhaps "look closer". In the first scene of *American Beauty*, the specific texture of the digital image foregrounds vision. A closely framed girl is voluptuously lying in bed, talking about her father's crush on her best friend and asking the cameraman to kill him – "Someone should really put him out of his misery". Voyeurism and death, masked by an incestuous desire to kill, set the frame for this thriller. In fact, murder and sexual empowerment will be intertwined in the movie.

Quoting the opening of the American classic *Sunset Boulevard*, by Billy Wilder (1950), the next sequence is introduced by the murdered man's voice, chronicling his announced death. The camera's traveling movement approaches, through a *plongée*, a peaceful American neighborhood. This downward gaze — from the clouded sky above, through the treetops, towards the symmetrical streets — structures the *cliché* re-presentation of *suburbia*. Besides, the camera's movement (doubled and inverted in the closing sequence) suggests that the voice-off screen belongs to a *deus ex machina* – i.e., the author, acquainting the spectators with the predictable tragedy they are about to witness. Sam Mendes does create a post-modern hybrid, combining different genres. Comedy mingles with tragedy as soap opera gives way to thriller. The comic aspect turns out to trigger the interpretative process, since it confronts the audience's preconceived expectations with individualized characters, humanizing American clichés. There are, indeed, several easily recognizable stereotypes of America, from the characters themselves (the ex-marine, the shallow cheerleader, the real estate salesperson) to the situations portrayed (illicit sex in a motel, junk-food eating in drive-in restaurants, *Beverly-Hills* sitcom dialogues). Images arise from the interplay between creation and

quotation, being

based upon several other filmic or literary works. Tarantino's cinema, especially *Pulp Fiction* (1994), is one of the possible sources of influence, since its camera work depicts a representational reality, but at the same time its evasive surfaces deny meaning. Characters are depicted in stereotyped situations, wearing colorful outfits, chitchatting, closely framed most of the time, in well-designed stage-settings. Conversations are reported through the outworn device of alternatively focusing each speaker, following the conversational turn-takings. The fictional universe presents decontextualized *slices of life* with a hyper-real quality.

As in Tarantino's filmic imagery, the icons that pervade *American Beauty* come also from pop culture. Notice that the pop domain (canonized since the 60s) results from the confluence of American humorous self-analysis and foreign projections/critiques both inside and outside America. This dialectics is even more important here as we might be tempted to think that the stereotyping of the American way is mostly due to Sam Mendes' European roots. However, we have to bear in mind that films always have a collective authorship, and in this case both the scriptwriter (Alan Ball) and the actors are American.

Adding to the predictable imagery, several discourses are thematized by their very recurrence — for instance, the discourse of propaganda, exemplified by Colonel Fitt's lectures on "structure and discipline" and by Ricky's parody of *the father's* voice. We could also underline the discourse of *New Age* culture, epitomized by the self-empowerment tape Carolyn listens to in the car and by her musical favorites. Furthermore, the soundtrack includes a few rock/pop hits from the 60s, which signal the protagonist's awakening and his escapism.

We would like to focus on the so-called "advertising industry" discourse. Consumerism as a version of success drives some of the characters' words and actions. Of course, the King of the Real Estate (whose first appearance takes the form of a street advertisement) comes to mind, his motto being "in order to be successful, we must project an image of success at all times". At all prices, one could add. It is interesting to associate the real estate business, as

represented in

this movie, with the American inalienable right to private property, bloodily fought for in the pioneer land rushes. Capitalism and the paragon of the self-made man structure the main characters' hopes and actions, related to the American belief in a Manifest Destiny. Convinced that they are following their unique paths ("There is nothing worse than being ordinary"), this crowd nevertheless falls prey to a homogenizing ideology.

Entrapped in this cycle, the fictional personae re-produce a series of codified actions and words, living in a virtual reality ultimately grounded on the circulation and reproduction of goods. "You must spend money to make money", Lester ironically remarks to the man who is about to fire him. In *American Beauty*, money, property and publicity seem to be the secret ingredients for the rotten success of the Burnhams' "commercial" marriage. Image selling, doubled by the quotation of visual clichés ("*Kodac* moments"), is the trick that sustains all characters.

Thus, advertising emerges as an offshoot of the American Dream, when that dream becomes a manipulated image, a post-modern simulacrum of happiness. Hence, the happy-face logo of the fast food drive-in functions as the satirical joker of commercial America, molding the middle-class lifestyle and intruding upon its privacy. Lester's pun, when he surprises Carolyn with her lover ("Smile, you're on Mr. Smiley"), might as well be an allusion to television show-biz, exploiting the voyeurism of its audiences while surprising their peers in humiliating situations — that is, "Smile, you're on candid camera".

Middle-class-lifestyle-rhetoric and rituals permeate Carolyn's minute gestures throughout her day, since gardening in the morning before driving off to work to her job as a real-estate agent. Driven by her self-inflicted refrain – "I will sell this house today" – she performs an erotic choreography, while setting the props. Later on, however, her act is not bought by the three couples that visit the residence. The potential buyers are the only re-presentations of the multicultural ethnic diversity of America and they take a stand (passive in the case of the Asian and Afro-American families) against the propaganda of "the

land of opportunities.”

Disappointed, Carolyn exits the stage, shutting the blinds of the unsold house, and engages in a pathetic and violent dramatic exercise. One must not forget that Sam Mendes comes from the Shakespeare Theatre Company and imports theatrical techniques to his filmic universe. Thus, the sequence of the lady in distress crying her heart out is ambiguous, since, while apparently portraying an intimate moment caught by us voyeurs, it ironically comments upon its own composition. After her ritual of self-punishment, Carolyn approaches and defies the fading-out camera, walking away gracefully as an actress who has just played her part.

Voyeurism is matched by instances of exhibitionism, akin to kitsch and *cliché*. After unwillingly over-seeing the semi-naked Jane desiring her father's death, the spectator eagerly laughs as he peeps inside the shower where Lester is masturbating (the “high point” of his day, as he says). We immediately feel drawn towards this pathetic hero who exposes himself to the ridicule of representing his life comedy before our eyes. This time voyeurism encourages sympathetic laughter. The comicality of this unwilling display, however, conceals the embarrassment of shameful sexual exposure to prying eyes.

Among the several movies that *American Beauty* evokes, Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) comes to mind. In this motion picture, video is a means of expiating people's most feared flaws, either sexual or emotional. The camera does offer the paradoxical privacy of both a silent observer and a public confessional.

Sam Mendes's camera, moreover, is sometimes doubled by the indiscrete window as a framing-device, enhancing the *leit-motif* of voyeurism, which, besides being an obvious reference to Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), is also a parody of Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). In fact, in *American Beauty*, the foregrounded axis of the camera's mirror lenses is replaced by the cross-structure of the window through which the characters spy and tease one another. Bazin's cinema, as an open window to the world is reconciled with Eisenstein's intersection in the real. In *American Beauty*, the window, a

transparent threshold, is not open, but nevertheless welcomes external gazes into a hidden parcel of intimate reality.

The confessed *voyeur* in *American Beauty*, Ricky Fitts, arouses some suspicion in the viewer, as he filters reality through his shooting camera. In both this movie and *Peeping Tom*, looking at reality through a camera is a source of empowerment, for the reified gaze may become fatal. Curiously, some of the scenes that Ricky films depict death – the white bird on the school ground, the ecstatic experience of finding a dead frozen woman in the street somewhere. Furthermore, he enjoys the gruesome brain-blown-blood-all-over scene, staring into death's eyes.

This terrifying stare co-occurs with a transfiguring gaze that animates daily circumstances and objects with a transcendent beauty. The shifting perception of Ricky, the next-door neighbor, makes him the only character that we cannot fit into any stereotype. The elusive eye triggers signifiers that happen to be empty and that we try to fill in with meaning, through a process of exegesis. Yet, contrariwise to our western myths, as Lacan and his followers pointed out, seeing is opposed to knowing. And we never know what Ricky is up to.

When he offers to show Jane “the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” we laugh at the plastic bag projected against a redbrick wall, until the boy convinces both the girl and us to share his vision. Emerson's transparent and transfiguring eyeball is distorted. Through the surrogate eye of this camera-boy, beauty is renewed, and the waste of civilization (not Nature), flowing past the allegorical wall of reality, gives way to an aesthetic experience. The world results no longer from an individual creation, but from a shared experience of vision blessed by a transcendent force that seems to animate the universe – “When you see something like that it’s like God is looking straight at you, and you just have to look back”.

It might be interesting to establish a parallel between Ricky's and Lester's speeches about the “beauty of the world”, which are mimicked by delayed-repetition. Whereas the boy whispers to his girl friend – “Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world that I feel I can't take it and my heart is about to cave

in;” the protagonist declares, in his after-death wisdom – “Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world that I feel my heart is like a balloon about to burst. But then I just relax and let it flow by”. This latter attitude represents a drawback from the adolescent’s passionate confrontation with pain in an aesthetic experience.

Adding to the moralistic undertones, the movie’s last words ironically point to a compromise with New Age redemption formulae, in that the film does not pursue its consequences to the limit. Ultimately, there is a sense of acquittal through dissolved responsibility, replicating the main character’s demission (“I want the least possible amount of responsibility”). Lester’s freedom cry, whose active stance distinguishes him from *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert, is disrupted by the impossibility of returning to an age of innocence (here equated with Woodstock culture). In the supposedly Edenic land of America, temporality cannot, after all, be reversed.

Despite enacting the most deviating life choices in this story, Lester and Ricky follow different courses. The protagonist’s attempt to fulfill the American belief that it is never too late to start over contrasts with Ricky’s utter contempt for the ideology of success. His resistance, however, is based upon an hypocritical compliance with the system - “Never underestimate the power of denial”, Ricky says, commenting on his father’s notion that honesty and work are the basis that should structure any man’s personality. While pretending to conform to his father’s despotic desires, Ricky leads a dangerous double life. He represents the type of the survivor, embodying the American conman.

The art of disguise, a common rhetorical strategy in detective fiction, is foregrounded throughout the movie as stereotypes are deconstructed by the audience. Angela Hayes is the most evident example: in her social and discursive behavior, she plays the part of the seductive Lolita, although in the end she confesses her sexual inexperience. In fact, she is reified as an object of lust — remember Lester’s words of appraisal, “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen” —, but she remains confined to the prudish realm of male fantasies. The pivotal image of the movie, her naked body covered with sensual red petals, transfixes the religious icon of Our Lady of the Roses.

An equally surprising turnabout occurs when the ex-Marine, reminiscent of the strict-troubled-father in Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989), misinterprets visual clues and trusts Lester with the secret of his homoerotic drive. This would constitute a strong motive for having killed Lester, since, in the flashback "reconstruction of the crime", we can't miss the incriminating proof of his bloodstained t-shirt. Carolyn Burnham, on the other hand, gets her "War-of-the-Roses-act" out of control, mumbling in a wild rage ("I refuse to be a victim"), while playing with a gun, a phallic empowerment symbol. But those who refuse to be victims (that is, to play their "ordinary" roles in a typified society) will inevitably fall into the category of suspects, and ultimately all characters are accomplices of murder.

Who dunnit? The wife? The Colonel? The boy who said he would? The girl who said he should? Nobody is innocent of this crime, least of all us viewers, who share Lester's proleptic knowledge without being able to resist the voyeuristic fascination of death.

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