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American Beauty (1999)

Directed by: Sam Mendes

Screenwriter: Alan Ball

Cast: Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch, Wes Bentley, Mena Suvari.

Certification: R

"My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This is my life. I am 42 years old and in less than a year I will be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet, and in a way I'm dead already." – Lester Burnham.

American Beauty is a movie about a 43-year-old advertiser Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) that faces a middle-life crisis after he falls in love with his daughter's best friend. Lester is married to Carolyn Burnham (Annette Bening) and even though they were once in love now they cannot tolerate each other, and they constantly fight. Their daughter Jane (Thora Birch) hates both of her parents and they all live at the same house and suffer in silence. Lester is facing problems with his job and marriage, but after he goes to watch his daughter cheerleading at a game, he falls in love with his daughter best friend Angela Hays (Mena Suvari). Angela looks for attention in any man, as she aspires to be a model. After Lester hears a conversation between Jane and Angela, that Angela likes Lester, he starts exercising and gets his life back at his hands. He

confronts and blackmails his boss and he starts working as cashier at a fast food restaurant, since he does not want any more responsibilities. His daughter falls in love with the boy that moved next door Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley) whose father is a homophobic US Marine. After Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper) confronts Lester because he believes that he uses his son for sexual purposes, he reveals his true identity and tries to kiss him. After Lester rejects him, he returns home humiliated. Meanwhile, Lester for the first time, after his many fantasies, he makes a move on Angela and he learns that she is a virgin. He then suddenly realizes what he was about to do, and he has his second wake-up moment, that Angela was just a fantasy. Finally, at the same night the father of Ricky goes back to Lester's house and kills him.

This paper will examine how Lester Burnham is presented before and after he finds the meaning of life. The reason that I choose to analyze Lester's transformation is because I want to examine how the director, Alan Ball, presents this mid-life crisis through the cinematographic techniques. I will compare 6 scenes with similar content so that I can point out how this change occurs. This will be achieved through the analysis of various techniques, such as camera framing, colors, sets, performance, and blocking. At the beginning of the movie Lester is presented as a depressed, joyless person that feels dead inside as nothing fulfils him, and at the end he shifts to a more energetic, happy person that finds again the meaning of life.

The first two scenes that I will compare are when Lester meets with his new boss Brad (Barry Del Sherman) and tells him that he needs to show what he is worth, or he will be fired, and when Lester goes back to his boss office and blackmails him and quits. In these two scene I will analyze the camera framing, setting, performance and colors

of the scenes. I choose these techniques because they emphasize better how from a frustrated person he becomes more confident person that is fed up with people's behaviors. The other two scenes that I will compare are the family dinner at the beginning of the movie and at the end. In these scenes I will analyze the colors, settings, performance, and blocking. I believe that these techniques will better emphasize how Lester's behavior changed towards his wife and daughter. Finally, the last two scenes that I will analyze are the scenes where Lester comes out of the door of his house. At the first scene he goes to work together with his family and at the second scene he goes out for jogging. At the first scene Lester leaves home and goes for work together with his wife. This scene is very important for understanding the psychology of Lester and the relationship with his family. This scene tells the audience how miserable Lester's life is, and I will analyze it from the moment he comes out of the door and I will use the techniques of camera framing and colors. Then I will compare it with the scene where Lester goes out for a jogging. In this scene I will analyze the camera framing and colors to see how this shift is presented. All the six scenes are very important in understanding how Lester is presented before and after he changes his life and behavior.

The first two scenes that I will compare are when Lester meets with his boss. First, we see Lester in a medium close up in his office surround by a light blue color on the walls, sitting in front of his computer where the numbers of the scene are blue and presented as bars. The reflection of Lester in the computer screen makes him look trapped behind bars. The light blue of this scene reflects how powerless Lester is (Bellantoni, 2005). The colors of the walls reflect how this job sucks the life out of his employees. This is another sign of how trapped Lester feels in his life. When his boss

comes to Lester's office we see Lester framed again in a low angle shot and his boss in a high angle shot. The angle of the camera affects the way the audience perceive a character in a movie, and in this scene, Lester is presented in his work place as insignificant and unimportant (The Film Shot, Camera Angles and Movement, n.d.). When they both go to his boss office the same camera angle is applied throughout the scene.

The two men are presented differently. We see Lester in a high angle long and wide shot that makes him seem small, as he only takes a very small portion of the image (Heiderich, n.d.). The long shot cuts his feet away from the frame and he has a lot of space above his head, moreover, it creates to the audience an emotional distance (Heiderich, n.d.). In general, the setting in movies have an active role in cinema and can dynamically enter a narrative story (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). So, in this case he is sitting in a basically empty room with blue walls that signify that he is trapped and powerless, the tree in the left corner is dying and the painting is to small for the wall. Even the setting of the office underline how insignificant Lester is and how empty his life is. His body language sends a message of resignation and weakness, and he is facial expression suggests anger, exaggeration, and frustration. He also holds a pencil with a rubber star that emphasizes his humiliation. Moreover, he is wearing a grey costume with a white shirt, both colors suggest depression and loneliness (Wei, Dimitrova & Chang, n.d.). On the other hand, Brad is in high and medium shot that occupies the whole shot and emphasizes his position in power. He is wearing a dark blue costume with a vivid blue shirt which suggest that he is a tranquility, smart, and noble person

(Wei, Dimitrova & Chang, n.d.). The setting of the scene is full of objects and his desk has gold pens and a sign with his name that represent elegance and wealth.

In the second scene that we see these two characters together, Lester has decided that he needs to change his life. He is quitting his job and blackmailing his boss for money. In this shot Brad is no longer dominant over Lester. When we see Lester's point of view we see him looking down at Brad with a high shot. And when we look over Brad's shoulder we see him in the bottom corner of the shot and his head is blurred. This shows us that he is no longer in power because the audience only focus on Lester. In the previous scene the background of Brad was full of objects and sharp edges but in this scene all of them have become smaller. Also, Lester's background has more objects with black and red colors. The red color is a constant reminder of Lester's fantasy over Angela and the black color symbolize his death that comes at the end of the movie (Wei, Dimitrova & Chang, n.d.). Lester wears the same gray suit in both scenes. The gray color can have a lot of meaning. It can signify wisdom, elegance, and someone sophisticated but it can also represent the loss of something, depression, and it is a boring color (Bourn, 2010). The gray color signifies how boring Lester's life is and it gives to the audience the sense that he is meaningless (Bourn, 2010). But eventhough he wears the same suit, Lester wears different ties in both scenes. In the first scene he wore a gray tie with blue strips that may suggest that he is trapped, and his life has no meaning, but in second scene he wears a grey tie with yellow and red strips. This suggest the passion that he desired for life and Angela and the light- yellow color suggest that he is slowly gains energy back to his life (Bellantoni, 2005). Lester's body language suggests that he is confident, hopeful, and relaxed, and his facial expression show that

he does not care about any consequences anymore, and he is being sarcastic over Brad. Brad is confused, and he is crossing his hands and it is a sign of defense over Lester. Lester is wearing a dark gray costume that suggests maturity and it is a reasonable color (Gray Color Meaning – The Color Gray, n.d). Finally, in the first scene Lester is presented in significant and small compared with his boss, but in the second scene he is more powerful, energetic, and he is fed up with how he is being treated.

In the next two scenes the audience can clearly see how Lester is differently represented in the family dinners. The scene for the first dinner starts with a close up to the family pictures over the table. The audience can see the pictures of the perfect family, smiling at the camera wearing white, blue, and red clothes. The pictures of Janes are placed right next to a bowl with red roses which Carolyn had collected from her garden. One of Carolyn's hobbies is to take care and cut the flowers on her yard. These are not any flowers, but the American Beauty roses, where she "harvests" the American Dream (Spector & Tsiopos Wills, 2007). The roses are presented in many scenes in the movie and they might represent the feeling of imprisonment and redemption. Furthermore, the film represents the American Dream, which is the equal opportunities that US offers, and that allows people to achieve their goals and pursuit happiness (Hirschl, Rank & Foster, 2014). But in this film the American Dream is just a coverage for the outside world, where Lester sold himself for it (Spector & Tsiopos Wills, 2007) Lester's family they live in a big expensive house with a beautiful garden full of red roses, but they hide their problems that they have with each other and they try to show

their best image in the society.[1] The American Dream is all over the movie and it is presented as cover up of the real situation. So, this is the reason that the audience see light blue colored objects all over the setting. The blue, white, and red colors are heavily used in this scene. These three colors represent the American family, good looking for the outside world, but tortured behind closed doors (Bellantoni, 2005). The passive blue color is in the walls, table, and objects, where the family is trapped in a melancholic room (Bellantoni, 2005). The white color is in the candles, lamb, walls, and curtains, which represent the depression of the family. And in the middle of the table we see red roses again. The scene presents the family in a long shot, so that the audience can both see the family and background (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). And then the camera moves to a medium long shot and to a medium close up of Lester and Carolyn. They are sitting at the edges of the table and Jane in the middle. This huge table and the way the characters are sitting emphasize how distant everyone is from each other. It's like they participate in a ritual very familiar to them, which is terrifying (Bellantoni, 2015). Lester wears a white shirt that signifies depression, Jane wears a sweater with red details that emphasizes the passion that Lester has to her best friend, and Carolyn wars a blue gray melancholic shirt. After Jane gets upset with her parents, she leaves the room since she cannot stand them anymore. The body language of Lester tells the audience that he is frustrated. When Lester makes fun of her and tells Carolyn that she treats Jane as an employee, we see Carolyn yelling at him and he looks down, avoids eye contact, and

[1] Since America has been through a lot after the change of the millennium, it feels like the golden ages were left behind. People felt that something was wrong with their society, thus it infected Hollywood movies, like American Beauty who had won five Academy Awards (Weeks, 2015).

leaves the room. He does that because he does not to create any troubles and destroy the "perfect" image.

The second time the audience sees the family at the dinner table, Lester has started changing he is life and he is not afraid to confront his family. The set is emptier than the previous time, suggesting that the image of the perfect family has started to disappear. The scene starts again with a long shot, where the audience can see that most of the blue details that existed in the table in the previous scene are almost gone. Also, the white reading lamp and the red roses are also gone. The scene starts only with Lester and Carolyn. Lester wears a light gray colored shirt which in this case symbolizes that he is still trapped, because he is in a transitional stage where he has not figure out what truly fulfils him. (Gray Color Meaning – The Color Gray, n.d.). Also, he wears a white shirt that might symbolize that even though he started changing he is life he still feels depressed. Carolyn wears a pink shirt with yellow roses, which suggests that after she cheated on Lester she found again her femininity, and the yellow roses represent her elegance and class that she gained from Buddy (well famous and successful real estate man) (Bellantoni, 2005). After Jane comes in the scene her parents start fighting. Jane keeps looking at them since is one of the first times that they are fighting so hard. Moreover, Carolyn makes fun of Lester and she is angry because he quitted his job and she keeps talking over Lester's voice. When Jane tells her parents that she does not want to be a part of this conversation she gets up and tries to leave the room. When Lester hears that he starts yelling at Jane to sit down, leaving his family speechless. Here is a major difference with the previous scene, because in the previous scene Jane left and he did not tell her anything. We see that Lester is in charge of this family and they must

respect him. When Lester gets up to take a plate of food that he was asking the whole time, but no one listened, we see him look at Carolyn with so much hatred. Hate for ruining his life for so many years. This is the moment where he throws a plate of food on the wall. At this point we see Lester at a high angle point and Carolyn at low angle camera (Heiderich, n.d.). This is again one of the major points of the move where Lester is taking again back control over his life. Moreover, Carolyn looks at him with wide eyes and her mouth open since she is not used to Lester yelling at her. All these years she was the one manipulating every situation and problem. After that Lester is sitting down smiling and announces that some things will change from now on, like the music, because he is sick and tired of them. While comparing these scenes it is obvious that Lester started changing his life from a quiet man who always avoids conflict, to a person that confronts his problems and wife.

The last two scenes that I will analyze and compare is when Lester leaves his house for work together with his family, and when he goes for a jogging. At the first scene the audience see Carolyn calling both Lester and Jane from outside the house to come quickly because she is late, and she must give them a ride. We see Carolyn in a medium shot bump the horn, and her body language suggests that she is the boss of the house and she is fed up with this situation. We see Lester with a deep focus long shot coming out of a big white house with blue windows and a red door. The deep focus shot allows the audience to pay attention to the whole image (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). The long shot in this scene wants to show how small and insignificant Lester is, and at the same time to show the background of the house that dominates the image (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). This scene is important because through colors it shows the

audience the psychology of the protagonists. The white, blue, and red colors are presented together in many scenes throughout the movie (Bellantoni, 2005). The white walls of the house represent depression and the sense of grief (Wei, Dimitrova & Chang, n.d.). A grief of his previous life and marriage that Lester was happy, and depression because of his current situation. Moreover, the blue represents sadness, melancholy, and the sense that he is powerless and trapped (Bellantoni, 2005). Finally, the red color of the door and the red roses in the yard symbolizes passion, love, desire, and anger (Bellantoni, 2005). The red color in this scene represents the fantasy and passion towards Angela. Even though, the audience has not meet Angela yet, it is a clue of the passion towards Angela, anger towards his wife who humiliates him all the time, desire for another life, and it also represents the death (blood) of Lester at the end of the movie. Moreover, all the family members wear gray clothes which is a boring color that represent sadness, depression, and loneliness (Gray Color Meaning – The Color Gray, n.d.). After Lester drops his case he tries to pick the white, blue, and red folders from the ground. While Lester is in the ground the audience see Carolyn in front of the car with a medium close up shot, so that the audience can notice her expression and frustration that she has towards Lester (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). After Lester drops his bag, Carolyn is presented with a high shot and Lester with a low shot. This camera angle shows how Carolyn has the power of the relationship and that she inferior to him (Heiderich, n.d.). Moreover, Carolyn is presented as a negative satirical thrust that tortures Lester (McCormack, 2007). This is obvious from the way that see looks at Lester when he is on the ground. Finally, Lester gets into the car where he sits in the back sit, this shows a powerless character that he is insignificant in his own family.

In the second scene that Lester leaves his house alone and goes jogging. The scene starts with an extreme long shot of the street where Lester leaves. The voice over of Lester says, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life” “Well that’s true with every day expect one. The day you die.” The camera framing of the scene when he comes out of the door is long shot and it moves to a medium shot. This helps the audience to first see the whole figure of Lester and what he wears and then focus on his facial expression. As he runs the camera movement used for these scene is tilt, and with this way the camera moves with an extreme close up to his shoes and then moves until his head. With this way the audience can see from top to down his outfit and see how Lester has turned his life around (Bordwell & Thompson, 2015). This time that he is coming out of the red door he is not forced to do something that he does not want to do but he is exercising, something that he chose. For the first time he does not wear a boring color, like dark gray or brown, but he is wearing a yellow t-shirt with black trousers and a black hat. The black color represents the death, mourning, and sorrow of Lester (Wei, Dimitrova & Chang, n.d.). The light-yellow t-shirt of Lester represents his mood that have changed to a more powerful energetic life (Bellantoni, 2005). Finally, Lester is presented completely different in both scenes. At the first scene the camera framing and colors suggest that he is worthless and insignificant in his own family, but in the second scene he presented as more powerful and energetic.

The movies effective use of colors, cinematography, and mise-en-scene helped the audience to observe the steady change of Lester’s life. The differences from the begging of the move comparing to the scenes closer to the end have tremendous

changes. The visual techniques helped the audience to understand how trapped Lester was in his life and how he managed to turn it around and find meaning.

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