

Introduction

There are few films that achieve the high level of quality exhibited by American Beauty. The film is a true masterpiece in both content and how this content is delivered to the viewers. It excels at being an enlightening and relevant drama about American life, and never fails to keep the audience entertained by providing many instances of well-placed humor. Every scene was filmed containing metaphoric elements that not only show great set aesthetics, but also create a mood and feeling for the theme of the movie. If one can't somehow relate to anything in this film, then they have only looked at the surface. To "look closer" is a must for truly appreciating this film.

Form

As with most dramas, American Beauty contains few special effects and not a whole lot more than the basic and necessary elements of video. An exception to this is during the metaphoric dream scenes where rose petals float everywhere. These scenes contain music using a wide variety of instruments, including a bird call. The music helps create the mood that these scenes are dream sequences, and go along with the theme that things are not what they seem. Many of the sets contain luxurious furniture and bright red American Beauty roses, symbolizing beauty and the American Dream.

Many scenes are metaphoric in how they are shot, and what is in the frame symbolizes a higher, deeper meaning. For example, in the beginning of the movie, Lester (the main character) is looking out the window of his house at his wife, and the blinds on the window represent jail cell bars. Even the blocks of text on his computer screen at work represent jail cell bars. Lester is "in jail" because his life at this point is so empty and missing substance.

The lighting is excellent, and never distracts from the action or dialog of each scene. It is used very well to create a mood in each scene. For example, a green and somber soft light is used in the scene where Ricky gets hit by his father and looks at his beaten up face in the mirror and wipes the blood from it. This makes the mood of the scene feel not dangerous and fearful, but melancholic and depressing. Ricky is obviously not afraid of his father, yet being hit by his father is not a happy situation for him.

The movie's script is extraordinary, and is one of the main things that make this movie so great. While the meaning and portrayal of all of the dialog in the movie has

rather deep and metaphoric meanings, individual lines of dialog are very simple and realistic. Many of these lines are quite hilarious, and they are all completely relevant to what is being communicated to the viewers. For example, when Carolyn sees her daughter after her cheerleading performance, she says “Honey, I’m so proud of you. I watched you very closely, and you didn’t screw up once.” Carolyn says this in an extremely cheerful and happy tone, which shows how oblivious she is to how rude she is actually being by saying something like that, when she thinks it’s a nice compliment. There are numerous other examples that demonstrate how relevant, well-placed, and funny the humor in this movie is. Another scene takes place at dinner where there is a huge amount of hostility between Carolyn and Lester for quitting his job. Carolyn yells at Lester for losing his job. He replies with “Lose it? I didn’t lose it. It’s not like, ‘Oops, where’d my job go?’ I quit! Someone pass me the asparagus.” His wife keeps yelling at him so he ends up having to go to the other end of the table to get the asparagus. As he puts asparagus on his plate, his wife continues to nag him very loudly, so he throws the plate of asparagus on the wall, and it shatters. He then calmly tells his wife not to interrupt him.

The director definitely is very familiar with the script and can pick it apart with a fine toothed comb. This is apparent in the director’s commentary on the DVD. He talks about how there is a somewhat hidden meaning in each scene. The movie was also cast very well. Every character is completely realistic and believable and can be related to in some way. The acting is superb and never over the top. Each character has a distinct and interesting personality. All of the characters do a great job of representing many types of people. For example, Angela is a prime example of a teenage girl arrogant about her looks, Ricky is an introverted only child, and Jane is a typical teenager.

The editing is of high quality as well. All of the deleted scenes were taken out for good reasons—either because they confuse the viewer, are unnecessarily to the story, or slow down the pace of the movie. Transitions are used appropriately. Most of them are cuts, and fades to black are used to simulate time between events. One cut to black is used extremely well and is very memorable. A very simple editing technique can be very powerful. After Lester is murdered, he delivers a spine-chilling monologue about the beauty of life. He ends with “You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t

worry...” and then the screen fades to black. “You will someday.” It’s obvious what is being communicated here, but it is done so well that it really sticks in the viewer’s mind. The final cut to black is much more effective than showing a gravestone, which would just be cheesy. Another video transition is used very well during the end of the movie. As Lester talks about his life, the screen pans through a few scenes showing his memories as well as some of the other character’s expressions at the exact time when the gunshot went off. This scene is so effective that it can make one’s hair on the back of their neck stand up.

Special effects are used only when needed (for the dream sequences mainly), graphics consist of very simple text and are used only when absolutely needed (such as for the credits), and each scene is located in a place that is very aesthetically pleasing or well at depicting the theme of the movie.

Content

The movie contains themes covering many situations relevant to contemporary American life. These include the beauty of life in general, death, self-awareness, power, love, mid-life crises, bureaucracy corruption, pedophilia, homophobia, adultery, spouse abuse, child abuse, teen-age troubles, and the American predispositions to materialism, physical attraction/shallowness, and youthfulness. All of these intertwine to create a cohesive masterpiece of a story.

Many of the scenes are about life in general; specifically the monologs given by Lester and the dialog from Ricky about his videos (such as the plastic bag floating in the wind). He says to Jane “Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it... and my heart is going to cave in.” Throughout the movie, Lester becomes very self-aware of the situation of his life, and decides to make quite a few changes for the better (for the most part—he does quit his job). There are a few examples of power in the movie. Angela has power over Lester, because she knows he is very attracted to her. Frank Fitts has power over his son, and this shows when he beats him. Frank also gains power over Lester and the rest of his family when Frank murders Lester. Lester has power over Carolyn when he reminds her that he supported her when she got her license.

The best example of love in the movie is when Lester picks up the picture of him and his family happy together, seconds before he is killed. He realizes how happy he

really is and dies with a smile on his face. When Ricky discovers Lester's dead body, he turns his head sideways and realizes that Lester died with a smile on his face, and so Ricky quickly smiles back at Lester. This is very subtle and may not be noticed on the first watching. Love is also demonstrated when Carolyn cries and grabs Lester's clothes after she finds him dead. Even after such a terrible marriage, she realizes how much worse life will be without him.

One of the best examples of materialism is when Lester almost spills beer on the couch. Lester says "It's just a couch" and Carolyn says replies with "This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk. This is not 'just a couch.'" Lester then goes off about her materialism by saying "This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts." and Carolyn ends up leaving the room disgusted and sad.

An analysis of American Beauty would be incomplete without descriptions of the characters. The characters truly drive the story forward.

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey)

The main character changes throughout the course of the film and is probably someone that most people can relate to in some way. At 42 years old, he is going through a mid-life crisis, (which turns out to actually be the end of his life). He has a steady job, a nice house in suburbia, a wife, and a daughter. However, he doesn't like his job, has extreme marriage troubles with his wife, and feels depressed and hopeless. "And in a way, I'm dead already... Both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser, and... they're right." He ends up changing quite a bit. He gets sexually obsessed with his daughter's friend Angela, decides to quit his job and get one where he can have "the least possible amount of responsibility", starts smoking a lot of marijuana, starts working out, and decides to not take anymore flak from his wife.

Carolyn Burnham (Annette Bening)

Lester's wife is extremely materialistic and frustrated with her husband. They do not get along well at all. There is one scene where they are actually not yelling or nagging at each other, but it is broken when Carolyn tells Lester that he's going to spill beer on her precious \$4,000 couch. She ends up having an affair with another man, but Lester doesn't care about this since their marriage is in such a bad condition.

Jane Burnham

Lester describes Jane as a typical teenager: “angry, insecure, confused”. Jane doesn’t like Lester and is embarrassed by him. She ends up becoming good friends with her new next-store neighbor, Ricky.

Angela Hayes

Angela is beautiful and the perfect visual example of the American Dream. She dreads being ordinary and lies to herself and others about being extraordinary, but other than being beautiful, she knows she is nothing special. She lies about her non-existent sexual life.

Ricky Fitts

At first Ricky comes off as being a very strange character. He video tapes people all the time without their consent and also odd things such as dead birds because he thinks they are beautiful. Once Jane becomes friends with him, we find that he is actually a normal person and just has a different way of viewing the world. He analyzes everything very deeply and is a thinker. He has had a troubled life.

Colonel Frank Fitts, US Marine Corps

Frank is a very stern and overpowering father. He treats his son how a drill sergeant would treat his troops. He will use anger and even violence to discipline his son. He is also very homophobic, but he actually turns out to be a closet homosexual or a bisexual himself.

Barbara Fitts

Frank’s wife appears to have a mental disorder that makes her oblivious to the real world. She always seems confused, disturbed, or detached.

Buddy Kane

Buddy is a successful real estate agent who ends up having an affair with Carolyn.

On the surface *American Beauty* is a comedy with numerous funny moments. Beyond all the jokes however, lies a very serious drama. *American Beauty* is very significant to American culture. It deals with difficult and complicated subjects such as hate, anger, and frustration. However, the purpose and main message of the movie is not to document the downfalls of contemporary American life, but so show that even in a world of utter ugliness, there is beauty in everything—even things that may seem

depressing or boring. Even a dead bird and a plastic bag floating in the wind above a parking lot on a cold, gray day are beautiful in some way. Alan Ball, the script writer, saw a plastic bag floating in the air near the World Trade Center and it inspired him to create this movie (statement made during Alan Ball's Oscar acceptance speech). Even though the themes are depressing, they are presented in such a way that I always feel happy after watching the movie.

Artistry

The plot is very unpredictable and original. The composition of the shots, lighting, and music all help create the perfect mood to drive the story forward. One example of great artistry is when Carolyn is walking nervously into her house while crying, tightly gripping her purse, and taking slow, laborious breaths. It is implied that she is planning on killing her husband at this point. This scene is very dark and takes place during a thunderstorm. Carolyn's figure is a rather dark silhouette against the soft gray light in the background. The music is also very sad and helps create the mood of this scene, which is depressing and angry.

The dream and fantasy scenes with Lester obsessing about Angela fit in very nicely with the theme of the entire movie. Being very attractive, Angela is a symbol of beauty in general. The deep red roses do a great job of abstractly communicating these scenes. The viewer sees these roses coming from Angela's body, her mouth, and her bath water. They not only symbolize beauty, but also a social barrier between Lester and Angela. Lester must impress Angela in order to seduce her.

American Beauty evokes moods that cannot be easily put into words. It emits an invisible pulse of energy. One scene where this is demonstrated is when Buddy gets out of Carolyn's car after they realize what a mistake the affair was. As Carolyn screams at the top of her lungs, the camera rises in the air above her car while spinning quickly. This is a foreshadowing of things to come, as everything goes wrong after this point.

The high quality of shooting and editing, script, acting, music, deep symbolism, and hilarious humor all help to create an artful viewing experience. This experience is hard to match.

The Viewer

Every character in the movie can be related to in some way. I relate mostly to Lester—we both share some of the same characteristics. My favorite quote in the movie was from him. Lester tells Ricky that he worked very hard when he was young just to afford basic things. Ricky says “that sucks,” and Lester replies with “No actually, it was great... I had my whole life ahead of me.” For this reason, there is nothing better than being young. Time is an arrow—the past can’t be changed, only the future. Once someone’s life is over, there is no future for them.

Each character in the movie has characteristics about them that remind me of people I know. The situations everyone is going through are also very realistic. Everyone knows affairs are always going on, and that many people are shallow and arrogant about their looks. Everyone knows teenagers put up with a lot of hardships, and that many marriages are corrupt, and that homophobia is a problem. I am sure the sad ending has made some highly emotional people cry.

The movie really grabs the viewer’s attention with its frequent humor. It would really be incomplete without the humor—it really lightens things up and makes the film more interesting and enjoyable to watch. The first time I saw it, I thought it was a funny comedy. After seeing it for the second time, I really started to analyze it and realized that it’s really a drama that happens to be funny. This became even more apparent with the third viewing. It is always a challenge to balance a lot of humor with a lot of drama, but *American Beauty* does a great job of it. The humor keeps the viewer interested and entertained throughout.

Even though the movie is not overly complicated, it is the kind of film that can be analyzed by its viewers to the extreme, and it really makes people think. For example, it is obvious that Frank Fitts killed Lester. However, it is not known whether or not Carolyn was actually planning on doing this herself. The look on her face while she is walking to her front door at the exact moment when Lester is shot shows that she may have wanted to end her misery by killing Lester herself. When she finds him dead, she is deeply depressed. Was she planning on killing Lester though? This is one of the many questions evoked by the events of the movie that initiates discussion.

Business & Commercial Success

American Beauty is an award winning movie. It is currently ranked 207 for its US box office success, has earned over \$130 million (it is ranked at 131 worldwide, earning over \$330 million for the world-wide box office). With a score of eight and a half stars out of ten, American Beauty holds the place at number 35 for the best rated movies on the Internet Movie Database. It has also won five Oscar awards, and another 83 wins and 66 nominations. These include awards for best picture, acting, writing, directing, cinematography, and more. The movie really makes you think when you watch it, and has spurred many discussions about it, both in person, and on the Internet (such as the forums of the Internet Movie Database).

It hit the target audience pretty well. As stated before, I can relate quite a bit to Lester. The first time I saw the movie I was also around the same age as the teenagers and went to high school with many people like them, and have lived in the American suburbs.

Conclusion

If you thought that a drama can't be funny or that a comedy can't be serious, you'll be in for a real surprise when you watch American Beauty. There isn't a single example of a film done better. Every scene keeps the viewer's attention, while being completely relevant, enlightening, and entertaining. Not only is the content top-notch, but the technical aspects of the movie are excellent as well. American Beauty truly demonstrates the power of film!

Sources

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