

How Well Has *American Beauty* Aged?: A Critical Review of the Suburban Film Genre

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American Beauty (1999) directed by Sam Mendes has been considered by many film scholars to be the epitome of Hollywood's assault on suburbs as a perversion of the American dream. The film received many awards and was highly praised when it was released--winning five Academy Awards. This paper examines how *American Beauty* represents the culmination and caricature of a suburban trope in Hollywood that goes back to the 1940s where the supposed suburban paradise represents superficiality, conformity, and submerged sexuality. The film recounts all this as being correct, but the redemptive, happy Hollywood ending reveals that even in the sordid suburbs beauty and happiness can be found. Within the context of other suburban films, the examination of the critical and popular appeal of *American Beauty*, as well as its diegetic elements, demonstrates how the reality of suburbia has changed yet Hollywood seems locked into now antiquated tropes. The longevity and viability of time honored genre formulas has been called into question meaning that the suburban film genre will have to become less exclusive if it is to survive.

It was other people who decided *American Beauty* was going to win an Academy Award. I felt at the time it was slightly over praised.¹

--Sam Mendes, director of *American Beauty*

American Beauty is just a bad, pretty movie.²

--Sarah Fonder, film critic

American Beauty was released in 1999, and directed by Sam Mendes from a screenplay by Alan Ball. The film has been considered by many film scholars to be the epitome of Hollywood's assault on suburbia as a perversion of the American dream. It won five academy awards as well as praise from film reviewers. But now it universally makes the most over-rated film list.³ How can a film that had been lauded for the technical proficiency of the screenwriter, director, actors, and production in the telling

of an effective, compelling story be now considered a “bad movie”? What has changed? This paper examines how and why *American Beauty* represents the end of a trope in Hollywood: the “suburbs.” Yet at the time of its release it had a very wide appeal to the American people, not only because of the good direction and screenplay, but also because viewers could recognize the familiar suburban characters and settings found in a long history of suburban films. My argument also looks at why there were so many films dealing with “suburbia” in the 1980s and 1990s, referencing the idea that the roots of suburban films go back to post-1945 America, and even the 1930s, when the suburban film came into being. This has importance in historically placing the emergence and evolution of the trope of suburbia in American cinema. While examining the critical appeal and historical relevance of *American Beauty*, this article also reveals how the image and reality of “suburbia” has radically changed but Hollywood still seems locked into the same old tropes. The critical analysis of this film shows how the longevity and viability of the “suburb film” has now been seriously called into question.

“The suburban landscape of America stretches all the way from Long Island to Anaheim, from TV sitcoms and movies, it has become as familiar as the mythic West—and of course many more people live in it.”⁴ Thus did the late art critic and historian Robert Hughes succinctly describe the ubiquity and complexity of the American suburbs. Suburbia was not just a geographic expression but represented a state of mind of endless possibilities, happiness, endless consumerism, and upward mobility. But this idyllic suburban community and modern consumer lifestyle that became the goal of the middle class was at the same time viewed by some American intellectuals as being a moral and social nightmare, deficient in values, leading to conformity and ultimately to a claustrophobic cul-de-sac going nowhere. Moreover, the struggle for Americans to make it in the suburbs by striving to be happy and content have in fact come at the cost of financial insecurity, environmental degradation, racism, gross hypocrisy, repression, and anxiety.⁵ Suburban life has long been the staple of Hollywood filmmakers who found the ridicule of the “Burbs” irresistible. However, the intellectual roots of the suburbs as an ideal, as well as the subsequent critiques of American conformism and materialism, go back to the Jefferson ideal of an individual rural, exurban form of living, to Henry David Thoreau’s ideas on Nature and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s view of Perfectionism. Alexis de Tocqueville also observed that Americans seemed restive in the midst of plenty, completely absorbed in the pursuit of material riches. Jefferson wrote that, “When we get piled upon one another in large cities as in Europe, we shall become as corrupt as Europe”, reflecting the danger of the city.⁶ Whilst Thoreau acknowledged the lack of sincerity in the city writing, “I love nature. I love the

landscape because it is sincere. It never cheats me.”⁷ Robert Fishman in *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* concludes that “Suburbia kept alive the balance between man and nature in a society that seemed dedicated to destroying it. That is its legacy.”⁸ Stanley Cavell articulated the idea of “Emersonian Perfectionism”, the idea that one must always strive for one’s unattained but attainable true self. He quotes Emerson on the embrace of the common and familiar matters in life:

show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; ... and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.⁹

Hollywood movies of the 1930s especially were underwritten by this concept of “Emersonian Perfectionism” and what Cavell calls the “Hollywood comedy of remarriage”, which William Rothman defines thusly:

By this he means such films as *It Happened One Night*, *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Adam’s Eve*. As exemplified by this genre, Hollywood films of the thirties attempted to formulate the conditions of a radically new kind of marriage between a man and a woman, a marriage that acknowledges their equality without denying their differences. As envisioned by these films, such a marriage also ‘marries’ the realities of the day and the dreams of the night; the realms of public and private; and the worlds of city and small town or country. The last point is registered in the films’ insistence that, for a man and woman to resolve the conflicts in their relationship, they must at a certain moment find themselves in a location conducive to the attainment of the new perspective. Shakespearean criticism calls such a place the ‘Green World’, and it is typically located, like Thoreau’s Walden, just outside a major city. As Cavell points out, Hollywood films usually call this place “Connecticut.”¹⁰

Rothman goes on to write that in the post 1945 economic and consumer boom, this Hollywood mythical land of contentment “Connecticut”, i.e. the suburbs, was now actually within the reach of most Americans. The masses could now “own a house in the real Connecticut or its equivalent.”¹¹ The dream would now become reality. But, “The reality of suburbia has proved to be a cunning instrument, not for marrying urban and small town or rural America, day and night, men and women, as Hollywood films of the thirties envisioned, but for dividing them.”¹² Two films made in 1946 represent this division and presage the later anti-suburban bias of Hollywood films that

culminated in *American Beauty*. According to Rothman, “*It’s a Wonderful Life* prophesies the creation of suburbia and envisions it as a utopian undertaking, the real fulfillment of...America’s romantic dream.”¹³ While the *film noir* classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice* grimly demolishes the dream of perfection being found in the suburbs, showing it to be just a cruel illusion. Yet as Rothman concludes, “What is striking is that both *film noir*, which deconstructs the thirties Hollywood dream, and *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which reaffirms it, points their audience in the same direction: toward suburbia.”¹⁴ The realities of suburban life itself would come to kill the positive utopian desire expressed in so many Hollywood films of the 1930s. The new positive, if superficial, affirmation of suburbia in the 1950s would now move to television with surgery sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, or the *Donna Reed Show*.

Conversely many intellectuals and Hollywood in the 1950s felt that Americans had in fact lost their internal gyroscope. Something had gone terribly wrong with the suburban American dream. The dissidence of the 1950s foreshadowed the qualities and tone of *American Beauty*. In response to the rapid growth of suburbia in post-war America Hollywood studios produced such films as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), *No Down Payment* (1957), *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), and the domestic melodramas of Douglas Sirk. In his *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) a middle class women (Jane Wyman) falls in love with a younger man (Rock Hudson). In his *Far From Heaven* (2002) director Todd Haynes pays homage to Sirk’s 1950s soap-opera films. In *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Barbara Klinger shows how Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956) could be perceived as a melodrama when it came out, as a critique of American capitalism in the 1970s and as a camp classic in the 1990s.¹⁵ Dorothy Malone won an Academy Award for her performance as the sexually self-destructive sister of alcoholic millionaire playboy Robert Stack in *Written on the Wind* (1956). Lana Turner starred in *The Imitation of Life* (1959), another Sirk critique of phony post-war American conservative and materialistic values.¹⁶ The critique of suburbia intensified in the 1960s in *The Apartment* (1960) with its dyspeptic attack on American corporate life along with the cinematic protest of alienated middle class youth found in *The Graduate* (1967). The 1960s also saw a number of sexual exploitation films such as *Sin in the Suburbs* (1962), *Suburban Roulette* (1968), and *Suburban Girls Club* (1968). A similar genre film was *The Chapman Report* (1962) based upon the 1960 novel by Irving Wallace. The film features a group of “Chapman” (stand-ins for Dr. Alfred Kinsey) scientists who survey the sex lives of troubled, upscale southern California suburban women. By the 1970s as David Wilt observes, “the suburban state of mind was by now so ingrained that many films were set in suburbia without comment.”¹⁷ After all, in 1970 the editors of *Time* magazine named “the middle Americans” as the

Man and Women of the Year.¹⁸ *The Stepford Wives* (1975), remade in 2004, with its issues of conformity, gender and materialism in the seemingly perfectly happy suburb of Stepford, Connecticut particularly stands out during this decade for its vicious attacks on core concepts of the American suburban dream. Well before the hackneyed remake “Stepford Wife” had already entered the lexicon meaning a docile housewife. In *American Beauty* all of these anti-suburban tropes are present, but ultimately blunted by the film’s “happy ending”.

As if in reaction to the social conservatism of the Ronald Reagan years, Hollywood responded in the 1980s with films that vigorously mocked and parodied the conventional values of conservative suburbanites. *The Neighbors* (1983) relates how Karl Keese (John Belushi) in order to be free burns down his house and then rides off into the unknown with two bizarre friends. Then there is *The Burbs* (1989), a tale of xenophobia gone wild. Set in the 1950s, *Parents* (1989) moves even further into the strange with the father insisting his family has to fit in with the suburban neighbors which means not revealing his cannibalistic tendencies. *Suburbia* (1983) shows just what suburbia produces: alienated, angry, violent, teenage proto-punk rockers, who retreat from tree-lined streets into a dilapidated urban “crash pad.” *Heathers* (1988) shows the dark side of high school life, where harassment and ridicule leads to violent reactions. This trend in Hollywood films continues into the 1990s with such films as *Coneheads* (1993), which carries “fitting in” with the neighbors to extremes with space aliens revealing that they can also be transformed into ideal suburbanites. *Pleasantville* (1998) adheres to the by now standard trope that emphasized the sterility and utter emptiness of the suburbs. *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is Tim Burton’s gothic fairy tale set in a pastel colored neighborhood right out of the 1950s. Directors and screenwriters were now willing to deal with new, provocative subjects. Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997) explores pre-adolescent sexuality and free love in the suburbs. Todd Solondz’s *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) deals with the discourse of how body weight destroys the lives of adolescent girls, while his later film *Happiness* (1998) tackles the taboo subject of pedophilia. Finally, independent filmmaker Kevin Smith’s trilogy of *Clerks* (1994), *Mallrats* (1995), and *Chasing Amy* (1997), present a loosely suburban view of convenience stores, strip malls, food courts, and comic book stores that act as a reassuring cocoon that is difficult to leave. Hollywood used “the suburbs” as an anonymous, interchangeable, short hand location sometimes with minimal presence or import in the films themselves. That is why the same house used in *American Beauty* (1999) was also used as the home of Danny Glover’s character in *Lethal Weapon II* (1989) with no difficulty.¹⁹

I will now summarize the plot of Sam Mendes's film *American Beauty* before proceeding to investigate the representation of suburban life in the film along with several critical responses. *American Beauty* has a contemporary 1990s setting. Although not identified in the film the consensus seems to be that the story takes place in a suburb of Chicago. The sweeping, opening, aerial shots show familiar tree-lined streets in a typical suburb of drab conformity. This shot, filmed above Sacramento, California, was originally intended to be a flying sequence where the main character Lester floats over the houses and into his bed.²⁰ On one of those streets live a family of three—dad, mom and daughter—in a large white house with a red door in the “ideal” family neighborhood, apparently living the American, middle-class dream. But of course all is not what it seems on the surface. *American Beauty* uses the tropes of the subversive suburban picture to present a dark and disturbing story about a dysfunctional family that ends ambiguously.²¹

The plot is relatively simple, narrated by a dead man, Lester Burnham played by Kevin Spacey.²² Lester is in an unhappy, sexually frustrating marriage that is just for show. He hates his meaningless job, and feels he gets no respect from his family, or anyone else for that matter. The high point of his day is masturbating in the shower. He develops a sexual fixation on the hot, teenage friend Angela (Mena Suvari) of his insecure, “goth” daughter Jane (Thora Birch) who thinks her father is a dork. Lester quits his job, trades in the Camrey for a 1970 Firebird he always wanted (“I rule!” he exclaims), starts to work out so he will look good naked, and gets a job in a fast food restaurant – “Smile! You’re at Mr. Smiley’s.” He has been reborn: “I feel like I’ve been in a coma for the past twenty years. And I’m just now waking up.”²³ Lester spends his time weightlifting or smoking dope with a strange, drug-dealing, emotionally damaged boy next door Ricky (Wes Bentley), who develops a crush on Jane and sees the world through a video camera, “Welcome to America’s weirdest home videos.”²⁴ Ricky has his own serious issues with his fascist, homophobic, ex-Marine father (Chris Cooper) and his distant, intimidating and passive Mother (Allison Janney), the perfect “Stepford Wife”. Scott Bakula and Sam Robards appear as gay neighbors (Jim and Jim), who provoke the Colonel yet in the film seem like the only normal people. Through all of this his real estate agent wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) whom Lester terms a “bloodless, money-grubbing freak”, tries to anesthetize herself against what she perceives as Lester’s aberrance in an affair with a smarmy real estate competitor Buddy Kane, played by Peter Gallagher, and with empowering trips to the pistol range shouting “I refuse to be a victim.”

In the denouement Ricky and Jane became a couple and plan to flee to New York. Ricky denounces the stuck-up Angela as being hopelessly ordinary, and a fraud.

Lester seems to be on the verge of sexually fulfilling his fantasy with Angela, who reveals that in spite of all her talk about sex, she is really a virgin. Lester then reverts from predator to father figure for Angela. Colonel Fitts who had earlier accused his son of having a sexual relationship with Lester, comes out as a violent repressed homosexual in an encounter with Lester who rejects his advances. As Lester sits in his kitchen contemplating his epiphany about the value of his wife and daughter, he is shot in the back of the head by the dazed and conflicted Colonel, a surprise element crucial to the construction of the film. Ricky and Jane hear the shot and come downstairs to find Lester dead on the floor. As Ricky stares into Lester's face he detects a smile. Lester had found happiness and beauty after all before his death. Carolyn comes to a similar realization when she breaks down sobbing uncontrollably upon learning of Lester's death, realizing how much of a loss that will be for her. But she will not have the rapturous send-off given to Lester. She only will be left with memories and the sordid details. These are the last lines of the film narrated by Lester from the beyond with his shade flying above the scenes from his life:

I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time ... For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars ... And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined our street ... Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper ... And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird ... And Janie ... And ... Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me ... but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst ... And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life ... You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure, But don't worry ... you will someday.

These lines are memorable because they serve the purpose of showing how the film's previous portrayal of the drabness and conformity of the suburbs becomes lost in this final elegiac reverie, revealing a conflicted view of the values it had previously presented about the barrenness of life in the suburbs. This redemptive ending separates *American Beauty* from earlier anti-suburban films.

By the time *American Beauty* was released the image of suburban malaise had been strafed by Hollywood filmmakers. The supposed suburban paradise bred conformity, class warfare, ignorance, competitiveness, consumerism, superficiality, racism, drugs,

submerged sexuality, soccer moms, and the well-tended lawn, all viewed through a picture window, and buttressed by the Jeffersonian myth of individual living as opposed to community. Wesley Morris, film reviewer for the *San Francisco Examiner*, pointed out that the critiques of black hearted suburbia in the Sam Mendes film were about “as daring as the fences, lawns and Volvos they’re ridiculing ... this modernist suburban expose ... finds shock in an uptight milieu that has been unwound so many times its residents—sunny-side out, repressed, depraved, murderous, pedophilic, always smiling—have become our movie friends and neighbors.”²⁵ *Time* critic Richard Schickel wrote, “Oh, god, not that again. Not another midlife crisis, with its subcurrents of suppressed violence and repressed sexual longing. Not another tale in which we wait patiently or impatiently—depending on our tolerance for cultural clichés—for the cathartic, concluding burst of morally instructive gunfire.”²⁶ For conservative commentators, *American Beauty* and the movie industry awards it received just confirmed the liberal animus of Hollywood. This “pop-buddhist” film “depicts the American nuclear family as a cauldron of curses and lies”, with “suburban sprawl ... the most threatening place to live in America (not Detroit or South Central LA.)”²⁷ Examples of the well-known sinister nature of middle class life and business in America from the film do indeed abound. Here are a few scenes of Lester revealing his frustration with his company and consumerism. In one scene Lester describes his position to his supervisor Brad Dupree in the face of impending “downsizing”: “My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and, at least once a day, I can jerk off while I fantasize about a life that doesn’t so closely resemble hell.” Brad pleads with Lester to reconsider any irrevocable decision: “Well, you have absolutely no interest in saving yourself?” Lester then literally becomes an incendiary about his job and supervisor: “Brad, for 14 years I’ve been a whore for the advertising industry. The only way I could save myself now is if I start firebombing.” Lester pleads with Carolyn to make her understand why he quit his job: “You don’t think it’s kinda weird and fascist?” Carolyn responds in a predictable, practical manner: “Possibly, but you don’t want to be unemployed.” Lester’s new attitude toward false appearance and materialism is reflected in his response to Carolyn after she admonished him for spilling beer on the \$3500 Italian couch: “This isn’t life! This is just stuff! And it becomes more important to you than living!” Lester (narrating) sees Carolyn as now representing that dull sense of propriety and perfectionism that he detests: “That’s my wife, Carolyn. See the way the handle on her pruning shears matches her gardening clogs? That’s not an accident.” All these scenes establish for the audience the conformist and meticulous character of Carolyn. Lester’s view of his wife even gets transferred to their daughter Jane when he tells her: “You better watch yourself, Jane, or you’re going to turn into a

real bitch, just like your Mother.” Carolyn again reveals her obsession with money and consumerism working as a real estate agent: “My company sells an image. It’s part of my job to live that image.” Showing her belief in the power of positive thinking, Carolyn chants: “I will sell this house today! I will sell this house today!” Jane and Angela are obsessed with fitting in and conforming as well. The self-centered Angela obsessed with her appearance and popularity states that “I don’t think that there’s anything worse than being ordinary.” The non-conforming Ricky sees through her phony façade warning Jane about Angela: “She’s not your friend. She’s just someone you use to feel better about yourself.” Screenwriter Alan Ball makes it clear what *American Beauty* represents for him:

I think I was writing about ... how it’s becoming harder and harder to live an authentic life when we live in a world that seems to focus on appearance ... For all the differences between now and the 1950s, in a lot of ways this is just as oppressively conformist a time ... You see so many people who strive to live the unauthentic life and then they get there and they wonder why they’re not happy ... I didn’t realize it when I sat down to write, but these ideas are important to me.²⁸

In continuity with the established suburban film genre, *American Beauty* superficially resembles Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.²⁹ Screenwriter Alan Ball began writing *American Beauty* in the early 1990s as a play, partly inspired by the media frenzy surrounding Amy Fischer. Dubbed the “Long Island *Lolita*”, in 1992 at the age of 17 she attempted to murder the wife of her older lover Joey Buttafuoco.³⁰ Despite Angela being 16 on the film, most viewers did not identify Lester’s pursuit as pedophilic. This separates it from films such as Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997) with its clinical view of sexuality or Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998), which presents an undiluted view of pederasty. In fact a study of bloggers reveals that a full third thought that the relationship between Lester and Angela was a crucial part of the transformation and rejuvenation process for Lester.³¹ While it does not seem overly uplifting for a middle aged man to be transformed by fantasizing about “nailing the cheerleader” this nonetheless was accepted by most reviewers except for the most conservative. Roger Ebert addresses the issue thusly:

Is it wrong for a man in his 40s to lust after a teenage girl? Any honest man understands what a complicated question this is. Wrong morally, certainly, and legally. But as every woman knows, men are born with wiring that goes directly from their eyes to their genitals, bypassing the higher centers of thought. They can disapprove of their thoughts, but they cannot stop themselves from having them.

“American Beauty” is not about a Lolita relationship, anyway. It’s about yearning after youth, respect, power, and, of course beauty.³²

Ebert is correct that *American Beauty* reveals so much more about suburbia than the fantasy physical relationship between Angela and Lester. The film at heart remains conflicted as to the depiction of life in modern suburbia as is revealed at the end of the film when Lester narrates after his death what constitutes real truth and beauty.

The original ending had Ricky and Jane being tried and convicted of the murder based upon a frame set up by Colonel Fitts. Mendes however found this too “clever ... cynical and at odds with Lester’s spirit taking wing.”³³ Instead he wanted the redemptive ending to be a “poetic mixture of dream and memory and narrative resolution.”³⁴ This spiritual panegyric separates the film from other attack films on suburbia. Lester understands that happiness is found in the freedom to give and take love. Happiness comes from seeing that beauty is everywhere, and in everything, and what appears as evil will vanish if one looks at the whole and understands what a wondrous thing life really is, even if as in Lester’s case it seems pedestrian and mundane, his failed “stupid life.” This is a Spinozian pantheistic or “pop-Buddhist” view of existence, where human beings are ignorant of the real interrelation and dynamism of all things in life. There is nothing outside of that living. All the petty events, choices, and actions are the stuff of life. For Lester Burnham, the human condition consists of nothing beyond, no need for more. So when craving is eliminated one experiences *nirvana*, “extinction”, or blissful experience. Understanding that will lead to whatever happiness or beauty there is in the world. What then appears as a tragedy, Lester’s murder, ends incongruously in a very optimistic vision. The character of Ricky occupies the visionary spiritual center of the film. Through his video camera he captures the beauty that is all around him, even a dead bird. He shows Jane what he considers the most beautiful thing in the world, a plastic grocery bag blowing in the wind. Ricky perceives, through use of his video camera, the beauty of the world around him. In his mind there was “an entire life behind things and... and this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever ... Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world I feel like I can’t take it.”³⁵ David Denby, film critic for *The New Yorker*, sees “nothing of 60s cant in Ricky’s vision.” Conversely, Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader* comes away with the much less generous view that this represents a “self-centered and self-satisfied New Age spirituality ... no better than ‘psychedelic nonsense.’”³⁶

As mentioned this transcendental attack on the values of American society and suburbia received generally rave reviews, numerous accolades, and grossed \$356.3 million worldwide. Gary Johnson in *Images* observed, “*American Beauty* is one of the

most wickedly funny movies ever made ... a fresh and funny portrait of American mores. *American Beauty* feels like a classic.”³⁷ *American Beauty* quickly became a subject of analysis and deconstruction by academics. For example, Bernice M. Murphy in her study, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, sees in it what are otherwise “fairly standard suburban misadventures”, the “first harbinger” of “suburban haunting” taking the “form of a compassionate, all-seeing voice from beyond the grave rather than the more traditional type of apparition.” For Murphy this gives those misadventures “a weight that may not otherwise have had ... In a sense, the viewer is haunted by the ghost of a man who is not yet dead.”³⁸ But in the years since its release the critical praise has greatly diminished. *Premiere* magazine named *American Beauty* as one of the 20 “most overrated movies of all time”. Sam Mendes took the criticism very philosophically: “I thought some of it was entirely justified. It was a little over praised at the time.”³⁹

American Beauty became the most talked about film of 1999 and quickly emerged as the darling of hip intellectuals and liberal scholars debating the hidden implications of the film’s imagery, message and relevance. The film also resonated with the American public, achieving box office success, a rare occurrence for a Hollywood suburb genre film.⁴⁰ James J. Lorence, the author of the popular film and history textbook *Screening America: United States History through Film Since 1900*, chooses the film to represent an important strand of American history and character: “millions of Americans trapped in the race to succeed.” It became the film about suburbia. He concludes:

The film’s frontal attack on materialism, intolerance, and conformity touches on the social confusion and climate of doubt experienced by Americans not quite sure that the good life has brought personal satisfaction. In focusing on this reality, *American Beauty* documents the central dilemma of modern American life.⁴¹

Even for a popular textbook, Lorence makes a hyperbolic statement about the centrality of *American Beauty*. As discussed earlier in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, Hollywood films have not been shy about addressing these issues, sometimes in a very spirited and even vitriolic way, with the films of Douglas Sirk, *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Written on the Wind* (1956), Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and Nunnally Johnson’s *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1956) leading the way.⁴² By the 1970s suburbia and its ills had become a standard trope in these films. The motifs were by now easily recognized. As Kenneth Jackson observed:

The term “suburb” is of course vague ... The stereotype is real, embodying uniformity, bicycles, station wagons, and patios. It has been sustained because it conforms to the wishes of people on both ends of the political spectrum. For those on the right, it affirms that there is an “American way of life” to which all citizens can aspire. To the left, the myth of suburbia has been a convenient way of attacking a wide variety of national problems, from excessive conformity to ecological destruction.⁴³

David Walsh at the time of the film’s release observed that, “As a supposed exercise in social commentary, *American Beauty* proves to be composed largely of limp and hardly earth-shattering criticisms of materialism and the American Dream and, when one examines them, the sort of banalities that currently make up much of the content of afternoon talk shows and works of popular psychology.”⁴⁴ David Bradshaw, film critic for *The Guardian*, wrote, “I think it was over-praised and we all became rather over-excited about it. It’s a bit like candy floss, it kind of reduces in the mouth and you think, well what was the fuss about, frankly?”⁴⁵ For these critics *American Beauty* offers nothing new to add about suburbia or its values because any criticisms lose their impact because of the mystical ending.

What then, made *American Beauty* such a phenomenon in 1999? Despite its dark side *American Beauty* tilts toward optimism, mirroring a more buoyant second half of the decade. Aging baby boom Americans, and now their children, especially males, can identify with Lester’s drive toward youth, then spiritual bliss, before all doors close, even if how he did it seems very material, crass, and self-indulgent, until the mysterious end. The appeal of the film for women would be much more problematic with the negative, anti-feminist portrayal of Carolyn being particularly pronounced. Narrating from the other world, Lester has found happiness. Lester finds so much beauty in the world that he cannot be angry. Clearly “pop-buddhism” runs throughout the film. The right would see this ending as a denial of consumerism and capitalism as a path to happiness. Americans have always had a tendency to conflate and confuse eastern religions. In 1845 even Ralph Waldo Emerson called the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Hindu scripture) “the much renowned book of Buddhism.”⁴⁶

In addition to the mystical ending the overt surface attacks on the nuclear family and the culture of material success, the connection between sexual frustration, capitalism, and gun ownership was not lost on the Right either. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon conservative critic William Bennett lashed out at *American Beauty*, as did others, as falsifying the “real” values of the white, middle-class, suburban, businessmen heroes of United Flight 93:

What lesson, exactly, do we learn from *American Beauty*, if not the lesson preached incessantly by our cultural elites over the decades: that America is itself a kind of death? And what lesson do we learn from the counterexample of Todd Beamer and Jeremy Glick and Tom Burnett? I can answer that easily enough ... Nihilism is contagious, and is truly a kind of death; citizenship and mutual responsibility are also contagious, but they lead into life. And, oh yes, *American Beauty* is a lie.⁴⁷

Susan Faludi commented that, “The men of flight 93 had prevailed in the culture wars” and “defeated their PC humiliators.”⁴⁸ Yet the moral majority, socially conservative advocates could not get too upset. After all just before his death Lester in ecstasy gazes at a picture of his family, understanding just how important they are in giving his little life meaning and beauty.

The film does indeed feature some controversial, titillating plot devices like infidelity, voyeurism, exhibitionism, homosexuality, pederasty, and incest. The treatment of homosexuality in the film presents an odd dichotomy. On the one hand there are “Jim and Jim”, the two openly gay professionals living next door, who seem completely absorbed in the suburban lifestyle without any psychic distress. Then there is the very conventional, violent, repressed homosexual marine colonel, who in 1999 does not seem very relevant or realistic. Also since the film attempted to market itself as a “teen” coming of age film, Ricky and Jane are invested with grace, sagacity, and spirituality. They perhaps become the only ones left to reach for an authentic life by fleeing to New York, and who might really understand beauty, other than Lester. Sam Mendes, admittedly not the most impartial observer, said about the film, “It was a kaleidoscopic journey through American suburbia ... It was a series of love stories. It was about imprisonment in the cages that we all make for ourselves and our hoped-for-escape. It was about loneliness. It was about beauty. It was funny. It was angry, very angry sometimes. It was sad.”⁴⁹ The fact that the film deals with so many human emotions helps explain its popularity as does the good screenwriting, direction and acting by the cast, beyond any perceived ideological message, making *ad hominem* assertions that *American Beauty* is just a bad film difficult to maintain. Like so many films it is bad in some ways, good in other ways. But the backing of Steven Spielberg and the mighty DreamWorks studio “was most crucial in “steamrolling us into thinking this was a very classy film.”⁵⁰ The midlife crisis and the malaise of the suburbs has arguably been done better in Ang Lee’s film *The Ice Storm* (1997), a virtual reproduction of 1970s suburbia and sexuality, and in the *Wonderboys* (2000), a neglected film directed by Curtis Hanson, in which Michael Douglas plays a college professor, who like Lester finds his personal and professional life collapsing. In addition, Kevin Spacey’s performance became “the great stereotype of his age,” finding “his riff just the way Jack Nicholson

has.”⁵¹ All of this prompted James Bradshaw to conclude that “after seeing this film I think I’ve seen all of Kevin Spacey that I want to see for a long while.”⁵² *American Beauty* has in fact very little to say that is new about American society or the suburbs for that matter, as it “ping-pongs from New Age epiphanies to hysteria to death.”⁵³ And some seventeen years after the film’s release this fact has become more obvious and accepted by critics, scholars, bloggers, websites, and viewers alike, including this author.⁵⁴ In fact Robert Beuka in his 2004 study of suburbia in fiction and film concludes that “Mendes’s *American Beauty* ... focuses on the darker side of the suburban experience, invoking essentially traditional, dated critiques of suburban life.” He continues:

Both the presentation of the protagonist as a beleaguered, emasculated head of household and the publicizing of his illicit sexual desires have a distinctly postwar feel; the caricatured depiction of his wife as an aggressively driven real estate agent amounts to 1980s’-style antifeminist backlash masquerading as contemporary satire ... But the most interesting—and perhaps most conflicted—aspect of *American Beauty* lies in its unqualified condemnation of suburban landscape. After the film completes its unqualified condemnation of suburbia, the narrator’s final, posthumous voice-over exhorts viewers to ‘look closer’ and find the beauty in life – even, one is led to believe, in so wretched an environment as the suburb.⁵⁵

Over the decades Hollywood has presented a variety of views of the suburbs, mostly negative. Yet they also offered up hackneyed stereotypes of materialism and social conformity and old dichotomies of supposed suburban individualism against urban community, that point to, “the gap between the homogeneity of myth and the divergence of reality”.⁵⁶ Social reality is always more complicated than the imagery and symbols used by Hollywood to portray it. But *American Beauty* shows that the myth of suburbia is still capable of generating conflict and empathy because it does capture the core dilemma of material success bringing happiness, or not, in American society that reaches back to its very historical beginnings. The popular success of *Mad Men*, the AMC series dealing with advertising executives in the early 1960s, indicates that the critique will continue but with a more nostalgic, tailored spin, crossing over into parody. One reason for the on-going fascination with depictions of the suburbs could be that so many Americans of certain generations recognize their own lives growing up in the suburbs. The photos of their parents remind them of characters in *Mad Men*. *American Beauty* invokes the “free spirit” of youth and renewal for an aging population. As these generations pass on, the dilemmas posed by the values associated with the concept and place of suburbia in American life, derived from a particular historical era, may no longer be as recognizable to subsequent generations, or so filtered through

contemporary attitudes as to frequently miss the point raised by these films. *Netflix* has now created an entire genre called “Dark Suburban Dreams” where a blog on “Five movies that make me never want to move to the suburbs” (*American Beauty* (1999), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Revolutionary Road* (2008), *Little Children* (2007), and *Blue Velvet* (1986)) provoked some of the following online posts:

Didn’t “Donnie Darko” take place in the ‘burbs?… M.Carter@the movies (18 May 2010).

Anyway, the reason why I don’t want to move to the suburbs is because it’s boring… Anh Khoi Do (21 May 2010).

Oh, there are many other reasons you don’t want to live in suburbia. People, for example. Homeowners’ Society. Lawns… Simon/Ripley (23 May 2010).

It’s funny how living in the suburbs can creep up on you. I try to make *American Beauty* related jokes about it, but nobody in the suburbs watches movies like that… Steve (26 May 2010).

Yes, there’s something about Sam Mendes that makes me want to run screaming the other way suburbia, and *American Beauty* is the best example. Annette Bening’s passive aggression, neo-nazi, abusive neighbors, aberrant sexual fantasies. *American Beauty* is no place to raise a family… blake (17 May, 2010).

Try mentioning those quotes in Utah suburbia. The looks you get are priceless… blake@Steve. (28 May, 2010).

As a proud member of suburbia, I must pipe up and say, IT’S NOT THAT BAD. Really… Jessica (28 May, 2010).

As a proud future member of suburbia, I’m happy to report this top five is a joke, and I’ll be eating my words when I move there in the near future. (possibly into your basement)… blake@Jessica. (28 May, 2010).⁵⁷

With these bloggers the heavy didactic anti-suburban *gravitas* of a film like *American Beauty* becomes an object of camp, derision and sarcasm. For them it can no longer be taken seriously, perhaps because the mystical ending washes away the earlier disenchantment with suburban life.

The suburbs will move beyond current Hollywood stereotypes of not only a place but a state of existence. The sharp cultural distinction between city and suburb

has already lessened, as has old racial assumptions.⁵⁸ For instance, for the first time, more African Americans now live in the suburbs than in cities. Hispanics and Asians had reached that milestone in 2000. Also today more than fifty percent of all immigrants live in the suburb, altering the common notion of an all-white suburbia. Barbara Miller Lane argues that suburbs in fact integrated more quickly than cities.⁵⁹ Despite this increasing diversity American suburbs still remain-two-thirds white.⁶⁰ Bernice M. Murphy writing in 2009 states that, “In the past decade there has been a steadily increasing groundswell of opinion suggesting that suburbia is rapidly heading towards a decline of hitherto unimaginable magnitude.”⁶¹ Leigh Gallagher in *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream is Moving* concludes that one American Dream has been “created...at the expense of almost all others: the dream of a house, a lawn, a picket fence, two or more children, and a car. But there is no single American Dream anymore; there are multiple American Dreams, and multiple American Dreamers.”⁶² The old, or new, problems and dilemmas will no doubt continue, alienation, anxiety and moral ambiguity being universal, but the formulation of any new critiques will reflect the needs, aspirations, hopes, or lack thereof, and the experiences of new generations. Sam Mendes’s well-crafted *American Beauty*, and his later even darker, *Revolutionary Road* (2008), represent the culmination of decades of an antiquated style of Hollywood movie that framed our understanding of life, love, and death in American “suburbia”. Robert Beuka in his book *SuburbiaNation* concludes that *American Beauty* “seems as appropriate a summation of this study as it is a compelling look at turn-of-the-century views of the suburban landscape.”⁶³ Even recent Hollywood attempts to reflect the new complexity and diversity of suburbia in a film such as *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) featuring a lesbian couple and a skateboard rattling down the tree-lined street, fails to escape the trope of middle class angst and dissatisfaction so well mined in the past. As Jennie Yabroff writes about these new depictions of mid-life crises: “In these films class is an affliction, an excuse for the character’s unhappiness ... The implication is that here you have smart, educated, tasteful, sensitive, attractive people, of course their problems are worthy of our sympathy.”⁶⁴ The suburban genre has become skewed and not as relevant. But filmmakers continue to suffer from “suburb-phobia”. The conservative charge articulated by cultural critics such as William Bennett that this represents the left-wing agenda of Hollywood and a reaction to the Reagan years is too simple. The declining critical and popular rating of *American Beauty* indicates that a trope prevalent since 1945 may be nearing exhaustion. It lasted as long as it did because people continued to recognize their own lives in the films produced by American filmmakers even if they did not necessarily agree with the negative slant. *American Beauty* attempts to affirm the hegemony of the Hollywood happy ending, even

in the suburbs, with an unrelenting attack on the social and cultural woes of that world. But as Robert Beuka points out both these visions are so diluted that the film retreats into a “caricature of suburban life as hyperbolic as any offered by postwar novelists and social commentators.”⁶⁵

Humphrey Carter wrote in 1964, “Everyone likes to live in the suburbs. Everyone pokes fun at the suburbs ... The suburbs are exactly what we asked for. The suburbs are exactly what we got.”⁶⁶ Murphy concludes that the very uncertainty of the future of the suburbs ensures the preservation of the older Hollywood trope in American popular culture, because it is “fundamentally related to the fears and anxieties of the specifically white middle class.”⁶⁷ The suburbs are funny and tragic. The suburbs are in fact “home.”⁶⁸ The longevity of the suburban film also comes with the acknowledgement that suburban domestic melodramas are frequently hybrids with action, comedy, romances, corporate business, teen angst, suburban gothic, horror, or zombie films, creating sub-genres that operate in the world of suburbia. But all genres and sub-genres have shelf lives and eventually the motifs start to bore the audience. Meanwhile, William Rothman’s sees the need for a “happy marriage of suburbia and the ‘other’ America whose dispossession is the other face of suburbia’s creation. This is an aspiration worthy of a renewal of American film, a renewal of the utopian spirit of the Hollywood films of the thirties.”⁶⁹ For example, Pamela Robertson Wojcik “looks to the apartment as a space through which we can uncover and recall alternatives to overly rigid ideologies of borders, containment, family, and home.”⁷⁰ She adds that, “The suburb needs the city to center itself, as a site for commuting, as what is proximate, and as its antithesis ... And obviously heterosexual family ideas depend upon the opposing examples of the single, divorced, childless, and gay.”⁷¹ No doubt a new genre of Hollywood movies will eventually reframe the legacy of the “suburbs” within the complex relationship between films, new cultural and social contexts, demographics, urbanism, gentrification of city neighborhoods, and the process and agency of film production. Because of these changes the suburban genre has to become less exclusive in order to reach more people so that the life on the screen is still going to be recognizable, and believable, for a new diverse audience. *American Beauty* represents the culmination of the Hollywood suburban genre in 1999, while its decline in popularity, critical acclaim and relevance in 2016 shows the exhaustion of that genre. *Entertainment Weekly* that keen observer of contemporary popular culture deemed it to be “like a laundry list of things That Seemed Important Until They Suddenly Didn’t.”⁷² Any new suburban genre will have to rise above just being a clichéd caricature of suburbia.

NOTES

¹ Sam Mendes, quoted in “Sam Mendes American Beauty Overrated”, *Female First*, no date, <http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/movies/movie-news/Sam+Mendes-12750.html>. Accessed 31/10/2016.

² Sarah Fonder, “Fifteen Years later American Beauty is just a Bad Pretty Movie”, 8 September 2014, <http://www.decider.com/2014/09/08/American-beauty-15-years-later>. Accessed 31/10/2016.

³ Darren Franich, “Entertainment Weekly: Which movie from 1999 has aged most poorly?,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 10 October 2014, 3, <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/10/geekly-movies-1999>. Accessed 1/11/2016.

⁴ Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 600.

⁵ A recent general introduction to the wants, needs, hopes, and aspirations of Americans is provided by Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For a thorough history of the suburbanization phenomenon in America using an interdisciplinary approach see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Roger Silverstone, ed., *Visions of Suburbia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) presents a number of essays in the comparative context of Britain, Australia, and the United States. An excellent short survey of the suburbs provided by Jon C. Teaford, *The American Suburbs, The Basics* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2008) places the suburbs in the larger context of American history. For an architectural and geographic history of the suburbs as well as social history see Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). For the decline of the suburban dream see Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), especially 3-59. For the “end” of suburbia and what will replace it see Leigh Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream is Moving* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013). For an early argument that the American suburb has been “grossly and unfairly maligned” (vii) see Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). He concludes that the “real house in the suburbs may be better ... At least it exists.” (216)

⁶ John P. Foley, Editor, *Jefferson Cyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnells, 1900), 143.

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 16 November 1850, quoted in *The Walden Woods Project*, <http://www.walden.org/Library/Quotations/Nature>. Accessed 9/8/2016.

⁸ Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 207.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*, quoted in Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 14.

¹⁰ William Rothman, *The “I” of the Camera, Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 171. For an earlier

articulation of Rothman's arguments see William Rothman, "Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia," *East-West Film Journal*, 3, no. 2 (1989): 96-105.

¹¹ Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera*, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 47-68 for a full discussion of the film.

¹⁶ For a treatment of all of Sirk's films see Lucy Fischer, ed., *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ David H. Wilt, "Suburbia," in *Columbia Companion to American History of Film*, ed. Peter Rollins, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 484.

¹⁸ Jon Meacham, "Keeping the Dream Alive," *Time*, 2 July 2012, 35.

¹⁹ John Horn, "Movies are giving dads their due", *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 2004, E1.

²⁰ "Trivia for *American Beauty* (1999)," *IMDb*,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0169547/trivia>. Accessed 28/5/2012.

²¹ For a revisionist look at the suburbs in terms of diversity and unrest see Rosalyn Baxandull and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). For a thorough discussion of the history of the Hollywood suburban genre, particularly those of the 1990s, see Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper, "Pleasantville? The Suburb and Its Representations in American Movies," *Urban Affairs Review* 37, no. 4 (2002): 543-574. They have a "complete" listing of post-war suburban movies based upon categories of "Set in" or "Centered In" reflecting the ubiquity of the genre in Hollywood. Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation, Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), offers a recent survey of Hollywood and suburbia, concluding with *American Beauty*. Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), examines a separate sub-genre that she calls the "Suburban Gothic".

²² For Kevin Spacey's views on the film, and especially the changes made to it by Sam Mendes, see Craig Moddero, "Kevin Spacey: London Calling," *Hollywood Life*, July/August 2006, 94-97, 109.

²³ Sam Mendes may have undergone a similar life-style transformation. At one point in the film Lester complains that because he has to go to some boring party with his wife he is missing a "James Bond" festival on television. Mendes himself will alter his own professional trajectory by moving from deep, dark, smothering, suburban films to the James Bond franchise where in *Skyfall* (2012) he relishes in the guns, girls, and locations, that have inspired fifty years of adolescent male fantasy even if in a slightly darker Daniel Craig iteration. Mendes also directed *Spectre* (2015), which he says will be his last Bond film.

²⁴ Digicams seemed popular in Hollywood at this time as symbols of alienated youth. Ethan Hawke in the contemporary, updated version of *Hamlet* (2000) also sees the world through one.

²⁵ Wesley Morris, "Sneering at Suburbia: 'American Beauty' splashes vitriol on the middle class, but sinks into its own stereotypes," 17 September 1999, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Sneering-at-suburbia-3067171.php>. Accessed 1/11/2016.

²⁶ Richard Schickel, "Dark Side of the American Dream," *Time*, 20 September 1999, 79-80. For a fuller discussion of the clichés found in *American Beauty* see Gary Hentzl, "Review of American Beauty," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (Winter 2000-2001):46-50.

²⁷ Charles Jarvis, "American Beauty Is an American Horror," *Human Events*, 24 March 2000, 14.

²⁸ Quoted in Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 10.

²⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1955). Also a 1962 film starring James Mason, directed by Stanley Kubrick.

³⁰ *Films Directed by Sam Mendes: American Beauty, Revolutionary Road, Road to Perdition, Jarhead*, ed. Books Group (Memphis, TN: Books LLC, 2011), 2.

³¹ Casey McKittrick, "I Laughed and Cringed at the Same Time': Shaping Pedophilic Discourse around *American Beauty* and *Happiness*," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 47 (2001), 6.

³² Roger Ebert, "American Beauty," <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/american-beauty-1999>. Accessed 1/11/2016.

³³ Mendes quoted in James Lorence, *Screening America: United States History through Film since 1900* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 200.

³⁴ *Films Directed by Sam Mendes*, 16.

³⁵ *American Beauty* launched the career of Wes Bentley, a struggling actor up to that point. But just as with the film his life and career went into an equally sudden decline chronicled brilliantly by director Tony Zierra in the documentary *My Big Break* (2009; MBB Group, 2011), DVD. Over a number of years Zierra filmed the lives of four struggling actors trying to make it in Hollywood.

³⁶ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Getting it both Ways: American Beauty," *Chicago Reader—On Film*, 23 September 1999, <https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2017/01/getting-it-both-ways/>. Accessed 30/5/2017.

³⁷ Gary Johnson, "American Beauty," *Images* 8 (no date), <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue08/reviews/americanbeauty/>. Accessed 19/12/2013.

³⁸ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 134.

³⁹ *Films directed by Sam Mendes*, 20, 22.

⁴⁰ Muzzio and Halper, "Pleasantville?," 570.

⁴¹ Lorence, *Screening America*, 199.

⁴² See Muzzio and Halper, particularly 550.

⁴³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4.

⁴⁴ David Walsh, “Is this the real thing?,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 29 September 1999, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/1999/09/amer-s29.html>. Accessed 1/11/2016.

⁴⁵ Peter Bradshaw, Derek Malcolm and Johnathan Romney in conversation with Tracy MacLeod, *Critical Review of the Year, The Guardian*, 18 December 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/dec/18/1>. Accessed 1/11/2016.

⁴⁶ Lisa Miller, “The Clash of the Yogis: Do the Hindu Roots of Yoga Matter?,” *Newsweek*, 24 and 31 May 2010, 25.

⁴⁷ William J. Bennett, *Why We Fight, Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2002), 175.

⁴⁸ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream, Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 62.

⁴⁹ Sam Mendes quoted in Lorence, *Screening America*, 200.

⁵⁰ Bradshaw, *Critical Review of the Year*, 2.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Muzzio and Halper, “Pleasantville?,” 550.

⁵⁴ Franich, “Entertainment Geekly,” 3.

⁵⁵ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 242.

⁵⁶ Lesley Felperin, “Close to the Edge,” *Sight & Sound*, 7, no. 10, (October 1997), 16.

⁵⁷ “Five movies that make me never want to move to the suburbs,” *Bitchin’ Film Reviews*, <http://bitchinfilmreviews.com/five-movies-that-make-me-never-want-to-move-to-the-suburbs/>. Accessed 19/12/2012.

⁵⁸ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 239-241.

⁵⁹ Barbara Miller Lane, *Houses for a New World: Builders and Buyers in American Suburbs, 1945-1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 192. Also see James A. Jacobs, *Detached America: Building Houses in Postwar Suburbia* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), who observes that Blacks may have made it to the suburbs but initially it was to inner ring suburbs vacated by whites (176).

⁶⁰ Carol Morello, “Suburbia is no longer the same”, *The Guardian Weekly*, 21 May 2010, 46.

⁶¹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 193.

⁶² Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 210.

⁶³ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 242.

⁶⁴ Jennie Yabroff, “High Class or Trailer Trash,” *Newsweek*, 12 July 2010, 61. For a sympathetic review of *The Kids Are All Right*, see Mary Pois, “Family Ties,” *Time*, 19 July 2010, 52.

⁶⁵ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 242.

⁶⁶ Humphrey Carver, *Cities in the Suburbs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 3.

⁶⁷ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 200.

⁶⁸ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 243.

⁶⁹ Rothman, *The “I” of the Camera*, 176.

⁷⁰ Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture 1945 to 1975* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 45.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Franich, "Entertainment Geekly," 3.