

Satire is one of the most satisfying, stirring, even life-changing experiences that art can provide. British writers have excelled at it since the early eighteenth century when Dryden, Swift and Pope imbued their poetry with a strong satirical tone. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* developed the satirical style into a political metaphor, and the magazine *Private Eye* and the television programme *Spitting Image* used satire successfully to produce yet new forms. Last year satire crept on to the big screen and caused a surprising and extraordinary success with *American Beauty*. Martina Nagel explains the secrets of its success.

# The beauty of American satire

by Martina Nagel

**A**lan Ball's biting script *American Beauty*, together with directing from Sam Mendes, put America's suburban life under the magnifying glass, exposing its absurdity. What is the secret of *American Beauty's* success? Why does satire appeal to us and make us pay to see ourselves – humanity – ridiculed?

Well, when satire aims its sharp sting at public figures, its effect on the audience is almost therapeutic. It releases a mixture of anger and powerlessness, fear and frustration in the exclamation, 'Finally someone has put their finger on it and spelled out who these people really are.' When satire is aimed at us we like to recognise our neighbour in it. 'I know so many people just like that,' was the common expression after *American Beauty* was released in cinemas. Many years before, Swift had observed that satire is like a mirror in which people see everyone's face except their own. The truth is that satire sits right on the back of hypocrisy, always on the look out for new discrepancies between values and actions, between people's lip service to virtue and their actual performance in life.

What sets satire apart from comedy – which only reminds us of our incorrigible human limitations – is that satire is dedicated to a shared sense of value. Its aggression draws upon an implicit moral agreement between satirist and audience, so that anything identified as being contradictory can become the butt of the jokes.

*American Beauty* targets the lives of perfectly normal middle-class individuals and their positions in society as workers and consumers, the ones who live comfortably but desire more comfort. The main character,



What you hear is what you get

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Lester Burnham, finds himself trapped in this perfect set-up behind the bars of an apparently harmonious façade. Instead of enjoying his job, Lester is overwhelmed by the meaninglessness and monotony of the work that drains the life from him. Instead of valuing the achievements of his marriage, Lester feels intimidated by his wife's respect for an Italian silk settee that inhibits the slightest touch of intimacy between them.

Instead of enjoying their daughter's adolescence, both accuse each other of not making an effort and withdraw to their own

worlds. The daughter escapes to the drug-dealing neighbour and Lester to the garage to pump up his body so as to be attractive to his daughter's girlfriend.

This is the basic structure from which the filmmakers will peel off layer after layer to make us look more closely, but not at the deep feelings and psychological bonds. No. Satire does not invite the audience to speculate on any complex motives of the characters because this would result in empathy with the characters' inner struggles and longings and make it impossible for the audience to respond to the satire. As the French say: 'To understand everything is to forgive everything.'

Satire does the opposite; it exaggerates and distorts the target in ways that emphasise the behaviour that the satirist wishes to ▶

attack. Alan Ball succeeds in painting a picture of suburban life that is close enough to be recognised but sufficiently distorted to be funny. The depiction is not life-like. Much of the best satire depends on skilful caricature rather than any attempt at an authentic rendition of the subject. Ball chooses Lester Burnham as the narrator and through him displays his distinct point of view and critical attitude towards the world that he puts on screen.

Lester appears to be as entangled in the patterns of an insincere lifestyle as is the world around him. It is his inability to hide his own hypocrisy and his utter exhaustion from its taxing dynamics that make him set out on his quest for life. "Both my wife and daughter think that I am this gigantic loser. And they are right. I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is but I didn't always feel this sedated. But you know what? It is never too late to get it back!"

This is a story about a man who wants to find his life. The irony is that he will lose his life within a year. But still the driving force remains the audience's curiosity: 'How will this pathetic little man whose highlight of the day is to masturbate in the shower and who is completely henpecked by his wife and despised by his daughter, how will he ever break free?' He does. True to character, it is his penis that senses the first prospect of new life and initiates a journey that slowly awakens his heart, mind and soul.

There are two important creative choices that the film-makers make that I would question. The first one relates to the opening of the movie. Sam Mendes tells us that he changed the beginning of the film many times, eventually ending up with three

different openings. The first describes in a prologue the teenagers' responsibility for Lester's death. The second shows Lester superimposed over the aerial shot and then awaking from a dream. The third is the existing opening where Lester's daughter and boyfriend consider killing her father. Mendes rejected the first two openings because they changed the tone and nature of the film. However, the question remains, what creative implications justify the present opening of the film?

As it stands, the shot of the daughter talking about her desire to see her father killed is very misleading with reference to the genre and the emotional journey of the film. This opening places the film in the murder mystery genre, identifying the suspect and corpse at the beginning of the film and provoking the question in the audience's minds: 'How did the teenagers kill Lester Burnham?' If this question is applied to every scene, it changes the point of view of the story and undermines the film's satirical potential. The key question that should be asked (despite the deceptive first shot) is: 'How will this little man find life?' because this perfectly enhances the subtext of each scene.

From the opening title, the movie proceeds in such an organic and stylistically unifying way that one quickly forgets the first shot and is entranced by the originality, wit and fantastic narrative of this masterpiece.

In the first four minutes the filmmakers use seven very specific satirical devices, namely: understatement, irony, wit, caricature, sarcasm, lampoon and hyperbole:

- The naive summary of Lester's life. "My name is Lester Burnham. This is my

neighbourhood. This is my street. This is my life." In its understated tone it demonstrates the incongruity between the complexity and value of a life and the minimalism of its depiction.

- Lester masturbates in the shower and shows neither excitement nor shame. Irony underlines this scene, bringing two contrasting meanings into play: our association with masturbation and Lester's expression of it as being simply boring.
- Lester watches his wife talking to the neighbours and comments on her gardening clothes. 'See the way she handles those pruning shears matches her gardening clogs? That's not an accident.'
- The neighbours are a caricature of a conservative, narcissistic, gay couple. "This is our next-door neighbour, Jim. And that's his lover, Jim."
- Lester thoughtfully describes his teenage daughter and ends his train of thought with the sarcastic statement: "Jane is a pretty typical teenager: angry, insecure, confused. I wish I could tell her that's all going to pass but I don't want to lie to her."
- Carolyn lampoons her daughter and Lester while she waits for them at the car. "Jane, honey, are you trying to look unattractive? Yes! Congratulations, you've succeeded admirably. Lester could you make me a little later, please, because I am not quite late enough!"
- Finally Lester's suitcase opens and he stumbles on it. This is a hyperbolic use of a pratfall.

Alan Ball skilfully uses several traditional techniques of satire throughout the movie in order to soften the attack and make it more palatable. It is essential that satire entertains and varies its critical approach with as many devices as possible in order to be acceptable to the audience. In a world of hypocrisy where social standing, church membership, titles and degrees, peer recognition, lip service to morals and wealth are all used as a façade behind which vice develops freely, simple moral encouragement would be totally meaningless. Various means of satirical presentation have to be used therefore in order to convey the message effectively without losing the audience's attention through unremitting criticism.

The application of satire can be used quite loosely because satire itself is more of an attitude or stance than a genre or type of



Dreamworks Home Entertainment

A thorn by any other name

film. Satire is an approach to a situation that can be used in any of the various film genres. Alan Ball chose to apply satire to the melodrama, a genre that can be described as a dramatised documentary of our own lives.

Ball's use of fairly strong language poses a risk of offending the audience. When the girls are talking in the bedroom, Angela paints a picture of making love to Lester using dirty language in such a way that some people rejected the satire as too rude or crude. In assaulting his target, repeatedly making it look ridiculous and uncovering its foolishness, the satirist is always going to push hard at the edge of audience acceptability.

When Carolyn confronts Lester about smoking pot in the garage, he uses abusive, non-ironical invective against his wife. "You are one to talk, you bloodless, money-grubbing freak." The danger of pure invective is that one quickly tires of it since there is little opportunity for inventive wit. Sam Mendes realised this and changed the tone of the following scene between the couple when Lester tries to seduce Carolyn on the Italian silk couch.

One of the most delightful scenes is the one at Smilies. Lester serves the snuggling couple in the car and burlesques them. Here Alan Ball creates a large gap between the situation of being caught in adultery and the style with which Lester speaks to the uncovered couple. "Smile, you are at Mr Smilies! ... Would you like to try our new beef and cheese pork pie on a stick? Just a dollar ninety-nine for a limited time only." Burlesque makes the discrepancy between the words and the situation appear ridiculous.

All the characters in this drama are to a certain extent caricatures. For comic effect, exaggeration is linked to caricature, which in turn produces the grotesque. The film-makers draw upon fertile ground that they establish for Carolyn. They exploit her loneliness and wannabe success in the bizarre sex scene with the real estate king, Buddy. Carolyn's legs spread into the air while the couple shout: "You like getting nailed by the king?" "Oh yes, I love it! Fuck me, your majesty!" "Who is the king?" "You are!" "Who is the king?" Alan Ball takes his description of Carolyn's sad struggle for survival to its logical extreme when she makes up her mind to kill her husband Lester.

The second point of minor criticism is that Carolyn is the only character who remains a caricature in the film. In extraordinary, sometimes shocking ways, all the other main characters gain some kind of self-awareness

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and allow their masks to slip. The most effective of these is the radical, right-wing neighbour who approaches Lester with sexual intentions and murders him after being rejected.

Carolyn, however, continues in the same pattern, in intensified but consistent actions that she displays throughout the film. After being exposed as an adulterer she finds herself at a low point in her life for the second time, echoing her breakdown when she was unable to sell a house. Carolyn behaves in exactly the same self-abusive way, not allowing herself to cry or express her sadness and dismay.

She again seeks guidance from a modern life-philosophy. This time it is not about positive thinking which she expressed in the repeated statement, "I will sell this house today", but comes in the form of a 'Me-Centred Living' tape: 'You are only a victim if you choose to be a victim' is the offered wisdom. Carolyn decides to act upon this apparent truth and approaches the house with her gun.

Since the film-makers decided to allow Carolyn's character to remain within a circle of behaviour instead of growing along a journey, even the intention of her action is immediately exposed as being hollow. It is therefore hard to fear her, or even believe her, when she sets out on the horrific task of murdering her husband. Nothing based on her life-philosophy has so far been successful; the selling of the house, her relationship with her daughter, her empty marriage, even her inability to have a proper affair, they have all failed. Now she intends to commit murder?

Had I seen this woman in touch with her real feelings or a true moment of darkness as she pondered her next step in the car, I would have been on the edge of my seat. Not that this would have changed her action or the outcome of the film, but it would have underlined her action with meaningful subtext. This superb character deserved to be lifted into the ranks of real people by the end of the film just as the other main characters were granted the depth and honesty they deserved in this extraordinary and life-seeking film.

Satire is inescapably didactic even when no definite, positive values are stated in the

work as alternatives to the loss of morality that is depicted. For a long time Alan Ball does not provide specific moral alternatives to replace the villainy of Lester's desire for the teenage girlfriend because the morality is apparent by implication. Then suddenly, at the height of the moment, Lester realises the controversy and flagrance of his action. A scene loaded with sexual excitement and the feeling in the audience, 'I cannot believe he is actually doing this,' suddenly turns into true beauty. Lester triumphs and this clear moral lesson becomes the unifying power of the entire film.

The best satire does not seek to do harm or damage by its ridicule but rather to create a shock of recognition and to make vice repulsive so that individuals will reverse their hideous actions and expunge vice. The practical hope and aim of the satirist is that the barbs will be sufficiently painful to stop, or at least slow down, the incidence of foolish behaviour and so prevent wrongdoing.

If the satirist touches a nerve in the audience, a common response is to find ways of neutralising the satire. Generally, satire in times of widespread misbehaviour has no power because people cease to feel ashamed when so many are behaving in the same way. For example, being laughed at today is often a sign of celebrity rather than something that automatically causes shame.

To a certain extent, the satirist probably engages in something of a vain endeavour: to have people recognise their own ridiculousness and to avoid such behaviour in the future. However, satire is not just a matter of attacking a target; it also attacks or at least challenges those who believe in the target, who do not see the moral imperfections contained in a particular social issue. Only when hypocrisy does not exist any more and people are openly badly behaved without any opposition from society will satire try in vain to inspire a desire for personal improvement.

Martina Nagel has an MA in Cinema Arts from the Free University of Berlin and is currently completing her dissertation on the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. She is a founder of script clinics organised in the UK by Spark Productions (tel: 01276 855 571).