

‘Oh Rose, thou art sick!’ Anti-individuation forces in the film *American Beauty*

David Hewison, *London, UK*

Abstract: The film *American Beauty* is used as a vehicle to explore difficulties in the individuation process, to look at a particular aspect of couple relationships in which mourning is avoided, and to make a general comment about the relationship between film and psychological experience. The thesis of the paper is that the individuation process is both an intra-psychic experience and an inter-psychic one which relies on relationships with external figures to enable development. The adult couple relationship is taken as one of the key areas of emotional life for the individuation process and as an area that can best show up false starts, successes, or even retreats in psychological development. Using the poetry of William Blake and the work of Michael Fordham, I show a process of anti-individuation going on in the relationship between the characters of Lester and Carolyn Burnham in the film.

Key words: *American Beauty*, Blake, couple relationship, film, Fordham, individuation, Jung, mourning, Tavistock Marital Studies Institute.

In this paper I am presenting my thoughts not just as a Jungian analyst but also as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist trained to work with couples at the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute in London, as well as a movie-goer who saw Sam Mendes’ and Alan Ball’s 1999 film *American Beauty* and wanted to think about it further. The paper has four main parts: I begin with William Blake’s poem, ‘The Sick Rose’ and then go on to sketch out the Jungian concept of individuation, taking into account Michael Fordham’s revision of this as beginning very early in development. I suggest that there is the possibility of a process of ‘anti-individuation’, where development is stalled or undone. I move on to *American Beauty* (Ball & Mendes 1999) and describe in some detail a key couple relationship in the film – that between Lester and Carolyn Burnham, which I feel shows us clearly a shared attack on the individuation process. I then discuss this relationship, *American Beauty*, itself and the experience of viewing films more generally. First, however, I’d like to address ‘The Sick Rose’.



The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick!
 The invisible worm
 That flies in the night,
 In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy:
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.

William Blake, *Songs of Experience* (1794/1991) plate 39.

William Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose' has given rise to numerous interpretations as to its meaning. Some commentators have seen it as being about the corrupting nature of illicit sexual desire: the 'dark secret love' which destroys life as the demands of the flesh destroy the needs of the spirit (see e.g. Damon 1924). Others have felt that it is not the illicitness of sexual desire that is the problem, rather it is when that desire is hidden or turned away from (see e.g. Meyerstein 1946; Gleckner 1956; Pagliaro 1987). In line with this latter interpretation, others (such as Gardner 1986) have seen the poem as an attack on a deadening piety which Blake saw as characterizing the religious atmosphere of his time, an attack which can be seen also in his *Urizen* books (Blake 1794/1998) where religious and spiritual oppression are investigated through an alternative narrative of Genesis. For Blake, mental passivity led to conformity, restraint, and then to cruelty and repression – a state in which the best that should be hoped for was virtue and humbleness rather than ecstasy and joy. In this vein it has been suggested that the devouring worm of 'Oh Rose' is a direct reference to and attack on Bunyan's poem 'Upon a Snail' (Bunyan 1688/1978), whose chief attribute seems to have been its uninspiring lack of presence and life (Holloway 1968). 'The Sick Rose' also carries an ambiguity about the attitude of the speaker in the poem addressing the sick rose: are they accusing her of a sin, or are they sympathetically informing her of an illness she didn't know she had? As Langland points out (Langland 1987), we can read 'Oh Rose, thou art sick!' in either of these voices and so the poem alerts us to the partiality of any one reading of something – including my reading in this paper of the film *American Beauty*. These themes that can be identified in 'The Sick Rose' seem to link with the various desires which run through the film – whether acknowledged or repudiated – and of their powerful impact on some of the characters in it. *American Beauty* shows what happens when an attempt to have a full exciting experience meets an equal resistance to it in others, others who do not wish to become so alive, or who are afraid of themselves and their own potentials.

The link between the poem and the Jungian notion of individuation comes from it having been published as part of a collection of illuminated verse whose full

title is *Songs of Innocence and of Experience – shewing the two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (Blake 1794/1991). In this, Blake has attempted to ‘hold the opposites’ in his concepts of Innocence and of Experience. Innocence is characterized by a steady faith, and the poems that form that part are about pleasure and consolation. Experience, on the other hand, is a disillusioned state in which distress leads to anger and then to a new kind of hope – as long as experience doesn’t destroy the capacity for further experience. It has been suggested that ‘The Sick Rose’ is a statement by Blake of how this might occur – that a meek surrender to experience rather than a vigorous struggle with it leads to a moral and spiritual decay. As Lincoln puts it in his *Introduction* to the *Songs*,

The Songs of Innocence and Experience rarely offer simple choices – as between moral absolutes – but tend to emphasize the relativity of particular images and points of view. ‘Mercy, Pity, Love and Peace’ can reveal the innate divinity in human life, or mask the selfishness of the natural heart. To accept one view and refuse the alternative would be to turn away from an unpleasant truth or to accept a reductive view of human feeling.

(Lincoln 1991 p. 10)

It is this process of struggle between an openness to the best and worst in our human nature and a closed refusal to know and feel who we are which links it to both the individuation process, and the film *American Beauty*.

On individuation

Jung’s concept of individuation is about a particular kind of development of the individual: a development in relation to *themselves* – their full internal psychological life – and in relation to *others* with whom this psychological life is fleshed out and lived. Often it is taken as a purely internal process, one of coming to some kind of accommodation with the collective unconscious – a shifting of the place of the ego towards the Self, the centre and circumference of the personality, away from any collective demands. Some of Jung’s writings lend themselves to this interpretation, particularly his earlier ones. His initial thinking about the individuation process is found in his work on *Psychological Types* published in 1921 – only a few years after his break from Freud, his own deep psychological turmoil and his self-recovery brought about by his self-analysis of the images and fantasies which came to him as he allowed himself to sink into the unconscious. His comments about individuation there are about the need to find one’s own way, against the pressures of general society to conform. At times he rails against collective standards as an ‘artificial stunt-ing’ (Jung 1921, para. 758) of the individual, and as potentially leading to an immoral existence. For Jung, immoral in this context refers to a refusing of the need to examine oneself – a turning away from a psychological necessity – rather than social morality. As his thought developed, Jung came to see the individuation process as an unfolding of the potential pattern of wholeness

within the individual: ‘the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being’ (Jung 1934, para. 289), as he put it.

For Jung, individuation was a process that took place in the second half of life – the first half being taken up with the demands of the social world to find a role, to make a relationship, found a family and support the next generation. He felt that – as a natural function with its own timing – the individuation process then ‘kicked in’ once these things (or their equivalents) were settled, and the process of searching for a meaning in life then became more pressing. He described it this way: ‘Individuation means becoming a single, homogeneous being and, in so far as ‘in-dividuality’ embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own self. We could therefore translate individuation as ‘coming to selfhood’ or ‘self-realization’ (Jung 1935, para. 266). This emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual’s own experience of ‘self-realization’ has been taken as suggesting that the individuation process is entirely intrapsychic, an internal process alone. This has led to some psychoanalytic commentators, Hinshelwood (2003) for example, concluding that the Jungian emphasis on the self undervalues object-relating, implying that the individuation process is a variant of narcissistic phenomena, and that Jungians are not interested in the quality of relationships with others. In a key paper revised in 1934, ‘The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious’, Jung showed he understood the dangers associated with too one-sided an approach to the self. He stated clearly that ‘The aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and of the suggestive power of primordial images on the other’ (Jung 1935, para. 269). In his 1954 paper, ‘On the Nature of the Psyche’, he pointed out the potential for turning away from the world into the fascinations of the self (either by an attempt to identify with it, or by being overwhelmed by it) and was clear that these were pathological events (Jung 1954a, para. 430). He described the individuation process as ‘psychically, a border-line phenomenon which needs special conditions in order to become conscious’ (ibid, para. 431) and went on to say

... again and again I note that the individuation process is confused with the coming of the ego into consciousness and that the ego is in consequence identified with the self, which naturally produces a hopeless conceptual muddle. Individuation is then nothing but ego-centredness and autoeroticism. But the self comprises infinitely more than a mere ego, as the symbolism has shown from of old. It is as much one’s self, and all other selves, as the ego. Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself.

(ibid, para. 432)

As Williams (1963) has suggested, it is false to distinguish too strongly between the collective and the personal unconscious; individuation therefore must require both internal and external experience as its ‘fuel’. The ‘gathering of the world’ cannot take place in isolation as it is driven not just by archetypal

potentialities in the person, but is also dependent on the experiences available to them and in particular, the experience of intimate relationships in which there is the opportunity for a process of immersion, withdrawal and re-immersion in a shared, meaningful, psychological life. Adult couple relationships are therefore one of the key areas of emotional life for the individuation process and are one of the areas that can best show up false starts, successes, or even retreats in psychological development. *American Beauty* is a film about couple relationships, about the change from a state of unconsciousness to one of consciousness, and about terrible forces to the contrary.

Post-Jungian thinking has also challenged the split between the first half of life and the second, as it has paid more attention to development from infancy onwards than Jung allowed himself to, following the break with Freud. Post-Jungians, particularly those influenced by object relations thinking in psychoanalysis, such as Michael Fordham, have paid more attention to the way that the process of psychological development is life-long, and feel therefore it is a false dichotomy to place the individuation process only in the second half of life. Fordham had noticed how apparent symbols of the Self – round mandalic forms signifying wholeness – had been used by infants to give an external presence to an internal feeling of identity, something which was not supposed to happen in Jung's version (Fordham 1957, p. 149). For Fordham, the fact of development suggested that the individuation process was in play at different stages of an individual's life – in a way relevant to the developmental needs of that life stage – and that as an individual grows more fully, so too do the demands of the individuation process on them grow in depth and complexity (see e.g. Fordham 1946, 1985, 1994).

Fordham felt that when an infant is born, they do not come into the world as a *tabula rasa* waiting to be filled with experience but rather that they come with a capacity for experience that is attentive to signs in the world outside that the time for the experience is now. These innate capacities are structured archetypally – that is they are capable of being filled with a range of elements of both positive and negative experience, both somatically and psychically. Fordham suggested that a process of opening up to experience was followed by the coming back together again with the experience 'inside'. He called this process that of deintegration and reintegration, and suggested that it is this opening up to something new yet expected that helps form the ego which is our sense of having an ongoing existence as ourselves. An example of this in infancy is the infant's untaught expectation of the feeding nipple, which is sought for and made use of by the new-born baby. Gradually, this process of expectation and realization builds up mental structure, memory and increasing psychological and physiological security. With 'mature' individuation processes the ego itself is both relied upon and has to relate to a sense of another centre in oneself: that of the Self which in a sense 'guides' the individuation process. As the individuation process continues, so the person can rely less on infantile defences such as splitting, projection, denial and so on and can be

more flexible in the way they relate to themselves, to important others around them, and to the world in general.

What then about anti-individuation? It follows that anti-individuation is concerned not with the opening up to a developmental deintegrative-reintegrative experience but with the defending against it – at all costs. Rigid states of ego consciousness are attained and clung to like a rock in a sea storm in order not to get swept up in an experience. Somatic sensations take the place of mental images as things cannot be held in the mind. The ego is swept to one side and unreflective action occurs in order to discharge a painful feeling state. Archetypal contents are not ‘mediated’ or worked through, but are experienced in their strong impact on the individual who can then become tangled up in them, without being able to muster sufficient resistance to the emotional maelstrom that then ensues. The world becomes viewed as a simple black and white place where some things are by definition ‘good’, and others, ‘bad’; ambiguity and ambivalence cannot be tolerated. Gratitude, concern and mourning cannot occur. If we were to adopt the language of the psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, then this would be the arena of the negative grid: not simply a regressive move from a more mature capacity for abstract thinking towards concrete sensory impressions which cannot easily be held in mind, but also a kind of perversion of these mental states (Bion 1963). Bion used arrows to combine the idea of movement in two directions: \uparrow , a movement back up the grid from the bottom of the page (the more developed and discriminated mental functions – concepts and scientific systems, etc) towards the top (the less developed – α -elements and β -elements); \leftarrow , a movement not *across* the grid, from the right hand side to the left, but a movement *off* the grid itself, to a non-existent grid which acts as a kind of mirror image, or distortion, of development. He made these two movements into a combined symbol, $\leftarrow\uparrow$, to convey the extent of the attack on growth seen in these kind of states, in which links between emotions, thoughts, perceptions and sensations are stripped of their real meaning: K, L, and H are replaced by -K, -L and -H and psychological truth is denied (Bion 1965). Bion put it bluntly:

The problem posed by $\leftarrow\uparrow$ can be stated by analogy with *existing* objects. $\leftarrow\uparrow$ is violent, greedy and envious, ruthless, murderous and predatory, without respect for the truth, persons or things. It is, as it were, what Pirandello might have called a Character in Search of an Author. In so far as it has found a ‘character’ it appears to be a completely immoral conscience. This force is dominated by an envious determination to possess everything that objects that exist possess including existence itself.

(ibid, p. 102)

This deadening need to possess even ‘existence itself’ is to my mind the opposite of individuation: its negation. This anti-individuation can be the result of many factors: the innate physical and emotional constitution of the baby – how much experience they can bear; the ‘fit’ between them and the mother/environment – how much they have to bear; then the later opportunities for

reworking their past in new relationships and settings and whether these can be made use of in a new way. As I intend to now go on to show, *American Beauty* shows us anti-individuation forces at work in all their strength.

The film *American Beauty*

American Beauty is a film which stirs up a range of different reactions. When I first saw the film I was gripped by its description of a husband and father disintegrating and re-forming himself, alongside the changes and transformations of others – his wife, daughter, neighbours – around him; I found it exciting as well as disturbing. The second time, watching it after having decided to use it as the basis of this paper, I was greatly disappointed: it seemed that knowing about the unfolding of the tragedy made the film-makers' artifice become apparent. The film felt clunky, exploitative and cheap. The third time I watched it, going through it scene by scene to make notes for this paper, I was struck by its capacity to evoke a multiplicity of associations, and so by a need to limit what I tried to say about it as I thought about the kinds of questions which it gives rise to. How is it that something can seem one way at one viewing and another way at a later one? Or how is it that two people can be so much in love, and then not be – or be so much in hate?

In the 1920s Jung wrote a paper on 'The spiritual problem of modern man' addressing what he saw as an inevitable psychological/cultural response to an over-emphasis on the spirit or psyche as opposed to the body during that time. Feeling that the young profession of the cinema was very much a part of this response – a symptom of the imbalance, in a way – he wrote:

The cinema, like the detective story, enables us to experience without danger to ourselves all the excitements, passions, and fantasies which have to be repressed in a humanistic age. It is not difficult to see how these symptoms link up with our psychological situation. The fascination of our psyche brings about a new self-appraisal, a reassessment of our fundamental human nature. We can hardly be surprised if this leads to a rediscovery of the body after its long subjection to the spirit – we are even tempted to say that the flesh is getting its own back.

(Jung 1928, para. 195)

Jung thought that all psychological life expressed itself in binary oppositions, and that a process of something turning into its opposite was common – and indeed was to be expected when it had gone too far one way, as his quote indicates. Jung also held that psychological health lay in allowing the psyche to bring about its own balance via the transcendent function – the process of 'holding and transcending the opposites' – something Blake attempted with his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

I want to put forward the following idea: two people can be in such a relationship with each other that they seem to stop themselves from actually being (or continuing to be) a couple, even though they appear, from the outside

at least, to be one. Or rather, they act to stop the psychological development that being in an adult couple relationship will have triggered as part of the individuation process. Guggenbühl-Craig (1977) in his book *Marriage – Dead or Alive* puts forward a rather pessimistic view of the impact of marriage on the capacity of a man or a woman to individuate, which at first sight seems to endorse this view of the couple relationship. However, Guggenbühl-Craig's version seems to me to attend too little to the details of the unconscious interactions between the couple, preferring to focus instead on a broader-brush view of the needs of 'salvation' for one or other of the marriage partners. His work could be compared, unfavourably from my perspective, with that of Lyons and Mattinson (1993) who make use of the concept of the opposites and Jung's idea of marriage as a psychological relationship (Jung 1925) to look in detail at the interactions of a particular couple, Mr & Mrs Turner, who illustrate the individuation process in the couple in detail. At the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute, where Lyons and Mattinson worked, we are accustomed to think of couples as a kind of system. When we see a turning away from change and development by the couple, we think not so much of individuals each with powerful narcissistic defences operating separately but simultaneously, but more of an unconscious 'agreement' between the couple to stifle growth, for whatever reason. We focus on a shared interaction between them at an unconscious level: each one acts upon and relies upon the other to maintain a 'shared couple defence' against a dangerous and frightening 'shared unconscious phantasy' about what development might mean (see Pincus 1960; Institute of Marital Studies 1962; Colman 1993; Ruszczynski 1993; Hewison 2003). The narcissistic defence within the couple relationship cannot be reduced to that in the individual, in this view. Since there is still a couple relationship going on – a fit between the two people involved – perhaps we should think of this kind of couple as an 'anti-couple', or more accurately an 'anti-individuation couple'. Following Jung's intuition of something becoming so extreme that it turns into its opposite, I suggest that this 'anti-individuation' state cannot be maintained for ever – something wants to 'get its own back'. This process of change is not at all guaranteed, however: instead of a 'transformation' – a successful change – we may experience a 'catastrophe' – a disaster. The couple relationship may then continue to be used against individuation and relating, rather than for it.

American Beauty is set somewhere in the heartland of the American Dream. A place familiar to us as a mythical America – home to a comfortable, prosperous, self-contented community. Thanks to the work of David Lynch (Lynch 1986) and Steven Soderbergh (Soderbergh 1989) we also know it as a place where discontent, lies and nightmares stir beneath the soft velvety appearance. *American Beauty* invites us to 'look closer', and go beneath the surface. As the camera zooms into the neighbourhood we hear the 40ish principal character of the film, Lester Burnham, talking to us as a disembodied spirit, telling us

that this is his neighbourhood, his street, his life, and that in less than a year he will be dead. He doesn't know that yet and confides in us that, in a way, actually he's dead already.

The film cuts to a shot of a vivid red rose – perhaps the *American Beauty* of the title, and we see Lester's wife Carolyn tending to her roses. Following Blake, we know something's up: there must be a worm somewhere. Lester tells us, scathingly, that she is the kind of person to have matching gardening clogs and shears. He says that she wasn't always like this – by which I think he means rather manically and obsessively active – but that both she and he used to be happy. Upstairs, their teenage daughter Jane (who is about 17) is logging onto a website about breast augmentation, and Lester describes her as a typical teenager – angry, insecure and confused. Lester wishes he could tell her that that's all going to pass but, he says, he doesn't want to lie to her. Both Jane and Carolyn think Lester is a gigantic loser and Lester agrees that he has lost something – he doesn't know what it is but he didn't always feel as sedated as he now does. The film then begins to unfold as Lester confides in us mischievously that it's never too late to get it back. *American Beauty* is about what happens as Lester 'gets it back' and the impact this has on the people around him.

For the purposes of this paper, I shall be concentrating on the relationship between Lester and Carolyn Burnham, though there are other people in the film whose struggles with relationships could also be discussed – particularly that between Jane and her boyfriend, Ricky. To my mind, Jane and Ricky's relationship appears to be a more developmental couple relationship than that of Lester and Carolyn – more enabling of individuation – but the structuring of the film means that we never quite find out, so I've chosen not to focus on them. Instead, I'm going to guide you through the film concentrating on Lester and Carolyn's relationship, and then follow up this description with some of my thoughts about them, about *American Beauty* itself, and on the experience of viewing films in general.

The story

The crisis which is the subject of the story seems to be triggered by Lester, a sleepy passive nobody, being threatened with losing his job in an impersonal corporation. Lester initially seems to be the classic anti-hero, the underdog who fights back, but this isn't a theme which is developed in the film, rather it's the impact of this change on his relationships with his wife and daughter which become important. Whilst Lester's 'downsizing' is going on he comes to realize that neither his wife nor his daughter are interested in his plight. As Jane tells him when he protests at her lack of concern, 'Well what do you expect? You can't all of a sudden be my best friend just because you've had a bad day. You've barely even spoken to me for months'.

Lester doesn't go beyond Jane's rebuffal of him to see how much she misses his attention and presence – he doesn't understand how she is in an ambivalent relationship to him as a father whose concern and love she wants, and whom she also wants to leave behind as she finds her own sexual relationship with a man of her own age. What seems to happen instead, is that Lester side-steps the difficulties of managing the emotional complications and demands of his relationship with his daughter and becomes intensely infatuated with her best friend, Angela. Rather than relate, he falls into fantasy. At a basket ball game where Jane and her friend are performing in the half time cheerleading routine, Lester becomes besotted with Angela, whom we are shown as sexually experienced and seductive. As she dances, he is captivated and launched into a fantasy world in which she is dancing only for him in an increasingly sexual way. In a dream-like sequence she begins to take off her clothes to show him her breasts. As she does so, they are hidden behind a cascade of red rose petals which tumble out towards him.

Subsequently overhearing that Angela thinks he'd look good if he built up his chest and arm muscles, he immediately takes off to the garage and begins to work out to achieve the shape which she finds so desirable. As his erotic imagination becomes filled with more and more images of Angela, so his real relationship with Carolyn becomes exposed as more and more hollow. In a telling scene Carolyn, awakened in the night, objects to him masturbating in bed as he imagines a naked Angela lying on a bed of rose petals. Carolyn protests that this isn't a marriage. He replies that it hasn't been a marriage for years, but that she was happy as long as he kept his mouth shut. He says that he's no longer going to do so, and she is shocked by this. Lester is as surprised as Carolyn at what's just happened between them, as it seems so out of character, but unlike her, he's delighted by it and sees it as a beginning. He feels himself to be becoming emotionally alive after 20 years of coma. However, instead of using this new aliveness to tackle the deadening arrangement that he and she have come to over the years and grappling with this stuck 'anti-individuation' relationship between the two of them, he retreats from the demands of relating to another person. He sells his 'sensible' small family car, buys a gleaming red classic sports car and gets a new job in a drive-thru Burger bar as a junior employee serving fast-food, having persuaded the reluctant young manager that he just wants a job with 'the least possible amount of responsibility'. He forms a relationship with the son of his new neighbours, Ricky, who supplies him with cannabis and whom Lester rather admires for his confident self-interest, and he continues to work out in the garage to become more attractive to Angela. At the point when he feels he's changed his shape to what she wants, he comes on to Angela, saying in mock surprise 'Oh, do you like muscles?' He notices her slight hesitation as though, against all the odds for someone so sexually assertive, she's frightened by his confident making himself available to her.

Carolyn, meanwhile, has found the change in Lester intolerable. Just like Lester, she too refuses to take their relationship as the focus for change; she too denies the need for psychological change in herself. She tells him that he won't get away with what he's doing, as though she feels he's cheating on her, which he is in a way as he's refusing to keep going along with her version of their life together. Her disappointment in him is an echo of an unacknowledged disappointment in herself: in a scene where she tries to sell a house we see her, in a frenzy, trying to 'self-motivate' herself to make a sale. She repeats the phrase 'I will sell this house today' over and over as she manically cleans and washes the place. When the house doesn't sell, even after all her best efforts, she breaks down into sobs and then slaps and beats herself in a frenzy of self-punishment screaming self-accusations of being 'weak' and 'a baby'. In the midst of this she suddenly pulls herself together, refusing to allow such unwanted negativity to overwhelm her any more. The effort with which she clamps down on her feelings is immense and shocking. We register the emotional violence she is doing to herself as she pushes her distress down, adopts a positive pose and moves on, as though nothing had happened and all the world is still at her feet.

As Lester becomes less and less as she wants him to be she too devotes her energies outside the relationship. She begins an affair with her arch rival – the considerably more successful Buddy Kane, 'the King of Real Estate'. He is like a male facsimile of Carolyn – talking the same self-motivational language and having an identical mantra: 'To be successful you have to present an image of success at all times'. The image comes first – and tellingly it is living in this imaginary way which is supposed magically to bring results, rather than any problematic engagement with the truth of internal and external reality. She is seeking an external mystical marriage rather than an internal *mysterium coniunctionis*. Carolyn has a steamy affair with Buddy, and in their post-coital warmth in a motel room she tells him how much their love-making relieved her stress. He says that when he feels stressed he goes to a downtown firing range and does some shooting. She's intrigued; she's never fired a gun before. She tries it and finds that she loves the excitement of shooting. It is at this point, with Carolyn and Lester much more awake and open to a sensual experience, that the chance for a rapprochement between them, led by their bodies, occurs. And fails.

Full of vigour from the shooting range, she returns home to discover Lester's new gleaming red sports car. As she confronts him in the living room he notices that there's something more lively about her and he begins to approach her sexually, reminiscing as to what she used to be like: lively, adventurous, exciting. She begins to respond sensually to his pleasure in her and we see a trace of the couple they once were until she notices that, as they are entwining themselves together, he still has a bottle of beer in his hand and that some of it could possibly spill on the couch on which they are lying. She switches into a different state of mind, abruptly cuts off from their passion and tells him to be

careful. He too cannot manage the gap which has suddenly appeared between them and instead of simply putting the bottle down and continuing, he tells her that it's just a couch. Angrily, she responds by saying it's not just a couch: it's a \$4,000 sofa upholstered in Italian silk. Lester, infuriated, screams back at her, and the moment is lost.

Carolyn becomes increasingly isolated – she realizes that their daughter Jane views her as pretty much the same as Lester – as a kind of 'fake'. Lester's discovery of her affair with Buddy Kane removes the moral high ground from under her feet. At the same time, Buddy announces that they need to cool their affair for a while, whilst he goes through an acrimonious divorce. Again her self-motivation mantras fail to keep her immune from the consequences of feeling cut-off from a relationship with another and she howls out in pain and fury. It is at this point, with Carolyn devastated at being left so alone and raging at being humiliated, that the *dénouement* of the film occurs. She drives home in the rain, with a powerful handgun beside her, refusing to be a victim.

Lester's increasing contact with Ricky – a young man whose principal way of relating to the world is through the lens of a video camera – has been noted by Ricky's father, Colonel Frank Fitts of the US Marine Corps. Colonel Fitts is a haunted, baffled, paranoid man. He is estranged from his son and lives with a wife who appears to be in a depressed fugue state most of the time; he keeps a large handgun collection along with Nazi memorabilia in his den, and spits out his fury at homosexuals who, alongside other unspecified forms of corruption, are taking his beloved America 'straight to hell', as he puts it. Colonel Fitts battles with his nascent wish to be in relationship with his son, and follows instead his overwhelming need to put 'structure and discipline' around Ricky to prevent him going wrong. He has already had Ricky sent to Military School and thence to psychiatric hospital because of Ricky's involvement in drugs. In a number of scenes between them we are shown the violence in his relationship with Ricky – a relationship made more poignant by the flashes of something softer and more empathic emerging in the Colonel which we also see from time to time. It seems Colonel Fitts is haunted by his own demons about relating to others. He's unaware of Ricky's current active and extensive drug dealership and prefers not to see the hints that things aren't all under his control. As Ricky puts it, in a comment which could be the motif of the film, one should 'never underestimate the power of denial'.

Denial, of course, makes for a partial view of the world, and we see the consequences of this when Colonel Fitts witnesses an interaction between Ricky and Lester which is both revealed and obscured by the layout of the windows in Lester's garage. From his vantage-point in Ricky's room the Colonel can see Lester leaning back, apparently naked. Ricky is leaning over him, attending to something which Lester seems satisfied with. The breaking up of the view means that Colonel Fitts cannot see the whole scene – he cannot actually know what is going on. We, the viewing audience, are allowed to know what Colonel Fitts does not: that Ricky is leaning over and rolling a joint, whilst

Lester leans back in relaxed comfort and anticipation, partially undressed after having worked out. The audience is invited to see what is going on as a kind of black comedy of contrasting perceptions, Colonel Fitts, however, imposes a realization on the interaction which overwhelms him with feeling: that Ricky is being paid to perform oral sex on Lester. The resulting physically violent confrontation between Ricky and his father ends with Colonel Fitts ordering his son out of the house for ever. Ricky, in turn, drops his compliant façade, showing the aggression that lies behind it, and tortures his father by claiming falsely to not only be gay, but also to be ‘the best piece of ass in three states’. These false versions of reality – what the Colonel thought he saw, and what Ricky claimed – have further consequences: something seems to shift in the Colonel and again his feelings are out of control.

In a terribly painful scene, he walks slowly out of the driving rain towards Lester in the garage. Macho facade broken down, struggling with overwhelming emotions, he embraces Lester in tears and kisses him on the mouth. Lester, baffled by this advance, draws away and tells him softly that he’s made a mistake. Colonel Fitts staggers off, apparently broken, wracked by raw feeling, struggling to contain the enormity of what he has allowed himself (and Lester) to know about in himself – his homosexuality; Lester goes into the house keen to take up Angela’s apparent promise to him.

Angela, having had a fight with Jane, sees her opportunity to be made to feel good by someone else’s attention. She tells Lester that the fight was about him, because Angela had said that she thinks he’s sexy. They move closer, framed by the window and a bunch of red roses. As he begins to kiss her, she says ‘I think I’m ordinary’. ‘You couldn’t be ordinary if you tried’, he responds. Shyly, like a child who’s embarrassed at getting a compliment she says thank you, and then with her old identity restored pronounces that there’s nothing worse than being ordinary. We again see a turning away from emotional pain. Lester continues to kiss her, and slowly begins to undress her; at last his dreams are coming true. She suddenly bursts out against all the odds ‘It’s my first time!’ He begins to realize what he’s doing and draws back – she wonders what’s wrong and reminds him he’d said she was beautiful. He wraps a jumper around her and holds her, crying in his arms; he tells her that everything’s ok.

He makes her something to eat and gives her a coke – to my mind he begins to be a father again, and asks, as a father, how Jane is; how her life is – happy? Miserable? ‘I’d really like to know,’ he says, ‘and she’d die before she’d ever tell me about it’. When Angela tells him that Jane is really happy – she thinks she’s in love – Lester is quiet for a moment, then smiles gently and says ‘Good for her’. Angela asks how he is. Lester, commenting that it’s been a long time since anybody asked him that, slowly responds ‘I’m great’ as if realizing something for the first time. Angela goes to the bathroom and Lester, filled with this realization repeats his comment to himself.

There is a sense that something is finished in him – the drive to perfect himself to get Angela has gone and he’s left with himself and a sense perhaps

of being alive again. The flesh, his body, has got its own back and he's begun to wake up out of his comatose state and become more open to the world and to his real place in it. In this frame of mind he picks up a photo of the family and sits at the kitchen table gazing at it. As he looks at this picture of the three of them at a fun fair when Jane was about three he seems to be drinking in the joy and vitality of it all. He has become again a father and a husband, in touch with the beauty of the couple relationship and of the mystery of parenthood. 'Man, oh man!' he whispers, 'Man, oh man!' As he does so, slowly lowering the photo down onto the table next to a vase of vivid red roses, he is shot in the back of the head, and the white wall and table become red with his blood.

The film shows us very little of the other characters' reactions to his death. Ricky comes down and we see him looking intently at Lester, and then slightly smiling for a moment – matching the slight smile still visible on Lester's face. Carolyn rushes to put her gun in a cupboard upstairs and gives way to anguish, falling into Lester's hung up shirts trying to hold them in her arms. We see Colonel Fitts return to his gun-lined study.

The film ends with a return to Lester's voice talking us through his life. We again see a lengthy shot of a plastic bag being blown about in eddies of wind, which earlier in the film had marked Ricky and Jane forming a relationship together. As we watch the plastic bag's swirling movements we hear Lester's disembodied voice – just as we had during the opening credits. Lester concludes,

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 it feels 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 onto 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 of what I'm talking about I'm sure, but don't worry – you will some day.

(Ball & Mendes 1999)

Commentary

What are we to make of this film – of the tragedy of Lester Burnham? The primary couple of the film was introduced to us through Lester's eyes; so we didn't really have the chance over the course of the film to see Carolyn's point of view, or to hear much of her experience. Seen like this, the film is not so much about a relationship between people, but rather an account of a narcissistic implosion which impacts upon anyone in the vicinity. We only really see one side of the 'anti-individuation' couple system, and so, of course, are left wondering how this opposition to development emerged in them.

We don't know about each of Lester's and Carolyn's individual histories; we're not told about the relationship between the couple prior to this frozen landscape they're latterly in; we don't know what it was like for Jane growing up as things began to chill – but we can imagine what it might have been like.

From comments during the film we can build up a picture of a fun-loving idealistic couple, who gradually had to adapt themselves to 'adult' life and the pressures of bringing up a child and paying the bills. There are indications that this wasn't how either of them saw their lives – Lester's rapid embracing of a return to adolescence confirms part of the initial clue in his comment about Jane's teenage anger, insecurity and confusion being a constant presence in life. We know that he had been a teenager and then that stopped: something else got put in its place, but rather than living through this, experiencing it and being emotionally in touch, Lester shut down and went into hibernation. He turned away from the demands of individuation of that stage of life. Carolyn's similar response, embracing exciting motel sex and powerful handguns, seems to have its opposite echo in daughter Jane's careful saving of the money she'd received for babysitting since the age of ten in order to grow up artificially by surgically enlarging her breasts. Carolyn and Lester rushed to become younger; Jane to become older. There is a feeling throughout the film that no one is quite at the right age for themselves – and from this comes a sense of wondering what it was like for them as children growing up. Their parents are not mentioned – Lester talks only about the quality of his grandmother's skin when she was old, and of a cousin who had a gleaming red sports car – and Carolyn angrily recalls growing up in a 'duplex' – a form of semi-detached housing which is certainly not a central feature in the image of the American Dream. We can perhaps see in each of their recourse to mania and denial that they have not had sufficient experience of emotional containment to enable them to make use of depressive position ways of relating; they fall into paranoid and idealizing states of mind, fleeing from the pain of accepting who and what they are and have been, fleeing from the demands of individuation.

Carolyn's experience of growing up seems to have been one of humiliation – being accused, maybe, of being stupid, not amounting to much, perhaps being worthless. Her choice of career in Real Estate, making her living from other people's need for houses could be a form of reaction formation to her own sense of deprivation. Her own adult home is spacious and pristine – carefully looked after, filled with fine expensive items and kept safe from chaos. She makes the revealing comment to her daughter after the important cheerleading dance that she'd watched Jane closely and Jane didn't screw-up once! She lives by trying to evoke in others a sense of herself being successful: it doesn't even seem as though she actually imagines her own success – instead she needs to keep her own self-attacking doubts at bay by repeating 'positive thinking' gibberish to herself. Rather than bear the truth, she hits Jane when Jane accuses her of being insincere – and then retreats in to a hollow self-boosting platitude that 'You cannot count on anyone, except yourself'. My impression from this is that she had desperately wanted to make an impact on a parent (I imagine this to be her father), to be known about as important and potent, but instead kept being seen as useless and unsatisfactory. She seems constantly taken aback when Lester points out how her life just isn't the way she seems to think

it is: that their marriage has been a sham for a long time, and she's been happy because he's not said anything. Perhaps this was their 'anti-individuation' agreement as a couple: he'll be unconscious so she can feel fuller and more alive. Significantly, firing a deadly weapon makes her feel powerful, perhaps combining the need to compensate for her feelings of being a failure with the unconscious desire to seek revenge on her father. The apparent murderous intentions towards Lester, as the father who isn't a proper father, are deliberately played on towards the end of the film as she becomes the chief suspect, driving towards home, in the pouring rain, gun in her handbag beside her, crying 'I refuse to be a victim'. However, a true refusal to be a victim, like a true aliveness to the world, had been left behind for both Carolyn and Lester when they turned away from the demands of a mature couple relationship, made their 'anti-individuation' arrangement, and set the wheels of their unfolding tragedy in motion.

What else can we make of the film? Returning to Jung's comment that 'The cinema, like the detective story, enables us to experience without danger to ourselves all the excitements, passions, and fantasies which have to be repressed in a humanistic age' we can ask what kind of experience we have had. The film has explored something of the difficulties of adolescence, of separation, of denial of life, of repression of sexuality, of the turning away from the truth of ageing. But how has it dealt with them?

There is a psychoanalytic view of film that agrees with Jung's assessment of cinema and links it with the notion of 'working through' (see Gabbard & Gabbard 1987; Hewison 2000; Izod 2001). Film allows us not only to experience the repressed excitements, passions and fantasies in a proxy way on the screen, but also to come to terms with them – to have more infantile anxieties displayed for us to identify with, for us to re-introject solutions to those conflicts, and to find our own. How does it do this?

One idea is that the setting of the cinema induces a state of lowered consciousness within the viewer – a state enhanced by the dark, warm environment, the use of atmospheric music and the carefully staged mix of visual sensual experience and narrative. This relaxed state allows us to enter emotionally and imaginatively into the film's world, where our empathic responses to the events unfolding before us pull us out of our everyday world and into a new one: where we are half ourselves and half identified with the characters on the screen. Ira Konigsberg has described this in Winnicottian terms as an entry into a transitional space with the film becoming a kind of transitional object (Konigsberg 1996). We allow our disbelief to be suspended, and at the same time become taken over by the events on the screen – we're all familiar with the experience of bodily reacting to particular scenes: holding our breath at periods of suspense, giving an involuntary start as something suddenly happens, being emotionally stirred up by what's happening to the characters. This, of course, is accentuated by us investing the characters with our own qualities and through this identification joining in with the story –

they're like (an idealized version of) us. It is through this process of identification that people watching the same film, or a person watching the film more than once, can come out of it having had at different times a very different experience; in short, the experience of the film also depends on what we are bringing to it at that point.

The disturbing nature of *American Beauty* isn't just the dreadful and shocking things which occur between the characters – it's more than this; it's rather that the film doesn't allow us, the engaged viewer, to know about the emotional resolution of these events. The power of the film isn't Lester's spirited clowning or Carolyn's downfall; nor is it the moving away of Jane from her shallow friend, Angela, towards a more promising relationship with Ricky. The film isn't essentially captivating because of its plot devices, or because of the intricacy of its editing which gives us alternating feelings of involvement and distance – though these help. Rather, the film engages us by doing something much more sinister, and invites us to become complicit in this. I'm suggesting that *American Beauty* actively plays on the denial of mourning as its driving force: it constantly avoids engaging with emotional pain as something which can and must be faced-up to, if life is to have any meaning and if individuation is to be managed. As a consequence of this, Lester does not mourn the destruction he's wrought; Carolyn does not go beyond her mantra of 'I refuse to be a victim'; Ricky doesn't deal with the split he's in, between false passive compliance and active ability; Jane doesn't allow herself to feel her love for her parents despite their behaviour towards her. Colonel Fitts cannot bear to face his homosexuality or to hold the humiliation he feels he's suffered as a result of Lester rejecting his advances.

Because of this refusal to do the painful and difficult work necessary to accept the complicated truth of their emotional lives, the relationships in the film lead to disaster rather than to development. Carolyn and Lester are simply the prime example of relationships used in the service of anti-individuation rather than psychological change. There is a hint that Lester, just before he is murdered, having got 'it' back, was about to make use of his growing engagement with life to re-invest in his wife and child, to have an adult relationship with both rather than an adolescent one. To 'catch-up' with himself, as it were. Similarly, Carolyn's keening anguish at Lester's death seems to suggest that she was at last ready for a vigorous interaction with him on her return home – perhaps even the vigorous sexual intercourse which so relieves her stress.

It is in this hint, of something different about to occur, that the significance of the repeated images of vivid red roses lies. Whilst they clearly stand as a chain of signifiers through the film, foretelling the bloody scene in the kitchen and allowing us to make a visual link between Carolyn's obsessive order, Angela's eroticism and Lester's death, they also conjure up other associations. Those readers who are familiar with Jung's work will know of his understanding of alchemy as a forerunner of depth psychology (Jung 1953, 1967). You'll

remember that his investigation of the mutative transference relationship between analyst and patient was done not as a contemporary case study but instead as an analysis of an alchemical text from the fifteen hundreds: the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, or the 'Philosophical Rose Garden' (Jung 1954b). You'll remember also that the rose was chosen as a symbol of change by the alchemists because its overlapping petals gave it a wrapped-over and enclosed nature – it was seen to symbolize a container within which a sacred marriage leading to transformation could occur (Jung 1967, para 383ff). It also, curiously enough, came to symbolize the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, whose bodily ascension into heaven was confirmed by Papal Decree in the 1950s (Jung 1956, para. 743). For Jung, significantly for the purposes of this paper, this at last signified Christianity's acceptance of the physical body – the flesh, of sexuality, and of the importance of earthly – as opposed to divine – parenthood. The visual association between the red roses and the rose-red blood at Lester's death also has its roots in alchemical symbolism: representing 'not natural or ordinary blood, but symbolic blood, a psychic substance, the manifestation of a certain kind of Eros which unifies the individual as well as the multitude in the sign of the rose and makes them whole' (Jung 1967, para 390). So perhaps the repeated image of the vivid red rose allows us to imagine that something had indeed been changed within Lester, and perhaps within others also; but the cruelty of the film is that, in fact, we'll never know.

The voice-over at the end, however, where Lester celebrates the overwhelming beauty of the world makes me feel that there has been a manic over-compensation for the horror of what has just occurred, and that a mock-aesthetic experience has been put in the place of a human one. In the other significant imagery of the film, I suggest that we're being asked to swallow a plastic bag, instead of something truly nutritious.

Why is this important? It's just a film, after all. Perhaps the question is better put this way: what model of development is *American Beauty* showing us? What fantasy is it addressing and what is it inviting us to conclude? The film can be seen as celebrating an infantile omnipotence: the idea that only 'I, the individual' matter; that 'We, the couple' are very much second best. As such, the film can be seen as an attack on the committed couple relationship of the procreative parents in favour of the infant who in fantasy can and has made themselves. In the language of individuation it can be seen as saying that only ego consciousness matters – that there is no inner relationship to make and sustain with the unconscious. It could be argued, of course, that the film only depicts these states of mind, rather than celebrates them, and that perhaps a distinction should be made between the film and the awards it received – and that the Oscars themselves are no simple matter of merit and recognition. But I think that this misses an important consideration: that of the resolution of the state of mind created by the film.

As people using relationship to work therapeutically, analysts and therapists have an interest in the images of relationship existing within our culture – and

particularly with images that are celebrated and publicized widely through a highly popular and powerful medium. As both citizens and practitioners we are being asked to participate in a kind of emotional economy of relationship, where a film like *American Beauty* is part of the currency. The vivid experience of engaging with a film means that we have to be even more mindful of what it is we are taking in than we would be if we were seeing these kinds of people in our own consulting room. Within the consulting room we are well primed to engage in the work – the frame carries with it a state of therapeutic-mindedness even if it is sometimes a struggle to maintain it. Within the cinema, however, we become more in the position of consumers, albeit with the possibility of a critical intelligence if we are able to see through what is being presented to us.

What *American Beauty* shows is that without a process of mourning, of keeping in touch with our emotional struggles with loss and change, the individuation process stalls; a relationship between a couple which doesn't allow for development as they and their child become older is doomed to a closed, defensive, 'keeping-out' of change.

My reading of this film is that, as Jung suggested about cinema in the 1920s, it is very much about 'the flesh getting its own back' in the face of a one-sided, omnipotent denial of reality. Lester almost manages to embody this process but is wiped out by others who cannot. In conclusion, I suggest that *American Beauty* is a vivid depiction of a failure to grasp the challenge of individuation, of a change towards maturity in relating to others. I also suggest that the resulting murderous catastrophe which ends the film, ripping apart the lives of all involved, can be taken as a indication of the danger of not paying attention to both our physical and our emotional lives.

Returning to William Blake's line 'Oh rose thou art sick!' I'd like to end with a couplet that has also been suggested as a source for *The Sick Rose* (Anshutz & Cummings 1970). This is a lyric by Matthew Prior, from 'A True Maid' about an encounter between Rose and Dick:

No, No; for my Virginity,
When I lose that, says Rose, I'll dye:
Behind the Elmes, last Night, cry'd Dick,
Rose, were You not extreemly Sick?

(Prior 1718/1973)

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

L'auteur prend appui sur le film *American Beauty* pour explorer certaines difficultés rencontrées dans le processus d'individuation, en regardant un aspect particulier de la relation de couple dans laquelle le deuil est évité ; il s'en sert aussi pour faire un commentaire général sur la relation entre film et expérience psychologique. La thèse

explorée par cet article est le fait que le processus d'individuation est un processus à la fois intrapsychique et interpsychique qui a besoin de figures externes pour permettre le développement. La relation adulte de couple est vue comme un des endroits clés de la vie émotionnelle dans le processus d'individuation, endroit qui peut le mieux révéler des mises en routes fallacieuses, des mises en mouvement réussies, ou des mouvements de recul dans le processus de développement psychologique. En utilisant la poésie de William Blake et le travail de Michael Fordham je montre un processus d'anti-individuation à l'œuvre entre les personnages de Lester et de Carolyn Burnham dans le film.

Der Film ‚American Beauty‘ wird als Vehikel verwendet, um Schwierigkeiten im Individuationsprozess zu untersuchen, um auf einen bestimmten Aspekt von Paarbeziehungen zu schauen, in dem Trauern vermieden wird, und um einen allgemeinen Kommentar zu machen zur Beziehung zwischen Film und psychologischer Erfahrung. Die These der Arbeit ist, daß der Individuationsprozess sowohl eine intra-psychische als auch eine inter-psychische Erfahrung darstellt, die sich auf Beziehungen mit äußeren Figuren verläßt, um Entwicklung zu ermöglichen. Die erwachsene Paarbeziehung wird als einer der Schlüsselbereiche des emotionalen Lebens für den Individuationsprozess angesehen und als Bereich, der am besten falsche Starts, Erfolge oder sogar Rückzüge in der psychischen Entwicklung zeigen kann. Ich verwende die Lyrik von William Blake und das Werk von Michael Fordham und zeige, daß im Film ein Prozeß der Anti-Individuation zwischen den Figuren Lester und Carolyn Burnham geschieht.

Viene usato il film *American Beauty* come strumento per esplorare le difficoltà nel processo di individuazione, per osservare un particolare aspetto della relazione di coppia e per commentare genericamente la relazione tra il film e esperienze psicologiche. La tesi del lavoro è che il processo di individuazione è un'esperienza sia intra-psichica che inter-psichica che, per potersi sviluppare, ha bisogno di relazioni con figure esterne. La relazione di coppia adulta viene considerata come aspetto chiave della vita emotiva per il processo di individuazione e come aspetto che può al meglio mostrare false partenze, successi o anche ritiri nello sviluppo psicologico. Utilizzando la poesia di William Blake e il lavoro di Michael Fordham mostro che è un processo anti-individuativo quello che si svolge nel film nella relazione fra i personaggi di Lester e Carolyn Bumham.

La película ‘Belleza Americana’ es utilizada como medio para explorar las dificultades en proceso de individuación, para ver un aspecto en particular en la relación de una pareja en la cual se evita el dolor y para hacer un comentario general respecto a la relación entre el film y la experiencia Psicológica. La tesis del trabajo es que el proceso de individuación es tanto una experiencia intra-psíquica como una inter.-psíquica que cuenta con las relaciones de las figuras externas para poder desarrollarse. La relación de la pareja adulta es tomada como una de las áreas de la vida emocional clave para el proceso de individuación y como el área que mejor puede mostrar los falsos comienzos, éxitos y hasta retrocesos en el desarrollo psicológico. Utilizando la poética de William Blake y el trabajo de Michael Fordham, Yo muestro el proceso de anti-individuación dándose la relación entre los personaje de Lester y Carolyn en el film.

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