

# FILM COMMENT

STEVEN YEUN IN  
**BURNING**  
LEE CHANG-DONG'S  
MASTERPIECE OF  
LONGING AND RAGE

Published by  
the Film Society of  
Lincoln Center  
September-October 2018



*plus:*

THE COEN  
BROTHERS

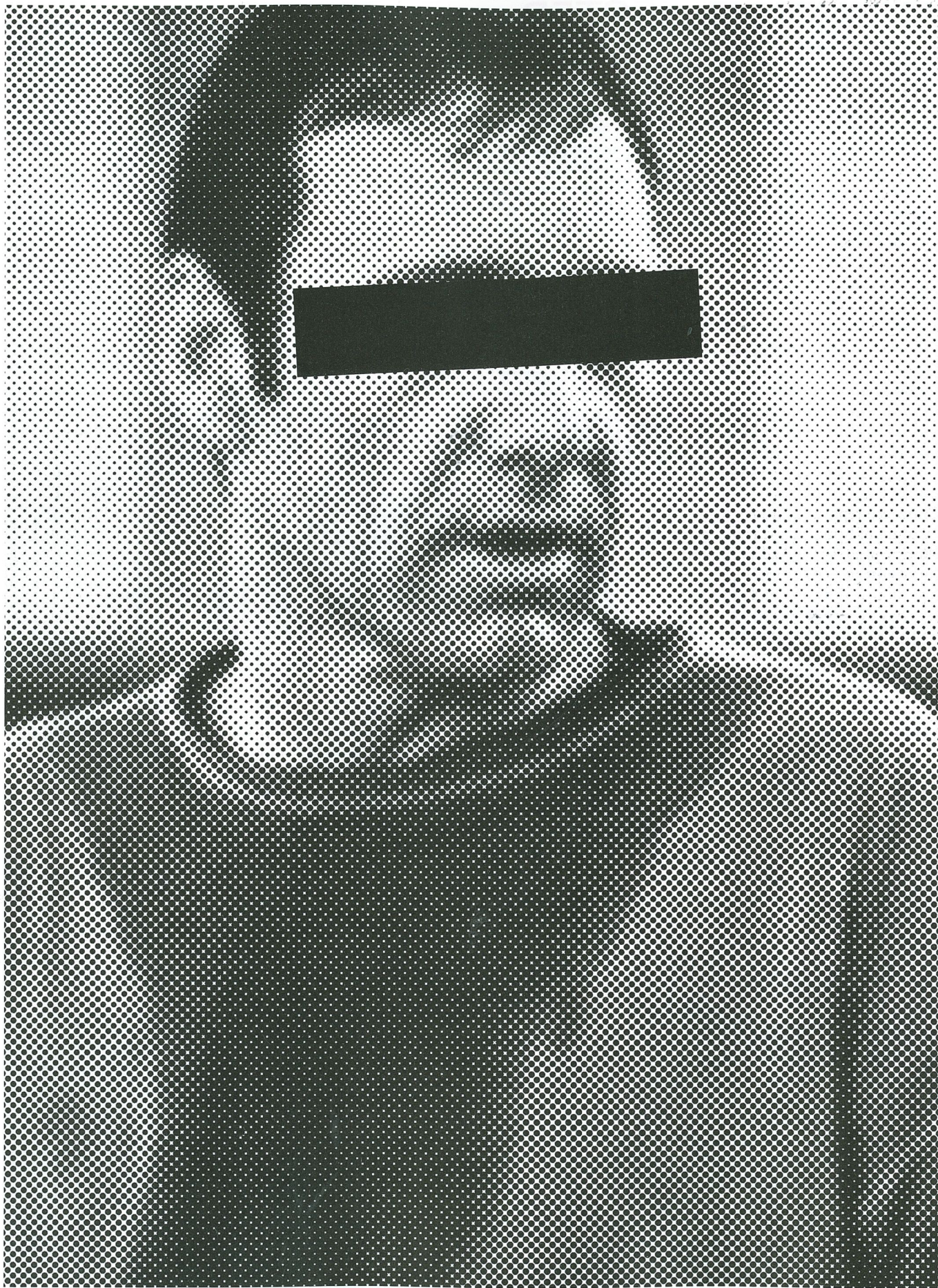
ALFONSO  
CUARÓN

FREDERICK  
WISEMAN

CANNIBAL  
CLOSE-UP









# POST-EVERYTHING, A TEACHER TESTS AN EMBATTLED 1999 FILM IN THE WHISKER-SENSITIVE LABORATORY OF A COLLEGE CLASSROOM

BY NICK DAVIS

**A**S A PROFESSOR OF FILM studies at Northwestern University, I am always trying to revive past moments of cinema history and public life in ways that will seize students' imaginations. Getting them to tussle with complex texts rather than hastily lionize or dismiss them is hard; so is checking my reflex to present movies via the frames through which I first received them, as they are often inapposite to the lives of 21st-century undergraduates. Sometimes, of course, the past becomes suddenly, aggressively present, inducing pedagogical quagmires of another sort.

On October 29, 2017, as BuzzFeed reported Anthony Rapp's account of being a 14-year-old target of Kevin Spacey's sexual advances, I was busily preparing a college seminar I would start teaching three months later about the movies of 1999. I had planned to launch the class, aimed at first-year undergraduates, with *American Beauty*, that year's Best Picture Oscar winner and an unexpected box-office juggernaut. Much of the film's story involves assiduous attempts by Lester Burnham, Spacey's character, to seduce his teenage daughter's best friend, Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari), who provides a crucial narrative alibi by enjoying, even soliciting his fumbling attentions. I had previously taught *American Beauty* with success, but the contexts around this plotline and indeed the entire film had abruptly shifted.

Consider, too, the logic of the lethal denouement: Lester's neighbor, the homophobic ex-Marine Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper), mistakenly believes he witnesses his teenage son Ricky (Wes Bentley) performing fellatio on Lester. Soon afterward, Col. Fitts kisses Lester, who gently but immediately rebuffs this carnal appeal. Humiliated by this refusal and by his own disclosure of repressed same-sex desires, Col. Fitts shoots his neighbor in the head. The aftermath of that bloody event is photographed, like much of *American Beauty*, as a glassily elegant tableau, then chased with monochrome inserts of Lester's final, pathos-heavy memories. This grim event thus completes the film's paradoxical project of selling its lead figure as both a mordant

eviscerator of middle-class America and its eleventh-hour apologist. The same sleights of hand seal Lester's transubstantiation from lecherous pursuer of adolescent girls to wisdom-dispensing martyr, tragically undone by being misidentified as gay. Given how Rapp's report prompted Spacey that same evening to end his many years of denying or evading rumors of his own homosexuality, this plot element also assumed new ironies, which would require careful classroom negotiation.

## PROBLEMATIC!



Opposite: Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*. Above: Mena Suvari

*American Beauty* has attracted copious celebrants and dogged detractors since its release, and the lack of a dominant critical line makes it a great seminar opener. So do the film's flamboyant audiovisual semiotics, perfect for students still learning how to deconstruct a frame or track a motif. While other movies cycled on and off my nascent syllabus, I never questioned that *American Beauty* furnished the ideal time capsule and interpretive riddle to kick things off. But who would shed a tear for Lester Burnham in the hour of Kevin Spacey's disgrace? Who, and especially what 18-year-old, would feel like watching this film?

Some trusted colleagues recommended preserving the film's placement at the top

of my course for all the reasons that inspired it; others advocated dropping it entirely. I loaded the Blu-ray to test the waters myself and survived my shock that, having first seen the movie the fall after I graduated from college, I was now only two years younger than Lester, whose eulogies for lost youth the film presents as totally sensible. Its erotic and dramatic gambits felt as vexed as ever, fueling my contradictory impulses to assign and to retreat. Ricky Fitts, the owlish, iceberg-eyed videophile, emerged again as *American Beauty*'s most original character and would resonate in intriguing ways with other 1999 figures my students would

later meet—for instance, those wayward hunters of the Blair Witch, who share Ricky's fetish for macabre footage but fatally lack his unflappable cool. The gargoylization of Carolyn Burnham (Annette Bening) remained a cheap route for making Lester's errant manhood seem temperate and soulful by contrast, and for marketing adolescent Angela as a tempting alternative. Carolyn is unpleasant to behold but, almost for that very reason, triply fruitful to teach. She poses a textual conundrum worth unpacking, somehow rendered emblematic of a milieu that *American Beauty* can't stop satirizing (her costumes are literally cut from the same cloth as her designer upholstery) but also aggressively alien to it, misreading everybody's signals and pursuing destructive lines of action. She offers stark contrast to Pedro Almodóvar's idolatry of women in the second 1999 film on my docket, *All About My Mother*. Finally, in another collision of art and life, she would prompt timely reflections on Hillary Clinton, the off-screen First Lady of Alan Ball's "beautiful" America, so demonized in and by U.S. media during my students' final years of high school that voters enshrined a man even more openly predatory than Lester as our preferred national protagonist.

My revitalized eagerness to assign *American Beauty* hinged most of all on a narrative fold I regarded in 1999 as a florid overreach, and which I tend to forget from one viewing to the next. Col. Fitts, no mere martinet, gets outed mid-film as an actual, arms-bearing Nazi who displays spotlit, Swastika-stamped ceramics in the locked



cabinet of his private study. He's far from world cinema's first queer fascist, but still, as closets go, that's a notable one. In what now seems a lifetime ago, I could not fathom why *American Beauty* ventured this far out on ghoulish limbs to brand its already-evident villain. Watching now, however, the Nazi Next Door constitutes one of Ball's strongest claims on cultural prescience and is much more plausible than a picket-fenced late-'90s family who still listen to Lawrence Welk over dinner.

I had fretted so much about my students' receptivity to *American Beauty*'s shifty viewpoints on sexual morality. I wondered who might feel triggered—to use an unloved term that now enacts exactly what it describes—by Lester's pedophilic impulses, shadowed now by talk of Spacey's own, or by Ricky's stalking of Lester's daughter Jane (Thora Birch), surreptitiously filming her and spelling her name in flames on the lawn, which the film accepts as offbeat romanticism. Why, though, had I worried less about the image of the hometown Führer worshipper, a husband who hollows his wife (Allison Janney) into a catatonic husk, whose access to literal triggers, attached to real guns, is in fact the bomb ticking beneath this story? I could forecast likely responses to sexual themes in *American Beauty*, from disarmed enthusiasm to righteous indignation, though that did not solve the problem of how to manage tensions within or between those positions. But about this other haunting in the movie's *heimat*, I simply didn't know to what extent, if any, Col. Fitts would strike them as incongruous to *American Beauty*'s landscape, or if his fusion of anxious cultural tropes would feel all too legible. I wondered how shocked or not they had felt about Richard Spencer or Milo or Charlottesville, and how the movie's gathering storm of actual and threatened gun violence would register, three months after Las Vegas. (When I polled the class on Day One about their strongest historical association with 1999, their instant reply was not the Y2K scare; it was Columbine.) I felt newly implicated in this movie's premise, where teens and their reluctant elders inhabit the same era and spaces but grasp nothing about each other.

Amid a needed but worrying cultural moment where moral clarity and acknowledgment of ambiguity have trouble co-existing, I remembered that teaching a worthwhile course did not require resolving my confusions or, potentially, theirs about the enduring value in flawed artworks or in corrupted artists' aesthetic expressions. One of my main tasks would be posing as many

I never questioned that *American Beauty* furnished the ideal time capsule and interpretive riddle to kick off my seminar. But who would shed a tear for Lester Burnham in the hour of Kevin Spacey's disgrace? Who, and especially what 18-year-old, would feel like watching this film?

non-rhetorical questions as I answered, coaxing out collaborators whose mindsets I should neither ignore nor coddle nor predict too much in advance. The generational typecasting of current college students as too fragile to engage tough material irritates me and almost always proves untrue—as it would again during this seminar. Hence my greatest disappointment with my premature panic. I know how attached I remain to *American Beauty*, bringing actorly and audiovisual verve even to dubious conceits, as luscious and idiosyncratic at some moments as it is sepulchral or hackneyed at others. So why was I preparing for how, whether, and why students would either love it uncritically or hate me for assigning it? Hadn't I learned, 17 years into my teaching career, that there were other possibilities—that my class, to purloin a phrase, would be happy and able to look closer?

**M**Y AGITA AROUND *American Beauty* marked not a disaster but a sign of the course working as I intended, in ways that helped me to recall. A while ago, I elected against teaching introductory film seminars on the standard model of a century-spanning overflight. On rare occasions of leading such courses, I felt I was propagating the kinds of superficial historical thinking I claim to dislike: individual films stood in for whole decades, which I necessarily painted in very broad strokes. By contrast, hunkering down in one year, as I planned to do in 1999, teaches students (and reminds me) that every historical moment percolates with the same levels of cacophony and contradiction we take for granted in our own, flouting epochal stereotypes as often as confirming them.

I always choose whatever year the

incoming class was born, given their vested interests in that moment; I prepare them to inherit their film-cultural astrology charts. Aesthetics, politics, famous faces, and cultural trends of 18 years ago are proximal enough to feel accessible to young spectators, but not so recent that they can project current sensibilities. I stack the deck by only offering this class to freshmen born under auspicious cinematic circumstances. I leapt at the chance to teach 1999, heralded even as it unfolded not just as a strong year for Hollywood but also one when multiple films questioned the nature of reality (*The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *eXistenZ*) and smashed conventions of genre and narrative (*The Blair Witch Project*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Limey*). From *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* to *The Iron Giant* to the U.S. release of *Princess Mononoke*, feature animation in variegated styles tightened its grip on adult sensibilities and critical esteem. First-time feature directors from Sofia Coppola to Tony Bui to Malcolm D. Lee to Lynne Ramsay issued bold declarations of artistic intent, and prior innovators like Catherine Breillat, David Lynch, Claire Denis, David O. Russell, and Malcolm's cousin Spike took major, rewarding risks. Yesterday's phenomena don't always hold up, but this crop has proved remarkably durable.

The map of what students know and don't know about the year we explore is never predictable but delicious to observe. Watching *Being John Malkovich*, which nobody had seen, my crew was alarmed to spot Catherine Keener, mistress of the Sunken Place, gracing yet another plot about an elderly cabal hijacking someone else's body—and thus unveiling new evidence of Jordan Peele's ingenious casting in *Get Out*. None of them, however, recognized John Malkovich as a real person, much less that he had played himself, until the credits rolled. In no way am I lampooning them for spotty cultural fluencies, which college partly exists to instill. Besides, our asymmetrical viewing positions make films and discussions fresher. Don't believe me? Consider what else *Being John Malkovich* might mean to you if your response had nothing to do with Malkovich or his persona. Imagine, too, having to translate that persona for today's teens: Michael Shannon, but more famous and chameleonic, with an even more prominent brow? Some shape-shifting clips from *In the Line of Fire* divulged how Malkovich had always contained multitudes.

As a list-maker by temperament and often by editorial edict, I tend to group



movies by year of release. As a festival devotee, I crave those eccentric connections that emerge among movies of identical vintage, autonomously nurtured in different corners of the industry and the globe. Such bonds surface constantly in these “yearbook” classes, sometimes because I planted them, but even then, students find new angles. “Lotte has that speech where she announces her interest in ‘sexual reassignment surgery,’” one student observed about *Being John Malkovich*, “but then she never mentions it again, and her storyline goes totally elsewhere, which made me feel like transgender was just a punch line to this film.” Another student opined that filmmakers probably weren’t too versed in trans lives or ideas in 1999, but proceeding to *All About My Mother* and then to *Boys Don’t Cry* upended that hypothesis. That said, the only stable thread among those three representations of gender nonconformity is that none aligns fully with current vocabularies or paradigms. The fact that no course participant knew about Brandon Teena struck me as progress; for me and many peers, this one hate crime marked our first exposure to “transgender” as a term, which amazed my students, and anchored our initial relation to it. One of the best and riskiest papers for the course cast Brandon in contexts I never conceived, arguing that he and Woody in *Toy Story 2* face related crises of self-conception vs. outside perception. Each also trusts a long-revered, flannel-and-denim regimen of cowboy masculinity—an even more nostalgic archetype as the millennium approached—to secure an identity in danger of disintegrating and to protect them from mounting threats of communal ostracism, albeit of very different natures and stakes.

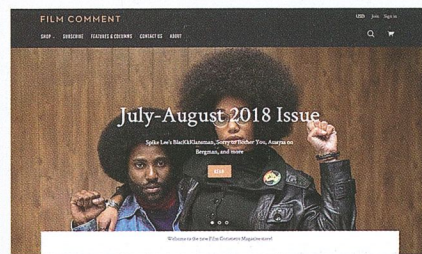
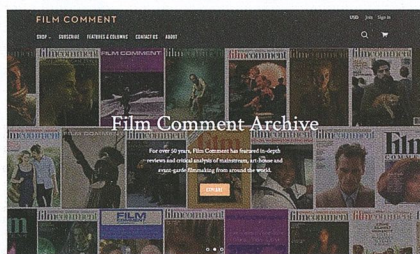
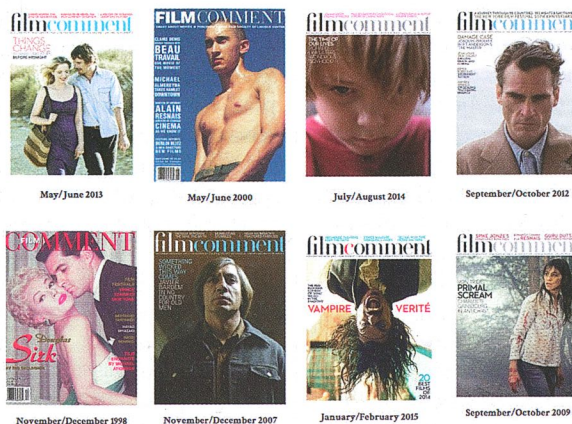
A different shift in global sensibilities arose after we encountered the philosopher-cum-contract-killer of Jim Jarmusch’s *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, the star-crossed romantic pairings of deaf women and hearing men at two moments in black Chicago’s history in Zeinabu irene Davis’s *Compensation*, and the subtly kaleidoscopic vantages on multilingual Dakar in Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun*, which refuses to reduce that city to an icon of exoticized vivacity or postcolonial hardship or triumphant modernity or monolithic patriarchy. None of these films offered typical, essential, or transhistorical narratives of black lives; that they “matter” is for these creators a supremely obvious given. They appeared free, in ways that struck many students as unfamiliar and almost luxurious, to fashion

syncretic and forthrightly diasporic visions of African and African-American identities and of Afro-Asian cultural convergences—embodied, too, in Morpheus, the black Obi-Wan Kenobi of *The Matrix*, a movie that recently became discernible as yet another avatar of everything “trans cinema” might encompass. Of course, such cross-textual threads and periodizing claims often wither under rigorous analysis.

Many students have already read Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, so they know the 1990s were no halcyon era of relaxed racism, and certainly that is not how I recall them. Still, it stirred all of us to enjoy an admittedly curated view of a social and cinematic age that conjectured so imaginatively on pasts, presents, and futures of color, one that at least *seemed* less

## DIG INTO THE ENTIRE FILM COMMENT ARCHIVE AT OUR NEW ONLINE STORE!

### FEATURED PRODUCTS



CONVENIENTLY EXPLORE PAST YEARS  
EASIER NAVIGATION  
BETTER SEARCH FUNCTIONALITY  
CREATE AND SHARE WISHLISTS

[FILMCOMMENT.COM/SHOP](http://FILMCOMMENT.COM/SHOP)



coerced into the square-one task of certifying black people's right to life.

In these and other ways, the 1999 course belied its ostensibly encapsulated historical parameters. We all discovered, or rediscovered, that any given year is many years at once, in mercurial conversation with other moments in time, especially the researcher's own. Neither my students nor I expect to exhume these films in the fossilized shape of their initial production and reception. To the contrary, the lure of the class is to locate fresh paths into movies too old to rate as cutting-edge but too young to foster much "critical distance." The volatility of these films and their reputations yield boisterous and ongoing tests of our interpretive and scholarly acumens. In cases like *American Beauty*'s, this critical instability also requires some careful stepping—just as the film inevitably exceeds the first waves of discourse it elicited, today's controversies cannot erode all its complexities. We had a window and a mandate to reject simple taxonomies of Good and Bad texts. Further unsettled by a diversity of student perspectives and by serendipitous overlaps with adjacent films on our list, *American Beauty* stood ready for rediscovery. The case for its continued relevance had been unhappily but unmistakably made.

**S**O, WHITE GUYS HAVE BEEN freaking out for, like... a while." Such was the well-earned takeaway of one student, long-enamored of *American Beauty* before coming to college, re-encountering Lester Burnham amid a gauntlet of male dol-drums that began with *Being John Malkovich*'s puppeteer-turned-profitteer (John Cusack), who bemoans his vocational and sexual sidelining. He locks his wife in a cage, lest she take away his last shots at success in either venue. The motley crew of men trying to make themselves great again also included John Lotter and Tom Nissen, who annihilate Brandon Teena's masculinity rather than contemplate its similarities to or differences from their own; and Tyler Durden of *Fight Club*, the schizophrenic anarchist who coaches Edward Norton's office drone to carpe diem in increasingly explosive ways, and who turns out to have crouched inside him always as latent macho-gonzo possibility. Extracurricular check-ins with *Election*, *Eyes Wide Shut*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* amassed more evidence that white dudes had been flailing for much longer than election-year think pieces implied.

Ultimately, I had moved *American*

*American Beauty* did not prove unapproachable, nor did teaching it require tabling or centering the topic of Spacey's disturbing star text. To assume otherwise or to bury the film, even out of protective impulses, would have mis-served and underestimated my students, segregating ideas that badly need synthesizing and blocking avenues for discovering that "current" discourses are not brand new, even if prior iterations are never identical.

*Beauty* to the midpoint of the term, paired with *Fight Club* as "problem texts" so dense with aesthetic and cultural quandaries that students would profit from a month of prior skill-building in order to stage properly layered arguments, using nuanced evidence from within and beyond each movie. As predicted, but to very constructive ends, *American Beauty*'s erotic dynamics sparked divergent responses, as did reverberations of Spacey's presence. One student offered that his casting only exacerbated a disdain she harbored anyway for the film's plucky sympathy with Lester's machinations and his eventual recuperation as a chivalric empath who halts the liaison he has cultivated throughout the film. Many others, even admitting a range of personal experience with harassment and assault, confided their amazement at how the film secures identification with Lester despite the embedded and extra-textual reasons to withhold it. That disjunction motivated them to scrutinize the film's methods and understand how it had, for lack of a better word, groomed them. Some students, especially fans of *House of Cards*, *21*, and *Baby Driver*, confessed newfound ambivalence in savoring the art of an actor they revered, even as they delineated their regard for his work from their view of him. Another student asked bashfully, "I'm sorry—was there recent news about Kevin Spacey that I missed?" That query duly reminded us that, in a way that is easier now than in 1999, given proliferating media platforms, it is possible to track daily news and still pass over what others find inescapable. At the term's end, out of 13 assigned films, *American Beauty* scored third-highest in a

collective ranking of students' favorites.

The winner of that poll was *Fight Club*, even though these two movies had engendered the most intramural disputes around their politics and their chaotic constructions of visual and narrative point of view—two concerns the students understood as deeply co-implicated. Making matters murkier, two months before BuzzFeed's fateful interview with Anthony Rapp, the FBI narrowly stopped a 23-year-old white man from detonating an Oklahoma City bank, as inspired by the Fincher film. Kevin Spacey was thus not the only person forcing us into tenser and timelier exchanges than I had foreseen. While the politics of this foiled terrorist, of the "alt-right Fight Clubs" profiled by *Mother Jones* midway through our term, and of *Fight Club* itself remain too incoherent for a single-serving label like "fascism," either classically or colloquially defined, reasons abound for deploying it. Students copped to feeling seduced—partly, for better or worse, by the invitation to ponder such an intimidating knot of textual problems, and by the notion that a giant corporation, as much as Fox kicked and screamed about *Fight Club*, had funded a film so caustic about its own values, or any values. Nobody could remember seeing studio cinema that felt like this. That said, several admirers of *Fight Club* primarily appreciated it as a clinic in questioning charismatic braggadocio, whether from a movie or from a muscular, half-naked man.

Exchanges that Lester Burnham and Tyler Durden catalyzed about millennial masculinities, simultaneously destabilized and regvanized, joined explicitly to misogyny in both movies, and channeled uncomfortably through eroticized adolescents with cognate names—*American Beauty*'s Angela Hayes and *Fight Club*'s Angel Face—felt more and more like the same conversation. They disclosed a shared root system beneath contemporary trends discretely branded as #MeToo and #MAGA. Indeed, Jennifer Barker, Daniel Tripp, and other film scholars had linked these movies long ago via shared neo-fascist motifs, expressed as fully in the diligent armorization of a normative white male body as in political rhetoric. These essays exonerated academic film studies from a frequent and lazy allegation of cultural irrelevance. They also cued us to forge new contexts around the reboots and remodelings of gender in *Boys Don't Cry* and Almodóvar, driven by an ethos totally foreign to the cis-masculine fundamentalism of *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, and they guaranteed sustained conversations about race even in the pointed absence of black images.



Dampening our enthusiasm, though, was the plain fact that these urgent ideas had fallen in forests where few people heard them. Affinities between chauvinism and nationalism barely resounded in the dozen popular reviews we read of *American Beauty* from 1999, where the Nazi neighbor attracted scant remarks, and only as Lester's foil, not his obscure twin. This was not a strictly journalistic oversight. Audiences who lifted *American Beauty* to an inflation-adjusted gross rivaling *Logan's* and *Justice League's*—astonishing even its admirers in my seminar—had absorbed the movie's faux-universal, quasi-philosophical terms and responded in kind. Its sexual provocations, pulling focus totally from political ones, had enticed gauzy euphemism. Casey McKittrick, a scholar commemorating *American Beauty* as one of the first causes célèbres of the infant IMDb, noted very rare mentions of “pedophilia” and none of “homosexuality” in gregarious discussion boards attached to the movie's page. These terms need not have structured the film's reception, but their

absence suggested an ardor unwilling to scrutinize its object.

My collaborators marveled at these discursive omissions, but we did so from a glass house. The Swastika plate still sat among us, a springboard but not a centerpiece for discussion. As metaphor or lexicon, “fascism” propelled rich debates about Lester's men's-rights oratory and his eerily all-white Everytown and Tyler Durden's paramilitary cabals. But the Nazi qua Nazi? We shuddered, in shared odium. Why did we articulate so little? Because the movie itself seems tongue-tied on this score? Because Col. Fitts and his present-day avatars, abounding in the polis, somehow short-circuit our language? Because the deepest horror is mute horror, and we all wish there were nothing that needed saying? Even in a garrulous class, where everyone trusted each other, he remained much tougher to treat than the figure I'd expected to stymie discussion.

In short, *American Beauty* did not prove unapproachable in this seminar, nor did teaching it require tabling or centering the topic of Spacey's disturbing star text.

To assume otherwise or to bury the film, even out of protective impulses, would have misserved and underestimated my students, segregating ideas that badly need synthesizing and blocking avenues for discovering that “current” discourses are not brand new, even if prior iterations are never identical. Sadly, like other forms of climate change, the general and destructive overheating of male egos, burning rings of fire everywhere in 2018, looked more and more like a long-brewing, well-documented catastrophe that attracted too little alarm and even less resistance before it was too late. This was not the cross-generational epiphany we had sought; pedagogical successes often come stitched to unsettling revelations. But I do think my students and I understood more—and more about each other—by the course's end. The year 1999 was a moment in time we only tangentially shared, but its movies brought us closer. ●

**Nick Davis** is a professor of film, literature, and gender studies at Northwestern University. He also writes film reviews at [www.Nick-Davis.com](http://www.Nick-Davis.com).

# FILM COMMENT

PUBLISHED BY THE FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER



The most in-depth reviews.

The most insightful critical analysis.

The most penetrating interviews.

From the greatest film writers working today.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

1 YEAR\*  
FOR \$29<sup>95</sup>

2 YEARS\*  
FOR \$49<sup>95</sup>

3 YEARS\*  
FOR \$69<sup>95</sup>

1 YEAR - APP\*  
FOR \$9<sup>99</sup>

\*Print subscribers receive full access to the new *Film Comment* app, with the latest issues and weekly digests of exclusive online content

[filmcomment.com/subscribe](http://filmcomment.com/subscribe)