American Beauty: *The Seduction of the Visual Image in the Culture of Technology*

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The critical examination of the film American Beauty *reveals characteristics illustrative of the form of culture coextensive with modern technological societies. This form of culture creates an imbalance favoring the aesthetical over the ethical dimensions of human orientation. Absorption into the aesthetical dimension of the electronic or digital visual image significantly reduces the capacity of culture to nurture a meaningful symbolic world. The relative absence of a meaningful symbolic world leaves both identity and social relationships without a foundation.*

Keywords: *culture; identity; suburbs; significance; technology; society; aesthetical; visual; image; power.*

> A symbol is always in general and, however precise its translation, an artist can only restore to it its movement: there is no word-for-word rendering. Moreover, nothing is harder to understand than a symbolic work. A symbol transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing.
>
> —Albert Camus (1955)

The 1999 film *American Beauty* is a stark illustration of the culture of a technological society. The capacity to demonstrate this assertion is predicated on the basic sociological finding that there is a contingent relationship between a society's basic mode of adaptation (e.g., agrarian, industrial, and technological), its culture, and the thinking and behavior of those residing in its context. Yet this relationship and its impact on constituents are seldom revealed in the absence of careful reflection and an accurate theoretical model. The process of socialization and enculturation that a society's members normally undergo makes the context appear natural. *American Beauty* is a superb illustration in that there appears to be no conscious effort toward elucidating this matter on the part of writer or director. Culling through many reviews yields virtually no attention to the existential dilemma of the characters within a technological society and the culture it engenders. If technological culture—as ideology—is indeed pervasive, one would expect that only a penetrating, theoretically informed analysis would be capable of bringing it to light.

The analysis herein draws from the insights into the particular path modernization has taken as identified by a select group of thinkers: most centrally Jacques Ellul and those who have developed his central themes. (See the corpus of work by Postman, Stivers, and Vanderburg.) Ellul (1954/1964) argued that by the middle of the 20th century, the blending of the ingredients of society and culture had crystallized around the force of technique. Technique, as the totality of methods, mechanisms, and procedures driven by efficiency, had become a monolithic force. This context or milieu of living established patterns of activity and habits that required a complimentary psychological orientation. In sum, it had to be believed in. Thus a sort of technological morality emerged, lending support to technique as the "good life." The populations within technological societies are more or less hoodwinked into facilitating technique. Take for example the belief that progress is fundamentally all that techniques and technology offer, ultimately leading to a utopian future. The same believers struggle to compensate and offer apologetics for the direct and indirect consequences of this very process (e.g., the myriad of environmental, social, and psychological problems evident in a technological society). These notions are so ingrained that it is a rare instance when the suggestion is offered that the progress of a people could be defined by

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alternative criteria (e.g., humility, trustworthiness, or moral love) exclusive of all that is associated with technology.

The central argument here is that a sociologically informed understanding of technique and technological culture offers a compelling understanding of the film. As we will see, *American Beauty* shows a culture mutated by an omnipresent, technologically mediated environment. The stabilizing and meaningful elements of culture collapse under the weight of these elements (e.g., electronic visual images primarily from the mass media), with human relationships and identity having little more than feet of clay (Stivers, 2004). One might say that *American Beauty* is best understood as an example of the cultural syndrome of technique. Furthermore, this diagnosis can be performed without hyperbole so as to avoid projecting the theory of technique onto the film. Following a brief analysis of the suburb as habitat, we will turn to the film itself.

The suburb, and a "nice" suburb at that, is the setting for *American Beauty*. With minor limitations, what could be more quintessential to the hopes, dreams, and enculturated notions of the good life than the American suburb with the comfort, convenience, and lifestyle (i.e., laminate flooring, zero-turning radius mowers, etc.) granted by technology. Beuka (2004) gives us a number of aspects of the suburb worth noting, including its representation in fiction and film. For example, the suburb is indeed the dominant destiny for increasing numbers of Americans. In 1950, the U.S. population was evenly divided between rural, metropolitan, and suburban environments. Residents of suburbs now constitute more than 40% of the population. The tendency within films, film criticism, and other forms of artistic representation of the suburb seldom rises above pointing to a defunct bourgeoisie morality with little to no explanation for its evaporation. Although representations of this habitat in film and elsewhere have come to illustrate the ambiguity of this setting in terms of community and genuine happiness, what is needed is a penetrating analysis born out of an understanding of the cultural and psychological ramifications of technique or the culture of a technological society.

The suburban backdrop is an integral part of the film as the "stage" of the American dream: tree-lined streets, neatly arranged homes internally and externally, sport utility vehicles, and a cornucopia of technology (e.g., music, video, TV, self-help audiotapes, and makeovers of all sorts). According to Beuka (2004), depictions of suburbia in fiction and film offer insights into its infrastructure and, in turn, its capacities as a human habitat. The author highlights the fact that in terms of layout and design, the suburban house is an enigma in terms of the human sense of home. Suburbanization itself involved planning in accordance with the integration of emerging technologies of construction, utilities, and public services. We might point to the calculated precision epitomized by tract housing. Despite ongoing efforts to humanize or personalize the space, each box and set of boxes within a grand box expands out as points on a grid. This is a setting described as invoking "the anxiety of the grid."[1] Although positioning oneself in the suburb—at least as literally advertised—is the realization of an ideal home, the result is more akin to occupying a kind of no place, in the traditional sense of taking root. The response to this anxiety appears to be endless trips to the home-improvement store to make over the dwelling. The image of the house serves as a primary preoccupation vis-à-vis others in the pseudoneighborhood. Picture clusters of individual suburbanites viewing numerous mass media images about people like themselves making home improvements to personalize their space! We now find a similar mass media preoccupation with making over extending to personal appearance, attitude, and behavior. From beginning to end, this is the predicament of living in a technological society.

The consequences of what might be referred to as the technological infrastructure for the human community has been analyzed by Baumgartner (1988) in an ethnographic study of a representative suburb. Lengthy interviews and observation led to the following summary conclusions. Although the suburb is very organized and expectations for behavior exist, relationships are best characterized by moral minimalism. There is conscious concern about the appearance of homes (i.e., houses) and behavior that is unusual or out of place. "Why don't they have a snow blower?" Yet from the relationships within the home outward, there is minimal engagement between members with regard to expectations in terms of strong convictions. Furthermore, conflict, an element of intense human relationships, is avoided at all cost. Activities are avoided that might trigger conflict. Living in this habitat seldom requires cooperative efforts or mutual reliance. High levels of social fragmentation, transience, and isolation leave residents largely indifferent to the plight of neighbors, with the exception of concern about the appearance of a residence. The goal is for things to run smoothly. It is worth inserting that should technical systems fail (e.g., power failure) or bad

weather cause a disruption (e.g., being snowed-in), we find those rare instances of spontaneous interaction and mutual assistance. Of course, such instances are then followed by measures to prevent them from occurring in the future (i.e., purchasing a gas-powered generator). Measures such as these further transfer reliance from neighbors to technology. When troublesome or erratic behavior is unavoidable, the primary response is to seek out a specialist, such as the police or mental health professional.

At the cultural level, the suburb is an example of a lived morality, a technological morality, and a minimal morality that Stivers (1994) argues follows the drive for success, survival, happiness, and health. Technological morality incorporates the negative consequences of technique on human relationships and the psyche by simultaneously promising ultimate fulfillment through professional advancement, a myriad of forms of entertainment, and the ability to stave off aging and ill health. Death, however, remains problematic and haunting. Having identified certain facets of the culture inextricably tied to a technological society as evidenced in the suburb, let us now turn to the film proper, beginning with a few reactions.

In my use of the film in the classroom, one student responded by stating that except for the weird ending, this was when Kevin Spacey, who plays Lester Burnham, the main character, became his personal hero. This was a clear case of the film's capacity to evoke identification between the viewer and the film's characters, where both are symptomatic of the influences of the culture of technology. Briefly, the character played by Spacey transforms himself from a victim into a self-centered hedonist. Another student, a nun from Nigeria, quite eloquently wrote that Lester's teenage daughter, Jane, though ostensibly in both a house and a family, was nonetheless homeless and an orphan. And last, as a segue into the film, one reviewer (Greydanus, 2000) indicates that if thought about as the visual version of a story, *American Beauty* offers us an aesthetic rather than "a moral to the story." As a consequence, his review gives the film high aesthetic marks while suggesting it is not worth seeing because it contains no moral insight. The reviewer's observation has a certain level of accuracy, but he fails to recognize the merit in seeking to understand the conditions and sources revealed through a diagnosis of the culture of a technological society. Once we understand the mutation of bourgeoisie morality into technological morality (Stivers, 1994, pp. 1-13), the film's morality is evident. Ellul and those that have taken his lead recognize the intricate tie between the cultural component of technological morality and the reality of life within technological society.

The Movie: *American Beauty*

It is essential for purposes of this diagnosis to acknowledge the film's explicit premise in the subtitle, which tells us to "take a closer look." In this regard, *American Beauty* places the visual image as the enveloping context of human existence and perception. What remains unstated, and the point we are pursuing, is that this is a condition specific to life in a technological society. Work and interaction are increasingly subject to finding the most effective method. Effectiveness is optimal only if there is complete subjugation to the method on the part of the practitioner and the target of the procedure; this is true whether the method's object is putting together a fast-food burger or the human techniques of the telemarketer and so on. We have witnessed the metastasizing of efficient methods throughout technological societies. Techniques for effectively dealing with people have extended into virtually every form of human relationship (e.g., husband and wife, parent and child, public relations, etc.). The electronic visual image serves to compensate for the depersonalizing and alienating elements of efficient systems (Stivers, 1994, p. 131-159).

American Beauty fails to explore the destructive consequences of the culture of technology's absorption into the visual dimension. Instead, according to the film, the fundamental human error is twofold. For one, seeing things always entails a limited field of vision (i.e., camera angles). When this limited field of vision is combined with resolute moral judgment, disaster ensues. Moral judgment is the villain. A deeper critique enables us to recognize the empathetic relationship between the viewer of the film, the filmmakers, and the characters in the film. They all operate increasingly within the medium of the culture of technology. By extension, you and I are really videographers on one side of the lens or the other (e.g., TV, surveillance, videotaping, digital cameras, and camera phones). But beyond this is the implication that the mind is a recording instrument and the eyes our lens. We turn now to a few specific scenes that dramatize the consequences of living within the visual dimension, itself one manifestation of a technological society.

Following a prelude with the main character's daughter expressing embarrassment with her father and suggesting that he ought to be put out of his misery, the

film opens as we glide-down on an American suburb that might easily lead to an invitation from the local realtor association or chamber of commerce to a great place to live and raise a family. But rather than a comforting, fatherly voice-over, Lester Burnham tells us with charming cynicism that each day is the first day of the rest of our lives, except for the day you die. We then move back a bit in time to learn of Lester within the context of his family, work, and neighborhood.

As Lester takes us on his retrospective, we discover that the point of departure is his sedated emotional state and marginal significance within the context of either family or profession. In the case of the family, both daughter and wife go about their lives with little to no concern or respect for the father or husband.[2] At work, Lester sits in a small cubicle calling potential clients for advertising services (i.e., image promotion), using techniques that are manipulative and impersonal. The parties involved have tacitly agreed to play a charade of interaction as a condition for success. Lester realizes that both he and those at the other end of the line are engaged in a game of cynical deceit through the stock-in-trade practices (i.e., techniques or methods directed at affecting the behavior of others) of modern business. Work is meaningless although it provides for a life in the suburbs and its accoutrements. Across time, the level of gratification from the suburban lifestyle has waned. Lacking these compensations, he can barely rise to meet the day ahead.

Lester's home life is managed by his spouse, who has boundless levels of energy directed toward success in real estate sales. Lester is subject to ongoing verbal ridicule from both wife and daughter and has come to take their negative perceptions as accurate. Life is utterly boring save for an occasional James Bond marathon on TV and habitual masturbation. For purposes of diagnosis, it is best to initially bracket Lester's self-professed state of lethargy as follows: Other than TV or masturbation, why get out of bed? Here we are called on to ask some basic questions about spheres of human motivation and their association with culture.

Two fundamental dimensions of human motivation and satisfaction are the aesthetical and the ethical. Although cursory, one path into the distinction would be to contemplate the commonplace question, "How was your weekend?" The nature of the question itself and the response it elicits provokes one or both dimensions. In the case of the aesthetical, the criteria of pleasure and excitement prevail, whereas the ethical would pertain to having or not having engaged in some way in thoughts and actions related to some meaningful purpose with moral criteria. At the level of culture or lived morality, a given society will occupy some position along a continuum of these dimensions as poles. The issue here is whether Lester's state of lethargy is primarily taken as a lack of excitement or meaningful purpose. Hypothetically, either could serve to invigorate life. This is critical. With boredom, meaninglessness, and cynicism covering this technological-suburban landscape, in which direction is one likely to turn?

In relative succession, middle-aged Lester has a Lolita moment, fantasizing while viewing his daughter's friend Angela's titillating cheerleader performance, and then is notified of his job being in jeopardy. Henceforth, Lester regularly fantasizes about Angela and creates a number of very awkward encounters for his daughter whenever the three are together. The imagery of the fantasies is filled with vivid red (e.g., silk and petals). Lester is thus awakened by this motivating force and sets into motion a commitment to health and other pleasures (i.e., the aesthetical). The turn toward lifting weights or jogging is itself aesthetic in that when inquiring about fitness advice, he describes his goal as wanting to "look good naked." He looks at himself during workouts while listening to classic rock, with periodic breaks to smoke a joint.

Lester is told to put together documentation to substantiate his value to the company relative to other employees by the company's recently hired efficiency expert (Brad). Many viewers will immediately identify with this feared predicament. Yet the film fails to draw any attention to the contemporary source of this fear: the technological society. Direct outcomes of technological societies include bureaucracies, methods of efficiency, and the growth of markets that all function as abstract systems defying any sense of loyalty or concern for the well-being of Lester or any other human being. He and others are expendable in the absence of any ethically binding dimension on the actions of the company. Lester's predicament illustrates the more general loneliness and vulnerability of the individual within a technological society. The intensification of these psychological conditions compels inhabitants to protect themselves through either garnering a position of power over others or insulation from them.

How is one to respond following an aesthetical awakening? First, Lester writes a scathing indictment of the company to which Brad responds by pointing to the door. Lester tells Brad that he'd like a substantial severance package or he will disclose company secrets and, closer to home, blackmail Brad with a sexual harassment charge via false allegations. Within the

context of the aesthetical dimension of technological culture, truth and honesty vanish because the reality of human relationships is one turning solely on power and manipulation. At its center, technology and efficient method are none other than the power to control. We see Lester gleefully leaving the office having apparently gained his severance package. In a similar vein, when his wife, Caroline, threatens to divorce him if he does not cease demanding consideration and sexual gratification, he reminds her that were she to do so, he would be entitled to half of her income as he supported her when she was seeking her real estate license. A smile comes to Lester's face. Now it is she who experiences vulnerability, having lost the upper hand in this relationship. In a related conversation, Caroline tells Jane that the only person you can rely on and trust is yourself.

The character of Caroline is obsessive about success and projecting an image that mirrors success. She is envious and infatuated with Buddy Kane, the local king of real estate. Crucial to the matter of the culture of technology is the proliferation of human techniques and their impact on human relationships and identity. Caroline uses sales techniques on potential buyers as well as her own audiotapes as sources of motivation and confidence. From these standardized techniques of self-improvement, she comes to repeat phrases to herself as mantras: "I will sell this house today." "I will not be a victim." These techniques are ultimately inadequate, and when ineffective, she collapses into childish fits only to further chastise herself for, above all, being weak. Her daily interactions are mediated by human techniques while she holds on to the vision that ultimate happiness will eventually emerge through motivational techniques and success in sales. An affair ensues with the highly successful real estate king. Buddy suggests to Caroline that when he is stressed, he prefers nothing better than pulling the trigger of a powerful handgun at the shooting range. Caroline comes to find this practice very pleasurable. Here we find the avid pursuit of aesthetical pleasures alongside fragmented and precarious human relationships. The underlying factor is the exclusive pursuit of power. We need to recognize that the factor of power is endemic to technology. And in a technological society, the factor of power becomes a monolithic force. What can challenge monolithic power? More power! In the absence of any real alternative challenge, there is no check on the tendency toward power and manipulation in all areas of life. With few exceptions, each individual becomes skeptical of the motivations of everyone else (e.g., better get it in writing).

We can compare the Burnham family with the recently arrived Fitts family next door. If the culture coextensive with a technological society represents the transformation from bourgeois morality to that of a technological morality, we can expect to find elements of each. The Burnhams are progressive with respect to the pursuit of happiness and success. Their treatment of their daughter entails friendship or trying to be best buddies. The daughter's room is a private sphere, where she looks at Web sites illustrating prices and options for breast augmentation. As moderns, the Burnhams experience ambiguity regarding values, roles, and expectations, with the exception of an obligation to the American lifestyle of the aforementioned pursuits. The roles formerly associated with mother, father, and daughter have all but disappeared. There is little evidence of any expectation in terms of standards of conduct outside of success. Judgment regarding nearly any issue has eroded into nothing more than private opinion.

By contrast, the Fitts family consists of a highly authoritarian ex-marine father, Frank; a son with a very cool veneer and a penchant for filming whenever possible, Ricky; and a wife left nameless as the mechanism that cleans and organizes the house with absolute precision. Frank Fitts sees the country going to hell in any number of ways, including flagrant homosexuality and a general lack of respect for authority. The difficulty is that although there are expectations for behavior on Frank's part, the source of this expectation is hollow and derives solely from the threat of force. The rigid structure in the Fitts household is fundamentally amoral because it rests on threat and coercion (i.e., power). One result is a dance of deception between father and son. For example, Ricky's former drug activity leads Frank to periodically approach his son for a urine sample. The son gets "clean" urine from a nurse to whom he sells pot. When Ricky's deviations are found out, the father attacks him physically, uttering again and again the need for structure, discipline, and respect for the possessions of others. Devoid of any balance between moral love and discipline, the relationship turns on fear and intimidation. Absent Frank's brutality, it is reasonable to expect that Lester would fare much better in his daughter's eyes as regards structure and discipline. Yet at one point, when Ricky and Jane are talking privately, she confesses that part of her loathing of Lester is because he fails to provide her with any structure or discipline.

In sum, the two families straddle the fence of a technological society's culture that ineluctably structures

thought and action in accord with demands for efficiency, bureaucratic rules, and technical procedure. The same system provides distractions and siphons off any energy for mounting resistance through compensatory aesthetical pleasure. Custom and tradition collapse, leaving, on one hand, the Burnham's morality by whim, with its vulnerability and cynicism between family members, and on the other, the Fitts family's clinging hopelessly to standards of conduct that have no legitimacy. In both cases, overpowering and the threat of being overpowered are the primary psychological preoccupations.

With rare exception, all of the characters are insignificant in the sense of being attached to a meaningful world or to others. There is an insatiable desire to be attractive to someone or to have him or her show interest. This is accompanied by a profound self-consciousness typical of insecurity. For example, Jane is initially put off by Ricky's filming of her. Nonetheless, we catch glimpses of her smiling as she turns or moves away from Ricky's camera or gaze because, beyond all else, it is attention and interest. After some rapport develops between the two, Jane, formerly highly self-conscious about her bust, bares her breasts to Ricky's camera through their respective bedroom windows. At one point in another conversation, Ricky asks Jane if she is jealous of her father's infatuation with Angela. Jane responds as if the inquiry is disgusting but suggests that she wishes he were as interested in her as in Angela.

The writer, Alan Ball, and director, Sam Mendes, both point to Ricky as, in many respects, the critical character. Ricky's character is driven toward filming, reviewing what is filmed for purposes of remembering the beauty of the world, and getting high. His main relation to the world is that he finds much of it interesting. He tells Jane initially when she objects to being filmed that he is not obsessing about her but finds her interesting. Creatures that are dead are as interesting as or more interesting than those that are alive. A funeral, dead bird, or dead homeless man all exist as if along a plane of what is potentially intriguing to the eye. Ricky is fascinated by his father's collection of guns and Nazi paraphernalia (i.e., absolute power). Ricky's favorite sequence of video is of a bag blowing in the breeze for a lengthy period prior to a snow.[3] In a very rare and unguarded moment, he confesses that he realizes there is this mysterious force behind all that we see that animates everything. This is the beauty. The filming helps him to remember this, and the awareness fills him to the point that his heart is about to burst. Lester likewise moves in this direction, eventually echoing this sentiment. What must be done is to end the struggle and judgment of life and more fully embrace aesthetical beauty—to let reality flow across one, as it were.

As the story unfolds, Lester continues to lust for Angela, takes to purchasing the red Firebird he always wanted and a remote-control car, and works at a fast-food restaurant—the place of least responsibility. It would be fair to say that for Lester, coming alive was reaching back to the lack of responsibility and impulsiveness of youth. He learns of Caroline's affair with the real estate king. The discovery of Caroline's affair is the final movement in the reversal of power in their relationship. He has power over her image and, therefore, her future success.

Because of Frank's direct observations of interaction between Ricky and Lester—Ricky is really selling pot to Lester—and Frank's piecemeal viewing of Ricky's videotaped material, he concludes that their relationship is sexual. As a walking voyeur or videographer within technological culture, Frank must approach reality from a limited range of angles and edit what he sees. In an interesting turn, Frank approaches Lester, offering physical intimacy. Surprised, Lester pulls away, telling Frank that he must have had the wrong idea. For Frank, an excruciating moment of letting his guard down results in rebuff and the revelation of his most intimate secret. Frank is now vulnerable, as well.

Lester has his sexual opportunity with Angela, resisting intercourse after discovering from Angela that she is a virgin. In the end, Lester is shot dead from behind by Frank at point-blank range, with the bloody physical aftermath in vivid color splattered on the wall. Ricky looks on at the scene with aesthetic wonder while Lester takes us through his last thoughts. The film concludes with Lester's recollections in black and white of his childhood, looking at the sky, automobiles, and the happy times with his wife and daughter. We are advised to accept this beauty moment by moment; allowing it to pass over us.

In an interview, Alan Ball described his fascination with screenwriting because of the medium's freedom. For him, this freedom affords the writer an opportunity to go anywhere in space and time as well as to explore people's dreams and fantasies. Furthermore, these opportunities derive from the advent of this amazing computer technology where you can really create worlds. As to *American Beauty*'s appeal, Ball had an early inclination that it would turn out well, though reactions were less predictable because of its being "controversial or edgy or whatever" (Ball, as

quoted in Harland, 2000). He noted a reoccurring critique that the film was pretentious and loaded with dime-store spiritualism. He found one journalist's pressing of the matter of the significance of a bag floating through the air as representative of just such a theme among some critics. Ball responded to this by suggesting that what should be realized is that the beauty of the bag is in the eye of the beholder. He further attempted to bolster this point by referencing his take on the Buddhist idea that the miraculous exists within the mundane. Furthermore, he suggests that as an artist, it is necessary to be thick-skinned and to not care about what people say. For him, in the final analysis, the film's success can be defined by the strength of the response it elicits.

Mendes, the film's director, also indicated in an interview (Short, 2000) that the film's crossing over into mainstream popularity was a surprise. He points to two pivotal scenes that he regards as central to providing the film with "a kind of soul" and "a turning point," with both arising out of the association of the score and speed at which the scene was cut together. These are the scenes with the floating bag and with Jane's exposing herself to Ricky as he views her through the lens of his video camera. Mendes describes the film as a private and interior film perhaps best watched alone. The solitude of the scenes is here best experienced in the solitude of the viewer. For him, many of the important scenes are wordless, as emotional experiences. Our analysis tells us the sad truth of much of life within the culture of a technological society. One aspect of this truth is the frequent and intense experience of loneliness. The lives depicted in this film and lives of viewers mirror one another. A second aspect has to do with the expansion and intensification of aesthetical pleasures as compensation for the frail identities that accompany loneliness (e.g., consumption, visual spectacle, drugs, or anything capable of producing excitement).

In the development of this thesis, what is the general relevance of films or of a particular film to a critical sociology of the culture produced by technological societies? Norman Denzin (1995) has gone as far as to characterize contemporary society as a cinematic society. Denzin's analysis, which preceded the making of *American Beauty*, provides a framework fully capable of predicting the central themes of the film. First is the basic recognition of an emphasis on the visual for cues and confirmation. It is to live as if the original or authentic event of a wedding, vacation, or so on has lost any qualitative distinction from its replication. Reality exists in a visual world of mediated images and thus the infatuation with being in them. Here one might refer to the photograph or video or digital image as evidence of reality, as if the vacation or taping of an event is more substantial than the event. Yet there is a recognition in film and elsewhere that these are nonetheless angles that by themselves are necessarily selective and must have some fascination for the viewer. The eye can make mistakes. I can even disagree with the instant replay meant to correct the original error. As a matter of fact, the enhancement of the visual image through coloration may contaminate the reality that the visual image is expected to accurately represent.

Denzin's analysis culminates with a meticulous examination of the film *Blow-Up*. The film's central character is a photographer who has taken a picture, only later discovering that it contains clues to a murder. The suggestion is that the photographer mirrors the lives of those entrenched in a visual or cinematic society (i.e., technological society). As mentioned earlier, we are so subsumed by the visual image that we are coming to be in the position of a videographer of our own lives, with our eyes functioning as the camera's lens. This process transforms the psyche of the voyeur into a character who remains aloof from the subjects within the field of vision except in the aesthetic sense. We are drawn to what is pleasurable or interesting to the eye. In the case of *Blow-Up*, the voyeur-photographer is captured by the game of solving the puzzle of which his photograph is a clue. The resolution requires a tenacious application of technical skills and equipment. This problem-solving experience supersedes the authentic tragedy of an individual death. One's relationship to the world is limited to the dimension of sensation. The more intense the sensation, the more it and its like are attended to. In *Blow-Up*, the photographer has no interest in the loss of life or in seeing justice done. These are outside of the visual dimension that the voyeur occupies.

Denzin concludes as follows with reference to *Blow-Up*'s screenwriter:

> Thus does Antonioni make his most important moral argument. The technologies of vision are without morality, and when they do permit the reproduction (or capture) of violence, they can do so in a way that only embellishes and often sweetens that which, to the eye, seems harsh and aggressive. . . . The experts who deploy these artistic technologies of vision are also without morality. Even when deeper meaning can be discovered in these records of reality, artists like

> Thomas [in *Blow-Up*] are unmoved to action. … Technology has turned the world into a series of images where sender and receiver stare blankly as though their transaction at some point still touched the solidarity of the ground. (Denzin 1995, p. 136)

A sociologically informed understanding of technological societies yields a critique of contemporary culture of which film is symptomatic. In the case of *American Beauty*, the characters are taken as living life within the visual dimension. The film suggests that as actors, we err in making moral judgments because of the limitations of any one angle. The primary prescription to be drawn from the film is to refrain from moral judgment and follow an aesthetically driven path of interests. Life is a game where we experiment with the script and characters we encounter. Above all, this is a therapeutic prescription that involves embracing the limitless vistas of technology and techniques, refraining from moral judgment, and never holding to anything or anyone too tightly or dearly. This formula would have us believe that resistance to the power of a technological society is tantamount to an invitation for needless pain and suffering when there is seemingly so much pleasure to be experienced. It may serve to provide some insulation from the desperate search for meaning in a culture mutated by the dictates of a technological society. The prescription is likely to require stronger and stronger doses as the conditions for identity formation and mutual obligation erode exponentially.

Notes

1. The subject of the transformation of the human habitat under technology is portrayed in the film *Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of Balance* (1983), produced and directed by Godfrey Reggio. At one point late in the film, there is a sequence with the frame of a microchip immediately followed by the structure or layout of the modern technological habitat. The similarities between the two grids are astounding.

2. It may be necessary to point out that there is no implied advocacy for the value of patriarchal power. Mutual expectation is an important element of cultural stability. Most directly the observation points to basic human respect and the role of legitimate parental authority.

3. One can see the parallel here between Ricky and Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951/1979, pp. 224-225). Both youths are set against the backdrop of a cruel world that is for the most part populated by hypocritical and imbecilic adults. The two are unwilling or incapable of entering a reality that contains decidedly imperfect human beings along with the necessary tragedies that accompany living. They attempt to insulate themselves from a precarious world that is riddled with contingencies. Yet these very efforts at insulation perpetuate the profound loneliness and insecurity that set them in motion in the first place. What we have attempted to demonstrate here is that it is an error to marginalize this problem, treat it as located within individuals, or attribute it to a vague notion of the "loss of values." This is a cultural reality inextricably tied to technological societies.

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