

## The Lethal Kiss: An Encounter with Truth

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*American Beauty*<sup>1</sup> depicts a suburban world ruled by ideals of success, popularity, masculinity, and moral uprightness, yet marked by generalised discontent. In this context, Lester Burnham becomes infatuated with his daughter's friend. This encounter reawakens a desire he had renounced in order to sustain the appearance of progress and prosperity. With this second wind, he begins to act out and becomes a symptom of the community. His protest crystallizes in a scene with his wife, who loses interest when she notices he might spill beer on the couch. "It's just a couch! ... This isn't life!" he objects.

Meanwhile, retired U.S. Marine Colonel Frank Fitts moves in next door with his family. His path goes in the opposite direction. Authority, structure, discipline—Frank relies on a rigid framework to contain an unbearable *jouissance*, which he also violently enforces on his son.

Ricky Fitts, the Colonel's son, occupies a key position between these antagonistic figures. Observant, sensitive, and transgressive, he challenges the performative normalcy of the suburban environment. He endures his father's abuse while seeking ways to escape home. Lester, for his part, idealizes Ricky as an image of the authenticity he longs for. Ricky sells him marijuana and is romantically involved with Lester's daughter.

Both Lester and Ricky trigger Frank, whose thinking becomes increasingly delusional. He interprets Lester's behaviour as evidence of a secret homosexual life and his son's absences as proof of sexual exploitation. When Frank confronts Ricky, the latter spells out for him the very secret Frank is trying to keep at bay, while opening a way out for himself. Frank's precarious solution for holding his world together collapses: his son is not engaged in homosexual acts, but he himself is disturbed by them.

Shattered, Frank goes to see Lester. Lester speaks candidly about his marital situation and offers him a moment of warmth and understanding. Taking this as confirmation that they are alike, Frank suddenly kisses Lester. Lester gently but firmly rejects the advance. This is the moment in which

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<sup>11</sup> Mendes, S. (Director). (1999). *American Beauty* [Film]. DreamWorks.

truth emerges. Stripped of any imaginary support, Frank is left alone with a prohibited jouissance encountered through a man oblivious to it. Truth appears here as an event of the Real rather than as knowledge: something that insists outside meaning and destabilises Frank's entire subjective economy. The kiss returns to him, naked of any semblance, as an unbearable real that precipitates a *passage à l'acte*.

From that point on, each character confronts a tragic fate. Unlike Frank, Lester does not respond to this encounter by jumping out of the scene; instead, he finds a fragile, imaginary reorganisation that allows him to leave this world on the side of desire.