

Awakening from the American Dream: The End of Escape in American Cinema?

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THE DREAM OF ESCAPE

What, then, is the American, this new man?" The question, posed in 1782 by the French aristocrat turned Pennsylvania farmer Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, answers itself: The American is a new man, a creature yet unseen, unknown in the annals of history. He is a being defined by his newness—self-created, unbound, indefinable. It is the newness of this new man that astounds Crèvecoeur: "*He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions."¹ The American sheds all that once defined him in an old and intentionally forgotten world. Most promising, perhaps, is the fact that reinvention does not cease upon arrival in the new world but remains an ever-present possibility as long as new avenues of escape from the limits and impositions of both the Old and New Worlds alike remain available to the New Man. And, for Crèvecoeur, it is precisely that possibility of escape to new potentials, new freedoms, and new self-definitions that stands so invitingly and inexhaustibly in the American's future: "[W]e are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be, nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are. Many ages will not see the shores of our great lakes replenished with inland nations, nor the unknown bounds of North America entirely peopled. Who can tell how far it extends? Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed and contain? For no European foot has as yet traveled half the extent of this mighty continent!"²

It is hardly surprising that a people who left various native lands seeking a new start should define itself as a nation seeking ever-new avenues of re-creation. It is a part of the American soul, a creed in its national devotions as old as its first moments and captured indelibly by some of

its ablest spokespeople. At the moment of America's direst early crisis, self-creation became part of America's official national definition as described by Thomas Jefferson in his 1774 pamphlet to a despised king. In "A Summary View of the Rights of Americans," Jefferson recalled that "our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness."³ Inasmuch as all humans are born into circumstances not of their own choosing, Jefferson proposed a revolutionary new justification for universal mobility, the desire for infinite improvement of circumstance, and a presumed suspicion for those who accepted their unbidden circumstance without reflection and choice. Jefferson, in revolutionary prose, articulated what untold millions of subsequent Americans would cite as their rationale for "pulling up stakes," "moving out," "starting over," "leaving town," and countless less-articulate but implicitly theorized declarations of independence from accidental circumstance and dedication to a life in the pursuit of happiness.

Always searching for the better choice of locale and lifestyle, this restless quality of the American character also threatened tranquillity of mind, undermined stability in communities, and gave rise to the possibility of the perpetually unsatiated soul: Happiness pursued, after all, may preclude happiness achieved. Alexis de Tocqueville identified a universal "restlessness" as one of the central characteristics of the American psyche some fifty years after Jefferson's articulation of the right to uproot oneself and discerned the oppression of spirit that infinite physical and psychic freedom could entail. Dreaming constantly of "the goods they do not have," Americans "show themselves constantly tormented by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest route that can lead to [them]." Tocqueville per-

ceived that the American constantly reaches for the next best thing, exhibits perpetual discontent with what he or she has achieved and thus “grasps them all without clutching them, and he soon allows them to escape from his hands so as to run after new enjoyments.” Tocqueville described a people who, rather than achieving ever greater levels of bliss with each perceptible improvement in circumstance, suffered from a kind of frenzied dissatisfaction: “In addition to the goods that he possesses, at each instant he imagines a thousand others that death will prevent him from enjoying if he does not hasten. This thought fills him with troubles, fears, and regrets, and keeps his soul in a sort of unceasing trepidation that brings him to change his designs and his place at every moment.”⁴

Tocqueville identifies a terrible contradiction in the American soul: In their unique craving for “newness,” for the infinite possibility of the better, greater, more perfect possibility, Americans are impelled to pursue a happiness ever out of reach. Incapable of rest and satisfaction with what they have achieved, Americans in effect fall into a form of enslavement—enslavement to a pursuit without end. In their restlessness they are endlessly driven without hope of contentment. Unable to restrain their desire for the promise of what lies around the next corner, they prove unable to find satisfaction with what they have come to know on their own street. The imperative of choice may itself result in the inability to choose no longer to choose, to accept a limitation on choice itself, but instead rather incline individuals toward feelings of dissatisfaction at choices not yet offered and not yet taken. By declaring what they are not, Americans preclude discovering what they are; by insisting on what they will not have, they prevent themselves from keeping anything.

What follows is an analysis of three popular films dating from the 1940s to the 1990s. Each captures an aspect of this ingrained feature of American character, the dream of escape. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, we witness the endearing story of George Bailey, a man who desperately craves to escape the limiting life of the small town of Bedford Falls. *Avalon* points to the cost of realizing escape, particularly the loss of community, and with it the loss of collective memory, a loss that leads to the triumph of amnesia over memorial for the dead. Lastly, *American Beauty* portrays the fruits of escape, the entrapment of the modern bourgeois American, and yet suggests a new form of escape in the rejection of the traditional American dream of escape, a form of escape that, ironically, only further embraces the solipsistic trajectory of American escape.

IT'S A DESTRUCTIVE LIFE

Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* portrays the decent life of a small-town American, George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart), an everyman who saves his community from an evil Scrooge—Henry F. Potter (Lionel Barrymore)—and who only comes to realize his accomplishments by witnessing what terrors might have occurred had he never lived. George Bailey represents all that is good and decent

about America: a family man beloved by his community for his kindness and generosity.

Yet, if there is a dark side of America, the film quite ably captures that as well—and contrary to popular belief, it is found not solely in Potter. One sees a dark side represented by George Bailey himself: the optimist, the adventurer, the builder, the man who deeply hates the town that gives him sustenance, who craves nothing else but to get out of Bedford Falls and remake the world. Given its long-standing reputation as a nostalgic look at small-town life in the pre-war period, it is almost shocking to suggest that the film is one of the most potent, if unconscious, critiques ever made of the American dream that was so often hatched in this small-town setting. For George Bailey, in fact, destroys the town that saves him in the end.

Undoubtedly viewers have come to adore this film in part because it portrays what Americans intuitively sense that they have lost. Among the film's first scenes is an idyllic Bedford Falls covered in freshly fallen snow, people strolling on sidewalks, a few cars meandering slowly along the streets, and numerous small stores stretching down each side of the tree-lined streets. It is an America increasingly unknown and unseen: wounded first by Woolworths, then Kmart, then Wal-Mart; mercilessly bled by the automobile; and finally drained of life by subdivisions, interstates, and the suburbs. Americans admire this movie because it portrays Mr. Gower's drug store as a place to meet neighbors over a soda or an ice cream, not merely a place to be treated as a faceless consumer buying painkillers; similarly, like the bar in *Cheers*, Martini's bar is somewhere that everybody knows your name, a place to spend a few minutes with friends after work before one walks home.

George Bailey hates this town. Even as a child, he wants to escape its limiting clutches, ideally to visit the distant and exotic locales vividly pictured in *National Geographic*. As he grows, his ambitions change in a significant direction: he craves “to build things, design new buildings, plan modern cities.”⁵ The modern city of his dreams is imagined in direct contrast to the enclosure of Bedford Falls: it is to be open, fast, glittering, and kaleidoscopic. He craves “to shake off the dust of this crummy little town” to build “airfields, skyscrapers one hundred stories tall, bridges a mile long. . . .” George represents the vision of postwar America: the ambition to alter the landscape to accommodate modern life, to uproot nature and replace it with monuments of human accomplishment, to re-engineer life for mobility and swiftness, unencumbered by permanence, a life no longer limited to a moderate and comprehensible human scale.

George's great dreams are thwarted by innumerable circumstances of fate and accident: most of the film is a retelling of various episodes of George's life for the benefit of a guardian angel—Clarence Oddbody (Henry Travers)—who will shortly be sent down to earth to attempt to save George during his greatest test. Despite all of George's many attempts to leave the town of Bedford Falls—first as a young man with plans to travel to Europe, later to college, and then still later, and more modestly, to New York City—various intervening events prevent him from even once leaving Bedford Falls. Over his life, however, we discover

that George has helped innumerable people in the community over the years; these countless seemingly small interventions will later be discovered to have amounted to the salvation of the entire town. Despite George's persistent desire to escape the limitations of life in Bedford Falls, he becomes a stalwart citizen of the town he claims to despise.

However, if George's grandiose designs, first to become an explorer and later to build new modern cities, are thwarted due to bad fortune he does not cease to be ambitious and does not abandon the dream of transforming America, even if his field of design is narrowed. Rather, his ambitions are channeled into the only avenue that life and his position now offer: he does not create airfields or skyscrapers or modern cities, but remakes Bedford Falls itself. His efforts are portrayed as nothing less than noble: he creates "Bailey Park," a modern subdivision of single-family houses, thus allowing hundreds of citizens of Bedford Falls to escape the greedy and malignant clutches of Potter, who gouges these families in the inferior rental slums of "Pottersville." George's efforts are portrayed as altogether praiseworthy, and it is right to side with him against the brutal and heartless greed of Potter. However, such sympathies serve also to obscure the nature of Bailey's activities and their ultimate consequences. In particular, it is worth observing the nature of "Bailey Park," not merely by contrast to "Pottersville"—in comparison to which it is clearly superior—but also in contrast to downtown Bedford Falls, where it may not compare as favorably by some estimations.

Bedford Falls has an intimate town center and blocks of houses with front porches where people leisurely sit and greet passers-by who constantly amble on the nearby sidewalks. Bedford Falls is a town with a deep sense of place and history. When George's car crashes into a tree, the owner berates him for the gash he has made: "My great-grandfather planted this tree," he says. He is the fourth generation to live in his house, and the tree's presence serves as a living link to his ancestors.

It is especially worth noting the significant role of the front porch in the film. Numerous scenes take place in the intermediate space between home and street. While apparently serving as a backdrop for the action on the screen, the porch points up the way of life that Bedford Falls permits. In a discerning essay entitled "From Porch to Patio," Richard H. Thomas notes that the front porch—built in part for functional purposes, especially to provide an outdoor space that could be used to cool off during the summer—also served a host of social functions as well: in was a place of "trivial greetings," a spot from which an owner could invite a passer-by to stop for conversation in an informal setting, a space where "courting" could take place within earshot of parents or the elderly could take in the sights and sounds of passing life around them. The porch "facilitated and symbolized a set of social relationships and the strong bond of community feeling which people during the nineteenth century supposed was the way God intended life to be lived."⁶

By contrast, Bailey Park has no trees, no sidewalks, and no porches. It is a modern subdivision: the trees have been plowed under to make room for wide streets and large yards with garages. Compared to Bedford Falls—which is

always filled with strolling people—the development is empty, devoid of human presence. The residents of this modern development are presumably hidden behind the doors of their modern houses or, if outside, relaxing in back on their patios. The absence of front porches suggests an alternative conception of life that will govern Bailey Park—life is to be led in private, not in the intermediate public spaces in front that link the street to the home. One doubts that anyone will live in these houses for one generation, much less four. The absence of informal human interaction in Bailey Park stands in gross contrast to the vibrancy of Bedford Falls.

The patio—successor to the front porch—embodies as many implicit assumptions about how life is to be led as does the porch. Thomas notes that the move from urban centers into suburban enclaves in the years following World War II led to the creation of "bedroom communities" in which one did not know one's neighbors and where frequent turnover made such stable community relationships unlikely, where privacy and safety were dual concerns leading to the creation of the patio space behind the house, most often at the expense of a porch in the front. Thomas contrasts the two:

[T]he patio is an extension of the house, but far less public than the porch. It was easy to greet a stranger from the porch but exceedingly difficult to do so from the backyard patio. . . . The old cliché says, "A man's home is his castle." If this be true, the nineteenth-century porch was a drawbridge across which many passed in their daily lives. The modern patio is in many ways a closed courtyard that suggests that the king and his family are tired of the world and seek only the companionship for their immediate family or peers.⁷

Bailey Park is not a community that will grow to have a form of life and communal interaction similar to that in Bedford Falls; instead, George Bailey's grand social experiment in progressive living represents a fundamental break from the way of life in Bedford Falls, from a stable and interactive community to a more nuclear and private collection of households that will find shelter in Bailey Park but little else in common.⁸

We also learn something far more sinister about Bailey Park toward the end of the film. George contemplates suicide after his uncle has misplaced \$8,000 and George comes under a cloud of suspicion. At this point the recounting of George's life for the benefit of Clarence the angel ends, and Clarence enters the action to dissuade George from taking his own life. Inspired by George's lament that it would have been better had he never lived, Clarence grants his wish—he shows what life in Bedford Falls would have been like without the existence of George Bailey. George's many small and large acts of kindness are now seen in their cumulative effect. Particular lives are thoroughly ruined or lost in the absence of George's efforts. Furthermore, the entire town—now called "Pottersville"—is transformed into a seedy, corrupt city in the absence of George's heroic resistance to Potter's greed.

Attempting to comprehend what has happened, and refusing to believe Clarence's explanations, George

attempts to retrace his steps. He recalls that this awful transformation first occurred when he was at Martini's bar and decides to seek out Martini at home. Martini, in the first reality, is one of the beneficiaries of George's assistance when he is able to purchase a home in Bailey Park; however, in the alternative reality without George, of course the subdivision is never built. Still refusing to believe what has transpired, George makes his way through the forest where Bailey Park would have been, but instead ends in front of the town's old cemetery outside town. Facing the old gravestones, Clarence asks, "Are you sure Martini's house is here?" George is dumbfounded: "Yes, it should be." George confirms a horrific suspicion: Bailey Park has been built atop the old cemetery. Not only does George raze the trees, but he commits an act of unspeakable sacrilege. He obliterates a sacred symbol of Bedford Falls's connection with the past, the grave markers of the town's ancestors. George Bailey's vision of a modern America eliminates his links with his forebears, covers up the evidence of death, supplies people instead with private retreats of secluded isolation, and all at the expense of an intimate community, in life and in death.

George prays to Clarence to be returned to his previous life, to suffer the consequences of the seeming embezzlement, but to embrace "the wonderful life" he has lived and has in turn created for others as well. His prayer granted, George returns home to find that a warrant for his arrest awaits him, as do reporters poised to publicize his shame. However, his wife Mary has contacted those innumerable people whose lives George has touched to tell them of George's plight. In one of the most moving scenes on film, George's neighbors, friends, and family come flocking to his house, each contributing what little they can to make up the deficit until a pile of money builds in front of George. Trust runs deep in such a stable community of long-standing relationships: As Uncle Billy exclaims amid the rush of contributors, "They didn't ask any questions, George. They just heard you were in trouble, and they came from every direction." George is saved from prison and obloquy, and Clarence earns the wings he has been awaiting.

Despite the charm of the ending, a nagging question lingers, especially when we consider that many of the neighbors who come to George's rescue are ones who now live in Bailey Park. If the tight-knit community of Bedford Falls makes it possible for George to have built up long-standing trust and commitment with his neighbors over the years, such that they unquestioningly give him money despite the suspicion of embezzlement, will those people who have only known life in Bailey Park be likely to do the same for a neighbor who has hit upon hard times? What of the children of those families in Bailey Park, or George's children as they move away from the small-town life of Bedford Falls? A deep irony pervades the film at the moment of its joyous conclusion. As the developer of an antiseptic suburban subdivision, George Bailey is saved through the kinds of relationships nourished in his town, which will be undermined and even precluded in the anomalous community he builds.

NOSTALGIA AND THE INESCAPABILITY OF REGRET

Barry Levinson's *Avalon* (1991) is both a paean to the cohesive immigrant culture of early twentieth-century Baltimore and a lament for the "lost city" in the wake of the automobile, the suburbs, and television. While acknowledging the temptations and even the inevitability of escape in a nation with abundant land populated by the offspring of the restless spirits who settled it, Levinson indulges in nostalgia for erstwhile networks of extended family, the obligations and trust that such commitments engendered, and the intimacy and slowness of everyday life that allowed for remembrance of the past through storytelling and inherited memory. Yet, while sometimes cloying, the nostalgia never overbears. Levinson is attentive to all of the limitations that immigrant urban life entailed, including the absence of private space, the resulting fraying of familial nerves, and the unfulfilled cravings for the outward signs of success that postwar Americans increasingly sought to display.

Avalon centers on the story of two generations of the Krichinsky family of Poland. The film opens with the wizened voice of Sam Krichinsky (Armin Mueller-Stahl) telling about the day when he arrived in America, 4 July 1914, amid the explosions of fireworks, endless red, white, and blue bunting, and streams of citizens on the streets of Baltimore celebrating with sparklers. We discover that he is telling this story to an entranced group of children on Thanksgiving, many decades after his arrival, above the background din of silverware and the complaint of his wife, who berates him for telling the story yet again. He continues with his story nevertheless, insisting that "if you stop remembering, you forget."⁹ *Avalon* marks the passing of years by successive portrayals of Independence Day and Thanksgiving, unquestionably the two most "American" of American holidays, and reveals the transformation of civic and familial structures and practices over time. Independence Day 1914 could not be portrayed more patriotically, and Thanksgiving several decades later, depicted in the film's opening scenes, is the occasion for an enormous gathering of extended family who live in a small world of row houses in Baltimore. Both holidays change markedly with the passing years.

The world of Baltimore in the years preceding World War II is settled, predictable, and comfortable. The children of the Krichinsky brothers benefit from this settled world, growing up in close proximity, with two cousins in particular, Gabriel and Izzy (Aidan Quinn and Kevin Pollack) sharing a closeness resembling that of brothers. After World War II that world becomes increasingly unsatisfying to the subsequent generation. Gabriel and Izzy work as door-to-door salesmen at the beginning of the film. Like their parents they are willing to work hard to earn a modest living that allows them to share space with parents and siblings in the crowded row houses of the old neighborhood. For all the charms of city living, life there is constraining for the ambitious younger generation. Gabriel's wife, Ann (Elizabeth Perkins), lodges a standing complaint about the overcrowding of the house, which they share with Gabriel's parents, Sam and Eva Krichinsky, as well as their own son Michael:

“The problem is we never have a moment’s privacy. Everyone is on top of everyone; we need our own place.” Izzy and Gabriel—who continue to live across the street from one another, presumably in the houses they grew up in, though now with their spouses and children as well as their parents—grow discontented with the limits of this comfortable but confining existence.

This discontent is symbolized most starkly during a flashback as Sam tells his grandchildren—Michael, as ever, among them—about the marriages of Gabriel and Izzy. They have both married American women (not women from their own neighborhoods and similar ethnic backgrounds), opting not for a family wedding but instead eloping without knowledge and approval of their elders. As Sam reads their marriage licenses he discovers that each Krichinsky son has changed his surname as well—they are now Gabriel Kaye and Izzy Kirk. Sam is furious: “What are you, a candy bar? How can we be a family?” he asks them. And although he eventually forgives them, his question lingers: How can the family persist when its most outward sign—a shared name, the inherited accident of birth that shows that one belongs to a community unchosen but inextricably one’s own—has been intentionally abandoned? Both Gabriel and Izzy join that oldest of American attempts at escape from the past, the creation of a new identity, the sloughing off of an unchosen inheritance and arbitrary past for a chosen future, echoing that ancient right claimed by Jefferson when justifying the right of all people to leave the unchosen home of birth for a chosen place of destination.

Increasingly, choice comes to dominate the film and is shown to be the natural inheritance of America’s immigrant families. The successive generations merely assume the same right to opt out of their inherited communities, just as their elders did when they emigrated to America—but in so doing, they threaten the new communities that were built as refuges of belonging in the New World. *Avalon* portrays a Baltimore as lost as the Chicago that Alan Ehrenhalt described in his seminal study, *The Lost City*, in which he observes that contemporary nostalgia for community often neglects the costs that necessarily accompany the cohesiveness of such settings, primary among which is the absence of choice in many aspects of daily life:

To worship choice and community together is to misunderstand what community is all about. Community means not subjecting every action in life to the burden of choice, but rather accepting the familiar and reaping the psychological benefits of having one less calculation to make in the course of the day.¹⁰

People in the old neighborhood are increasingly bombarded by the choices resulting from the prosperity of the 1950s, choices that are viewed warily by the older generation even as they are embraced by their children and grandchildren. Detecting and seeking to capitalize on this restlessness and increased craving for the novel, Gabriel and Izzy, having chosen new identities, forswear their careers as door-to-door salesmen and open a store that sells televisions—with numerous different brands and dozens of styles. The logic of choice culminates in their opening of a

warehouse department store—now no longer in the center of the city, but at the outskirts, reachable only by automobile, presumably because the cost of rent and overhead allows for cheaper prices, greater sales, and ever more expansion of choice as consumer demand and expectations grow. They open their new warehouse store on the Fourth of July, many years after Sam Krichinsky’s arrival in America, amid the patriotic effusions of Baltimore’s citizens. Now, instead of marking America’s founding, innumerable shoppers are lined up outside the store awaiting its grand opening. The consumer replaces the citizen; novelty replaces memory.

Gabriel and Izzy also choose to leave the urban community in which they were raised, mimicking that choice made by their parents when they journeyed to the New World in search of freedom. When told they will be leaving Baltimore for the “suburbs,” Michael asks his mother, “What does it mean, the suburbs?” She replies, “It’s a nicer place to live—it’s got lawns and big trees.” Yet, despite this description of the external qualities of the suburbs, life there comes to center inside, rather than outside, the home. In Baltimore, daily life is depicted as unfolding largely outside, on the stoops and on the streets of the neighborhood. The discomfort of row-house living is not ignored, particularly during the summer months when the absence of air conditioning and the enclosure on two sides by other houses could make interior life stifling and unbearable. Yet, solutions to the absence of air conditioning are also in evidence: one Fourth of July, Sam takes Michael and other children to a local lake where they watch fireworks and then, along with many other families in the neighborhood, remain on the shore to sleep for the night. Sam tells the children stories and also imparts the ancient wisdom of outdoor sleeping during the summer: “[W]ith the breeze, you can sleep.” As Sam falls asleep with the children, the camera pans back to reveal hundreds of temporary campers by the water, reposed securely together as they seek the breeze. The scene of a sleeping neighborhood ably captures that lost world of public life described by Ehrenhalt, when people “considered the streets to be their home, an extension of their property, whereas today the streets are, for many people, an alien place. A block is not really a community in this neighborhood anymore. Only a house is a community, a tiny outpost dependent on television and air-conditioning, and accessible to other such outposts, even the nearest ones, almost exclusively by automobile.”¹¹

As Ehrenhalt’s comments suggest, the film, also about a lost city, increasingly features the automobile and the television. With the move to the suburbs, it becomes essential for each of the adult family members to drive to reach other family members or to purchase the essentials of life, in contrast to the Baltimore neighborhood which they left, where a large open-air market is full of people making their daily purchases, all walking and mingling informally. Eva regards Ann’s driving skills with suspicion, but the film implicitly shows that Ann must learn to drive if she is to run a household in the suburbs, even as Eva must increasingly come to rely upon others for transportation.¹² While the move to the suburbs from the city involved an act of definite

choice, it also removes the choice of whether to learn to drive or not, or whether one will increasingly depend on the automobile for one's daily life. One choice leads to the removal of other choices, but that removal is obfuscated by a growing consumer culture that offers myriad choices of models of automobile, even as people grow unaware that they have lost the choice whether to own and operate one in the first place.¹³

Television becomes the other star of the film. After they move to the suburbs, the family's life comes to center around the television for leisure and is the place where life unfolds, in contrast to the streets and stoops of Baltimore where they formerly retreated in the evening. The family begins to eat in front of the television, even abandoning their meal when the *Milton Berle Show* comes on. They eventually put a television in nearly every room, including the kitchen and the bedroom. Toward the film's close, in stark contrast to the opening scene of a chaotic but lively Thanksgiving holiday, Gabriel and Ann Kaye eat their Thanksgiving dinners silently seated on the living room couch with their two children, each facing the television as they shovel food into their mouths without remark. While perhaps an overstated example of contemporary American trends, Levinson rightly reminds us of the extent to which television has come to be associated with a central family holiday like Thanksgiving, with entire families often gathering after dinner to watch specially scheduled football games or popular movies.

By the end of the film, television comes to dominate the domestic landscape and aptly serves as a symbol of the innumerable choices that allowed the dissipation of the urban community and added to the isolation of suburban life. Television has come increasingly to mirror and accommodate a lifestyle dominated by a central desire for endless choice, the avoidance of long-term commitments, and an unwillingness to remain in settings that could prove demanding, if ultimately rewarding. Ehrenhalt finds television the perfect symbol for this culminating obsession with choice over stability:

Channel surfing is not exactly a metaphor for life, but it isn't a bad caricature of the larger predicaments for the 1990s. . . . Too many of the things we do in our lives, large and small, have come to resemble channel surfing, marked by a numbing and seemingly endless progression from one option to the next, all without the benefit of a chart, logistical or moral, because there are simply too many choices and no one to help sort them out. We have nothing to insulate ourselves against the perpetual temptation to try one more choice, rather than live with what is on the screen in front of us.¹⁴

Television obscures certain forms of memory even as it imparts new memories. As Sam insisted, "If you stop remembering, you forget"; however, Levinson implies that, in addition, when one loses the capacity to speak and listen there are no memories to recall. *Avalon's* last scene portrays an adult Michael visiting his grandfather Sam in a nursing home with his son, also named Sam. Michael has grown up in a world of extended families that are not yet completely dissipated, before the dominance of television, and steeped in Sam's stories related at countless Thanksgivings and in

the semipublic places of presuburban life. Young Sam, however, grows up in a world where those institutions have almost ceased to exist in the wake of the escape of families from both the encroachments and the richness of urban life. The movie ends as it began, with Sam telling about the day he arrived in America, 4 July 1914. But unlike the previous generation, trained in listening and using their imaginative resources to paint an inner picture based on another's words, young Sam's attention wanders quickly to the television, where the flickering images supplant the need to listen, where words cease to guide and vision is divorced from meaning and memory.¹⁵

Sam relates that he tried to find Avalon, which is the name of the apartment house in which he lived with his brothers when he first came to America. America, however, has moved on, uprooting the old to be replaced by the new, obliterating memory in the pursuit of the novel and stylish. Avalon is gone, and Sam's fruitless search to find the physical evidence of his lost past leads him to admit that "for a minute, I thought I never was." Close to death, silently wondering about the continuities of existence, Sam recognizes that obscurity and amnesia about the past are the results of a culture of escape.¹⁶ If George Bailey literally plows over the graves of the dead to erect his subdivision, *Avalon* suggests that the move from the "lost city" to the suburban idyll echoes this burying of the past, if not as swiftly and obviously as the bulldozer, nevertheless, over the long term and with help of the automobile and the television, just as thoroughly.

AMERICAN BEAUTY: END OF ESCAPE?

American Beauty portrays a world in which Bailey Park is ascendant and where the fancy of Ann Kaye to have her "own place" in the suburbs is achieved. Yet in this film one finds none of the progressive hopes for the future of *It's a Wonderful Life*. The suburbs are a trap, not an escape, a place where life has become predictable, stale, and without wonder or enchantment. However, the film also contains none of the nostalgia of *Avalon* for a better place in the distant past, before the exodus from the vibrancy of the cities and the move into an unstable present peopled by strangers. There is no fantasy of escape to a particular *place*, as from the small town to the city or city to suburbs. Yet escape remains as fond a dream as ever, even if it is no longer evident to where one can escape, or even if escape remains possible.

American Beauty centers on the life of Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), a suburban husband who longs to escape the deadening existence of modern American conformity. The film opens with a long shot above an unnamed town, one more affluent than Bailey Park but composed of houses built along a similar design, though larger and more comfortable. As the camera zooms in to reveal a tidy suburban street lined with trees and neat houses, Lester intones in a voiceover: "This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This is my life." He then tells us, "In less than a year I'll be dead. In a way, I'm dead already."¹⁷ The film centers on the brief period between Lester's observation and his actual

death and describes how he comes to embrace life even as death approaches.

Lester's existence is portrayed as sterile, predictable, and wholly uninteresting. He detests his job, and his family appear to detest him. The sterile neighborhood represents nearly the full extent of life for the Burnham family, aside from stultifying work, clique-driven school, and a dissatisfying family life inside the home. In the neighborhood are a gay professional couple named Jim and Jim and a new family that moves into the house next door to the Burnhams'. Like the Burnhams, the new neighbors are a small nuclear family: a father—Colonel Frank Fitts—a mother who appears to be autistic, and a son, Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley). Colonel Fitts is a homophobic autocrat who collects Nazi paraphernalia, tests his son's urine for drugs, and beats Ricky when he disobeys. Ricky, in turn, puts on an act of abject obedience for his father but in fact sells drugs throughout the town.

That which is usually shown to be "normal" in most American television shows and movies—the suburban nuclear family—is portrayed in *American Beauty* as a repository of deceit, conformity, materialism, marital—and especially sexual—discontent, selfishness, anxiety, psychological disorder, substance abuse, and even outright violence and hysteria. Indeed, the only well adjusted and traditionally "normal" family that appears during the course of the film is the gay couple, Jim and Jim, who appear at the Fitts' door with a generous housewarming gift and maintain informal neighborly contact with the Burnhams.

Lester is suddenly awakened from his conformist slumber one evening while attending a basketball game. There, watching his daughter's friend Angela perform a cheerleading routine, Lester becomes nearly obsessed with the promise of youth. Into his disenchanting world explodes a fantasy of color, texture, sight, and sound, represented by deep red rose petals that continue to appear in any fantasy involving Angela. Later that evening, envisioning Angela surrounded by rose petals, we hear him realize that he's been in "a coma . . . for twenty years, and I'm only now waking up."

In the theme of "sleeping" and "awakening" one hears echoes of that classic American tract of nonconformity, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. As Thoreau describes, one must will wakefulness against the temptations of conformist sleep: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep."¹⁸ Almost as if describing Lester before his epiphany induced by the cheerleaders, Thoreau writes that "by closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure."¹⁹ As Lester rebels against the unreal life he leads, he adopts more and more the perspective of a child, attempting to recapture his own youth by reliving various experiences of his adolescence. He quits his job by

means of his rebellious "job description" for management; he begins smoking marijuana supplied by Ricky; at Angela's suggestive prompting, he begins lifting weights and eventually sets up a combination weight room/drug den in his garage. He takes a job at a "Smiley Burger" franchise, where he works at the drive-through window. He seeks to relive the freedom of his youth, a time when "all I did was party and get laid. I had my whole life ahead of me. . . ."

Lester seems to follow the teachings of Thoreau in *Walden* through his rejection of civilization's expectations and his disdain for materialism. Yet Lester's rebellion seems in many respects a pale shadow, even a laughable parody, of Thoreau's move away from civilization. If there is any "place" that resembles the retreat that Thoreau's Walden Pond represents, it is Lester's garage. Hardly a repose of natural solitude, his garage—that architectural feature that gained prominence at the time of developments such as Bailey Park—is a place that is both *not* his home, therefore representing a place apart, yet still attached to his home, still within the bounds of what is safe, predictable—apparently nonconformist even as his mortgage covers the costs.

Similarly, although Lester quits his job in an act of apparent bold confrontation with the inanities of management, he succeeds in extorting a full year's pay and benefits from his immediate boss when he threatens him with false charges of sexual harassment. His rebellion will be financed by corporate America, including his health and retirement benefits. One detail of Lester's town we discover later is that he lives on Robin Hood Trail, a telling irony since he steals from the rich to give to himself; he is hardly poor but wishes to pretend to disregard material possessions without the discomforts that poverty would entail. In a late scene in which he tries to seduce his wife, Carolyn, by reminding her of how vivacious and fun she was as a younger woman, she breaks the spell by warning him that he is about to spill beer on the living room sofa. Infuriated at this petty observation, Lester explodes at her: "So what, it's just a couch. This isn't life. It's just *stuff*. It's become more important to you than living." One marvels at Lester's accusation of Carolyn's materialism here, for the scene began with Lester declaring to Carolyn that he has just purchased a 1970 Pontiac Firebird, "the car I've always wanted. And now I have it. I rule." Lester's rebellion is financed by corporate America, comprised of adolescent retreat into the garage (where, for generations, teenagers have gone to practice in their makeshift bands) and prurient fantasies about underaged girls, and symbolized by the purchase of youthful muscle cars.

Lester is awakened from his "awakening" when he finally has the opportunity for a sexual liaison with Angela. As he disrobes her, he discovers that, notwithstanding her braggadocio, she is what she appears to be, a vulnerable, sexually inexperienced girl. Lester suddenly awakens—again—and appears to recognize the shallowness of his rebellion. As he contemplates a picture of his family, in which each member smiles unassumingly at some point in the obscured past, Lester is shot from behind by Colonel Fitts, a man contorted by his own homoerotic longings, which Lester has rejected. In the moments before death, Lester engages in a nostalgia for a purer past, a past that symbolized the

true happiness of his life—picturing himself as a boy scout, his grandmother's hands, his cousin's Firebird, Jane as a girl, and Carolyn as a young woman. One can only relive the past through memory, not through the literal attempt to recapture an adolescent past as an adult.

Achieving a kind of clarity at the moment of death, Lester imparts to us the wisdom of that moment. As his soul rises above the town, his voiceover intones:

I guess I could be pretty pissed about what happened to me, but it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold onto it. Then it flows through me like rain. I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I'm talking about I'm sure. But don't worry—you will, someday.

Lester's soul flies above the city into the clouds, and we have a final image of the only form of actual escape in an age when all other avenues are closed—the gratitude for a lived life that comes at death. It is knowledge that we cannot have now—we have “no idea” what Lester is talking about—but will come someday, since death comes to us all.

However, one wonders if Lester has in fact gained a special kind of wisdom at the film's end, whether death has given him insight into human happiness. For, in keeping with that oldest feature of the American character, it is only through escape—literally pictured as he ascends above and away from his town—that Lester realizes the abiding value of the events of his now passed life. In a revelation comparable to that of George Bailey, Lester understands that he led “a wonderful life,” but one that looks wonderful in retrospect, not as it's lived. The disdain for the conformity and sterility of late-twentieth-century American suburban life is not dismissed, only obscured by the distance that the camera provides as it pans outward and away. The film finally does not pose any potential remedies for the anomic life of the nuclear American family, seemingly trapped in the place to which so many, for so long, sought escape. In contrast to the other films under examination, there is no evidence of an extended family in *American Beauty*, no network of familial bonds or friendships built over time in an intimate and stable community. Lester's apparently profound concluding remarks are in fact revealed to be wholly facile when one considers the film's concluding recommendation for how to live in a setting that it so obviously disdains. Cynicism is still the order of the day, until the moment of death when redemption will be provided at the moment of final escape. The frontier is closed; return to Eden is forestalled; community is quaint, impossible, and finally too limiting. Political remedies are nonexistent, as politics is as entirely absent as grandparents or trusted neighbors. All that remains is the hope of escape in the future and the willful disdain of our American present. Awakening from our American dream of escape we discover that it was a nightmare all along, a fond wish that brought us to the point of hating what we so desperately craved, of despising what we

have become, and of no longer seeing how we can find a way to escape from the interminable vision of escape.

NOTES

1. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 69; 70.

2. Crèvecoeur, 67–8.

3. Thomas Jefferson, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 105–6.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

5. *It's a Wonderful Life*, produced and directed by Frank Capra, Liberty Films, 1946. All subsequent quotations are from this version of the film.

6. Richard H. Thomas, “From Porch to Patio,” *The Palimpsest* (August, 1995): 123.

7. Thomas, 126–7.

8. People in such communities cease to lead a common life, but increasingly share common *interests* that are based on similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Such self-selected “communities” result in a decline of interaction between people of different classes, backgrounds, ethnicities, and experience, even as it gives the outward *appearance* of commonality through concurrence of interests. See Robert B. Reich, “The Politics of Secession,” in *Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 282–300; and Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), 25–49.

9. *Avalon*, produced by Mark Johnson and Barry Levinson, directed by Barry Levinson, TriStar Pictures, 1990. All subsequent quotations are from this version of the film.

10. Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950's* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 23.

11. Ehrenhalt, 255.

12. Eva believes her suspicions are justified when a street car jumps its tracks and destroys Ann's car. Ironically, while the film explicitly portrays a moment when a public transportation vehicle destroys a privately-owned automobile, the true tendency proved to be the opposite—the popularity of automobiles would eventually lead to the dismantling of many systems of urban and suburban public transportation. This dynamic is delightfully explored in the live action/animated film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

13. As Benjamin R. Barber writes, “the American's freedom to choose among scores of automobile brands was secured by sacrificing the liberty to choose between private and public transportation, and mandated a world in which strip malls, suburbs, high gas consumption, and traffic jams (to name just a few) became inevitable and omnipresent without ever having been the willed choice of some democratic decision making body—or for that matter the individuals who liked driving automobiles and chose to buy one. This politics of commodity . . . offers the feel of freedom while diminishing the range of options and the power to affect the larger world. Is this really liberty?” *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Random House, 1995), 220–1.

14. Ehrenhalt, 271–2.

15. On the way that visual media obliterates context and memory, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), esp. 99–113.

16. Hannah Arendt describes cohesive political communities as a form of “organized remembrance” in *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), 176. Such a city “assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and generally appearing before an audience of fellow men . . .” (176–7). See also my discussion on the connection between the embrace of limits, human community, and the possibility of memorial for even the most obscure of humanity in *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), ch. 5.

17. *American Beauty*, produced by Bruce Cohen and Dan Jinks, directed by Sam Mendes, DreamWorks SKG, 1999. All subsequent quotations are from this version of the film.

18. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Random House, 1965), 81.

19. Thoreau, 86