

*A Movie Goer's Guide To  
The Meaning of*

*Life*

*&*

**Death**



# Course Introduction

Welcome! *A Movie Goer's Guide to...* is a new course being presented by Leeds Atheist Society. Each session a topic will be introduced using carefully selected segments from popular films, music and television series.

## **Purpose**

The aim of the course is to provide a gentle introduction to complex topics from analytic and continental philosophy. The issues discussed will be secular answers to the question: what does it mean to be human?

## **Structure**

The structure of each individual session may vary depending upon the number of participators and the complexity of the issues. In general, the session will take the form of a presentation, with intermittent questions from the audience. Every Guide will begin with a short description of the topic and an overview of the films being used.

## **Schedule**

There will be two Guides each semester, with the topics and dates for second semester sessions still open for review. Every session is an independent unit: you can attend any without having been to the previous sessions. However, the Guides are meant to fit into a larger narrative with the first analysing our launch into the world and the second the meaning of our time here.

# *American Beauty*

Welcome to *A Movie Goer's Guide to...*

## The Meaning of Life and Death

It is difficult to explore the Hows and Whys of life and death academically, it is not sufficient to simply have a curricula of life and explore, in turn, the ways of *living* it.

To understand life you must experience it, here today we are going to experience a year in the life of Lester Burnham...



# *Dead Already*

LESTER BURNHAM lies sleeping amidst expensive bed linens, face down, wearing PAJAMAS. An irritating ALARM CLOCK RINGS. Lester gropes blindly to shut it off.

The opening is artificial and highly sedated.

Life has lost its meaning, it is all ritual – mechanical procedure.



# Dead Already

Wife is highly animated, “(overly friendly)”. Recalls Truman’s wife from *The Truman Show*, who is selling coffee: the wife is *acting*.

Brad, (the “management consultant”) asks for a job description, reducing people to *employees*, people who fulfil a predefined function (purpose/meaning).



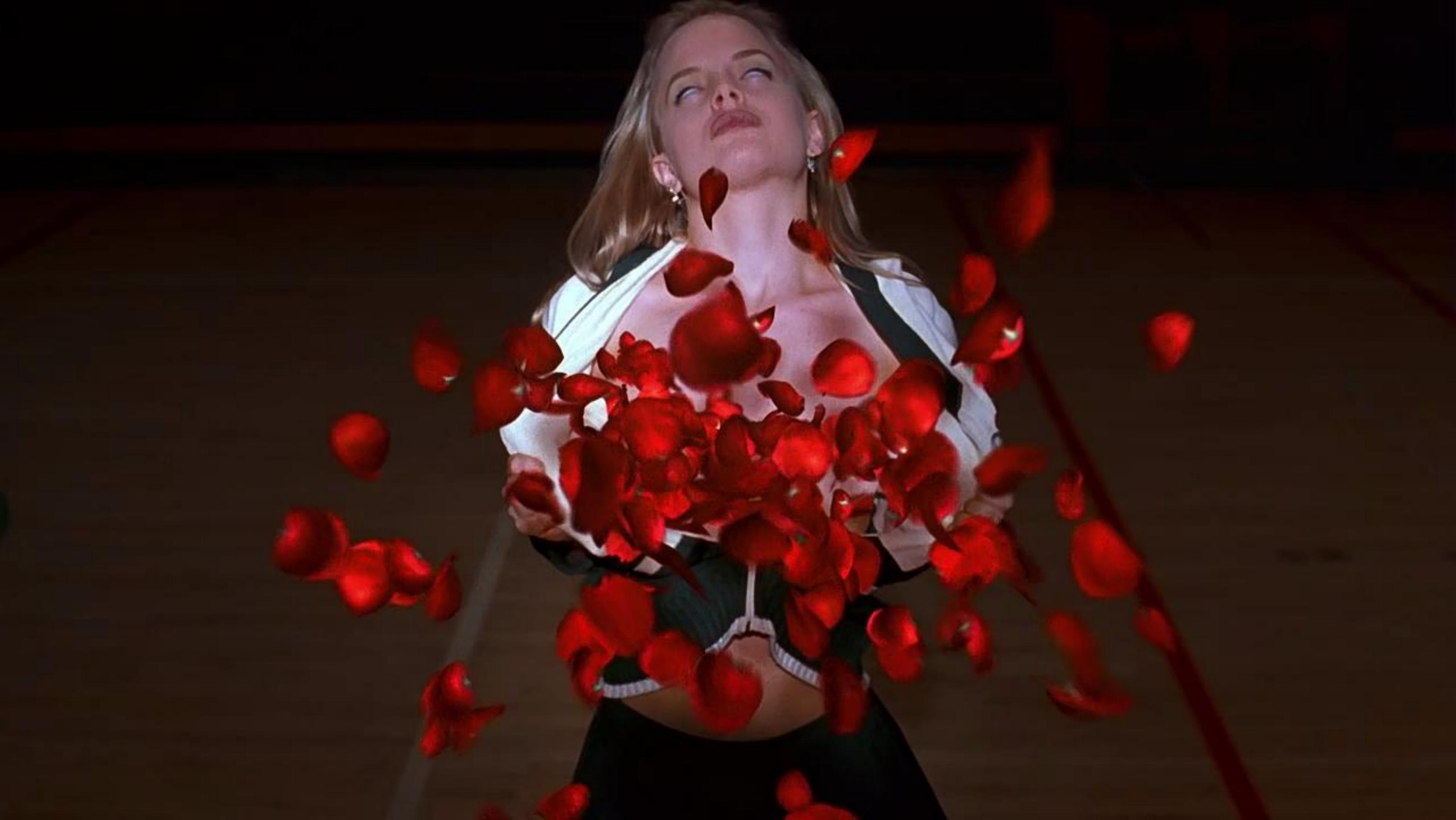
# Sports Game

Lester goes through three phases throughout the film,

A Ritualistic They-Self	(inauthentic)
A Passionate Selfishness	(inauthentic)
Fulfilment	(authentic)

Here begins the second phase, the rebellion / breaking of The Ritual of the first phase.

Introduction to Angela, the *cheerleader*. All image, ritual and projection. Angela serves a dual function of symbolising both the inauthentic phases.



# Sports Game

Angela is the object of Lester's desire – the first emotion and meaningful experience he has had in a long time.

Symbolism of the Rose – note tag line, “...look closer”. The rose highlights something underlying, it usually appears at the moments of *transition* where Lester changes (for good or bad).



# Drooling Guys

Angela *exists* for her image: modelling is her chosen career.

The inauthentic aesthetic. Angela doesn't want to be ordinary, but interesting. She lives in the aesthetic sphere.

Also note, “meant to happen”, a rejection of responsibility.



# *Ricky versus Angela*

Ricky symbolises the authentic aesthetic, he like Angela, lives for the interesting and hates the boring.

Ricky ignored Angela: the boring!



# The Party

The party – All image and Ritual! Carolyn's (Lester's wife's) playground.

Lester is told to, “Act Happy”. Lester does exactly this, he *acts* but to *expose* the facade.

Ricky begins role as Lester's mentor, helping Lester throughout the second phase: usually the catalyst for most transitioning actions.

Ricky has no obligations to others (selfish, the aesthetic life) – he quits job, he sees it as a function of image and money Not in terms of obligations to others.

Lester isn't like Ricky, but wants to be...



# Things Forgotten

Lester thinks “flipping burgers” for an 8-track was the best time of his life... Ricky cannot understand this... He sees jobs *aesthetically* as functions of pay... Lester sees them in terms of their social (ethical) role.

Lester’s job description signals the end of “for the time being” for Lester. He no longer lives “for the time being”, putting off the things he wants to do, and keeping the most significant questions (those of meaning etc.) at a distance.

Most people live “for the time being”, hence Brad (Carolyn, etc.) have difficulty in understanding Lester.



# Beauty in the World

The magic of the mundane... Beauty in the motion of a *plastic bag*!

Sometimes there is so much beauty IN THE WORLD.

The this-worldliness of the overman (Ricky) ... Contrast with the other-worldliness of Angela (who lives for the artificial world of image).

Other-worldliness of Christianity was the motivation for this thought.

The argument, “Whoops, where did my job go?” – Lester exposes the euphemisms of fake speech.

“Tired of being treated like I don’t exist” – He has to break a plate to *exist* in Carolyn's world: everyone is an *employee* (eg. Janie, as Lester says).



# *Bad Faith Exposed*

Carolyn at the shooting range... Authenticity from Carolyn? (No longer acting?)

“This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts.”



*Mr. Smiley*

CAROLYN

Oh, no. I understand completely.

(sarcastic)

In order to be successful, one must project an image of success. At all times.

She regrets it the second it's out of her mouth, and turns to him. He just looks at her sadly, then gets out of the car and shuts the door. She starts to CRY. As before, she SLAPS herself, hard.

Carolyn, since shooting range, has seen her life exposed as an Image of Happiness, not happiness itself. Here is the event which reveals all her previous decisions to select the former. The experience is *infinite*.



# The Overman

Even during a fight Ricky still has *control*.

Ricky's father is a convoluted character, outside the scope of this session however some key points:

1. Inauthenticity comes from his confusion about his sexuality.
2. An army officer who follows orders and lives to be *assigned* a purpose.
3. He functions poorly in the outside world where he has to be himself – he cannot, he doesn't know what “himself” is.
4. He is the *exemplar employee*, the antithesis of Ricky.



# *Becoming the End*

Angela becomes real – no longer merely an object of Lester's desire this signals Lester's final transition to fulfilment... (The Ethical Life)

He lives no longer as an employee (for Carolyn, for Brad)...

He is no longer a selfish aesthetic person, who lives for himself

He is now Himself, Lester Burnham: Authentic.

How is he: finally we find out what Lester feels (after being repeatedly told about everyone else)....

He Feels Great!



*Life is Absurd*

Don't forget...

Life is absurd: nature, other people...

The Universe

Doesn't care about your Meaning of Life, your fulfilment...

At any moment **DEATH** may come...

# *Because the World is Round*

Because the world is round it turns me on  
Because the world is round... (ahh...)

Because the wind is high it blows my mind  
Because the wind is high... (ahh...)

Love is all, love is new  
Love is all, love is you

Because the sky is blue, it makes me cry  
Because the sky is blue... (ahh...)

(ahh...)