

Drowning in the Mainstream —

The Crisis of Men in *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*

Part 2

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In Part 1 of this paper I considered the issues involved in the purported “masculinity crisis” in the United States, including issues of sex and gender, approaches to studying the “crisis,” popular perceptions of the crisis, and reactions to the crisis, as well as the role of film in reflecting this and other cultural phenomena. In Part 2 I will offer synopses of the two films under consideration, for use in the analysis to be offered and conclusions to be drawn in Parts 3 and 4.

2.1

Look closer.

— Tagline for *American Beauty*

Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it...

— Ricky Fitts, *American Beauty*

American Beauty was one of a number of 1999 movies seen to be a study in the hot topic of the decade (and of the following decade) – the masculinity crisis in *fin de millénaire* America. This motion picture was the first to be directed by Sam Mendes, who, though unproven on film was already well known and highly respected for his work on the stage. Even though he was only thirty-four years old at the time of *AB*'s release, Sam Mendes had already had an extensive creative career. He had been Artistic Director at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London and was, at the time of pre-production negotiations for his debut film,

coming off of a Tony Award-winning reinterpretation of the musical *Cabaret* in New York.

Also central to the artistic realization of *AB* were the writer of the original screenplay, Alan Ball, and the cinematographer, Conrad Hall. Like the director, Sam Mendes, Alan Ball was a man with an impressive career in his creative field, but not specifically in the realm of feature film production. Also like Mendes, Ball was relatively young at the time he began working on the film *AB* (just having entered his forties). Early in his career Alan Ball had made a name for himself as a New York playwright. In the 1990s, he moved to Hollywood, where his television writing credits included *Cybill* and *Grace Under Fire*. Ball was greatly frustrated by the limitations placed on his creativity by network television, and was to be truly in his element by working in the less restrictive milieu of Hollywood movies.

Conrad Hall is a Hollywood icon of cinematography, well known for his innovation and his experimentation, but also famed for his exacting precision. Before *AB* Hall had film credits including *Harper* (1966), *In Cold Blood* (1967), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Marathon Man* (1969), and more recently such films as *Tequila Sunrise* (1988), *Class Action* (1991), *Searching for Bobby Fisher* (1993) and *Sleepy Hollow* (1999). Though Hall had preferred to work in black and white, he had also achieved stunning results with his use of naturalistic color cinematography, with numerous Academy Award nominations (and an Oscar win for *Butch Cassidy*).

Before we know who is behind the voice or how he is related to the other characters in *AB*, we discover that Lester Burnham (played by Kevin Spacey) is an unhappy man with a biting sense of humor. We also learn from the character, in a possible *homage* to the character Joe Gillis that William Holden played in *Sunset Boulevard*) that the narrator will be dead before the film is over. In this case, the narrator, Lester Burnham, has “less than a year” to live. Thus, the timeframe of the *Schicksalstragödie* is set up. Immediately we know that he little approves of his wife, and seconds later we know the low esteem in which Lester himself is held by his wife and daughter.

Lester isn't the only unhappy person around. His family is a case-study in suburban dysfunction. Both his wife Carolyn (played by Annette Bening) and his daughter Jane (played by Thora Birch) show their contempt for Lester. Both address him sarcastically and seem to revel in his foibles, as we witness in the three characters' first scene together. The viewer is invited to both loathe the stumbling, bumbling object of his family's scorn and yet to sympathize with his predicament.

Carolyn Burnham appears initially as an acid-tongued harridan, whose coldness is causing misery for Lester. We soon learn that there is a vulnerable, suffering side to Carolyn. In spite of her excellent façade as the perfect homemaker, ornamental hobby-gardener, wife, mother and professional real estate salesperson, she too is miserable. She tries to coax herself out of her own suffering by means of dime-store philosophy and pop psychobabble remedies, complete with aphoristic chanting, one-on-one pep talks to herself and even self-inflicted insults and physical self-abuse. As with Lester, nothing seems to be working for Carolyn.

Daughter Jane dislikes both of her parents (a revelation that comes later as a great shock to her mother – who had assumed Jane only disliked Lester). Jane, though, is particularly disappointed in her father, and reserves a special contempt for him. In a flash-forward home video sequence before the main titles, we learn that she has asked her friend Ricky Fitts (played by Wes Bentley) to kill her father. We are not certain now or later if this proposal is to be taken seriously or not. Ricky is equally confused. Jane seeks refuge from her dysfunctional family by first escaping to the company of her high school classmate (and fellow cheerleader) Angela Hayes (played by Mena Suvari). Later, she finds a new safe harbor in the affectionate friendship of Ricky Fitts, who seems to Jane the only person she has ever known who actually understands her or cares about her as a person.

Other important characters in the film are also unhappy, confused, angry or otherwise miserable. Ricky Fitts, the dark, brooding, new kid at school (and on the block) is no exception, although the source of his personal misery, unlike that of other characters, turns out to be almost entirely external. His father Colonel

Frank Fitts, a retired Marine officer (played by Chris Cooper), is a bullying, red-necked authority figure who performs semi-annual urine checks on his son – to make sure he stays off drugs. This is particularly ironic in that Ricky supports his own well-honed habits of consumption by selling top-end, genetically altered marijuana.

Ricky's mother (played by Allison Janney) lends an additional dose of melancholy turned to utter despair. She is so thoroughly oppressed and so completely intimidated by her husband that she is most often entirely detached from and even unaware of her environment. When she is called back to reality by family members, she becomes awkwardly defensive and apologetic.

In this character-driven black comedy, the trials and tribulations of Lester, and later the “new tack” that his life follows, take center stage and provide most of the biting humor as well as a large part of the spot-on social commentary. The narrative seems little more than a collection of accidents coming the way of the characters, coming principally Lester's way. Feeling alienated by his own family and emasculated in his own home, Lester appears initially resigned to his lot. The viewer assumes that this resignation may have been Lester's prevailing mood for some time already.

Quite early in the piece we learn that Lester has problems at work. It is obvious from the first phone call we see him taking that his job is making him miserable, but the major source of his dissatisfaction with work is conveyed through a meeting with his new supervisor, Brad. Lester dislikes this man so strongly that he even finds his name repelling. He is threatened with the loss of his job and given the opportunity to keep it if he can write a justification for his continued employment. This scrap of written homework seems to be more important to the organization than the fourteen years Lester has given the company. Along with a litany of problems at home, this threat at work is nearly enough to push Lester over the edge.

The pivotal moment, though, in Lester's life comes when he is forcibly escorted to a high school basketball game by wife Carolyn. Although he would much rather be home watching a James Bond movie marathon on TV, as he had intended, he is coerced into going. Carolyn thinks this would be a good way to show interest in

their daughter, who will be performing with the other cheerleaders in a half-time musical number. He assumes, correctly, that this gesture will not be appreciated by Jane, but he simply lacks the *cojones* to resist Carolyn's latest foray into pop psychological parenting.

In an instant, Lester's entire outlook on life is changed, and soon he is starting to reengineer his very being. The impetus for the great change that engulfs Lester is Angela Hayes. Lester, the 42-year-old father of Angela's high school classmate and best friend, is overcome by lust for this teen-aged girl. In what is simultaneously a hilarious in-joke and a heart-felt *homage* to Bob Fosse, we see Jane, Angela and a whole troupe of high school girls performing a Paula Abdul-choreographed dance number. Almost immediately Lester is plunged into a dream sequence in which only he and Angela remain in the high school gym. She continues to perform the dance number in lasciviously suggestive silence, for him alone. The dance turns into a silent seductive tease sequence. Lester, and we, are jolted from this dream into disoriented confusion when the high school band's thumping rendition of "On Broadway" comes thundering back into the soundtrack. Lester is reunited with the cheering crowd, as Angela completes the routine – surrounded by her fellow cheerleaders, also restored to the *mise-en-scène*.

Lester is spiritually and psychologically transmogrified by the experience. After a few brief interludes of bashful awkwardness, befitting a pre-teen, in the presence of the actual Angela, Lester begins to consciously transform himself in material ways, to match his spiritual and psychological reawakening. Lester becomes a regular consumer of the best dope Ricky peddles, and he begins seriously to work out. He buys the classic muscle car of his dreams and starts listening to his old Pink Floyd favorites, both pop-cultural icons of his college years.

Lester also quits his job, after conveniently extorting a full year's salary from the organization, in exchange for silence over the big boss's sexual misconduct. He goes to work at a fast-food restaurant.

In the meantime, Carolyn is searching for some relief of her own. She finds it in an outrageously amusing series of trysts she has with the self-styled real estate

“King” Buddy Kane (played by Peter Gallagher). In fact, Carolyn's affair with Buddy is so satisfying and so reaffirming to her, and Lester's own journey is so fulfilling and so self-validating to him, that the two of them actually rediscover the spark that once animated their own relationship. This reconciliation ends as quickly as it begins when the old gulf between them yawns open once again – over a piece of furniture.

The only major character in the film who seems at peace with life, with self, even with family is Ricky. There are two more minor characters who do not seem to share the middle-class *Angst* of the neighborhood. They are the professionally successful gay couple, both named Jim, living next door to the Burnhams (in ironic juxtaposition to the Fitts family, on the opposite boundary). But Ricky is the only character we get to know well who seems to be functioning smoothly as a human being. His people skills could use work, but at least he is not conflicted within himself.

In the first act of the film, we do not yet know how well adjusted Ricky is. Everything we see and hear suggests that the dark, brooding, solitary young man living next door to the Burnhams is, indeed, troubled. Jane shares in our appraisal, scolding him for videotaping her and shunning him at school. It is only later that we learn about the “normal,” centered side of Ricky; only then can we appreciate the irony of Ricky's history. He is the sole character in the film who's been institutionalized for psychiatric treatment.

Where the other characters see occasion for anger, disappointment and frustration, Ricky sees beauty. And he sees it in the most unexpected places. Ricky sees beauty in things like the bit of plastic garbage he videotapes, dancing in the wind amidst dead leaves. He sees it equally in a dead bird or in a passing hearse. Further, he finds beauty in the peace bestowed by a homeless woman's death.

Ricky also sees Jane's beauty, in spite of her own failure to appreciate it. He appreciates Jane's beauty in spite of being assaulted constantly by the received notion that Angela is the beautiful one. Not only does he identify Jane's beauty at first sight, Ricky also pierces the façade of Angela's beauty – seeing right through to her spiteful, jealous, ugly core.

Lester continues to obsess over Angela, and Colonel Fitts continues to wonder what his son is up to, and what his strange neighbor Lester might be up to. Worse, the wacky colonel fears that his son and Lester may be up to something together. At the same time Carolyn is working through her need to aggress by shooting a handgun at her local, indoor shooting range. All of these tensions come together in the final, closely connected episodes of the film.

Ricky takes another shot from his father's fists. The colonel is shot down by Ricky's wicked sarcasm. Jane decides to give a shot at life with Ricky. While he's at it, Ricky shoots down Angela's opposition to this plan. Lester finally gets his shot at Angela. The colonel takes his best shot with Lester. And Carolyn seems to be ready to level a shot at her husband. Roughly, in that order.

Colonel Fitts believes (as a result of a hilarious visual misunderstanding) that his son is giving homosexual pleasure to Lester. He confronts Ricky and, for the final time, beats him to a bloody pulp in the son's bedroom. Ricky decides to leave home, taking with him his \$40,000 in savings from his drug pushing enterprise. He also thinks it might be a good idea to take Jane along.

Jane, in her bedroom with Angela, agrees to go with Ricky. This decision infuriates Angela, but Ricky successfully reduces Angela to a sobbing heap by calling her both ugly and ordinary – her two greatest fears in life. The only way Angela can think to retaliate and to avenge her humiliation is to offer herself, at last, to Jane's father.

In the meantime, the macho colonel comes in out of the rain to confront Lester in his garage with his “discovery” that Lester and his son are sexually involved. What viewers expect to be an ugly confrontation leads eventually to a pitiful attempt by the repressed colonel to kiss Lester. Lester very gently, very simply and very sympathetically says, “I'm sorry. You got the wrong idea.”

In what was surely bound to have the “Appeal to Hollywood” lobby blowing their minds, if it had taken place on film, Lester is now ready to consummate his lustful imaginings with the real Angela. But, it doesn't come off as Lester has for so long visualized, nor as Angela spontaneously decides it should happen. She reveals to Lester that she is not simply short on experience, but that she has no experience of sexual intercourse, full stop. In spite of the non-stop sex reportage

she has fed Jane for months, Angela is a virgin. Her sexual adventures have been as imaginary as Lester's – if far more promiscuous and far more varied in the telling.

Lester is jolted into the realization that Angela is not the carnally knowledgeable woman of the world that he has fantasized. She is a frightened, insecure child. His response, as it had been with the colonel's misunderstanding, is, again, gentle. In this case it is also nurturing and protective – in a word, fatherly. Lester seems to have been jerked back to the present and back to reality by both the bizarre events in the garage but even more significantly by his recognition of Angela's true identity.

Lester is still thinking back to earlier times, to happier times in his life, but his focus turns away from his college years to a time when he was a young father. He looks at photos of his young family and seems to be reminiscing more than regressing. There is a suggestion that this former happiness could be his once again, now, with these same people. As he looks fondly at the photos a pistol is put to the back of his head. In a second or two, Lester is dead, his head lying in a pool of blood on the kitchen table. The beauty of his own life is visualized as well as described in the narrator's voice-over (in Lester's voice), and it is Ricky who sees the final beauty in Lester's death.

2.2

I would flip through catalogues and wonder, “What kind of dining set defines me as a person?” We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection.

— The Narrator, *Fight Club*

How much can you really know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?

— Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

Another of the American motion pictures released in the 1990s that commentators have seen as further evidence and as an additional portrayal of an

American masculinity crisis is *Fight Club*. This film was the fourth directorial contribution of David Fincher, who debuted as a director in *Alien3* (1992), at the age of thirty. Although the young director's career was nearly shipwrecked by the critically maligned *Alien3*, Fincher's detractors could hardly fail to note that his debut film was one of the top grossing Hollywood releases of 1992. Two films directed by Fincher, *Se7en* (1995) and *The Game* (1997), were released in the interim, with *FC* coming out in 1999.

With *Se7en* and *The Game* Fincher had already won a reputation as a director who did not shy away from difficult subject matter and was not afraid to deal with socially, politically or morally charged issues. Fincher's filmmaking apprenticeship (four years at George Lucas's Industrial Lights and Magic and eight years making commercials and music videos) is strongly evidenced in both his moviemaking techniques and in his cynicism toward advertising and consumption, as expressed in *FC*.

The motion picture *Fight Club* was based on the debut novel of the same title by Chuck Palahniuk. The novel, though not widely read before the film was released, created a certain critical stir from the time of its publication in 1996. It remained a mainly underground work until word got out in 1997 that 20th Century Fox had asked David Fincher to direct a film version of the novel. Jim Uhls wrote the screenplay and Jeff Cronenweth, who had previously worked with Fincher in *The Game*, was responsible for the cinematography of *FC*.

Although we see the central character of the story (played by Edward Norton) in some disarming "flash-forwards" in the opening scenes, we do not then (or ever) learn his name. Norton plays a nameless Everyman who is listed in the film credits simply as the Narrator. Soon the film settles down into a somewhat more linear narrative, and we find the Narrator suffering from the effects of and seeking relief for his insomnia. We learn gradually that his insomnia is only a symptom of what really ails him – a complete disconnect from the life he is leading. He is alienated by his job and his boss. There is no evidence of friendship or of any kind of social life. With this he is struggling to make sense of the life he is leading – which seems to be defined by the things he buys for his apartment.

He begs the intern who is attending him for a quick fix of barbiturates.

Unwilling to layer Tuinals on top of Seconals, his doctor insists on natural sleep and is not swayed by the Narrator's cries for help. In a facetious throwaway line the intern barks, "You want to see pain? Swing by First Methodist Tuesday nights. See the guys with testicular cancer. That's pain."

The Narrator does visit the First Methodist Church the following Tuesday night, but not because he expects anything. He goes because he is awake and has nothing better to do. It is at this first visit to his first support group that he begins a journey of addiction – not to barbiturates, but to the catharsis of sharing in other people's suffering. He also becomes, unintentionally, a supportive new friend to people like Bob (the testicular cancer victim played by Meat Loaf Aday). Soon the Narrator has a full schedule of psychological support groups for the terminally ill, and, as a result, he is cured of his insomnia.

His remission ends as unexpectedly as it began. The Narrator's idyll and his nights of sweet sleep are brought to an abrupt end by the appearance of Marla Singer (played diametrically against type by Helena Bonham Carter). Just like the Narrator, Marla is a phony. She has none of the diseases shared by the other support group participants; she shows up for the free coffee. Her attendance at the testicular cancer group is particularly ironic, but when the Narrator calls her to task on this, she is quick to remind him that he is the only one in attendance in possession of testicles. The Narrator is furious, because Marla's lie underscores his own lie. Thanks to Marla, his insomnia returns.

The Narrator's job is a major part of his problems. A big part of his dissatisfaction with work is the content of the job and the people he has to work with – in particular, his unctuous boss. He works as the automobile recall coordinator for a palpably evil corporation that is far more concerned with annual reports than with the highway carnage their poor safety design is wreaking. But these and other psychologically distancing aspects of the job are not all there is to the disorientation suffered by the Narrator. His health, as reflected in his sleep disorder, is also materially damaged by the work schedule, including the requirement that he travel frequently to different time zones.

On one of his blar-eyed flights home, he meets Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) for the first time. The man in the seat next to him seems at once cynical and

disarmingly cool and charming. His wit is sarcastic, yet Tyler seems to see to the very soul of the Narrator on this first meeting. Actually, the audience has come into contact with Tyler already, in a number of places, in a variety of modes. He is present in the opening scene, holding a gun inside the Narrator's mouth, taunting him in yet incomprehensible ways. He also appears in "subliminal" single frames four times before the airplane meeting, though the viewer is never really sure if s/he has actually seen something (maybe just a flaw in the print? Is my VCR's tracking system playing up again?). Tyler appears once more, riding the Travelator® in the opposite direction from the moving sidewalk the Narrator is riding. It is only many flight sequences later that the two are seated together and actually meet.

The Narrator had plenty of troubles before this meeting, but at least the infrastructure of his life was reliably intact. After meeting Tyler, though, the very foundations of his life begin to collapse. First, his suitcase is lost (in which he "had everything... [his] C.K. shirt, [his] D.K.N.Y. shoes, [his] A.X. ties"). Then, upon returning to his high-rise IKEA-perfect apartment, he discovers that it has blown up, and with it, all of his worldly possessions. The Narrator is so completely alone and friendless that the only telephone numbers he can come up with are Marla's and Tyler's. He rings his fellow traveler in palliative care, but can't bring himself to speak when he hears Marla's voice. He hangs up and dials Tyler, instead.

The next thing we know the Narrator is living in Tyler's dilapidated, seemingly uninhabitable old house, but not before he does Tyler a favor in the parking lot of the bar where they met after the explosion. The favor that Tyler requests is for his new friend to hit him as hard as he can. After an initial sissy-punch from the Narrator, both get into the spirit of the fight, and we find them frequently, in flash-forward and flashback crosscutting, enjoying their newfound release. The Narrator neglects his support groups; he forgets Marla; he forgets the terminally ill people he's recently befriended, like Bob. But, once again, he sleeps like a baby.

By strange happenstance, Tyler and Marla meet. The first the Narrator knows of his housemate's new, sexually charged relationship is when his former nemesis

enters the kitchen for breakfast. A brief, but angry exchange ensues between Marla and the Narrator, and this sets the mood their relationship will maintain for as long as she continues her sexual liaison with Tyler. Once again, Marla is interfering with the Narrator's peace of mind – and with the most important relationship in his life, his relationship with Tyler.

Little by little, other young (or recently young) men notice what Tyler and the Narrator are up to in the parking lot. They want to join the fun. Soon, Fight Club is created – complete with ceremonial openings, ceremonial reading of the rules, and ceremonial rites of initiation. There is only one activity of Fight Club – that is, bare-knuckled one-on-one fist fighting. The extended, bloody, graphic, Foley-deranged depictions of these Fight Club meetings are what caused so much discussion about and opposition to the film from the time of its release. The organized savagery these clubs promote, in fact, turns out to be so spiritually exhilarating for the members that, without the knowledge of the two founders, branches of Fight Club are springing up all over town, and across the nation. Although enjoined never to talk about Fight Club, its members want other men to share the sedative *Abreagierung* that the meetings bring them. Of course they talk about Fight Club, and their proselytism brings explosive expansion in the number of Fight Club branches and in membership.

The fabric of the Narrator's new existence, which already began to come undone with the arrival in his household of Marla, now begins to unravel in earnest. Tyler is becoming dissatisfied (with Marla, with Fight Club) and needs new projects and new conquests. Tyler's new frontier is named "Project Mayhem" and represents a major ratcheting up of two of the movie's themes. On the one hand, there is a massive escalation of the narrative violence (if not that depicted on the screen). On the other, we witness Tyler's accelerating descent into his most extreme tirades against consumerism, materialism and institutionalism. Tyler seems to be turning into an incoherent, fascist demagogue, but on a more visceral level, the Narrator is simply jealous. He is envious of the respect Tyler is accorded as the leader of this "movement," and he is envious of the attention his Fight Club co-founder gives to other project operatives. He felt left out at the inception of Project Mayhem, and he feels completely marginalized now. His

newfound alienation culminates with his brutal, bloody thrashing of Angel Face (played by Jared Leto), whom he thinks is getting too much of Tyler's attention. At the same time, the Narrator is questioning the motives and the methods of the Project and its legion of mantra-chanting drones, dubbed "Space Monkeys."

But before the *dénouement*, one more plot twist ensues. Tyler disappears. The Narrator finds himself abandoned, left nominally *in charge* of a vicious plot of senseless violence and wanton destruction. The Narrator is in charge, but not *in control* of the plot. He can't seem to influence the Space Monkeys, and he can't make them stop. He needs to find Tyler. In his nationwide search for the founder of Project Mayhem, he discovers that the Space Monkeys are everywhere. And the strange thing is that they seem to know him, even on first meeting. Presently, he discovers that these people think he is Tyler.

The audience, like the Narrator, has thought all along that Tyler Durden is a person – a bizarre, charismatic, enigmatic, uncanny person, indeed, but a person. The audience (simultaneously with the Narrator) learns that Tyler is no more than a prosopopoeial representation of the Narrator's "dark side." Explanations, previously unavailable, appear to him (and to us) for things that have happened, for things that Marla, *inter alios*, has said, and for feelings he has not been able to understand. The Narrator and Tyler, he realizes at last, are the same person. The viewer is surprised; but the Narrator is overwhelmed at the realization.

The final scenes have been particularly eviscerated by critics, even by those who otherwise liked the film or could, at least, give it credit for some of its high production values. The depravity of Project Mayhem is fully revealed, and the Narrator is, despite his earnest efforts, powerless to abort it. The Project – the leveling of an entire city center's high-rise ensemble of corporate architecture – is actually carried to its conclusion. This is particularly eerie when viewed two years after FC's release, in the wake of September 11, 2001. Marla returns, and she is vaguely reconciled with the Narrator. Tyler is destroyed. That is to say, the Narrator has rid himself of his dark side. There is no suggestion that he will return to his former life as IKEA Boy, but he has, at the very least, rejected Project Mayhem as a solution to the anomie and the alienation he has felt from the outset.

In Part 2 we have seen the characters and events comprising the narratives of *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*. In Part 3 and 4 we will return to the description of the masculinity crisis posited in Part 1 while recalling details of the characters and events as summarized in Part 2. Part 3 will utilize the Masculinity Crisis matrix set up in Section 1.5 (of Part 1) and will also propose an alternate analysis of the film texts from a cultural perspective. Part 4 will be the conclusion, relating to individualism, the American Dream and the “good life.”

Filmography

American Beauty (1999) Directed by Sam Mendes. Produced by Cohen Productions and DreamWorks SKG.

Fight Club (1999) Directed by David Fincher. Produced by 20th Century Fox, Fox 2000 Pictures, Linson Films and Regency Enterprises.

N.B. A full Bibliography for “Drowning in the Mainstream – Part 1 and Part 2” is given at the end of Part 1 (published in *Kotoba to Bunka (Language and Culture)* No. 6, University of Shizuoka, 2002, pp. 89-92). A revised and updated Bibliography for Parts 3 and 4 will be provided in the final paper (“Drowning in the Mainstream – Part 3,” to be published in *Kotoba to Bunka* No. 8, 2005).