

AN AMERICAN PASTORAL

A FILM BY AUBERI EDLER



LES FILMS D'ICI MÉDITERRANÉE ARTE FRANCE & LES FILMS D'ICI PRESENTS "AN AMERICAN PASTORAL" A FILM BY AUBERI EDLER CINEPRODUCTION AUBERI EDLER
CINÉMA LOMBA PÉRIODIQUE NEW YORK BARBARA BAISCHOW DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY SIOBHAN CANTO COSTUME DESIGNER GRACEYLA JARON COSTUME DESIGNER ELIAS BOUCHERON
COSTUME DESIGNER NATHALIE VIDAL COSTUME DESIGNER PRODUCED BY SERGE LAUDON COSTUME DESIGNER PIERRE-OLIVIER MONIER WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR CINEMA AND THE MOVING IMAGE
WITH THE SUPPORT OF PROCEEP - PRODUCERS' SOCIETY AND ANGSA INTERNATIONAL FILM MEDIAPART RIGHTS A CO-PRODUCTION BY ARTE FRANCE LES FILMS D'ICI MÉDITERRANÉE & LES FILMS D'ICI
FILM MOVEMENT arte

"A TIMELY AND TRENCANT OBSERVATION OF SCHOOL BOARD POLITICS." -VARIETY

"REQUIRED VIEWING FOR THOSE STRUGGLING TO MAKE SENSE OF THE RECENT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION." -SCREEN DAILY



DISCUSSION GUIDE

An American Pastoral (2024), dir. Auberi Edler

“Elizabethtown. I discovered the town on a frigid February night. After months of probing from afar, I was finally there. My camera concealed to protect it as much from the drizzle as from potentially hostile passersby, I remember standing on the deserted main street, interrupted only by the occasional pickup roaring through. For 30 years, my personal and professional life has been closely tied to the United States. Yet the images of the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021 shook me to the core. How could I have lost sight of the despair and anger of a large segment of Americans? How long had I passed over the country’s vast countryside, its sleepy small towns and abandoned industrial areas? How had the temptation of theocracy, of conservative values from another era, spread so quickly and taken such deep root? Etown, as the locals call it, is like thousands of small American towns. It, too, is emblematic of the civil and moral divide now plaguing the United States. The atmosphere is tense, poisoned by fear of the "other," often just a familiar neighbor. Mistrust has devolved into all-pervasive paranoia, rendering communication impossible. That's what I was contemplating that February evening as I looked out over the heart of this small town, awash in rain, where I knew no one, where every door was still closed to me. It took time – so much time – to allay fears, to work around enduring hatred. It was through exchanging and listening that invaluable connections were made, by offering everyone, from Christian fundamentalists to progressive Democrats, what they can no longer afford each other: respect. I discovered generosity where I least expected. And the film’s completion hasn’t changed that. *An American Pastoral* is one of those films that leaves its mark on the filmmaker, like a stitch in the side. A part of me remains in Etown.”

– Auberi Edler, Director

SYNOPSIS

In a quiet Pennsylvania town, a storm is brewing over the soul of its public schools. What begins as a debate over library books quickly reveals a deeper battle – one over religion, democracy, and the future of American education. Set in Elizabethtown, nestled in the heart of Lancaster County, *An American Pastoral* follows a high-stakes local school board race as it becomes a flashpoint for a national culture war. With far-right activists pushing a theocratic agenda and longtime public servants stepping down under threat, the town’s once-routine school board meetings erupt into scenes of conflict and division. This gripping documentary captures the voices of citizens fighting to protect their schools – and the fragile promise of secular democracy – one ballot at a time.

FOR EDUCATORS / DISCUSSION LEADERS

Before watching and discussing the film, it is important to provide background reading for the role of public education and local government in the US. An abstracted explanation of how school boards work, how they are elected or appointed, and their authority over curriculum, libraries, and school policy is useful context. A brief history of censorship in American schools is pertinent context as well – establishing historic precedents of book banning, debates over what is deemed “appropriate in schools, and the impact on students’ access to diverse ideas and ideology. Additional reading may be done on these topics as they pertain to civil rights in education, as well as into contemporary American culture and the rise of Christian nationalism and broader tensions over identity, democracy and civic life. The themes and topics explored in ***An American Pastoral*** can tie into many subjects including Civics/Social Studies, History, Literature and Language Arts, Media Studies, Ethics/Philosophy and Sociology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is at stake in the school-board election documented in ***An American Pastoral***?
2. Who are the major players shown in the film?
3. How does the film challenge the idea of “small-town America” or “tight-knit community”? What may look calm or idyllic from outside may hide deep divisions – why?
4. What role do books, libraries, and curriculum play in shaping democratic citizenship, critical thinking, and inclusion according to the film?
5. How does ideology – religious or political – influence what people believe is “appropriate” for children?
6. Why might people support or oppose book bans / curriculum control? Are their concerns understandable, even if you disagree?
7. If you were a student or young person in that school district, how do you imagine you would feel if you had no voice in these decisions?
8. Have you ever seen or experienced similar debates in your own community (about education, history, identity)?
9. What choices does the filmmaker make – what to show, what to leave out – and how do those choices influence your view of the conflict?
10. Did the film feel balanced, or did it seem to side with a particular viewpoint? Does it matter? Why or why not?
11. How does the film’s title – particularly its use of the word “pastoral” – contrast with its scenes of conflict, contradiction and struggle?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Following a screening of the film and subsequent discussion/workshop, viewers should be able to:

- **Understand** the role of local school boards and community governance in shaping public education.
- **Analyze** how political, religious, and ideological forces can influence curriculum, library books, and school policy.
- **Reflect** on the impact of educational policy on civil liberties, minority rights (e.g., LGBTQ+ students), and social inclusion.
- **Develop** critical media-literacy: question how documentaries frame conflicts, represent voices, and reveal power dynamics.
- **Engage** civically: think about the importance of local elections and community involvement in public education.

FURTHER READING / ENGAGEMENT

News articles and reports on recent U.S. school-board controversies; Local and national organizations advocating for academic freedom, inclusive education, and civil-liberties in schools; Scholarly articles or books on censorship, education policy, religious influence in public schools, and democracy; Guides on how to hold safe, respectful, and constructive community dialogues – especially on controversial topics.