

## Abject Humanism in Tom Perrotta Adaptations: *Election* and *Little Children*

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One of the key figures in the development of a suburban ensemble cinema over the past two decades has been author Tom Perrotta, whose novels typically feature multi-focalised structures, blended affect, and suburban scrutiny. Two of his books were translated to cinema, *Election* (1999) and *Little Children* (2006), directed by Alexander Payne and Todd Field respectively, and more recently *The Leftovers* has been adapted as an HBO serial. *Election* and *Little Children* are both high-profile examples of the suburban ensemble dramedy, a millennial American filmmaking mode similarly featuring multiple protagonists, usually half sentimental and half satirical, set in different iterations of the American suburbs; other popular titles include *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) and *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010). These films have often been called ‘human dramas’ and are an example of what I call narrative humanism. In this paper I wish to extend the scope of literary and narrative humanisms, using the Perrotta adaptations to articulate the role abjection might play in suburban ensemble cinema. The paper also demonstrates how a humanist hermeneutic method that accounts for the abject can produce a new, complex ethical inquiry that is focussed on honouring the challenges we face in living up to the prosociality humanism espouses.

Narrative humanism refers to attempts to understand and record versions of human social complexity in narrative, the remit of the human drama. In a way, narrative humanism is the philosophy of kindness: it makes kindness central to theory, and how we achieve a more generous concept of one another through storytelling. It asks how we go about promoting kindness in those contexts that seem to inhibit it, and an abject humanism studies more carefully those inhibitions to expressions of kindness. When

Murray Bookchin longs to return to a sense of ‘enchantment’ or ‘wonder’ in the human, Edward Said enthuses about the close listening of philology, or Cristine Gardner documents the use of humanistic anthropology in listening across cultures, these terms appear to be different lexical means getting at a similar question: how do we think more generously about one another *through* our stories, given an intellectual tendency to locate problems, and potentially to overemphasise the worst qualities in others?<sup>1</sup> Perrotta’s works effectively foreground human cruelty to destabilise any sense of an inherent prosociality, but then ask what is salvageable in spite of such cruelty; how do we square our need to see one another as fundamentally good with the worst human behaviours? Like many other humanisms, however, this essay is also ethically centred: it asks how narrative media can harness our aware cognition in ways that might improve our relations. These questions chime with the literary humanism of figures including Andy Mousley and Bernard Harrison who have attempted to restore ethical agency to literature, presenting literary works as an essentially practical component in asking how we ought to live, with epistemic value in their facilitation of searches for meaning.<sup>2</sup> Narrative humanism expands from literature to focus on the history of storytelling practices and adaptation across media. It expresses complex modeling of the interiority of others and their social worlds as a generosity of thought, and asks how such a generosity of thought translates between stories across time.

The suburban ensemble dramedy is one such example of a narrative humanism in practice. These films tend to reject the utopian/dystopian binary discourse that developed around American suburbia, prompted in particular by late 1990s fantasy features including *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998). The open sociological reflection embedded in Perrotta’s multi-protagonist prose, contrasting a range of affective politics across various lives in suburbia rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Anti-Humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism and Primitivism* (London: Cassell, 1995); Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Cristine Gardner, ‘Humanism in the Narrative Voice,’ *Anthropology and Humanism* 19.2 (1994) 166-168.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Harrison, *What Is Fiction For?: Literary Humanism Restored* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); see also Richard Gaskin, *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

recapitulating a geographically homogenised ‘type,’ fruitfully informed new suburban cinema over the turn of the millennium. Recent works of suburban media criticism by scholars including David R. Coon, Robert Beuka, Claire Elizabeth Perkins, Melanie Smicek and Joanna Wilson, working in part from Robert Fishman’s earlier monograph *Bourgeois Utopias*, all reify a version of the restrictive utopian/dystopian binary.<sup>3</sup> In lieu of such a division, the suburban ensemble film asks questions of the lived experience of suburbia with all of its indivisible pains and pleasures, joys and sorrows.<sup>4</sup> If the compound *sub-urban* might suggest the spaces in between the rural and urban, the suburban ensemble dramedy locates the in between of emotional space—cinematic blended affect, bittersweetness, not knowing whether to laugh or cry—that can convey something of the richness of domestic experience rather than symbolise and moralise about suburban constituents.<sup>5</sup> The suburban ensemble film typically presents a cross-section of an American neighbourhood with concerns equalized across generations; it contrasts personality types, gender, sexual, ethnic, ideological and other differences. It tends to look at suburbia as geographically amorphous rather than replicating the imagery of 1950s domesticity. The Perrotta adaptations could be considered on the darker side of the suburban ensemble dramedy, and this is what makes them interesting: the sense of threat and imminent collapse circulating such humanistic ideals and relational sentimentality.

The following, then, uses readings of the two Perrotta film adaptations to articulate a concept of abject humanism. To do so my analysis seeks to exhume some of the ethical scripts underscoring the two films; *Election*

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<sup>3</sup> David R. Coon, *Look Closer: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television* (New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Claire Elizabeth Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Melanie Smicek, *American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares: Suburbia as a Narrative Space between Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary American Cinema* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014); and Joanna Wilson, ‘The End of the Good Life: Literary Representations of Suburbia and the American Nightmare,’ *Forum 20* (2015): 1-16; Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Wyatt Moss-Wellington, ‘Sentimentality in the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy: A Response to Berlant’s Optimism-Realism Binary,’ *Forum 20* (2015): 4.

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Ed S.H. Tan and Nico H. Frijda, ‘Sentiment in Film Viewing,’ in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 48-64.

addresses questions regarding how we ought to think about ourselves in relation to others, while *Little Children* illuminates the ways that such thinking translates to socially dynamic moral behaviours in suburban settings—in particular, ostracism and implicit social exclusions. In addressing the moral consequences of these behaviours I will turn to broader fields, including anthropology and social psychology, to help answer some of these tandem questions of interpersonal ethics. If narrative humanism seeks to make our understanding of others more generously complex, then it makes sense to pay attention to social sciences that also attempt to resolve questions of relational complexity.

Like many of the suburban ensemble dramedies, *Election*'s ethics are intergenerational and arise partially from a comparative deconstruction of midlife crisis and coming-of-age tropes. As the filmmakers envisaged *Election* as somewhat rhetorically responsive to the character types that populate similar films, the following reading also engages with media responses to the philosophical interventions staged by Perrotta, Payne, Field, and others working in the suburban ensemble mode. Finally, this investigation also performs something of a historical function, documenting how the concerns of suburban ensemble cinema may have morphed over the first decade of the millennium, from the foundational works of 1999 to *Little Children*'s reflection on indices of suburban intimacy, conflict and altruism in 2006.

### *Humanism in 'Election'*

*Election*, Payne's 1999 adaptation of Perrotta's then-unpublished novel, pits humanistic schoolteacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) against upwardly mobile, achievement-centric student politician Tracy Flick (Reece Witherspoon). Using Jim as a cipher, this early film laid the groundwork of self-reflection and interrogation of humanistic convictions that would sustain throughout later ensemble dramedies. Although we ostensibly follow the teacher's moral undoing and potential rebirth, we are also permitted ingress to a number of other characters' internal dialogues and affective space. When we follow Tracy or fellow student candidates Paul (Chris Klein) and Tammy Metzler (Jessica Campbell), the varied incidental music, for instance, allows us access to their emotional world even while we are invited to view them critically, evoking American national political

players and ideologies as they do.<sup>6</sup> We adopt their subjectivities, yet return to Jim's warped vision of others, as Derek Nystrom puts it: 'we see Tracy largely through the eyes of high school teacher Mr. McAllister ... whose annoyance at her relentless striving is mixed with a barely sublimated desire for her and resentment at his own station in life; any disdain for Tracy we might share with him is thus called into question.'<sup>7</sup> It is this comparative work that distinguishes the satiric multi-focalisation of *Election*; the subjectivities of other protagonists send up both Jim McAllister's presumption of neutrality and centrality, and any impulse for unconstrained sympathetic identification on behalf of the viewer. Relentless lampooning prevents us from championing anyone in particular, but we are primarily focused on the relationship of the frustrated humanist to his uncomfortable and long-unheeded dissatisfactions. For example, he feigns apathy in student politics but through its moral prism runs up against confusion about ambition in his own life (much of his indignation toward Tracy stems from attempts to bury his own ambition and suppress his envy); he refuses to face conflicts in his desire to referee people toward their full potential and simultaneously promote fairness (he sabotages the election partially to punish Tracy for her hardline politicking and perceived character flaws); and his inability to conceive fuses with his misogyny (he rolls his ire at women in his life together in a disturbingly comedic angry sex scene).<sup>8</sup>

Although Jim tries hard to serve others, via the incongruity of unreliable narration he inadvertently reveals resistance to recognition of his own personal trials. Jim describes his marriage in glowing terms while the camera bears witness to a sadder reality, for example. The aversion to complication means that he cannot approach or overcome the moral paradoxes within his humanist convictions. Payne has said that he and his team 'find very unaware people interesting. Jim McAllister is constantly, unconsciously, totally

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<sup>6</sup> Saul Austerlitz, *Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 443. Perrotta also suggests that the characters reflect a move to personality politics, or what he calls the 'character issue' during the Clinton era, and through this prism *Election* makes a point of the conflation of sexual and national politics. Greg Veis, 'Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick,' *New Republic*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/the-plank/tom-perrotta-the-evolution-tracy-flick>

<sup>7</sup> Derek Nystrom, 'Fear of Falling Sideways: Alexander Payne's Rhetoric of Class,' *Postmodern Culture* 16 (2005), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/192266>

<sup>8</sup> This sequence echoes the masturbation scene in Payne's satirical horror comedy student film *The Passion of Martin* (1991), with its copious visualizations of an angel/whore complex.

creating the crisis in his own life, so that he can break out of it. And it's all in denial.<sup>9</sup> Jim's attempts to conceptually divorce morality and ethics in the classroom reveal a fundamental confusion he starts from. He preaches positive change, but his life in service to others promotes stasis; he teaches political awareness, but will not make the time to evaluate his personal life; he adopts both the language of destiny or fate and the language of responsible self-actualisation when it suits him; he wants to allow the ambitious to succeed, but also wants to prevent the ruthless from ascending; he wants to care, but we all live with some hate.<sup>10</sup> Abject humanism finds its concentration in these kinds of contradictions. Finally and perhaps most crucially, Jim presents as selfless, but as well all do, he puts together a hubristic autobiographical narrative of his life in which he is the locus, and others, especially the women around him, are subject to *his* life story. Thereby he is surprised when his wife Diane (Molly Hagan) and neighbour Linda (Delaney Driscoll) are revealed to have a complex relationship reaching beyond his simple solipsism, as they abruptly terminate a one day old affair that he conceptualised as his rebirth. So *Election* is an ensemble narrative moving between equally unreliable first-person accounts of unfolding events, however it seriously upbraids the supremacy of its main protagonist in a way that destabilises the masculinist, privileged righteousness of *American Beauty*, released the same year and perhaps a more influential text in shaping future suburban ensemble dramedies.<sup>11</sup> The transformative role reversal of characters such as Tracy and Jim is seen by Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Pablo Echart to be 'undermining any self-satisfied or pragmatic philosophy of success' that Payne's middle-class characters cling to with such comically inflated desperation.<sup>12</sup>

In 2006, Payne told journalist Matt Connolly that he 'has always aspired to be a humanist,' causing Connolly to reflect on Payne's method:

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<sup>9</sup> Annie Nocenti, 'Adapting and Directing *Election*: A Talk with Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor,' in *Alexander Payne: Interviews*, ed. Julie Levinson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), ebook edition.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the fusion of self-actualization with religious imagery, see Lesley Brill, 'Chance And Choice, Biology And Theology In Alexander Payne's *Election*,' *Senses Of Cinema* 65 (2012).

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, 'Too Close for Comfort: *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif,' *Cinema Journal* 44 (2004): 69-93.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Pablo Echart, 'Tales of Rebirth: Alexander Payne and the New American Dream,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44 (2016): 104.

Looking at all his films through a humanist lens, you can see where he is coming from. The multiple perspectives through which *Election* is refracted defuse any sense of one character possessing smug superiority over the others. Each is flawed in its own individual way. Conversely, the characters that populate [*About Schmidt* (2002)] and *Sideways* [2004] are royally skewered for their petulance, lethargy, and pomposity. As always, though, they are brought back from the brink of mockery by the inherent empathetic detail Payne and Taylor imbue in even their most unattractive moments.<sup>13</sup>

Humanism here means exhibiting the kindness of closer listening to the details another's lifeworld, even toward those lives that are the subject of an author's criticism. Although in later models of the suburban ensemble dramedy a clear protagonist became harder to identify, *Election* can be seen early on modifying the formula to see how humility might be admitted in spite of the individualist orthodoxy of heroic film conventions. In *Election*, individualism and American politics are juxtaposed and critiqued—both the book and film leave us with the lasting impression that all politics and all democracies, from the private to the institutional, the federal to the family, are subject to human frailty.

Concurrently, Payne reveals human detail beneath the surface pathology of a character we may otherwise identify as the principal antagonist: Tracy is genuinely disappointed in her own lack of connection to others, such that a short-lived affair with a teacher she considers one of the closest relationships of her school years. The alienation she confronts—especially in the form of resentment from characters such as Jim—leads her to give up on connection to others in favour of solitary work on her political career. Just as Jim feigns disengagement from the affective politics of his students, Tracy feigns her smile, even while being congratulated for her achievements. Payne will often hold the camera on Witherspoon until after the smile falls, and we see its artifice in its deconstruction. While reviewers erroneously assumed Tracy as the story's villain, a number of articles have since re-evaluated the iconic status the character generated as an archetypal

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<sup>13</sup> Matt Connolly, 'Film Commentary: Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor.' *The Wesleyan Argus*, April 12, 2006, <http://wesleyanargus.com/2006/04/21/film-commentary-alexander-payne-and-jim-taylor>

Machiavellian overachiever.<sup>14</sup> (Or as Perrotta puts it, an ‘unapologetic achiever.’)<sup>15</sup> In conversation with Annie Nocenti, screenwriter Jim Taylor said, ‘we didn’t want her to be just a femme fatale,’ and Payne agreed, drawing attention to the exploitative affair with her former teacher: ‘I was very conscious that she be presented more like a victim and not really like a full participant. That she’s a really sweet girl. And what you see visiting high schools is that they’re just kids. They’re not the beautiful vixen sexpots you see in teen movies. That’s completely fake ... Tracy Flick’s a kid.’<sup>16</sup> As Perrotta himself said, quite simply: ‘I just think people are made uncomfortable by ambitious women.’<sup>17</sup> Apparently this included *Election*’s early critics.

By the film’s close, Tracy, initially the object of ridicule looks potentially less foolish than the allegedly humanistic Jim. An alternative ending leaked online also emphasises her working class background.<sup>18</sup> In recognising her circumstances, Jim is forced to confront his hypocrisies.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Tracy’s class status is broached halfway through Perrotta’s novel, which spends slightly more time backgrounding the genesis of its characters’ longings and sadnesses, in particular the sadness of incremental estrangement from family members and loved ones.<sup>20</sup> The novel thereby comes across as less brutally satiric than the film, and more openly concerned with its characters’ welfare and possibilities for conciliation. Jim, for example, manages some manner of reparations with most of the women he has wronged throughout the novel, including his wife Diane. Perrotta’s book also makes it clear that Tracy’s alienation from her peers is partially due to the notion, inherited from her hardworking mother, that their compromised class status means she will have to make her entire life about

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<sup>14</sup> Garance Franke-Ruta, ‘Why Washington Needs More Tracy Flicks,’ *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2012; Leigh Kolb, ‘Women in Politics Week: *Election*: Female Power and the Failure of Desperate Masculinity,’ *Bitch Flicks*, November 28, 2012; Jillian Mapes, ‘The Enduring Legacy of *Election*’s Tracy Flick and ‘Who the Fuck Does She Think She Is?’ Women.’ *Flavorwire*, April 23, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Veis, ‘Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick.’

<sup>16</sup> Nocenti, ‘Adapting and Directing *Election*.’

<sup>17</sup> Veis, ‘Tom Perrotta On The Evolution Of Tracy Flick.’

<sup>18</sup> Whitney Jefferson, ‘See The Original, Unused Ending To *Election*,’ *Jezebel*, May 16, 2011, <http://jezebel.com/5802300/see-the-original-unused-ending-to-election>

<sup>19</sup> The film’s actual conclusion sees Jim escape to the city, where we eventually see that his inner problems remain; they did not belong to the suburbs, they belonged to him.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Perrotta, *Election* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 81-84.



work and ambition. Although her mother's influence is clear in the film, the class components of their relationship are minimised.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps because of the early responses to Witherspoon's Tracy, Perrotta has questioned whether or not the screen adaptations have diminished his humanism somewhat. He references what he calls 'tonal' changes to make *Little Children* darker and the conclusion more horrifying, and *Election* more satirical.<sup>22</sup> He says of *Election*:

They're comic characters who are doomed to repeat their mistakes because that's who they are: people who make the same mistake over and over again. So it literally went from a book about people who have a traumatic experience, learn from it, understand themselves better, emerge a little bit smarter and more forgiving to a story about people who do horrible things to each other and will continue to make the same mistakes throughout their lives.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, however, Perrotta emphasises that

both *Election* and *Little Children* are technically really interesting films but they're not about technique in the same way that as a writer, I'm not really about style. I put the story and the human element before that. So you can call it a kind of humanistic cinema: that's what I'm looking for.<sup>24</sup>

What we can ascertain from this is that as long as an examination of human complexity comes first, there is a kind of humanism taking place.

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<sup>21</sup> In his article on Payne's 2004 film *Sideways*, Nystrom speaks of these issues as an 'ambivalent' rhetoric of class across Payne's films, that is, instances of 'class abjection' are coupled with a contradictory interest in the way markers of class distinction cross boundaries and will not stay put, in particular markers of taste and tastefulness. Nystrom, 'Fear of Falling Sideways.'

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Maxey, 'Tom Perrotta in Conversation about Literary Adaptation,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38 (2010): 270-272.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 273.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 276.

*Abjection in 'Little Children'*

So what of the abject, then? Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, the lasting treatise on cinematic abjection, refers us to the qualities of film that can make materially proximate those unpleasant aspects of being that we deign to quarantine and separate from ourselves—the impure, the dangerous, the repellent.<sup>25</sup> These concerns are clearly relevant for an abject humanism, too. *Election* studies the existential breakdown resultant when we fail to problematize such separations of self and threatening other. Where Kristeva's study, however, focuses primarily on bodily and material horror (along with their more metaphysical implications), abject humanism is concentrated on psychologically purposeful abjection, including our practical responses to dangerous or repellent personality traits. While *Election* does motivate symbols such as rubbish trucks and garbage as a figurative framing device across multiple scenes, these devices are in effect proxies for the characters' interior conundrums—they are not, as in many of Kristeva's examples, viscerally upsetting in any physiological or corporeal sense. However, abject humanism is not simply concerned with individual thought or notions of a primal psychoanalytic repression, it is concerned too with social action, with the way our ethics might morph in honestly encountering abjected personhood as socially transactive rather than separate to or distant from ourselves, and the ways our identities might change as a result. I now turn to address *Little Children's* study of problematic socially segregating behaviours such as group ostracism.

For *Little Children*, Perrotta shared a screenwriting credit with director Todd Field. Perrotta's works often take readers to the brink of problems found in suburbia—notably here, sexual predation, paedophilia hysteria and en-masse ostracism—and then pull back at the very end to see what kind of goodwill is reclaimable. Horror is always lurking behind this feature's humanism, which not only makes it a unique experience in the canon, but also provides a clue to narrative humanism's affinity with the abject. Carina Chocano lists its matrix of social studies in the *Los Angeles Times*:

Firmly rooted in the present and in our current frame of mind—a time and frame of mind that few artists have shown interest in really exploring—the movie is one of the few films I can think of that examines the baffling combination of smugness, self-

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<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

abnegation, ceremonial deference and status anxiety that characterizes middle-class Gen X parenting, and find sheer, white-knuckled terror at its core.<sup>26</sup>

Central to the narrative is the idea that we can be stuck idealising or fetishizing our past, especially experiences we feel we missed out on in our youth, and so we become frozen in time and fail to develop in maturity beyond the little children of the film's title. In a way, it is also a critique of a moral language that we may lack when we approach problems in the suburbs. No one in the film ever quite has the language to explain her or his predicaments, desires or miseries, and so negotiation happens at the level of inference, through behaviours like ostracism, social exclusion and inclusion, unspoken social rewards and punishments—something of what anthropologist M.P. Baumgartner describes as particularly suburban 'limited anarchy,' or a general adherence to accepted moral codes while avoiding direct moral conflict.<sup>27</sup> Being inducted into a seemingly rigid system with no recourse to question its boundaries causes the narrative's characters to look back at their youth, and fantasise about what could have been. Examples include the igniting of an affair, and later the elopement plans, of protagonists Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) and Brad Adamson (Patrick Wilson); their fantasies of a different life that was available to them when they were younger are bracingly correlated with the corrosive fantasies of paedophile Ronnie McGorvey (Jackie Earle Haley), who is struggling with his psychosexual disorder. All are fetishizing a version of youth, their former selves, or what could have been. The drama in the film—and the novel—comes from the impingement of those fantasy lives upon the responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood.

The most severe example of these retrospective fantasies is embodied in Ronnie, whose mother (Phyllis Somerville) keeps mountainous display cases full of baby-faced kitsch trinkets, porcelain, and chiming clocks, and habitually infantilises her adult son, coddling him (although interestingly it is not explicitly stated that she has in any way caused his psychosexual disorder, but rather provides him relief by being the only person who accepts him as a human worthy of loving care). Likewise, Brad feels he missed out on the time to be a carefree young man. As he ritually gazes at nighttime

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<sup>26</sup> Carina Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields; Satire and Anxiety are Brilliantly Blended in Todd Field's 'Little Children.' It's a Suburbia Where Parents are as Unformed as the Kids,' *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October, 2006, E1.

<sup>27</sup> M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127.

skateboarders outside the library where he is pretending to study for his bar exam, the narrator reveals his sad contemplations: they are the age he must have been when his mother died. The trauma has locked him into a belief that he has missed out on formative experiences, which he vicariously attempts to recover by nurturing an obsession with young male activities. Brad's wife Kathy (Jennifer Connolly) has encouraged him to suppress these avoidant compulsions, herself transmitting status anxieties passed on from her mother. Ex-cop Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich) is stuck revisiting the trauma of accidentally shooting a teenager in a shopping mall by transferring his guilt and anger onto Ronnie in the form of a 'Save the Kids' campaign, while former literature PhD candidate-turned-housewife Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) longs for freedom from the shackles of intellectually unstimulating suburban motherhood. Living in a mansion Sarah's husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) inherited from his mother, and that was once the project of his ex-wife, Sarah crafts a small sense of belonging by turning one room into a shrine to the adventure and promise of the texts she studied earlier. She feels the remorse of dropping out of her PhD, and wishes for a more attractive and younger body, something of her former self. They all reach for, and fetishize, the openness and promise of an earlier time in their lives, many marked by a tacit trauma that has kept them rehearsing a fantasy of their former selves at a pivotal life moment, a kind of repetition compulsion or 'repetitive maladaptive behaviour.'<sup>28</sup> The film's narrative spine is the igniting of an affair, and later the elopement plans, of Brad and Sarah. (That this fantasy of escape and a new life is correlated with the destructive fantasies of McGorvey's psychosexual disorder is one of the film's most bracing thematic impressions.) As Chocano sees it, Sarah:

gets through the days pretending to be 'an anthropologist studying the behavior of suburban women,' not as a suburban woman herself. Her attraction to Brad, therefore, is not only impulsive and romantic, it's intrinsic to her sense of who she is—or was ... Sarah is happy to live with him in the past, clinging to the idea that they are hovering in the pleasant limbo of unrealized potential.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, none of their longings are fanciful or unfounded—it is reasonable, this desire for a better life than the alienating and cerebrally bare circumstance they have arrived at in this amplified picture of small town

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<sup>28</sup> Brad Bowins, 'Repetitive maladaptive behavior: Beyond repetition compulsion,' *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 70 (2010): 282-98.

<sup>29</sup> Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields,' E1.

America.<sup>30</sup> The guilt over such longings, however, and the cultural barriers preventing deeper discussion to expunge their longings, lead these characters to attempt selfish enactments of their fantasy lives.

We are initially introduced to the difficulty of meaningful connection delivered by this medium-density impasse via Sarah's experiences with a trio of mothers at the local park. Their parenting one-upmanship and protection of pack mentality, buttressed firmly in black-and-white morality, make the ice difficult to break. Sarah feels ostracised and excluded, yet is hesitant to reach out and challenge her loneliness. Sarah in turn rejects them by attempting to send up their values: on a whim she kisses the attractive father who frequents the park (Brad). The ensuing exodus of mothers from the playground is the moment we first bear witness to what Chocano calls the film's 'empathetic, humanistic vision that rejects, even in difficult, extreme cases, the mob impulse to demonize,'<sup>31</sup> a recurrence throughout the film, notably in a central scene of mass panic when Ronnie attends a local swimming pool ostensibly to spy on children underwater (although it is clear he knows he will be caught, and may in fact be seeking reaffirmation of his ostracism from the wider community). The exodus from the pool echoes the earlier exodus of mothers from the park, and similarly represents the problems with collective, public displays of impulsive revulsion, and the norm of rejecting the abnormal in tacitly unified ostracism: even where moral objection is reasonable, the resulting marginalisation of the infringer can compound detrimental behaviour, as with Ronnie.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, long-term

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<sup>30</sup> A cloying book group conversation stresses to a presumably less literary audience the feminist credentials of *Madame Bovary*. Sarah tells the group that it is reasonable to long for a better life, ruefully reflecting on her own experience of feeling trapped in a gender role performance, of which the affair is a part. However the scene is also about the difficulty of living up to our own convictions; it is followed by sequences detailing Sarah's insecurity about body image and comparisons to Brad's wife Kathy. We can have the knowledge of gender role problems and still be held captive by their anxieties.

<sup>31</sup> Chocano, 'A Disturbance in the Playing Fields,' E1.

<sup>32</sup> Recent pilot programs for preventative therapy have shown some success in reducing emotional deficit and offense-supporting cognitions, as well as improving sexual self-regulation. See Klaus M. Beier, et al. 'The German Dunkelfeld Project: A Pilot Study to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and the Use of Child Abusive Images,' *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 12 (2015): 529-542. Such studies complicate the popular 'hardline' approach of demonizing ostracism the narrative speaks to. *Little Children* reasonably suggests that these behaviors (such as the pool incident) while understandable amount to willful ignorance of the consequences in

ostracism is associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviour, and depletion of coping resources, as Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida write:

individuals appear to accept the essential message of their ostracism—that they are completely insignificant—and they experience a sense of alienation and worthlessness. They seem, then, to self-ostracize, perhaps in a misguided effort to prevent further rejection at the hands of others; they report high levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, as well as other indicators of psychological difficulties.<sup>33</sup>

A later scene in particular demonstrates the struggle for deeper connection across suburban boundaries through a chain of rejection and ostracism: late one afternoon Sarah finds her husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) masturbating over a soft-core porn website (with images including an adult subject ‘dressing up like a little girl and playing with balloons’) and immediately feels rejection. She tells him they will ‘talk about it later’ and leaves for a jog with her friend Jean (Helen Carey), who invites her to a book group, which Sarah appears to feel is beneath her, stalling on the offer. Back out the front of her house, one of the mothers from the park is waiting to warn her about Ronnie. Sarah invites her in for a cup of tea, but the mother is too embarrassed and afraid to take up the offer, rejecting Sarah’s olive branch. Once inside, Sarah’s husband offers to start a conversation about the earlier incident, but she in turn rejects him and will not talk. This completes a cycle of rejections that typically bridges the narrative arcs of *Little Children*.

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our responses to pedophilia and child sexual abuse. Ostracism strategies can be seen as another of Baumgartner’s conflict-avoidant moral minimalisms. Although calls for alienation of offenders appear to be an ethical hyper-engagement, they actually shirk collective responsibility, exacerbating the problem by increasing subjective distress, which is ‘a significant predictor of deviant sexual fantasies, potentially increasing the risk of recidivism and limiting involvement in treatment,’ Lauren Ducat, et al. ‘Sensationalising sex offenders and sexual recidivism: impact of the Serious Sex Offender Monitoring Act 2005 on media reportage,’ *Australian Psychologist* 44 (2009): 156-165. See also Jean Proulx, *Post-treatment Recidivism Rates in Sexual Aggressors: A Comparison Between Dropout and Nondropout Subjects* (Montreal: Ecole de criminologie-Université de Montréal, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida, ‘Ostracism: Consequences and Coping,’ *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20 (2011): 73.

Such sequences reflect on the thin boundaries between personal rejections, coordinated ostracism and outright demonization. We might feel rejection as a physical pain, as social emotions have physiological and embodied components.<sup>34</sup> But group exclusion, perhaps because recognition by and cooperation within groups is fundamental to our survival, has the ability to threaten up to four of our primary needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, some ostracism is an acceptable part of life. Think of the way most strangers might avoid one another in public transport, an example of coordinated group ostracism that serves mutual ends; this is generally referred to as *role-prescribed* ostracism.<sup>36</sup> The boundaries of acceptable ostracism, however, are always ambiguous and so can be extended and manipulated—this is how reasonable rejection and unquestioned group ostracism become contiguous. We see these boundaries constantly negotiated in *Little Children*. At the same time, ostracism can be both practical and punitive. The pool scene is dynamic because of the confusion between the two: the practical need to protect one's child is folded into a collective response that reinforces the retributive nature of Ronnie's exclusion. It can be a short distance from defensive to punitive motivations in ostracism.

These events recall the moral minimalism of the suburbs Baumgartner addresses in *The Moral Order of a Suburb*. Baumgartner maintains that greater human density produces more social cohesion, along with more social problems and therefore the generation of more antidotes to conflict. So we find greater altruism in tandem with greater need for social control (such as law enforcement) in urban areas:

If weak social ties generate weak social control, they undermine strong patterns of mutual aid as well. Much theoretical and empirical work has established that generosity and kindness increase with intimacy and social cohesion. It therefore follows that groups in which people are atomized and separated from one another by a great deal of social distance—and where moral

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<sup>34</sup> Mark R. Leary, Erika J. Koch, and Nancy R. Hechenbleikner, 'Emotional Responses to Interpersonal Rejection,' in *Interpersonal Rejection*, ed. Mark R. Leary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012: 146-147.

<sup>35</sup> Williams and Nida, 'Ostracism,' 71.

<sup>36</sup> Kipling D. Williams and Lisa Zadro, 'Ostracism: On Being Ignored, Excluded, and Rejected,' in *Interpersonal Rejection*, ed. Mark R. Leary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012: 29.

minimalism is likely—will not be very altruistic. This seems part of an even larger pattern in which many human activities rise and fall in intensity together. Highly dense and closely bonded groups appear to produce more music and more religion, for example, as well as more social control and altruism.<sup>37</sup>

In a way, the suburbs are a kind of in-between zone of intimacy. They are not the cohesion-, conflict-, prosecution- and altruism-dense cities, nor are they the distanced tight units of our rural ancestry. The suburbs may have developed partially as a matter of majority preference for a middle ground of density, and likewise a middle ground of pleasures and problems in community attachment. However, this relatively recent living arrangement throws up new dilemmas, addressed by films like *Little Children*. How do conflict-averse communities deal with serious moral infringements without maximising and reinforcing their impact? In the film, documentary filmmaker Kathy's media work, ex-cop Larry's hardline vigilantism, and Sarah's aloof liberalism could all be seen as moral responses to the suburban challenge. One thing is clear: this at times distressing and deceptively cynical picture insinuates that genuine understanding and altruistic care are not only *possible* in the context of American suburbia, but they are currently evolving along with the geographies they are expressed within, despite clear challenges. At the film's close, the major players are all permitted to take a step past their mired craving for yesteryear by recognizing the worth of their care for others as an alternative: Sarah and Brad both confront the folly of their fantasy to run away together by remembering their responsibility to their child and spouse respectively, while Larry races Ronnie to the hospital after Ronnie castrates himself.<sup>38</sup>

The film's closing sentimentality, as with many of the suburban ensemble dramadies, is complicated by the problems the film has surveyed which reach no resolution. *Little Children's* narrative symmetry belies its thematic and affective open-endedness: the film closes with opportunities for the open conversation and conflict resolution, reassessment and mutual care we have seen lacking, but promises none of it. We do not know if Sarah

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<sup>37</sup> Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> This is markedly different from the more tentative reconciliation of the novel's ending, which is less redemptive for Ronnie's character; he shows less remorse for even worse crimes. While Taylor and Payne wrote the remorse and reconciliation out of the end of *Election* in favour of a more biting conclusion that suggested repeated mistakes, *Little Children's* ending was conversely softened to emphasise the potential for moral growth and human change.



will leave her loveless marriage, if Brad and Kathy will work things out, or even if Ronnie will survive. We are left with an empty swing in a dark park at night, creaking ominously as the screen goes black: the site of the castration, unpleasantly impeding upon prosocial sentiment and offering no promises of easy change. Again, not only can all of these things co-exist in suburbia—heartless and altruistic behaviours, pleasure and pain, negative affect at the same time as positive affect—they can exist in *one person* in suburbia too.

The film manages to find dark humour in all these situations, often by drawing attention to its own melodramatic tendency, such as the underexposed, etiolated images, with vignetted smudges of lightlessness advancing their assault on the corners of the frame throughout the picture, or Will Lyman's ironically audiobook-reminiscent narration, with a close vocal compression propelling the voice out of the speakers. Greg Dickinson links Lyman's voiceover to nostalgia in the suburbs.<sup>39</sup> Yet this brisk reading of rose-coloured retrospection does not quite admit *Little Children's* sense of both terror and irony, and its humorous study of contradictory impressions of progress, ageing, and the passing of time in suburban America.<sup>40</sup> Perrotta explains Lyman's irony: 'It's a very wise, deep, mature voice. So you have a wise voice speaking over sometimes hysterical action and it creates a funny counterpoint.'<sup>41</sup> Nostalgia may be one component in a sense of 'maturity' that is undermined in *Little Children*; after ersatz nostalgia is compromised, we are forced to ask what is left.<sup>42</sup> The soundtrack is also worth mentioning, managing to emphasise the fragile silence of suburban geographies (upset regularly throughout the film by characters suddenly screaming through the silence and shocking others nearby into attention). The roar of atmospheric noise—with almost no sounds of other human life—is clear at the beginning of the film, as we are aware it does not sound like other films set in upper-middle suburbia. In the end, when it stops as abruptly as the movie began, the absence of the buzz track is so disconcerting that we realise we have been listening to it the whole time without noticing it—the sound of no life happening. The soundtrack forms perhaps the most critical insinuation about

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<sup>39</sup> Greg Dickinson, *Suburban Dreams: Imagining and Building the Good Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 51.

<sup>40</sup> As Mary Douglas has it, 'The mixture of nostalgia and resistance explains why the topic [of the home] is so often treated as humorous.' 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,' *Social Research* 58 (1991): 287.

<sup>41</sup> Maxey, 'Tom Perrotta in Conversation,' 269.

<sup>42</sup> C.f. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

upper-middle, medium-density living: that in its construction we have lost something of real life. The incidental music is usually sparse, ominous, probing and yet magical, with tines and keyboards hanging on minor chords and dissonant extensions. The effect of all this together is to hold our emotional state in that sense of mild dread: something is off, something is not right here in suburbia. We are provoked to ask: what is it? In the end, however, it is not as easy to articulate or resolve as *American Beauty*'s vision of an enlightened Lester rising above his neighbour's rooftops, or the materialist admonishments that had developed throughout 1990s suburban cinema as a fallback critique—*Little Children* is a question more open to examining systems of morality that develop between people living at close quarters, yet who remain estranged. At the same time, however, there are moments of calm in the score. A comforting piano in a major key plays over early flashback montages of a pregnant Sarah at home during rare downtime moments, suggestive of a quiet suburban pleasure she may initially have been attracted to, and the piano part is echoed again, with more reverb and distant strings, when she first visits the swimming pool to find Brad. Thus the theme, belonging as it does to Sarah's interiority, initially plays over a nostalgic flashback montage and then comes to emphasise a potentially disruptive new love interest. It conceptually links the affect of nostalgia and excitement for the new, again destabilising any clear admonishments that might have otherwise been drawn from the film's satire (of suburban nostalgia or of adulterous fantasy). Yet these moments never occur without admitting some frustration that contradicts the sustained affect of the score. While the piano lilts, for example, Sarah's daughter Lucy (Sadie Goldstein) inconveniently refuses to go into the pool and Sarah snaps at her. The piano keeps playing its sweet song.

### *An Abject Humanism*

We could call Perrotta's film adaptations an abject humanism in that they study problems that arise if we fail to admit horror, cruelty and negative affect in our lives—they are part of human experience. When we disavow these things in service of a more symbolically ideal picture of the trials of our suburban being, as does Jim McAllister, our visions of human complexity and ethics become too divorced from the reality they describe. Yet there is a more central dilemma taking place in these films: once we admit the darker emotive complications that we are most loath to let into our self-schemas, how do we keep them from taking over our internal reasoning, from depression, misanthropy or excusing our cruelty to others as natural or

‘human’? This kind of humanism asks how we can admit abject qualities in our lives without them becoming a dominant mode for thinking through social interaction; the realism of blended affect becomes not just an aesthetic goal for fiction or film, but is demonstrated as a condition of healthy problem solving, reasoning and living. This is also why the dominant binary discourse of utopias and dystopias in suburban media do little to describe a phenomenology or lived experience of suburbia—they instead ask us to pick a side, the suburbs as ideal or corrupt.

In narrative humanism, it is not enough to conceive of others as complex entities, we also need strategies to determine whether our complex notions of otherness fabricate their identities in some way. Abject humanism simply acknowledges the struggle of integrating the abject into our more positive pictures of human otherness, of remaining hopeful when we must discuss cruelty, and the difficulty of readjustment when the easier road would simply be succumbing to a totalising unification of negative affect and verisimilitude, as in Lauren Berlant’s self-diagnosed depressive realism, which she positions as opposed to humanistic sentimentality.<sup>43</sup>

*Election* and *Little Children* take us to the brink of a suburban abject before locating its redeeming features, and in so doing they provide strategies to achieve more realistically complex social simulations: it is important to check if our models for understanding domestic life include its most painful elements, but equally important to check if our models for depicting pain include the possibilities for its relief—this is the work of humanism. Self-interest exists alongside altruism, cruelty is mediated by the need for loving connection, domestic pleasures are not without their emotional pains; studying their relation leads us to a consequentialist ethic. In our attempts to understand the interrelation of lives that are so difficult to comprehend—the so-called dark triad personality traits or repellent behaviours, for example—we might, hopefully, emerge into more honest attempts to deal with our social ills.

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<sup>43</sup> Moss-Wellington, ‘Sentimentality’ 2-3; Earl McCabe, ‘Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant,’ *Hypocrite Reader*, June 5, 2011, <http://hypocritereader.com/5/depressive-realism>

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