Humanist Narratology and the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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ABSTRACT

What is a "humanistic drama"? Although we might describe narrative works as humanist, and references to the humanistic drama abound across a breadth of critical media, including film and literary theory, the parameters of these terms remain elliptical. My work attempts to clarify the narrative conditions of humanism. In particular, humanists ask how we use narrative texts to complicate our understanding of others, and question the ethics and efficacy of attempts to represent human social complexity in fiction.

After historicising narrative humanism and situating it among related philosophies, I develop humanist hermeneutics as a method for reading fictive texts, and provide examples of such readings. I integrate literary Darwinism, anthropology, cognitive science and social psychology into a social narratology, which catalogues the social functions of narrative. This expansive study asks how we can unite the descriptive capabilities of social science with the more prescriptive ethical inquiry of traditional humanism, and aims to demonstrate their productive compatibility.

From this groundwork, I then look at a cluster of humanistic film texts: the suburban ensemble dramedy, a phenomenon in millennial American cinema politicising the quotidian and the domestic. Popular works include *The Kids Are All Right*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Little Children*, *Junebug*, *The Oranges*, and what is arguably the inciting feature in a wave of such films entering production, *American Beauty*. I provide examples of humanist readings of these films at two levels: an overview of genre development as social phenomenon (including histories of suburban depiction onscreen, ensemble cinema and affective experimentation in recent American filmmaking), followed by a close reading of a progenitor text, Ron Howard's 1989 film *Parenthood*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION:

Humanist Hermeneutics

We are all story addicts. We might go to bed with a book or film, or wake up to the news; our immersion in micronarratives on the internet has scarcely made a dent in television use (United States of America Bureau of Labor Statistics np); the expansion of television into epic serialised narratives made for intensive or "binge" consumption tells of an increasing appetite for fictive immersion throughout the day; narratives in songform now follow us relentlessly throughout the urban environment; and we tell of our lives by ordering autobiographical memories into comprehensible narratives. Much of our day is, thus, engaged in storied activities, a phenomenon that some have positioned as a contemporary Western "addiction" or "obsession" with narrative (Landy 497). In fact, for a narrative theorist like Walter Fisher, storytelling is the foundation of all human reason and communication ("Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm"). Although we perform multiple acts of sustained creativity in our lives, which arguably have further reaching impact on participants – childrearing and teaching, for example – we single out the fictive storyteller for special regard and loftier status, in many cases aspiring to similar creativity, while ignoring our own quotidian creative practices. So why should this activity, concocting and disseminating creative fictions, matter to us so much? As Dennis Dutton writes:

> Human beings across the globe expend staggering amounts of time and resources on creating and experiencing fantasies and fictions. The human fascination with fiction is so intense that it can amount to a virtual addiction. (109)

Joseph Carroll has pointed out that many evolutionary interpretations of the genesis of art fail to account for the insatiable need to create and consume narrative, our story "addiction" (*Literary Darwinism* xxi). Considering the widespread use of narrative arts in the daily life of a majority, it would not be right to characterise this addiction as pathological; instead, it appears to be foundational to human sociobiology, one of those very few qualities that can truly be considered pancultural. Once investigated, we begin to witness the diversity of uses we have found for the storytelling instinct, and they are terrifically manifold.

The following thesis largely concerns the utility and the ethics of narrative. Specifically, it looks at our motivations for storytelling, and the way we might extend research in human sociobiology to ask ethical questions: how we ought to live. As such, I begin with an attempt to come to grips with what, precisely, a narrative is, and ground a sense of narrative purpose in human history and development. Following from these foundations, I will introduce my central concerns: what humanistic narrative and humanist hermeneutics might look like. From the start, however, it is necessary to be careful in delineating the confines of sociobiological speculation and literary Darwinism: given that we find new uses for old adaptations (exaptation occurring at a complex cultural level, for instance), we cannot explain all human behaviours via portrayals of their origins (Buller *Adapting Minds*; Turvey 49), and further, evolutionary theory contains no prescriptive value and cannot tell us *how* to act. Accounting for these dilemmas will be one substantial component in the project I am calling humanist narratology.

I take a broad view of story. Story is a communicative act that specifically implies a chain of causality, and story as we popularly know it is any series of descriptors, transmitted via any sensory means, which can be read as causal, or "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" (Bordwell and Thompson 69). In effect, stories mimic how we think: due to our necessary abstraction of the world into causal patterns, if we receive any communication from another, we intuitively attempt to unpack its concept of causality.[1] Likewise, when concocting imagery using tools from the written word to a stage prop, the storyteller suggests "a set of perceptual processes that the reader then uses to construct a particular idea or experience" (Mar and Oatley 178). For example, we may neuroaesthetically react to the ornamentality of an abstract painting and thus be drawn to consider it, but once considered we apply meanings based on a pattern of causal understandings, by which we know the world – thus our relationship with the artwork, and how we explain its meaning to ourselves, although abstract, is "storied," founded on narrative. It is also an implicitly human narrative we are attempting to read, as we discern and empathise with emotional states the artist moved through in their creative process: "the relationship between embodied simulation-driven empathic feelings in the observer and the *content* of art works, in terms of the actions, intentions, objects, emotions, and sensations

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[1] Perhaps this is why, in Marie-Laure Ryan's view, the meaning of "narrative" has been diluted into concepts including "'belief,' 'value,' 'experience,' 'interpretation,' or simply 'content'" (*Avatars of Story* 6); because all of these things rely on a mental causality that narrative does not quite copy, but simply *is*.

portrayed in a given painting or sculpture" (Gallese "Mirror Neurons and Art" 446). That is, artworks and still images tell all kinds of stories: stories of the emotional and interior process of their creation, stories of the kind of person we are when we react to them, or the culture we mutually exist within, a prompting to conceptual causality that ignites a reasoning that fortifies or puts into question our values. So even if an image does not suggest a narrative in itself, it connects to other narratives, or reductions to pertinent causal details – self-narratives, cultural narratives and so on – to become meaningful.[2] Likewise, if we describe to an acquaintance two separate and seemingly unrelated objects, merely by offering them in succession we have suggested a story: our friend cannot help but attempt to read their relationship, and effectively put together a narrative in their mind which will suggest a causal perspective on the world. Our pattern recognition faculties beget a storied understanding of the world.

Fiction "is a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect" (Oatley "The Science of Fiction" 43). Not only is storied behaviour vital to retaining complex social structures, we may also be more likely to *remember* the exertion of piecing together causality, and thus recall information or analysis gleaned from emotionally stimulating narrative. Causal narrative's use in stimulating memorability can also be observed in the mnemonic link system – the practice of constructing a story to memorise unconnected items. These are accounts of the uses and perhaps the origins of *fictive* storytelling. Laura Ashe dates literary fiction to 1155 ("1155 and the Beginnings of Fiction"), we often refer to Greek theatre as the birth of a specifically Western formalised narrative practice, and Palaeolithic cave paintings from sites across the globe, dated as old as 40,000 years, contain narrative information; however such accounts refer only to literary and artistic histories, which have the benefit of a visual record. There is, of course, no way to timestamp the birth of oral storied imaginings.

There are equivalent non-fictive paradigms of causal storytelling. In the construction of memory into autobiographical self-narrative, for instance, there is evidence to suggest that writing one's story assists trauma recovery (see Joshua M. Smyth's summary of such findings in "Written Emotional Expression: Effect Sizes, Outcome Types, and Moderating Variables").

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[2] This is not to deny that we have thoughts, dispositions and convictions that are acausal; causality is simply our provision of meaning, how we develop and justify those thoughts, dispositions and convictions.

However research conducted by James W. Pennebaker and Anna Graybeal in 2001 also found that:

> individuals who showed an overall increase in the use of causal words (e.g., "because," "cause," "reason") and insight words (e.g., "realize," "know," "understand") demonstrated comparatively larger and more significant health improvements than those who did not increase their use of causal words. (91-92)

This contrasted with predominant use of emotional words, which they found "only weakly related to health" (91). Similarly, Amanda Barnier and Penny Van Bergen offer a rundown on the individual and relational health benefits of sharing autobiographical memory stories in "'Remember when we…?' Why sharing memories is soul food", in particular highlighting the research of Robyn Fivush.[3] Developing causal narratives appears to be essential for our mental health – it is the provision of meaning by which we may feel in control of our environment, and ourselves, and know how to act accordingly. Perhaps the more causal attributions we make also, the more likely our account is to acknowledge complex multi-causality, and capitulate to the interrogation of distilled and discrete causal theories which are essentially tied into a composite account; we know by their multifariousness that such accounts do not summarise the world, but provide a few of the many explanations we require to make collective meaning from its boundless causal convolutions. However, in this thesis I will mostly be concerned with fictional narratives, and while life narratives and fiction are both storied behaviours, the similarities may well end with their founding causal structure, or as Peter Lamarque suggests in his article "On the distance between literary narratives and real-life narratives", their most superficial aspects. On the other hand, divorcing the two completely would be inappropriate, neglecting how each informs the other: Katherine Nelson (125-136), as well as Qi Wang and Jens Brockmeier (45-64), describe the interdependence of autobiographical memory and collectively produced narratives, Dan P. McAdams discusses the influence of biographical genres (in particular redemptive biographies which fortify generativity) in *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, while Tilmann Habermas and Susan Bluck describe how life narratives begin in adolescence ("Getting a Life"), which could also be seen as a primary age for developing and negotiating awareness of cultural narrative

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[3] C.f. Fivush's 2006 work with Catherine A. Haden and Elaine Reese "Elaborating on Elaborations: Role of Maternal Reminiscing Style in Cognitive and Socioemotional Development."

absorption.[4] In cinema studies, the debate on what constitutes documentary filmmaking shows us just how difficult it can be to separate fictive and non-fictive storytelling acts (Eitzen "When is a Documentary").[5] The following analysis will acknowledge how freely we can exchange between fictive and non-fictive storytelling, while at the same time noting distinctions between the two. Ultimately, though, all comparisons between fictive and real-life narratives reveal just how deeply storytelling behaviours are ingrained in our cognition: it is the "structure of sense" (Burkert 5) particular to humans.

Further to the causality account of storied behaviours, in Alan Palmer's conception of narrative explored through 2004's *Fictional Minds*, we concoct a psychological map of other autonomous agents and their intentions, and use our resultant understanding of motivational interactivity to navigate the complex social world. Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley see this process as the same as any kind of psychological simulation, which has two functions: to "provide information by offering a model when access cannot be direct" (174), as in another's mind and motivation, and "to understand, and to some extent predict, the behavior of systems made up of many processes in interaction" (ibid. 175), as in the complex social world. In theoretical discourse the understanding of narrative as a network of causal intentionality also reaches back to Kenneth Burke's grammar and rhetoric of motives, which, while innovative in its time, in Jerome S. Bruner's view suffers from a negligence of "character" (20); there is something indubitably human missing from such a mathematical approach. Perhaps a multiplicity of motivational causalities in fiction, by which we must work to extend the bounds of our simulation of social structures, is what we read as a more "human" and "complex" narrative, a psychological verisimilitude or a more lifelike conception of other minds. Although all simulation is a reductive abstraction to comprehensible formulae, what matters then is *how* reductive our abstraction is: how many causal factors our simulation takes into account.

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[4] Note that many of these discussions are centred on American cultural contingencies. Where Nelson assumes a societal trend in American "personalisation of culture" (133), variously labelled the individualist or narcissistic trend in popular debate, McAdams contends, "All societies have their share of generative adults. Americans are likely to be no more or less generative than any other people" (96) although the manifestation of self-narratives will differ between cultures.

[5] See also Bill Nichols's foundational *Representing Reality*, the groundwork and point of departure for critiques like Eitzen's "When is a Documentary."

Although story is possible without intentional causality, it is rare to encounter, as narrative quickly becomes tiresome (perhaps obsolete and robbed of purpose) when the intrigue of motivation is extracted. In Bruner's account of the difference between logical debate and narrative, which he positions as different cognitive modes – a distinction defining the "narrative turn" of the 1980s, echoed by Donald E. Polkinghorne in the similarly influential *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (35) – the former "leads to a search for universal truth conditions, the other for likely particular connections between two events" (Bruner 12). This account splits human causal thinking into two categories that we could equally call the cerebral and the procedural, although clearly they are interdependent and each can inspire the other; a strict contradistinction of this nature will be problematized in ensuing chapters. However, Bruner also makes a case that, within narrative cognition, "good" and "gripping" and "believable" stories will deal in "human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course" (ibid. 13). In fact, for Bruner, instead of causality, exploring the vicissitudes of intention is the one true condition for stories to be stories (ibid. 17).

We are always looking for intentions as they provoke us to wonder *how to act*; this suggests that ethics are the crux of narrative interest. However, we also tend to apply such readings of intention beyond the human. Bruner's analysis points to research from Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel in 1944 to Judith Ann Stewart in 1982, demonstrating that we read motivation and intention in abstract animated figures (18). We thus find ourselves mapping human intentionality onto things that may not be similarly motivated (including other living things, the inhuman and posthuman, as well as nature, the cosmic, and the physical world, the origin of theistic and teleological thinking as explored by Pascal Boyer in *Religion Explained*). This meta-ethical challenge to humanist narratology will be addressed later in the chapter, in my introduction to the philosophy of humanism.

For now, I work with the assumption that at base level, stories offer causalities, and thereafter may apply intention and motivation to causalities, which leads us to ethical pondering.

On first reflection, it almost goes without saying that offering stories – perspectives on series of causalities and intentional mapping – is adaptive, foundationally aiding survival goals including hunting prey and resisting predation, for example, or promoting group

bonding and coordination, but thereafter, as immersion in a mediated environment became more extensive, our storytelling instinct splintered into countless other utilities connected to survival and thriving in the increasingly mutable social world. Story provides such a boggling array of uses, both obvious and undiscovered, that it is daunting to consider its totality. It is part of our job as analysts in the humanities to exhume far-reaching concepts of what story can do, and for some scholars (myself included) to make our own inferences about how stories can serve us better to reduce suffering and promote equality, globally and without prejudice. For the past century has taught us, if nothing else, that such ambitions are realistic and achievable, as Edward Said insists in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*:

> People all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality–the South African victory in the liberation struggle is a perfect case in point–and the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. And despite the (in my opinion) shallow but influential ideas of a certain facile type of radical antifoundationalism, with its insistence that real events are at most linguistic effects, and its close relative, the end-of-history thesis, these are so contradicted by the historical impact of human agency and labor as to make a detailed refutation of them here unnecessary. Change is human history, and human history as made by human action and understood accordingly is the very ground of the humanities. (10)

There is indeed evidence that real positive change has been made over the years in which we have been engaged with humanist thinking, redeeming belief in human autonomy and progress toward a vast mutual benefit. According to Charles R. Varela, the last century's history of emergent social sciences is also the history of reclaiming faith in a human agency for positive change (ix). I start from the assumption that storytelling entails responsibility, and that improvements can be made to the narratives we distribute (as well as our theories of narrative purpose) that will promote mutual care and prosociality – thence a focus on narrative ethics. Humanism is a kind of hope, and hope presupposes agency to make positive changes in the world, even if the blueprint is elusive, even if we fight about what that blueprint should be. As such, this thesis presupposes *analysable* human agency. Further, it requests specificity about the conditions of change in lieu of totalising answers to

unresolvable questions of free will, or insistence on intellectual attendance to its limitations.[6] With theory we have the power to imagine new ways of living; some of these imaginings will come to fruition.

Not long ago I became aware that a lot of the narratives I enjoyed were consistently nominated by analysts as human or humanistic dramas; however when perusing the literature on humanism's philosophical lineage, the two appeared to have little in common. I became intrigued by the space between the humanisms I had read about, and the potential for a narrative humanism – what was the relationship between the two? This thesis is in part an attempt to shine a light on that space, but it is also both a descriptive and demonstrative argument for narrative humanism's utility today. The thesis comes in two parts: a theoretical description, in which I exhume hermeneutic possibilities from a humanist narratology and its associated ethics, and later an application, in which I demonstrate its use in a particular case study.

In this introduction, I expand on histories of narrative theory and humanism to locate and detail a humanist hermeneutics, its reasoning and methodology. In the ensuing chapter I provide a social narratology – a list, as comprehensive as possible, of narrative's social usages – and highlight the ways in which these functions of narrative may be of interest to a humanist narrative theorist. I will then apply an emergent humanist narratological paradigm to my primary case study: the American suburban ensemble dramedy film after the turn of the millennium, historicising this cinematic mode, tracing its development, and extrapolating some of the concerns this cinema raises, before moving closer into a reading of an early exemplary film, *Parenthood* (Ron Howard, 1989). I use "social narratology" to describe inquiry into the social functions of narrative, and "humanist hermeneutics" to describe the means for reading and evaluating specific works. Together, I abbreviate this discourse to

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[6] Fundamentally, this is a difference of focus: humanism focuses on locating and describing the conditions of human change rather than stasis. Writers after a Foucauldian constructivist tradition have complicated notions of agency, instead preferring to emphasise how our identities are inherited or governed. Problem identification alone yields no template for living, however – humanism demands that after the complexity of a cultural problem is identified, we extend ourselves to look for ethical solutions. Failure to search for such an agency permits theory to self-sustain in tandem with the circumstances it describes. I refer to John Dewey's "first-rate test" of value in any philosophy: "does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?" (7). We cannot end with problem description alone.

"humanist narratology," connoting the range of humanist examinations available in the storytelling arts.

In this way I am attempting a demonstrative application of humanist narratology by magnifying it to ever closer readings, suggestive of its scope: humanist hermeneutics are applied to storytelling at large, then a specific genre often described as "humanistic", offering analytic readings of films within that genre, and finally a close reading of a prototypical film. I hope to communicate humanist narratology's use in capturing detail at many levels of the study of human interaction, and craft the thesis into an exciting narrative itself, magnifying its detail as I progress through broad theoretical understandings to situated close study. The latter half primarily concerns film analysis as an example of humanistic story reading. I agree with Murray Smith that "film theory has, throughout its history, overstated the significance of the specificity of film as a medium and consequently underplayed the extent to which fiction films perform the same imaginative functions as fictions in other media" ("Film Spectatorship" 113-114), and so I will regularly draw from fields outside of film theory in analysing film.[7] Classical narratology has changed shape in the age of media convergence (Jenkins 2) and a new field has opened up, seeking to integrate awareness of a changing media landscape into narrative theory, as in volumes like *Storyworlds Across Media* in 2014 (Ryan and Thon). I believe that it is best to analyse narratives *as they are used* by their creators and consumers in order to determine their social meaning. This means respecting the ways people choose to work with, negotiate through, and relate to each other using stories – narrative function – even while we emphasise medium specificity and question differences in meaning across media.

Finally, the humanism I refer to must be swiftly severed from universalising, essentialist or exceptionalist claims enshrining a truer humanity. We must be careful not to universalise a particular storied language use, as various languages contain different causal emphases: sentence construction in the native west Canadian Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) language, for example, is uniquely dependent on articulation of the cause of an action, event or property, where in English we can construct sentences without referring to causes. It is, in many cases, impossible to translate directly between these languages. For now, where I refer to humanism, I could briefly summarise the perspective as the presumption that we *can have*

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[7] See also Rodowick *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*. Film philosophy is a good way into a discussion of story, art, humanism and purpose, and this is how it will be used throughout the thesis.

a more complex or deeper understanding of human otherness, the conviction that in striving to complicate our concept of others we are able to improve our social and political relations, and in my case, in humanist narratology, the notion that we use storytelling as a primary means for facilitating this more realistically complicated view of others, which in turn allows for more inclusive and specific ethical considerations. As I believe it is misguided to attempt narrative or textual readings without first asking what the stories are used for, and equally misguided to speak of narrative's function without recourse to specific examples, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to unpacking and clarifying humanist hermeneutics, and thereby providing a foundation from which to begin the taxonomic work of social narratology.

Humanist Hermeneutics: Reading the Human Drama in Film and Fiction

If I mention the study of humanism, what am I talking about? As a reader, it would be hard to say; too often we read of humanism without any clarifying annotations. We could be discussing Renaissance pedagogy, or deliberating on the intercession of divinity and "man"; we might be wondering if there are essential or stable properties one could nominate as human nature, perhaps a higher order to the human extending beyond pure materialism, or an agency particular to humans; we could even refer to humanism's precursors in pre-Christian concepts of reason, in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, in Greek *paideia* and Roman *studium* (Torrance 164). In these early philosophies we witness the precursors to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer's foundational humanist pedagogy – a promotion of the study of humanities sustaining long after its vivication during the Renaissance, and retaining its key place in universities today, often summarised as "humanistic inquiry." As Said points out, the purist canonical protectionism of eminent literary scholars such as Harold Bloom takes this usage of the term to its absolutist extreme in expressing the idea that there is one true corpus of classics, which should be studied to enrich the human (Said *Humanism* 27). No matter what we think of canonical humanism and Bloom's work, however, the question of human value in art, and thus relativist trends in assessing the worth of art, is part of humanist dialogue.

Then again, increasingly in popular usage now, humanism appears spuriously distinct from atheism. Robert M. Torrance positions this extrapolation from secular humanism as a kind of shibboleth, along with its contemporary connotations to a "vague humanness or

humanitarianism" (165) which ignores Christian humanism and the substantial role the church played in developing a humanist pedagogy in the Renaissance. In light of recent popular usage, though, the project of unifying humanist philosophy with the sciences appears complete (c.f. Sarton; Keyser). In fact the popular secular affinity with human sciences makes sense when working from the conception of humanism as the ethical imperative to defer to human complexity, as science is never complete – each question uncovers new possible deeper understandings to be accessed by further inquiry, where fideism offers a holistic explanation that is an end in itself. Faith can lock us off from further inquiry and thereby complication of our understanding of others, hence the hostility toward religion displayed by humanist rationalists. And then *again*, it is possible when I say humanism that I mean something entirely less Euronormative. Scholars such as Lenn E. Goodman in *Islamic Humanism*, Hamid Dabashi in *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, and María Rosa Menocal in *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* make the point that there are plenty of examples of humanist thought outside of Europe even before Renaissance humanism. Ken Seigneurie's work clearly identifies a progression to what he calls Arab humanism in contemporary literature (109), while conversely Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies characterise the early humanist movement as "a reaction against Muslim learning" (np). Emily Apter's reading of a new Saidian *Welt-humanism* moots "that humanism itself be rezoned to avoid misleading cartographic divisions between European and non-European" (52). While it is not hard to locate instances of Niethammer's *Humanismus*, Francesco Petrarch's epochal Renaissance Catholic pedagogy in *Secretum*, or even the explicit educational liberalism of Wilhelm von Humboldt – humanism's antecedents – used as tools of oppression, this "flattening [of] the term 'humanism' and backdating it uncritically to the Renaissance" (Mousley 19) wilfully ignores diversity and inconsistency in early modern concepts of human essentialism, sovereignty, and individualism, as well as "original humanism's disruption of the institution- and elite-centred middle ages" (Holland 6). It also overlooks the new humanism of scholars including Said, Seigneurie and Goodman emergent today, motivating the concept in projects of inclusion and social equity.

I prefer to begin from Murray Bookchin's defence of humanist conviction in *Re-Enchanting Humanity*: "the serious thinker must look beyond the 'real' to speculate *what should be* rather than validate *what is*" (258). If this is a pragmatic ethic to start from in encouraging progressive thought, it should also be true of the language we use to describe

that thought. In this case, it would be important to define how humanism might be discursively useful, looking forward, rather than assert one true Humanism of yore.

In both popular and scholarly film discourse, the descriptor "humanistic drama" appears to signify something else again. It is my intention in this thesis to locate a contemporary humanist narrative theory that draws from these philosophies in order to sketch the parameters of an on-screen humanism, and suggest a hermeneutic sensibility that may result. It is also my intent to use humanist theory more common in the history of literary studies and apply it to film theory. In cinema the humanistic drama – or "human drama" – connotes an attempt to replicate the complexity of human sociality in fiction. Yet this gives rise to certain questions: whose complexity is represented, and how do we decide what complexity is? There is also the problem of fabricated complexity, in that complex explanations do not always reach more truthful or verifiable conclusions. For example, we may have a complex reason to explain a social phenomenon, but we can still be verifiably wrong about its causes; or we may have a complex explanation for another's behaviour, but again, we can still be wrong about their motivation. Complexity does not equal truth, and we can construct complexity anew rather than finding it in the world. Noël Carroll objected to a confounding assembly of semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism in 1988's *Mystifying Movies*, for example, and Karl Popper called into question the unfalsifiability of Marx, Freud and Adler in 1963's *Conjectures and Refutations* (34-35), yet suppositions drawn from their works sustain as the leading mode of evaluation in film theory.[8] Assessing whether or not a complex portrayal of human sociality, in theory or in fictional representation, is fabricated mystification or truly reveals reliable human detail is the trickiest component in humanist hermeneutics. Once again, recourse to human sciences helps us to achieve such assessments, but more on science later.

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[8] Subject position theory is essentially the same, and as disempowering, as a conspiracy theory. Per Popper's critique of Marx, Freud and Adler, not only are the subjectivists' claims unable to be falsified, but all contrary arguments may also be taken to reinforce the initial conviction. Literary postmodernists are "suspicious of the truth claims of science" (Wells "Humanism and Human Nature" 232), likely to be seen as part of a "system" of hierarchical power from which they are born, and to protect unconstrained association, "both subject-position theorists and culturalists tend to shy away from inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning" (Bordwell "Contemporary Film Studies" 23). All evidence, again, will reinforce the theory, the defining psychopathology of conspiracists. This manner of subjectivism and conspiracism excuses us from attempting change, as in both cases the asserted power structures are mystified and placed out of reach: a proof by intimidation.

Humanising the Other

If humanism has a significant challenge in scholarly thought at the moment, it is less an antihumanist attack on human autonomy for positive, progressive or even transhuman change – it is the idea of the posthuman. We cannot say with certainty that we know the parameters of the human; we cannot any longer agree on what a human actually *is*, suggesting it may be an inadequate concept to start from in understanding the workings of the world. In his book *The Posthuman Condition* Robert Pepperell suggests that we cannot pretend the mind is synonymous with human identity. Neuron activity defines the mind, yet we also have neurons in our stomach – in this case we must consider our stomach a human entity (Pepperell 93-97, for a more sensitive analysis of what we might call the "mind-tummy" problem). As we discover more parasites, pathogens and other microbes that have significant effects on our behaviour, often co-adaptive behavioural influences (Moalem and Satonick *Survival of the Sickest* passim), concepts of human selfhood again come under scrutiny.[9] Also, if we use machines as ambassadors for our thought – recording our ideas on a computer, for instance, which will go on to represent a version of our thoughts – we are already in a position whereby we cannot easily separate our mind and the machine. This conceptualisation of cultural symbol as akin to life, however, is similar to memetics, which has been contradicted by geneticists including Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, as memes do not contain information of themselves: "In each case the organism (or group) actively reconstructs the pattern of behaviour, or the pattern of emotions and ideas, through learning. And learning is not blind copying—it is a function- or meaning-sensitive developmental process" (209) so "the copying mechanism is not independent of what is copied" (210). Thus it remains problematic to assume non-living ambassadors for our thought have life akin to our own.

On the other hand, nor have we ever been able to pinpoint exactly where life begins or ends. Japanese researchers have recently announced the creation of the first artificial copper sulphide synapse with little fanfare (Nayak et al.), perhaps making the posthumanist discussion all the more urgent. David Boyle rejects notions of human-machine indivisibility, however: "The truth is that only if you define humanity as a simple matter of data processing

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[9] Recent focus on toxoplasmosis's relationship with intermittent explosive disorder (dubbed "crazy cat lady syndrome" in the news media) provides a good example.

can you ever believe that human beings and machines are alike" (200). He goes on to critique the cybernetic totalism of Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs":

> There is fatalism to this debate – as if those who believe there is no difference between real and virtual, being alive and being 'better than well', and no such thing as irony or intimacy or partiality, are somehow bound to win ... yet we have retained enough of a sense of ourselves to feel nostalgic about the idea of real relationships, real sex, real passion, real bank managers, face-to-face public services, that we have created an underground backlash in their favour. Artificial intelligence is just that: it's artificial. 'Intelligence' has become just a metaphor – and the prophets of AI are like religious fundamentalists in the way they *mistake their metaphors for real descriptions of the world* ... people are reacting against this kind of reductionism. The closer the AI people get, the more authenticity becomes the critical concept at the heart of culture. (202, emphasis added)

So despite the excitement of such transhuman idylls, there is an observable movement pulling us back toward some notion of authenticity: a real that recognises something more than just *known* data, an unreachable complexity that posthuman daydreamers – resurrecting a Galilean mechanistic theism[10] – deign to conquer with a comforting reduction of human ambiguities to the consistent machine.

As intriguing and urgent as the posthuman ethical debate may be, I would like to suggest a way of looking at the human that makes it possible to move beyond the ontology and semantics of the human entity. We can embrace the *fluidity* of the human mind and form at the same time as acknowledging that the human is *what we have to work with*, even if its parameters cannot be known or subject to essentialist certainty. We cannot sample another reality beyond that dictated by the recurring, evolving natural pattern of the human form and the perspective (obviously limited, as Pepperell stresses) it allows. The fact that the human is

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[10] As in Pierre Bourdieu's "Scholastic Point of View," scholarly analytical methods mechanise the social world even where our complex relations cannot be so rigidly determined, simply because such systemisation is convenient for theories that seek to master human interactivity; the neatness of this process in explaining the importance of our work as social theorists should not overwhelm our acknowledgement of the limitations of our models, simulations and metaphors (Bono passim). This gives rise to all sorts of terms expressing excess, unknowables and ineffables (c.f. terms like the "really real" and "the-rest-of-what-is" in works of existential anthropology such as Mattijs van de Port's *Ecstatic Encounters*).

fluid should not dismiss our striving to understand this perspective and how it works – we must still be able to discuss concepts and entities without reference to essential properties, or all argument devolves to the same ontological impasse.[11] Humanism is, instead, a kind of methodological naturalism: we proceed with the understanding of the unknowable nature of reality, but it behoves us to accept these limitations and make decisions based on our experience of what is real. At the same time we understand our phenomenal perspective will always be bound to our experience as a human. In deeply understanding other things, thus, we "humanise" them. In effect, anthropomorphising is all that we can do to understand the experience of a life not our own. "Humanising the other" involves a projection of what it might be like to be another entity; we need the imaginative process, this kind of anthropomorphising, in order to incorporate other living things into any system of personal moral accountability, including fellow humans, nonhuman entities and indistinct entities like animals and, for some, machines – we consistently need to imagine what it is like to be them in order to accept them as worthy of ethical inclusion. Normative ethics and this variety of humanism can, then, begin to look like the same thing – the indivisibility of ethical culture and humanism is acknowledged by one of the largest international bodies representing the movement, the International Humanist and Ethical Union. It is perhaps useful to look at humanism as the philosophy around the reasons for foregrounding ethical discussions; the emphasis on ethics results from a humanist position.

While it is fallacious to suggest we also have a science that can reliably summarise the mysteries of empathic modelling and projection, we should at least acknowledge that we are referring to a cognitive process. This is why humanism inquires into the experience of empathy with an emphasis on the social sciences rather than metaphysics or speculative ontology. We can have "humanism without the human" and an "ethics without metaphysics" (Sheehan 64).

So our process of understanding other things *has to* involve some amount of projection. Our imaginative capacities cannot exist in a vacuum, they are ordered by our own experience – that is, human experience. To comprehend a narrative, we immediately try to connect its events with our own recollected experiences; in this way empathy is an act that innately works from introspection. This is an insurmountable position, and no amount of lip

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[11] This pragmatism is, perhaps, what Jean-Paul Sartre sought to achieve in exploring the conditions of human agency within an experimental existential humanism (see *Existentialism and Humanism*).

service to the erroneous centrality of the imagined panhuman, umwelt or qualia, can shift us into seeing wholly as another sees. In Erica Fudge's notion of inevitable anthropocentrism, Francis Bacon's "false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (Bacon 54) is "natural to the human mind and therefore impossible to dismiss" (Fudge 5). The human is central because for all of us bar none, the human perspective is what we have to work with, and what we then must study to comprehend the moral behaviours and quandaries we foreground as cultural theorists. Or, as Adam Smith put it, "I judge of your sight by sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I never have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them" (23). As in Fudge's work on early modern English drama, attention to the values of Renaissance humanists reveals disapproval levelled at the killing of both people, in a militaristic sense, and animals, in the crown hunt. See in particular Michel de Montaigne's essay *Of Cruelty*, which by its radically personal nature demonstrates a humanistic departure in opinion writing: the essay form elevates a nascent phenomenological description and resultant empathy into philosophy. Here, analogising human and animal suffering does not necessarily promote the human above other living things, as in much religious doctrine prior to the Renaissance, but instead is a necessary condition of liberalising compassion. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, for example, Jacques is reported to lament a deer killed during a pastoral hunt. However, he first imagines himself as *like* the deer, their melancholy and outrage at human incivility being one and the same, and makes elegiac use of metaphors linking the deer's situation to various contexts in human cultures. Despite the deer clearly not possessing these human qualities, the imaginative leap permits Jacques access to an empathy he could not otherwise entertain, as human culture is his only framework for understanding any suffering, and in turn such imagination translates to (extremely performative) compassion. This language "shows that [Jacques and Duke Senior] can only feel animal suffering when it is imagined as human suffering, a response that might be said to deny the reality and authenticity of animal experience" (Berry 176). Yet what is the alternative; is it direct access to a real or authentic animal experience? As this is impossible, Shakespeare instead explores problems with our attempts at human-animal and civility-nature delineation. Even in early humanist thinking, compassion begins from imaginatively and speculatively connecting our experience to the experience of other things – our own (human) vantage is the only tool we have for reaching compassion, with respect to its limitations.[12] Thereafter we can attempt to push against these limitations by learning more

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[12] In *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays by Shakespeare*, Stanley Cavell describes this as the

about the context, the ecology and biology of the other, but this will still in turn be unpacked by human pattern-seeking perception.

Consequently, if this is all we can do, it is better to have more complex modelling and projection of others, which should lead to better decision-making in collective matters. So we come to ask what it is that storytelling and the storytelling arts offer in this process. The simple answer is that story can complicate our conception of others in revealing ways. Imagining the experience of another entity, be it another person in a remote location or circumstance, or an animal to be slaughtered for consumption, is going to lead to superior ethical judgments about our engagement with them the more nuanced and realistic our understanding of their circumstance – this is, for example, what social realism has sought to provide for the underprivileged. As Brian Boyd puts it:

> Narrative especially helps coordinate groups, by informing their members of one another's actions. It spreads prosocial values, the likeliest to appeal to both tellers and listeners. It develops our capacity to see from different perspectives, and this capacity in turn both arises from and aids the evolution of cooperation and the growth of human mental flexibility. (*On the Origin of Stories* 176)[13]

Although his analysis foregrounds the role of gossip in social accountability structures, he does go on to suggest, "But maximum flexibility, in humans as in others, depends on play" (176). In cinema ethics, this process puts to practical work Stanley Cavell's cinema-as-quotidian-philosophising reclaimed from rarefied establishments: "the latest of the great arts, [showing] philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film

difference between knowing and acknowledging. Knowing another is both necessary and impossible, and so our attempts at knowing the other become a kind of acknowledgement. As Cavell has it, Shakespeare's works show us that applying epistemological scepticism to our social world can become corrosively alienating. The kind of scepticism we fetishize as cultural theorists, then, can fail to build bridges between people. This is the problem encountered when we assume our job is to *emphasise* the limitations of empathic and compassionate connections rather than merely accept them. All knowing and acknowledging of the other can know its own limitations while acknowledging its utility and necessity.

[13] A story's effectiveness in this regard would naturally depend on the story being told. Although Boyd is correct to identify the broad appeal of prosocial morals in popular narrative, not all stories will perform the same work, even if we are to nominate the adoption of plural perspectives and attendant group coordination as foundational functions in the genesis of human storytelling. This will be elaborated in the following chapter.

is so apt to capture" (Cavell *Cities of Words* 6). If we are to evaluate responses to ethical problems beyond those presented by direct interaction with others in our immediate community, we need hypothetical characters: fiction. Writers such as Alex Neill consider empathy for actual persons and fictional characters as one and the same, as projection of the feelings of another is, in essence, always an imaginative act (257). Hypothetical empathic subjects do not represent the totality of storytelling's place in our lives, of course – stories are much more powerful than that – but these are the functions of storytelling a humanist may be interested in.

Much storytelling that fosters group cohesion equally defines that cohesion in relation to outgroup members, in some cases by vilifying them; think of *Jud Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940), or political and religious quasi-historical narratives that nominate a "chosen people." Humanistic narrative, on the other hand, adopts plural perspectives without needing to concoct an inferior opposite which they will be judged against. So if the type of story matters, then it makes sense to focus on how we might achieve kinder stories – the conditions of storytelling responsibility – and evaluative claims are available to be made. Thence the humanistic focus on human kindness. If humanistic scholars omit the study of such storied kindnesses in favour of hermeneutic admonishments levelled at narrativised bigotry and the cultures that produce it, then we will never learn the conditions under which kinder narratives flourish. This points to a politics of emphasis that circulates philosophical discussions around humanism and antihumanism. Kwame Anthony Appiah points to the negotiation of "value terms, meant to shape our responses to the movie. And if the story it tells is truly representative, our discussion of it will help us decide not only what we feel about the characters but how we should act in the world" (*Cosmopolitanism* 29). Thus, he says of film, "It keeps our vocabulary of evaluation honed, ready to do its work in our lives. And that work, as I say, is first to help us act together" (ibid. 30). After grappling with the way cosmopolitanism might deal with the antihumanist charge of normalising humanity and disregarding human difference, he settles for the fact that this "acting together" after discussion cannot be a reprehensible moral aim, despite its imperfectability.[14] We can locate complex understanding of both similarities *and*

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[14] All communication, including cinema, might be flawed and imperfect transmission, but this should not lead us to devalue the efficacy of all communicative intent, as with Jacques Derrida's "decentred subject," a particular poststructural nihilism (Schwartz "Antihumanism" 33). Mary K. Holland describes recent opposition to these poststructural cues: "contemporary calls for humanism characterize exactly the baby that antihumanism discarded: literature and theory's ability to be about something, to matter, to communicate meaning, *to foster the sense that language connects us more than it estranges us*, so that we can come together in ways that

differences in the experience of the other without needing to refer to human exceptionalism or requiring differences to be quelled; indeed, wonder at difference and similarity alike is an important part of comprehension.

There is a lack of vulnerability and humility in much poststructural and antihumanist theory that humanism may seek to recover. A humanist alternative might proffer vulnerability as a necessary condition of discovery, and attempts to reach between people to forge connections, which may then avoid the worst of intrahuman cynicism (bigotry, violence, objectification, oppression). Humility, in this case, is the attribute by which we might access vulnerability, and learn of the new. As Said put it, the "possibility of a critical understanding that may never be completed but can certainly be provisionally affirmed ... there can be heroic first readings that enable many others after them" (*Humanism* 67-68). All of these alternatives require imaginative empathic effort, flawed and culturally contingent as these processes may be. Recognising this imperfection, we begin to emphasise the *effort* people put into complex comprehension. To extend this to an ethic: we try to connect our experiences to complex otherness despite barriers or boundaries – we do the best we can.

Similar values can be seen put to use in anthropology. As in mainstream anthropological method, we empathise with disparate people and cultures not to adopt their perspective (which is impossible), but to learn the complexities and nuances of their being, which allows us to work together from an enhanced intersubjective comprehension. But crucially, this does not invalidate any ethical debate. In other words, *suspending* moral judgment in order to listen and learn – what Edmund Husserl called the "phenomenological epoché" (91-100) and is now referred to as "bracketing" – does not preclude later resolution on moral issues. In participant observation, or the fieldwork prior to an ethnography, a kind of methodological relativism is employed to learn from other peoples: "a commitment to suspending moral judgment until an attempt can be made to understand another culture's beliefs and practices in their full cultural, material, and historical contexts" (Turner "Human Rights, Human Difference" 275).[15] This method appears to me equally applicable to narrative

build relationship and community rather than the alienation and solipsism of antihumanistic postmodern literature" (6, emphasis added).

[15] We should remember, too, that "cultural relativism" remains a contested concept in anthropology. Thinking in identifiable "cultures" can summarise others into holistic and politically non-transformative units – a disavowal of changing global interdependence through which responsibility becomes isolated. When problems appear as "separate" to one's

theory, as stories are culturally produced. We can apply this listening method to distant peoples whose lives are affected by our decisions, niche communities within one's own vicinity, and even one's immediate family members and peers, as all people have their own distinctive experiential heritage to consider, which they tell of in storied communication. In fact, it is a central tenet of narrative humanism that this empathic work can be performed not just in understanding distant others, but proximate others, too; the latter half of this thesis interrogates attempts to understand the otherness of those closest to us in Western domestic settings, and takes as a case study the methods filmmakers have developed to represent conflicts and their resolution across a diversity of personhood in American suburbia. The case study of the suburban ensemble dramedy elaborates on humanism in its propinquitous iterations.

The self-reflection and introspection required in such an anthropological method can form an integral part of textual readings. C. Jason Throop expresses the concept thusly:

> It is by means of just such a vulnerable, passive and open orientation to another that we are able to confront some of our most deeply ingrained assumptions about ourselves, our world, and those others with whom we interact. In so doing we are able to envision new horizons of experience. To be compelled by another to interrupt our tendency to assimilate experience to the self-sameness of our being, we thus become opened to possibilities for seeing other ways of being that are not, and yet may never be, our own. (281-282)

Anthropology is, like the storytelling arts and debates around stories, just one kind of humanism in practice. Its heritage of progressively overcoming descriptions that minimise another's humanity, like the notion of the "primitive," speaks to the self-correcting function of the anthropological method, in that striving for close listening to others can only lead to a more generously complex understanding of their being and their context.

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own culture, interventionism can paradoxically seem more reasonable. In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving" Lila Abu-Lughod wrote: "The reason respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is that it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places have found themselves ... A more productive approach, it seems to me, is to ask how we might contribute to making the world a more just place" (789).

Close attendance to another's perspective is the same as a good story: we risk losing ourselves in its liminal space, we allow ourselves to forget a little of our own lives and concerns, and when we emerge we reconstruct a sense of self to include the disturbances we found so rattling in the implications of the narrative. This pleasure of deep listening involves risk, as we have to allow ourselves to become unbound, no longer whole, to truly admit new knowledge and perspectives. The pleasure is curtailed the less we can admit the inherent self-doubt of coming unbound – we have less to re-evaluate, and so less to gain. Thus all close listening, all real attendance to what others are doing and saying, entails considerable existential risk (Ingold 389), the vulnerability and humility of assuming doubt rather than projecting it.[16] However, we can never truly let go of our values or our sense of self; we just attempt to take one another seriously by undoing our expectations inasmuch as possible, a courtesy of mutual intersubjective benefit, of learning and allowing others the space to express what they know without the restriction of our preconvictions. So again, we value the attempt, or the work put in, rather than the ideal.

In a sense, humanism always fails. Its project can never be complete as we are never able to be completely inclusive of all human otherness at once, just as we can never completely comprehend another human. Christine Gardner commented in *Anthropology and Humanism* that humanistic ethnography, "lays bare the possibility of partial understanding … by allowing discord in the record, by resisting closure for closure's sake, by forsaking completeness for clarity's sake" (166-167). No narrative will be able to contain due consideration of all relevant humanness. For example, we always have the opportunity to focus on those symbolically omitted from any given narrative, and we tend to use this as an evaluative shortcut: does the narrative represent a true spectrum of sexualities, ethnicities, economic statuses? As the ideal of representing an entire spectrum of human difference is impossible, we place emphasis on *efforts* to comprehend otherness, not the goal of pure comprehension of otherness. This resignation to constant failure and refinement, the relinquishing of ideals in favour of the utility of the attempt, is another source of vulnerability and humility in humanism.

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[16] Of course, self-doubt can be paralyzing too, and should not be thought of as a catchall exhortation for all of our interactions. There is a kindness to assuming doubt, but some experience doubt chronically, and internal balance must be sought between reasonable self-dubiety, confidence and conviction. This is no small task. I clarify that I am describing a method for close listening to others, not a general prescription for all thinking and social interaction.

Character Complexity and Elaboration on the Attempt

When answering a question such as "why do we tell stories?" we often run the risk of totalising, offering monocausal or telic accounts to serve a thesis. My purpose here is to offer one small corner of the myriad utilities performed through story in human evolution, and in our daily lives. Identifying complexity in our interactions, allowing some awe in the immensity of human systems we cannot totalise, and yoking such an awe to discover more about ourselves, are substantial components in the contemporary humanist project. Often this has been summarised as engaging "wonder" (Bookchin *Re-enchanting Humanity*) in our fellow human.

As such, when addressing questions regarding what character complexity is made up of and why it matters so much, I offer the following response: perhaps there is a place we can reach which both strives to uncover ever more complex human detail (narrativised social and psychological causalities), and derives self-sustaining, generous wonderment from the interminability and incompleteness of this project. We might call this "human excess." Clearly there are many kinds of effortful cognition that creative fictions inspire in attempts to complexify our thinking on a variety of concerns, and in this section I turn to elucidate some of their differences. Yet as human excess is foundational to humanistic narrative concerns, I begin by identifying its dispositional humility of unknowing – that in any attempt to represent a complex human system it is still not possible to conceive of all its relevant causal detail together – from which most human dramas themselves begin. The anthropologist Michael Jackson marries Theodor Adorno's untruth of identity in *Negative Dialectics* with John Berger's observations on ineffability and story: "If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories. As things are here, life outstrips our vocabulary" (Berger 64). From these underpinnings he draws his own existential-humanist concept of human excess in the story arts:

> Concepts represent experience at the cost of leaving a lot unsaid. So long as we use concepts to cut up experience, giving value to some things at the expense of others, we inhibit our sense of the plenitude of Being. We gain some purchase on the world, to be sure, but claiming that our concepts contain all that can be usefully said about

experience, we close off the possibility of critique … writers approach the world so tortuously and obliquely, using "inept metaphors and obvious paraphrases" to draw attention to a subject they are unwilling to name. It is their way of recognizing that life eludes our grasp and remains at large, always fugitive. (Jackson 5)[17]

Beyond such a literary surrender to the ineffability of experience lies an affective and intellectual zone reachable by fiction, which does not forfeit knowledge collation but the very unfinished business of it all excites its pursuit: a seeking to represent ever more accurately, through the consilience of new sciences, observation and experience, as much as we are able to truthfully express about life.

Here, multi-causality becomes key in explaining character complexity. No one can claim to have such knowledge of people that they can create a character that is like a human, rather than a constellation of ideas about a human. Characters are, after all, constellations of ideas. But once this is acknowledged, what we can do is offer ideas about the human multitudinous and multi-causal enough that they simultaneously offer insightful perspectives to discuss, and yet also allow us to keep in mind human excess, engaging the aforementioned wonder at our unreachable complexity. The same is true of our peers: we comprehend them as constellations of attributes to which we have emotional responses, but if we are honest, we never quite trust our necessary reductions to discrete explainable details (of motivation, of personality and so on) as truly representing the sum of their identity. This openness is a humanist disposition – we can retain such a generosity of thought even as we construct internal models to imaginatively map their individual and social complexities. If complex

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[17] The paradox of metaphor is that the more an expression can mean, the less it *does* mean. One can be aware that properly descriptive acts suppress lingual alterity in a way that cannot match the world's depth, as with science's less proscriptive use of metaphor (Bono 81), and yet still see that restraining conceptive possibilities has utility. This is because at the same time, eliminating possibilities makes way for new possibilities – at the moment of scientific breakthrough, the avenues for understanding the world that are closed are more often replaced by many more avenues for new knowledge. The same is true of cogent language. In summarising one part of the world, lucidity opens new possibilities for observation and articulation from the groundwork of its condensation. The world becomes bigger, not smaller, in articulation. Jackson's quote demonstrates the kindness it extends to its subjects: writing can be poetic and specific at the same time. Similarly, science and scientific description can obliterate possibilities and remain open to the human unknown. Our descriptions of the world become more negotiable when we can be sure we are negotiating the same concept – so again, conceptual precision's invitation to negotiation is, paradoxically, an opening rather than a closing of possibility.

understanding of peers corresponds with interest in complex fictive characters, however, is the reverse necessarily also true, and is our engagement with complex fiction transferrable in some way to our conception of others in the real world? Various researchers have attempted to measure the complexity of our understanding of peers against the complexity of comprehension of fictional characters. One such researcher, Susan D. Hynds, found that:

> curiosity about and understanding of people in everyday life is a strong component in the understanding and enjoyment of literature. Further, since developmental studies have established that construct repertoires can indeed be expanded throughout a lifetime, literature provides a vehicle for enlarging students' understanding of the people they are likely to encounter in the social world ... The reading of literature, then, demands a flexibility, an openness, and a willingness to perceive strange people and novel events in all of their multiplicity and dimensionality. (399)

Given the limitations of such studies, we still employ some conjecture about the nature of this generalizability, but surely there is an observable transfer as we use story to discuss life, and these discussions should be more detailed, more specific, the more detail and specificity is provided to discuss.

The focus on character complexity in film theory is quite different, with a tendency to be more procedural in nature, clarifying narrative techniques more than overall effects. Michael Z. Newman attempted to delineate the differences between narrative and character complexity in comparing the puzzle film *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003) with human drama *Passion Fish* (John Sayles, 1992), concluding on a difference in the focus of our problem-solving cognition:

> unlike *21 Grams*, *Passion Fish* is not the kind of film that makes its audience puzzle out its story moment by moment. The spectator watching the opening scenes of *21 Grams* asks, What is going on? The spectator watching the opening scenes of *Passion Fish* is shown much of what is going on and is free to think about the characters, settings, and themes in more detail and with more intensity. (93)

After exploring some of the means for developing character complexity in *Passion Fish* (which point to the social multi-causality of ensemble casts), such as loading information about

primary characters, reversing our assumptions of their "types," and the introduction of minor characters (103), Newman goes on to make a value judgement that elevates the human drama: "The contrast with *21 Grams* should be clear. A narrative that starts out in confusion is most likely to become clearer, less problematic. But a narrative that starts out simple has the opportunity of developing in the direction of intensified interest, of accumulating sophistication" (104). There may be many kinds of narrative complexity, all of worth in different ways, but we can be engaged with cognitive puzzles which matter internally to narrative comprehension, or illuminate character points which make us think differently about people.[18] Finally, Newman makes a claim that due to their trajectory from clarity to questioning, human dramas provoke a more substantially thoughtful afterlife: "*21 Grams* makes unusual cognitive demands as it unfolds, as it makes itself difficult to understand initially. But *Passion Fish* makes you think when it ends" (105). Such "character points" might not lead to obvious or ethically unconditional conclusions about how to behave – a straightforward moral. However, if sufficiently complexified, character considerations do fill out a background to our ethical lives by reminding us of the enormity of variation in circumstance and personality implicated in our daily decisions.

This state of openness to otherness should not be viewed as an attainable, conscious permanency; it might only be reachable every now and again. It does not make cognitive sense to sit suspended in a state of expansive acceptance of human complexity, without action or application, without the usual cognitive strains of going about one's day – again, we must be careful to avoid chimeric ideals. Perhaps narrative can simply act as a reminder that such openness to human detail should be called upon when making decisions that affect others. If we are to make the distinction between narrative and character complexity as Newman has done, this may also be what we refer to as narrative complexity: too many concepts conveyed for us to get our head around all together and at once, the excitement of ineffability, intellectual striving and the capacity for new knowledge it brings (clearly accessible by narrative modes outside the human drama, too). So perhaps a final humanistic function of story is not just to suggest human excess epistemologically, but in the limitations of our cognition too. Perhaps we need both social simulation to discuss ethical particularities, and reminders that our simulations will always be inadequate to explain the complex multi-causality that is life.

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[18] The view of "humanism as striving for character complexity" is a familiar strand across Sayles scholarship (Moss-Wellington "Humanist Ethics in John Sayles's *Casa*" 109).

The Use of Science in Analysis

If we are to continue referring to a "realistic" complexity, we need to check the veracity of our claims to realism before proceeding. As mentioned above, it is a fallacy to assume an explanation is correct simply because it is complex, so we cannot conclude the project of humanism merely in complexifying our visions of human otherness – we still must ask who gets to decide what is "realistically complex"? This is the arbitrating purpose of scientific method. Not because all methods calling themselves science are unimpeachable (pseudoscience uses the language of science without the method), but because attempts at the impartial gathering of empirical evidence are the best means we have for ascertaining the validity of a claim – and so this should be equally applicable to claims made by philosophers within the humanities. Many of us use (limited) social science in arts evaluation without even acknowledging that we are doing it: pointing out how American filmmaking fails to include certain demographically relevant groups, for example, relies on impartially gathered data on such demographics. Advances in the natural sciences are gradually subsumed into a general conception of the world philosophers describe. But we can do more. Regressing to a purist notion of realism or the real is precisely what bothers most antihumanists, as it allegedly offers opportunities to invalidate the subjective experience of others, but some notion of reality from which to work is unavoidable. This often means referring to experimental science, a deferring to the expertise of well-researched others to mediate one's view of humans and their sociality; it seems to me that such a practice conversely opens us up to further intersubjective potentialities rather than limiting them. This is not the kind of positivism or scientism philosophers like Popper object to (in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, *The Poverty of Historicism* and *Conjectures and Refutations*), whereby the natural sciences can be extended to moral blueprints, teleological certitude and prognostication, or represent the sum of meaningful human thought,[19] but merely the assertion that evidence gathered by others should be a backdrop to our conception and evaluation of human activities, including narrative production. Sometimes we put ourselves above this process, and the humanities and hermeneutics become a pseudoscience – again, the language of complexity without the method of evaluating its veracity.

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[19] As suggested in works such as Alexander Rosenberg's *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*.

Clearly there are some observations that cannot be referred to empirical evidence, and measurable data does not represent all that is worthwhile approaching in narrative – but these facts should not excuse narrative theorists from building familiarity with the science around their subject. (Nor can demarcation problems in the social sciences – sometimes called "pre-science" as opposed to "hard" science, drawing from Wilhelm Dilthey's initial problem of methodological difference in *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft* – permit us to dismiss the knowledge and expertise of researchers working outside of the natural sciences; for example, we cannot ignore evidence in psychology simply because of a knowledge categorisation problem.) At worst, these two truisms – the ineffable and the unquantifiable – are given as excuses to dismiss any evidence contradicting a favoured theory. While "life outstrips our vocabulary" (Berger 64) perhaps providing the need for stories, it simply is not true that the narrative arts exclusively explore the space that science cannot reach. Much of the social detail that can be broached in narrative has been equally studied outside of creative practice. To suggest otherwise smacks of poorly conducted research, or willing oversight. Nor does it reduce the impact of arts, but rather the extra richness of detail gleaned in attention to the expertise of others matches a richer experience of narrative engagement, evaluation, and creation.

In cinema studies in particular, after Bordwell and Carroll we have seen a blossoming of cognitivist approaches, with a few, such as Joseph D. Anderson in *The Reality of Illusion*, attempting a union of cognitive and evolutionary approaches to explain film perception. Following debate around the discovery, implications and relevance of mirror neurons, it may seem to the cognitivists "preposterous to claim that our capacity to reflect on the intentions, beliefs and desires determining the behaviour of others is *all there is* in social cognition" (Gallese "Before and Below 'Theory of Mind'" 659), which put "the Grand Theory rooted in semiotics and psychoanalysis in a difficult position, foreseeing the advent of a biocultural approach to cinema" (Gallese and Guerra 188). It also may be time for cinema studies to put the sociality back into social cognition, exploring the mental space between people involved with cinema rather than the isolated neurological studies of individual mental states we have relied on in the past. Thus I propose to look broader afield, integrating social research around issues such as, for example, prejudice, ostracism and group dynamics into understanding the storytelling act, and the film experience. An attendance to the communal features of cinema

and story does not allow us to ignore the substantial contribution fields like social psychology and evolutionary anthropology can make to the discipline.[20]

Popper contemporary Jarvie wonders why his fellow cognitive film theorists and analytic philosophers, for all their love of science, "study and cite philosophers, not scientists" ("Is Analytic Philosophy the Cure for Film Theory?" 436). Theorists can be released from *some* of the demand to directly cite scientists when dealing with questions that can have no definitive or falsifiable answer – questions of purpose, for example, or ethics – but Jarvie's imperative to reference scientists, not science in general (ibid. 437), could be a helpful one in descriptive or evaluative work, or in our application of hermeneutics. However, I am primarily making a case here for a scientific *backgrounding* (especially in the social sciences) from which to work, not pure scientism. Such a backgrounding merely helps us avoid, inasmuch as possible, saying things that are untrue, and helps us grapple with the truth claims of others, including storytellers.

The nominal problems of science and analysis remain important. While I believe it is remiss to neglect what social sciences may tell us about story culture, I also believe it is important to recognise that our own practice – theory without testing – cannot and should not have pretence to a scientific legitimacy. When theory applies science, we cherry-pick studies to make a point, which is fine as long as the theorising is not conflated with science merely by using it as a reference.[21] The legitimacy theory can claim is in imaginative agitation and uplift, which may be, at least in a humanistic paradigm, of equal importance in finding our way forward (ethically determining *what to do*) as the descriptive and diagnostic potentials of hard science.

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[20] This is in addition to the thorough cognitivist perception studies and mysticising psychoanalytic pseudoscience now so familiar in film theory. While psychoanalysis could be seen as having poetic value in its circuitous ambiguity, when it is used to colonise other people's experiences with static, universally applicable metaphors that do not admit cultural variation, it should be put into question. If only an elite community possesses access to acquisition of such a language, which is then used to describe the experience of others with a pretence to empirical truth or science without contact, psychoanalysis could be seen as a kind of class violence (and another example of fallacious proof by verbose intimidation).

[21] This is not to delegitimise the ambitious rumination that is theory, which Tim Ingold describes as "an imagination nourished by its observational engagements with the world. The rupture between reality and imagination—the one annexed to fact, the other to theory—has been the source of much havoc in the history of consciousness" (393).

Since at least 1931, figures including George Sarton and Cassius Jackson Keyser were publishing monographs in an attempt to unify humanism and science (see *The History of Science and the New Humanism* and *Humanism and Science* respectively). Humanism and science appear to me to have a natural home together as they both start from a place of unknowing rather than top-down theoretical explication – they search for knowledge rather than defend pre-existing knowledge – and they both pursue ever more complex detail and explanations for our selves and the world around us. Indeed, sometimes humanism and scientific rationalism are taken to be synonymous: the Rationalist Association, for example, publishes the New Humanist quarterly. As in Edward O. Wilson's version of complexity theory, the complexity of social systems is akin to the complexity of biological systems, or any other process of interaction making up the physical world, and thus emerges the possibility for a non-reductive physicalism:

> To recite one of the mantras of science, the explanations of the physical sciences are necessary but not sufficient. There is too much idiosyncrasy in the arrangement of a particular cell's nucleus and other organelles as well as the molecules composing them, and too much complexity in the cell's constantly shifting chemical exchanges with the environment, to accomplish such a conceptual traverse. And beyond these particularities awaits the still-hidden history of the prescriptive DNA, stretched across countless generations. (*Consilience* 74)

So again, as in the diverse sciences Wilson cites, social narratologists and humanist hermeneuticians might strive for ever greater descriptions of complex interaction with respect to our limitations – the absence of holistic causal explanation – preventing us from presuming or imposing any totalised conception of human identity, and keeping discovery alive.

Despite monistic physicalist fantasies of the explanatory powers of a oneness of sciences and associated dogma, a humanist epistemology holds that it may be dangerous to believe that our cognitive capacities can hold all meaningful information about the human together at once – from this reductive position, we will always miss deference to an infinite complexity, the acceptance of which mediates our morality and behaviour. In this case, as we will never be able to descriptively and meaningfully totalise human experience into a singular conception, we need theorists to suggest and simulate the excess beyond the sciences we

already have awareness of, make imaginative connections between sciences, observe theoretical convergences and concoct hypotheses with such imagination: like story itself, imaginatively providing "the ability to see possible formal connections before one is able to prove them in any formal way" (Bruner 13). The theorist can then challenge holistic myths by which we may act on a fallacious assumption that what we already know explains everything, or could explain everything if we just found the right data: "knowledge is not built from facts that are simply there, waiting to be discovered and organized in terms of concepts and categories … it rather grows and is grown in the forge of our relations with others" (Ingold 391). Fields like film theory, in this case, can move past the necessary specialist study of minutiae to connect a macro perspective between scientific knowledges (an epistemic consilience), and allow us to imagine what to do with the diverse information received. Bruner's "paradigmatic mode" of abstracted logic, to which science belongs, thereby forfeits its particularity in application, which imaginative and storied modes can recover. Story applies directly to our lives in a way descriptions of the world cannot – it provides the link between abstract knowledge and our lived procedures by playing out knowledge and ideas in realised scenarios. It is our abstract information applied, which subsequently generates new abstractions and new theories of life. In turn, I believe *we must* pay attention to those who go to *test* resultant theories, or we are not part of the human epistemological journey, we are obscuring it.

Antihumanism and Alternatives to Humanist Hermeneutics

So far, we have established that we must "humanise" things to ethically include them; that this process should involve some complication of our understanding of others; that any such resultant complex understanding should be evaluated against available empirical evidence where possible, so that we know whether or not we are empathising with something complex and real rather than a fabricated or misconstrued complexity; further, that we must acknowledge any such project as always incomplete, thereby valuing the attempt to understand above total comprehension; and that storytelling, along with the evaluative work we do around stories, is a primary method for achieving these goals. I have also begun to make the case that film is well positioned to provide an experience whereby we can exercise our complex empathy for the other. This is what humanistic narratives seek to do, and what a humanist hermeneutics can evaluate.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to respond to all of the claims of the various antihumanisms, it is necessary for any narrative-based humanism to approach some of the common objections raised against a humanist hermeneutics in particular. I must reiterate that there is good reason to be sceptical of humanism, in that the term has a history of use in appeals to a universally dominant humanity, and these appeals are in turn used to deny outsiders sovereignty of cultural self-determination and identity:

> The single normative foundation of humanism can be used to disqualify some human beings as less qualified to self-governance than others, based on culturally specific criteria for virtuous human behaviour. For example, the development of liberal humanism in European political discourses during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be linked to the popular notion of the 'civilizing mission' used to legitimate colonial expansion. (Laurie 143-144)

Andy Mousley counters: "the Renaissance has been located if not as the unprecedented source of individualism, then as a key agent in its development" (16), and yet a literary or narrative humanism drawn from early modern hope and textual inquiry, he argues, "has little to do with the humanism which was attacked on various grounds by anti-humanists in the 1970s and 1980s, but ever since then the humanism of the anti-humanists has been routinely invoked as though it encompassed the whole of the humanist tradition" (ibid. 14). He disrupts the humanist/antihumanist binary by suggesting that ideas of authenticity and ethics, what the human being is and the conditions of its flourishing or compromise:

> are present, for example, in the hope of Marxists that class exploitation and the commodification of human life might one day end. They are also implicated in post-colonialism's critique of dehumanising ideologies of race, even when or especially when such ideologies are perpetrated in the name of humanity. And they are also evident in the feminist commitment to terminate the subjugation of women by men. (ibid. 11)

While some may hold that imperialism is the inevitable conclusion of all humanist philosophy, a humanism that entertains any notion of a locus for a truer humanity is not the humanism I speak of – in fact, it is a perversion of humanist discourse, if humanist discourse principally comprises, as I am proposing here, learning from others through empathy.

Ousting imperial attitudes from the academy appears to have come at a price: a contemporaneous conflation of reasonable (and necessary) cultural relativism (suggested even in use of the term hermeneutics) with vague and generalised disrespect for the insurmountably intrinsic human act of publically discussing ethics. Today, we remain sceptical of the prescriptive values of humanistic texts, and any associated methodology of evaluation. In short, constructivism compels disavowal of moral arguments as such arguments can only reflect the status of the moraliser, ergo moral conclusions made through art may, after all, be mere statements of taste, the kind of status symbol Pierre Bourdieu criticized as symbolic class violence in *La Distinction*. However, moral resolution – even after attempts at a suspension of judgement – must be permissible in any humanist reading method. Perhaps pragmatist Jarvie put it best: "Methods are not true or false, but adequate or inadequate, fruitful or barren … but they can be moral or immoral, above all in the investigation of humans" ("Relativism and Historicism" 582). We should still analyse our ability to harm or aid through narrative texts. It may be time now to find a way to reintegrate morality into narrative theory, while retaining respect for the different contextual challenges, power relations and identities in flux across the globe. These values need not be in conflict: we can ask an ethical question and understand the political context in which ethical decisions will be made. Otherwise, we forfeit the use of moral language to those powerful interests that continue to harness moral discourse as a mechanism for hegemonic social control.

Said's "nontotalizing, nonessentializing humanism that admits fallibility, limitations in understanding and difference" (Holland 6) suggested one such way forward while exploring the bounds between secular and theological humanisms:

> One might say that Saidian secular criticism sublimates a repressed politics of transcendence while unmasking organized religion's pose of impartiality. But one might also venture that Said's attentiveness to theological exegesis in the preface to *Mimesis* attests to an intellectual curiosity toward cultures of belief, a willingness to engage 'religiously' with the matter of how philosophies of transcendence have shaped revolutionary ethical militance and subjective freedom. (Apter 47)

This is, if anything, a Saidian humanism. Said was instrumental in exhuming a secular, emancipatory, optimistically leftist spiritualism from humanism's theological underpinnings,

one that located wonderment in identifying commonalities across the depth and detail of texts and languages. It is hopeful in a human agency at once apparent – the evidence is found in stirring literature from all places, all times – and unknowable, hence the presence of a necessary spiritualism in Said's work. If humanism has been, as Apter says, "a tradition shaped and structured historically by tensions between religion and secular culture" (46), then after Said's sublimation of humanism beyond national, ethnic or theological fealties to reflect a world of increasingly unbound identities, associated languages and texts, we can ask what is salvageable from the old humanism. For literary Darwinist Joseph Carroll, it is reaffirmation of "three core ideas in traditional humanism: individual identity, authorial intentions, and reference to a real world" (*Reading Human Nature* x). This reintroduces the humility and utility of *listening to others*, yet moreover for Said, in philological close study (or what one might call a close listening through sympathetic study, in an anthropological-hermeneutic sense, to human development and movement), we are able to reveal and honour an untotalisable humanity, and in so doing "intuit" (*Orientalism* 258) a human excess, an unknowable something-more that is our agency, our sympathy toward complex otherness, and thus our will to progress together. In a way, by listening closely to the uplift transmitted through human-produced texts, we access a great *relief* in *not knowing* a human essence. We are relieved from the pretence to totally know the variability of human identity and activity which is beyond our ken, a hubristic reductionism that, especially working from the cues of grand theory, it can seem we must accept simply to make an ethical or political argument; at the same time, we also appreciate the human labouring to communicate through narrative which is the fruit of our unified complexity. Thus, to argue against universalising notions of the human misses the point: we do not need to naturalise hierarchical views of superior humanness to engage any of these humanistic pursuits.

For many of the aforementioned antihumanist critics, the fact that some have more access to sympathetic narrative distribution than others invalidates the process;[22] for example, older white male dominance in the demography of the Hollywood Academy of Arts and Science unquestionably dictates the kind of people their mass-produced stories will ask us to sympathise with. A humanist might counter that these empathic processes remain the only means (however imperfect) by which we will overcome such disparity. The production

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[22] As well as Derrida, the post-Foucaldian subjectivists, and others I have mentioned like Laurie, Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies; in later chapters I will engage with recent political writers like Lauren Berlant who critique the sympathy management of specific humanist texts.

and direction of sympathy is undeniably political, but such critics have put us in a lose-lose situation: extension of group identification is both the goal and the problem. The positioning of sympathiser and sympathised, speaker and spoken for, is an inevitability as long as we have global imbalanced powers, yet the alternative – not listening to, imaginatively connecting with and facilitating stories told of the oppressed – is far worse. When we attack attempts at liberal empathy, we sterilise the means to seriously address power imbalance: the ability of stories to turn grander structural abstractions and observations into applied narratives, through which the relevance of personal detail provides a reason for political action. Nonattendance to the emotional lives of others bars identification and thereby the search for self-sacrificing answers or generative cosmopolitanism in practice, prolonging inequity, which should lead us to a simple maxim: humanism seeks to cosmopolitanise sympathy, but not generalise ethical action. A liberal sympathy grounded in complex understanding of local contingencies has a superior chance of locating actions with genuine mutual benefit.

Writers such as Heather Love have extended the antihumanist critique to challenge humanist reading methods. She begins by asking:

> What to make of this persistence of humanist values in the context of a disciplinary milieu that often sees them as outmoded? It might be explained as a typical contradiction between intellectual conviction and lived practice—there are no doubt de facto humanists among posthumanists, just as there are Marxist heroes of consumption. (372)

Love goes on to wonder whether the use of close textual readings to "enrich" or "deepen" our understanding of the human is all that efficacious. The de facto humanist describes those theorists who are engaged in attempts to comprehend complex human systems yet disavow a nebulously evoked notion of humanism (the humanism of antihumanists is also addressed in Soper 18, 128; Davies *Humanism* 48-49). Love advances two alternatives: distant and flat reading. The distant reading is really a quantitative analysis, oddly positioned against qualitative readings. As many critics have done, Love here pins humanism to an unrelated methodology. It is a false depiction, however: how many humanists really see quantitative analysis as opposed to a fuller or more realistic understanding of the human, and what do we then make of so many humanist-rationalist societies across the globe proffering scientism? Of course both have their place in building a holistic picture of our lives. Flat reading is a more

intriguing concept, a variant on Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's surface reading, which "suggests the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness" (Love 375). Despite her inability to provide a demonstration (ibid. 383-387, which cannot avoid the kind of interpretative analysis she hoped to suppress), perhaps there is something to the concept. Perhaps in leaping straight to the hidden qualities of a text, we are not actually reaching a "depth" of understanding, and maybe a realist perspective is sacrificed in our attempt to use texts to uncover submerged meanings. Sometimes the apparent can reveal as much as the subtextual. Again, however, this realisation shouldn't sit in opposition to any other analytical activity providing any other kind of detail about living things, and their efforts to communicate and interact. The surface reading is in no way opposed to humanist hermeneutics.

One could call this an eclectic humanism, then, drawing as it does from profoundly diverse perspectives to upset and extend visions of a panhuman. However all humanisms might contain this egalitarian imperative where they have fealty to the accumulative pursuit of comprehending human complexity. If the human is understood as sociobiologically adapted to environments they live in and create, never good or evil and yet never able to be removed from cultural-ethical intercourse, there is perhaps something we can learn not only about ourselves, but the fascinating and unfathomable complexity of all life, from listening deeply to a multiplicity of perspectives and knowledge (c.f. Wilson's *Consilience*). From this position, we do not have to take sides or adhere to monocausal accounts of arts adaptation, cultural variations, alleged superior ethical frameworks or truths. We make sense of the world by thinking more generously about people, epistemology and sociality in order to, hopefully, ambitiously, find new answers to old problems.

This egalitarian respect for others' knowledge does not hold that all information is equal. A principle is still applied, as I continue to insist that we ask: does this information *realistically complicate* our understanding of humans and human activity, even where the question cannot be conclusively answered. Identifying patterns of discrimination and normalised prejudice in cultural narratives should not be seen as opposed to this humanism in practice. Humanism just asks what we can do instead, or what the possibilities may be for replacing and moving past discriminatory narratives, instead of concluding with their documentation.

Perhaps another reason humanist readings have fallen out of repute in academe is that the question at its heart is too obvious: how do we be nicer to one another? The answers, however, are complex, and if we are honest, it is the question behind all the rest of our questions, such as "what is a human?" or "is the human an adequate ethical subject?" Humanism in the storytelling arts is, foremost, a reminder that when we transmit and discuss story and its theory, we should do so to serve, equally, living things. It is the way in which we go about this act of disturbing ourselves into ethical inclusivity that is of interest, especially in humanist hermeneutics and narratology.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Narrative humanism (for example, the cinematic human drama) and humanist hermeneutics share a common goal – attempts to comprehend a realistically complex human otherness – yet differ in their means, and we might more readily ascertain how we attempt this through storytelling than through scholarship around storytelling. Here, then, is a summary of the hermeneutic method I am proposing: that we begin by listening to others with generosity, which means approaching storied communication from a position of potential unknowing, as we may have something to learn from the storyteller; that thereafter, as evaluation needs a backbone in some sense of the real, we ought to elevate science over unbridled intuition, or the specialised knowledge of others beyond ourselves; and that we can then evaluate how well a text, a cluster of texts, a cultural movement or phenomenon opens us up to complex human otherness, which includes both its imaginative and potentially illuminating simulation of sociality and psychology, as well as how it might represent causal plurality and the vastness of the human unknown. As nothing is finalised in human studies, we value the utility of the attempt at comprehending others above a chimeric completion of human knowledge projects. Finally, if we realistically complicate our comprehension of others through narrative and evaluative discourse in this way, we might access more truly inclusive, more generous, and more apt ethical debates regarding the complex situations confronting others, and ourselves.

This is clearly something of a rescue act that I've been engaged with, a recovery of wonderment (c.f. Bookchin) in an age of academic professionalization that impresses upon us the need to have and defend a presupposed answer to everything human, in the tradition of

much grand theory. Adopting such summary approaches to a diversity of lives in turn means that we must resist the grand – and I think exciting – *unknowing* of humanism. It is akin to the productive fretfulness of anthropology, always willing to have core assumptions upset by new communities presenting new knowledge, to admit and work with failures in comprehending others. I also sense that, after the cognitive turn, film theory still needs to catch up not so much with the debate on the nature of empathy, but with integrating new work such as literary Darwinism, as a few philosophers, such as Anderson or Torben Grodal,[23] are now engaged with. One nice thing about being a humanist is that in defending our field, we do not have to merely defend an immovable existing framework or paradigmatic reading mechanism – although we may cherish such applications, there is no portentous answer to "how culture works." Foremost we defend our right to be excited by new knowledge that we can integrate into our attempts to deeply comprehend others.

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The following chapter is a social narratology. As well as providing a demonstration of the broadest possible kind of humanist analysis – at the level of taxonomic narrative theory – it will also perform groundwork in establishing the many uses of narrative that we should have in mind when we consider, and offer detailed readings of, individual texts. Before we can assume the mantle of ethical scrutiny, we should first be conversant with the ways people are actively using the narratives we critique; this is the work of narratological detail.

As I have continually suggested throughout this introduction, I will be keeping in mind story's adaptive functions, and drawing on literary Darwinism as well as evolutionary anthropology and social psychology to present a catalogue of the vast uses and purposes of narrative formulation and distribution. Before proceeding, however, it seems important to convey the limitations of such an endeavour, and especially to offer a few notes on the explanatory work of Darwinism. I have already qualified that I am not claiming that biological imperatives explain everything, or that any humanities theory using social science makes that theory a science. I also must make it clear *that any action that is good for a majority, utilitarian or cosmopolitan, is not necessarily adaptive*. Understanding human adaptation might help us

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[23] In particular, see Grodal *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film*.

uncover realistic solutions to encouraging a better-naturedness (for example, demilitarisation) amongst a global populace; however we must remain careful in our use of the term "adaptive." Traits are adaptive if they help a species (interspecific adaptation) or individual's genetic material (intraspecific adaptation) sustain and survive, not necessarily if they help people get on better (although in interspecific competition the two outcomes regularly coincide), or reduce suffering (painful self-sacrifice is written into the social structures of many species, such as worker ant autothysis or suicidal altruism). In much of the popularly employed language around evolution – language regarding human progress in particular – we appear to attribute intentionality to selection and other natural processes. Fallacies such as these should be avoided.

Beyond this general disclaimer, however – that our purpose is not nature's purpose – there are a handful of other objections raised against the use of Darwinian considerations in arts evaluation that require abatement. The first is a perceived primacy attributed to biological over cultural explanations of human behaviour when we admit evolutionary theory into the humanities. In *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Boyd dismisses the circular logic of arguments about the construction of human as culturally determined or otherwise (23), and goes on to present a discussion of some of the possible human functions of storytelling from an evolutionary perspective. Boyd points out – and I agree – that the apparent opposition between cultural constructivist and sociobiological explanations of human behaviour is a mirage. Although much theory rests on this presumption, there is no naturalist or biologically determinist consensus among evolutionary theorists, and many now work from the conviction that our biology and our culture are synergetic and react to one another. *How* this happens is the subject of debate.[24] Genetics can be conceived as a series of switches reacting to an environment: as such, nature or nurture is almost always the wrong question to ask. Phenotypic plasticity (how our genes are expressed within an environment, which can change throughout our lifetime) must clearly inform any such analysis; this process begins from the time we are conceived, as we receive information about the environment we will be born into from the gametes of both partners, and from within the womb. This perspective on evolutionary synthesis, then, is compatibilist, often described as a "gene-culture coevolution" (Wilson *Consilience* 139), which makes possible a

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[24] Neuroscientists and neuroanthropologists such as Merlin Donald (*Origins of the Modern Mind*; *A Mind So Rare*) have begun to explore our coevolution with technology-supported culture at a cognitive level, for example.

Lamarckian study of acquired characteristics within constructed niches (cultural variance, in this case), admitting that human niche construction in turn changes which traits will be adaptive in the new environment, and ergo selected for.[25] We do not just inherit genes from our ancestors, we also inherit the environment those genes will react to.

For example, a reductive or ad hoc evolutionary theory might look at sexual activities as stemming solely from biological imperatives to reproduce,[26] but as we are highly socially adapted animals, a post-Mendelian evolutionary synthesis provides the understanding that our sexuality and sexual behaviour are equally driven by complex socio-cultural behaviours extending beyond direct individual fitness and reproductive goals. The plasticity of psychological mechanisms and malleability of their function to vast unplanned environmental variation and contingencies (Joyce 6-7) means the relationship between our biology and the environments we create cannot be considered reducible to a simple argument of cultural or innate primacy. Evolution does not equate to biological determinism. The polarity of grand nature versus nurture theories misses a breadth of possibilities in uncovering the way we interact with environments we create, and exaptation in manipulated environments. Extending this perspective to the pancultural occurrence of human morality, one could say that while the framework is hardwired, our programming is flexible – and this is a culturally dynamic phenomenon, so does not invalidate cultural analytical theories.

If we are scared of the prospect of sociobiological determinism not allowing for the ethical sovereignty of cultural exchange, we should remind ourselves too that there is agency in mate selection – and its subsequent genetic reformulations – as well as in cultural negotiation. We may choose a mate based equally on matching ideology (Buston and Emlen "Cognitive processes underlying human mate choice") as we do on other complementary factors. Presuming this process as deterministic is revealed merely as a desire to *witness* the long-term effects of a direct agency within our lifetime, but change often happens much more slowly and indirectly, hence a constructivist philosophical focus on cultural negotiation as the

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[25] We might note too that vice versa, our genes predispose us to choose and manipulate certain environments that then affect the expression of those genes, a process known as "gene-environment correlation."

[26] Geoffrey Miller elaborates this apprehension to an extreme position, contending in *The Mating Mind* that sexual display is the adaptive genesis of social behaviours including conversation and art. In a sense he distils natural selection until only sexual selection, mate choice and signalling remain.

totality of human agency. It is indeed a convenient position for the cultural theorist to be in if culture has primacy over all human behaviour and cognition, and happens to dictate all other outcomes. The conscious interactivity of culture is simply more visible, more observable, and therefore makes the case for human agency and change easier to put forward.

Sometimes in cultural criticism too, it seems that the biological is aligned with conservative interests, as they have been misused in the past. However this is far from the truth. Peter Singer has argued for a new Darwinian progressive politics in *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*, and in so doing, made the point that Darwinism is not so much a blow to human agency as it is to leftist utopianism – a changing of the goal posts. Accepting and striving to understand the nature of the human form leads us to more modest goals than the elimination of competitiveness, power relations and general human strife, so the call to a scientific realism concerning human capabilities renders the ambition of *reducing* the harms of inequity more attainable. Asking for us to analyse how we are sociobiologically ushered to mutually beneficial cooperation takes the place of a former idealism which mystifies the act and places it out of reach; Singer summarises all of this in a brief list of projected features for a Darwinian left distinct from the prophetic past (60-63). Others, such as Robert H. Frank in *The Darwin Economy: Liberty, Competition, and the Common Good*, have used Darwinian insight to argue convincingly for progressive economics, and writers such as Barbara Creed, who described a "Darwinian gaze" (102-126), Elizabeth Grosz (13-33), and Rebecca J. Hannagan in articles including "Gendered Political Behavior: A Darwinian Feminist Approach" have admitted the utility of the Darwinian perspective in the project of equalising gender inequity.

So finally, if we are indeed driven to fasten ourselves to storied causalities, we should make certain we are not misrepresenting what we do know about human altruistic capabilities in order to moralise about what others should do. In extrapolating Darwinism *directly* to an ethic (rather than using evolutionary studies as an epistemic background to our ethics), we may concoct something akin to social Darwinism or eugenics.[27] How do we avoid this? Literary Darwinism should heed Darwin's own counsel, a maxim he repeated more than once, frustrated by distortion of his claims:

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[27] Anxieties like these, and the "biologisation" of political rhetoric, are historicised by Virginia Richter in *Literature After Darwin*.

As my conclusions have lately been much misrepresented, and it has been stated that I attribute the modification of species exclusively to natural selection, I may be permitted to remark that in the first edition of this work, and subsequently, I placed in a most conspicuous position—namely at the close of the Introduction—the following words: "I am convinced that natural selection has been the main but not the exclusive means of modification." This has been of no avail. Great is the power of steady misrepresentation. (*The Origin of Species* 451)

Our comprehension of natural selection cannot explain all of life. This means, however, that if we resist natural fallacies in approaching Darwinism (of deservedness, or of unilineal progress), attention to its profound elucidatory potentials can – perhaps counterintuitively – temper the claims of theory rather than rendering theory conclusive.

Storytellers, yarn-spinners and producers of narrative art continue to conduct the natural storytelling of the conscious mind, making sense of our lives in an internal dramatic narrative, into intersubjective experience. This begets a moral issue: how ought we attempt to shape one another's internal narrative? Just as humanist storytelling must permit complex multi-causality to offer any workable or realistic view of human operations, so must humanist media studies and hermeneutics permit complex social multi-causality in their readings of narrative function and textual analysis alike. So statements on the true function of fiction, portrayals of the origins of storytelling to explain current circumstances, and doctrinaire readings from a single-purpose paradigm are not enough. When we ask these questions of art, we keep in mind how little we can keep in mind in order to think more generously about one another, and the humility of wonder retained creates new opportunities for knowledge rather than intellectual turf protectionism and paradigmatic warfare. In this ambitious project, I hope to both demonstrate this capability and establish for my reader a position of openness to complex humanness that we could go on to apply to all our practices of cultural analysis.

SOCIAL NARRATOLOGY:

A Catalogue of Storytelling Social Functions from a Humanist Perspective

> There was not enough time for human heredity to cope with the vastness of new
> contingent possibilities revealed by high intelligence ... The arts filled the gap. Early
> humans invited them in an attempt to express and control through magic the abundance
> of the environment, the power of solidarity, and other forces in their lives that mattered
> most to survival and reproduction. (Edward O. Wilson *Consilience* 255)

I begin with Wilson's much-quoted passage, as in respecting a multiplicity of the uses of art it reminds us that communication itself has evolutionary causes. Story, he suggests, helped manage the confusions arising as a result of the processing power of incomparable neurological development. As such, it is also a good place to start in mapping out just some of the functions of narrative in our daily lives. These early developments introduced complex internal worlds that more direct communication could not fully represent the dynamism of: projections, including imagined future events, the existential terror and anxieties made possible in reflexive rumination on those projections, simulations of another's internal state, metacognition, social cognition and complex, blended affect may not be fully conveyed without utilising the drama and refracted interior conflicts of storytelling. Fiction introduces new resources to represent complex internal states, in some cases mirroring the inherent speculation, imprecision, and boundlessness of everyday imaginative capacities. Heeding Wilson's own advice, we should recall, however, that the evolutionary perspective can only take us so far: the origins of a human activity do not necessarily account for our appropriation of the activity for different purposes across millennia, any more than we could claim that our hands developed to facilitate typing on a keyboard. We find new uses for old adaptations, which cannot necessarily be traced to a clear and direct survival goal. We refract instincts and goals through complex culture, which is multi-purposeful. Human systems – epistemological, sociocultural, historical – are gestalt. This is a core principle of social narratology.

Much of what we call narratology appears to me to be concerned with cataloguing, in particular making lists of story mechanics and functions: from Mieke Bal's structuralist or Algirdas Julien Greimas's semiotic narratology to Mar and Oatley's psychological narratology,

and from Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* to Peter Hühn et al.'s "Living Handbook of Narratology" at The University of Hamburg, narratology has always been taxonomic. Social narratology is, along with previous works in the narratological field, a kind of complexivism, in that it seeks to describe a complex system. However, the complex system it seeks to describe is social – it is the space between people that is facilitated by stories. Where cognitive narratology has been particularly good at describing the psychological relationship between a reader and a text, social narratology refocuses the science of storytelling to the relationship between two or more people engaged with a text.

To put it another way, although many cognitive theorists have been at pains to point out the non-exclusive nature of the applications of cognitive studies (Herman "Cognitive Narratology"), much of the current research leans toward perception studies precisely because the cognitive sciences are good at investigating the *moment of engagement* with narrative.[28] Social narratology, on the other hand, extends from our knowledge of textual responses to ask questions regarding the social use these relationships with narrative are then put to – how a story facilitates or mediates relations between people, for instance. It might be regarded as a particular application of cognitive theory rather than a difference of kind (it draws on many of the same sources), or simply a shifting of the focus of cognitive studies. Social narratology reintegrates some of cognitive science's formative disciplines, and as such engages more extensively with anthropological and evolutionary biological research, and turns to the explanatory powers of social psychology more so than neuroscience (although again, they are not in any way exclusive, but rather complementary fields of inquiry).[29] In the conclusion to his work on cognitive film theory and emotion, *Moving Viewers*, Carl Plantinga suggests room for further direction on social cognition: "Popular narratives have a communal function, the significance of which can easily be undervalued. In embodying virtual solutions to traumatic problems, they play a role in the development of

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[28] Some, such as Malcolm Turvey, have questioned the ability of perception studies to tell us much at all about film. He argues that the mantra of many cinematic Darwinists from Joseph D. Anderson onward – that the language of film developed to appeal to perceptual faculties originating in the Pleistocene – is hardly surprising, and a slight claim that does little to illuminate anything about cinema in particular (50-51).

[29] As in much of the work within cognitive film studies, these accounts sit alongside insights from literary theory, philosophy and experimental media research to see what can be gleaned from their comparison. I will be calling upon much more wide-ranging sources in addition to those noted here, presenting an attempt at interdisciplinary consilience, or a humanistic unifying of knowledge from various backgrounds.

what might be called distributed or social cognition" (225-226). I intend to pick up where these works leave off, and I hope that this will in turn inspire a broadening of the epistemic palette cognitivists might draw from.

The purpose of the current chapter is both to lay a foundational comprehension of this extraordinary human behaviour that we might retain when offering closer textual readings, and to suggest a human excess by the very span, multiplicity, and challenge of this list. The ineffable untotalisability of any life is always subject to the limits of reliable human science – limits we must acknowledge in order to remain realistic about any claims of a "human nature" or our moral capabilities. This honesty in turn, I hope, should stimulate wonder and deepen understanding at the same time. I will extend each description of a storied behaviour and its social purpose to speculate on humanist-ethical approaches to the responsibilities of narrative. The point, too, is not just to list pre-existing narrative theories, but also to explore new ground that might be less familiar in narrative theory, to develop and interrogate new insights into the social functions of fiction. In keeping with the explorative values of humanism and wonderment, this narratology should provide expansion, not stagnation.

Although the latter half of this thesis uses filmic genre study as a primary example of humanist analysis, I am determined not to pretend that humanism or the human drama *belongs* to any one expression or art. This is why, in the following narratology, I analyse a broad range of story media, and join a growing number of theorists in calling for a media-conscious narratology (Ryan and Thon *Storyworlds Across Media*). This means that while we can remain aware of each medium's distinctive characteristics, possible effects, and devices for carrying a story, we can also look beyond medium specificity to stress the foundational narrative functions that unite various storied acts. Working as a film scholar, there can be a pressure to specialise in that which is unique to the medium rather than how films are received and used as narrative, much like any other art. Film, then, should not be discussed in isolation from other media as comparison generates a broader understanding of how stories function in different contexts, yet while we remain aware of media differences, it is important not to overstate their value. To an extent, social narratology equalises media forms by treating them on the same level – as acts of storytelling.[30]

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[30] It should be noted too that the following narratology errs toward English-language texts, simply because these are the texts I am most intimately acquainted with and best equipped to offer studies of. Examples for many of the following points could be found in a breadth of storytelling contexts. Some of the following functions will speak specifically to Western

What ensues is a social narratology (emphasising the relationship between individuals as facilitated by narrative), working from a cinematic Darwinism, cognitivism and anthropology (privileging examples from the cinema), resulting in a humanist ethics (speculation on what to do with this information) and ultimately, a refinement of humanist hermeneutics, which I will later apply to closer readings of specific examples from the cinema. I thereby unite social narratology and humanistic hermeneutics into what I call "humanist narratology."

This chapter demonstrates four key points: that it is in their social expression that the cognitive sciences we apply to film and narrative theory find their meaning, that we can use the findings of such sciences to help us answer questions of narrative ethics and responsibility, that it is not possible to summate all human motives for engaging in narrative behind one unitary function, and hopefully, to demonstrate that when investigating and cataloguing a multiplicity of narrative functions, a tandem story of human complexity emerges that opens further avenues for narratological description and knowledge, and ultimately understanding the people we live with through their storied behaviours. Finally, the positively ambitious nature of the following is a vulnerability that is open to human complexity, and thus social narratology is a narrative humanism, an explorative story of our interactivity that invites discovery, complication and extension.

Foundational Functions of Fiction

Foremost, **we use stories as part of a discussion about what we can mutually hold to be real**, the different ways we can understand and experience what is real, as well as what is important for us to pay attention to. Michelle Scalise Sugiyama describes how non-fictive

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contexts and some comparatively observe cultural variation, while other functions speak more broadly to story in general. In a chapter on "The Geography of Film Viewing" Daniel Barratt points out that some cognitive processes are found to be universal while others are culturally influenced; in a social narratology, both are interesting. The following stresses the importance of niche cultures within communities that are sometimes assumed to be homogeneous. Above all films are expensive to produce, and in a globalised era they have become, like innumerable other commodities, economic balancing acts, the funding of which rarely defers to cartographic boundaries, and this has implications for the cross-cultural distribution and consumption of narrative.

causal communication per se may have developed to overcome the constraints in energy cost, risk and time spent on personal information gathering across local environmental variation; so we learned to receive causal information second-hand (237). It is clear how this may be attempted through nonfiction – news stories, for example – however fiction also provides a trigger or even a facilitator for discussion about the actual. Whether the story is realist, allegorical, abstract, nonlinear, or somewhere in between, we ask what the story wanted to infer about our world.[31] The question, then, is how the utility of complex information sharing translated into an appetite for fiction. Malcolm Turvey doubts that we evolved a taste for fiction in order to convey environmental information germane to our survival, as the information imparted in fiction appears remarkably unreliable (56). All evolutionary theory can really tell us, he argues, is that stories betray our taste for information in general, not reliable information. But the claim here is not that stories tell us what is real, rather that stories provide a compelling space for discussing what is real. We still need to explain, though, why fiction is a particularly apt place for these discussions to occur, rather than direct communication.

The argument for fiction as adaptation often hinges upon the memorability of emotionally contrived information: "The didactic purpose of storytelling is diminished in literate cultures, but by providing a vivid and memorable way of communicating information, it likely had actual survival benefits in the Pleistocene" (Dutton 110). The causality of narrative is crucial to this explanation. Because storied communication links information causally, it allows us to "live" through a narrative. Imagining complex causalities between sensations, stories activate parts of the brain not only used for language processing, but also the sensory, motor and frontal cortices, and areas associated with emotions and social memory, the co-stimulation of which may help us remember the narrative substance by causal association to the narrative's sensation (as in the mnemonic link system). Fiction has the potential to exaggerate conflict and produce a more memorable simulation. We see selective fitness and survival-related goals playing out in all manner of narratives (Torben Grodal offers an especially compelling filmic genre study from this perspective in the first half of his 2009 book *Embodied Visions*); however, the transmission of knowledge becomes more complicated the further it is extended into complex narrativity, where survival goals are displaced and truth claims are more abstracted and conceptual.

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[31] Even if the inference is merely "this fantasy world is a better place to be for a number of hours than our own world"; fantastical tales also impart information corresponding to real-world experience, practice and information (Sugiyama 239) – but more on fantasy later.

For many this is a crude way of thinking epistemically about the meaning of the storytelling arts and their production. Disciples of popular film theoreticians such as Gilles Deleuze, for example, may be openly hostile to the idea that a primary function of cinema is to open an intersubjective dialogue and refine our perspectives on a mutual ontic externality (rather than endlessly producing experiential novelties). Yet even when we accept our inability to experience, know or rationalise an externality or perfectly access another's perception, the emphasis on perceptual frailty explains nothing: "If there were no common human experience and no common cognitive means of representing and responding to that experience, storytelling would be futile" (Sugiyama 245). Various epistemological scepticisms present platitudes at best, and describe little about the world beyond reasserting our undeniable subjectivity. As Noël Carroll argues convincingly in *Mystifying Movies*, these concepts inhibit comprehension of processes readily understandable by reference to available and verifiable knowledge and sciences. When Deleuze uses "brain biology" to bolster his claims, he favours obscurant analogy over clarification, "making sometimes difficult to understand the real meaning of terms like, for instance, 'cinematic synapses'" (Gallese and Guerra 187). These metaphysical alternatives effectively ask us to solve an unsolvable, speculative ontological question before we get to the work of discussing human interaction, a hierarchical positioning of philosophical thought which obscures our ability to talk specifically of the needs of living things; in this case we might read such positioning as antihumanist. Story is an intrinsic part of human sociality – we need to share information, and we use causal narratives to do so.

It is evident not just that we can, but that we *do* use fiction as an inroad to discuss not only truth claims about fundamental workings of the world around us, but also some of the more complex, conceptual and obscured workings of the world. When an audience exits a film arguing about the way women have been represented, for example, they use the film as groundwork to discuss what is and is not real about the fictional world, and gauge how the filmmakers' perspective may or may not match up with their own experience. The same may be true of representations of physics in fiction, for example we may be annoyed that a film fails to reflect basic physical properties.[32] Abstract stories, too, are often thought to express an

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[32] This somewhat depends on the context of the film. When protagonists survive a tornado tied to flimsy pipes with leather straps in the climax of *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996), we may feel let down that the film did not try harder to craft excitement from a plausible physical scenario, limiting our investment. However in a film like *Sharknado* (Thunder Levin, 2013),

internal, emotional, or conceptual "higher" truth. Finally we might use, for instance, a biopic as a pedagogical device not to accept its version of events, but to craft interest in those events and generate a number of talking points from which we might debate what is and is not real about their representation. Hence, we use story as a *springboard* into articulation of what we can *mutually hold* to be real; we do not need to solve an epistemological materialist dilemma to do this.

American Splendor (Shari Springer and Berman Robert Pulcini, 2003) is a good example of a film that calls attention to an audience's implicit search for truth claims. The film begins as a biopic. Actors play characters from a series of autobiographical comics by author Harvey Pekar. Initially, the affected performances of characters like Toby Radloff (Judah Friedlander) might seem far-fetched, but eventually the film begins to include interviews with the real-life figures being represented in both film and comic. Toby's demeanour and self-presentation is surprisingly even more affected than Friedlander's performance. The dissonant moment gives us pause to reflect upon our presumptions of what is real and what is not – an important component in the film's radical mix of the fictive and non-fictive. The search for a foundational reality to rely upon remains with us, often implicitly and tacitly as we move through a narrative. The actor is always a site of doubt, scepticism and interrogation, or as Huw Griffiths puts it, "the body of the actor is revealed as a site in which faith cannot readily be located" (94). We wonder what they intend to tell us through their performance, what parts of their performance constitute their intention, how this connects with the intentions of the other storytellers involved a performance, and thereby what, if any, "real" we can draw from the actor. Even in these more abstract spaces within narrative, beyond its plot or procedure, we can search for a mutual real – and crucially, we can become *aware* of our search for a mutual real, and its problems.

These attentional politics lead us to a related function of narrative. As well as inciting non-fictive discussions about what is real, **stories can make a claim about what is important for us to pay attention to**, and we often conflate the two. As story theorists, we can make the mistake of assuming that the claim someone makes when they put together a narrative is: "this is the way things are, or the way people are." Yet the primary claim made by a storyteller might be more attentional than ontological. That is, it might have more to do with

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we might take pleasure in a complete flouting of physical properties when the protagonists use bombs to eradicate tornados. Stories are able to disavow truth claims to focus us on other spectatorial experiences.

what kind of causality is worthy of our attention – after all, we attend a narrative to have our attention diverted from our daily concerns, which is a powerful commandeering of another's time. Consider the discourse of public relations practitioners, often casting themselves as expert storytellers: this does not mean that they attempt to accurately represent our lives, it means that they use story to pull our attention toward their product, service, public figure or other interest, and our attention is the prized commodity more so than any of the meanings that might be imparted by the narratives they use to snag our time and consideration. In fact, narrative itself is sometimes characterised as a conducting of attentional cues to produce coherence (Mar and Oatley 176). As story theorists, we tend to study the ways in which narrative imparts or transmits meaning, often at the expense of attentional politics (that which tells us what is important rather than what is). The point I would like to make is that we can never assume allegorical readings are the most apt to explain narrative's influence; it can be fairer and more clarifying to start from a question of why a particular story has been chosen above all others. Our attention is ethical and political because stories constitute claims of relative importance. This makes subject choice ethically evaluable. We should remain aware of how our attention is manipulated by all manner of storytelling.[33]

These two foundational concepts – of representation and attention – become more complex when we take historiographical considerations into account: how **we use stories in attempts to record and understand our history**, and events we will never be present for but that we could learn from. Without contesting the subjectivity of storytelling historicity, we can say we attempt an understanding and recording of human history through chains of cause and event. This is, as Donald E. Polkinghorne has it, the way we connect identified events into "synoptic judgment," a narrative coherence or plot (63); only in this case, that synopsised plot is human history. The selective and summary nature of history is crucial to its coherence. Any practice of retelling our past is a string of distillations of causality, and as events can rarely be considered monocausal, we make claims about the most important causes that are most worthy of our attention, which then become history, told and redistributed such that we might make better choices in future – or sometimes, of course, we distort such reportage for

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[33] By the same token media users, readers and viewers are not passive, and still have some agency to choose subjects they will engage with. When we overemphasise the influence of storytellers, we disavow the dialogical relationship underpinning all narrative practices.

political gains.[34] Yet it remains that we are able to use our distillation of the most important causes and events to engage advanced predictive faculties, which inform our decision-making, both at an individual and organisational level. Aristotle in *Poetics* suggests that fiction in particular can locate universals between past, present and projected future events to predict the probability of what may happen; again, this aids decision-making (13). After Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*, though, this can be no science of prognostication or historical determinism, attempting to reduce human movements to mathematically quantifiable repeating and isolated systems they will never conform to – but like the test subject receiving electric shocks on reaching for a reward, we do need to be able to read *probability* into past events to make informed decisions for our future.

Stories can also contain inadvertent traces of our history. Comparative mythology studies looks at information regarding environmental locality and human migration contained in extant myths across the globe (Witzel *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*). Versions of the same myth can reference different flora, fauna and places, telling its own story of human movement and our shared history. In fact, much of the project of literary Darwinism has been a search for elements of our shared past within narrative structures. So we use stories to understand our history even where they were not explicitly crafted to impart reliable historical details.

The accounts of storytelling above all refer to telic sequential narratives, as well as outlining some of their limitations. Yet there is another kind of thought available to us in fiction when we resist or refuse to recognise causality or patterns: we can also **upset narratives of causality** with nonlinear structures and, generally, not making immediate causal sense. In Bruner's construction: "While it is true that the world of a story (to achieve verisimilitude) must conform to canons of logical consistency, it can use violations of such consistency as a basis of drama" (12). Narratives employing such techniques can conduct our attention to reflect on our paucity of ontic certainties, how little we know about our lives,

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[34] History produces another attentional politics: some have pointed out that an academic condescension toward historical storytelling at an amateur and practical level, such as genealogy and family histories, disavows the centrality of the quotidian, the domestic, and in particular women's worlds precisely because they upset another narrative of the gravitas of superior male figures, their achievements and concerns (Evans "Secrets and Lies"). We can ask: how much does attention to these grand narratives usefully explain how meaning is made in our own lives?

meaning, why and how the universe operates. To an audience member fixated upon our existential condition, absurdism, for instance, might come across as gratifyingly honest – even profound. The therapeutic benefits of absurdity have been recognised by artists across many fields: songwriter Robert Wyatt uses nonsensical verse alongside pained internal monologues and political outcries in *Rock Bottom* and cartoon blogger Allie Brosh combats depression with the pictorial non sequitur in *Hyperbole and a Half*. Their strategies are backed up by research (Brooks et al. "Therapeutic Humor") and a study by Christopher R. Long and Dara N. Greenwood confirms that those primed with attention to the existential find humour funnier ("Joking in the face of death"), perhaps because they need it more, or perhaps because its antagonising absurdities seem more honest. We upset narratives of causality, predictable spatiality and temporality, to draw attention to our perceptual limitations, experiential limitations, tendency to monocausality and empiricism; in sum, how little we know. These are the reasons a figure such as David Lynch has come to support reams of scholarly writing, as this version of cognitive dissonance in cinema retains critical favour as a metaphysical "profundity" (Moss-Wellington "Affecting Profundity"), a scholarly narrative and aesthetic interest sustained since late modernity: rejection of the perceived telic imposition wrought by linear narrative conventions.

Problematic distinctions between the causally suggestive and causally disruptive have followed us throughout the history of narrative theory, and they are bound with a host of other attempts at erecting related binaries: theories versus narratives, causal events versus causal ideas, narrative immersion versus reflexive thought, and higher versus lower art. When Jean Cocteau, for example, indicates that his "primary concern in a film is to prevent the images from flowing, to oppose them to each other, to anchor them and join them without destroying their relief" (Fraigneau 151), his distinction between cinema as entertainment and the cinematograph as a "vehicle for thought" mirrors Bruner's conceptions of logical debate and narrative as different cognitive modes. By inhibiting our ability to read causal *events* in a film, we are theoretically drawn into consideration of a different and more cerebral causality: that of an author's ideas and the discussions they might inspire. Whether or not these two attentional causalities are so clearly separable is in dispute. Throughout this chapter, I will be making an implicit case that immersion in (more-or-less linear or discernably causal) narrative should not be conceived as negating intellectual or political concern, or indeed any

other reflexivity in spectatorship.[35] There is scant evidence, in practice or in theory, that focussing our pattern-recognition causal cognition upon narrative events will preclude the subsequent use of these same faculties to ruminate on their moral implications, or develop structured, theoretical accounts of those events, a story's "meaning"; narratives that upset linear causality simply foreground the inherent unreliability of these cognitions.

Having explored some of the broadest possible functions of story, I now turn to some of their correlate, yet often more covert functions. Principally, what does the emotional content of narrative provide for us?

Affective Functions of Fiction

In story, we can **safely exercise emotional responses and mortality/need threats not required in day-to-day life**. Different varieties of emotional arousal, adrenaline release and suspense, focussed on variations in the subject causing the arousal – from terrifying monsters to romantic anxieties – translate to pleasure, gratification and enjoyment for different audiences. When we use terms such as "feeling alive" or "having our buttons pushed" in relation to audience experience, this is the experience we are talking about: "the quest for excitement in unexciting societies" (Elias and Dunning 31). However, the existential components in this process need to be unpacked and understood. There are now multiple contexts across the developed world in which humans encounter very few direct threats to mortality on a daily basis, yet we still seem to seek the feeling of that threat, a safe activation of the flight or fight response, or we may well ask, "what are we doing here then?" Working from a Darwinian approach to story, in which there is no tropologically objective higher ordering of our motivation, all we are really compelled to do in our lives is procreate, survive and help kin survive, so that we (or our genes) keep surviving, even if this is a gestalt and culturally refracted process – if the immediacy of this process is gone, perhaps we displace the impulse elsewhere, as in narrative. Survival offers meaning even when distantly or vicariously related to our mortality or fitness, and many have posited that other attempts at creating

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[35] As Rita Felski has it, literary enchantment can coexist with "a phenomenology of self-scrutiny" (*Uses of Literature* 35) and its broader political implications, so she calls for literary theory to "face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal … the modern dogma that our lives should become thoroughly disenchanted" (ibid. 76).

meaning (acquisitional culture, relationships, humour, and political conviction for example) stem from a desire to create distance between oblivion and our sense of selfhood. Dorothy Rowe describes the many ways in which we are driven to displace existential anxieties to corporeal goals throughout her 1987 work *Beyond Fear*.[36] Drama relies on conflict; we can create dramatic conflicts as a safe way to achieve these feelings, conquer them by making it out the other end of the story alive, and recover mortal meaning without adding similar conflict to our actual lives or the lives of those around us.

This hypothesis must be carefully distinguished from relief theory or the argument from catharsis (from Aristotle to popular psychology, or primal therapy as a cathartic theory in practice). In these models, there is a negative affect inside us that we have the opportunity to jettison by simulating the emotion in narrative. There is scant evidence that via "exploration" or mere re-experience of a problematic emotion, we curtail it.[37] It is not merely proximity to the affect that releases it, although recognition of that affect (via personal expression or narrative engagement) can lead to reflective listening, problem solving and reappraisal, which may reduce distress (Littrell "Is the Reexperience of Painful Emotion Therapeutic"; "Expression of Emotion"). So an emotion is not *necessarily* abated when addressed through narrative, and as narrative creators and consumers we cannot assume merely airing an emotion will do the job for us – but we still must confront the phenomenon that people overwhelmingly pursue the opportunity to feel closer to problematic affect, and derive pleasure from experiencing affect that would, outside of narrative contexts, be something we choose to avoid.

Clearly the dynamism of human identities means we all have different appetites for emotional manipulation through story – for those who like a lot of push and pull, it remains a

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[36] These earlier treatises eventually gave way to the dominant terror management theory (TMT) in which existential terror is alleviated by absorption in cultural narratives of progress or longevity, offering symbolic displacement of our mortality (for example, personal achievement, career progress, or the success of groups that will last after our death such as the family or nation state). Narratives of progress undergird such goals, and so threats to these goals in story are proxies: an indirect yet existentially felt impingement upon our survival. See Greenberg et al. "The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem" for the theory's beginnings, Maxfield et al. for recent elaborations, and Burke et al. for a meta-analysis of empirical evidence.

[37] See Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli's findings on cultivation theory and fear, or Bushman, Baumeister and Stack on venting anger and aggression.

safe place to exercise and explore one's affective extremities. Consider that those scoring high on sensation-seeking personality traits are likely to attend more horror movies than their peers, for example.[38] Emotions elicited by fiction can even reinforce a sense of identity: if we identify as a "deep feeling" person, we might enjoy rehearsing these responses by watching tearjerker films (Oliver "Exploring the Paradox"), as the emotion itself reinscribes a grander autobiographical narrative about our own appropriate responses to the world's ills. In other words, emotions form part of our procedural scripts, rehearsed through fiction. These scripts connect to feelings of purpose and meaning (this is largely a function of the amygdala: to register the emotional significance of events). Moreover, as Ellen Dissanayake puts it: "I suspect that most people hunger for a more profound life. The arts – ours and those of others – are *ways of treating the inner life seriously*" (192). She connects this lack of a sense of purpose to the political devaluation of arts within affluent nations in particular. Perhaps too, as religion has long been a primary site of narrative distribution, the decline of social contact through religious institutions could help explain our contemporary demand for fiction.

A symptom of a shrunken hippocampus, one function of which is to correlate action with mood, is depression (Schmaal et al. "Subcortical Brain Alterations"). There is clearly an interaction here between the amygdala (crafting meaning from emotion) and the hippocampus (suggesting courses of action based upon our mood) that is being worked through narrative arts to generate meaning and derive purpose. This is why theorists who suggest that emotional appeal depletes intellectual engagement should resist disparaging those who find meaning through emotive art: it could be helping to stave off purposelessness. Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur Raney's research also goes some way toward explaining media engagement motivations as more than just hedonic, but also "eudaimonic" ("Entertainment as Pleasurable and Meaningful"), in that we craft meaning directly from our emotional experiences in narrative rather than just feeling their excitations. Tenderness, for example, is not just something we experience for its own sake, but because it can then spur us to think about and discuss human purpose. Eudaimonic responses involve distributed connections between regions of the brain separate to the reward circuit. For a species so aware of its imminent passing, the affect of stories has existential value. Oliver and Raney's study shows that this is exactly how many film viewers conceive of their own motivation for engaging in dramatic narratives: the emotions are a platform to work from in thinking through a film's

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[38] See Oliver and Sanders 244-245; we will return to the specific offerings of the horror genre shortly.

insights and meaning. We can go through an emotional experience, and then discuss its outcome.[39] The eudaimonic can operate "as an additional (but not opposite) motivation for individuals' entertainment selections" (ibid. 989). Oliver and Raney remind us not to look at hedonic motivations in isolation from other social and meaning-making motivations in media selection, as focussing on hedonic gratification alone misconstrues us all as solely pleasure-seeking machines rather than complex pleasure- and meaning-seeking entities. A cognitive fixation on the hedonic aspects of media engagement can fail to extricate sensation-seeking motivations and dispositions from their attendant meaning-seeking motivations; as they are so intimately tied, they can often look like the same thing. No doubt as neuroscience develops, this picture will become ever more complex.

Accounting for the development of human emotion in lieu of a pure reason has occupied many evolutionary theorists. Dylan Evans describes an "evolutionary rationality" in which our emotions enable swifter responses to familiar situations and environments than reason alone could provide (without which the active possibilities available with pure reason would be paralysingly multitudinous). As Martin L. Hoffman puts it, "humans must be equipped biologically to function effectively in many social situations without undue reliance on cognitive processes" (79); this is a popular explanation for the evolution of emotion. As we have established, reason and rationality are to an extent subject to emotional cues: cues ordering what we *expect to achieve* through reason. This can take the form of an affective projection or simulation, and narrative can harness this capacity for autobiographical projection or "future thinking." When we picture the death of a loved one, we use an emotional imagination to access the pain we project we may feel, in order that we may avoid behaviours that could result in such a scenario. If we were not able to imaginatively feel this pain, it might not make rational sense to avoid actions that could result in their death – it would not matter unless their life served another non-emotional goal for us. One wonders, then, with what purpose in mind we would act without emotion, if we would need to locate life's purpose for every decision we made, and be thwarted by our own rationality which defeats even the very idea of a purpose. That is, perhaps we would need to solve the puzzle of the reason for caring about our survival and procreation at every instance of decision-making. Indeed, many of the psychopathologies that are characterised by a lack of feeling are

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[39] Meaningfulness is more than just another pleasurable affect: Corey L. M. Keyes, Dov Shmotkin, and Carol D. Ryff distinguish between subjective wellbeing (largely hedonic) and psychological wellbeing (largely attitudinal). Meaning and insight may have emotions attached, but they describe more than just an affective experience – they describe ideas.

correlated with depression, such as anhedonic depression, and studies have found that "psychopathy was negatively correlated with positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction, and positively correlated with negative affect and depression" (Love and Holder 114-115). As emotions give us impetus that we cannot have in rational thought alone, humanist narrative permits emotive appeal and may even rely upon emotional imagination, the description and discovery of far-reaching nuances in emotional experience.[40] Emotion lays a foundation for the empathic functions of narrative. The rational mind also, we cannot forget, never has access to perfect information to work with, so in many cases may be liable to lead us astray when making decisions from environmentally contingent information, and without the innate memory of emotions. Thus, emotions may be a way to keep in contact with lessons learned throughout our past, and even our collective past stored in the human epigenome – lessons which may be fatally bypassed by a purely rational mind.

Reaching back to figures such as Bertholt Brecht, there has long been a theoretical imperative to dismiss emotional responses to narrative, emotional absorption or emotive appeals in narrative, as antithetical to our application of reason and ergo political action, but this could not be further from the truth:

> The dominant tradition in Western thought has regarded emotion as a burden to human existence, an impediment to reason—a view manifest in thinkers as varied as Descartes, Kant and the playwright Bertolt Brecht. And if anything, this is a view of emotion even more entrenched in popular culture than it is in the realms of philosophy and art theory—think of those models of supreme intelligence, the emotion-free Spock and Data from *Star Trek*. (Smith "Darwin and the Directors" 259)[41]

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[40] Exlcusive concentration on negative affect can preclude attendance to the use of blended affect or complex emotions in narrative (such as the many variations of bittersweetness, for example). The ensuing chapter will go into detail on the suburban ensemble dramedy's use of mixed emotions.

[41] Although Smith rightly calls attention to the emotion-intellect binary, Spock and Data are actually interesting examples of characters envisioned as a challenge to this presumption. Characters such as these are regularly used in the *Star Trek* universe to examine logic's inability to account for an inconsistent world (for which we have incomplete knowledge) or for the social utility of emotion.

David Boyle also notes this fantasy of human as mere data processor (the computational theory of mind) as a driving fantasy behind many post- and transhuman aspirations (197-201). The limbic system, associated with mood regulation and emotions, is one of the most primordial networks in the brain and has a much more complex relationship with other regions than could be described as merely "computational." When interrogated, the suggestion of the emotional automaton – that we would be better off or more computationally rational if we could supress emotive responses, or at least not validate these responses as authenticity – also starts to look suspiciously like a normalisation of a culture of psychopathy, characterised by emotional response deficiency (Herpertz and Sass), resistant responses to emotionally provocative stimuli (Patrick) as opposed to operational *appraisal* of emotional cues (Lorenz and Newman) or "cognitive empathy", and problems with early emotional development and learning (see *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain* by James Blair, Derek Mitchell and Karina Blair). Although this is a contentious claim, it is one that needs to be made: successive literary and dramatic theorists in the Brechtian tradition have advanced notions impelling us to avoid emotional absorption in narrative to further political ends, or what director Michael Haneke describes as "clarifying distance in place of violating closeness" (89), yet empathic concern relies on emotional responses that should then inform our political reasoning, without which we may approach something akin to a cultural psychopathy.[42] As Jesse Prinz points out, "emotional deficits result in moral blindness" (369) and politics without moral ends in mind is precisely what we should look to avoid.[43]

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[42] As Frans de Waal indicates regarding the kind of moral perspective-taking we find in narrative: "Without emotional engagement induced by state-matching, perspective-taking would be a cold phenomenon that could just as easily lead to torture as to helping (Deacon 1997, de Waal 2005)" ("Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism" 287). He describes this as, "the beauty of the empathy-altruism connection: the mechanism works so well because it gives individuals an emotional stake in the welfare of others" (ibid. 292). As Douglas Allchin explained in 2009's "The Evolution of Morality", specific comprehension of the social conditions of reciprocity is not evolutionarily essential to allow for selection of cooperative and selfless traits – so other impulses beyond a conscious, rational, calculated or self-interested altruistic motivation can still influence moral behaviours.

[43] In effect, these admonishments of audience emotion are an ethical overreach, in that they police abstract thoughts rather than actions. There are three levels of moral criticism here. One can choose to focus upon moral issues addressed within the diegesis, on the audience's moral thoughts regarding diegetic events, or on the audience's abstract thoughts and emotions while they are engaged with the narrative (rather than their specific attendance to a moral quandary). Haneke's modernist alienation principles are an example of where narrative ethics do not match ethical standards we apply in life: we might understand that it is unfair to hold an acquaintance accountable for an unarticulated thought crime, but at the same time assume that this is a reasonable ethic to apply to audiences in narrative theory. It remains

Some evolutionary theorists come to a similarly trivialising conclusion about the emotive values of art, totalising all of its functions as mere supernormal stimuli. Writers such as Steven Pinker, echoing Stephen Jay Gould, dismiss this matrix of functions the arts serve as exaptive neural "cheesecake, pack[ing] a sensual wallop unlike anything in the natural world because it is a brew of megadoses of agreeable stimuli" which potentially evolved to serve other adaptive functions (*How the Mind Works* 524-525). He goes on to single out music in particular as "a pure pleasure technology, a cocktail of recreational drugs that we ingest through the ear to stimulate a mass of pleasure circuits at once" (ibid. 528). He positions music and art as spandrels, or phenotypic byproducts of other qualities that were selected for. Spandrels are not necessarily adaptive – they "piggyback" on other adaptations. This is the argument from mere superstimulus, and Pinker is correct that we seek activations of a dopamine system developed in earlier humans that music harnesses (along with much storytelling art, and activities ranging in direct fitness utility from purposeful exercise to the mere thrill-seeking of a rollercoaster ride).[44] Yet surely superstimuli can still be reappropriated into other productive and purposeful behaviours, as we adapt to a world with cheesecake in it, working it into peripheral advantage (such as everything social that happens around such a stimulus). Darwin himself thought that music offered early humans a way to exhibit passion, a demonstration of feeling that might be assumed by potential mates to be a sign of strength (even if this was not the case), conferring survival advantage that was thereby selected for (*The Descent of Man* 872). This function may have changed over time, especially as music and storytelling formalised and professionalised.[45] The memorability of a melody

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deeply problematic to police emotions and abstract thoughts rather than actions, behaviours or our assessment of specific infringements.

[44] One impetus for enjoying the negative affect of art could simply be that the biochemical stimulation triggers homeostatic mechanisms to produce pleasure. Just as crying at a tragedy in one's life might trigger an increase levels of the prolactin hormone, consoling us with sweeter and more comforting feelings afterward, so might a sad song produce the same endocrine response (Huron "Why is sad music pleasurable").

[45] In his book *Sex, Genes & Rock 'n' Roll*, Rob Brooks asks what makes rock musicians international sex symbols, for example. The equation of musical passion with reproductive fitness continues today – however we must admit many iterations of and subtleties within this phenomenon, such as accounting for personal music taste and its relationship to social status. Musicologist David Huron also argues that it is hard to consider a phenomenon as widespread and as old as music nonadaptive (45), especially as some of the earliest known human-made artefacts are musical instruments; even if music were nonadaptive now, its enduring prevalence seems to signal that it must have once conferred survival benefit (ibid.

that may remind us of the person who performed it, leading toward predisposition toward them as a mating partner (Levitin 261), might be less important now than an extended display of dedication to a music group, and what the allegiance broadcasts about our social aptitudes. Music tells a story of affective causality (at a very basic level, for example, the push and pull of movement between major and minor chords), and one thing that both music and stories can provide is **a demonstration of affective aptitude or emotional intelligence**: our propensity to navigate the social world of emotions, and sometimes allegiance to a particular emotion (from Goths to Emos). Consider also the display of affective unity that is dance, which is inseparable from music.

So a superstimulus is rarely "mere" superstimulus where more than one human is involved. Likewise many recreational drugs are considered superstimuli, but can be used socially or antisocially in a variety of ways. The interesting part of the story is not their status as superstimuli or spandrels, but the use such superstimuli are then put to. Exaptation continues; it does not halt at the generation of a superstimulus. In Joseph Carroll's summary of the "cheesecake" perspective, art is "a nonadaptive exploitation of adaptive sources of pleasure" (*Literary Darwinism* 64). Carroll goes on to object to this view, as art and literature can provoke fitness by allowing us to imagine better ways of living (66-68). His view connotes a kind of fulfilling emotional imagination, which encourages us not only to foresee possibilities for living that may help us circumnavigate environmental challenges, but also to attach to, craft meaning and purpose from, and *desire* these changes. This would also be foundational to ethical conceptions of narrative's use, such as Charles Taylor's notion of storied projection as a means to imagine possible future moral identities (*Sources of the Self* 48). Again, emotional projection provides the reason for change, and we will often demonstrate our emotional projections to others while engaged in narrative to broadcast these capacities.

There are further academic attenuations of the sensation-seeking function of narrative art. One politico-cultural argument proposes mainstream consumer culture's politically sedating excesses as motivationally centred on seeking affective commodities (Hardt and

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46). Others have pointed to music's place in cognitive development, as it rehearses high-level pre-speech abilities from cortically complex motor skills to speech perception (Levitin 254-257), and socially cohesive abilities like turn taking behaviour, coordination and cooperation (ibid. 252).

Negri 62) and affective newness (Bauman 26). Consumers seek affective stimulation; ergo emotive arts are bound in a study of commodity cultures. Pointing out the concurrence of consumer culture and our need for emotional stimulation, however, myopically ignores a rich history of similar use for story and art spanning millennia. Seeking such emotional stimulation is an ancient pancultural human behaviour, which we have consistently used our free time to engage in. If it has burgeoned today, we need to ask why that may be – it may turn out to be an abundance of non-work time which we have traditionally used to engage in emotion-seeking or -mediating activities, in which case fiction's proliferation is not the culprit so much as a symptom of post-producer and post-religious cultures.

The above rationalisations of narrative emotion-stoking in contemporary Western cultures may all be unfair characterisations of our emotional needs, as without emotional cues, our rational thought struggles to locate pivotal purpose (as in anhedonia), and where removed entirely can veer toward the psychopathic (of which a defining characteristic, in pathology, is an inhibited response to emotive stimuli).

It is also likely that we may be using story for different purposes now than those that presumably propelled its origins in the Pleistocene, thus the position of Carroll, Dissanayake and myself that we should presume in audiences some manner of "fulfilment" motive: that we now use story to mediate our mood in a way that may keep us mentally fit, or that we *assume* may make us feel better, as in uses and gratifications theory. The **use of media to regulate our mood or shift affect** has been recognised by numerous researchers. For example, Greenwood and Long ask what media we are most likely to turn to in differing affective states ("Mood Specific Media Use"), while Edgar C. O'Neal and S. Levi Taylor look at how we might choose media to sustain an existing mood for an ulterior purpose, such as the choice of violent media when angered subjects perceive the opportunity to retaliate against a low-status provocateur ("Status of the Provoker"). Shifting, sustaining or otherwise moderating affect through emotive storytelling can also distract us from our own daily concerns, and perhaps provide welcome relief from negative affect we have difficulty self-regulating. Consider going to a film when in the doldrums – the experience can quite seriously and lastingly change one's mood by transferring thought from our own tribulations to sympathy for others. And we cannot forget that storytellers as well as audiences work to regulate their own emotional states. As Kay Redfield Jamison puts it: "creative work can act as a way of structuring chaotic emotions and thoughts, numbing pain through abstraction and the rigours of disciplined

thought, and creating a distance from the source of despair" (123). So mood regulation provides not only another impetus to formulate and distribute stories, it also allows us to *explain* emotional shifts to ourselves, and through narrativised causality feel in control of our own negatively valenced emotions – structuring them, displacing them, or otherwise taming them.

Although David Hume dismissed the "excitation" explanation for fictive negative affect in his essay "Of Tragedy," it is clear that most audiences exhibit sensation-seeking motivation that relies in some way on negative affect, even if it is balanced with correlate positive affect, or what Plantinga calls a "working through" of negative emotions, leveraging them against positive affect to make our enjoyment of those emotions stronger (178-179). He postulates: "If strong negative emotions are accompanied by physiological arousal, this arousal may contribute to the strength of the positive emotions" provoked later in the narrative (ibid. 187); this is a version of excitation-transfer theory. Each narrative contains a roadmap of causal mood shifts that we might find pleasurable, perhaps as a rehearsal of methods for dealing with negative affect.[46] However, Hume also points out another motive for enjoying a narrative's particular suspense and sadness – they are turned into pleasure upon reflection of the artistry or eloquence of the author's expression of those emotions. We do clearly like to have pain expressed in narrative, as it is an acknowledgment of common feeling. When a sad story impresses us in its telling, we respond to how well it matches our own lived experience of sorrow. As in other non-narrative arts, we are taken by a kind of affective verisimilitude, if not a stylistically accurate representation of the world then indeed an emotional one. Once articulated and shared, a common emotion often seems easier to manage. This reaches behind the sensation-seeking to its social underpinnings: we feel these emotions in fiction to discuss their influence on us, perhaps gain a mastery over negative affect, and perhaps to shift our mood through socially distributed recognition of those feelings.

Of course, different media have different regulatory capacities, with Greenwood and Long finding:

> that individuals may derive more emotional satisfaction from music, which they can
> tailor to fit or uplift various positive and negative mood states. However, when feeling

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[46] This can even have a much more direct survival benefit: we are more likely to procreate when in a good mood.

disengaged from their immediate social or emotional environment, television may offer viewers relaxation, structure and diversion. It is also possible that increased television viewing inhibits the development of alternative and perhaps more successful solutions to boredom. In support of this idea, research has documented a "passive spillover effect" in which viewers may continue to watch television even as the emotional gratifications of viewing have receded (McIlwraith, Jacobvitz, Kubey, & Alexander, 1991). (620)

So various media will affect mood states in divergent ways, perhaps some more lastingly or effectively than others. Some media, for example, may have a greater capacity to orchestrate parallel neural responses across a range of viewers (Hasson et al.), or activate mirror neurons, or be more effective in achieving emotional contagion, described by Elaine Hatfield as "the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronise facial expressions, vocalisations, postures, movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (96). Emotional contagion is just one of the many contagions a storyteller might attempt to affect in their audience, however. We also tell stories **to stimulate all manner of contagions in addition to the emotional**, from ideas and ideologies to ways of life and states of being. In *Connected*, Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler make a strong argument for the far-reaching influence of contagions (emotional, ideological, medical, dispositional, to name a few) across social networks, extending to people we have never met (our friend's friend's friend); thus the need for human studies to commit to social rather than individual psychological analysis. Stories are resolutely part of this process, and we will return to more specific uses of various contagions throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Exploring emotions has another side, too: we can use the narrative act to **achieve proximity to extreme emotion or a trauma that is hard to process, in order to replace mystification with causal attributions**. Melanie A. Greenberg et al. demonstrated that, beyond the established benefits of disclosure in recovering from personal trauma (not necessarily in a therapeutic setting), sharing narratives of both real and imagined traumas amongst fellow victims resulted in fewer illness visits, perhaps representing recovery or mental health gains.[47] In their abstract, the researchers summarised possible attributions for their findings, which "could reflect catharsis, emotional regulation, or construction of resilient

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[47] In practice, this could explain the popularity of narrativised phenomena such as "sharing circles" both in person and online.

possible selves" (588). James W. Pennebaker and Anna Graybeal contend of written narratives in trauma recovery, however:

> There is now sufficient evidence to suggest that the power of writing is not due to mere emotional expression in the sense of cathartic venting, or "blowing off steam." For example, participants who wrote only about their emotions about their most traumatic experience, without a description of the event itself, did not reap the benefits seen by those who both described the event and expressed their feelings about it (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Also, those who reported that writing served a cathartic function invariably had poorer health than other writers (Pennebaker, 1989). (91)

Jessica McDermott Sales et al. also found in 2003 that parents naturally tend to more causal prompting rather than emotional elaboration in discussing traumatic events with their children ("Parental Reminiscing About Positive and Negative Events"). It should be noted, however, that storytelling as therapy cannot be liberally applied to all situations. Camilla Asplund Ingemark outlines some Swedish studies questioning the "cultural imperative to narrate" (12-13). Perhaps there are times when linear causal retelling of trauma becomes a reliving of that trauma, and needs to be put aside as a therapeutic method.[48]

Whether or not the process could be called catharsis or a kind of purging, whether it allows for identity reconstruction or the means for control over one's emotions, it appears that simulating a proximity to extreme events and emotions via storytelling acts is a beneficial means to at least approach difficult psychological processes, and cope with them by application of a causal narrative structure. I would also stress that this process could be fictive (an abstraction from real-life experience) or non-fictive. Following Jill Littrell's "Expression of Emotion: When It Causes Trauma and When It Helps", the exploration and reappraisal is what matters, and perhaps fictional displacement could help avoid reignition of trauma through retelling. Littrell's process of reflective "listening, paraphrasing and acknowledging" followed by the question "where to next" and its inherent attendance to problem-solving cognition in trauma recovery social work, the imperative to "reframe, refocus and rework" (314), is similar to that attempted in much dramatic and humanistic fiction working in a realist mode: listening to and representing problems in a populace, and then directing attention to the

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[48] This is not a statement on the efficacy of techniques such as "cinematherapy" in certain scenarios, which is in need of further clinical research.

agency of socio-ethical problem-solving. It could also apply to a humanist hermeneutics: listening to an author, reframing and refocusing their perspective through reading and debate, and then actively *working* with the results to ask where we ought to go next. I hope this discussion has demonstrated that the emotional functions of narrative reach far beyond the purely hedonic. I now turn to some more specific emotions bound in genre fictions.

Fear and Anger in Fiction

Affect studies – and particularly of that contradictory experience we seek out between the very controllability of our engagement in self-selected fiction, and our involuntary emotional state matching – leads us naturally to the experience of horror in fiction. I have addressed appetites for negative affect such as sadness and tragedy in fiction; however we cannot address all aversive emotions as one, and it should be noted that horror provides a very different set of experiences deserved of their own scrutiny.[49] We use horror **in attempts to test our fears for validity and deflate fears that are not needed, and contrariwise to indulge and generate fears in others**. This is just one dimension in the functions horror can serve, of course, as people of differing personalities will have different motivations for pursuing horror narrative (for example gore watching, thrill watching, independent watching and problem watching as identified by Deirdre D. Johnston in "Adolescents' motivations for viewing graphic horror") and thus such narratives may produce different effects accordant to motivation. Aside from the pleasure of adrenaline (horror provides excesses of adrenaline) and existential meanings we attribute in proximity to extreme affect (covered above), we have long established that successive simulated exposure can be used to combat phobia, following Watson and Marks's findings in 1971 ("Relevant and Irrelevant Fear"). The same may be true of broaching irrational fears in narrative. Take the child, for example, afraid of the monster in the closet, growing up on a diet of monster movies, surviving, and effectively bringing themselves to the realisation that monsters are not much of an issue. Spectators who watch horror movies consistently report desensitisation to its manipulations as they become more familiar with its cues (although we will investigate shortly how generalisable this desensitisation is to fears in the world). This phenomenon could be explained by "the

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[49] Happiness, sadness, and mood regulation only take us halfway. Horror is unique as it combines the four other so-called "basic emotions" (c.f. Ekman): fear, anger, disgust and surprise.

developmental shift from perceptual to conceptual processing" (Cantor and Oliver 232): the change in children's threat appraisal as they learn that things that look scary are not always the most pertinent dangers. Many writers, especially in the substantial tradition of psychoanalytic horror studies (including, surprisingly, psychoanalysis sceptic Noël Carroll, albeit from an incongruity theory perspective), have focused on the repulsion felt toward human or bodily deviation and otherness, but this is just half the story.[50]

While fears of threatening animal otherness might not be innate (Thrasher and LoBue "Do Infants Find Snakes Aversive?"), it makes sense that attention to the signs of danger – readable malice, the neuroaesthetic call of the colour red, and so on – would be prominently hereditary. Nonhuman monster designs can dole out these properties to a level of extreme superstimulus as can, for example, hyper-aesetheticised cinematography of a crime scene. This may generate in some a self-sustaining feedback loop of fascination and repulsion; when we resolve the cognitive dissonance of these conflicting spectatorial urges by elevating the value of one response, the other reasserts itself, perhaps creating an internal puzzle over whether or not to engage (Moss-Wellington "Affecting Profundity" 48). Although the heredity of fascination with violence appears self-evident, as genes without sensitivity to the potential for others (including nonhuman others) to cause us mortal harm might not have lasted, perhaps various facets of these fears must be discarded through our experience when we find they are not needed, for example when we do not encounter seriously threatening animal otherness in our daily lives. Humans have the unique ability to *attempt* to use cognitive control (what we often call "executive function") to ignore fear responses. Johnston also found a level of fear mastery motivation in attendance to graphic horror (slasher films with human antagonists) was applicable across a number of personality traits, including differing levels of empathy:

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[50] Horror psychoanalysts have also, unsurprisingly, emphasised repressed violent desires, although fascination and obsession with violence may in fact be borne of our fear of committing immoral acts rather than a foundational, internalised and restrained desire to harm, or see others harm (Miller and Spiegel). This would be similar to a "high place effect" or *l'appel du vide* (Hames et al.) – the urge some feel to jump when near high places – as it does not express a desire but a fear. Desires and fears should not be so easily conflated. The fact that we imagine ourselves performing an action does not mean we have a repressed desire to do it. We just tend to fixate upon that which irks us, and many find themselves imagining the same frightful scenario again and again, as in horror cinema that depicts the infliction of violence upon others: the notion of causing as much as receiving pain could be one of our deepest fears.

Although there is a subset of adolescents who view graphic horror for gore-watching motivations and who hold disturbing beliefs and responses to the viewing of graphic horror [such as female victims "getting what they deserve"] … It is also comforting that independent watchers—who seek mastery over their fears, are characterized by low empathy, and report positive affective responses—tend to identify with the victim rather than the killer in these movies. (548)

It has also been suggested that the long-term effects of filmic fright (anxiety specific to horrific scenes can even last for years, unlike most other emotions media elicits) may be explained by the extremity of empathic engagement the genre requires (Cantor 297). But none of this is to suggest that our fear mastery is necessarily successful – the important point is that we *attempt* to deflate fears through this kind of narrative, but perhaps when we minimise them in narrative, we in turn indulge or enlarge them elsewhere.

Dolf Zillman is a staunch sceptic of the fear relief hypothesis (183-187), although the research he cites reveals that we have no serious longitudinal studies to ascertain prolonged exposure in young people to supernatural horror and recovery from its terrors, and it remains that, success or not, horror attendees report fear mastery as one of their motivators (Johnston). Zillman also postulates that humans share primal aggressive tendencies and fight-or-flight responses with other mammals, the utility of which is blunted or counterproductive in contemporary societies, and we address this through violent media:

Today's humans rarely can act on their fears and their anger by destroying the agents of circumstances that instigate these emotions. Feeling threatened by air pollution or global warming, for example, is unlikely to be remedied by any physical assault or by literally running away from it … It is this lack of evolutionary adjustment by the brain, then, that can be held accountable for a continuing, not entirely appropriate sensitivity to danger. ("The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence" 194)

Although he remains sceptical of another, more speculative Darwinian hypothesis "that for millennia blood and gore were linked to the gratifications of food intake, to well-being, and to survival … a trace [from the selected paleomammalian brain] that manifests itself in a continuing interest in blood and gore and kills made by others" (ibid. 192). Perhaps we need a more sensitive theory than emotional catharsis, then – a kind of fear regulation rather than

expulsion, like the mood regulation outlined above – to properly analyse how horror attendees utilise the experience.[51]

Stories can alert us to dangers, and horror alerts us to the intent of others that mean us harm, but potentially not with the greatest success in directing our attention to the most relevant or preventable dangers: we are much more likely to be killed in a car accident than by another living thing with ill intent, yet we are less attuned to this in narrative (Grodal 108). Many have analysed fear as a political tool, however some, including George Gerbner and Larry Gross, see the stoking of fears specifically through media violence as a control mechanism with primacy above all others, or "the established religion of the industrial order, relating to governance as the church did in earlier times" (194). These reminders of the generalisability and misattribution of fears explain why horror film may not always be viewed seriously, rated comparatively "more predictable, silly, and low quality" (Oliver and Sanders 255) compared to other suspenseful media, and why horror comedy sits at an intriguing point in our psyche: through humour, we are questioning what may be a legitimate threat.

Cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer would hold the view that, as we have developed instinctual cognitive assets for both predator and prey detection, and it has benefited our ancestors to be hyper-alert to the mere *possibility* of danger, we are prone to a kind of pareidolia of agency, a cognitive inference over-detecting agency in natural phenomena which can play out as religious and supernatural belief – dispositional characteristics styled by Justin Barrett as "hyperactive agency detection devices" in his book *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* However, it is not just irrational fears that we deal with in horror narrative. We also observe people who live with violence in their everyday lives attending more horror films, leading back to the hypothesis of a coping method (see Boyanowski et al.; Goldstein *Aggression*; and Williams "When Horror Hits Home"). In any case, it seems that horror is used *in attempts* to process, test and potentially move past oppressive fears of aggression and victimisation, and that this impulse can equally be exploited through narrative, possibly to produce the reverse effect.

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[51] One example of fear regulation might be located in the post-atomic horror cinema of Japan, through which notions of complicity and victimhood are thrashed out and extricated, but not necessarily expelled.

Sometimes we engage with narrative specifically to feel angry, or for a space to feel that our anger, despair and confusion in the face of a bafflingly cruel world is shared. So **we also use horror to experience existential oneness and shared anger**. Horror demographics, while not exclusively, still retain a spike of younger people in their audience (Val Morgan Cinema Network np), and it may be an important developmental activity to bond through the particular anger of discovering the extent of injustices we face in the world we are being inducted into; this bonding can last later into life. Following Harvey Whitehouse's hypothesis that dysphoric rituals promote not just group identification, but identity fusion, especially where routinized and activating an assumed collective memory (284-285), horror may also be a way to relate to and feel closer to peers, as well as others undergoing the experience simultaneously, through a simulation of shared traumatic experience. This could equally apply to sad stories and other genre film, and can actively be seen in our desire to be together while we witness dramatic storytelling, from the darkened theatre full of bodies to the pyjama party movie night, from the campfire singalong to the intimate folk gig. However, well-orchestrated terror holds a special place in the simulation of shared dysphoric experience. Neurocinematic researchers found that Hitchcock's *Bang! You're Dead* "was able to orchestrate the responses of so many different brain regions … turning them on and off at the same time across all viewers" (Hasson et al. 16), much more so than other (non-frightening) media studied. This would also seem to give credence to the notion that horror is reliant on an intensified level of empathetic response, if we define affective empathy as feeling what another feels (feeling with as opposed to feeling for). However, if we value subtlety, subjective viewer agency, moral and political attention and questioning, or the capacity of films to inspire a range of different reactions and thought, such manipulations via screen could prove problematic. Social research also shows us that films offering extreme arousal, such as horror cinema, can have the effect of generating increases in attraction and behaviours such as talking and touching (Cohen et al. "At the Movies"). This could explain the enduring convention of horror movies used as date movies (Oliver and Sanders 248), perhaps even generating unity through the emotional contagion of alarm pheromones (Mujica-Parodi et al.). This feeling of oneness – a presumption of shared experience that binds us, the sense of a kind of social monism – amounts to a storied method of social bonding. In social psychology, this is also referred to as "self-other overlap." Social psychologists have identified the emergence of this sensation in varying contexts, from the intimate "feeling of 'oneness' or merged identity with relationship partners" (Clark and Lemay Jr. 920) to feelings of oneness

with strangers (Maner et al.), both of which are predictors of prosocial and helping behaviours toward those we feel "at one" with.

As an example, consider the recent popular zombie fad, emergent about half a century after *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) established the contemporary zombie's lasting iteration. Perhaps, as many popular horror creators including Stephen King have suggested (Tamborini and Stiff 433), horror provides a safe outlet for anger at our fellows, and the kind of human-on-human graphic violence which is the hallmark of the zombie genre would seem to support this (of course, another component of the zombie genre's endurance is the application of its central metaphor of contagious human malignancy across social and political contexts). This could be the explanation of Tamborini and Stiff's finding that "the graphic portrayal of destruction" is yet another motivation for viewing horror movies (ibid. 432-433).[52] By way of personal anecdote, not long ago I asked a friend how he feels at the end of a story in which zombies have obliterated the living world, and he replied, "calm and cleansed." The increase in morbid conclusions of the apocalyptic variety across the zombie genre, and the spectator's pleasure in such ends, presents a challenge to Zillman's insistence on moral monitoring and the euphoric deliverance of justice as the primary motivator for audiences of violent fiction, contingent upon a built-up excitation transfer over the period of a narrative. This destruction delivers no justice (although perhaps it may for those totalising misanthropes among us), but in fact obliterates the need for justice. Perhaps if we dispositionally (or have reason to) experience generalised anger at humans but cannot express our misanthrophy another way, apocalyptic horror is a harmless way to bond and experience oneness through such a frustration, recover some faith in fellows who share our ire and know that someone else also fantasises about total destruction. Perhaps this is sharing a kind of totalised justice *acknowledged* as a fantasy. Like voicing one's innermost anxieties to a trusted friend, we might begin knowing that our anxieties are overwrought and are not reliable reflections on the world, but still have trouble minimising them; after vocalising and externalising them, the feelings seem to have less dominance over us through their mutuality – the mystery and potential shame of these feelings is expelled. This is not quite the individual catharsis envisaged by King, but rather a social catharsis of implied affective mutuality. The theory points again to Booth's thesis of fiction as friendship. Although perhaps providing friendship is not so much the function of narrative here (as a real-life

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[52] So too is the ordinary or reluctant hero in apocalyptic fiction. Mass elimination of other heroic candidates allows an easy way to imagine oneself into the scenario.

corporeal companion entails many other qualities not accessible by fiction); the feelings of relationality in our shared destructive horror fantasies might again distance us from our oblivion, or the weight of our daily worries, or the shame of feeling defective in one's negative affect, merely by having these things voiced.

The Connectedness of Fiction

Experiencing oneness or closeness to others is not restricted to horror or other violent narrative, of course. We also **explore multiple affects and avenues for achieving a sense of connectedness through narrative, as stories facilitate foundational intimacy**. Dissanayake has pointed out that stories do not merely encourage intimacy – they can be our means for *learning* how to be intimate with our family members and peers. She uses the complexities of baby talk and protoconversations as a primary example (29). Dissanayake identifies love as the experience of mutuality, and the arts as its elaboration (ibid. 11), which is a pancultural phenomenon (c.f. Murdock **"The Common Denominator of Cultures"**); again, she sees these qualities as fundamental to our selective fitness, yet our understanding of these narratival utilities and our societal integration of their benefits can fluctuate. Even disagreements around narrative can bring people closer: consider the prevalence of book clubs in which we come together to air conflicting readings, or the way that when we discuss favourite songs and bands we really discuss minutiae and differences of opinion that we take pleasure in, and that often feel binding despite their disparities, simultaneously representing that which makes us different and the same. Greenwood and Long found that individuals high in the "Need To Belong" (NTB) personality trait scale:

> may be particularly likely to feel lonely when not in the presence of others and/or use their time alone to reflect on missed or lost loved ones. Engaging more intensely with media may be one way that individuals high in social inclusion needs attempt to cope with loneliness. Media programs are after all, inherently social (indeed, even nature programs feature compelling narrators or experts), and may offer individuals with increased belongingness needs a soothing if temporary replacement for genuine social interaction. Moreover, recent research finds that individuals high in the NTB are also more empathically attuned to and accurate at interpreting others' emotions (Pickett, Gardner & Knowles, 2004). This social and emotional vigilance may enhance the

gratifications associated with transporting into media narratives, as well as identifying with and feeling imagined kinship with media characters. ("Psychological Predictors of Media Involvement" 640)

So NTB is a predictor of cognitive and affective empathy, which might predispose some toward the gratifications of narrative transportation. The intimacy of the storytelling act – whether we call it connection, love, or empathy – challenges boundaries in a globalised context, in which stories may travel at the lightning speed of a social media feed. Story's potential for intimacy at a distance is, therefore, an integral tool in the cosmopolitanisation of our social structures. This should be kept in mind while exploring related functions of fiction.

Intimacy and connectedness lead us again back to the capacity of narrative to provide something akin to friendship, and in Greenwood and Long's case above, **to combat loneliness**. This is hardly a contentious claim, yet what Greenwood and Long suggest is that media programs may be *effective* in assuaging our loneliness in some circumstances. Clearly there are select cases when media practices such as television use, online social gaming, cinephilia, or celebrity obsession come to replace more effective means to fulfil social needs, but we can use media to temporarily replace such activities. Often there is good reason that we cannot be closer to other people (including geographic isolation), and so we use absent or imagined others in narrative instead; not just fictive characters, but we might imagine a connection to fellow audience members, narrative producers, or use more interactive modes of engagement (talking to a screen, gaming or roleplaying) that rely less upon a notion of any precise other behind the narrative. We can again consider the shared attention that is part of narrative (Boyd *On the Origin of Stories* 101), such as consuming media together or the particular pleasure of being read to. Sometimes we need to simulate this sense of unity when more direct options are not available.

The desire to feel closer to one another via narrative can be identified widely: through common knowledge of television characters and celebrities we can potentially discuss even with strangers,[53] the common experience of being in a theatre and reacting as one, affinity

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[53] Perhaps television has been a necessary development in the face of the threatening anonymity of mass urbanisation, providing strangers a mutual knowledge to share perspectives on, although David Boyle sees this function of television as diminished with the proliferation of channels (or streaming services) and superficial choice (125).

with the ontic assumptions or insights a story presents or relies on, our familiarity with the conventions and culture around an arts practice or storytelling community, and so on. These experiences help us feel closer to others and build communities, and in some cases can reinforce pack mentality or **establish ingroups through common language**. Common language and discursive shorthand are necessary of course. A plumber, for example, has a list of terms she will not need to explain to others who are not plumbers – the language necessarily establishes a community for ease of communication. But sometimes the process isn't merely about facilitating ease of communication, it is also about demonstrating closeness to others through shared communicative codes, or challenging thoughts and ideas of outgroups using lingual exclusion. Consider that this happens in literary and media theory too: we erect boundaries of acceptable language use (and in hermeneutics, acceptable readings, often opposed to a disfavoured group's methodologies). A good example can be found in Terry Eagleton's inductive instruction for aspiring academics in *Literary Theory*:

> Nobody is especially concerned about what you say, with what extreme, moderate, radical or conservative positions you adopt, provided they are compatible with, and can be articulated within, a specific form of discourse … Those employed to teach you this discourse will remember whether or not you were able to speak it proficiently long after they have forgotten what you said. Literary theorists, critics and teachers, then, are not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse. Their task is to preserve this discourse, extend and elaborate it as necessary, defend it from other forms of discourse, initiate newcomers into it and determine whether or not they have successfully mastered it. (175)

This dismally nihilistic example is apt as it robs scholarly communication of all other purpose than its use in defining an ingroup.

The phenomenon can readily be explained by communication accommodation theory: the way we adjust all manner of language, including "pronunciation, pause and utterance lengths, vocal intensities, non verbal behaviors, and intimacy of self disclosures" (Giles and Smith 46), depending on whom we are speaking to. Communication accommodation extends to language selection (Giles and Smith also study how people select which language to use in bilingual encounters), as well as more abstract language use, such as mediated storytelling. Thus stories can establish ingroups through a common language as can everyday

conversation and jargon use. When a film diverges from classical Hollywood formula, for example, and calls into question the conventions of a film language we have absorbed in order to comprehend these stories, we become excited because it is marked *for us*, for intellectuals and cinephiles. Noël Burch in particular has carried forward the notion of classical narrative style in cinema as hegemonic rather than pragmatic language negotiation, and the disparagement is a common one across popular film theory. On the other hand, neither "natural" nor arbitrarily constructed, Bordwell sees that shot-reverse-shot conventions developed like any language to be "enormously flexible" ("Convention, Construction, and Vision" 99), emphasising psychological causality (which we see clearly in the much-vaunted Kuleshov Effect) because of its primacy in narrative interest. In James Chandler's account of D.W. Griffith's initial forays into eyeline shooting, the new film language promoted a mutual sympathy derived from attempts to access the kind of direct facial interaction modern canonical literature was able to describe, in particular the sympathetic closeness and face-to-faceness of Dickensian sentimental and melodramatic modes (np). Attendance to the direction of another's gaze is, after all, a foundational form of empathy developed from infancy (Repacholi "Infants' use of attentional cues"). Mar and Oatley elaborate:

> By turning our gaze toward another's target of attention, we are automatically engaging in a shared experience with another, and from this point we can choose to proceed with more complicated inferences such as understanding that person's mental state, whether it involves a goal (e.g., is she looking covetously at my chocolate cake?) or an emotion (e.g., why is she looking fearfully over my shoulder?). (176)

Classical narrative techniques may synchronise responses between character and audience member, or between multiple spectators, to generate a sense of cohesion, but alternative filmmaking similarly uses language that antagonises against norms to create its own sense of group fealty.

The languages used to achieve a narratival ingroup can be auditory as well as visual. Consider Michel Chion's concept of "emanation speech", dismissed by Sarah Kozloff on humanistic grounds:

Chion regrets the dominance of intelligibility; he prefers what he calls 'emanation speech' (what I term 'verbal wallpaper') – speech that may be inaudible, decentred, and that serves no narrative function. I find his argument misanthropic. (120)

In effect, Chion and many others in his wake have told us that our fascination with fellow humans is somehow intellectually inferior. The idea that unintelligibility of voices would more truthfully represent the "cacophony" of "the sounds of the world reproduced naturalistically in cinema" (Tarkovsky 159) is also wildly inaccurate – the human ear has, in part, co-developed with the larynx and vocal folds to privilege the frequencies on which the human voice projects its vibrations, and single them out for special attention. Once sounds are recorded (via the artifice of microphone selection), there is no ideal or more "natural" amplification of those sounds. Differences in mixing decisions may speak to different audiences and in some cases mark themselves as being *for* certain audiences, as is the case with Chion's emanation speech. Substantial numbers of filmgoers enjoy and find much value in words and dialogue as a primary means to comprehend film; they are not wrong to enjoy this, and no one inroad into film appreciation is superior. Film theory, unfortunately, is littered with these false lingual binaries and battle lines, which are ready to be revealed as ingroup establishments. While ingroups are necessary, they need not be generated in such direct opposition to others (they can be practical more so than punitive), and where this is the case, we must be careful we are not engaging in bigotry.

Ingroup establishment and pack loyalty must be seen as evolutionarily purposeful human behaviours without diminishing our ability to problematise them, and we must acknowledge that these behaviours carry a lot of meaning for participants: most of us have familial loyalty, for example, offering clear survival and fitness benefits, which are pleasurably reinforced through storytelling and language codes specific to the family (Barnier and Van Bergen; Fivush et al. "Personal and Intergenerational Narratives"), although like any fealty it is contestable on cosmopolitan grounds. Yet extending the inclusivity of lingual group formation can be problematic too. Marketers of popular commercial narratives can attempt to offer the experience of being inducted into a community, a "family" of fans or a world of related stories connected to a pivotal narrative experience, which serve as socially gratifying acceptance into a unique discursive space with its own language and social codes. We can

consider fandom or alternate reality gaming as different examples of this process.[54] Jargon and specialised language are uniquely powerful in promoting group cohesion – for example, new nurses bond by adopting jargon (Wolf "Learning the Professional Jargon of Nursing"). However, this discursive induction can be wielded as a commercial tool with great potency. Social media marketers can disguise themselves as disinterested members of the public, and moreover mimic the language used by audiences to create a sense of group solidarity. This means that they have an interest in making neophytes feel special when they are granted access to a new vocabulary with which to broadcast their allegiance. Ingroup language facilitates community generation, but we cannot demonise or romanticise the process, as it is equally an innate component of our sociality, and our attempts to manipulate social behaviours to exploit others.

Social Elevation and Fiction

Relatedly, stories can also quite clearly **help us to feel intelligent or equipped with special knowledge**, not just by presenting as "intelligent", such as, in cinema, the puzzle film or smart-wave, but also in our rejection of perceived falsehoods or ineptitudes propagated through other stories. Recently, for example, we have seen the extension of B-film appreciation to vast fan cultures built around inept cinema such as *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) or *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990).[55] We construct identities around a self-congratulatory cultural recognition. At times this function of story can take a turn for the haughty or downright degrading. Internet microstory phenomena, including viral Youtube videos, have introduced us to many new ways to scorn others, and can turn psychosis or other mental illness into objects of ridicule. On the other hand, dramatic readings of illiterate missives such as "How is Babby Formed" or "Dot Dot Dot" can reveal both a sense of superiority against clear signs of dyslexia, or a developing use of English, and at the same time joy in appreciating its resultant peculiarity of expression and detachment from familiar language use. This particular phenomenon can seem new, but it is far from being unique to

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[54] Alternate reality gaming has been used as a method to create communities in which to sell other products. For example, 42 Entertainment created an alternate reality game to generate a community around *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) prior to its release; Warner Bros. subsequently had marketing access to this community.

[55] Or "so bad it's good" or "badfilm" apropos Jeffrey Sconce's "Trashing the Academy."

contemporary media. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play acutely concerned with our responses to outwardly bad, tasteless or inappropriate storytelling, Theseus requests his fellow audience members receive The Mechanicals' play with a particular kind of generosity:

> The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
> Our sport shall be to take what they mistake:
> And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
> Takes it in might, not merit. (5.1.89-92)

Theseus appeals not only for his fellow audience members to acknowledge the effort put into work that is not one's proficiency, effectively claiming that value can be found in processes and gestures rather than the merit of a finished product,[56] but he also models a method for enjoying the creativity of those who misunderstand social cues and language that we may find instinctive: in observing misunderstandings, savvy audiences have to explain to themselves precisely what was misunderstood. There exists a re-evaluative tension when we must reconcile a potential violation in the compromise of meaning (similarly to puns) and erosion of social norms, benign as they are refracted through the safe interposition of fiction. In our attempts to explain lingual or narratival norms, how they operate and how they have been mishandled, they become no longer instinctual and reveal their tacitly assumed codes. This too is "our sport" when we watch *The Room* or "How is Babby Formed", and a new kind of attentiveness is produced. What this makes an audience do is question *what exactly* we were laughing at, as per the ensuing interferences of Theseus and the lovers (with Hippolyta in turn questioning their response).

We have historically used all manner of narrative acts to single out the ways in which we are different, and sometimes intellectually superior, to others. By the same token, we also use narrative to consolidate or reify opinions – which may well be prosocial – by mere virtue of their collective production. When a product is formalised in the marketplace, such as the collective effort of a publishing house mass-producing a novel, there is a sense in which it is legitimated by the amount of people involved in its production and distribution. This draws from our presumption of the validity of group thinking over individual thinking, which is contradicted by phenomena such as "group polarisation", whereby groups tend to make more

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[56] Theseus later references their position as poor labourers to draw attention to theatre as a rare space of direct contact with authority figures.

extreme decisions than individuals (Myers and Lamm), collaborative inhibitions, in which working together in certain conditions can produce less favourable results for tasks requiring memory, and groupthink. Legitimation of a narrative in this way hinges on four qualities: more than one worker, using a substantial amount of resources, working through established procedures to reach us, with a greater audience share implying greater validity. Film studios, for example, play on these presumptions with grandiose title sequences. The Universal or 20th Century Fox logos connote the toil of many workers reaching many spectators working from reputably proven traditions at great expense. Narrative formalised through the norms of engagement with a medium can be very powerful in reinforcing the impression that our opinions are shared by important others, and therefore valuable. There can be some self-congratulation involved when we presume our artistic predilection is shared by a vast sum of others.

This can clearly be related to the function of story **to flatter oneself and others, and thereby concoct hierarchies of personal attributes**. Most narratives contain messages of congratulations to their audience for merely engaging with them – in fact some have positioned the inherent flattery of all media, in that it so consistently treats our attention as a prizeworthy goal and is designed to please us, as the primary gauge of a mediated epoch (Zengotita *Mediated*). There are many clear objects of flattery available to a storyteller (for the venerable Baron Munchausen, his own valour, extraordinary undertakings and conquests are prime), but for now I will continue to focus on intelligence, which is one of the primary objects of storied flattery. Media presuming a certain level of audience acumen can become used as an apparatus to determine intelligence hierarchies, which in some cases eclipses other meanings suggested by the content. Thomas Elsaesser, writing on the puzzle movie, points out that some popular film scholars conflate cinema with "doing philosophy" in order to elevate the gravitas of their concerns when viewing film (36). Similarly, D.A. Miller describes his concept of "Too Close Reading" through the prism of the nested metatexutal puzzles in *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951). While he keeps returning to the seeming "pointlessness" (125) of the pursuit, and in so doing makes a case for narrative reading as a kind of autotelic fun, he also reveals the self-congratulation that such fun is grounded in. After a fleeting reference to "our swollen heads," he backhandedly offers the following regarding Hitchcock's appearances in the film: "One would also suppose that many people in the audience, less clever than ourselves, fail to notice his appearance, even though (barring infants and aliens) such ignorant spectators are hard to come by" (ibid. 107). Later, he becomes enthralled by

measuring his intelligence against the director's: "We'd thought we were patronizing Hitchcock when all along it was he who was patronizing us; in smugly discerning him, we were only being his dupes" (ibid. 113). Essentially what this demonstrates is that Hitchcock's works flatter us, and that we respond with expressions of our own self-flattery in re-narrating them, but then if we look closer, good stories can also offer opportunities to dismantle that flattery. Miller, in his facetiously camp style, suggests interpretive, scholarly or hermeneutic one-upmanship as part of the narrative itself; the problem is that he sadly does not push himself to imagine anything beyond the gameplay. For Miller, the appeal of narrative readings and hermeneutics is, at least in part, about separating out who is intelligent, and who is less so. When we posit the hierarchic politics of flattery, cajoling, intelligence and superiority in art as a grander narrative beyond the text, this function of fiction can come to transcend any relevant meaning making provided by the text itself. In this way, any text can become a redundant cipher for our own smartness, or allow us to order people, real and imagined, into hierarchies of traits including intelligence (or moral hierarchies, or aesthetic hierarchies, given the right narrative). Texts can flatter the reader, the author(s), and the communities they share by virtue of having engaged with the same text, and by distribution of the values associated with that text. Conversely, we should also acknowledge the capacity for mental work performed by audiences following a narrative – from puzzle films to their crime fiction predecessors – as potentially exercising and developing mental feats which have pragmatic use in our daily lives, including social problem-solving. Stories can probably both make us more intelligent, and make us *feel* more intelligent.

Another curious narrative experience that allows us to feel clever is the prediction of correct ways to respond to a given text, often positively reinforced by setups and payoffs. For example, we have probably all experienced being seated in the cinema next to someone who laughs outrageously, forecasts oncoming events from blatant signposts, or names the affect associated with a sequence – "isn't that sad" – demonstrating that they know the correct way to respond to a narrative's cues. This is a version of the mere-exposure effect, first documented by Gustav Fechner in 1876, and comprehensively researched by Robert Zajonc in the 1960s:

> People seem to misattribute their increased perceptual fluency – their improved ability to process the triangle or the picture or the melody – not to the prior experience, but to some quality of the object itself. Instead of thinking: "I've seen that triangle before, that's

why I know it," they seem to think: "Gee, I like that triangle. It makes me feel clever."
(Margulis np)

Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis asserts that this is why we enjoy repetition in music, and also that "repetition serves as a handprint of human intent" (np). Reacting in the way a narrative elicits – and in some cases demonstrating affect contrary to that which a narrative attempts to invoke – can make us feel intelligent, socially included, comforted by the "flow" of ingrained readership practices (in the Csíkszentmihályi sense), satisfied with one's own performance as reader or spectator, reassured by the corroboration of recognised rules, traditions and symbols, and perhaps satisfied that we can trust the narrator. Thus we also use story to **engage in ritual**. Story can be seen as having a function like innumerable other rituals performed with others: it can comfort or reinscribe values with procedural scripts and provides social cohesion. It solaces by allowing us not to have to worry about what to do in a given circumstance – we know how to proceed through a narrative, just as we know the expected procedures at a funeral, not necessarily because they have inherent meaning, but because they provide a succouring script which circumnavigates the discomfort of having to manage both one's independent actions and grief simultaneously.

In Whitehouse's distinction between imagistic and doctrinal modes of group cohesion, ritualised story behaviours may be an imagistic method to make us feel fused with others undergoing the same narrative experience: "The impression of sharing subtle or hidden meanings of the ritual experience is thought to contribute to high levels of identity fusion among participants. We call this the 'imagistic mode' of group cohesion" (284-285). This could apply where we perceive that we share special access to the particulars of a text, from collective knowledge of genre tropes or broadly applied media knowledge (such as cultural references), to identification of small innovations or deviations within a text, and subtle reactive behaviours the reader of the text may exhibit to their fellows during engagement. However, people use ritualised narrative in different ways: one cinemagoer may attend twice a year, another may routinize their participation to a weekly event or an appreciation society. As narrative appreciation involves procedural scripts – ways we are supposed to respond and act – participation, in this case, also involves some doctrinally ritualistic qualities. It is not surprising that the more we participate in a ritual (such as attendance at a regular event, a reading group, a songwriting club, or cheap cinema Tuesdays), the more trust and cooperation will be generated with people we see undergoing the same experience.

However, the ritual aspect of story offers more than a Durkheimian social organisation or reinforcement. In Victor Turner's interpretation, story is a liminoid experience that depicts and mimics liminal experience, and is perhaps proliferating in the post-industrial world (our story addiction again) as a means to make up for a lack of liminal ritual in our lives. He argues that genres in entertainment and theatre can be:

> historically continuous with ritual, and possess something of the sacred seriousness, even the "rites de passage" structure of their antecedents. Nevertheless, crucial differences separate the structure, function, style, scope, and symbology of the liminal in "tribal and agrarian ritual and myth" from what we may perhaps call the "liminoid," or leisure genres, of symbolic forms and action in complex, industrial societies. ("Liminal to Liminoid" 72)

Turner has analogised ritual at all levels of society with theatre, noting the social drama characterising both: breach, schism, redress and reintegration (*From Ritual to Theatre*). Redress is a critical moment of possibility emulating the space before and after a ritualised experience, whereby the individual is put into a kind of crisis, becomes no longer whole, unresolved, and must move through the upheaval to find a new resolved self.[57] Stories are the "play" or "leisure" or "non-serious" version of such a crisis, thus liminoid. Returning to our exemplary loud audience member introduced above, the demonstrative and performative acts within a theatre audience reveal a presumption of communitas at the time of engagement: the supposed equality of spectators during their common experience in proceeding through a narrative together seems to permit acknowledgement of the common experience, and perhaps a desire to resolve its inherent upset (or "drama") socially. The process of acknowledging an affective-procedural unity chimes with both Whitehouse's cohesive and Turner's antagonising conceptions of ritual. Thereafter, narratives can offer us an apparent way to resolve the crisis, tools to resolve it, or leave us hanging within the liminal emulation – all have their place.

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[57] Redress recalls the vulnerability and humility of humanism covered in the first chapter. Another means of communication that might provoke a similar affective openness is the "deep and meaningful" conversation (colloquially abbreviated as D&M). A film like Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) attempts to demonstrate the similarities between the liminoid space of a story and these exploratory, risk-taking conversations, in which the world seems alive with philosophical possibility while one is unbound. *Before Sunrise* maps the experience of a D&M onto a film narrative.

A particular kind of ritual outlined above deserves special recognition: **story as rite of passage introduces a subsequent bartering of control via access to narrative**. Arnold van Gennep's early musings on the rite of passage ritual inspired Turner to expand on the liminal in broader ritualised settings, yet what is of interest to us here is what happens *around* this particular ritual rather than its actual procedure. Stories, where constructed as rites of passage, are negotiated as maturity markers. For example, parents often withhold certain media from their children until they reach a certain age. This can be regulated at a political level through governmentally recognised ratings systems and enforced by retailers or admissions staff. The rite of passage may then be used as a tool to haggle power and identity formation: some children, for example, will attempt to see films containing content their parents do not want them to witness before permission is granted, thus the story becomes a device for parent, child and state to negotiate the development of the child's agency.

Character and Identity

The relationship between ritual and identity suggests another major inroad to narrative pleasure for a majority of audiences: character identification. We **articulate our identities through character comparisons**, often subliminally throughout a lifetime's absorption of reiterated identity handles across media; and simultaneously we enter the very familiar ground of identity politics. Media theorists such as bell hooks and Douglas Kellner have attempted to demonstrate just how far the pedagogical function of cultural artefacts, such as film, extends. Perhaps, they suggest, identity options gleaned from media narratives are more ingrained than any attempted complication of such narratives in formalised education. Hooks presumes a primacy of media content above other means for identity formation: "my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read" (*Reel to Real* 3). One question that can be asked about these identity politics, however, is how much an individual film or product is able to tell us about identity formation. That is, close readings of texts can neglect the influence of media saturation or cultivation, and likewise the values that percolate in peer groups and at home, the influence of which could explain more about our lives and behaviour than the content of the texts themselves; this casts some doubt over a more traditional text-based

hermeneutics. For now, we should keep these contextual considerations in mind when we approach identity politics.

If, as hooks suggests, we choose to identify with fictional characters before we identify with the moral dialogue the characters spur, then media fictions have powerful ethical agency. But there are other possibilities: audiences can also be more conversant with rather than receptive of identity markers. Theodor Adorno, for instance, sees all forms of identification as reductive constructs and therefore focuses instead on what he calls non-identities in *Negative Dialectics*. Once established, we tend to be drawn to question the efficaciousness and validity of apparent identity reductions such as, for example, our blackness or whiteness, maleness or femaleness; these discussions of validity are subsumed into the ethical dialogue identity handles introduce. This tension is recognised by writers as diverse as Murray Smith, in *Engaging Characters*, and Jane Stadler, who submits the possibility of a more reflexive "ethical gaze" (211, 215) and a film's ethical "afterlife" (2): the effects of our ethical attention to character may echo in a Riceourian fashion beyond our conscious investment in the story itself at the time of engagement. For Charles Taylor, identity *is* a story about our moral orientation and its mutability, "similar to orientation in physical space" (*Sources of the Self* 48). Constructs, reductions to conceptual scripts, and the ease of ethical determination and action these scripts provide must have some utility to be in such widespread use. Identity may be a helpful reasoning shortcut to avoid decision paralysis if we had to weigh every decision based on ideals of the self and the other constructed in each instance. Martha Nussbaum, in fact, sees the identification process as essential to theory of mind, reason and empathy:

> The narrative imagination is not uncritical: for we always bring ourselves and our own judgments to the encounter with another, and when we identify with a character in a novel, or a distant person whose life story we imagine, we inevitably will not merely identify, we will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations. But the first step of understanding the world from the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible act of judgment. ("Education for Citizenship" 299)

The reductive nature of identity description promotes coherence by which we then have a tangible other to identify and empathise with, but this also means we have to decide when identity handles become too reductive, or "typified" beyond reason, and when they misinform us about human complexity and otherness. This is a debate reaching all parts of our lives. Its

foundational presumptions and complication may occur in our homes and amongst family and peers as much as it does in media. It will have sociobiological and dispositional components. Consumers also talk back to media producers when they foreground certain identity handles at the expense of others. Some scholarship presumes that audiences do not have awareness of the character types our media trades in, but a sexist, for example, may be acutely aware of reductive or essentialised notions of a male and female type, and yet still subscribe to those notions, being less aware of precisely how their thinking about those types produces biases. Humanistic narrative, cultural scholarship (like that of hooks), and narrativised methods for mapping the experience of others (like phenomenological ethnography) are not just an exercise in promoting awareness of the types we use, they instead extend to awareness of our biases around those types. A narrative's trajectory can reveal the biases evident in both our view of others and our self-schemas.

As well as ordering and informing our own personality and aspirations, sometimes having characters we identify with onscreen can make us feel like the person we are is okay, as our pre-existing self-concepts are recognised; through representation, we are implicitly accepted by an external party (and in this way, we identify too with a presumed author). When we read a book and identify with the protagonist, for instance, we might feel comforted that the values that make up our self-schema are shared. We might also **broadcast our self-schemas using the stories we like**. For instance, the books on our bookshelf introduce other people to our chosen identities – even books we have not read can sit on our shelves to tell a grander story about our own self-schema.

None of this is to suggest that it does not matter who we identify with, or that the moral dialogue and cohesion available in character identification should be seen as an ethical end in itself. John H. Lichter and David W. Johnson's seminal 1969 research showing prejudice reduction in children exposed to multiethnic story characters was corroborated by Phyllis A. Katz and Sue R. Zalk in 1978, who went on to show that exposure to a 15-minute story featuring African-American characters was possibly more effective at reducing bias than superordinate goals, and the effects were still observable four months after the exposure. If this is what storytellers are capable of, there is, then, an ethical imperative to expand the bounds of representation past those known handles an audience may ordinarily choose to identify with. The humanist storyteller might strive to circumnavigate the demand-driven marketplace for stories already known to the audience, with easy identification handles, and

wherever possible represent multiple others their audience is less likely to have contact with (so especially minorities). In summary, identity is a series of reductions by which our moral selves and choices are made comprehensible, electable, and governable, yet their inherently reductive nature introduces moral debate and a humanistic imperative not just to complicate types, but the complex processes by which we attach to biases around those types. This will include representation of a range of characters of varied backgrounds in fiction.

While on the subject of perspective taking, we also use narrative **to vicariously roleplay**. In addition to character identification, we live through characters' experiences of events that we would never be party to, and observe behaviours we ourselves would never perform. To witness someone else perform an exciting other life is a pleasure that can be different from mere identification, as it does not necessarily rely on us feeling like – or even wanting to *be* like – a protagonist. This principle can be extended to personality traits we do not covet, but enjoy imagining what it might be like to live with: most of us do not want to be as bloodthirsty or ill-tempered as an action hero, for example, but still enjoy the simulation of someone else's experience of these traits. If a function of fiction is to play out alternate realities, courses of action and moral responses, then there may be a particular kind of pleasure in adopting the perspective of a character who leads us somewhere new, simply as they behave in ways we would never condone; such a simulation could reinforce the reasonableness of our own moral actions by showing us the consequences of poorer alternatives, for instance. That this is somewhat a vicarious version of roleplay, without attendant fantasies of real-life imitation, complicates notions of pure identification or mimesis. Any line between observing values in fiction and absorbing those values needs to be very carefully drawn. We also cannot forget the pleasure the actor can take in playing a role, or that a nonactor may take when playfully adopting a storied role among friends (think of a *How to Host a Murder Party* game), or indeed any kind of performative gesture we enjoy with others, however fleeting.

This points to the experience of video gamers, as roleplaying a character or avatar is a convention most games rely upon. Fears of the loss of human identity or posthuman claims of an identity fusion between consumer and medium have followed past media developments, right back to the notion of the camera apparatus stealing one's soul, and Charlie Chaplin becoming one with the machinery of *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936). These qualms continue to shift focus to new media as it arrives, such as video gaming today (see the essays

in Jahn-Sudmann and Stockmann *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon*), and similar horrors of posthuman identity fusion with machines are played out in films like *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) and television series such as *Black Mirror*. But in order to take seriously these fears of a loss of identity, we need to ignore the vicarious nature of storied roleplay, in that it is still a social storied act, an authored world created for others to consume with parameters that delineate the extent of the possibilities for an avatar's action, and therefore restrain free identification. Histrionics centred on the boundaries of the human under threat prevent us from being specific about the changing nature of cognitive engagement in new media forms, and the narrative relationship between developers and their audiences.

On the other hand, we still seek stories that **affirm ideological positions to justify our own lives and beliefs**. Instead of engaging in narrative to explore different moral identities, attitudes or outcomes, it has long been noted that we seek out stories that flatter or justify pre-existing dispositions (producing effects such as confirmation bias). When we discuss fiction's relative ability to change hearts and minds, this is the question that is often silently addressed: whether or not one's self-schema is able to be touched, and whether or not our purposeful engagement with fiction as self-flattery diminishes its power to reach us. However, surely fiction is capable of both reifying prior beliefs as well as sowing the seeds of doubt, if not subverting our ideologies unhindered.[58] In an observation of Leon Trotsky's (120), which subsequently became a popular maxim of early documentary filmmaker and theorist John Grierson (qtd. in Ellis 236), art is not a mirror but a hammer. Not only can it be used to "shape society" as such, it is by repetition and reiteration that the values imparted in the narrative arts are absorbed. Especially in experimental media studies, we often run the risk of privileging singular fictional engagement above the longitudinal study of repetition in storied cultures. Perhaps single narratives tell us less than trends. On the other hand, I am certain that most can recall a number of powerful moments in narratives that have left them shaken, and opened a liminal space where they were at least able to question their ideologies; some may seek this narrative experience more than others. It remains, however, that much of the time we seek narratives that will complement our prevailing belief systems.

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[58] For more on the moral functions of fiction, see below under *Symbolic Memory, Social Roles and Ethics.*

The ability of stories to reinforce self-schemas also points toward **narrative's function as status marker**. For some, engagement with a particular narrative artform – for example opera or ballet – will also be used to broadcast their social standing. This is not to dispute enjoyment of that art, but merely to point out that the narratives we choose can be a status marker like any other accoutrement we use to display our social class, our allegiance to and even solidarity with that class. From Thorstein Veblen's recognition of the wilfully "conspicuous" or performative nature of consumption in 1899's *Theory of the Leisure Class* to Quentin Bell's *On Human Finery* in 1947, many have noted that fashion tells a story of one's class, and likewise so do story choices. It is not just the medium or form itself that speaks of our status, but particular narratives within a medium too – we might want people to know that we enjoy arthouse movies because they tell of our access to education, or Adam Sandler movies because they tell of our solidarity with another class of presumed audience members. These underlying narrative engagement signifiers introduce a subtextual level of communication that becomes evident when we analyse the symbolism associated with various media. I now turn to address the utility of such symbols.

Proximity and Refraction

Character and identity clearly entail an interpretive push and pull for the audience, the examination of which reveals a close and often overlapping relationship between literal and symbolic representations of humanness; in turn we might ask what function the abstraction of symbolism performs for us in narrative. In symbolic representation, we can **displace discursive candour to a safer allegorical realm** when dealing with sensitive interpersonal matters. Writer/director John Sayles's 1999 film *Limbo* reconsiders all manner of storytelling activities, including his own role as a filmmaker, through a matrix of inconclusive narratives: not only does his own film end in the middle of a survival crisis, the conclusion of which would have told us the correct response to the situation, the film features multiple nested stories, many ethically stimulating, which reach no conclusion – a challenge to our need for ethical closure and certitude. Moreover, many of the characters use open-ended stories to talk about their lives analogically, rather than directly. A primary example is the fiction Noelle (Vanessa Martínez) crafts in an attempt to convey her emotional problems to mother Donna (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). Says Sayles: "Sometimes the storytelling just takes her and sometimes she looks at her mother and just lays it out, especially the angry parts. She could

not have those literal conversations with her mother, but she can tell those stories" (West and West 30). In this realm of vague allegory, it is possible to hurt others, but it is also possible to avoid hurting them too much with directness or candour – and perhaps the ambiguity of the act opens the possibility of finding new answers to our personal problems.[59] Sonya Dal Cin et al., for example, argue in "Narrative Persuasion and Overcoming Resistance" that fictional stories may be especially persuasive for those who hold strong countervailing attitudes, not only because the ideas embedded in a story are implied rather than explicitly stated, but because the simulation demanded by stories leaves few resources for counterarguing. Perhaps this rhetorical technique could be extended to a pedagogical function, too. One might teach fictionalised versions of events in films like *Capote* (Bennett Miller, 2005) or *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard, 2008) to journalism or history students, or use the teaching of humanistic literature and cinema to convey prosocial notions without having to state them so directly that students may balk or be otherwise put off (one foundational premise in educational English studies from the 19th century onwards). To be told explicitly of these things outside of narrative might be less appealing, and even be received as a kind of condescension. It is also a way to reach those students who are more predisposed toward narrative transportation (Dal Cin et al. 186) in addition to those who value a more directly discursive learning. In a way, the discursive refraction of narrative can actively hide persuasive and informative intent if an audience is primed against these functions; so stories provide a way to reach people through allegory or other refractive devices, who may not be as receptive to direct communication.

Katz and Zalk's research ("Modification of Children's Racial Attitudes") suggests that perhaps the psychological distance and sense of control afforded by mediated perspective taking may in some cases be more beneficial for empathy production than working cooperatively with outgroup members or superordinate goals (Mar and Oatley 181). So **generating emotional distance by which social relationships seem more manageable** may be another function of storytelling, which in turn may generate empathy. If this is the

[59] Narratives can provide an affective distance, in that we notice the emotions a narrative incites but we are removed from them because of their fictive quality, and so we are provided an opportunity to reflect on rather than react to negative affect such as fear or grief; this may bear similarity to the benefits of mindfulness. Narrative arts can provide relief by expressing emotional subtleties we are unable to communicate ourselves, providing a sense of stability, control, and unity that may make us feel more equipped to approach our own problems anew. The paradox is that when we feel emotionally proximate to others (the storyteller, other audience members, or a broader presumption of human unity the text inspires) we may feel more distance from – or less captivated or dictated by – our own emotions.

case, perhaps through stories **we rehearse care responses to others in a controllable fictive environment**, so rather than relying on a spontaneous direct empathy when encountering another, we may be ready with a procedural empathic script to reach for, based upon identity handles gleaned from media or story. Consider the case of sentimental, sensational or Romantic story modes, as well as Peter Brooks and Ben Singer's works on the complexities of the melodrama: the emotional excesses on show (and the intended audience's mirroring of characters' internal states) could be a rehearsal of care responses to others. Rehearsing responses, which occur in the safe space of narrative, not only primes empathy, but its increased familiarity could make us feel more in control of, and less threatened by, our responses to unfamiliar others or the inherent vulnerability required to navigate human differences in a social world.

On the other hand, explicatory accounts of a fictive character's psychology and identity allow us to **simulate a direct access to mental states**. The kind of private information we are afforded to a fictive character moves far beyond that which we would have in life. We use such insight into inner worlds to make inferences about how people operate. As emphasised by Mar and Oatley throughout "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience", this is story as practical shorthand for describing social fabrics. Proximity to a character's thoughts and the social fabric it describes, however, need not be opposed to allegorical refraction: we can tell an internal narrative with expository prose that both describes a thought process and still entertains symbolist readings (Moss-Wellington "Affecting Profundity" 53-57).

Similarly, stories can offer **a simulated experience of authenticity or direct access to a truth** that is not internal or personal. In *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life*, alternative economist David Boyle contradicts writers like Thomas de Zengotita (*Mediated*) in claiming that, despite the march of pervasive mediation and exposure to artifice across an increasingly virtualised globe, there is a strong, collective and instinctive pull in the opposite direction toward a principle we may feel necessary, even while we cannot quite define its precise nature or its value to ourselves: this is authenticity. He writes: "Despite the possibilities of cosmetic pharmacology, despite the conveniences of virtual communities or the demands of the market, the possibility of inconveniently human relationships with real people won't somehow slip unnoticed out of our lives" (Boyle 202-203). The concept of an unmediated real is the site of resistance to conglomerates masquerading as individuals,

embedding advertorial narratives in news media, product placement in entertainment media, or even concocting creative fictions of their own that sit unnoticed alongside non-commercially motivated arts, like a Disney mural comingling with the work of a local graffiti or street artist. These paranarratives goad us to think of and respond to their originary institutions as acquaintances and friends, often using social media to blur the lines between friendship and information exchange on the one hand, and public relations, advertorial, personalised commodification, and brand enthrallment on the other. While Boyle focuses on the way in which businesses motivate ideals of purer humanness – and even the symbols of counter-culture and rebellion become owned by a handful of companies (ibid. 122) – we can also look at story as a linked component: neither stories nor businesses are corporeal entities capable of registering pleasure or pain, but they both attempt to connect with us in a way that feels like real human connection.

So if we do need to assess the authenticity value of narratives, how can this be achieved? In making such assessments we begin with a definitional problem, in that different notions of authenticity are applied to different entities. Take food production, for example. The food that reaches us has gone through a variety of human mediations: planting, tending, harvesting, packaging, and transportation, all of which can be subject to analysis of relative artificiality. Evaluating authenticity in food production, then, has more to do with the *amount* of processes the food has been through and how synthesised they are (for example, the chemical compounds involved in each process), and in some cases, the newness of these procedures stands in for our evaluation of how artificial they are. This has been the case from the publication of Carlo Petrini's *Slow Food Manifesto* in 1989 right up to today's Palaeolithic Diet. Thus food authenticity standards, and the narratives of purity they rely on, are different from the standards by which we evaluate a business or a story or even an individual. The authenticity of an individual, for example, usually describes how beholden they are to inauthentic culture (divisive claims of this kind have been made by philosophers including Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Nietzsche). Contrariwise, the authenticity of a business is often motivated by claims about its size, locality and processes. Following from this conceptualisation of corporate authenticity, the extent of collaboration on a product can, perhaps unfairly, be used to assess its legitimacy – and this is true of stories, too. In film studies, auteur theory bridges the authenticity claims between business and story, as figures such as Andrew Sarris emphasise the quality of directorial "dominance" (246). Sarris suggests that in any filmmaking context the authoritative ideas of a singular individual will be more

valuable than ideas developed and expressed by an egalitarian group without "dominance." The absurdity of the claim is revealed when we apply the same concept to any other field outside of the arts: we may ask whether such a dominance by one figure in the family, in a government, or indeed a business, reduces or expands the quantity and quality – or the authentic legitimacy – of ideas and output. Our notions of authenticity, then, are often contradictory and mutable depending on the object of evaluation, providing uneasy foundations from which to ask how we assess the legitimacy of a given narrative.

That said, the longing for authenticity is completely understandable as the "strategic responsiveness" (Brants 24) of tailored content becomes more prevalent (c.f. Davies *Flat Earth News*), media becomes redundantly fawning (c.f. Zengotita *Mediated*) in order to get to the real business of selling us a product, and media engagement becomes ubiquitous and inescapable across our daily routines. We want to have trust in storytellers, our facilitators of social dialogue, with good reason: not only is higher social trust linked to health outcomes (Barefoot et al.; Subramanian et al.), as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett point out, "Trust is of course an important ingredient in any society, but it becomes essential in modern developed societies with a high degree of interdependence" (214). This is why stories can embed a claim on authenticity to comfort an audience, to affect trustworthiness. Yet trust is not uncomplicated, either. Mistrust can be both a healthy and reasoned component in our interactions with the media, and those interests the media selectively represents (Schudson "Would Journalism Please Hold Still"). It is no coincidence that the erosion of perceived trustworthiness in authority figures and their channels of representation (Peters and Broersma passim) is correlated with an increase in elite wealth concentration and inequality across the globe (Wilkinson and Pickett passim); as power is consolidated, we have good reason for a generalised media scepticism. But this does not mean that mistrust will always be directed toward the most harmful storytellers or institutions (the Trump phenomenon is a disastrous case in point). Some see the genesis of prejudice as a historical biological imperative to mistrust strangers and outsiders, a heritable trait that helped our ancestors protect against pathogens and parasites within the village community (Schaller "Parasites, Behavioral Defenses").[60] In a largely urbanised globe, traits once adaptive in the village community are gradually, collectively reassessed through cultural mediation. Perhaps this is

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[60] A meta-analysis of 24 studies examining the association between the behavioural immune system (including an amplified response to stimuli provoking disgust, for some translating as sociomoral disgust) and social conservatism confirmed a correlation (Terrizzi et al. "The Behavioral Immune System and Social Conservatism").

an important part of the re-evaluative process we are addressing through narrative: reassessment of the conditions of a reasonable trust in others is part of our cultural evolution. Kees Brants wrote ominously of journalistic media, "If trust is the glue of social relations and the medicine for restoring or establishing cohesion in a society in a midlife crisis, then we are slightly in trouble. Trust is a necessity for the contribution of politics and media to a well-functioning and legitimate democracy" (26). In emphasising the value of critical inquiry, perhaps scholars can overlook its complication – scepticism and scrutiny must be balanced with the human need for public trust, a comfort that authenticity narratives provide, in journalism as in fiction.

Despite all this, it is sobering to remember that at times we genuinely need media to represent the real. Our daily choices have international consequences, and we require information sources at least attempting objectivity *and* an enlightened perspective on the information to know how to behave, considering the frightening array of ethical decisions we now confront in the developed world. So we rely on shortcuts of reasoning to assess believability and reliability of sources and information, which is reasonable, as we cannot spend our whole lives researching each source. That is, breeding more critical thought, which might be seen as a key pedagogical goal within the humanities, does not solve the problem of our inherent need for information and stories to trust. Stressing the political efficacy of public trust in media, Stephen Coleman et al. admit, "we need to be able to rely upon the reputation of the reporter without having to check and recheck every single account that is given to us" (4). The falsification problem of proliferated informational sources online breeds its own makeshift solutions. Many of the shortcuts we might take to trusting a source are aesthetic, which is a great contemporary dilemma: the creators best at understanding the politics of representing reality need not have a premium on authenticity or truth. For example, as Monroe Lefkowitz et al. demonstrated, we appear to place greater trust in people wearing suits ("Status Factors in Pedestrian Violation of Traffic Signals"); perhaps likewise with handheld camerawork, exploiting our recollection of documentary footage, or an internet site with a minimum of design errors (Bierhoff 49). In fact, it is quite likely the only difference between these creators is that the credible-appearing source could afford the means to affect more expensive representations of truthfulness – that is, they purchased credibility. This is a worry. Increasingly, one of the moral-societal dilemmas of the information revolution appears to be how we will choose to trust representations of reality. Knowledge of this problem is naturally going to make us suspicious of anything that appears to buy our trust by emulating

reality. Affecting outsider status through carefully constructed aesthetic "error" may connote a reaction against this problem, but it does not solve the twin dilemmas of authenticity and the need for public trust.

Any humanist hermeneutics, then, must take into account a human social need for public trust, iterated in authenticity narratives, whenever we stress a generalised benefit to some manner of sceptical or media-critical thought; yet such readings must also acknowledge how these needs are exploitable through narrative. We might even use this understanding to reclaim hermeneutic interest in the functional intent of authors and conglomerates, rather than omit motivation entirely from our readings to elude intentional fallacy.

Manipulation and Power Relations

Authenticity and trust in particular encapsulate some key concerns regarding narrative's use in power relations and governance. So we can use story both **to trade in manipulations, and derive comfort from our trust in storytellers and their manipulations**. I could easily have said that we use story to manipulate others here, but that does not tell the whole story. As we have already covered, there is a certain comfort in merely knowing how to react to a narrative – to respond in the ways the narrative asks us to. We are willing participants in the manipulations endemic to all storytelling, and the security we derive from responding to a story in the manner the story elicits must be recognised. This is a kind of trust, and is closely related to feelings of "oneness" or closeness to others when we come closer to responding as one. When, as an adult, we watch the latest computer animated family film from a major studio such as Pixar, we are familiar with the conventions that manipulate us and want to, in some way, give ourselves over to them – a thoughtful family weepy like *Inside Out* (Peter Docter, 2015) would not work without such complicity. When one browses a beauty magazine, one can be aware of the ways in which they are being manipulated, and yet still enjoy the process of responding to manipulative (and photographically manipulated) images with exactly the kind of receptivity prompted by its marketers. Evidence abounds for the cross-cultural absorption of unrealistic body image norms (Yan and Bissell "The Globalization of Beauty"; Jung and Lee "Cross-Cultural Examination of Women's Fashion and Beauty Magazine Advertisements") and contradictory messages (Duncan and Klos "Paradoxes of the Flesh") in beauty and fashion journalism; these

magazines are not without harm, but perhaps we should still comprehend the reader-viewer as an agent that is more conversant with the material. The reader-viewer can either wilfully overlook the manipulation in order to reach a neuroaesthetic relationship with the images unburdened by consumer consciousness, or keep the psychological damage of airbrushed figures always in mind while appreciating a particular fantasy of heavily mediated beauty attainable through advertised products. In any case, fashion and beauty magazines contain aesthetic and storied manipulation that is desired, sought out and paid for.

The uses of story for manipulative purposes are so multifaceted that I cannot cover them all here, and on this much has already been written – dissecting power relations is the purview of countless scholarly disciplines. However I do want to illuminate one important concept for humanist studies, as I believe it is an important concept to remember, and that is debt manipulation. Many manipulative acts depend on erection of a psychical debt (consider the flow of gifts from public relations agencies to media outlets or the bartering of physical and verbal affection between parent and child), and similarly, an unarticulated debt can be erected through a range of narrative acts. Thus **the inherent antagonism of storytelling – in that it seeks to provoke – is a kind of gift**, and as such involves a fundamental reciprocity (sometimes even a price of admission). In fact, at times we purchase or create stories for one another *as* gifts. Thus the act of storytelling bears striking resemblance to many power dynamics present in gift giving, elaborated in *The Question of the Gift*, a 2002 cross-disciplinary volume edited by Mark Osteen. Barry Schwartz's summary of such power dynamics in "The Social Psychology of the Gift" can also be extended to story as gift. He considers the gift as imposing identity on recipients, broadcasting a giver's identity, using this identity mediation as a method to control others, generating the debt of gratitude, establishing group boundaries and social rank, and guilt atonement or abatement for the giver; all of these functions, including the coercive functions, can contribute to tacit social contracts that help us relate, but can also be abused.

Not only are stories and their perspectives gifts in themselves, stories can work to create a sense of indebtedness to others within their diegesis. Even when presenting, say, a piece of social realism which encourages us to consider the lives of those less fortunate, the authors and distributors of the work have attempted to provoke the idea that we owe something to another. I call this "unarticulated" debt, as any exact parameters concerning what is expected of us in correcting the balance sheet of inter-responsibility are not defined

within the narrative, and debt manipulation can be much more powerful this way. In some films, too, desired audience actions are clearly articulated, prescribing a moral course of action, as with more directly political cinema. Consider the conclusion of a film like *Fair Game* (Doug Liman, 2010) in which Joseph C. Wilson (Sean Penn) lectures an audience about democratic participation and the responsibility of all citizens to question powerful interests.[61] When we speak of generating care or consideration for the other, we should always keep this idea of debt manipulation in mind in order to understand how stories may operate in shifting our perspective and hopefully our behaviour. I am also using this concept to reveal that there are varieties of manipulation we achieve through story that are socially acceptable, mutually performed, ethically dynamic and even desirable.

Stories are undoubtedly commoditised using such power dynamics, but there may be danger in assuming there is no alternative to the storied gift as coercion and control. Despite popular theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu advising "that giving gifts involves bad faith, that we lie to ourselves by choosing to ignore or forget our calculation of self-interest" (Osteen 16) and imploring us to focus exclusively on their power dynamics, it must be noted that Marcel Mauss himself (author of the inciting 1925 work *The Gift*) conjectured that gifts could also include genuinely altruistic motivation in a matrix of impetuses, calculated and otherwise. As Jonathan Parry put it, "Mauss repeatedly stresses a combination of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint, in the gift" (456). There is also no reason we cannot see many instances of gifted story within the framework of David Graeber's everyday communism, or the economy of reciprocity underlying many of our most basic transactions, "small courtesies" transferring particularised skills, knowledge and objects, or even responding to the extreme need of a stranger, to which no debt is attached (Graeber 97). So while we remain aware of the ways in which the storied gift is used to generate indebtedness and activate control mechanisms, we can also admit the prospect of

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[61] This kind of polemic in narrative is in disrepute, perhaps unfairly – fiction workers are often chided for telling an audience explicitly what to do or think. Some writers, however, have explicitly lambasted the "show don't tell" rule espoused by screenwriting gurus like Robert McKee and Syd Field (Mesce "Myth #5: Show Don't Tell"). Similarly, Claudia Puig's review of *Lions for Lambs* demonstrates the shifting priorities of film journalism, which decrees politics a lesser function to "entertainment": "the film feels preachy and falls flat as entertainment" (np) she says. Perhaps, on occasion, narratives suggesting a course of action can be more helpful than the generation of unarticulated psychical debt, provided the action is reasonable and thought-through. Expository dialogue or politicised direct address point to another usage of such narratives: the exegetic work of fiction.

those circumstances where one may be motivated to unconditionally "gift" a story out of care for the recipient or interest in their wellbeing, even where the storyteller experiences secondary benefits such as the pleasure of performativity.

Unarticulated debt and the power dynamics of gift giving point to **story's function as a regulatory tool and a mediator of group behaviours – yet also story's simultaneous ability to demonstrate transgression against mediation**. The development of more complex moral codes seems to coincide with a gradual increase in the size of local and extended communities throughout human history. Larger group sizes required greater social coordination, which meant enforcement of codes and social norms to maintain group cohesion (to borrow the terms from Durkheim's *Division of Labour in Society*, this is a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity). As Prinz puts it, moral "rules are as varied as the problems" (405) and so increases in population density produce an increase in social problems to be managed, which in turn produces greater complexity of moral codes for dispute management, whether enforced by custom or governance. By the time of global urbanism, proximate populations are so diverse and interactive that they no longer extensively agree on many of these moral codes.[62] So at first, stories may provide avenues for moral regulation, such as cautionary tales, but they also accumulate use in transgressing against and questioning prevailing moral codes as population density increases. The prevalence of fictive story in contemporary urban routines may be explained by an amplified need for discussion and mediation of mutual morality and governance as social problems change. From the private sermon of yesteryear to the broadcast evangelism of today, stories, then, are often intended to influence the way a group behaves. Many hope for influence or ideological contagion spreading far beyond the initial, listening audience. Along with story's clear utility as a regulator and mediator of group behaviours, other storytellers have found a way to use the same function as a rebellion against such mediation. Trash cinema, such as the work of John Waters, is one such example, along with other avant-gardists and counter-cultural icons across media, from Alfred Jarry to Frank Zappa. At the same time these artists demonstrate another kind of rebellion in the face of serious, moral and proscriptive narrative: story's function as play.

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[62] C.f. Hans-Peter Müller's disruption of Durkheim's somewhat utopian notions of advanced moral cooperation in "Social Differentiation and Organic Solidarity."

Fantasy, Imagination and Play

Imaginative capacities have thus far been a recurring theme, connecting as they do to our ability to concoct fictions. As imagination appears key to so many other narrative functions, I now turn to the use of story **to flex our imagination, and to play**. Murray Smith considers that fiction may have developed as an evolutionary by-product of learning to imagine. He writes:

> to imagine: one thing that sets us apart from other species is our ability to simulate, in our minds, circumstances which we might encounter, or indeed which we have encountered in the past. And in doing so, we are able to rehearse how things might go in circumstances we have not actually experienced. The imagination, in other words, enhances our foresight and supercharges our ability to plan; and it is not hard to see how this improves our fitness in the environment of human action. ("Darwin and the Directors" 259)

Thus imagination is a pivotal part of the storytelling act from which many other functions may arise. One of these is the intrinsic drive to the cognitive developments afforded by play, as Boyd suggests in *On the Origin of Stories* (passim).[63] Subsequently, there is also a direct application of the imagination to find solutions to environmental challenges. The imaginative expansion offered by play crucially also guides moral development, and is therefore relevant to pedagogical theory. Introducing a narrative-focussed edition of the *Journal of Moral Education*, Carol Witherell notes the concomitance of education, imagination, morality and narrative: "To educate in the moral realm is to enter the world of imagination as well as judgement" (239). Understanding when developmental imaginative acts should be free and explorative (as in noninterventionist play) and when they should be guided (as in moral education) relies on a concept of imaginative reciprocity. Sometimes when elders extend themselves into the imaginative openness of the child's world of play, we can see a reciprocal

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[63] Theorists including Boyd and Joseph D. Anderson insist on story as a kind of play that extends beyond sensorimotor development and into further cognitive feats, adult activity and lifelong engagement with narrative; their arguments find support in the earlier work of Jean Piaget (*Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*), as well as Sue Taylor Parker and Michael L. McKinney (*Origins of Intelligence*). Since Johan Huizinga's formative text *Homo Ludens*, theorists from Boyd to Roger Caillois have advanced notions of play as the foundations of human culture.

connection that yields surprisingly gratifying results: think of the innovation on themes of childhood development and play in computer-animated films from *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) to *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001), and *Despicable Me* (Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud, 2010) to *Inside Out*. Part of what is affecting about these films is the imaginative "reaching out" between intergenerational worlds, our concept of the film's workers admitting that imaginative and moral development are never over, and thus they find surprising new ways to tell stories. The construction of digitised characters that feel so well rounded, for example, is a feat of the human imagination – an imagination centred on the recognition of many social components working together.[64]

Moral development's dependence on imagination does not end when we reach a certain age. Metaphysical wordsmith, songwriter and cartoonist Peter Blegvad writes in his song "King Strut": "Imagination, like a muscle, will increase with exercise / King Strut developed his by having dreams and telling lies." The titular character's capacity for playfully imaginative storytelling eventually leads him to concoct effective political solutions to social ills. One of his many examples of the power of story as play, Blegvad uses both cartoons and songs as metaphysical games, the fun of which can provide stimulating uplift and potentially challenge the boundaries between imaginative acts and their real-life applications. He once said of his incompatibility with more "serious" songwriters: "People who take themselves very seriously make me giggle; it's a problem of mine. Of course, if they're pointing a weapon at me or my loved ones, I don't giggle. That's why I giggle when they're not, because I expect that's the sort of person who one day will. So before they're armed, I get my giggle in" (Blegvad np). Even Blegvad's defence of a playful disposition deconstructs itself playfully, and points to a mortal counterpoint his sense of play grapples with. His works are unabashedly metaphysical in theme (akin to puzzle films in songform), yet his singular refusal to take the metaphysical storytelling act too seriously may work to the advantage of imaginative capacities, and its proximity to mortal goals at the same time points to what we call "the seriousness of play" (Turner *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*; Levell *The Seriousness of Play*).

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[64] There is, of course, a difference between imaginativeness, as a quality that describes creativity and originality, and imaging, which is the use of our imagination "to entertain, in the mind, some make-believe series of events, or to think of possibilities – possible creatures, episodes, or the like – which are not part of the actual world" (Taylor "Imagination and Information" 206), although imaginativeness is clearly an extension of our capacity for imaging. Ergo, our creativity depends upon the development of this fundamental psychological trait.

Imagination's foundational importance in moral development is often linked to the maturation of our empathic competences. As Daniel B. Johnson suggests in "Altruistic Behavior and the Development of the Self in Infants", mirror self-recognition and cognitive empathy appear co-emergent in infants and other animals, which suggests the dependence of altruism on self-awareness; this complex understanding of the self provides a foundation from which to imagine the experience of another. Early childhood games often incorporate roleplay. The child concocts scenarios in which they imaginatively adopt the experience of others – from ordinary domestic situations to an astronaut in extraordinary circumstances. They may also perform roleplay in conjunction with others, and imaginatively exchange between them a world for those characters to exist within. More formalised versions of this exchange may be employed later in life, for example performing as an actor in a film or play with others, or roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Play is a place where identities become open and negotiable, which is why it is ripe for regulation by authorities, as with child labour (a play deprivation) and the strict artistic standards enforced by many dictatorial states. Regulated environments produce narratives of resistance that often incorporate elements of playfulness, indicating that imaginative or noninterventionist play (play without guidance) is likely a fundamental human need. This is true of the regulation of women's identities in storytelling media (de Lauretis "Rethinking Women's Cinema"): for example, the playfulness of the young women pranksters in 1966 Czechoslovak New Wave film *Daisies* (Věra Chytilová) outraged authorities, who banned the picture and prevented Chytilová from working in the (centrally controlled) Czech national film industry again until 1975. The Czech authorities famously clamped down on its depiction of the "wanton" or sense of play unbefitting of its leads, and cited food wastage as a reason for the film's suppression.

On one hand, the physical, cognitive, and social developments associated with these activities and their interactive demands should be clear; play deprivation has been linked to the perpetration of violent crime (Frost and Jacobs "Play Deprivation"), for example. However maintenance of a play world is complex. Incongruity in the particularities of the imagined world and each player's motivations within and outside of it are in need of constant revision. We could equally consider the very fine line between the seriousness and the frivolity of play: one moment two children are playing happily together, and then for one of them the game's implications become serious. The concern they exhibit (for example, crying) disrupts or potentially dispels the imaginative world between them. Play is fragile, as is agreeing on what

constitutes play. The tacitly negotiable overlap between serious and nonserious play remains an important component in our dealings with art and narrative later in life, and it is precisely what makes play in art so difficult to define. We might be able to identify perceived playfulness in the performing arts, but it is much harder to describe what distinguishes it from the non-playful. For example, some playful elements might be motivated in service of a seriously rebellious goal. Consider Jarry's *Ubu* plays, or Lindsay Anderson's "Mick Travis" films, in which absurdist elements are playfully motivated to make severe political statements. Much avant cinema employs playful and explorative methods toward serious ends. Should we, then, carefully distinguish the ludic and the explorative? Should we define playfulness in the narrative arts as that which is autotelic, or has no purpose other than its own internal fulfilment, rather than pointing to another utility, or is playfulness expressed when the outcome of a storied expression simply *matters less than* the pleasure of its execution? Hans-Georg Gadimer recognised many of these contradictions in art and play: it is a form of both restraint (in the mutual rules we construct around storied play) and freedom (in our mutual ownership of those rules), and its indivisibility from our lives confirms its highest seriousness at the same time as it flaunts exuberant abandon (130). In this case, there may be no straight answer to the definitional questions of play in narrative, although we can see the importance of imaginative play extending throughout our lives, and story is a primary mechanism for its exercise.

There are other benefits to interactive play. For example, Sayles's interest in places where those who would not usually come into contact interact (Godfrey 101) such as the American high school, which he calls "the last bastion of American democracy" (Osborne 36), recognises the inverse relationship between contact and prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory"). When disparate communities are forced to work together, adopting superordinate goals (Sherif *In Common Predicament* passim), racism, for example, is inhibited and we extend our field of ethical inclusion. Yet here's the rub: recent studies suggest that merely *imagining* working with the other could have positive results (Crisp and Turner "Imagining intergroup contact reduces implicit prejudice"). I contend that this could point to an imaginative complicity that comes from adopting not only the perspective of a fictive other, but also the goals bound to that perspective. We might have direct contact with others through early play, but we also need imaginatively projected contact with others to extend throughout our lives if we are to continue to expand our field of inclusivity. This is just one of the narrative functions a figure like Sayles intends to provide.

When we talk of the seriousness of play, we do tend to emphasise it as "working" under-acknowledged cognitive functions. However, in play, **stories can also offer relief from purposeful cognitive work**. Quite simply, engagement with narrative can offer us downtime from the daily strains of achievement, a space for our other tasks and concerns to recede while we are absorbed in an observational practice that has no end in mind. This relief, like the experience of boredom, can "kill time" (Misek 779) in ways that can be reflective, like mindfulness, or just a more simple relief, releasing load from the hippocampal translation of mood to actions, and transferring our problem-solving skills to an interpretable object which will require no further action.

As with roleplay, fantasy can be an integral component in play. So we use story to **fantasise, and to separate fantasy from what we can mutually hold to be real, and to escape, by which we can comparatively appreciate the real**. The challenge in a Darwinian account of fantastical storytelling is that the problems faced by its protagonists are far removed from the structural fitness challenges of our actual environment. At the same time, these narratives clearly replicate many familiar challenges from our past and present: evading beasts, identifying and struggling with those who mean us harm, reputation management, and so on. Mar and Oatley maintain that fantasy still "strives for realism in the most important aspects of human experience: the psychological and the social" (185). However, we can ask what leads us to entertain fantastical allegory in lieu of attempts at verisimilitude or direct realist representation. Grodal thinks that the appeal of these narratives may have something to do with a cognitive call to attention whenever events unexpectedly deviate from our usual causal pattern recognition, and regarding supernatural or fantastical themes, that this is most evident in our concept of physics and the natural: "Changes, deviations, and novelty attract our interest. As soon as events are slotted into familiar and well-explained patterns, they lose their salience, unless they prompt us to further action" (98). He sees film as unique in stoking this particular kind of cognition (ibid. 100). This concept of genre development appears to fit neatly with Pinker's view of narrative development as superstimulus or spandrel, a pleasurable activation of cognitive processes adapted for other purposes. However, given that disbelief requires more cognitive effort than belief (Gilbert et al. "Unbelieving the Unbelievable"), belief being our initial subconscious position, perhaps we should look to the work of decoupling cognition to explain fantasy's utility. Fantasy in narrative locates negotiable crossovers between the fact and fiction it presents, and as we become attuned to

those crossovers, it provides a place to discuss the nature of reality by comparing the simulated world with the real one. Lest this appears absurd given the conspicuousness of fictions concocted across fantasy genres, we should recall how prominently superstitions and attributions of nature's intent retain a place in political and group decision-making across the globe. Moreover, Grodal points out that superstition and supernature are integral concepts in art cinema – consider Bergman, Tarkovsky, Wenders, Kieslowski, Lynch, and Trier (106). Not only does such cinema point to the very contested nature of objective externalities, reminding us of the breadth of phenomena unchartered by our sciences, but in calling attention to dissonances between our experience of the world and the diegesis described, it may also exercise our ability to locate (and probably *create*) hidden textual meanings – to identify and question the relations between artifice and intention in storied communication. What may be contested is how much more of this discrepancy identification a fantasy viewer may need, whether it diverts from other mental tasks, and whether the experience of flow in fantastical discrepancy identification becomes self-fulfilling and hardwired to the specifics of the genre itself. The question remains whether contemporary fantasy adventure stories reveal more or indulge more of these misconceptions.

There are other clear excitations we undergo specifically in the "high" or "heroic" adventure fantasy genre: many have focused on wish fulfilment (reaching back to Freud's *wunscherfüllung* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*), and especially fantasies of supernatural power, strength, and control. But these worlds are equally filled with near uncontrollable dangers and matches of strength against strength, good against evil, and horrors, so unparalleled power is not a holistic explanation. How, then, would we explain the emotionally moving powerlessness of the characters populating literature such as Mervyn Peake's *Titus* trilogy? Grodal believes that, like religious narratives, "The fantastic makes life more complicated, more colorful, and more uncertain, because it increases both poison and antidote" (104). However, more often than not, it seems these worlds provide a kind of gratifyingly idealistic reductionism as the supernatural laws fantasy worlds introduce make the poison and antidote knowable or known. Good and evil are very often clearly demarked (morality manifests overtly and materially through supernature), as are free will and an "agency of the spirit" made material (ibid. 109-111); human power and ability progress in a linear fashion; ordinarily motiveless natural objects, such as trees or weather events, are given comprehensible intention; and a vast world is reduced to an index of important places, events, and characters defined by the author. That is, the world is manageably reduced. Think

of the title sequence to the television adaptation of *Game of Thrones*, the comforting familiarity and self-satisfaction felt when we know the map's most important places. In many stories (especially those featuring ghosts) disembodied mental activity is also provided a material form and objective after death, solving another worrying problem by projecting realisation of an afterlife. At the same time many of these narratives are journeys of discovery, but the conditions of discovery, the reasons for discovery, and the manner in which discovery should happen are all customarily laid out in an initial quest, if not discovered along the way. The fantasy in fantasy genres, therefore, can be seen as reductive: applying a myth of purpose, our great desire to have clear goals and know what to do in life, and to separate clearly ever confounding artificial constructs like right and wrong.

This all puts fantasy in a unique position: the cognitive excitation of the uncanny or physical dissonance between a diegesis and our own world seems open to possibility, discovery, and negotiability, while the fantasies of verifiable purpose, intent and salient, encompassing world-knowledge seem closed. Fantasy can clearly offer both of these experiences, but in any case we witness in these works **the relief stories can offer by reducing our world to an index of its salient properties, and the reprieve we can find in comparing fantasy worlds back to the complexity of life**. Perhaps one reason we enjoy fantasy in narrative so much – and especially its reductive element – is that we can comparatively appreciate the real. This is evident in the counter-relief we might feel on, say, walking out of a cinema even after we enjoyed a film. Although we all have different thresholds for how much story we can take, at some point we always feel a little bit glad to return to real life. Escapism tends to allow us to appreciate the real and the complexity of life by making us think comparatively about our fantasies.

Wonder, sensory stimulation and fantasy coalesce and augment one another when we use story **to ogle at human invention**. Nonverbal storytelling techniques are able to provoke impressions of human achievement and advancement; filmic special effects are an obvious example here. Neuroaesthetics may help explain foundational responses to spectacular stimulus, attention and appreciation, yet we still craft narratives from our initial reaction. We integrate our sensory response into a comprehension of the fiction and its eudaimonic meaning, and we construct for ourselves a story of human achievement to explain the pleasure of engagement. We consistently feel the need to rationalise sensory pleasure using a narrative of technical progression, and our own comprehension of effects innovation. The

resounding sentiment is, just as with any spectacle involving skilled manufacture or virtuosic artifice: look what humans are capable of. Special effects and spectacle are, at least in part, a pat on the back for being us.

Tom Gunning's cinema of attractions fixated on qualities that move beyond diegetic immersion and therefore beyond narratival concerns. I contend that spectacle focuses us on a different story, however: that which we construct for ourselves about our interest in film art and spectacle, or about appreciation of the achievements of artists we admire, and their innovations as representing human potential per se. Writers such as Michele Pierson have moved forward from Gunning's notions of cinema language development to look at the various narratives of technocentric progression fostered by special effects connoisseurs (now a mainstream sport). See, for example, the phenomenon of *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), a film sold on its special effects prodigiousness and innovation. Removed from the publicity narrative, the film itself is a skeletal classical narrative structure strung together along some familiar images of space, and earth as seen from space. It quite clearly relies on a very busy soundtrack to retain audience interest. Audio tomfoolery abounds, along with epic and sentimental scoring, musical and sound cues transacting between incidental and diegetic, the familiar voices of Sandra Bullock and George Clooney along with their ultra-compressed heartbeats, and aurally overwhelming, frequency mashing techniques to affect a sense of profundity. Behind these auditory techniques, we are for the most part just watching more space images, which fail to develop considerably throughout the feature no matter what advanced motion capture or digital editing technique was employed. Yet the publicity narrative stressed visual effects as the greater meaning-making device. Bruce Isaacs hinted at two central experiential qualities to *Gravity* in a largely phenomenological August 2014 presentation: first was the experience of boredom which lurked behind the visual repetition, and second, that his preliminary background reading on *Gravity*'s digital capture and suture processes in magazines such as *American Cinematographer* brought him to the theatre in the first, and thus somewhat directed his engagement with the feature (np). Despite reliance on these publicity narratives – or perhaps because of them – the film was hailed a success. It garnered awards recognition and $716 million worldwide in box office receipts (Box Office Mojo). No matter how we evaluate the film, however, the story behind the experience, which has to do with the human achievement of special effects innovation, remains as an integral guiding factor in our understanding of the spectatorial experience, and it blends with the

narrative of human technical achievement that marks the space crisis movie, from *Apollo 13* (Ron Howard, 1995) to *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015).

Thus the stimulus that promotes wonderment goes on to be incorporated and understood as part of a narrative of the self – this is human achievement, and recognising technical progress in skilled human actions is another way we imagine ourselves as akin to others. There are innumerable examples: much musical theatre creates a recognisable, delimited spectacle focusing us on the genius of its singers, dancers and technicians that impresses by its very immensity, and the narrative around art games often focuses on the design genius of its creators, appealing to notions of sophisticated medium-specific comprehension in discerning video gamers. Even if our primary concern is how a movie pleased the eye, or how a piece of music moved us through an emotive soundscape, or how it felt to be in the theatre during a particular performance, we are still asking questions about what these experiences mean to us, and so therefore what they say about the experience of being human.

The oeuvre of writer/director Terry Gilliam offers the perfect demonstrative union of all these concepts: artistic playfulness, fantasy and the appreciation of human invention. His more frivolous works explore the boundaries of the fantasy adventure genre, upset polar nodes of genre comprehension we rely on, question what story means to us, and always suggest excess beyond the knowable by cluttering his frames with all manner of visual detail that cannot be clearly made out. We have to become used to the kind of cognitive-perceptual mess of highly composed visual clutter to enjoy his films; we are always aware we are missing details, and this is key to Gilliam's sense of play. This impulse has been with him from early films like *Jabberwocky* (1977). Gilliam upset laws of physics by making them contingent to superstition, raconteurism, consumerist and religious fantasy in *Time Bandits* (1981) and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988); he upset recognisable genre forms in *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), wherein we are as confused as the eponymous brothers whether we are engaged in horror or family adventure, a world of real dangers or a world of make-believe dangers; and he upset the very moral binaries fantasy relies on in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009), especially as the Devil (Tom Waits) is robbed of any sense of moral certitude toward the end of the film (he is more interested in the gameplay of "evil" than its actualisation). As Peter Marks points out in his analysis of the more sombre *12 Monkeys* (1995), Gilliam's most popularly enduring studio picture upsets notions of interpretation and

perceptual reliability we find ourselves navigating on the precipice of the information age (161). The complication of sensory information is a common theme in accounts of film history and technical achievement (see, for example, Fraigneau "Dialogues with Cocteau").[65] *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) in particular is a recurrent reference, and one that *12 Monkeys* addresses to call attention to its conversation with film history. Using time travel as a device to challenge telicity, *12 Monkeys* like its predecessor *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) upsets concepts of cultural chronology and cinema development, too: *12 Monkeys* features the re-purposing of old motion capture and projection technologies to nefarious ends, despotic interrogation and surveillance. Similarly, technologies like plastic are re-purposed and become unstuck in time – the time travel device is flimsy, unreliable and patched together like all of our technologies, including film effects and their manipulation of perceptive faculties, which we might deploy while never quite wholly understanding their operative principles. Despite being cobbled together and exploitable these human inventions still inspire wonder, from the filmed image to a time machine made of plastic.

Gilliam's work is also, much of the time, imaginatively comedic – another variety of play. We tell stories **to laugh, to account for, to explore and perhaps deflate our concerns and anxieties in comedy**. The subject of mountains of theory, often asserting one particular cause or effect of humour as foundational, comedy is a substantial component in narrative with human and social functions that may be as multitudinous as those of storytelling itself. It is perhaps not surprising that a breadth of storytelling styles, including those operating outside of strictly comic genres, use humour as a narrative device. Humour has been demonstrated as particularly effective in establishing reciprocally enjoyable connections between strangers (Treger et al. "Laughing and Liking"), which may help to develop a bond of trust between storytellers and their audience. Humour also mitigates stress in favour of feelings of wellbeing (Crawford and Caltabiano "Promoting emotional well-being"), which could countervail the agitating influence of the conflicts on which stories rely. A recent theory put forward by Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, however, has been advanced from Thomas C.

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[65] Gilliam points to a complication of technical achievement even while he goes about trying to emulate the beauty and power of his favourite oil paintings within the film frame: "I wanted it to be painterly," Gilliam said of *Doctor Parnassus*. "I didn't want it to feel like anything naturalistic or even crude and cut-out. There were models, too, and photographs of real things stuck in. It's still a mess, the way I work" (Covert np). Thus Gilliam's integration of digital effects functions in a similar way to his cut-out animations from Monty Python and his convoluted art direction: although vibrant and neuroaesthetically appealing, his effects disturb by putting ease of perception just out of reach, clouded as they are by proximate and often anachronistic technologies.

Veatch's 1998 work "A Theory of Humor": benign violation theory (styled as BVT) carries great analytic potential and synthesises a breadth of historic theories of laughter and the comic into a comprehensible phenomenon. A violation is defined as the perception "when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening" and it is benign when "it seems okay, acceptable, or safe" (*The Humor Code* 10). The website for their Humor Research Lab offers a succinct elucidation:

> humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously. For example, play fighting and tickling, which produce laughter in humans (and other primates), are benign violations because they are physically threatening but harmless attacks. (np)

I would add that it is possible our swift cognitive *transition through* perception of violation to down-regulated status of an event as benign could also explain such phenomena as laughter *following* a surprise or shock; the perceptions may or may not occur strictly simultaneously, but they are definitely in conflict. This concept of humour chimes with incongruity theory, whereby "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall 11), but it both identifies the specifics of the incongruity required to produce humour (cognitive dissonance can equally produce discomfort), and suggests a practical social reason for our humour needs.

In fact, BVT specifies the humour value in the three major pillars of humour theory, each of which seem to identify only one aspect of humour: superiority, relief and incongruity. From the vantage of BVT many of the hitherto surveyed functions of laughter seem understandable: the conditions of ambiguity and incongruity are specified; Freud's emphasis on repression of unacceptable thoughts and behaviours clearly explores potential social violations (usually benign as they are only thoughts, not actions and so reveal no consequences); our ability to cope with the potential impingements of grotesquery and chaos also lie at the intersection of the threatening and safe; schadenfreude and Aristotelian superiority cover the area where we recognise a threat but it is benign because it is not our own; conflicts in our perceptive faculties may present a threat in surprise and confusion, a brief experience of cognitive dissonance, sensory perplexity or mistaken reasoning, resolved swiftly as we move through a gag or point of humour in narrative, cognitively consigned to the

benign; this same principle of brisk dissonance applies to recognition of the unreality of our mechanised regulation of nature and life, apropos Bergson's famed *Laughter* essay, or the deceptive dehumanising of a person represented as a material thing; and the relief offered by relegating mortal violations to a more benign status could be explained by the need for a self-aware mind to navigate the threat of existential terror. The latter explanation of the integral nature of death and attention to impermanence in humour is bolstered by research performed by Long and Greenwood in 2013, who found that priming subjects with subliminal thoughts of death aided humour production, potentially as a defensive mechanism,[66] promoting resilience against existential anxieties, and also possibly allowing for enhanced creativity and open-mindedness. Bergson reminded us that humour is a social phenomenon – often the effects are amplified when experienced alongside others. Following Bergson's defence of a social corrective or moral function of humour, and its synthesis in BVT, we can look to humour as a political tool by which we mediate amongst ourselves what is a threat worthy of our attention and what anxieties are unfounded or unneeded. Exploring these zones in narrative may allow us to be more specific about the aspects of social problems that are genuinely worrying, or that are distracting us from matters of genuine concern. The consequent politics of laughter could inform both humanistic storytellers, and a humanist hermeneutics. For this reason, I will turn to BVT when discussing narrative humour in the remainder of this thesis.

Hovering somewhere nearby comedic narrative, forever treading a line between the benign and the violating, is **story's function as titillation**. Much mainstream pornography still constructs a cursory narrative as some kind of anchor to sexual display; arousal appears to depend upon a narrative context, a path into comprehending the action as something more than just body parts on a screen, to merge with a viewer's internal fantasies.[67] In "Generic Pleasures," Linda Williams notes genres that feature similar extents of affective and stylistic repetition centred on heterosexual unions – in particular Hollywood musicals – and

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[66] C.f. George Eman Vaillant *Ego Mechanisms of Defense*.

[67] Alan McKee wrote about the narrativity of pornography in "Pornography as Entertainment," in which he finds that adult entertainment fulfills many of the same goals as other narrative entertainment or "audience-centred" (548) media. One of these goals might concern the nature of pleasure audiences find in the representation of and identification with fictional characters: the characters that populate pornographic media are schematic – quite clearly constructed and typified – yet somehow still produce real longing and real arousal in the viewer (Frow "Avatar, Identification, Pornography").

disciplines that similarly construct sex as a "problem" that needs to be solved with more knowledge and accommodation of desire, and proximity to the gendered other, like sexology. The foundation of a problem that needs solving is ubiquitous in narrative. It should not, then, come as any surprise that titillating media requires some groundwork of narrative structure to develop arousal or viewer interest. That dramatic conflict, in pornography, is an absence of sexual accord, which is "solved" by an extreme level of sexual accommodation.

Sex and sexuality need not be so cursory, however. Story is also used in **courtship and mateship displays, mate selection, and even friend and acquaintance selection**. This can be a much more extended process, especially in the display of desirable skills and traits associated with narrative construction and artistry. During the height of the feminist sex wars, a range of writers including Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia adopted the term "sex positivity" to connote the philosophy of acceptance of consensual sexuality in all its different and difficult iterations, and a deflation of the shame and stigma around diverse expressions of sexuality, like sadomasochism. In narrative theory, a sex positive theory could attempt to find ways to portray the difficulties we have in sexual relations in a light that demonstrates the normality and ubiquity of interpersonal sexual problems, and thereby makes them easier to deal with. In interviews about her performance in *The Sessions* (Ben Lewin, 2012), actor Helen Hunt, playing a sex surrogate for a disabled man, described how she wanted to be part of a story that demonstrated what she termed "sex positivity":

> Sex is never perfectly elegant: The light isn't just right, and the underwear doesn't fall on the floor perfectly, and the hands don't clutch, and you don't come at the same time—it's all bullshit, basically … And the disability of this character renders all of that impossible, so you're left with something much more like your own experience as a nondisabled person, which is that you're human and that it's good and it's bad and it's weird that it's silly, and it's embarrassing that it's scary, so I think that the disability is just a way to get to what it's actually like. (Zakarin np)

The dimensional complexity of sexual and bodily shame in cinema, which Hunt refers to, can be represented as a natural problem to productively work with, or sexual fears can instead be leveraged to heighten the drama of a narrative in a way that amplifies rather than questions sexual stigma, as in films like *Shame* (Steve McQueen, 2011) or *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998). These films conduct the audience's pre-existing sexual fears to an emotionally intense

and dramatic rather than a deflating and diagnostic effect, leaving less room between the spectator and their reactive sexual shame, and thereby, I would argue, less room for the kind of reflective analysis prompted by Hunt and Lewin. Other films that attempt a deflating or diagnostic effect include *Bedrooms and Hallways* (Rose Troche, 1998), *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006), *Women in Trouble* (Sebastian Gutierrez, 2009) and the works of a figure like Pedro Almodóvar. A humanist critic might therefore ask: does this story provoke or question our established sexual stigma?

Of course, we can also create narratives and exhibit story preferences that aid in other kinds of social choices beyond sexual selection – for example, a music scene that generates friendship circles of likeminded people, or communities of niche genre enthusiasts. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. write that, "movie preferences are an important ingredient of interpersonal etiquette, providing a topic of conversation, as well as a vehicle for assessing others' attitudes and interpersonal compatibility. For instance, people discuss film preferences in social networking and online dating sites to decide whether their views are shared by others" (111-112). The etiquette of exhibiting story preferences acts as a display to both potential friends *and* romantic partners; sex, mateship display and selection are all so intimately entwined with storytelling practices that they cannot be ignored. Like all of the functions of narrative art explored in social narratology, "The sexual display and socialization accounts can peaceably sit side by side as long as one does not try to frame either explanation as all-encompassing" (Taberham 221). Likewise a synergy of these approaches could offer a more holistic picture of our complex motives for story engagement; these motives should not be seen as separate from one another, as we can derive a variety of gratifying experiences from a single narrative, sometimes which appear contradictory. For example, a film can both titillate and moralise about titillation at the same time. I agree with the sex positivists that we need to accept all of these functions of story as productive in their own ways – theories of sex positivity could help us achieve better tools to discuss sexual fear, timidity and shame in story with less fear, timidity and shame around the subject itself.

All of these imaginative and ludic narrative functions, from the autotelic to the seriousness of play, from fantasy to narrativised sexual play, regularly sit alongside our more serious concerns rather than being separated out into singularly affective narratives. I now move to look closer at the correlate mental work of fiction, and how it might produce pleasure or rewards in cognitions that are germane to our flourishing in the world.

Mental Work, Memory and Need for Cognition

As we have established, different people have different appetites for the various cognitive processes fiction guides us through. An appetite for open-endedly effortful cognitive tasks is measured by the "need for cognition" personality variable (c.f. Cacioppo et al.). As these needs change from person to person, writers like myself who value stories that offer difficult cognitive tasks – narrative puzzles, challenges to reason and opportunities for elaboration – should not universalise this disposition, or presume that an appetite for the interpretive work of avant or other experimental fictions is somehow superior. Nonetheless, we can still point to some of the positive functions of narrativised mental work, and its results. In particular, we can use stories **to exercise advanced pattern recognition, explore the limits of our cognition, hypothesise, perform mental experiments and guide our comprehension of abstruse concepts**. Pattern seeking has long had survival benefits, from the physical to the social (Boyd *On the Origin of Stories* 88), and story remains a place to exercise advantageous pattern recognition, or what Boyd calls "cognitive play with pattern" (ibid. 14). But stories can exercise cognitive processes that are not directly social or moral, and that move beyond appeals to naïve physics: we can make complex scientific and mathematical problems easier to grasp, for example, by procedurally laying out their terms in an analogous narrative. Further to Boyd's work on cognitive play and its relation to pattern recognition, Peter Swirski has written extensively about all manner of thought experiments in *Of Literature and Knowledge*. Swirski notes multiple intrinsic links between science and story; each framework for understanding the world, and its associated cognitions, opens up new tools to explore the other. The exploration of science through story can have a pedagogical element – consider Raymond Smullyan's use of logic puzzles to teach mathematical concepts in a popular book such as *The Lady or the Tiger?* – as well as being a process of discovery for both storyteller and audience. For example, one can find a solution to a problem by crafting a narrative around it, or alter existing narratives to meet the demands of their own particular problem.

Rationalising the appeal of avant-garde film, Taberham writes that avant narratives stretch our discernment of meaningful patterns to a radical degree: "On occasion, the more indiscernible the patterns are, the more rewarding their identification may be" (225). Considering the relatively recent emergence of modernist art in human history and its

concurrence with globalising technologies such as electronic-telegraphic transmission, auto and air travel, it may be that our skills at recognising more complex patterns in social products like stories and artworks *were* in fact advantageous as our social context expanded and became more complex. We needed new complex stories to understand new social patterns that made up the globally connected world we describe, and social comprehension can confer a survival advantage. However, some levels of creative inference working from abstractions (especially graphical or non-semantic abstraction) are so removed from description of a specific context that they can be hard to explain. Taberham echoes many cognitivist-evolutionary theorists in postulating the function of avant art as a mental work that is pleasing as a pattern-recognition superstimulus, although, he is at pains to point out, it is not adaptive, offering no survival benefit of itself (ibid. 226-227), and its marginal appeal makes it "inefficient" as a sexual display (ibid. 221). This assumes that traits are only adaptive if they have pancultural appeal, or make us attractive to all potential human mates, but traits can also be selected for and passed on within niche communities, and this heritability is still part of human evolution. Once removed from broad appeal, according to the universalisms of such evolutionary psychology, a trait can no longer be considered part of the selection process. Yet the technical skills in arts production that we identify as mateship or fitness display are very often culture-specific, and they will speak to niche communities and become adaptive within those environments. That virtuosic behaviour may demonstrate one's intellectual skills as much as their technical skills. Punk music may not demonstrate virtuosic technical ability, but it demonstrates a raft of intellectual and creative values that speak to the social needs of a specific community and will thus be attractive traits within that community. This is similar to avant art, a creative expression of intellectual prowess and invention that will be selected for in communities that place value on the social skills it signals, and thereby be a heritable trait (perhaps intellectual passion in the case of punk, and intellectual restraint in the case of an avant cinema phenomenon like the slow film). Deterministic flattening of the myriad contexts in which humans have thrived produces unitary explanations, and it is an example of how evolutionary psychology can limit itself to a narrow or ad hoc notion of environmental fitness that neglects the complexities of culture – we adapt to the cultures we create, and can become "fit" for an environment that includes intellectual values apt for the circumstances they emerge within. This includes all sorts of cognitive feats that are demonstrated in narrative that have unclear practical applications, yet demonstrate a mental ability or disposition that is valued by peers.

Of course, there are also complex concepts and cognitive feats in narrative that have clear utility. For example, reminiscence is a complex task of tying together multiple cognitions into a coherent narrative; so **story can also be used as a memory exercise**. Shared reminiscence – when memories are externalised and negotiated – is a directly communal storied activity with all manner of social utilities (Alea and Bluck "Why Are You Telling Me That?") and benefits. Sharing family stories, for instance, can aid children's socioemotional knowledge development (Van Bergen et al. "The Effects of Mother Training in Emotion-Rich, Elaborative Reminiscing"), cognitive developmental processes and wellbeing outcomes (Fivush et al. "Elaborating on Elaborations"), and collaborative recall can have benefits lasting our whole lifetime, including in aged cognitive decline (Barnier et al. "Reaping What They Sow"); the foundation of memory and identity is the crafting of a story of social causality.[68] Maurice Halbwachs noted in 1950 that the individual's recollection was inseparable from group memory (*The Collective Memory*), and psychologists now recognise that memories are equally inseparable from their expression or externalisation (Hirst et al. "Putting the Social Back Into Human Memory"). Autobiographical memories are one place where social storytelling practices and the construction of internal stories are aligned – and they all contain traces of fiction (our memories are all somehow reconstituted and fabricated). As William Hirst et al. put it, "Remembering is, if you like, communicating" (275). Additionally, the transactive nature of story can act as a socially distributed cognition or extended mind (Sutton et al. "The Psychology of Memory"): we accumulate collective information in stories, and so they do some of the work of remembering that an individual themselves might be unable to perform.

Family reminiscence, including the prompting of open-ended questions of narrative construction and context, is also important in the development of literacy, and thereby comprehension of fictions (Peterson et al. "Encouraging narratives in pre-schoolers"). It may be apparent how autobiographical memories are storied, and therefore how distributing and negotiating memories as nonfictional narratives can have benefits in social cognition, although we might equally inquire how fiction in turn helps us craft causal narratives that connect meaningfully to our lives. Various scholars have queried the experience of rewatching or re-engaging in narratives we have already completed (Bentley and Murray; Weispfenning).

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[68] On another level, the unity of storytelling and memory is much simpler: observe the saying-is-believing effect. In vocalising or externalising a thought we ourselves come to believe it (Higgins and Rholes "Saying is Believing"). So even more fundamentally, we use story to reinforce and attach to our own memories.

Why are we able to experience the affect of a familiar narrative more than once, and how does it change on multiple readings or viewings? Some sports viewers, for example, are able to enjoy revisiting favourite matches despite knowing the outcome. This experience points to a particular kind of investment in the players, be they sportspeople or characters that we reclaim a proximity to. We want to empathically walk in their shoes again, but how does their fate provoke us if we already know the events and emotions that will follow? Rewatching is a particular kind of dramatic irony – one that encompasses the whole piece. Bentley and Murray's research qualifies participants' self-reported goals of re-watching: social rewatching (such as showing a friend), mood management or regulation (although this is not particular to the rewatching experience, knowing a narrative makes its emotive content more dependable) and nostalgia; they also note that fans of specific content will rewatch to gain mastery of complex storyworlds and thus build a "social connoisseurship" (np).[69] This self-reportage points to a simple answer to the question of a familiar narrative's ability to provoke emotional responses we have already been through: we might remember the thrust of a narrative and those few points impressed upon us, but we are liable to forget or overlook its cadences and nuances. We rediscover the affective path it leads us through upon rewatching – the emotional variation from one instance to the next, its affective causality. John Weispfenning theorised that television reruns provide the comfort of generational narratives, making sense of our shared history especially in times of social change (172). In rereading, there is cause for reflection on a story's emotional causality afforded by distance from any suspenseful immersion, and a subsequent feeling of mastery provides comfort. Again, we should keep in mind personality variation: different viewers with different memories and different tastes for drama will exhibit a range of desires, and some do not like to rewatch a narrative at all.

In Patricia Meyer Spacks's *On Rereading*, returning to favoured novels aids a reflective self-narrative construction: we monitor our reactions to a familiar story, and so the story provides a benchmark for the way we have changed over time. We can even use such stories to critique the views of our former self, and in this way clarify lessons learned, and also compare our own social development with the development of historical events in the world. There are, thus, two types of memory being exercised here: the memory of narrative events, words, images and our response to them, as well as the memory of who we were at that time

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[69] In nostalgia, the memory exercise of narrative engagement overlaps with more hedonic motives for media use.

that may have led to these interpretations.[70] This chimes with literature on the bidirectional link between memory and identity (Wilson and Ross "The Identity Function of Autobiographical Memory") and similarly points to story's nostalgic potentialities as being part of the process of attaching to a causal narrative of the self and our development.

At the same time, **we use stories to forget**: not just to forget our daily trials, or forgetting as aversive mood regulation, but in order to replace memories with new versions of events, or reduce the importance of painful and inconvenient memories. This has benefits in the creation of new identities (Connerton 62), or even just as a way to prioritise information (ibid. 64). Paul Connerton's work also points out many of the more socially imposed narratives that attempt to inspire forgetting in a populace: to erase criminal conduct or painful cultural memories (ibid. 60-62) or to sell new products by diminishing remembered attachments to the old (ibid. 66). We also protect our self-concept and social status by forgetting people (ibid. 64) and events (ibid. 67) that humiliate or do not reflect favourably on ourselves. Without these mechanisms, we can end up deeply unhappy (Price and Davis *The Woman Who Can't Forget*).[71] Perhaps, more speculatively, even phenomena like collaborative inhibition – when groups working together recall fewer unique events or less information – may have some social utility, too, in paving the way for an empathic connection between mutual narratives of reminiscence.

Finally, I will connect all of the narrative experiences explicated so far to our ethical considerations: how do we use narratives to derive prescriptive meaning from our observation of the world, and from our understanding of nature, when neither our phenomenology nor our scientific reasoning can ever offer us reliable instruction for acting in

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[70] As well as these two types of memory, one might conclude here that there are four levels of autobiography worked through in narrative: when we first respond to a story we explain our sense of self through its evaluation (deeming it good or bad, for example, tells us more about ourselves); if we return to the narrative, it might become entrenched in a grander history of the self, or a personal corpus; where that corpus is shared or a particular work becomes canonised, it can tell of a shared history with specific others (for example generational identity); and finally, if that story is distant enough (for example a narrative belonging to another time, centuries or millennia ago), it might speak to a shared history with general others, even all of humanity.

[71] Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* grapples with these questions: the use of fantastical fiction as a site of transaction with our traumatic memories, what we need to forget and what we choose to remember.

the world? This discussion first requires an understanding of how memory cognition supports our ability to read narrative symbols that contain ethical information.

Symbolic Memory, Social Roles and Ethics

A lot of the symbolic functions of narrative we have already covered connect symbolism to social roles and our co-construction of communal ethics. All of these functions of narrative in some way acknowledge the value of symbols in storytelling – narratives tend to codify their meanings, and most narrative events in fiction point abstractly or symbolically to their utility in our real lives. But we also use story to **sort out what we need to know and what symbols we need to privilege in memory and consciousness**. In fact, Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb list symbolic inheritance as one of the four components of human heredity in their book *Evolution in Four Dimensions* (the others are genetic, epigenetic and behavioural). Symbolic inheritance is different from behavioural learning or transmission as symbols (including language and fiction) can provide latent (202), translatable (203), and infinitely variable information in a rule-governed, self-referential system (199), which is part of the heritability that will shape who we are.[72] Pre-existing symbols allow for human cultural evolution. Thus we are constantly metonymically linking together cultural handles and iconography, and fusing memory connections to swiftly access the cultural shorthand language we need to communicate, and indeed to comfort one another with mutual understandings. When engaged with media, we are always negotiating what is culturally expedient for use in our own communiqué. This might be a primary social usage of television and celebrity: "the discussion of, for example, stars of film and sport, produces a basis on which people transitorily associated can find something personal to talk about" (Gluckman 315). In a globalised context, mobile populations need ways to swiftly access mutuality with the vast number of strangers they meet; the comfort we receive from knowing the same stories and characters on television is one example of this function of narrative, as are rock-pop classics that anyone can sing along to at a karaoke bar.

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[72] We should keep in mind that biology, like all sciences at their vanguard, is an open debate rather than a holistic or closed explanation, and so these Lamarckian notions of "soft inheritance" are still in question (Dickins and Rahman 2916).

For Zengotita in *Mediated*, a pervasively ironic reflexivity has crept into popular (in particular televised) media, which fulfils this function of enforcing a comforting sameness, simultaneously serving to pacify (63) and ignite feelings of business, work or achievement (191). We feed the story addiction and feel like we are working, purposeful, when we learn, discuss and endlessly reappropriate cultural symbols. Likewise, when we debate musical acts and bands we like and do not like, another level of tacit conversation may be occurring as we discuss how similar we are merely via common knowledge of the music, the stories around the music, and acknowledgement of the music and its related stories as important – a narcissism of small differences.[73] This is another way of experiencing oneness, but it is ordered by our recognition of cultural symbology, which we learn through narrative, and which also privileges assumptions of importance or status: an image of Popeye, for example, might be identified as more important to commit to memory than an image of an obscure cartoon figure from a non-American country, simply because we may need to refer to Popeye later amongst peers. The implications of this process in asserting dominance point to the sale of symbols as a transnational imperialist device, and reinforces why culturally hegemonic practices remain a constant field of study. It would do some good to recall, however, the socially-derived utility such processes rely upon: it is impossible to operate as a social being now without being complicit in privileging such symbols in memory and consciousness, or we risk a lack of connection with others. Chamorro-Premuzic et al.'s etiquette of film preference exhibition is dependent upon mutually known narratives – their mutuality is potentially an even more important predictor of friendship potential, partner selection, and ingroup statuses than the way we feel about those narratives. Dominant cultural symbols become part of our deepest social spheres, with direct utility in our sense of connectivity with others. Even if we wanted to reject them, we cannot do without them. This genuine need is what is being exploited in all forms of cultural imperialism.

Clearly the process of negotiating what cultural handles are pertinent to commit to memory also extends to a familiar cultural-ethical discussion, concerning who we would like to be together: we use stories to discuss what our togetherness should be, and what values it should be based upon. Deciding which symbols we will use and interpret in this task plays an

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[73] This term has been reclaimed by figures like Glen Owens Gabbard to demonstrate its prevalence in loving relationships ("On Hate in Love Relationships"). Gabbard's narcissism of small differences might provide a model for understanding this narrative function among friends and acquaintances, too.

important role in the process. It also points to the way **stories reinforce and demonstrate adherence to social roles, or reflexively prompt social role renegotiation**. Examples include gendered reactions to scary films, in which women are more often required to demonstrate empathic fear and men fear mastery, providing comfort for female viewers (Zillman "The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence" 197-198), or diegetically, those same films can demonstrate comparable social roles in their narrative events, such as the reprehensible trope of the hapless woman twisting her ankle and the enterprising male saviour coming to her rescue. Both offer demonstration, adherence to and reinforcement of social roles. This aspect of narrative has often been portrayed as a one-way mass media social control mechanism rather than a dialogous relationship between audience and storyteller, although this view is complicated by the fact that we exhibit genre and story preferences that tailor to pre-existing self-schemas (Chamorro-Premuzic et al. "What Type of Movie Person are You"). It is very difficult to change attitudes with story, rather than fortify existing dispositions. However, the net effect of a mass media appealing to the same social roles is clearly part of a process that normalises identities as universal, natural types – as with gender essentialism or heteronormativity – whether or not we see media norms as a genesis or a symptom. We could refer to this as the "echo chamber" effect: if the film market appeals to prevailing social roles in order to sell products, it leaves little room for the potential function of narrative to reassess social roles that go out of date as our cultural environment changes. Yet there always remain storytellers whose conscience outweighs the need for wider distribution, more than willing to circumnavigate market demands and tell a story they are passionate about. These stories can often involve a direct engagement with, and renegotiation of, prevailing social roles.

Exclusive focus on mass media, too, can lead us to neglect quotidian experiences that contribute, in some respects much more substantially, to our self-schema or concept of our social selves. Many of these are storied. One of our primary storied means for the reinforcement and performative demonstration of social roles is gossip; so **story can be a form of gossip**. Volumes of literature on the subject of gossip have been published since early anthropological accounts by figures including Paul Radin (in 1927's *Primitive Man As Philosopher*), Melville J. Herskovits (in various works across the 1930s and 40s) and Elizabeth Colson (in 1953's *The Makah Indians*), propagating later reflection on those works (Gluckman 307). Gossip can be understood both in non-fictive terms (peer group gossip, as we traditionally know it), and in the use of certain narratives as objects of gossip, such as

discussion around the events of a television show to demonstrate an epistemic mutuality. Celebrity gossip also blurs apparent boundaries between the fictive and non-fictive – readers of gossip magazines can be aware of the highly dubious nature of the claims made, and yet still enjoy entertaining the notion of its stories as actualities (McDonnell 86). Gossip itself is always a storied act, but fictions can also mimic gossip, appealing to the same discursive formula that peer group gossip exists within: discussions around soap operas are able to somewhat seamlessly fit into the same kind of conversational mores as peer group gossip, for instance. High production television serials like *Game of Thrones* offer a similar utility – the questions that circulate after the release of new episodes still gravitate around who did what to whom, and the morality of their actions. There can be differences, though, in the levels of moral relativity or fortifying certitude about transgressions that such shows exhibit or incite.

Gossip clearly has similarities with a foundational function of story: spreading secondhand information between peer networks, so that information gathering did not have to be direct. However gossip is clearly more complex than that, as it spreads information specifically focussed upon the social behaviours of others, and human conflicts of interest render this kind of information particularly unreliable. In fact, theorists like Robin Dunbar have posited gossip needs, emerging initially as a form of allogrooming, to be the adaptive genesis of storytelling behaviours and thereby language development itself (*Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*). Gossip is a kind of hyper-attentiveness to social interactions, the storied nature of which elevates its impact and sense of purpose. As the mutuality of attentional focus in narrative audiences can build feelings of rapport with other observers, so too can the alignment of information, interests, salient personalities, reactions and emotions in gossip generate ingroup cohesion, perhaps with even more efficacy than other storied activities. Although not exclusively so, the primary knowledge communicated through stories is social in nature (Mar and Oatley 182); the information provided in gossip is both assiduously, directly social (gossip leaves out narrative events that do not speak directly to moral interactivity) and personally relevant. This makes it a very powerful social tool, especially when identifying indiscretions that may lead to ostracism. Gossip does not just ask us to be hyper-attentive to social events, but in particular singles out negative appraisals of players within those events (Anderson et al. "The Visual Impact of Gossip"), aggressors and antagonists we might avoid. We should naturally be wary, then, when fiction enters the realm of gossip: identifying aggressors and negative traits of real-life figures (in biopics for instance), or those that allegorically summarise a maligned group (from German or Russian

"bad guys" in Hollywood cinema to the current portrayal of Islamic antagonists). These narratives have gossip value while remaining unspecific about a particular individual; they can similarly generate aversive responses to those perceived as transgressors, which is also a primary function of gossip (ibid.).

Conflicts within stories open a space where we can imagine possibilities for change, and in particular change as a response to social and ethical dilemmas (even if the efficacy of human agency is later defeated or revealed to be inconsequential to larger forces at work). Mar and Oatley describe the reader's process of comprehending character thusly:

> the psychological effects of character include the pleasing surprise of recognition, the satisfaction of being able to understand visible behavior in terms of deeper principles, the insight of seeing both others and ourselves in terms of human attributes that are both valuable and also problematic, as well as the possibility of some movement in our mental makeup. (182)

This means that our conception of and reaction to character, the information it communicates, and its abstraction to social principles is an entrée to ethical discussion, especially given a narrative that stresses our capacity for psychological change. As well as provoking character evaluations, we can **play out responses to ethical problems** in narrative. Stories offer us ways to imagine the consequences of actions, even actions that are impossible to take (like superhuman feats). The consequences we explore reflect moral reasoning. Charles Taylor's storytelling as moral identity extends to a projection by which we can imagine future moral identities. Locating oneself within a framework of moral goodness, "requires a narrative understanding of my life, a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story. And as I project my life forward and endorse the existing direction or give it a new one, I project a future story, not just a state of the momentary future but a bent for my whole life to come" (*Sources of the Self* 48). This conceptual view of story as a projection with which to explore possible ethical direction is made politically palpable by Augusto Boal, who used "legislative theatre" in Brazilian parliament to invite voters to act out solutions to a social dilemma to see where it took them.[74] Video games can similarly focus their narrative interactivity on moral causality: the entire interface of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games,

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[74] This is similar to the way Mette Hjort invites us to extend cinema hermeneutics to address real social needs ("Community Engagement and Film").

2012) video game, for example, is the making of moral and social decisions, primarily in conversation. After their consequences are revealed, the game focuses upon retrospectively explaining one's decisions and ethical positions (which usually stress the pressures and limitations in which those decisions are made, and question how we can "own" our ethics when they are so mutable given differing circumstances). Here again we can see the potential value of play in moral development: storied play can be focussed not only on imagining ethical consequences, but the work of explaining subsequent responses to ourselves and others. Mar and Oatley also go on to clarify how the act of projecting feelings is connected to the imagining of consequences: "narratives allow us to try out solutions to emotional and social difficulties through the simulation of these experiences" (183). So we imagine an aversive scenario that calls for change, project possibilities for intervention, and imagine consequential emotions and meanings by trialling out potential actions in narrative. The consequences portrayed are a moral reasoning – this is how the end of a story can come to matter to us so much. Endings point to consequences that will not be further questioned, and are therefore one of the best suggestions of an ethic stories can provide, even where the story might explore many other quandaries, responses, causes and effects along the way.

So finally we use story to **ask ethical questions: how we ought to live**. These questions, and story's remit to answer them, also introduce the possibility of "imposing social control and, hence … achieving power" through moralistic narrative (Sugiyama 241). It might seem obvious that one function of narrative can be to demonstratively articulate and offer perspectives on particular ethical problems, but we might also consider the possibility that ethics are imbedded in *all* narrative and drama involving one or more living things. As Martin Price puts it in *Forms of Life*, all novels and the characters that populate them are forms of life that we imagine, and because they live, they have a moral dimension; this interior moral dimension is in itself another entirely necessary "form of life" (50-51). As soon as a living thing is present in a narrative, an ethical tension exists, as we read its purpose and consistently ask what we would hope to happen next and how it is achievable through agency, the many pathways of which translate to an *ought* question. It is very difficult to come up with a plot point that does not spur an ethical question about how we should behave; it is the implicit internal examination undergone whenever something happens involving a living entity. According to Booth, narrative ethics are a universal subject because story is at the genesis of the human and the means by which humans reinvent themselves, and now the "daily barrage of narrative to which we are subjected" heightens the need for ethical criticism

(39). If it is clear how ethics are inextricable from narrative (even those that purposefully frustrate ethical intelligibility or minimise ethical evaluations within the diegesis), and if we accept that our quotidian engagements with story media are proliferating, then it also makes sense to ask how we should value the relative ethical strategies employed by various contemporary narratives, and what we want from narrative ethics. In relation to the contemporary philosophy of cinema, Robert Sinnerbrink says, "despite the evident concern with the 'unethical' aspects of cinema throughout the history of film theory, it is striking how few theorists have attempted to explore the positive ethical potential of the medium" (28). Narrative humanism, with its emphasis on articulating positive ethical potentials, can perform this exploration.

We have established that storytelling is a kind of ethical thought, and one that may rehearse responses to problems arising in the world. However, this points to some problems in the relation of ethical thought to ethical action as we also might have rehearsed ideologies that we fail to act upon – when we act, we can fail to meet our own moral standards, or choose to ignore or overlook ethical discernments previously abstracted from and rehearsed in fiction. We might read a book detailing the plight of sweatshop workers, for example, but still knowingly buy textiles that support the industry. It remains difficult to politicise our thoughts rather than our actions: one can spend a lifetime studying complex ethics and still behave reprehensibly toward others (not me though, I swear). This means we have a need for stories that can make clear the precise relation between complex moral thought, and potential moral action.

To briefly recap, humanist storytelling emphasises difficult, multifaceted ethics and complicates intuitive responses to familiar problems, especially punitive responses – it challenges the comfort of seeing justice prevail, threats brought under control, and order occurring independently of our personal efforts, brought by a hero, heroes, or nature. It asks us to think twice about our closely held principles; in short, it promotes a sharper view of one's convictions, in order to improve our understanding of one another. In humanist story ethics, we have to be challenged to refine what we think about a human problem – if a conclusion is easily drawn from the narrative without articulation of its contingent complications, it is potentially reductive, failing to encourage deeper thought about the human. Stories can entertain pre-existing moral predilection, or seek to complicate the ease of our moral responses, considering a quandary from multiple perspectives, with due

compassion for the lives of all involved, and "humanism holds that the tool of compassion is not by nature apologist or lacking in attention to culpability and pragmatic response to culpability" ("Humanist Ethics in John Sayles's *Casa*" 107).[75] Yet any questions that lead us to evaluate an individual's moral worth are decentred in humanist narrative, as we are focussed upon social interaction and the collective forces that drive behaviour, not the punishment of bad behaviour. As humanism does not totalise human identities into moral categories in order to dole out reward and punishment to the deserved, its ethics are emphatically consequentialist.

It is tempting to conclude, after all this, that what we need is simply more moral doubt – complications of our ethical solutions. But what happens when we need to conclude on a course of action? As Kwame Anthony Appiah points out, shared moral language and mutual values are essential components in reciprocally beneficial outcomes:

> Folktales, drama, opera, novels, short stories; biographies, histories, ethnographies; fiction or nonfiction; painting, music, sculpture, and dance: every human civilization has ways to reveal to us values we had not previously recognized or undermine our commitment to values that we had settled into. Armed with these terms, fortified with a shared language of value, we can often guide one another, in the cosmopolitan spirit, to shared responses. (30)

The best stories can do, I submit, is to provide a space to test our convictions and our hypothetical, narrativised moral responses against both simplicity and validity, an arena by which courses of action can subsequently be confirmed or denied against these principles. The arts unite phenomenological and moral knowledge through striving, giving rise to moral *possibilities* rather than actualities (Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*); their completion is up to the individual after the narrative closes and we are once again called upon to act in the world. We may consequently, at the very least, be primed for more complex eventualities, and ready to face the difficulty of sticking to our convictions when self-interest intervenes.

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[75] There exists an attendant fear of the loss of culpability, especially in legal settings, when we admit biological explanations. But if we see our genes and environments as co-dependent and their effects as indivisible, this makes little sense. Understanding criminal or unethical behaviour as a product of both our sociobiology and the world it is expressed within should lead us to a consequentialist rather than a retributivist ethic. We can identify culpability and still explain its emergence without resorting to punitive rather than pragmatic measures.

Conclusion

So again, we arrive at an ethic of striving rather than perfection. The development of moral language requires striving and mental work; as a case in point, Darcia Narvaez's research finds that children apply pre-existing, context contingent moral schemas to literary narratives (as do adults), yet they rarely comprehend morals the author intended to convey. To my mind, this points to the complex sociality of storytelling, in that we use narrative to develop a moral language in concert with others; again, stories are a springboard into discussion not only about the actual, but also about possible morals arising from the story, and a child is probably much more likely to receive moral instruction from a parent or guardian than an interpreted narrative. Caregivers and children instead might use the narrative together in conversation as a point of reference for emergent moral knowledge; the story itself may not be the primary conveyor of information, so much as the effort put into discussion around the story, and that effort breeds a familiarity with moral conversations that will help the child navigate more complex social interactions as they gain independence. While it may be unsurprising that a brief intervention teaching reading skills fails to surmount children's moral misreadings (ibid. 166), these skills should be thought of as developing over many years, with effort. When we read a picture book to children, for example, we may discuss the story with them to clarify alternative interpretations, yet this does not mean they will have an immaculate comprehension of moral storytelling within six weeks. Narvaez speculates: "There may be moral developmental hurdles that prevent a young child from comprehending an author's theme until sufficient developmental structures are in place" (ibid. 166-167), however these developments will need a context in which to flourish, a reason for their development. Stories provide a safe context for such developments. Comprehension of intent may become easier over time, although we still interpret and discuss our interpretations with others, a learned advanced sociality.

We are thus returned to a primary humanist value: the striving and effort of complex understanding is more important than moral perfectionism, and emphasising ongoing development keeps us open and adaptable to human difference and change. This connects the mental work of fiction to its potential for a complex empathy: it takes effortful care to remain alive to how other people's stories are alive (c.f. Price *Forms of Life*), adapting and changing as they confront new environments in which new stories will be relevant. The primary ethical

appeal of the narrative humanist, then, is that we should never allow our conception of one another to become complete, to reach an end in which we think of another lifeworld or culture as static; we achieve this through stories, those mutating transactions that speak of incessant mutation, that diverge and require a comparison back to those moments we diverged from.

There will doubtless be objections to this taxonomy: story functions I have or have not included, that I have made too much of, or not enough of, or those that seem too indistinct to be separated into more than one function. These are all the problems of taxonomy, and I should reiterate before closing that I do not expect this first attempt at a social narratology to be in any way comprehensive. I expect it to be extensive enough to inspire imagination, however, and to lay the groundwork of untotalisable unknowing at the same time as offering space for new descriptive insights, the openness to discovery that humanism relies upon. In the spirit of humanism, it invites complication and extension.[76] I hope to retain this sense of open wonderment, but also prompt attention to many of these uses of narrative in practice, as I address a case study of the human drama on film: the remainder of this thesis concerns the millennial suburban ensemble dramedy as an example of humanist narrative practice. Where I have so far only described the theory of humanism, I turn now to demonstrate its application at two levels: an expansive cinematic genre reading, followed by a close reading of a single film.

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[76] Literary scholars have been famously hostile toward quantitative or otherwise systematic approaches to narratological inquiry (like functionalism), and I hope that I have demonstrated too that these approaches just offer some new vantage – they do not ordinarily totalise their findings as the summation of narrative's meaning in our lives – and that they will not obliterate, and indeed can be harmonious with, traditional hermeneutics.

THE SUBURBAN ENSEMBLE DRAMEDY:
History, Taxonomy and Discussions

The suburban ensemble film had been hinted at prior to the turn of the millennium, yet only really began to coalesce into a recognisable cinematic mode or genre with identifiable conventions as the 1990s drew to a close. Some of the more successful titles include *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) and what is arguably the inciting feature in a wave of such films entering production, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). Although seldom recognised as a genre in its own right, beyond being identified by critics as "humanistic drama" as we will see, the conventions are familiar: a cross-section of an American neighbourhood with concerns equalised across a transgenerational multi-character cast, contrasting personality types, gender, sexual, ethnic, ideological and other differences. The shift in independent filmmaking – to ensemble cast family and domestic studies with a focus on performance rather than perceptible or ostentatious technique – was not impulsive or abrupt, or without precedent, but a gradual development is observable throughout the 2000s, possibly as film investors began to recognise the potential for return on films experimenting with the inexpensive yet high-profile *American Beauty* formula. The film grossed $356 million worldwide against a $15 million production budget (Box Office Mojo) and won the Academy Award for Best Picture. A pioneering example of the influence, prestige and financial success possible in studio-independent hybrid modes of production, DreamWorks borrowed practices "from the indie/specialty realm, from budget to handling to textual qualities" (King *Indiewood* 195). *American Beauty* emerged from a major studio, yet spearheaded a trend that would traverse modes of independent and Indiewood production, gathering momentum throughout the 2000s.

Along with a realist or representational mode of expression and suburban context, characteristics of the genre include ensemble casts often featuring no distinguishable protagonist; concentration on the ways in which families mediate dysfunction and ultimately get by after traumatic events force reconciliation; a feature-length transition from sardonic displays of familial conflict to sentiment; a converse upsetting of sentimentality with humour; admission of painful or repellent desires and taboos, usually followed by a deflation of the shame they incite; recurrent themes of adultery and ephebophilia; comparative fusion of

coming-of-age and midlife crisis drama; observational, performance-based comedy of manners, coupled with politically aware satire; coverage which concentrates the viewer's attention on character and performance; interventions of the real in comical situations, whereupon we are called to imagine the characters' broader lives outside of the comedic diegesis; a critique of consumer culture obedience, aspiration, status and class anxiety in the suburbs; a concurrent attempt to understand the roots of narcissism and promote humility; anatomisation of ennui, depression and "affluenza" (c.f. Harmon) in the suburban malaise; and communally prompted redemption, resulting in a new political awareness and liberalised care. Being a low-cost domestic mode, the suburban ensemble film also features a predominance of early career and first time filmmakers working on limited budgets.

In 1999 three suburban ensemble dramedy films were released: *Election* (Alexander Payne) in April, followed by *American Beauty* and *Mumford* (Lawrence Kasdan), both in September. Although *American Beauty* was by far the most successful of the three films and can claim the clearest lasting impact on future productions, both *Election* and *Mumford* are important in the development of suburban cinema in their own ways. The first half of the decade saw the release of a diverse range of films from Rose Troche's *The Safety of Objects* in 2001 to Mike Binder's *The Upside of Anger* in 2005. 2006 was the second watershed year, with the much darker *Little Children* (Todd Field) and ensemble dramedy-road movie splice *Little Miss Sunshine* both receiving awards attention. Films like *Lymelife* (Derick Martini, 2008) cast a critical eye over early influential texts, referencing *American Beauty* in particular and revisiting some of its questionable gender politics (Beuka 242; Karlyn passim) and haughty spirituality (Hentzi 49). By the middle of the decade, the genre was recognizable enough for its own conventions to be satirized in works like *The Chumscrubber* (Arie Posin, 2005) and *A Serious Man* (Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, 2009). Latter works include *The Kids Are All Right* and *The Oranges* (Julian Farino, 2012).

There were predecessors. Although *American Beauty* could be considered the watershed moment, an earlier breakthrough is evident in the release of *Parenthood* (Ron Howard, 1989) a decade prior, then an unconventional script both in its narrative structure and resolve to scrutinise the inherent drama in our everyday familial relations that other films overlooked or sidelined (I will take a closer look at *Parenthood* in the ensuing chapter). These multi-character family dramedies were for a long time isolated examples, however. For now, I will trace some of the more generic predecessors, as the suburban ensemble film has

amalgamated conventions from a number of filmic traditions, including coming-of-age and teen films, infidelity dramas, televisual family sitcoms, the family crisis drama, generational reunion pictures, and some of the pioneering post-Production Code ensemble works of the New Hollywood era. Following from an introductory history and taxonomy of the suburban ensemble dramedy's influences, this chapter looks at the politics of suburban representation on film, discussions around its affective formula, in particular the implications of sentimentality and satire's interdependence, and finally the political context from which this particular ensemble form emerged at the dawn of the new millennium. First, however, as the suburban ensemble dramedy's polyphonic storytelling presents something of a narrative fusion of genre forms spanning the preceding century, I turn to an archaeology of some thematic elements it juxtaposes and revises, including various iterations of domestic melodrama and comedic genres. The following proliferation of genres and styles suggests from the outset the filmic histories millennial suburban ensembles are steeped within, and in many cases talk back to; this taxonomy should then place the suburban ensemble in a historical context, providing the grounds for further discussion of its politics.

The Thematic and Generic Heritage of the Millennial Suburban Ensemble Film

A number of dramatic ensemble film forms were popular in the years leading up to the millennium: the episodic family genealogy film, often emphasising romance or theistic identity, such as István Szabó's *Sunshine* (1999), released the same year as *American Beauty*; the social issue ensemble drama, such as *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh) in 2000, or what Hsuan L. Hsu describes collectively as the "Los Angeles ensemble film" ("Racial Privacy" 134-143);[77] and Alejandro González Iñárritu's butterfly effect cinema sustained throughout the 2000s, a popular version of the "network narrative" (Silvey), "fractal" (Everett) or "hyperlink" (Quart "Networked") cinema, in which seemingly disparate people are revealed to share causal connections. In an overwhelming majority of these films, the tragic or melodramatic modes far outweighed the comedic, and suburbia was rarely a primary consideration (urban spaces are much more prominent in the above examples). These phenomena were continuous with a trend of proliferating multi-protagonist films throughout the rapidly globalising 1980s (Azcona *The Multi-Protagonist Film*), and of course with countless multi-focalised literary and

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[77] Hsu describes these films as categorically melodramatic, sociopolitically mysticising and principally urban. Hsu's principal example is *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004).

theatrical traditions before that. Nonetheless, surveying all of these ensemble forms, it does appear that the turn of the millennium initiated special interest in our connectivity and shared meaning. This is perhaps unsurprising considering plentiful evidence that temporal landmarks, no matter how apparently arbitrary, spur searches for meaning (Dai et al.; Alter and Hershfield), and this phenomenon could also help explain the high volume of influential film productions released in 1999, a year Geoff King positions as the coming-of-age of Indiewood filmmaking (*Indiewood* 191-192). Other ensemble pictures became popular in the millennium's first decade: the seasonal, such as *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) or *The Family Stone* (Thomas Bezucha, 2005); the thriller, including Quentin Tarantino's works and *Rashomon*-influenced (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) polyphonic perspective films like *Vantage Point* (Pete Travis, 2008) or *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003); musical adaptations; Rodrigo García's women-centric hyperlink vignettes; political history revision narratives, often humanising peripheral characters, such as *Bobby* (Emilio Estevez, 2006), *Battle in Seattle* (Stuart Townsend, 2007) or *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007); and one-off experiments like *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000). Nor can the popularity of ensemble filmmaking be considered an exclusively American phenomenon. Notions of global connectivity in popular films such as *The Edge of Heaven* (Fatih Akin, 2007), Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2000) and Susan Biel's cinema vivify transnational causality and thus present a broader political reach. Finally, the success of Paul Thomas Anderson's Los Angeles ensemble *Magnolia* (1999) also paved the way for a number of connectivity films throughout the following decade, often employing a similar romantic irony and narrativised reflexivity with abstruse purpose, such as *Happy Endings* (Don Roos, 2005), *The Rules of Attraction* (Roger Avary, 2002), or *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (Jill Sprecher, 2001), all of which present as some manner of temporal-causal puzzle.

There were two suburban period pieces prefacing the ensemble dramedy genre in the years prior to *American Beauty*: *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), a parable of child neglect during the sexual revolution, and *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), somewhat more facetiously taking aim at mediatised ideals of 1950s suburbia. These were both accounts of mid-century suburbia, the lasting images of which are, as Steven Mintz (353), Stephanie Coontz (*The Way We Never Were*) and Arlene S. Skolnick (*Embattled Paradise*) all assert, inaccurate representations of the breadth of family living arrangements across America at the time. The white picket nuclear family was never the standard, and is thus a case of ersatz nostalgia, or "nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory" (Appadurai 78). Drawing

on ideas from historiographer David Lownethal, suburban media narrative theorist David R. Coon agrees: despite the imprecision of so many of our presumptions of postwar suburban demography, nostalgic visions of the suburban archetype are still motivated to create demand for neotraditional development and related policy goals, as well as to criticize these goals (30-68).[78] The archetype – or suburban façade – remains a fabrication we continue to discuss as if it were a real rather than psychical space, or "symbolic ecology" (Hunter "The Symbolic Ecology of Suburbia" 199), yet Coon suggests that in 1998, *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir) anticipated a trend in self-reflexivity around suburban image construction.[79] Understanding suburbia in these early examples of the genre meant understanding homogeneity – whiteness, family standards and upper-middleness, for example, were tied to the geographic imaginary of extant postwar sociospatial iterations, even if the reality was increasingly divergent.

It is arguable, though, how much the late 1990s suburban films reveal an unacknowledged psychical construction of suburbia, or merely extend popular fantasies founded on a suburban stereotype. Robert Beuka claims, "these films also represent a perpetuation of the two-dimensional view of suburban life that has characterized the dominant perception of suburbia" (14), displaying both affection for and chastising attitudes toward the fantasy of a postwar uniform suburbia. *Pleasantville* and *The Ice Storm*, for example, in different ways cautioned against idealising a sexually confused past, both emphasising their suburban settings as nodes in the history of sexual repression. David E. Wilt points out that *The Ice Storm* riffs on themes of suburban sexual dissatisfaction explored in 1960s exploitation cinema such as *Sin in the Suburbs* (Joe Sarno, 1964) and *Suburban Roulette* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) (484). However, again, our image of sexual unknowing in these eras is exaggerated (perhaps compounded by the Production Code's distortion of thematic candour): early multi-character coming-of-age melodramas such as *Peyton Place*

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[78] To borrow Svetlana Boym's terms, it is possible to have reflective rather than restorative nostalgia; that is, a nostalgia that has no need to retrieve a version of the past, but rather remains responsive to transience (*The Future of Nostalgia*).

[79] In fact, the *Pleasantville*, *Truman Show* and *American Beauty* trio of late 1990s films have become somewhat of a benchmark for recent scholarly discussions of suburbia on screen in America (Smicek *American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares*). It is interesting that we continue to return to this trio of pictures as exemplary; *American Beauty* appears to me the only one of these texts whose influence can be clearly charted across the many suburban films in the decade to follow. It is also notable that they prevail as objects of critical reading on many high school curricula.

(Mark Robson) in 1957 and *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan) in 1961 tackle sexual repression lucidly, as well as providing another humanistic suburban ensemble template.

Between renewed interest in the family unit under strain in the 1960s-70s, surprisingly giving rise to "some of Hollywood's most searching explorations of family life" (Mintz 359),[80] and its resurgence after 1999, American cinema often reimagined the US suburban context within the canon of popular genre film. Examples include the much-discussed family- and home-under-threat in post-1960s horror and suburban Gothic,[81] through to the more pointed suburban gender politics in hostage/siege dramas such as Roger Donaldson's *Cadillac Man* and Michael Cimino's *Desperate Hours* remake (both in 1990), or the less observed gender role redefinition of comedy features such as *Mr. Mom* (Stan Dragoti, 1983), in which the climax sees both parents (played by Teri Garr and Michael Keaton) hastily patching together a deal to co-work and co-childrear, out of necessity to mitigate the slapstick chaos unfolding around them (the settlement comically coincides with a sudden end to their suburban entropy). The generational studies of reunion films *The Big Chill* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1983) and *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (John Sayles, 1979), as well as Barry Levinson's "Baltimore Films" and later, Whit Stillman's "Yuppie Trilogy", all provided another blueprint for ensemble works that emphasised social inquiry. Sayles's influence in particular should be noted: a pioneer of creative funding methods for American independent filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s, Sayles was already known for his various experimentations in ensemble cinema. After exploring the urban ensemble drama with *City of Hope* in 1991, Sayles wrote and directed a number of fascinating and highly political hybrid films: he crossed the small town ensemble with a Frontera Western mystery in 1996's *Lone Star*, and with the survival film in 1999's *Limbo*, before reaching perhaps the closest he would come to a purist suburban ensemble with 2002's *Sunshine State*, a look at development politics in Florida, and then returning to the small town ensemble detective story with 2004's *Silver City*. Although his works never quite mimicked a recognisable genre form, as his recognition of human hybridity in all its forms permeated not just his casting and dialogue but his approach to genre also, it is

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[80] These include suburban dramedy precursors such as the domestic humanism of ensemble melodramas like Robert Ellis Miller's 1968 adaptation of *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*, or the use of familial estrangement narratives to open a dialogue with emergent antisuburbanism in *The Gypsy Moths* (John Frankenheimer, 1969).

[81] See in particular Robin Wood "The American Family Comedy: From *Meet Me in St. Louis* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*."

clear that Sayles's filmmaking throughout the 1990s provided another model for the millennial suburban ensemble dramedy. There is a discernible hope for developing global fairness in Sayles's reiteration of inevitable hybridity in such a variety of narrative spaces (Moss-Wellington "Humanist Ethics in *Casa*" 199), which may be carried from Sayles's influential ensemble templates to later suburban pictures, too.

Reaching back further, there are clear precedents in the early work of John Cassavetes, Mike Nichols – particularly in the care displayed for all characters, malcontent and otherwise, in *The Graduate* (1967) – Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971), Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) and other New Hollywood films including the pioneering ensemble dramedies of Robert Altman, along with some experiments in a new magic realist aesthetic such as *The King of Marvin Gardens* (Bob Rafelson, 1972), which prompts consideration of the ambiguities of familial responsibility. The voluntary ratings system that succeeded the Hays Code in 1968 clearly opened the door for New Hollywood maturity, capable of more candid representations of domestic politics. Altman in particular experimented with (monogenerational, non-suburban) fusions of comedy and drama across an ensemble cast with *MASH* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975). Before this, we can trace the humanising of suburban lives to figures including Frank Capra, particularly in the enormously influential *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). We can also trace family and drawing room drama on the stage from Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill to Tracy Letts today, whose *August: Osage County* was adapted into a suburban ensemble film by John Wells in 2013. Although all of these works contain elements that would turn up in later American indie cinema, the suburban ensemble dramedy as genre, with sustained conventions of its own, did not cohere until the turn of the millennium.

Perhaps one of the clearest generic threads prefacing the suburban dramedy cinematic form can be witnessed across family crisis dramas, from the affecting narrative efficiency of *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979) to *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980) and palliative dramas like *Dad* (Gary David Goldberg, 1989), right up to *One True Thing* (Carl Franklin) and *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus) in 1998. Of course, these films tend away from comedic relief, lean to melodrama, and mostly fixate on parental concerns rather than equalising our sympathies across generations or neighbourhoods. They also may have got it wrong: in the crisis drama, we often we see family trauma (particularly the loss of a child) tearing families apart, where research demonstrates that shared dysphoric experience is

actually more likely to bind communities through identity fusion (Whitehouse 284) and promote cooperation (Bastian et al. 2014).[82] Many films of this ilk, however, do take gender role definition as a springboard for drama – in particular *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *One True Thing*[83] – and this remains a key component in most millennial suburban ensemble works. Later, Alexander Payne fused the family crisis drama with ensemble dramedy conventions in both *The Descendants* (2011) and *Nebraska* (2013). The latter, perhaps less humanistic than many of Payne's works, exemplifies an in-vogue fantasy of small town and semi-rural suburban existentialism, permeating films as diverse as *Fargo* (Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, 1996) and *The Good Girl* (Miguel Arteta, 2002). Each offers discriminatory visions of a mundane world the very provincialism of which diminishes human worth and potential – a barren aesthetic and moral landscape, and its parallel physical and human geography, generates parochial ennui.

Sexual politics play a substantial part in many of the millennial suburban dramedies, in particular infidelity, and deconstruction of a contemporary confusion around young sexuality and pubescence. Therefore another precedent can be witnessed across infidelity dramas, from *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) to *Strangers When We Meet* (Richard Quine, 1960), both considering the context in which the infidelity takes place, and of course *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962). There is also a subgenre honing in on the inextricability of gender, class and sexual politics, in which well-to-do families invite a young prostitute to stay with them as part of a saviour fantasy; they usually end up parting ways with the young woman's life relatively unchanged, and the upper suburbanites having an epiphany which allows them to move past a roadblock in their lives. Examples include *Afternoon Delight* (Jill Soloway, 2013), unpleasantly concluding with the lead character's relationship satisfaction after an opaque sexual-philosophical breakthrough she has used and dumped a young sex worker to obtain,

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[82] Sara Albuquerque et al. found that "a child's death can cause cohesive as well as detrimental effects on a couple's relationship" (30) and Astri Syse et al. found no general association between childhood cancer and risk of parental divorce ("Does Childhood Cancer Affect Parental Divorce Rates?").

[83] While the former documents the recompense of renewed familial fulfilment following the inherent drama of gender identities in flux (making the case for reciprocal gain when sex roles become unbound), the latter recognises and elegantly magnifies casual sexism underscoring the family lives of a New York cultural elite; however it doesn't use the recognition of gender roles to dismiss or discredit the lives of those participating in them – the film is, in part, about honouring the lives of those we don't necessarily agree with, including those who have absorbed archaic gender roles.

and the more palatable *Welcome to the Rileys* (Jake Scott, 2010), at least allowing some conciliatory discourse to take place as we return to a more comforting normality of separation between classes. In these films, our identification and ultimately our sympathies are aligned with the normalised upper-middle families; their exoneration becomes more important than the lives of their protégés. It is also worth noting a contemporaneous spike in four-hander adultery and spouse-swapping films including *Fourplay* (Mike Binder, 2001), *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (John Curran, 2004), *Closer* (Mike Nichols, 2004) and *Married Life* (Ira Sachs, 2007), and some earlier, lesser-known ensemble pictures dealing with monogamy such as *Denial* (Adam Riffkin, 1998).

Recent melodramas may seem to be a useful reference here, from the knowingly ham-fisted excesses of Todd Haynes's didactic suburban critiques, including Douglas Sirk homage *Far from Heaven* in 2002 and 1995's *Safe*, to the outrageously popular high production soaps of HBO. The emotional arc of a majority of suburban dramedy films seems derived in no small way from television, perhaps as television provided an early model for the family ensemble, across which further structural influences were carried. Indeed, feminist media theorist Lynn Spigel has underscored just how much of our historic presumptions of suburbia were carried through television in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*. However, as the millennial suburban dramedies resist melodrama in favour of diverse attempts at realism, and a pathos tempered by humour, I see more in common with family sitcoms such as *Roseanne* and socially conscious predecessors such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *All in the Family*, *Diff'rent Strokes* or *Good Times* than TV serials such as ABC's *Desperate Housewives* or *Big Love*, both of which attempt to "transcend" geographic specificity in suburban depiction (Coon 223), and thus wind up as hyperbolic misrepresentation.[84] *Roseanne* pioneered a kind of dramedy in the family sitcom format that has clear threads to this day: the gags are often cruel, the characters overtly aggressive toward one another, but when they are faced with the complex ethical dimensions of a particular social dilemma and struggle to devise their own resolution, each short story concludes with opportunities for sentiment, as each character's attempts to do the best they can demonstrates a genuine care for one another. The format was carried through cartoons such as *The Simpsons* to today's *Modern Family*, albeit gathering excess ironic

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[84] Similarly, the American soap opera presents another domestic ensemble template, yet a sustained melodramatic singularity and internal moral concerns' preclusion of broader socio-political reflexivity distance soap conventions from the suburban dramedy. Perhaps again, the sitcom *Soap* could be seen as a more influential text than any purely dramatic televisual narratives.

address along the way, which by the time of *Modern Family* would overwhelm and undermine any social critique or sincerity. Of course, the difference remains that *Roseanne* admitted class and regularly foregrounded financial concerns. These influences are, sadly, now dwindling in related sitcoms; where they are apparent, class too often becomes farce, as with a series like *Raising Hope*. Equivalent contemporary programmes are drained of sentimentality until only the humour remains, as in the pathos-hostile *Family Guy*; these productions demonstrate a tendency to bigotry, complicating the notion of sentimentality as conservative praxis, which I will assess later in the chapter.[85]

As coming-of-age and teen films involve a liberal dose of family relations, many of the conventions also have crossover with the suburban ensemble dramedy. Some films, such as *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), *Dirty Girl* (Abe Sylvia, 2010) or *The Way Way Back* (Nat Faxon and Jim Rash, 2013) straddle the border between the suburban dramedy and coming-of-age film. These pictures have absorbed a progression in teen revolt dramas from *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), and of course *Peyton Place* and *Splendor in the Grass*, along with milder coming-of-age ensemble features like *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), through rebellion hysteria pictures *Suburbia* (Penelope Spheeris, 1984) and *Over the Edge* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1979), in which the youths' disgruntlement explicitly stems from the town planning self-interest of their parents. This was followed by Francis Ford Coppola's S.E. Hinton adaptations, then via John Hughes and the "brat pack" to Richard Linklater's more sober reflections on youth rites of passage. Concurrently to Linklater's early youth studies, films such as *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin, 1990) began to chart changes in racial and spatial mobility, as racially mixed characters "traverse a landscape that runs the gamut from inner-city 'projects' through lower- and middle-class suburban fringe neighbourhoods to the upper-middle-class suburbs" (Beuka 216-217), and Lasse Hallström extended his own rite of passage filmmaking to variations on a multi-character suburban perspective for the humanistic features *Once Around* in 1991, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* in 1993 and the more episodic bildungsroman *The Cider House Rules* in 1999. Hallström's later films, however, waned in humanist subject matter.

Post-Hughes studio teen pictures too, such as *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), now include more screen time and consideration of parents, teachers and other adults in the lead teen's

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[85] See under "Drama in the Comedy: The Problem of Sentiment and the Possibility of Affective Equilibrium" below.

life, which indicates a trade in genre conventions has begun to take place (perhaps also taking cues from the broader suburban critique of independent predecessors, such as Hal Hartley's teen romance films). On the other hand, films like *The Kids Are All Right* and *Enough Said* (Nicole Holofcener, 2013) take a dramatic moment in teenagers' lives (moving out of home to college) and focus on the way in which the parents displace their anxiety around the lifestyle shift to relationships with their partners and peers. The latter splices the kids-going-to-college movie with romantic comedy conventions. The suburban ensemble dramedy does not necessarily require inclusion of family: some films, such as *What Goes Up* (Jonathan Glatzer, 2009) and *Best Man Down* (Ted Koland, 2013), include very little to no family relations, focusing on the relationship between children and adults who are related by extra-familial acquaintance. *What Goes Up*, like *Election*, could be seen as representative of another movement in this cinema: the focus on adults in high school contexts. Some include a breadth of young people and their teachers, and some, such as *Juno* or *Butter*, examine how a central character relates to a breadth of adults and peers around them. Others again, such as *Mumford* or *The Station Agent* (Thomas McCarthy, 2003), include little or no lead child or teen roles. Many of these films test the boundaries of the suburban ensemble dramedy, which is, like all genres, permeable. In summary, coming of age cinema could be seen as symbiotic with the suburban ensemble dramedy (often sharing a suburban context and considering the meaning of family): early teen cinema could be seen as inspiring a suburban ensemble formula of humour and pathos, and in turn teen films have featured larger ensembles with a greater breadth of character types receiving attention alongside young protagonists. For now, though, I will stick to analysis of those films that work squarely within the confines of the suburban ensemble rather than bildungsroman or teen cinemas that have incorporated suburban ensemble influences.

So the suburban ensemble dramedy presents an amalgamation of several genres, both antecedent and concomitant. It borrows their conventions and fuses them into something comparative and new. Wilt compellingly identifies the longstanding influence of another convention in exaggeration of the relatively mundane activity of home maintenance and renovation, extrapolated to a (usually comedic) nightmare (482): examples include 1948's *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* to 1986's *The Money Pit*. Aspirational-conformist suburban aesthetic gags were once the bread and butter of satirical fantasy filmmakers in the suburban Gothic tradition, too: Tim Burton opening *Beetlejuice* (1988) with a spider crawling over a model dream home, for instance, and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) with cookie-cutter

suburban rooftops of alluring toybox colours. The "imaginative construction of suburbia as uniformly dull or relentlessly gaudy" (Millard 186) endures as a fantasy of cultural specificity and diversity of taste lacking in the suburban populace. *Neighbors* (John G. Avildsen, 1981), *Parents* (Bob Balaban, 1989) and *Serial Mom* (John Waters, 1994) also reach for a cynical fantasy show of suburban horrors via camp hyperbole. Joe Dante draws attention to the inherent solipsism of these images in *The 'Burbs* (1989) when, in one of the most underrated film openings in cinema, we zoom in from the Universal logo (aspiring to considerations of the global) right into a darkened, pristinely art directed film set of a suburban cul-de-sac (parochial considerations are now inescapable), where a hilariously extrinsic trophy home cum Gothic mansion looms over the street. Composer Jerry Goldsmith's disconcerting, alien percussion blends into ominous string arrangement clichés recognisable from recent thriller films, culminating in the classic, over-the-top Gothic organ to craft a truly unique experience projecting the viewer into the suburban uncanny.[86] These hyperbolic images of material conformity, once a dark gag exposing absurdity in the media fantasy of the suburban façade, were imported right into the realist dramedy in 1999 with *American Beauty*.

Finally, the concept of the façade in suburban representation is a long-standing cliché of particular interest to these filmmakers, many of whom challenge its summary of suburbia as a front for depravity or vice, while others, such as writer/director Derrick Borte in *The Joneses* (2009), uncritically replicate it. The imagery associated with the suburban façade has also been increasingly loaded with irony, revealing a growing discomfort with its uncomplicated deployment. Despite enduring appeals to "look closer", as in *American Beauty*'s publicity campaign, or strip back appearances to "shatter the illusion" and expose "what is hidden underneath" (Coon 18-19), we are already familiar with what is hidden underneath. The discourse and tropes of an intellectual "special access" cajole us into thinking we are being granted an exceptional vision of deeper truth, when all we are witnessing is dog-eared manipulation of fantastical socio-spatial iconography masquerading as truth, repeating the viewer's preconceptions: "look closer" assumes the on-screen suburbs are a reality hiding a truer reality. A central tenet of both *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* is that there is a real world outside of the suburban ideal or utopia, and the notion has extended in American

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[86] This musical pastiche was, in some ways, an experimental self-parody of more serious-minded genre scoring conventions that Goldsmith himself had employed across previous features (Clemmensen np).

antisuburban cinema since their release in 1998.[87] Coon admits these spaces are as bogus as the West of the Western, or the crime-addled urbanity of a noir thriller (19-20), or what Beuka refers to as a suburban "imagined environment, a landscape of the mind" (229). "Despite the range of options available," Coon says, "storytellers tend to return to one particular vision of suburbia more than any other. As a result, the image of the suburb as a middle-class bedroom community continues to dominate our cultural imagination, even as the reality of suburban life becomes increasingly difficult to define" (222). Reliance on some veracity of the suburban façade as a real-world phenomenon in a film like *The Joneses* lays bare the didactic and cynical elitism of its reductive fantasy, totalising all suburban lives as unfulfilling, vapid and concealing corruption, duplicity, or human ill. *New York Times* journalist Stephen G. Freedman uses the films of Todd Solondz to point out how this antisuburban cinema implicitly frames its concerns as polarised, ideological war between those who struggle in the confines of suburbia, and those who epitomise it:

> Solondz, a native of New Jersey who calls his production company Suburban Pictures, means to speak for the misfits in a monochromatic world … Such compassion, though, relies on cheap shots against whatever or whomever represents the suburban status quo. The white-collar father in "Happiness," a Cheeveresque figure with his car phone and rep tie, cannot simply be unmasked as a hypocrite or a souse; no, he turns out to be a pederast who rapes his son's playmates. When Mr. Solondz's camera in "Dollhouse" surveys a suburban home, it lingers over a veritable catalogue of bad taste – gaudy afghans, mismatched paneling, green shag carpet, cabinets stuffed with Yodels and Ring Dings. This kind of satire, far from seeking to jar an audience out of its complacency, sneers along with it from a superior distance. (1)

After the millennium however, a new breed of films, largely independently produced, have taken the time to reclaim and explore humanising character possibilities within the suburban cinematic context.

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[87] Another formal difference is that films like *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* begin with a falsely idyllic absence of conflict and then incrementally reveal schisms undergirding their suburban context – in this way they "reveal" suburbia as fraught. Later suburban cinema, from *American Beauty* onward, begins from the assumption of suburban friction and increasingly works inversely from conflicts toward their resolution, shifting the narrative focus substantially.

None of this is to suggest a complete expulsion of antihumanism from suburban depiction in cinema after 1999. On one hand, filmmakers like Derek Cianfrance with *Blue Valentine* (2010) and Mendes with *Revolutionary Road* (2008) extended "yet another presentation of the suburban world as a hopeless trap for clueless people who had wanted more out of life than marriage" (Basinger 353). The image of suburbia as prison sustains. Across the history of suburban cinema, a number of films, unpleasantly asserting their misogyny as comedy, also reveal an impulse to blame, punish or deride women (at worst offering their simulated abuse as nihilistic catharsis) for a perceived awfulness seething under the suburban façade: from *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) to *American Beauty*, and to an extent *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), these films identified the suburban malaise as a female problem, the regressive mores and routines particular to women's domesticity (*The Stepford Wives*) and women internalising or sustaining the worst of American competitive exceptionalism (*American Beauty*); these films often went on to scorn and degrade their female characters for such crimes (*Blue Velvet*). They are part of an ongoing suppressive characterisation of women's domesticity as operating outside of real labour, productivity and political relevance (McHugh 193). Susan Saegert critiques this sustaining misconception of the suburban, private and parochial as feminine and the urban, public and productive as masculine in "Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs."

American Beauty's inclusion of elements of aesthetic fantasy also reveals a key development unfolding throughout the ensemble dramedies of the 2000s: the gradual relinquishing of extra-realist style (a realism occasionally interrupted by presentational flourishes, dreamlike sequences or editing bombast, particularly evident in the early works of Alexander Payne). Concurrently, we see a movement away from the distancing irony associated with filmmakers like Wes Anderson and Solondz, through a more romantic irony and eventually to a clear reaction against postmodern ironic distance.[88] As the suburban ensemble developed as a recognisable cinematic mode, it would eschew the ironic and metafictive address still lingering in *American Beauty* and *Election*, supplanting remaining

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[88] Figures including Anderson, Solondz, Noah Baumbach, David O. Russell, their contemporaries and their independent predecessors, like Hal Hartley – variously labelled the directors of "smart cinema" (Sconce "Irony, Nihilism"; Perkins 132-156) and members of an ironically named New Sincerity (Hancock np; Olsen 17) – have worked with ensemble family casts, yet they tend to operate outside of realist modes and emphasise the inventiveness of their artifice, and as Kim Wilkins suggests, many present an amplification of meticulously orchestrated eccentricities, disclosed through "hyper-dialogue" or evasive, perhaps pop-ironic verbosity, behind which lies an ongoing existential meditation (413).

distancing techniques with a much more prominent sincere realism, proximity to and care for character. King notes that in *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno*, "Ironic distance and foregrounding of quirks tends to give way to a more direct appeal on this ground that seems to be intended seriously and unironically" (*Indie 2.0* 42). Some films – perhaps most markedly *Juno* – chart this course within their own structure: beginning with overt quirky irony, having the irony challenged with interventions of the real, moving through sincerity in order to deal responsibly with the awakened drama, and ending with a kind of mediated irony, a kinder self-awareness that does not permit dismissal of human frailty or the manner of irreverence postmodern irony appears to invite.[89] The difference, then, is that the suburban ensemble dramedy is a predominantly realist mode: the object of our attention is the narrative's ethics rather than its construction, or the pleasure of identifying the hand of a cinematic auteur like Solondz or Anderson in the aesthetics of a film world.

This realist tradition is also what differentiates the suburban ensemble dramedy from millennial hyperlink cinema such as *Happy Endings* or *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*, perhaps its closest ensemble relative unfolding on a similar timeframe. In these pictures, the hermeneutic confusion propelled by ironic devices – such as "register alteration, exaggeration or understatement, contradiction or incongruity, literalization or simplification, and repetition or echoic mention" (Hutcheon 152) – becomes a metaphor for contemporary identity confusion, whereby we must likewise make meaning from complex, splintered communities with ambiguous interpersonal cause-effect structures. In this way, they wield the techniques of narrative irony (fudging intentionality to explore open-endedly interpretive spaces) to represent an existentialism particular to the encroaching digital era's splintered causal relationships. The suburban ensemble dramedy consequently sought to answer the questions of shared meaning making raised by the ironic connectivity narrative, and by earlier examples of the suburban ensemble form. This left two very different forms: the suburban dramedy's focus on human drama and earnest approach to quotidian moral predicaments, with smart and connectivity cinema tethered to ironic, presentational or

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[89] In fact, at times the clichés of the American "smart film" are antithetical to the humanistic ambitions of the suburban ensemble dramedy: "In each film, the suburb is rendered as a veritable totalitarian state that denies individuality and represses freedom through its institutions of work, school and family. Limited detail is given on the particulars of any character's job: all are sketched in broad, cartoonish terms of boredom and surveillance" (Perkins 141).

otherwise aestheticized modes of address, along with the films of cult drawcard directors like Anderson and Solondz.[90]

There is a sense in which the films I am concerned with could be designated *domestic* ensemble dramedies rather than *suburban*. However it is important to note that even those that particularise their locations are working with and against visions of suburbia inherited from previous works (rather than the everysuburbia of films like *Little Children* and *The Oranges*). Their geographic particularity upsets notions of uniformity across the medium density living arrangements broadly designated as "suburban" – for example the small town or semi-rural suburbia of *Mumford* or *Junebug*, or the different versions of suburbia within greater Los Angeles that are presented in *The Kids Are All Right* (Horn and Cholodenko 2).[91] Later films increasingly talk back to a notion of suburban homogeneity resurrected and propagated at the turn of the century, so in their geographic specificity they are still engaged with a critique of suburban media. *Lymelife* is emphatically set in Syosset, Nassau County, yet references the everybusurbia of earlier films including *The Safety of Objects* in its model houses, materialist symbolism and dark aesthetic, and *American Beauty* in its synonymous narrative structure; *Little Miss Sunshine* takes place mostly on the road, but still works within the template inherited from these earlier suburban films. As the suburban critique retains such a primacy across all of these works, I prefer *suburban ensemble* to *domestic ensemble*. In this case, however, I leave out urban ensembles such as the work of Holofcener and Kenneth Lonergan's *Margaret* (2011). The suburban ensemble dramedy is effectively one kind of domestic ensemble that emerged in the millennium.

Historicising a mode of filmmaking or cinematic genre is, of course, not without definitional problems. As many philosophers have pointed out, the nature of genre is, like all categorisations of human activity, and like the human itself, porous. Considering the

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[90] María del Mar Azcona treats the "multi-protagonist film" as genre, however excepting a passing reference to *Little Miss Sunshine* (121) the suburban ensembles do not feature as examples in her otherwise comprehensive book. Azcona's multi-protagonist film seems again more closely tied to the network, fractal or connectivity film, as is her thesis of globalisation popularising the genre (128, 135-137).

[91] "Suburban" does not simply mean the outskirts of the urban, it is an arrangement of housing density that produces changes to the geographies it is iterated within; this is why I include small town suburban ensemble works like *Mumford* or *Junebug*. Human geographers, of course, continue to point to the instability of all of these terms (Brenner and Schmid 749-752).

seemingly infinite ways we can group texts – by form, ideology, use or purpose, for example – any categorisation will always be vulnerable to alternate classifications.[92] But nominal problems never completely invalidate the use of problematic terminology in scrutinising cultural adaptation or change; despite the challenges, it still behoves us to take note of commonalities and chart patterns in ever-changing cultural formulae, as the narrative that genre language directs us to is one of human adaptation and transformation. As John Frow puts it, succinctly: "Instead of being 'in' a genre, texts are transformative instantiations of genres," and so genres introduce a range of discursive tools around cultural transformation ("Reproducibles" 1633). Genre identification is an act of historicism and can potentially reflect the complexities of cultural shift, involving multi-causal interactions which can be economic, symbolic, socially direct, or reciprocally influential: "a genre develops according to social conditions; transformations in genre and texts can influence and reinforce social conditions" (Thwaites et al., 100). As Daniel Chandler puts it: "An interpretative emphasis on genre as opposed to individual texts can help to remind us of the *social* nature of the production and interpretation of texts" (5). That is, genre identifications are yet another kind of storytelling focused on the complexities of social interaction (and are thus subject to the same responsibilities as any other narrative act).

While the genre anatomy detailed so far points to some of the interactions between the suburban ensemble film and other, related filmmaking tropes, there remains a distinct subgenre of humanist filmmaking, or a mode of creation bringing together humanistic ideological traits (respecting our struggles to get along) within a particular format (suburban; multi-focalised; shifting affect), which is recognisable even with its permeable boundaries. After Janet Staiger ("Film Noir as Male Melodrama"; "Hybrid or Inbred"), genre identification is in itself a political act, and we can probably learn more about the development of narrative conventions and related psychology if we avoid extrapolating from perceived patterns into alleged purity in genre labelling, and perhaps by privileging an examination of the ways filmic works *resist* presupposed generic boundaries. We do not want to rob filmmaking of its explorative nature by anachronistically applying categorical intent to each motion picture, thus it is important to identify problem works and canonical in-betweens. Some of the films I look at significantly overlap with other genres, such as *Election* (the high school or teen film) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (the road movie), and others innovate subtly within more

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[92] See in particular Daniel Chandler's broad-reaching attempts at a typology in "An Introduction to Genre Theory."

recognisable genre confines, for example *The Oranges* and *Lymelife*. All, however, ask where we might take film next, to remain relevant and intriguing. In a Darwinian sense, hybridity is life – mutation, trial and error, mixing components. Genre hybridity is a story of human hybridity, of cultural evolution and changing interests. These texts began as an experimental mix not only of genres, but of the disparate characters, plots and themes associated with genres, and so they continue to scout future imagined landscapes; domestic, reformative, emotional, cerebral and visceral.

Taking a cue from the exploratory spirit of these filmmakers, my approach to genre articulation takes joy in the very instability of the suburban framework it proposes. This heuristic method of genre archaeology nonetheless calls attention to the way narratives of human movement are encapsulated within modes of filmmaking that align momentarily, broadcasting a unity of interest among storytellers perhaps just for a decade, before stemming to explore emergent concerns arising in emergent contexts.

The remainder of this chapter is split into four focal points: considering the class politics of suburban cinema against the history of suburbanisation in America; a look at the nature of sentimentality and related dramatic affects in the suburban ensemble dramedy; analysis of the tandem sources of humour in these films; and finally, a consideration of the millennial political context this emergent ensemble filmmaking mode responded to.

Class Politics and Suburban Polymorphism in the Ensemble Dramedy

I have already begun to chart how the heterogeneities of the suburban ensemble dramedy contradict notions of an insidious suburban unanimity familiar in popular media. Suburbia, in reality, is many things to many people. The suburban ensemble intervenes in the treatment of suburbia as merely a symbol of dystopia, lifelessness and corrupt ideals, rather than a place where people live. I now turn to a comparison between the literature and public debates around suburbia, the interpolations the suburban ensemble film makes within antisuburban discourse, and the ways in which these films reflect polymorphic shifts in suburban geography after the postwar era. This in turn reveals the class politics that cluster around suburban discourses; suburban settings are a good place to look for some of the enduring issues of class that recur in American cinema.

Scholars from Elaine Tyler May to Robert A. Beauregard and Kenneth T. Jackson write of suburbia as the locus of American exceptionalism, and either symptomatic of or propelling America's worst divisive economic behaviours. Robert Fishman, for example, inflammatorily labels the suburbs *Bourgeois Utopias.* This reading is not new: Coon and Beuka summarise a wave of literature from the 1950s onward indicting suburbia as homogeneous and oppressive (Coon 9; Beuka 6), which they both suggest influenced the cinema of suburban critique in ensuing decades, starting from pictures such as *No Down Payment* (Martin Ritt, 1957) and carrying through New Hollywood dramas such as *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry, 1968). I would add slightly less hysterical, more understated and humanistic works dealing with similar politics of suburban development and transition, from small town drama *Some Came Running* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958) to *Rachel, Rachel* (Paul Newman, 1968), and the mid-century films of Douglas Sirk. Critics have traditionally drawn from histories of postwar suburbia to inculpate suburbia today. Many of the contemporary antisuburban arguments, where they similarly treat suburbia as a metaphor to stand against rather than a dynamic social phenomenon to understand, conceptualise the move to majority suburban living as concurrent with conservative values perceived to be burgeoning across America, in lieu of any compelling causal account – with the exception, perhaps, of Jackson's views on suburban inefficiency.[93] Fishman, for example, historicises suburbia as a zone of exclusion (4), and many other suburban critics focus on examples of blatant postwar exclusion in planned communities, such as the discriminatory socioeconomic experiment of Levittown, New York, which comes to stand for all iterations of suburbia thereafter.[94] The application of an all-encompassing motive for suburbanisation, however, should be challenged. The initial postwar boom provided:

> a practical alternative to [economic] hardships in the city. A severe housing shortage in urban centers was soothed by Federal Housing Administration (FHA) construction loans and low interest mortgages provided through the GI Bill. (Spigel 110)

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[93] Jackson's history of American suburbanization is slightly less moralistic than others, and his critiques focus on the energy waste of sprawl.

[94] Levittown was a planned postwar suburb, built 1947-1951, the developers of which explicitly advertised its exclusion of black residents. The resultant controversy bolstered its advertising appeal and status, spawning imitators. Levittown became a symbol of suburban homogeneity, which is at times more liberally applied to contemporary suburbia, or suburbia in general.

Such policies were driven by a need to accommodate growing populations outside of cramped and increasingly unaffordable cities, but were explicitly segregationist. Accounts like these complicate visions of the postwar suburb as economically elite utopia (perhaps that title should belong to those who could continue to afford city dwellings in wealthier localities), yet at the same time provide cases of consciously administered exclusion and homogeneity.

Although the phenomenon of suburbanisation has been an indicator of developing affluence in many countries (Jackson 303), this does not mean that excessive wealth has been concentrated within the suburbs, or that segregation has remained static rather than changing shape. The isolated postwar examples we continue to draw on tell only a small part of the story of American suburbanisation in the second half of the century, so we cannot speak of current iterations of suburbia as if they are the same thing.[95] A myopic focus on postwar suburbia leaves us powerless to explain how the ethnic makeup of the suburbs has since begun to balance (Coon 8) despite a history of explicitly discriminatory housing policies (Lamb *Housing Segregation in Suburban America*), especially throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Palen 132) as the invasion-succession model of black American suburbanisation reversed (Lee and Wood "Is Neighborhood Racial Segregation Place Specific?"). Nor how narratives of inclusion and superordinate goals in suburbia may have worked to challenge historic geographic segregation initially for European and Hispanic immigrants in the 1970s (Massey and Denton "Trends in Residential Segregation"), followed by black Americans in southern states throughout the 1980s (Stearns and Logan "Racial Structuring of the Housing Market"), and in northern states thereafter so that in 1995 "the all-black suburbs … tend to be not poor but middle-class or even affluent communities" (Palen 133), and at the same time extreme wealth (and its opposite), from which ethnic groups are largely excluded, was consolidated in *urban* centres (Conzen "Making Urban Wealth"). Nor can it explain how narratives reinscribing essential differences worked to resegregate ethnic communities across both

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[95] Contemporary antisuburban literature also appears to echo the anachronism of recent story media: J. Hoberman noted in 1987 Hollywood's "superimposition of the '50s over the '80s" (np). He asked, "could the region AmeriKitsch evokes be less a place than a time? Attempts to revive the Summer of Love notwithstanding, the '50s remain our favorite theme park" (ibid.). And so they have remained: audiovisual references to an imagined geographic and moral landscape of 1950s America were, surprisingly, sustained seemingly unamended from their late 1980s resurgence into the early years of the millennium, perhaps because the moral substance of this retrospective, "unhyphenated American" landscape is easier to deal with than the amorphously confounding new – suburban diversification.

suburban *and* urban spaces in the years leading up to the subprime loan crisis (Wells et al. 128). Migration patterns inverted: "white flight is reversing course, moving toward central cities, where black population is declining" (Freilich et al. 9), and America's momentum of spatial hybridisation reversed along with it. We should recall, too, that the mortgage crisis disproportionately affected inner-suburban (Ekers et al. 36-37) and exurban homes (Freilich et al. 10), driving further disparity between high-income, predominantly white urban dwellers and the rest of the nation – a trend beginning long before the crisis (Leinberger 71).

Some of America's most impoverished constituents now live in various suburban arrangements on the outskirts of larger cities, and as Beuka notes, African-American identification in media narrative has struggled to move out from urban centres (and the often violent dramas associated with them), and so now appear inconsistent with these demographic changes (215-216). In 1999, Freedman cited rap music as an example, and in particular the urban crime narratives of the suburban-raised Ice Cube. Freedman says:

> suburbia has evolved in startling ways, becoming ever more varied by race, class and ethnicity and eluding the grasp of all but a handful of perceptive artists and entertainers ... The counterbalance to the successful movement of immigrants and minorities into suburbia, though, is the deterioration of inner-ring suburbs. These communities, clinging to the borders of cities, have been growing poorer, more segregated and more troubled for decades, losing population nearly as rapidly in some cases as urban ghettoes. Several years ago, the Federal Government surrounded its own office complex in Suitland, Md., a suburb just outside Washington, with a chain-link fence topped by razor wire. (1)

He goes on to stress the diversity of these new suburbias in the face of continued homogenising media images. Black identity mobility is revealed as compromised both by nostalgia for a time when people knew their place, and the particular comfort of knowing how to identify the "other." If ethnicity onscreen can only signify a preselected range of spatial identities, agency of selfhood is curtailed for the comfort of those who may feel threatened by nonstatic and dynamic humanness afforded to ethnic others who might surprise us by not acting in the ways designated by screen cultures, or those who feel safe in the sense of historic antagonism these recurring images of racial polarity provide.

In suburban ensemble cinema we begin to see a move away from the exclusionary dystopian archetype that characterises *American Beauty* and suburban works from the turn of the millennium, with black American examples of the genre such as *The Cookout* (Lance Rivera, 2004), often presenting more as comedy than dramedy, Sayles's ethnically hybrid features such as *Sunshine State*, and films explicitly scrutinising the process of a developing inclusivity in the suburbs, the political forces that work to keep ethnic marginalisation alive, or the ways we might rally against such forces by stressing a better nature, such as *Butter* (Jim Field Smith, 2011). These films can also be connected to early ensemble examinations of integration politics and racism in American suburbia, such as *The Intruder* (Roger Corman, 1962). To an extent they chart the progress of, and resistance against, spatial mobility and equality in the United States, and the difficulties of sustaining a narrative of positive hybridisation while essentialist separatism moves in and out of vogue.[96] Earlier domestic ensemble experiments depicting black social class and identity heterogeneity, such as the Chicago-set family ensemble melodrama *Soul Food* (George Tillman Jr., 1997), remain pegged to predominantly urban locales.

Unfortunately, however, all of these works tend to be the less famous examples of the genre, revealing both an industry-wide problem of racism by subtle omission, as well as American audiences' presumed reluctance to move past visions of the suburbs as wholly white. Reiterating the postwar fantasy of an all-white suburbia could probably be conceived as a method for Hollywood filmmakers to excuse themselves from maintaining a standard of all-white casting, indulging homogeneity under the pretence of critiquing homogeneity. However, increasingly in noted examples of the genre, race-consciousness is not only evident but key to comprehending these films: for example, in *The Kids Are All Right* we are invited to complicate our identification with the lead characters when they vilify a Mexican gardener, and their petty racism is contrasted with their children's open-mindedness – the generational disjunct here may be a suggestion of some kind of progress. Although the lead characters remain white in popular films such as *The Kids Are All Right*, racial complications are not ignored: the suburban façade archetype as white exclusive utopia is slowly being abandoned. Despite the suburban dramedy genre's decline in recent years, isolated examples such as *Black or White* (Mike Binder, 2015) now tend to focus on ethnicity and spatial politics. As reviewer Nathanael Hood wrote:

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[96] For a humanistic look at the difficulty in maintaining narratives of desegregation's benefits, see Glass "The Problem We All Live With."

I cannot remember the last time I saw such a wide variety of American blackness represented onscreen: blacks living below the poverty line, affluent blacks, upwardly mobile blacks … black criminals, black judges, black lawyers, black musicians, black mothers, black fathers, black children. Rowena herself is a self-made businesswoman who operates six businesses from her garage in South Central and supports upwards of a dozen relatives living in her home. But in a grim touch of economic realism, they live just across the street from a crack-house. (np)

It may have taken some time for American filmmakers to cultivate sensitivity to these demographic changes, but perhaps media representations of black suburbia have now begun to reflect the diversification of identity we originally struggled to admit for white residents. Of course, there are other ethnic groups in America with even less onscreen visibility: indigenous Americans and Arabic Americans would count among these omitted groups.

At times, this increasingly outdated narrative of suburban exclusion is also taken to encapsulate a problem of "The West" in general, as a contemporaneous suburbanisation occurred in various iterations across Western nations over the globe. As with so many American cultural exports, the clichés of America-specific suburban development have become a benchmark for the self-analysis of other English-speaking nations. Suburban narratives and images in Australia, for example, "point to the influence of an American suburban imaginary when thinking through our own geographic context" (Moss-Wellington "Our Suburban Contempt" np). Suburban desegregation occurred in different trends, and at different speeds with a varied level of permanency in different countries, yet the American cultural discourse of suburban homogeneity was often imported uncritically as a parallel narrative across Western nations. Iconography such as the suburban façade proliferated in global histories and narratives of municipal development, despite local contingencies and challenges presenting as enormously diverse. Historian Mark Peel explained the cultural myth of suburban homogeneity in Australia with a vivid personal anecdote:

We were puzzled when people talked about "monocultural" outer suburbs. Most of our neighbours were migrants or the children and grandchildren of migrants. In our part of the estate, Koreans, Filipinos, Greeks, Indians, English, Dutch, Samoans and New Zealanders were mixing as neighbours, partners and friends. It was post-multicultural,

in a way. And rather than abstract tolerance, it meant managing the concrete problems

and opportunities that came from living with different people. It was farmers' children

moving in from Gippsland who lived next door to the grown-up children of Vietnamese

refugees moving out from Springvale and Clayton. (np)

This is the very source of the contradiction much suburban cinema now attempts to unravel, with perhaps a little less distanced censoriousness than aforementioned literature. While the green living and efficiency arguments may have merit, they are expounded into hyperbolic, incendiary and unjustified value judgments by figures including the dogmatically outspoken star interviewee of feature documentary *The End of Suburbia* (Gregory Greene, 2004), James Howard Kunstler, and at worst are generalised again to the alleged retrogression of suburban inhabitants, their parochialism and their lack of intellectual capability (a familiar and recurring stereotype, as identified by Coon and Felperin). Kunstler's speech on "The Ghastly Tragedy of the Suburbs" is an example of how this dialogue has permeated the mainstream. After cherry-picking some of the worst examples of brutalist *urban* buildings (occurring in civic spaces), he blurs a distinction between his critique of suburban sprawl and imposed, demeaning public architecture. Worse, he then blurs the distinction between the homogeneous lifelessness of environment and inhabitant, without pause to reflect on the economic realities of population increase and suburban growth. He instead leaps straight into classism. Reflecting on an image of a semi-rural suburban home, he says:

> This is really, in fact, a television broadcasting a show 24/7 called "We're Normal."
> We're normal, we're normal, we're normal, we're normal, we're normal. Please respect
> us, we're normal, we're normal, we're normal. But we know what's going on in these
> houses, you know. We know that little Skippy is loading his Uzi down here, getting ready
> for homeroom. [Laughter] We know that Heather, his sister Heather, 14 years old, is
> turning tricks up here to support her drug habit. (np)

This gobsmacking conflation of identities with allegedly unenlightened living arrangements is indicative of the way we have come to popularly imagine suburbia. Richard Porton describes how a more personalised antisuburban rhetoric infiltrated the political discourse of the American intellectual left: "[New Left] students rightly perceived that suburbia partially reflected a boring, bureaucratized conformism, but stupidly attacked workers who merely yearned for some of the creature comforts that the much maligned 'consumer society'

promised" ("American Dreams" 12). Antisuburban attacks on the cultural integrity of an American working class became an accepted part of radical thinking.

The lack of specificity in describing vastly divergent conditions of suburbia internationally appears to lead us directly to a process of dehumanisation by robbing a majority of identity specificity. The suburban ensemble dramedy makes the case that suburbia is a majority experience (Hayden 3; Hobbs and Stoops 33, for demographic evidence), and therefore entails human diversities not accessible by this level of debate. Peel continues to expose the bigotry in Kunstler's presumptions:

> There's a difference between arguing that an outer-suburban estate manifests something that is wrong in our culture and arguing that the people who live in it are causing what is wrong in our culture. There's a difference between criticising people for their choices and criticising the context that limits and defines their choices. There's also a difference between lecturing people about what they must do - lower their expectations, accept less, sacrifice more, be more like us - and talking about what we all have to do ... There's no doubt that what is called "McMansion-land" has social and environmental consequences. There are real costs, for the people who live there as well as everyone else. If nothing else, there are long drives to work on crowded freeways. But these problems are symptoms and examples of larger forces. (np)

Peel goes on to anecdotally suggest that people are now driven to suburbia because they cannot afford access to the more moral and green urban alternative – the cost of an environmental conscience precludes many. So if suburbia is a zone of exclusion, then we may ask who is being excluded. In a way, these films constitute a claim that suburbia is merely a backdrop to the drama of our lives: it may be a problematic backdrop, but the norms of suburban living and the way environments *project* a homogeneous lifestyle are not what matters. Scratch beneath that surface and you will find that people are not homogeneous, and that they matter to other people more than their houses matter to them.

The point is not that all suburban residents are compromised at the hands of urban elites; it is that it does not quite make sense to talk of the suburban life as a discrete and unchanging phenomenon, and so metaphorising the lives of those living in suburban arrangements, as do many of the early suburban dystopian works, is inherently problematic,

and at worst a class violence. Terry Eagleton once disparaged humanism as "a suburban moral ideology" (207). Eagleton meant that focussing on what he calls "largely interpersonal matters" (ibid.) prohibits us from focussing on the larger political forces that shape lives, and shape privilege. In a sense, he was merely offering yet another suburban slight: humanism is politically impotent, and the suburbs are somehow humanistic, therefore suburbanites are also impotent. Yet in synonymising humanism and individualism, Eagleton suggests that our understanding of one another's daily circumstances necessitates lenience toward their self-interest. This antihumanism is the strategy by which theorists might excuse themselves from curiosity, investigation and articulation of one another's lives, and instead treat them as abstract phenomena calling for distanced evaluation, such as the suburb-as-metaphor; it is a claim that invalidates local and situated knowledge (and at the same time, an interest in human narratives also provides us with a stake in the welfare of others who are affected by the political systems we study, so that our political ideals and theories do not become too divorced from their lived impact). It also invalidates entire disciplines seeking to document such knowledge like anthropology, and suburban ethnographies like the work of M.P. Baumgartner, all of which use immersion in the personal to *specify* how larger social and political forces might play out in our lives, with a degree of care and nuance, an understanding that suburbia is more than just a metaphor and contains many iterations of group interaction. At this level of theory, humanism and suburbia are reduced to symbolic sketches and lose their specificity as any lived practice, contrived into a mundane whole to rally against. For example, Greg Dickinson reduces the suburbs to a "rhetorical spatiality" rather than a lived experience, and refers to its "topos" to deliver abstract backhanders at emotionally inferior residents, chiding them for wanting a "good life" (c.f. Berlant *Cruel Optimism*). There is a kind of affective classism in Dickinson's claim that, "the enforced normality of the suburbs distances, abstracts, even makes impossible access to true feelings, deep emotions, or passionate experiences" (*Suburban Dreams* 49). Similarly, a volume like *Visions of Suburbia* features multiple chapters in which humanism and suburbia are fused into a repugnantly facile museum feature, far distant from the real work of tut-tutting global political abstractions (Silverstone 175, 190). Suburban residents are still depicted as homogeneous in order to maintain elite theories of governed identity, robbing a majority of any sovereignty of meaning in their own world, their own place. This looks a lot like an intellectual colonisation – the very crime literary humanism has long been admonished for. It is bad spatial analysis when a standardised geography can be presumed to delete the human complexity of its inhabitants. Thus, metaphorising people's lives can be a kind of class violence.

So how, then, do suburban ensemble films circumvent this trend? Coon argues that "viewing suburbia as a cultural construct helps to reveal the individual ideals and values that define it, and which are less apparent when suburbs are viewed as merely physical spaces" (10), but the millennial suburban ensemble insists that there are no individual ideals and values that define it – at least not anymore. It is now evident that from this position we can displace blame for America's political ills to the *symbology* of suburbia, which is bracingly generalised, remains historically fixed despite rapid, profound human spatial-psychological mobility, permits ignorance of immeasurable human detail, and is thus inaccurate. Focus on suburbia strictly as cultural construct allows us to turn away from the reality of its diverse iterations and peoples, and perpetuate the same inadequate cultural analysis extended from the postwar era. Coon insists upon polar, perpetually at-war representations of the suburbs as utopian or dystopian, even after admitting their complication (15). This is typical of scholarship on suburban depiction in recent cinema.[97] Yet in the suburban ensemble dramedy, the suburbs are neither utopian imposed custodial community, nor dystopian exclusionary zones, as the multi-character casts emphasise a momentum of inclusivity, challenging one another to include and accept a greater field of others. This new cinema explores the middle ground, where so many of us live; the suburban ensemble dramedy paves a way to move beyond the binarism of utopian/dystopian analysis, which has dominated and framed the debate on suburban media for so long.[98] Freedman pointed to this inadequacy as early as 1999 in his piece "Suburbia Outgrows Its Image in the Arts", and following Freedman, Beuka does at least suggest some ways we might move past "didactic essays on the dystopian aspects of suburbia" (15): humanistic geography, with its emphasis on the lived landscape rather than the physical land, or Foucault's concept of heterotopia in "Of Other Spaces."[99]

So suburbia changes, but its popular image remains largely static: it becomes a kind of summary of our anxieties of negative social change. Beuka synopsises these anxieties as "cold

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[97] For example, Claire Perkins fixates on utopias in her chapter on the suburban smart film (132-156).

[98] See Coon, Beuka, Perkins, Fishman, Smicek, Joanna Wilson for examples.

[99] However the latter may be misguided, as Foucault's oblique description of space as cultural mirror stresses the influence of excessive regulation (27), which anthropologist M.P. Baumgartner avows is an untrue characterisation of legal process and law enforcement in the suburbs, where moral self-regulation is a prevailing standard (134).

war-era fears over mounting social conformity" (234) and Wayne Brekhus similarly describes the projection of majority "averageness" (6) serviced by the suburban stereotype, the everyfamily or everycommunity.[100] But to ignore the shifting topography of the suburbs means we are missing the most salient point: the fascinating mutability of human life and culture, the ways in which we adapt environments to suit our needs and in turn adapt to them. The ensemble dramedy represents an awakening to polymorphism in suburban media depiction.

Suburbia may be the setting, but the commentary in these films is on personal and political relations at large; our quotidian suburban experiences are an appropriate zone of conflict as this is precisely where so many of us will feel the impact of, and perhaps impact upon, sociopolitical phenomena of the day. Where these films raise similar geographical issues to suburban critics – to what extent suburban living directs regressive behaviours or values – they are not as quick to reach a verdict, or indeed conclude that the suburban turn is so dire. The question of whether or not suburbanisation is a good thing is decentred from these narratives; rather, what is in question is how we make meaning in our lives *given* a sociopolitical climate in the suburbs. The location that comes to matter is the community and the family – the heart is where the home is – not the figuratively conjured suburbs. In this way, suburbia can never be reduced to a mere metaphor that in turn summarises the lives of suburbanites. The community, family, and domestic spheres are never an uncomplicated site of privilege, as they are forced to be in any utopian/dystopian reduction to an idyllic suburbia or its opposite. In his conclusion, Coon is willing to admit that texts such as *The Kids Are All Right* represent a new breed of suburban depiction, circumnavigating the familiar typification:

> Instead of focusing on the particular behaviors, mores, and values generally associated with suburbia, these texts emphasise the tense conflicts and humorous predicaments that their characters face, with suburbia serving as a largely unremarkable background … Although these texts do not draw attention to suburban norms by making them the focus of their stories, each of them quietly challenges assumptions about the social identities and family structures of suburban residents. (222)

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[100] We might even catch a whiff here of that particularly American paradox: a fear of perceived economic threats to individual liberty that in turn obliterate liberties (the phobic language of which peppered neoliberal campaigns against Obamacare, for instance).

Considering how often the drama documents lives in transition through conservative values to a more cosmopolitan position – consider self-help author Richard Hoover's (Greg Kinnear) character arc in *Little Miss Sunshine* – we could also derive the idea from these films that the current political and psychical manifestation of American suburban living is transitory (c.f. the awakening of responsibility to various others in *American Beauty*, *The Safety of Objects*, *Little Children*, *Smart People*, *What Goes Up* and all of Thomas McCarthy's films, as well as the destroy-and-rebuild values arc of Alexander Payne's cinema). They suggest another dominant political ethic is possible *within* a majority suburban context; speculatively, this could then be a force for spatial-architectural change if enough people no longer saw the suburbs as suitable to their needs. During the final reels of many narratives – *Junebug* (Phil Morrison, 2005), *City Island* (Raymond De Felitta, 2009) and *The Oranges* for example – suburban living is revealed as appropriate for some and not for others, as some characters flee the suburbs (to the city in *Junebug*, to university in *City Island* and to participate in overseas development programs in *The Oranges*) and some stay; these films accept that people's appetites can change as much as the places they inhabit. In fact, they emphasise a capacity for lifestyle change associated with ideological shift, so the suburbs, whilst not demonised, are neither valorised nor assumed as immovable norm. It is a hope akin to Dolores Hayden's imaginative suggestions for working with existing suburban potentialities and spaces, closing her historical work *Building Suburbia*, or the public policy suggestions in Wim Wiewel and Joseph J. Persky's volume on *Suburban Sprawl*. Rather than indicting the old, they look to the new. They also demonstrate that versions of suburban life are not suitable for everyone; this is not a new utopianism, just a call to work with what we have. Changing needs built the suburbs, and changing needs will lead to further geographic change.

Almost all suburban ensemble dramedies are, at least to some extent, about trying to find a mutually beneficial way through social dilemmas arising from context-driven behaviours (although the instructive context is presented as more social than spatial, without making absurd distinctions between the two). On one hand, it is refreshing to see films dealing with moral situations isomorphic to everyday experience, that a majority audience can presumably recognise and apply to their own lives; this can validate our lived experience rather than providing an impression that real life is happening somewhere else, that we are somehow secondary. On the other hand, this validity can still be questioned if the lives we are leading are by their nature globally exploitative, and remain exploitative – so one can ask whether the constituents of middle-class America really need any more of our sympathy than

they already command. Filmmakers such as Kenneth Lonergan, especially with *Margaret* (2011), and Glatzer with *What Goes Up* are actively raising these issues, as we will see.

There are more troublesome characteristics thrown up by realist ambitions coupled with a fantastical view of middle-class living arrangements. Much more has been written on the aesthetics of aspiration, and how American cinematic conventions might compel a competitive individualism or normalise the unattainable. Noël Burch, for example, presents classical Hollywood editing norms as hegemony, but I believe the more obvious example is pertinent: production design standards in which the alleged Everyfamily is placed in upper-class environs.[101] Wilt points out that as early as the 1960s:

> the suburban state of mind was by now so ingrained that many films were set in suburbia without comment. As with television, the norm was now a detached house in suburbia, often larger and somewhat more luxurious than those in which the audience lived. (484)

Demographic shifts offer a partial explanation: "from 1940 onward suburbs accounted for more population growth than central cities" and "in 1960, the proportions were nearly even" (Coon 8). Reviewer Leslie Felperin describes how this phenomenon of "suburbia without comment" means that suburban cinematic depiction "is seldom allowed to convey the character, specificity and local identity that cinema allows cities and countryside alike" (15).[102] A number of volumes have attempted to wrestle back the diverse iterations of suburbia from media stereotyping and draw a more complete picture of geographic variation from the first suburbs of early 19th century Boston (Binford passim) to now; these include *Expanding Suburbia* in 2000, edited by Roger Webster, and publications associated with new bodies dedicated to mapping urban morphology, such as the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF). We still must remain careful not to homogenise American suburbia: films from *City Island* to *Lymelife*, *Junebug* and *Mumford* emphasise the particularity of suburbia in their differing locales (often these films stress isolation as an incubator for drama). While the suburban ensemble dramedy attempts to remedy such discriminatory universalising with

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[101] Here is where Heather Love's flat reading may be useful.

[102] Catherine Jurca has made a similar point of suburban literature in her work *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*, and urban cinematic counterparts have been much discussed by figures including Pamela Robertson Wojcik, Steve Macek, Mark Shiel, Tony Fitzmaurice and Merrill Schleier.

focus on exactly this specificity and human diversity, the form rarely provides an exception to the rule of production design identified by Wilt, and many are equally guilty of propagating unreasonable aspirational norms as any other Hollywood genre cinema.

This is not true across the board, however. In 1998, at the beginning of the suburban cinema renaissance, Tamara Jenkins suggested an alternative vision of suburban habitation with *The Slums of Beverly Hills*, a picture some of the ensuing ensemble dramedies more closely resemble:

> After shooting the interiors of the apartments, people got concerned it looked too depressing. It was like, "Oh, all the walls are so bare. Can't we put some color in there?" I'd told the production designer that these apartments are bare except for what the previous tenant left behind. They said, "But it's a comedy." I said, "You read the script; poverty is not funny." (Freedman 1)

Jenkins's experience points to two primary factors influencing production design standards in American cinema: foremost, we often forget the career interests of the majority of film workers beyond the director. The entire art department may be looking to develop their reel with attractive designs, advance recognition of their work, and use any notoriety to access further employment opportunities (in part the product of a casualised workforce moving between contracts). It might, thus, not only be within the publicity interests of art department workers and production designers to build what they feel to be appealing – often an inflated view of the living standards one might expect to find the characters in – but these interests can also chime with the concerns of studios, production houses and film investors. The high publicity value *Housesitter* (Frank Oz, 1992) variety of design decadence may also attract awards consideration. Secondly, Jenkins's experience could reveal more about how, and from which social echelon, the industry drafts its employees rather than how it fashions them. The living standards depicted may accurately represent the high salaries of film departmental heads, and therefore appear to its makers as realistic – the segregation of Hollywood film workers from a majority American experience is clearly going to have an impact on the kinds of stories told. These are all undesirable, although far from unique, effects of American income inequality. Unfortunately these conditions may keep many filmmakers from realising a truly class-critical vision; however, there are plenty of exceptions within the suburban dramedy

cannon.[103] As most suburban ensemble dramedies also permit specificity of place in lieu of an imagined or purely symbolic geography, it is also harder to accuse them of generalisation. These filmmakers may not indulge the pretence of speaking for all of America, but they still choose predominantly upper-middle contexts to analyse. Although fixation on elite classes in the dramatic arts is certainly not new, it remains problematic.

Some films share these qualities, however are set in recognisably urban locales, usually looking at upper-middle family relations and class anxieties, such as *Every Day* (Richard Levine, 2010), or the films of Nicole Holofcener. Holofcener's cinema is excellent at unearthing our discomfort with the invisibility of status markers, and they draw compelling lines between status and gender inequality. The dénouements in her scripts, however, often worryingly dismiss these concerns in favour of a return to the improvident, inward-looking norm of consumerist guilt annihilation, building and protecting one's pack and possessions – see *Friends with Money* (2006) and especially *Please Give* (2010) for examples. Nevertheless, these films do assert urban dwellings as the grounds of the upper-middle class, which is consistent with global socio-spatial class divisions (Coon 5), rather than the conventional depiction of a suburban fringe as the locus of "bourgeois utopia."

Many of the suburban narratives I am looking at foreground class relations, questioning our responsibilities to one another while avoiding moralistic blame or vitriol, such as Phil Morrison's release *Junebug* in 2005. *Junebug*'s outsider art dealer, Madeleine (Embeth Davidtz), is confronted with the disjunct between her idealism of southern suburban eccentricity and the reality of the ordinary nuance of lives within the communities her gallery selectively represents (in turn, these communities read her own Chicagoan intellectual elite mores and behaviours as equally eccentric). Madeleine's contract negotiation with the outsider artist (Frank Hoyt Taylor) recalls Julia S. Ardery's commentary on the industry's economic anomalies and duplicities: "folk art's popular success and institutionalization throughout the 1970s and 1980s have continually depended upon barring folk artists themselves from substantial gain, and on locating and nominating to folk artist status creators ever more socially disadvantaged and personally frail [sic]" (331). The loser must remain the loser for the reductive narrative of marginal authenticity to perpetuate. Madeleine's version of acceptance of the semi-rural suburban, Christian working class communities she engages

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[103] I look at *City Island* and *Junebug* as examples of such class-consciousness at the end of this section.

with is dependent upon the safe spectre of maverick psychosis, a reduction via which she can overlook the complex humanity of the majority. While visiting both a potential client and her newlywed husband George's (Alessandro Nivola) family in North Carolina, she comes to realise the meaning of her class in tense relations with the community, especially George's brother (Ben McKenzie) and mother (Celia Weston). Madeleine privileges her relationship with the artist she is attempting to woo and sign to her gallery over the unfolding of a genuine family event – her sister-in-law (Amy Adams) gives birth to a stillborn child. This, however, comes after the family rejects Madeleine by not driving her to the hospital, so the undertone of classism is reciprocal. Likewise, the film contrasts communication of intent through words and actions; Madeleine finds words easy to manipulate, for example, while the southern community demonstrates care through deed. Madeleine says, "I love you" to her employees on the phone in loveless situations while George's father (Scott Wilson) speaks little, and yet still manages to transmit love for his family (for example, using wood carvings as gifts). In *Junebug*, demonstrative and highly codified verbal communiqué are synchronised with working and upper classes respectively. George's brother Johnny finds all of these communications difficult, thus not allowing us to elevate either as uncomplicated social intercourse. Johnny misreads Madeleine's clumsy attempts at ingratiation via sexualised kinetic overcompensation as a genuine advance, and also in one of the film's most affective scenes (with strings fading in softly in the background), attempts a demonstration of care by taping a documentary on meerkats for his wife, but fails and ends up taking out his frustration by yelling at her. The true outsider of the film may be George, however, who straddles an uncomfortable border between classes, living with tension from his envious brother and a community that feels he should come home, and his own sense of belonging in a culture and class within Chicago that he has no roots in. He is curiously and unexpectedly absent for much of the narrative, which focuses instead on relations between Madeleine and George's family. An example of what reviewer Mark Bourne calls "the faith [*Junebug*] shows in handing us small puzzles" (np), George appears to vacillate between his stringent family values, and expressing relief when he escapes from them – a recognisable ambivalence, no doubt, for many viewers. His position never crystalizes, but instead changes each time we see him, an expression of the divisive convolutions of American class culture.

In Raymond De Felitta's *City Island*, another film foregrounding class concerns, a family's-worth of characters perform a secretive dance around one another, and all of their duplicities are variously related to status anxiety or class-bound pride. Vince Rizzo (Andy

Garcia) takes acting classes at night, but would rather his family believe that he is engaged in another, more class-appropriate vice, such as gambling. He also conceals details of his illegitimate son Tony (Steven Strait), primarily because his association with Tony's unreliable mother reveals background in a class he has struggled to distance himself from. Thus Vince is stuck between a tall poppy syndrome (embarrassment in the presumption of educational and cultural mobility), and the humiliation he sees as inherent in his working class background, a "hidden injury of class" (c.f. Sennett and Cobb) that undermines self-confidence. The identity contradiction manifests in familial conflict. Daughter Vivian (Dominik Garcia-Lorido) will not tell her parents she works at a strip club to pay her university fees, as she lost her scholarship due to marijuana use; the implication is that she struggles with the family's hopes for her to move beyond their working class roots. Family tensions regularly focus on access to education and whether or not one is "smart." In fact, the only character whose problems turn out to be relatively unproblematic is Vinnie (Ezra Miller), a teenager whose fat fetishism is presented as somewhat more detached from class anxieties, making the shame easier to deflate. The characters' uncertainty around their place in the social strata of America at large is contrasted with a relatively fixed identity in their locality: the Bronx's City Island.[104] As in many of these films, the real home (or valuable mutuality) is revealed to be family at the explicative conclusion. The tensions and guilt they have experienced exist in a shared context, spatial and familial, and are therefore familiar and understandable to all involved. They have a mutual language to resolve these issues. When contrasted with the power of familial and community care, class shame ceases to have such power over their lives. The picture closes with bonding through shared sentimentality.

So class issues in millennial suburban cinema rarely remain uncomplicated: the suburban façade can normalise upper-middle living arrangements in some cases, but in the ensemble feature is more often used to reveal prejudice and class tensions in a variety of specific zones we problematically generalise as American suburbia. Along with films like *Junebug* and *City Island*, hybrid pictures including *The Slums of Beverly Hills* and *Duane Hopwood* (Matt Mulhern, 2005) also interrogate our assumptions of class indicators in suburban spaces. However, as sentiment is taken to be synonymous with class unconsciousness for many theorists – especially in the apparent sentimental celebration of

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[104] *City Island* can also be seen as part of De Felitta's continuing documentation of the Italian American experience in New York and New Jersey in films such as *Two Family House* (2000) and documentaries like *'Tis Autumn: The Search for Jackie Paris* (2006).

familial norms (Loukides 97) – the following section deconstructs the use of sentimentality in the suburban ensemble film.

Drama in the Comedy: The Problem of Sentiment and the Possibility of Affective Equilibrium[105]

Sentimentality has a long history in literary theory, and more recently writers including Lauren Berlant have extended its reach to media and film critique. Famously summarised by James Baldwin in 1955 as "the mask of cruelty" (14), the experience of sentimentality has earned a particularly poor reputation as being synonymous with bigotry. The philosophical underpinnings of sentiment – seeking higher truth in the internal, the bodily and meta-physiological, sensation and feeling – translated to a literary tradition that, to critics such as Baldwin and Berlant, has appeared to value self-congratulatory and self-justifying emotional excess, a means by which a privileged few were attributed the humanity of higher feeling (a more profound interiority, and connectedness through superior affect) at the expense of others. Berlant reinforces a contemporary conflation of humanism and sentimentality, using both as bywords for prejudice: "the critical literature on sentimentality has now long refused the appearance of apoliticism brandished by sentimental humanism, connecting it to racist, imperial, and exploitative alibis for control" (*The Female Complaint* 282).

On the other hand, in a 1999 article June Howard points up the shedding of sentiment's philosophical heritage of mutual empathy and emotional imagination:

In postbellum America, the literary was often defined against sentimentality and the domestic culture of letters. Prestigious writing gradually and unevenly became less openly emotional and more ambitiously intellectual, less directly didactic and more conspicuously masculine. Antisentimentalism is an important part of that story, especially for literary studies. (73-74)

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[105] A version of the following first appeared as "Sentimentality in the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy: A Response to Berlant's Optimism-Realism Binary" in *Forum* 20 (Spring 2015).

In its translation from philosophical doctrine to literary form, Howard argues that sentimentality was conflated with domesticity and the feminine.[106] Any principled opposition to such a form then had to propose alternative authentic emotional states that sentiment could not reach; thus antisentimental analysts are still imposing hierarchies of acceptable affect.

A contemporaneous reappraisal of antisentimentalism can be witnessed in another unlikely source: by constantly shifting focalisation and thus representing a range of mental states, ensemble dramedies move us between satiric, realist and sentimental filmmaking modes, asking us to consider a greater range of affective possibilities in tension and in flux. Of these kaleidoscopic affects, sentimentality stands out as a significant place of transition – we move through sentimentality, and it has purpose in both fortifying and broadening our field of community identification, responsibility and sympathy. The suburban ensemble film stands as a counterpoint to Berlant's generalisations about sentimentality, and related ideals. These include the underlying assumption of a binary between optimism and realism, which much of Berlant's work relies on; her appropriation of terms from psychology, such as depressive realism; the elite third person effect of notions such as "the good life" and her lack of specificity regarding alternatives to the sentimental or cruelly optimistic, including the conditions of complicating one's identity in politically acceptable ways.[107]

Baldwin and Berlant voice a prevalent assumption in suggesting that sentimentality is somehow a defective response concealing conservative values or identity boundaries; however, the proposition only remains true if we focus singularly on those stories which *do* reach conservative conclusions and ask us to bask uncritically in them. Indeed such films are not hard to find, and Berlant has extended the literary critique of sentimentality to cinema adapted from novels including *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Show Boat*, and the output of celebrities such as Shirley Temple. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant analyses sentiment's social orderings and anatomises the conservative values that reinforce gender and class norms and

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[106] Carl Plantinga goes a step further: "The wholesale denigration of sentimental emotions is an expression of masculine bravado at best and of rampant sexism at worst. To denigrate the emotions caused by sentiment's concerns is to denigrate the concerns themselves" (Plantinga 193). The claim finds support in the work of Flo Liebowitz ("Apt Feelings") and Molly Haskell (*From Reverence to Rape*).

[107] I refer to this notion as "identity upset" hereafter.

protect privilege; it is also true, however, that for every Shirley Temple movie, there are examples of films encouraging a relational mutuality founded on respecting difference and striving for equality. Stoking sentiment, as we will see, is a means, a tool, not an end in itself. Surely it matters what the object of sentimentality is, what we are sentimental *about*. Berlant, however, suggests that even the most radical of these humanist narratives, upon reaching for sentimentality, allow us to relax into apoliticism and dismiss critiques of structural disadvantage, as the sense of relation and belonging they provide is rarefied and protected – blinding, even.

The development of a suburban ensemble dramedy mode in American filmmaking after *American Beauty* provides an interesting case study in the use of cinematic sentimentality for progressive thought: in such films the audience is rarely allowed to feel sentiment until a progressive conclusion is reached. Sentiment may allow us to feel comforted by a conviction, but if this conviction is that sometimes life is hard and surprises us, yet we can turn to our families and communities and look after one another for consolation or that we need to think generously about one another's misdemeanours and a breadth of different humanness, then is such an apparent pause in reflexivity doing anyone any damage?[108] Could we not instead call this kind of sharing "consolidation" or "solidarity"? It is impossible to live in a state of constant reflexivity, so if we are to share conviction through sentiment, which in effect asks us to relax into a mutual value (or what we imagine to be a mutual value in order to reinforce it), then the value itself should be assessed, not the notion that we may respond with sentiment in the first place.

Berlant assumes a binary between the idealism she locates in sentimentality and a depressive realism, which, she says, "in contrast, [is] more accurate" (McCabe and Berlant np). This is a dubious fortification of a negative bias, extrapolating favourable self-diagnosis of a controversial psychological effect to generalised cultural theory, from which any pessimistic sociopolitical prognosis could be asserted as being "more accurate."[109] One may exhibit depressive realism, but one cannot *be* a depressive realist any more than a cultural theory can be buttressed as such. Further, Berlant continues to embody a tension between personally

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[108] This is a behaviour, not a relation with an "imagined" or "imagined intimate" public, as Berlant argues, referring to Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community."

[109] See Moore and Fresco for a meta-analysis.

affected self-searching in works such as "Affect is the New Trauma," and her foundational condescension, particularly throughout *Cruel Optimism*: the latter in fact seems to imply that everyone except Berlant is trapped in a relational nightmare, not clever enough to recognise that their imaginary connections to people and things are at the same time aspirational-neoliberal fantasies of "the good life", and thus we are all engaged in some form of self-harm when we relate. The hostility toward coherent self-narratives as representative of normalisation, political certitude and lack of reflexivity locks us into a self-defeating lack of specificity about the structuring of our identities.[110] Yet since coherent self-narratives are unavoidable, valorising the state of identity upset in and of itself – ironically erecting new identity boundaries – merely permits us to be unclear about the conditions of identity flux and politicisation, about thoughts, actions, causes, and the way we transmit ideas about our selves through storied behaviours.[111] What exactly is it, we should ask, that we want from identity upset? Being specific regarding the *particular* values we should question is a humility that remains vulnerable and open to discovery, in a way that binaristic admonishments of others' sentimental optimism or masochistic fantasy of the good life cannot be. Berlant challenges us only to reimagine ourselves on this restrictive continuum – subject to or not subject to hopeful political narratives – and so I am doubtful Berlant manages to achieve this specificity.

The binary between sentimental idealism and depressive realism is imaginary. Brian Wilkie points out some of the classist undertones in these readings of the literary sentimental (570-71) and spins a neat analogy for thinking about elitist antisentimentalism, or the claim to an attitudinally superior cognitive bias in cultural analysis that is allegedly provided by depressive realism: "Sugar is as much a fact of life as vomit; one is a soft fact and one a hard one, if you will, but both are facts" (572). Similarly, David Foster Wallace uses expository passages in *Infinite Jest* to casually discard the discriminatory binary: "sentiment equals naïveté on this continent" (694). He goes on to facetiously connect an essential experience of being "really human" to the "unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone" (694-695), at once sympathising with and satirising the presumed alternative to hip cynicism as unthinkingly sanguine affective stasis. If such a binary does exist, Wallace muses that sentiment is preferable (which at least skirts anhedonia), but this concept of humanness is

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[110] At times Berlant self-defensively refers to her own social analysis as "incoherent", as in the alternatives-that-aren't-alternatives in "A Properly Political Concept of Love" (685-686).

[111] Perhaps this could also be seen as an extension of Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives" to a livable ethic.

clearly false and limiting. Note also the humour sitting alongside a drive to earnestness, honesty and realism in both Wilkie and Wallace's remarks, as this affective balancing act is an important component in the suburban ensemble dramedy that I will look at shortly. Most of the millennial suburban ensemble dramedies recognise that neither bias, focusing on one affective state and not the other, would be superior or more realistic – instead they illustrate the possibility of affective balance or equilibrium. Films such as *Little Miss Sunshine* or *The Kids Are All Right* use such recognition to their advantage, yoking human insight from the affective spectrum they are able to cover. *Little Miss Sunshine* features a family moving through rage, contempt, grief, sarcasm, scepticism, flippancy, cheer, hope, disappointment, love and sentimentality, yet they are permitted all such responses, as is the spectator. *The Kids Are All Right* features reflection on the heredity of bias to particular emotional states, as two children with lesbian mothers meet their biological father, prompting consideration of the unknowable inheritance conditions, genetic and cultural, of varied personality traits and coping mechanisms.

Sentimentality, then, is not "unearned", to borrow a descriptor popularly attributed to James Joyce.[112] These films use sentiment to find a place where we do not know exactly how to feel or what to think, as we could equally be laughing or crying, feeling shock or understanding, and embracing or rejecting characters and their actions. Screenwriters Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel have demonstrated this on a number of occasions, especially in *Parenthood* and their follow-up film *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood, 1991), which similarly portray sentimentality and humour as alternating coping mechanisms, their characters juggling negative and positive biases in dealing with crises both existential and physical. We feel the pull of emotional excess – sentiment – but it is charged with conflicting knowledge

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[112] As Payne once said, "Sentimentality can work better either in literature or film if the background is cold and those moments feel earned" (Nocenti np); in these discussions of "earning" sentiment (see also Plantinga 193), we again see sentimentality used as a tool and not an end in itself. Narrative resolution may often be the moment in which sentimentality "earns" its bad name, yet ensemble dramedy films offer opportunities to resist thinking of narrative in either/or terms, like sentimental *or* realistic. If the conclusion is sentimental, then it is at least mediated by our knowledge of the unavoidable negative affect that preceded it; life will continue to include these contrasts. Payne also elaborates that sentimentality should always be about affective contrasts: "I'm deathly afraid of being too sentimental. But a film should be emotional. There is a letter from Chekhov in which a young writer asks him for some feedback, and he's kind enough to do it. He writes the guy back and says, basically, 'It's too damn sentimental. If you want emotional effects, you have to place them against a cold background, so they stand out in relief.' I think that's true" (Talbot np).

and feeling. This delicious tension, the space where we are not certain exactly what a film is eliciting from us because, in a kind of affective verisimilitude, its dynamism precipitates no correct response, is a curiously empowering place to be – it exists elsewhere in cinema too, from the horror comedy to the political romantic comedy. Here we can reach a zone of sanctioned affect where that affect is not prescriptive, and by stoking a lifelike confusion, we can think more generously, receptively and open-heartedly on the subject at hand.[113]

More specifically, we need to scrutinise the grouping of repartee, oft-unkind riposte, and performance gags with genuine attempts at unpacking socio-ethical problems to comprehend the purposeful interlacing of drama and comedy in the suburban ensemble film. This could be seen as extended from the fluidity between social commentary, sarcastic jibe and demonstrations of familial care in the lineage of television sitcoms from *Roseanne* through the *The Simpsons* and *Modern Family*, as described above. The tension between pathos and associated moments of bathos shows up both our attempts to dismiss that which troubles us with jest, and our impulse to become absorbed by our own woes. We are permitted both states, but encouraged not to remain too long with either condition, as we are prompted to use one to upset the other – to challenge affective inertia – in our search for answers to difficult ethical situations. The technique promotes a kind of sifting through affective responses to find what is appropriate, yet none are considered inadequate or incorrect, and all emotive responses are potentially useful in finding a way forward.

So sentimentality is not in and of itself an affective coherence. We can have an affective incoherence – an "incompatibility between conceptual and embodied affect" (Semin and Smith 215) – in features that engage sentimentality. In fact, sentimentality before, after and alongside other emotive responses may increase the scope of the upset and reflexivity

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[113] In performative storytelling, we might draw the affectively experimental melting pot back to that famous onstage rule-breaker Shakespeare, with his seemingly limitless tightrope chartered between the moralistic and inquisitive. G. Wilson Knight's reading of *King Lear* as horror comedy (176), for example, or Julie Taymor's 1999 film reading of *Titus Andronicus*, exploring politico-ethical consequences within the horror, comedy and poetic aestheticisation of staging and play-acting chaotic violence; and consider too originary romcoms such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, cementing the antagonism-into-romance trajectory now so familiar, that groundbreaking union of politics and romance, *Romeo and Juliet*, the ironic-empathic liberalism-by-surprise of both perspectives and identities in *As You Like It* or experiments in affective genre comparison like *The Winter's Tale*. We should be careful not to pretend that such an affective spectrum belongs only to our immediate history, or entertain unilineal assumptions of an affective cultural evolution.

available, potentially even leading to a reduced reliance on stereotypes.[114] At the same time, as George McFadden argues, following Charles Mauron, affective incoherence nourishes laughter as the critical viewer wonders "how sense and nonsense are combined to make comedy, and what kind of adult behaviour correlates with the zany and outrageous activity on the stage" (156). Our affective experiences in narrative, however, should be recognised as separate from unmediated lived experience – we recognise a level of intentionality in emotional cues, so we might refer to *attempts to achieve* the state of affective incoherence in art by another term: a challenge to affective inertia, or a call to affective mobility. Again we should look at sentimentality as a tool or device that can be put to use in this capacity, and not merely as a generic code (which might in any case more accurately be called melodrama).

As just one example, many of these films demonstrate how anger can be a force for positive change, as long as we do not indulge its permanency. *The Oranges* stands out here, repositioning as redemptive possibility the antagonism of people we might otherwise scorn as immoral – in this case an adulterous, intergenerational couple (Leighton Meester as Nina Ostroff and Hugh Laurie as David Paige) whose affair spurs family and friends to reimagine their own lives. Sentiment is just one of the responses we move through to patch together our best moral resolution. *The Oranges* makes counterintuitive use of a gentle, pensive, acoustic score at moments of expected melodrama and audience disparagement, and its focalisation shifts between characters of differing perspectives; later we learn how the indiscretions of some characters have productive effects on others. The couple's exploration of moral ambiguities justifiably enrages those implicated, yet ultimately moves everyone along a continuum of affect – including laughter, attempts at deflating their torment, and sentimentality, allowing them to access redefined communal attachments and potentialities. Without moving through anger, they may not desire change; without levity, they may remain in depression or the inertia of resentment; without sentiment, they may refuse to work together to revise relational responsibilities.[115] This process allows them to attach to a new life less complacent and more fulfilling than before. The perspectives on anger offered by the

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[114] As suggested by Jeffrey R. Huntsinger's 2013 research, "Affective Incoherence Reduces Reliance on Activated Stereotypes."

[115] Clearly, for the spectator, there is an excitation transfer at work in experiencing these mixed emotions along with the characters. Our enjoyment of accumulated mixed affect is not entirely hedonic; we see here that the narrative's emotional causality grants access to questions about meaning, purpose and morality relevant to our lives.

suburban ensemble dramedy, though, are far from homogeneous. *Junebug* and *City Island*, for instance, look at anger arising from class friction, and conflicting demonstrations of belonging required by different communities, families and locales (semi-rural suburbia in North Carolina or the Bronx's City Island, for example).

Problematic as the community may be in identity politics and Berlantian queer theory, as all community entails some kind of exclusion, Darwinian humanists such as Ellen Dissanayake suggest that such problems cannot be used to dismiss inextricably human impulses:

> we evolved to need mutuality with other individuals, acceptance by and participation in a group, socially shared meanings, assurance that we understand and can capably deal with the world, and the opportunity to demonstrate emotional investment in important objects and outcomes by acts and experiences of elaborating. (168)

In denying these human needs, we risk devising an unworkable and self-defeating ethic to live by, thereby proffering dissatisfaction and disappointment.[116] We imagine ourselves as ethically bound to a community in order to reach mutually inclusive goals. This can apply to a cosmopolitan communal adherence too. These films position sentiment not just as mutuality, but as an important part of our communal governance, diplomacy or decision-making processes, which can lead to outcomes of care for *a broader spectrum* of otherness, and certainly do not preclude ethical or political action – this is realised in philosophy and deed by all of the protagonists at the conclusion of *Little Children*, for example.[117] Vigilante ex-cop Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich) realises he has a duty of care to Ronnie McGorvey (Jackie Earle Haley) when he discovers that Ronnie has attempted self-castration following struggles with paedophilic desire, stigma, and the death of his mother; and a couple involved in an adulterous affair, Brad Adamson (Patrick Wilson) and Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet), must confront the inherent self-absorption of their elopement plans, stemming from a belief that they have missed out on earlier formative experiences, to ultimately reclaim a wider sense of belonging and accountability. Often the sentimental component of these films is focused on mutual redemption, a political awakening into a new communal care: the characters' comprehension of their interdependence helps them reconstruct their identities to be more

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[116] Of the kind Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, seeks to avoid.

[117] C.f. Bowles and Gintis, "Social Capital and Community Governance."

broadly considerate of others. Dan P. McAdams's research looks at how narratives of redemption promote generativity, or concern for the welfare of future generations (c.f. Erikson 240) – in fact, McAdams suggests such narratives are integral to maintaining generative values beyond the present self (82). "High scores on generativity measures," he writes, "are positively associated with indexes of prosocial behaviour and productive societal engagements," which include "interest in political issues and involvement in the political process" (84). The sentimentality of personal redemption within a community – in which we come to care more about community – may help shape our behaviour in positive ways, whether or not it is founded on a mythical, optimistic or entirely imaginary public.

Ed S.H. Tan and Nico H. Frijda argue that sentiment and crying are inherently submissive, in that they express a giving up of personal autonomy to be overwhelmed by emotion ("Sentiment in Film Viewing"); this could contribute to a kind of idle acceptance that Berlant sees as unconducive to political action (although it remains unclear how emotional acceptance necessarily generalises to political idleness). Yet many narrative events can propel such a feeling, including those related to attachment and separation (56), morals and justice (58), or awe-inspiring stimulus (62), and again these emotions are transitory. If sentiment and weeping are submissive in one instance, the excitation transfer from such a state may later be leveraged to more rousing ends, and those ends do not necessarily need to be reinforced attachment to an imaginary public or exclusive group.

If we reach a point of sentimentality in a narrative of social inclusion, however, we may ask whether the imagined intimate norm we arrive at, the recognisable conventionality the device relies on, and those who are excluded by omission or subtle disassociation, render such a narrative ineffectual in changing an exploitative status quo, or positions it above and beyond more active political concerns. So we must ask whether, as audiences, "they" (Berlant uses the third person to describe such audiences) are even allowed to feel closer to others when they, as Berlant says:

> take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers. Another way to say this is that I am interested in a realist account of fantasy, insofar as

the political and the social are floated by complex and historically specific affective investments. (McCabe and Berlant np)

Although this is, on the surface, a good description of the relational experience of sentimentality, it is accompanied by some specious correlational reasoning – that sharing values or imagining the communal around those values necessarily constitutes a fantasy (in the psychoanalytic sense), and cannot be concomitant with political reflexivity.[118] Berlant has identified feelings of belonging as part of the problem that sustains political imbalance and class unconsciousness, arguing that it is concurrent with unheeded exploitation. However, belonging is part of everything we do: it is an intrinsic condition of human sociality. Exploitation, however, is different – there are periods, places, thoughts and actions that have varying degrees of exploitation, so it must be subject to change. The need for belonging is everywhere in equal measure, in intimate publics as in cosmopolitan fealties. As Frans de Waal notes:

> Individual interests may be served by partnerships (e.g., marriages, friendships) that create a long-lasting communal "fitness interdependence" mediated by mutual empathy. Within these relationships, partners do not necessarily keep careful track of who did what for whom (Clark & Mills 1979), and derive psychological and health benefits not only from receiving but also from giving support (Brown & Brown 2006). (292)

Belonging is not simply part of life; it is also positively correlated with health outcomes.

For Berlant, the sentimental inspires an imagined group cohesion which is bigoted, oppressive or incorrectly aspirational, but to sustain this view we must resist recognition of the many different ways we can imagine ourselves as akin to others: group identification is different from identity fusion, which is in turn different from tolerance, and surely there are

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[118] While it is true that compromised peoples can often vote seemingly against their own interests, propelled by a hard-sell individualist ideology that benefits another social echelon entirely, this fact does not license the theorist to downgrade anyone's emotional lives as uninformed or inferior, or indeed to presume that such constituents are uniquely unaware of the emotions or fantasies undergirding their political beliefs. These presumptions require more than anecdotal evidence to be taken seriously.

many more social glues.[119] All of these recognised varieties of communal identity construction, and the spaces in between them, may be the object of sentiment, and may drive compassionate behaviours.

Harvey Whitehouse's work makes an important distinction between group identification and identity fusion, encompassing different levels of personal accountability felt to others, and different activations of self-identity. Blending all kinds of group cohesion and identification into a single problematic process without scientific recourse is a dangerous route to simplifying, and thereby dehumanising the ways people operate together. A spectrum of degrees of adhesion to social identities and fused groups should also be recognised across local experience and extended imaginings, and shared ideology does not necessarily have to follow from either cohesion, especially with extended fusions (in Berlant, imagined publics). Whitehouse writes:

> Recall that one of the hypothesized features of local fusion is that personal experience, on which my sense of self is at least partly constructed, provides the main reference point for sharing a common bond. So extended fusion would seem to be a more tentative kind of fusion of self and other. Since it depends on external sources as well as direct personal engagement (e.g. testimony rather than experience) it carries less conviction. (286)

This could also translate to ideological conviction. Although we see strong methods for generating a fusion by which we might favour peers in a large anonymous grouping – such as routinised doctrinal rituals – it does not necessarily follow that we will all adopt the same *values* in any grouping (consider the breadth of dispositions even among one's immediate family), so we may be looking in the wrong place if we are to politicise communities and imagined publics to this extent. Communities can be established by interaction rather than shared ideology, which should be seen as a set of behaviours constituting a kind of community self-governance that crucially complements state and market, as Bowles and Gintis argue; and communities can exist even without the perception of relationality or commonality, as Robert J. Sampson explains ("Collective Efficacy Theory" 153). Although we still see social groups influencing values and neighbourhood effects in ideological contagion, it seems that contact

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[119] For example, Lakin et al., "The Chameleon Effect as Social Glue"; Bastian et al., "Pain as Social Glue"; Van Vugt and Hart, "Social Identity as Social Glue."

with peers is still key. As in Nicholas A. Christakis's "Three Degrees of Influence" theory of social influence outlined in *Connected*, the attitudinal and behavioural contagion we exhibit is reduced with each degree of separation from direct contact. No modelling of community per se *mandates* shared values or privilege, so we cannot assume imagined communities control the genesis of political attitudes.

Suggesting an excess beyond the detail of cohesion we have so far been able to gather data on, Whitehouse also mentions that:

> While individuals are only capable of fusing with a small number of groups (typically two or three at most), it is possible to identify with a great many different groups. This means we can build a complex division of labour in which we shift flexibly between roles as changing social situations dictate. There is no limit on the size of groups with whom identification is possible. (288)

For some, group cohesion appears to be *the* problem, but for others with perhaps more faith in the concurrence of local community fealty and political cosmopolitanism, a fair scientific deconstruction of the diversity of human group identification may suggest opportunities for reducing civil and global conflicts, poverty and exclusion.[120]

Thus, even though some community fealties may be problematic, this should not mean that all of our communal behaviours are – even some exclusionary social groupings are impossible to avoid, and some condoned ostracism is necessary to live: ignoring strangers on public transport, for example, is not without purpose. But this does not mean we will refuse ethical responsibilities to others outside of our social circles. Tolerance is another kind of group cohesion in which we neither identify with nor aggress against an outgroup, and thus encompasses a kind of communal responsibility without affinity. The strictures on social grouping and how we think about our social groupings are therefore inadequate philosophies. Even if Berlant accepts a version of communal belonging, this level of debate cannot tell us what conditions of belonging make our relationality acceptable; thus we are all prescribed a suspicion of our inherent and varied attachments to others. Sentimentality, then, when it allows us to feel comforted by feelings of connection to others in our community, is not the

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[120] This is what Whitehouse suggests in "Three Wishes for the World."

problem. However we can still ask if conceiving of oneself as "special" because of these feelings is reasonable: a number of urban ensemble dramedies, such as *Margaret* and the films of Nicole Holofcener, actively ask this question.[121]

It seems that, working within this stringency, no one is allowed to feel comforted by any qualities they share with others without risking being immediately denigrated as participating in normalisation, fantasy or falsehood. Anything we locate as mutual becomes conventional and thereby abhorrently compromising. I conclude that this is an unfair condition to saddle viewers and readers with. The ethic proposed by Berlant constitutes, paradoxically, another attempt to restrict parts of our identity – in this case our affective identity – for ideological reasons that spuriously relate to how we actually treat one another.

To summarise, we can see sentimentality as a device rather than having intrinsic ethical value. The communities we may attach ourselves to via sentiment are not merely imaginary; communities also constitute behaviours we exhibit to one another. The need for belonging is a pancultural phenomenon and cannot be realistically appraised as a surmountable problem. Further, identifying with members of one's community does not necessarily mean we will not exhibit kindness or ethical inclusivity to outgroup members. The

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[121] *Margaret*, for instance, acts as an extended essay on the privilege of affective indulgence. Lisa (Anna Paquin), who witnesses a bus accident in which a woman dies in her arms, leverages the ambiguity of reasonable selfishness after trauma to impose her emotional responses on others, making certain she remains the centre of dramas unfolding around her – she is in turn indulged by those who feel they must respect her sensitivity. Lisa projects her deep feelings as having primacy over others' concerns; analogously, when she discusses politics in class, her self-righteous depth of feeling overwhelms debate and makes real concern or political inquiry impossible to reach. At times Lonergan will interrupt the action to have the camera pan across cityscapes featuring other New Yorkers going about their lives, or mix the dialogue of extras on the periphery louder than his characters, reminding us how easily we can forget a world full of other people when we are so absorbed in our tribulations. It is interesting that these narratives of affective indulgence have attached to the city, suggesting that solipsism is made more possible in urban environments – quite the opposite of what antisuburban critics suggest regarding the apoliticism of suburban sentimentality (Eagleton 207, in particular). However the film makes an important distinction. It is not depth of feeling in itself that is the problem, and nor is it an imagined mutuality or earnest sharing of values via emotive cues; rather, it is the use of emotion to protect one's narcissistic isolation from others' concerns that is the problem. A kind of affective indulgence is real, but maybe relational sentimentality is not the most problematic experience of all. In fact, maybe it is worse for us to imagine ourselves as affectively alone – perhaps this spurs a less communitarian sense of belonging and acceptable behaviour, and generates more possibilities to protect our own privilege.

use of sentiment in stories, in acknowledging a breadth of otherness, may also work to *extend* our cosmopolitan actions by humanising others, and encourage us to find points of ethical identification with and commitment to a broader range of living entities. Berlantian affect theory needlessly restricts identities and attitudes that do not translate to political or compromising actions, and can thus be seen as arguably prejudicial. A third person effect is also discernible: the philosophy applies to the relationality of others, but not the writer's, and is thus elitist.

Comprehending how the suburban ensemble film appropriates sentimental experience allows us to access an alternative to Berlant's political-affective binaries. The affective spectrum covered in the suburban ensemble dramedy permits concurrent diverse emotions in tension with associated ideas and attitudes, and opens up a place to truly consider how we might behave *given* our troubled relationships with peers.

Comedy in the Drama: Humour and Benign Violations in the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy

Having mounted a defence of the politically and pragmatically motivating role of sentimentality in these films, I turn now to the detail of their humour, how comic devices are used to disquiet our expectations and explore alternatives to social anxieties. Writing on Shakespearean comedy, Northrop Frye says:

> Participation and detachment, sympathy and ridicule, sociability and isolation, are inseparable in the complex we call comedy, a complex that is begotten by the paradox of life itself, in which to exist is both to be a part of something else and yet never to be a part of it, and in which all freedom and joy are inseparably a belonging and an escape. (104)

As we have seen, a similar matrix of ostensibly conflicting emotions is integral to understanding the affective formula, and political upset, of the dramedy film.[122] The best

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[122] For further humanist readings, see Robin Headlam Wells's *Shakespeare's Humanism*, rescuing the Renaissance's more subtle, sensitive and self-consciously hopeful attempts to comprehend a human nature from antihumanist generalisations, and Andy Mousley's *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, reading Shakespeare as, again, a self-consciously hopeful way to

comedy, perhaps, is inextricable from the very real social threats underpinning its relevance to an audience. Working from the benign violation model (BVT) in humour studies advanced by Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, we can view comedy as an exploration of events, circumstances, people and things that may or may not pose a threat – a process by which we implicitly identify potential violations to the self which might cause harm and are simultaneously afforded the opportunity to reduce our perception of such threats by acknowledging our relative circumstantial safety. Using humour to evaluate threats as less serious, or more benign, can allow us to make way for other concerns; or, as Sergei Eisenstein wrote in "Bolsheviks Do Laugh" (68-72), humour can reinforce and remind us of political threats to be overcome. Therefore humour has political resonance as a negotiator between the interpersonal behaviours, attitudes and events we should and should not assume as a threat, or what we should treat seriously, without levity. Humour and its absence can make a claim as to the level of violation entailed in certain situations, as well as their social or political contexts.

Humour arises from multiple sources in the suburban ensemble dramedy, but chief among these would appear to be witty dialogue, character eccentricity or quirk, and the surprisingly frank renegotiation of social mores. Although the films employ techniques familiar across cinematic comedy genres – for instance visual humour, or sight and sound gags[123] – these three are the comedic and satiric elements we might most readily associate with the suburban ensemble dramedy. Instead of locating every instance of screen humour therein, I will focus more broadly on those elements that seem integral to the form.

What we read as wit in these dialogue-heavy films can be broken down into three concomitant categories also: cynical haughtiness, epigrammatic insight, and inventive lingual play. These attributes make up the comedy of repartee (succinctly historicised by Abrams and Harpham 417-419). The place of cynical haughtiness, as discussed above in relation to the sitcom heritage of the suburban dramedy, must be read with regard to the films' structural trajectory: after critical jibes, insults and unkind riposte are offered, the scorn is regularly

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think through "how to live" both ethically and practically. Mousley's work is typical of more recent works in literary humanism that stress what literature might have to teach us about life (Harrison), and attempt to recover the epistemic agency of literary objects from which we can derive valuable information about our world (Gaskin).

[123] Consider the honking, spluttering vehicle of *Little Miss Sunshine*, or editing that compounds the slapstick of its screen presence.

revealed to be self-defensive play. Indeed, George Eman Vaillant recognised humour as a defensive mechanism (*Ego Mechanisms of Defense*), and here we find one of the most overt examples: distressing thoughts vocalised, dealt with, and made smaller, thus displaced from their threatening position. Humour can be an effective familial coping mechanism, and one that may implicitly request flexibility in family roles and expectations (Brooks et al. "Therapeutic Humor in the Family"). Even this oft-cruel humour retains something of Bergson's corrective function: once again, we see the characters *move through* their cynical haughtiness (which has some revelatory power in both its candour and acknowledgement of interpersonal hardship), and then go on to reveal their communal care in various ways. We find a new morality by deigning to laugh about, and thus bring into the open, our ire at one another. That is, the very recognition of ire at one's family and peers can, when paired with conincident or subsequent acts of care, demonstrate its triviality or commonness via a humorous or witty construction, and signal a willingness to work with rather than internalise anger. By bringing it into the open, acrimony resolution becomes a shared workspace rather than individually owned; a study by Elisa Everts suggests that such barbs and aggressive humour styles may even promote relational harmony by their very inclusive nature ("Identifying a particular family humor style"). This humour recognises cynicism about others as another component in the affective spectrum we cover when living through a social problem: it explores the space between harmless wit (without tendentious content) and tendency wit (externalising repressed hostility or obscenity), and collapses Freud's distinction (in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*) into a more subtle human interaction. Between the binary is a space of potential discovery. No one is at fault for harsh feelings to others – we move transitionally through them – and these attitudes and behaviours can offer revelation, then are often mitigated or dissolved upon exposition of superordinate goals: the need to work together or remain miserable.[124] *The Upside of Anger* may be the poster film for this manner of cruel comic address, with character narration telling us that, "People don't know how to love. They bite rather than kiss. They slap rather than stroke," and Denny Davies (Kevin Costner) reiterating across multiple monologues that the verbal displays of anger making up a substantial part of the film are "real life." He insists that the familial tensions within his neighbour's house, where Terry Wolfmeyer (Joan Allen) lives with her four daughters, inspires his affection for them. The title of the film refers to the person we become

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[124] This view also supports the idea of benign violations as transitional, a cognitive process rather than cognitive state. Humour appears at the beginning of a progression through perception of a potential violation, thereafter down regulated as benign.

through the liminal space of anger – anger and humour are liminally aligned. There are other models, however, including *American Beauty*, which employ this convention to different ends. In *American Beauty*, the cynical haughtiness is corrosive and does not, at first, appear to offer any relief. The sentimentality of the conclusion is detached from the characters' wordplay; the film implies that another, more spiritual force is at work in bringing compassion to its subjects.

Abrams and Harpham interpret the surprise element of epigrammatic wit as "usually the result of a connection or distinction between words or concepts which frustrates the listener's expectation, only to satisfy it in an unexpected way" (417). Thus insight can also be offered through repartee and satirical dialogue, occasionally in tandem with scornful retort and banter: a character may voice an imaginative perspective on the events of the narrative, causing us to laugh simultaneously at the sudden shift in our diegetic conception to accommodate a surprising new assessment, the ingenuity of the screenwriter's observation and expression (the cleverness of the epigram), the cleverness of the hypothetical character, and our own cleverness for recognising their wit. At this point we may also be surprised that scorn is capable of revelation (somewhat of a satire-by-surprise). Once again, all parts of the affective spectrum we move through may have revelatory value, and a validation of the breadth of emotional experience remains central to a realistically complex view of human life.[125] This shows how the use of both humour and sentimentality in the suburban ensemble dramedy puts the lie to pejorative and belittling assessments of family studies across the history of film:

> The celebration of family movie is, in a sense, a therapeutic dream of the family in which the very real tensions and traumas of ordinary family life are always resolved by love and good intentions. In not a single celebration film is any member of the family permanently injured by another member of the clan; in the celebration of family film parents do not traumatize their children, nor children betray their parents' dreams. (Loukides 98)

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[125] This tension has occasionally been addressed as the "melancomic" across a different set of contemporary films, such as Deborah J. Thomas's work on Wes Anderson ("Framing the 'melancomic'"), yet the term tends to refer to another mode of ironic address that focuses us upon the filmmaker's artifice: a gentle distancing effect that is offset by sympathy for character.

In fact, the films I have been looking at both admit the listed familial ills, and still celebrate family in its diverse affective structures – a complexity and specificity this binaristically constricting and discriminatory discourse cannot reach. See in particular the latently injurious teachings of certain uncontrollable, internal family relations explored in *Little Miss Sunshine*, which still treats problematic characters such as the grandfather, Alan Arkin's Edwin Hoover, with due consideration and care, despite his clearly harmful pedagogy; harming and helping can coexist in families. Where happy endings occur, they tend to emphasise the possibility of progress toward prosociality within families rather than obliteration of all of the family's woes.

Lingual jokes, such as puns and sarcasm, offer violations from confusion in perception of intent, communication breakdown or invalidation, as well as disobedience of grammatical and other rules of communication we rely on for perception of another's intent (syntactic and semantic violations); however the lingual-intent chaos is resolvable and resolved, thus benign. This suggests puns may be funnier to one who conceives of rules such as grammar as particularly important (McGraw and Warner *The Humor Code* 11), otherwise there is insufficient perceived violation for the joke to appeal. Of course, as Sarah Kozloff reminds us, repartee, reaching back through Wilde, Congreve and Shakespeare, requires performative skill to be comedically effective, and often the source of our laughter is as much an imaginative, off-centre or startlingly counterintuitive performance as it is the cleverly penned words (174-177). At this point, it is worth asking why we take humorous delight also in eccentric performance gags and characterisations we read as "quirky." Working from BVT, it is easy to see how we may receive abnormal social behaviours as a potential threat, and also how our knowledge of healthy diversity mitigates this response and places social abnormalities in the zone of tension between safe and threatening. The surprising rejection of social norms that we apprehend as quirk may, then, encourage us to accept human difference by pointing to ingrained reactions to otherness, and potentially comprise a claim that such social behaviours – where they harm no others – should not matter so much.[126] Bergson explored our location of and reinforced adherence to "moral" behaviours through humorous discussion of the eccentric or ludicrous in *Laughter*. In convergence with BVT, laughing at

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[126] This might also help explain the rising appeal of the much-discussed comedy of "awkwardness." Pansy Duncan writes that associated "cringe comedy" requires a mental labour that contradicts presumptions of comic media as pure autotelic relief or play ("Joke Work").

character quirks may be a way to defuse our prejudicial impulses, and disconnect personality features from falsely associated moral behaviours – that is, we recognise that one can be socially different without being unempathic, cruel or otherwise threatening. This also specifies the source and the reason for ironic distancing that McDowell, updating Jeffrey Sconce's work on irony, locates as part of quirky "tone" ("Irony, Nihilism" 11), connecting the linguistic and performative features of quirkiness to its broader generic characteristics.

Later suburban ensembles, perhaps influenced by the likes of *Juno*, experiment with methods to excise the distancing effect from quirk and permit a fuller empathy and identification with idiosyncratic characters.[127] There remains the problem, however, that quirk seems to represent "slight shifts from the norm" (King *Indie 2.0* 27) rather than radical difference or even pathology, the "odd, but not *too* odd" (Hirschorn np) principle.[128] Perhaps our recognition of the harmlessness of quirk is merely placatory, and comes at the expense of those who exhibit real departures from social norms that we must work harder to accept. On the other hand, it is also possible that quirk offers safe opportunities to exercise our empathic reach and thus incrementally countervail perceived threats of otherness, drawing a wider circle of compassion via systematic conditioning and narrativised rehearsal of friendly responses to human difference. It is also true that the quirky describes a substantial range of performance practices and film conventions – not all of them are so "safe" (King *Indie 2.0* 27). In fact, quirk must retain an element of danger – the potential violation – to remain funny. Again, there is a dark and conflicted notion of accountability present in *Little Miss Sunshine*. The quirk of many characters is all but benign in the narratives they trade with each other about family, gender and political identity, as they both harm and help one another. When Edwin teaches his granddaughter Olive (Abigail Breslin) hyper-sexualised concepts of womanhood, or when Frank (Steve Carell) trades in suicidal nihilism with the impressionably

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[127] The kind of quirky performance value we find here has more unfamiliarity and revelatory uplift to be reduced to Sianne Ngai's famous aesthetic categories: it does not match squarely with the commoditised, fetishized powerlessness of the cute, the hyperactive productivity of the zany, or focus on production in lieu of substance when we demote an artistic statement to the "merely interesting," or just a cut above boredom, sameness. There is more going on here.

[128] Quirk signifies a kind of hedging, as James McDowell points out, "for marketing purposes 'quirky' suggests a film to be a unique, and therefore desirable, product – though simultaneously not *so* unique as to discourage those who might be repelled" (1). McDowell identifies quirk as a spectrum of stylistic sensibilities engaging some manner of spectatorial ironic distance from onscreen eccentricity – and this includes a dramatic irony, whereby audiences have a comprehension of diegetic eccentricity not acknowledged by the players themselves (Wes Anderson's films are a good example of this).

dark teen Dwayne (Paul Dano), the harmlessness of quirk is a veneer. There must be an ongoing genuine social threat for this manner of comedy to sustain, or else there is nothing to laugh at – quirky comedy thrives on this sense of possible threat. When it is gone, quirk becomes too conventional and ergo comedically stale, drained of threat and ripe for criticism for its self-defeating hypocrisy. *Little Miss Sunshine* rises above such a critique as it retains this sense of threat across its ensemble, allowing the film to consider circumstances in which our behaviour can have positive and negative effects on loved ones at the same time.

The quirky label, now overused by film publicity departments, has suffered considerable backlash. Where once it referenced alternatives to homogenising character construction, it now seems to embody an essence of character homogeneity, as certain performance or aesthetic choices presented as idiosyncratic become cinematic norms. King warns against binaristic thinking regarding the construction of the quirky, as it would be a misrepresentation of conceptual heredity in cultural production to draw a line between authentic and fabricated quirk (*Indie 2.0* 25).[129] However, there is still a very real difference in the level of innovation a film can present, and as the descriptors "quirky," "offbeat" and "idiosyncratic" invite us to read a film's attempts at originality, we should feel free to assess such works on the grounds of their uniqueness in manipulating existing film conventions to draw new human insights and present new pictures of diverse humanity, not to assess their uninfluenced authenticity. Ultimately, the generic convention of the quirkiness is insufficient; rather the moral insight made available via quirkiness is both aesthetically and generically crucial.

The "quirky-small-town dramedy" (Murray, Rev. of *What Goes Up* np) places ensemble dramedy conventions in semi-rural suburbia or in provincial towns outside of the city. Examples include *Mumford*, *The Station Agent*, *Junebug* and *What Goes Up*. Many also work from another inherited formula: a traumatised outcast protagonist retreats to their hometown, reconnecting with eccentric locals, old relations, flames and playmates. It is interesting to note how filmic quirk has been fastened to small town suburbia, resulting from the presumed idiosyncrasies of particularised geography, while urban fringes are presented as homogeneous norm, and constituents are more likely to be presented either as locale-

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[129] This is, in fact, a primary example of the *Indie 2.0* thesis: that narratives of authenticity circulating indie cinema movements describe the investments made by patrons of the indie discourse more than they describe independent filmmaking practice.

bound types, dimensional characters resisting suburban types, or conflicted personalities failing to live up to those types. In any case, the small town is associated with freedom of personal expression in a way other locales are not. A film like small town ensemble gay romcom *Big Eden* (Thomas Bezucha, 2001), for example, uses secondary character eccentricity to generate recognition of our typification of others. The film's humour arises from surprising exposure of the audience's own quiescent discriminative presumptions about the values of semi-rural suburbanites – we expect the characters to be less broad-minded than they turn out to be, and may take delight in the comic disruption upon having these expectations subverted.

Comical reassessments of potentially threatening sociality flow naturally into the humour of surprising candour, whereupon the arbitration of social norms, etiquettes and traditional identities that we still struggle with in political discourse are treated as comedy (for example, the sexualised dance routine in *Little Miss Sunshine* or secondary characters' reactions to adultery and sexual relations in *The Oranges* or *The Kids Are All Right*). This works as humour because we recognise the solemnity around a public discourse, but we see people experiencing the identity conflict in a way that fails to match the gravitas we expect. The technique is similar to "shock" humour: the mocking of concerns the majority accepts as serious. The guiding light of the contemporary American shock genre may be television's *Family Guy*. Although the shock value of humour has been a staple in concurrent American comedy films (many of them suburban studies also, such as the works of Judd Apatow), the difference is a subtle one. The source of humour may be the same – surprise at the flippancy with which a serious subject is treated, destabilising our conception of broader societal threats by exploring the border of what we are permitted to consider benign – but what is subsequently achieved with the humour, or what work it is put to, varies substantially.

Studying dissimilarities between shock humour and frank social renegotiation humour not only explains the difference in perspective offered in these films, it again specifies the claims embedded in their gags about the social issues that are worthy of our attention and concern. The key to explaining such a difference is the mock value within the shock value: once destabilised, in American satirical shock humour the potential social threat often remains unexplored as we swiftly move onto the next shock, a version of "manic-satire" (Hughey and Muradi passim) leaving us with the impression that we may have been impractically engaged with a triviality. Indeed, one of the interventions such works stage

against the history of shocking satire, from Jonathan Swift onward, is to extract "the unitary function of satire" so that only its rhetoric remains (DeRochi 45); the means without the associated ends of political insight or social commentary satirises the purpose of satire itself, undermining the subsequent possibility (and perceived authority) of any earnest moralising or moral questioning. This is the work of *Family Guy* and much of the Seth Rogen variety of American gross-out cinema, especially when it self-consciously moves from toilets to identity politics. Hence, the point is merely to somewhat let us off the hook, as the joker has already accomplished by example, achieving a superior indifference by alleviating social concern (an affectively powerful position to be in). Once the deflation of our anxieties is realised (often around a matter of political correctness), we no longer need to evaluate their source, or whether there is currency to any related concerns, as true questioning would miss the point that subversive frivolity is superior to anxiety, perhaps producing a one-upmanship of callousness.[130] Rarely does this humour close with a sense of dismissive finality, however, as the confusion between benign and real violation keeps the humour alive – the reason we are attracted primarily to its provocations. Think of the feverish pace of *Family Guy* skits, often lasting seconds at a time before rolling onto the next stereotype in the next vignette. Part of the appeal is the lack of any sense of finality, or any emergence into a notion of what the satire attempts to achieve or tell us about the stereotypes in employs; it thwarts opportunities for moral reflection in order to keep its violation alive, and its humour in a state of permanent suspension. Being kept in this space of generality, we cannot move to locate a more specific set of problems, and instead we remain at a level of appeals to a common social consensus on the threatening nature of broadly defined social issues (again, nervousness around political correctness stands as a primary example).

To elucidate an alternative, we should return to the tension between Vaillant's conception of humour as defensive mechanism, making the unpleasant, terrifying or distressing overt but still cognitively displacing it, and Bergson's moral function of humour. Clearly both can coexist, but if we are concerned with reaching the moral potential of

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[130] Matthew W. Hughey and Sahara Muradi find, for example, that the hyper-irony of such texts simultaneously critiques and reinscribes racial stereotypes ("Laughing Matters"), and LaChrystal D. Ricke quantifies the use of derogatory speech in *Family Guy* specifically, although remains ambivalent about the satirical use such speech is put to, or any generalisability to derogatory perspectives in its audience ("Funny or Harmful?"), perhaps because ambivalence is precisely the response these texts prompt, and the only response possible when the opportunity for moral assessment is removed.

politicised shock humour, then what matters most is what *follows* the shock of deflated sociopolitical anxieties. In contrast to the politically disengaged or superior "mocking shock," which undermines interrogation of the threat's source, throughout suburban ensemble dramedies we see the shock followed by an extrapolation: the use of jest to deflate generalist hysteria about a social problem, proceeded by location of specific related ethical values for consideration. *Little Children* is a case in point. Various sexual indiscretions and predicaments (from the concealment of pornography addiction from one's spouse, to adultery, to struggles with paedophilic desire) are raised frankly, producing uncomfortable humour, but the film's very structure homes in on the source of our discomfort: the film continues to present more information about the context of each indiscretion, in effect asking us to maintain attentiveness and analyse specific aspects of that threat. The procedural conditions of realist narrative become a kind of pragmatism that can then provide a less hysterical set of practical matters as we follow the characters' attempts to resolve their interpersonal dilemmas; but crucially, in a film like *Little Children*, we still do not know how to respond. The information provided in each scenario might cause us to laugh again, to consider the morality of the situation or to simply recoil, and all responses seem reasonable. The film presents a tentative response to its own questions in concluding with several characters' equally tentative attempts at mutual care. Again, after the humour, we see a move to sentimentality achieving reassertion of the centrality of social ethics. Yet nothing is ever resolved completely with the mere addition of sentiment, so the potential for humour remains alive, only changed. In essence, this change marks its difference from pure shock humour. It is not that frank social renegotiation neuters comedy, but that it shifts the goal posts to admit rumination; it is no longer the mere mention of shocking concepts that produces benign violations, it is our problematised ability to find shared solutions to shared woes that makes us laugh, a recognition of our own fallibility as mutual problem-solvers.[131]

Also called to our attention is the ability that people possess to work out their problems in an intimate social sphere without the magnitude of public debate or the interventions of media content, which are inherently and unavoidably reductive functions. We see people negotiating living arrangements and personal relationships on their own terms out

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[131] Of course some films, such as the Judd Apatow dramedies, motivate both hyperactive shock humour and frank social renegotiation humour, and so it is possible to achieve both modes within one production. The suburban ensemble dramedy, however, works almost exclusively within the satirical conventions of the latter.

of necessity, and trust in them to do so reciprocally – this does not invalidate public discourses so much as remind us that people are driven to find mutual benefit with or without input from theorists, analysts, media professionals and lay media, and that as longitudinal social analysts we can assume we know too much of others' lives without specificity or complex detail. As anthropologist M.P. Baumgartner has pointed out in her study on *The Moral Order of a Suburb*:

> The pervasive moral minimalism found in the suburbs contrasts sharply with claims that American society is particularly violent or litigious. However true such characterizations may be for other settings, they do not reflect suburban reality … When problems occur, most people do not seriously consider recourse to legal officials, and, in fact, they generally act as if law did not exist at all. In this sense, suburbia is a kind of limited anarchy. (127)[132]

Across many of the suburban ensemble films, candid renegotiation of social roles is seen to be occurring without explicit mediated guidance, public attention, or reference to political standards. We are, on the whole, driven to work together to locate superior reciprocity – media discussion, a kind of communal ethical negotiator if not arbiter, participates in this process but crucially does not represent its totality. As cultural analysts, we can be prone to forget this humility: the components of a culture that are visible to us in recorded media, and that we position as paramount in personal meaning-making, may not represent the sum of how constituents construct their identities. The self-governance of everyday sociality often remains invisible to the (non-anthropological, or distanced) analyst. In these varieties of humanist cinema, we can be shocked into reassessing our presumptions of media sovereignty. The audience subsequently asks how much we should evaluate a film's flippancy around identity politics as a substantive violation. We ask: if our grander socio-political theories and abstract armchair convictions cannot necessarily account for the nuance of our quotidian circumstances, what, then, should we take seriously?

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[132] Baumgartner's findings have been corroborated by later ethnographies that look into more specific areas in suburban life where one might expect to find violence, such as suburban drug dealing (Jacques and Wright *Code of the Suburb*), which also displays the cultural hallmarks of moral avoidance, tolerance and peaceful conflict management.

American Millennial Sociopolitics and the Ensemble Narrative

Although propagation of the suburban motif, and visions of suburbia as quintessentially American political iconography, reach back at least to the 1950s and 60s if not earlier (Wilt 484), Coon points out of the past two decades, "it is notable that such a large number of high-profile suburban films … have appeared in such a short period of time" (3). The retreat to domestic concerns may seem like an apolitical gesture to a surface reader of these films, yet politicoethical upheaval runs deep throughout. Resistance to a direct political prescription could also be off-putting to some theorists, however instead we witness onscreen representation of a specific, contemporary political confusion and disillusionment, and tandem inquiry as to how we might navigate the despair of political uncertainty and associated feelings of inconsequence. The remainder of this chapter explores how the suburban ensemble film spoke to mounting political disillusionment at the end of the last century.

Although it would be reductionist to equate the breadth of concerns covered here to a handful of American historical events, selectively conjuring political occurrences to rationalise the emergence of a broader cultural phenomenon, one still might speculate that a collision of the political and personal had already reached its zenith in American media at the height of the Lewinsky scandal. As Thomas de Zengotita put it: "no one ever called attention to his privates, literally or figuratively, with the splendid abandon of Bill Clinton. His whole persona was performance intimacy. In the long run, that is what will make him the archetype of leadership for the media age" (*Mediated* 153). In 1999, the same year as *American Beauty*, Payne's adaptation of Tom Perrotta's novel *Election* provided the perfect filmic example. Perrotta said, "so much of it has to do with what I was seeing out of the Clintons during the '92 elections: that politics is personal, the 'character issue'" (Veis np).[133] We had effectively been taught that the extraction of political and personal relations was to play out on a battlefield of sexual politics. It may seem little wonder that political discussions on film would increasingly

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[133] Author and screenwriter Tom Perrotta is an important figure in the history of the suburban ensemble dramedy. He wrote the novels both *Election* and *Little Children* were adapted from; he also co-wrote the screenplay for *Little Children* with Field. More recently, options for his 2007 novel *The Abstinence Teacher* have been associated with filmmakers Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (*Little Miss Sunshine*) and Lisa Cholodenko (*The Kids Are All Right*).

take sexual misdemeanour as a springboard. However, we could equally say that the synthesis of (once more easily distinguishable) right and left politics into a blur of populist opportunism and seemingly condoned narcissism (culminating more recently in the shock of the Trump presidency) also directed us to a re-evaluation of personal beliefs. We had been purposefully confused: successive administrations moved to conceal an agenda of incremental neoliberalism by directing public debate to questions of political presentation rather than conviction. From Ronald Reagan to Arnold Schwarzenegger and now Donald Trump, the unconcealed conflation of Hollywood and politics permitted what Bernard Manin has termed "audience democracy" (223), in which voters react to issues generated by celebrity politicians rather than exercise any agency to set a people's agenda. This reduction of the voting populous to reactive "audience" has embroidered and cemented the strategic discourse of economic liberalism – eventually leading to Trump's obliteration of any need for a coherent ideology beyond self-interest. When the political became so much more about character and celebrity, our attention was so diverted that any dubious political compromise became plausible.[134]

As Ben Dickenson explores in *Hollywood's New Radicalism*, filmmakers responded to this disillusionment in a variety of ways. Cinema began to trace how such confusion and abuses of civic trust affected our lives. If we could no longer identify a continuum of political conviction or evaluate what a public figure stands for, if after Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?* we had no leaders discussing a meaningful alternative, if we have been unwittingly inaugurated into a kind of political anomie, and critically, if we in fact *require* mistrust of all media channels that communicate political values (leading eventually to ideologically targeted fake news on social media), then how do we even begin to *discuss* such values anymore? These films all explode any remaining certitude in our political identities, and then go about building our values back up from rock bottom. We cannot forget that in the 1990s America had seen a huge disturbance of suburban voting norms, as Seth C. McKee and Daron R. Shaw reflected in 2003: "the factors that led to GOP dominance of the suburbs have dissipated … This context varies so dramatically by region that we would be surprised if suburban voting patterns do not vary more significantly in the future than they did in the 1990s" ("Suburban Voting in Presidential Elections" 144). The changing demography of the suburbs is a deeply political subject, and these filmmakers have recognised it; not just in the

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[134] For more on the Trump era and future directions, see the last chapter, "Afterword."

transformation of identity, ethnicity, sexuality, equality, ideology, and associated imagery, but also direct electoral influence. Across these films, there is the sense that we need to rediscover a political identity in order to truly combat the pervasively impracticable conservatism stewing in our adherence to politicised media cues. Characters in these films attempt to match their unquestioned ideals to a lived reality, fail, have to explain themselves to others, and in so doing discover a more generous way of looking at one another that suggests (usually without prescribing any particular behaviour or action) the possibility for a new political identity that will respect the diversity of our lives and moral challenges. The social critique of such suburban cinema can be summarised thusly: our political assumptions and debates no longer seem to match the reality of contextual and personality diversity they must address.

In his 2004 "Declaration of Independents" for *Variety*, Payne wrote:

> Whether Bush and his corrupt gang are reelected or not — and especially if they are — these times ensure increased demand for films with human and political content. Art is all we have to combat the fearsome, awful animal side of man that today controls events. To portray real people with real problems, real joys, real tears will serve as a positive political force, a force for comfort and possibly for change. With the inhumanity forced upon us by governments and terrorists and corporations, to make a purely human film is today a political act. To make a film about disenfranchised people is a political act. To make a film about love is a political act. To make a film about a single human emotion is today a political act. And bad things happen when good people fail to speak up. Intelligence and humanity should not be "specialty" items. (S7)

From Reagan into the bloody results of the Bush Junior years, these domestic filmmakers saw themselves not only as responding directly to the accumulative dehumanisation of their era, but the environment of cynicism and disengagement that made such regimes (and their worst results, terrorist retaliation and corporate dominance) possible. The most sensible way to talk about all of these issues on a level that seemed pragmatically relevant to mainstream American audiences disaffected by political distancing rhetoric may, to some filmmakers, seem to be a look at the misalliance of our political values and our everyday lives, in the family and at home.

Coon notes that many suburban storytellers have clearly stated in interviews that they were reflecting upon the disparity between suburban images they grew up with and the more complex realities they lived through (225-226).[135] Somewhat like Stanley Cavell identified across remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, this genre is a philosophic inquiry into the sociopolitical and moral upheaval encroaching on our everyday lives; its narrative conventions service questions regarding how we can live well despite the ideological and domestic uncertainty of our epoch (in his case, the Depression; in this case, a politically splintered, incrementally unequal, disempowering, media-drenched, trust-poor and above all confounding new millennium). The filmic responses, in both cases, continue to cite a kind of maturation of human relations based upon a relinquishing of beliefs and practices that keep us from a deeply satisfying connection with others. Concomitantly, an urgent cosmopolitan question arises: to whom do we owe responsibility? The concentric circles of accountability found in these films – to partner, to family, to neighbourhood, to distant family and friends, to nation state and to globe – display characters actively juggling these interests in their daily lives, and position difficult cosmopolitan ethics as unavoidably quotidian. Thus we must also keep the political nature of ensemble narrative empathy equalisation in mind when we discuss these films, as it is a cornerstone of their intervention against Hollywood individualism (the emphasis on individual triumph over collective or collaborative agency).[136]

Globalisation puts pressure on cosmopolitan ethics, which may help explain the millennial trend toward ensemble film narratives, which have the ability to "stress a sense of collectivity and community at odds with the structure of protagonism that otherwise characterizes Hollywood cinema" (Mathijs 89). Lorraine Sim makes a similar point in her analysis "Ensemble Film, Postmodernity and Moral Mapping":

> Through its use of the ensemble form, *Babel* reminds us that a recognition of our
> responsibility for, and connection to, others is particularly important in the era of

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[135] Again, this political problem is mirrored in the research on news media and public trust. Stephen Coleman et al. found that "public trust collapses when journalists are perceived to be reporting on social groups, areas and practices that they do not understand. Distrust happens when the news fails to address the world as the public recognise it, leaving them feeling like outsiders looking on at a drama that even the leading performers do not care if they really comprehend" (2).

[136] For more on cinematic individualism, see Richard Rushton on Hollywood and the "unified subject" (94).

postmodernity as our lives become increasingly intertwined with the lives of more and more strangers who – while often geographically or socially distant – are, through the forces of globalization, ever more proximate in ethical terms. (np)

Both Sim and Vivien Silvey ("Not Just Ensemble Films") point to recent ensemble narratives' attempts at complex cognitive mapping in new and unfamiliar social spaces.[137] Sim's analysis becomes more specific when she addresses Zygmunt Bauman's work on the ethical splintering that characterises postmodernity, the narrativised investigation of which she describes as "moral mapping." In *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman emphasises the increasing invisibility of the outcomes of our personal actions, the elusive connection of social consequences to their respective agents, and cognitive limitations in summarising moral causalities: "The scale of consequences our actions may have dwarfs such moral imagination as we may possess" (Bauman 18). In a global world, our moral certainties are rendered increasingly ambiguous, are pluralised, and when called upon for revision, the resultant insecurity is existentially felt. Thus, Sim suggests in order to avoid "floating" responsibility into a colossal global bystander effect, we resort to the kind of moral mapping ensemble narratives are apt to provide. The ensemble mode, then, regularly appears as another narrativised humanist ethic: again we find ourselves constructing hypothetical others to understand and talk through our moral effect on the world, with respect to local contextual contingencies. The films I am looking at do not merely represent onscreen the existential feeling of this millennial condition (as do the fractal or hyperlink narratives discussed at the top of this chapter), but develop from the political roots of confounding and depreciative feelings of disempowerment into questions about how to live within a causally entangled and variegated world – open contextualised ethics.

The suburban ensemble dramedy in particular features polyphonic, intergenerational perspective-taking through alternating focalisation, which could be seen as comparable to the real family narratives discussed by Fivush et al. in "Personal and Intergenerational Narratives in Relation to Adolescents' Well-Being." The films not only recognise and represent this

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[137] They both attribute this conception to Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* despite the treatise having been prefaced by multiple decades of work on cognitive mapping in narrative, and its complications, both within narrative theory and in the social sciences (see Mar and Oatley for a summary). Jameson's contribution may be the application of précising terms such as post-capitalist or postmodern to the vast worlds we attempt to represent, again wrapping up entire cultures in unifying grand theory.

activity, integral to familial wellbeing, of collectively determining a family narrative; they may also be a good way to reflect on one's own family narrative-building practices. As Fivush et al. point out, for example, family narrative is instrumental in the teaching and learning of gender identities, particularly for adolescents: "That adolescent males and females tell stories about their parents' childhoods that differ by parental gender suggests that adolescents are understanding and propagating the gendered roles their parents are narratively portraying" (52). The kind of reflexivity asked of us in the ensemble narrative can politicise this process. It encourages us to wonder at others' internal states and perspectives, and thus how this information will help us co-construct identities more equally, as well as providing a simulation of the kinds of stories we tell in our own lives, a model for thinking through our own construction of self-histories. "The multi-character drama is inherently positioned against individualist monocausality" (Moss-Wellington "Humanist Ethics in John Sayles" 119), and the alternating focalization of an ensemble format, at its best, is itself a striving for egalitarianism, and systemically resists elevating the concerns of one above another.

So I prefer to acknowledge that maybe this cinema arose precisely because we *did* have a lot to work out, a kind of a cry against a climate of apathy burgeoning in the wake of ideas such as Fukuyama's absurdly bowdlerised modernisation theory and the publicity narratives of successive presidential offices, sold so proficiently to us by an elite. We needed to be self-reflexive about consumerism, gender politics, humility and narcissism at large, because we had been ignoring these problems in popular narrative by pinning them to bygone eras, as in the examples in the years leading up to *American Beauty* (*The Ice Storm*, *Pleasantville*). Even within more fantastical near future settings, as in *The Truman Show*, the politics were still displaced and not quite *our* problem. It has been curious to see the extent to which *EDtv* (Ron Howard, 1999, again in collaboration with Ganz and Mandel), which tackled the real psychological torment and contractual immorality that astonishingly endures in reality television production, has been largely forgotten in cinema analysis in favour of *The Truman Show*'s pessimistic fantasy of such abuses being clear, visible and unheeded.

Above all, this cinematic movement offers trust in people to work things out on their own *despite* an unpleasant political reality. In this way, it attempts to restore agency to the majority. Another way to put this is that the suburban ensemble dramedy works from a reasonable scepticism levelled at outmoded institutions, public and private (for example academe in *Smart People*, systems of justice in *City Island*, business enterprise and the

workplace in *In Good Company*), foremost among these the family. We sympathise with the cynic, then move through a trajectory of comprehending the human grounds – through practical situations where we need support from one another – for rebuilding trust and integrity into our communities and the structures that bind them, demonstratively expressing how humility, understanding, acceptance of complexity and the will to cooperation make this possible. This cinema both validates a sceptical point of view of our political status quo and asks where we can proceed from here.

The following chapter uses a close reading of progenitor text *Parenthood* to demonstrate how these concerns play out across an ensemble film narrative.

PARENTHOOD:
A Humanistic Close Reading

The following chapter studies *Parenthood*'s treatment of the domestic politics, ethics and psychology of family relations from a humanistic perspective. I turn primarily to two extant substantial readings of *Parenthood* in academic monographs, those of Kristin Thompson and Joseph H. Kupfer, as well as some passing observations made by other scholars and critics.

The film's domestic realism sets up some of its political questions, and especially changing gender politics. Once raised, it asks what ethical standards will be appropriate to apply to these problems. Finally, and principally, it is concerned with the psychology of living up to those ethical standards. In the thesis of the film, scrutiny of domestic situations reveals its everyday politics. Those politics mandate the need for ethical solutions, and thus prompt a search for guiding principles. However, we can hold these ethical standards in our head but fail to live up to them – the film asks what conditions allow our ethics of familial responsibility and care to flourish or flounder, and in so doing builds a picture of the existential components in family life. A more complex, holistic and dynamic understanding of domestic life and its problems feeds back into and tempers both our politics and ethics.

The Domestic Realism of Parenthood

Halfway through *Parenthood*, director Ron Howard's 1989 collaboration with screenwriters Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, is a scene in which the disturbed and secretive pubescent teenager Garry Buckman-Lampkin (Joaquin Phoenix) asks his working, single mother Helen Buckman (Diane Wiest) if he could live with his estranged father for a while. Emerging as we do from a sequence in which Helen reacts with comic surprise to her new son-in-law Tod Higgins (Keanu Reeves) shaving her daughter Julie's (Martha Plimpton) head, the audience is caught off-guard by the question, and the swift change in mood. The ensuing scene encapsulates the way the film rewards close listening to lives in domestic environments.

Garry is first introduced in a medium long shot, appearing tentatively behind Helen as she prepares to leave for work – she manages a local bank. He sticks close to the walls as if being in the open space of the house might be hazardous. The camera tracks Garry, moving along the wall and away from his mother as, in a pre-emptively defensive tone, he tells her the house is "getting crowded" since Tod moved in. When he finally gets to asking if he could stay with his dad for a while, Garry is positioned as far from his mother as possible within the dining room, a large table between them, standing awkwardly with his back against a monolithic white cabinet, hunched, arms crossed, and looking up sheepishly, head slightly bowed, aware of his vulnerability but seemingly unaware that he is being dwarfed by a looming domestic object (a technique employed more than once in this film to convey parent-child power relationships in a space governed by parental agency). He occupies a portion of the left of the frame, walls, tables, chairs and cabinets all larger than his own figure – the wide set-up of Garry alone, before we move into progressively tighter eyeline coverage.

Garry alone among the domestic objects

A stillness follows: a long beat with a hushed buzz track, a kind of showdown of information processing while both of them survey an inevitable oncoming sadness. This disappearance of background noise sustains throughout the scene, crafting something of an auditory bubble around a private two-player drama that speaks to the fragile acoustic intimacy made possible in close domestic settings. In the ensuing shot of Helen, Wiest manages to convey not just trepidation, but the agony of not knowing what to do in these charged moments of parenting, so loaded with contradiction. She is both surprised and unsurprised, as she has speculated on her son's desire for connection with his father but wanted to suppress it; she wants to prevent him from the painful rejection she envisages, but also knows she must respect his agency and cannot prevent him from being hurt; she is both longing to hold onto "that little boy who never left my side" and aware that she must take a step back to allow him to explore the world on his own terms; she both knows the aching trials of growing up, but not his own specific trails, and not how to ease them.

Wiest's portrayal of these contradicting emotions earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Reviewers also recognised that such attempts to convey the realism of mixed affect were key to understanding the film. *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden observed Wiest's, "anxious longing, exasperation and pained tenderness … Even being the most sensitive parent, the film reminds us, has its limits. No matter how hard you try, you can't live your children's lives for them" (234). As Kupfer puts it in his chapter on virtue in *Parenthood*:

> Child-rearing involves a tension between protecting children and fostering their growth and independence from us. Cushioning the blows our children are bound to receive must be complemented by helping to prepare them to meet the world on its own terms. Complicating the work of raising children is the fact that not only do the children change but the world changes as well. Consequently, parents cannot always rely on what has worked in the past as they respond to their children's growth. Parents must adapt to great changes - in their children, the world, and in their children's relationship to the world. (92)

What is being asked of Helen here is a manner of humility particular to childrearing:

> Humility is essential to raising children because parents must deal with the fact that they cannot protect their children from all harm. In addition, parents must accept their ever-diminishing control over children who are becoming increasingly self-governing and involved in a world outside the home. (ibid. 97)

Garry's arms remain folded as he briskly makes his case: he clenches and unclenches his fists nervously, and positions his body away from Helen and towards the kitchen, where he will soon use the phone to call his father. When Helen advises Garry against calling his father, telling him "you don't know your father like I do," she does so in an uncharacteristic whisper, a resigned but tense monotone, and it is evident she knows her resistance to the idea is a matter of procedure more than guidance. "I don't know him at all," Garry snaps, using reassertion of his familiar role – reactive and righteous defiance against his mother's authority – as a kind of courage, and the impetus to move toward the kitchen.

Howard and cinematographer Donald McAlpine shoot this as Garry's over-the-shoulder POV. As he walks to the phone, the camera swings around Helen and pulls away from her while she watches on, her eyeline just above and behind the camera, and then finally the movement ends behind a framed glass divider separating the kitchen from the dining area. The foregrounding effect emphasises the distance between them: neither can stop the motion that has started, now, and they only see each other refracted through the glass, not quite in separate rooms, not quite in the same room, in the same house for now, but one of them is looking for a way out. Helen quietly, haltingly provides the number, and Garry looks up to receive the information, both defiant and afraid, reading her face once more, a last moment of emotional contagion as Garry fails to resist mirroring his mother's doubt (c.f. Hatfield et al.), before he turns away and dials. With each shot of Garry the coverage is slightly tighter, but it is only now, when he turns his back to Helen, that we have the first uninterrupted close-up. Behind him, Helen sits down to silently watch, her hand covering her mouth to protect against an impulse for intervention.

Garry's father, a dentist, has a receptionist who answers the phone, and Garry explains that "it's his son" calling, but when his father comes to the phone, clarifies that he is the "other" son – his father has a new wife and kids. Garry's voice already has a desperate, raspy quality when he has to introduce himself to his own father, but then he stumbles over his words when he asks, "well… would it be ok if I stay with you for a while… a few months?" We

have a final shot from Helen's perspective, her son behind the glass huddled over the phone, protecting himself from her gaze.

In the final close-up, we do not hear Garry's father's response; we just witness it on Garry's face. The camera is trained on his reaction, and all peripheral details have fallen away. Garry's lip quivers, he squints back tears, and his voice cracks as he acquiesces without retort, and meekly says, "ok." At this cue, Randy Newman's bittersweet string section fades in softly underneath, not cloying, not sad, not certain, but still comforting in its resignation, encouraging us to accept the melancholy of the circumstance without being overwhelmed by it, an example of Newman's "tender, melodic writing [that] ultimately defines the score" (Clemmensen np). Helen mirrors this resignation when she sadly and quietly curses her ex-husband under her breath. When Garry hangs up and emerges from behind the glass divider, he can barely face his mother to say, on the verge of crying, "he didn't think it was such a good idea." Helen reaches out to her son, says "oh sweetie," and tries to approach, but Garry walks in the opposite direction around the dining table to avoid her embrace, heading for the exit. "I've got to go," he says, and disappears through the front door. Helen hangs her head. As Thompson puts it, "Garry's abrupt departure, rejecting Helen's consolation, leaves dangling her inability to cope with his problems" (*Storytelling* 266), but also her struggle to be released from shouldering the blame for her ex-husband's neglectful behaviour. Both are left alone to process their pain: Helen in her home, and Garry somewhere outside of it.

The first thing this scene demonstrates is the film's foundational quotidian humanism, locating drama and meaning in the everyday life of an extended family in personally charged situations we might otherwise read as unextraordinary, or are omitted from more conventional dramas. *Parenthood* explores the space between people, and rewards close attention to that social space. Comprehensive description of the filmic resources used to trace a quietly unfolding everyday tragedy reveal rich human detail: domestic politics, the push and pull of emotional contagion in proximal spaces, navigation of and bartering for control over shared familial space, the internal lives we struggle to share even when living so closely with relatives, the quiet pain of tacit kinship rejection, need and desire (in physical contact, in positive attention, in mere presence, in accommodation of one another's needs and verbal demonstrations of love), and an intersubjective chemistry of hope. Garry, for instance, can read his mother's sense of futility, and on one level knows the answer he will likely receive from his father, but has chosen to ignore this intuition and call him anyway. Her only choice is

to mirror this hope back to him, and let him own it for this short time, even in her apprehension of its consequences. The domestic realism of the suburban ensemble mode challenges us to read nuance and infer intersubjective politics from everyday events seldom represented onscreen.

New York reviewer David Denby's close reading of Weist's performance provides a good example of how sustained attention might increasingly reveal conflicted affect:

> Sensing her need, her teenage daughter and son have disgustedly pulled away from her … Weist has those crinkled eyes, her clipped, harried look, and her nervous smile, greeting each outrage from the kids with a beseeching grin. The way she plays Helen, she's a mother whose every instinct tells her, despite much hurt feelings, to stay available, stay open—they'll come back. Weist's soft hopefulness, combined with anger underneath (which comes bursting out in weird, almost unconscious little jokes), gives the performance its pathos and its comic tension. (79-80)

Denby recognises that the film's true conflicts and drama are discovered only within such close attention, as they are largely internal and closely, quietly, often subliminally held by each protagonist, iterated in domestic spaces where we feel the curious blend of estrangement and sanctuary. The following reading attempts to map some of the complex interactions of these internal worlds as they are externalised into a causal family network. The interdependency of domestic psychology, behaviour, politics and ethics might be confounding, as both characters and audience try to draw workable meaning from the family's multi-causal social structures, but these interdependencies also reward our acceptance of their complexity rather than our mastery of them, or the distilling of information into doctrine or dogma. Before moving into an analysis of the politics, ethics and psychology of the film, I will look at the resources of onscreen domestic realism it uses to approach these topics.

In reading the cinematic devices employed to construct environments that resonate with social detail, it pays to scrutinise the creative exchanges occurring between various film workers (inherently social in nature too) rather than isolate contributions; for example, the production designer and the ensemble cast. Scholarship on production design has traditionally emphasised its haptic materiality and contributions to film texture (Donaldson *Texture in Film*) over its practical use; however Howard and his actors use designer Todd

Hallowell's interiors to examine behaviour in familiar domestic settings, exposing not just individual character identities with symbolic art direction (the work of Christopher Nowak with decorator Nina Ramsey), but the particular methods we use to negotiate physical contact and verbal exchange within these proximal environments. Helen has to read Garry's cues when he puts objects between them, yield to his threats of complete withdrawal, and resist approaching to comfort him. After the call to his father, when he is in need, Helen attempts to enter the space Garry has carved for himself, but he uses the dining table as a shield against contact, choosing to leave the house to feel the pain on his own terms rather than hers. Hallowell's design speaks of controlled domestic space: Helen's attempt at ordering the chaos of work, life and family commitments, the way she projects her upper-middle identity, and implicit material requests for her rebellious teenaged progeny to fall into a commitment to the life she envisioned – a commitment they can no longer provide for her. Garry sits uncomfortably among the objects of this world, but has learned to navigate them. In this scene, we witness a testing of the boundaries of learned behaviours in a controlled environment, or what some sociologists might call (somewhat hyperbolically) the tyranny of the home: "Even its most altruistic and successful versions exert a tyrannous control over mind and body. We need hardly say more to explain why children want to leave it and do not mean to reproduce it" (Douglas "The Idea of a Home" 303). Yet crucially, negotiation is still possible here. Although they are playing their own familiar roles in this location, Garry is attempting to redefine his role and his relationship to his mother through the domestic space; the phone call to his father is just one amongst many attempts at escape.

Both of Helen's children use their rooms as a protective shell of private interests against their mother's interventions of order. When we first meet Helen's family, we are provided access only to Julie's room: "Indeed, we immediately learn that, like Garry, Julie has turned her room into a secret domain within her mother's house. Tod emerges from under the bed … She plays loud music (the equivalent of Garry's lock on his door) as the two begin to make love" (Thompson *Storytelling* 255). When we finally catch a glimpse of Garry's room later in the movie we see, perhaps unsurprisingly, an entropic mound of toys. But they seem largely neglected: there is an archaeology of puberty here, with forgotten beloved items still in transition, still held near despite Garry's growing interest in pornography and his developing sexual shame, putting his boyhood toys at a distance. As Joëlle Bahloul muses, for adolescents a closed door (or locked door in Garry's case) can conceptually contain their liminal space of self-perceived dirt or impurity (263). The room's chaos may represent something of his inner

tumult, and the layers of deteriorating and forgotten playthings speak to the discomforts of pubertal transition and a past he is reluctant to leave behind. However, the props are also used practically by the actors. When an insouciant Tod picks up a pair of bug-eyed toy glasses in Garry's room, he demonstrates a casual affinity with Garry's world, and Garry subsequently trusts Tod enough to talk to him about sex. The chaos in Garry's room somewhat connects with that of his aunt Karen (Mary Steenburgen) and uncle Gil's (Steve Martin) house, which is equally messy, and contrasts with Helen's more orderly settings of feature pieces and imperial furniture. When Garry mentions his uncle Gil, he does so somewhat ruefully, as if Gil's family had something he wishes he had in his own – Garry clearly imagines them as more carefree, and Gil as a man who is not struggling under the weight of his own domestic chaos.

The set's lighting, too, will affect our reception of the relationships that are bartered within its confines. Although it appears sunny outside, the light inside Helen's house is strangely muted, with half drawn timber windowshades blocking some of the exterior sources. McAlpine's darker yellow-brown palette, suggesting the languor of a late afternoon rather than the brightness of a new day, implies another kind of control within this space – a subdued affective control out of step with the radically exploratory dawning of teenaged identity, but which Helen's progeny might take cues from in managing their own privacy and self-containment.[138] Moreover, it speaks of the situation this family has reached, struggling to let light in. Set in St. Louis but with interiors filmed at Universal's Orlando studios, these scenes are where we primarily witness the "scrubbed and anonymous" look of 1980s suburban settings that *Parenthood* works with (Denby 79), but shrewdly subverts. *Parenthood* disrupts prior images of suburban domesticity by contrasting living arrangements instead of unifying them, and this might be more due to subtle differences in lighting and decoration between each family house than to the somewhat similar set builds. Lighting changes in the film remain understated, with McAlpine maintaining a naturalist standard across scenes, flattening these contrasts rather than interfering with perceptible or purely symbolic shifts in colour palette or dynamic range. The muted change in Helen and Garry's scene is subtle, but palpable.

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[138] McAlpine, it should be noted, is no stranger to domestic cinematography and became somewhat of an expert in lensing these environments throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Dawson 62).

This domestic study is not purely visual, however: the space between Garry and his father is suggested in close attention to Phoenix's vocal performance, and rejection and absence are represented in the complete omission of his father's voice from the soundtrack. Garry's huskiness indicates not only the discomfort of acclimating to a transformed voice during pubescence, but also the self-handicapping behaviour of swallowing one's words, defensively adapting to laryngeal change by overemphasising constricted qualities, becoming quieter and raspier, potentially a kind of adolescent transitional dysphonia (see Morrison and Rammage "Muscle Misuse Voice Disorders"). Garry is clearly uncomfortable with being heard; his vocal norms usually service attempts to slip by his family members unnoticed, but now he has to adopt firmness and feigned confidence within the vocal confines he has set for himself, and those of male puberty. His lack of familiarity with assertiveness shows in abrupt vocal shifts: he becomes suddenly louder for a single sentence without changing pitch when he challenges his mother, or when he must interrupt his father's initial rejection to plead for a moment of his time, in lines such as "I don't know him at all," or, "It'll only take a minute." However he lowers his voice mid-sentence, as if the volume change took enormous effort, or was not what he intended. Interestingly, studies have found that the absence of a father predicts early onset of pubertal indicators such as vocal change, potentially as a father's absence induces hormone-altering stress (Bogaert "Age at Puberty and Father Absence" 544). There is a sense that Garry is struggling with a maturation that he feels underprepared for, in vocal change but also in onset of masturbation, which we later learn he feels is a shameful activity, and is a primary source of much of the avoidant behaviour he exhibits toward his mother and sister. Simultaneously, editors Daniel Hanley and Michael Hill explore social space using pauses and their attendant opportunities for reflection: the temporality and rhythms of nonverbal conversation and communication that occur in between utterances, as well as the time the audience is allowed to spend considering a character's interiority and emotional processing before moving ahead with the narrative.

Despite this, we might also note a slightly embellished cinematic realism operating within the sequence, or a subtle resistance to purist naturalism that also characterises the film. For the most part the scene maintains a standard of conventional, naturalist two-character conversational shooting, yet at times Howard chooses grander or delicately presentational cinematic gestures – potentially conspicuous indoor dolly shots and camera movement, domestic objects obscuring parts of the frame or played symbolically against the characters, and incidental strings intervening on the soundtrack – which would not be out of

place in, for example, one of Alfred Hitchcock's apartment-bound domestic thrillers such as *Rear Window* (1954). Recalling analogous techniques in *Rear Window*, we might be so focussed on the anxiety induced by a sequence that we could conceivably fail to notice the way the camera moved to ratchet tension. Indeed, Thompson's chapter on the film focuses on *Parenthood*'s recollection of classical film techniques (she comments chiefly on narrative structure and progression with particularly fine observations on the transitions between scenes). In *Populism and the Capra Legacy*, Wes D. Gehring called Howard a "contemporary Capra Auteur" (85) and singled out *Parenthood* as a primary example: "*Parenthood* seems to soar because it pushes the Capra envelope into new areas (ibid. 107; see also Thompson *Storytelling* 250). Howard is a Caprian classicist at heart, and his filmmaking similarly draws from some of the earlier domestic settings of figures like Capra and Howard Hawks, helping to establish the "emotively heightened" realism that sustains in Hollywood today. Indeed, Holden wrote that *Parenthood*'s central relationship "recalls James Stewart and Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*, a film whose tone *Parenthood* periodically echoes" (Holden 234); other reviewers, too, made the connection to Capra's iconic family film (Kempley D1). Howard had absorbed these classical Hollywood techniques through years of work on film and television since his early appearances on *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Happy Days*. He was by now renowned for employing them in fantasy settings, having previously directed films including *Willow* (1988), *Cocoon* (1985), *Splash* (1984) and receiving early filmmaking opportunities with budget genre producer Roger Corman. In the production notes to the DVD release of *Parenthood*, Ron Howard said, "After directing films which were very theatrical in theme, I wanted to do something more organic, something I could feel" (np). I have already noted some of the film's very tactile environments – feeling here comes to mean the corporeal, as well as emotional "feeling" bound to the corporeal. In *Parenthood*, the more presentational cues of early Hollywood are sparingly used and balanced with predominantly realist stylistic choices.[139] Grander gestures are underplayed, focussed as we are on the nuance of the

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[139] When I write that *Parenthood* works in a realist mode, I do not mean that it presents its content as more "real" or relevant than other narratives, or that it encourages unreflexive thinking about the world it constructs. Instead, we have our attention guided away from the filmmakers' artifice in favour of immersion in the social ethics of the film – or what André Bazin used to refer to as the attempted "invisibility" of the director (74). Realist filmmaking does not entail a lack of critical analysis. It encourages analytical thinking to be centred upon the problems within its diegesis; the spectator still understands the diegesis as constructed (unless something has gone horribly wrong) and might disagree as to its construction, but ultimately we are permitted the cognitive space to see "through" the work of the creators to concentrate on the dilemmas they have concocted.

performances, the characters, and the interpersonal politics of each scene. In later interviews, Howard indicated that electing to do a realist piece "stretched" him as a director (Wayland and Howard np). Working outside of genre filmmaking was a challenge; because disparities in a realist diegesis are more intuitive for the audience, they might then be more discerning (and less forgiving) of perceived contrivances.

Parenthood also employs some overlap of the real with daydreams, imagined and projected realities – expressionistic gestures that are uniquely bound within the film's realism. As Gehring observes, "Like *Wonderful Life*, *Parenthood* begins with an inspired scene of fantasy born of sadness" (101). The film opens with protagonist Gil Buckman daydreaming about being a boy (Max Elliott Slade as Young Gil) attending a baseball game with his father Frank (Jason Robards), who pays an usher (Ganz) to mind his child. Young Gil motivates pop psychological concepts to explain to the usher that he is in the middle of a daydream, and that the usher does not exist, being an amalgam of ushers he was left with as a child, at which the usher becomes irate: "that's great, you have a family and I'm a goddamn amalgam!" The sequence elegantly (and uncannily) introduces a number of elements the film will be working with: serious concerns raised in comedic settings or punctuated by jokes which deflate solemnity; an associated question regarding how we might balance hard work with playfulness in childrearing (Young Gil mentions that his father taught him to see parenthood as "a prison rather than a playground"); family politics and attempts to make progress through superior childrearing (Easton 5); the collapsing and overlapping of generational identities to explore shared meaning in intergenerational collectives; frictions between confounding social realities and our simplified interior fantasy lives; the power and importance of imagination as a social tool (Kupfer 100); critical engagement with some of the contemporary pop psychological concepts of the era (such as the "positive male influence"); the way we group memories together or "amalgamate" them to narratavise family experience and develop moral goals (Gil promises to be different from his own father); the difficulty of finding the place for humanistic sympathy in this process;[140] and affinity with the uncanny and bizarre, engendering yet another affective tension throughout the film as we are asked to reflect upon some of the absurdities of family life, even while we acknowledge the seriousness

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[140] Thompson writes: "Gil, while wanting to avoid Frank's mistakes, has some sympathy for and understanding of his father ... Gil's tossing around of pop-psychological terms suggests that he has read books on child-rearing, trying to avoid his father's mistakes" (*Storytelling* 251).

of family ethics. As Thompson points out, the film begins with an absurdity of temporal displacement not only as the child spouts pop psychology, but becomes "doubly odd" in its anachronistic twist: "the scene seems to be set in the 1950s, while the 'positive male influence' is palpably a modern term" (*Storytelling* 250), confounding the usher further. Gil's wife Karen soon punctures the daydream and brings him back to the present, explaining that the ball game is over, at which Newman's Oscar-nominated song "I Love to See You Smile" commences and the opening credits roll over a sequence, gently slapstick and comically observational, both lovingly and astringently depicting the trials of loading a family into a car to go home, drawing the film's beginning laughs from the recognition of a parent's end-of-day weariness.

Daydream sequences permit interior lives to be projected and realised. In *Parenthood*, they are largely used to poke satirical fun at our internalisation of the cultural-psychological pressures of caregiving, such as all-or-nothing thinking (binaristically conceptualising a child as either succeeding or failing in life) or dysfunctional perfectionism (obsessing over best childrearing practices to the detriment of one's progeny). Howard makes use of these more fantastical elements without saturating the overarching realism, quotidian insights of his cast and crew, or guidance of the spectator's focus toward the work of the performers and dialogue – the actors' efforts to communicate meaning, both internal and social.

Of course, Helen and Garry's story is just one subplot of many in *Parenthood*'s substantial ensemble drama. *Parenthood* surveys four generations of conflicting motivations and desires within the one family (and the film's conclusion introduces a fifth generation). We are regularly encouraged to be considering how other family members might be responding to the action of any given scene. The attentional politics of our guidance toward narrative focal points is key to understanding any film (Moss-Wellington "Affecting Profundity" 43, 53), and one of the primary methods Howard, Hanley and Hill employ to achieve polyphonic perspective taking throughout the film is the frequent use of reaction cutaways, or grabs. In a scene during which the action appears focussed on a particular character and their perspective, we cut to characters who may have been forgotten, see the unfolding drama momentarily through their eyes, and adopt a plurality of perspectives which fosters a different kind of engagement, keeping us from absorption in a particular character's emotional state, or a morality that fails to take into account the many others who are implicated. The editors will often counter-intuitively show us those who are not engaged in

conversation, as *People* reviewer Ralph Novak noted: "Howard keeps the film focused on the painful-exhilarating relationship between kids and parents. One way he does it is by often showing all the participants in a conversation onscreen; the actors react as well as speak their lines" (17). This is a primary method for what reviewers identified as *Parenthood*'s "masterstroke … offering the points of view of everyone in an extended and wildly diverse middle-class family" (Variety Staff Rev. of *Parenthood* np). Early in the film, we meet the extended family as everyone comes together for a Thanksgiving dinner at grandparents Frank and Marilyn's (Eileen Ryan) house. We have already met three of their four children, but the wayward youngest sibling Larry (Tom Hulce) arrives as a surprise, bringing in toe a black son, Cool (Alex Burrall), who he has until now kept secret. This scene demonstrates innovative use of the cutaway: when Cool first turns up, amidst all the shock, we cut briefly to Julie's barely concealed pleasure at the unfolding family drama; during Larry's speech about his latest get-rich-quick scheme, we cut briefly to Helen and Gil exchanging furtive glances; and we cut to the reaction of Karen and Gil's two eldest children Taylor (Alisan Porter) and Kevin (Jasen Fisher) when Larry makes an inappropriate comment to his sister Susan (Harley Kozak), and once more after Gil mistakes Helen's vibrator for a flashlight during a blackout.

Again, the sound design of the scene reveals as much as its visual cues, the complicating detail of family chaos off-screen usually sitting softly under the dialogue track – children at play, other conversations, a distant television. The soundtrack works as much with the absence of information as its inclusion. When the peripheral sounds disappear – as in Cool's introduction, or the brief lack of cutlery-on-crockery foley when Larry alleges that Cool's mother was involved in a homicide – the disappearance is noticeable. The blackout sequence recalls *The Graduate*'s famous bedroom argument: when the lights go out and we no longer rely on visual information, our focus is brought to spatial sounds and the dialogue becomes more tense and complex. Alongside discussion regarding the whereabouts of a flashlight, overlapping thoughts reveal various character relationships. Frank tells his wife "your mouth used up all the power," Gil tells Frank, "don't worry dad, we can still find the bar," Kevin's panicked exclamations drown out the more inquisitive and excited children, and Nathan begins lecturing the kids about blackouts while Karen attempts to sooth them.

Musical cues are also regularly used to bind the emotional content of disparate scenes as we are bounced between subplots with limited narrative continuity. Thompson uses *Parenthood* as an example of a multiple-protagonist film with parallel plotlines and what she sees as "virtually no causal interaction" (*Storytelling* 48). She says that with "separate goals

Julie's reaction cutaway

and causal chains, each plotline constitutes a nearly self-contained narrative" (ibid. 248). I beg to differ: the causation in the film is largely attitudinal and unspoken, as *Parenthood* uses its narrative transitions to explore the psychological network of an entire family. The trials faced by each character are not primarily physical but subliminal and social, in that most pursue metacognitive goals relating to *how they think about* their role as a parent or child or sibling, especially when the reality of each role comes into conflict with other components of their self-schema. Key to this narrative's intentional cognitive map is the way such attitudes tacitly affect one another across extended family lines, how in a family we come to absorb one another's expectations and hopes and woes, how we distribute responsibility when we intervene on another's behalf, and the effects of collective familial approval and disapproval. This unspoken causation is evident from the first extended family dinner scene onward, as we are primed with some of the key relationships and (often harmful) attitudes at play from the start. Even before this, the film's first transition between narratives – Gil and Karen's reproval of Garry introduces a cut to Helen's subplot – performs a similar function. We are aware of the

field of expectation the family has erected around Garry before he even appears onscreen, and thus we are left to wonder at the potentiality of a Pygmalion effect (or tacit expectations that shape behaviour and performance, c.f. Rosenthal and Jacobson) in the extended network. *Parenthood* calls for spectatorial attendance to the social psychology of a family unit more than it does unfolding causal plot points, which are usually tied to family politics and present a primary dilemma regarding its protagonists' attempts to achieve clarity in *thinking* about families. Audiences are liable to miss this psychological substance when fixated upon a search for more conventional narrative cause-effect configurations.

Thompson is correct in her summation that the transition between scenes is a primary thematic device the film asks us to become fluent in when assembling its meaning: "characters are compared and contrasted in ways which demand a fair degree of alert interpretation" (*Storytelling* 249). The film requests this comparative work as it cuts between narratives, which chiefly reveal thematic links between the dilemmas faced by each family. However, Thompson also points to the fact that the transitional cuts during the film's setup, introducing us to each strand of the Buckman family (except Larry and Cool, who arrive later), are focussed on comparison between the relative shortcomings and merits of their children: Julie's academic performance is superior to Patty's (ibid. 256), and Kevin's emotional disturbance is not as bad as Garry's (ibid. 254), a comparison that will reach across scene transitions throughout the movie (ibid. 269). The interesting part of this is that the characters themselves are doing this comparative work with us, putting together a morally charged family narrative as we do, yet the story we are invited into often subsists on unwarranted judgment that speaks more to the parents' anxieties as caregivers than it does to their child's actual capabilities; the audience must locate their own reflexive distance from these comparisons. The very structure of the film invites us to speculate on the causal relationships between family gossip, collectively distributed expectations, and each individual's wellbeing.

There is, thus, more than a thematic unity to the parallel narratives. Although of course the thematic parallels between plots are equally pivotal, there is a psychological causation at play too. Critics recognised this psychological causality as the film's primary ambition. Even ambivalent and hostile reviews noted that the film, despite its realist veneer, was "the most artistically ambitious American film to appear this summer" (Kehr 2; see also Hurlburt 1E), or called it "a middlebrow *masterpiece*, with the latter word being the subject, not the modifier" (Henderson np, revealing some critical disdain for studies of everyday domestic life as less

serious or important than their more fantastical counterparts). Retrospective reviews have called the film "revolutionary":

> *Roseanne* had been on a year, but cinematic families still tended to fall into two categories: the golden sages of Ozzie and Harriet (or their slightly more modern incarnation the Huxtables) versus the shattered destroyers of Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams. *Parenthood* instead explored what many Americans, at least many white upper-middle class Americans, were experiencing – the balancing acts of exhaustion and ambition, true hearts and neurosis. Families in which love means sorting through the trash to find a lost retainer. (McNamara D1)

The film's innovation, then, had to do with its resistance to binaristic thinking about families and what they represent. As in many of the subsequent suburban ensemble dramedies, family is not a metaphor here but a lived experience, neither all good nor all bad, and this permits a more nuanced version of psychological causality among large networks, and for its actors a freedom of expression grounded in observation of human detail more than contrivance toward symbolic detail.

The film's ethic of close listening to causation among the variety of lives found in proximal domestic spaces meant that performance would always be one of the film's pivotal narrative devices. Consequently, Howard's method for working with his ensemble cast is key to how the narrative polyphonics would be received. Reviewers commented on Howard's thespian-centric coverage (holding the camera on his actors and letting them do much of the communicative work) which allows performers to be: "uniformly expressive—using every second onscreen to give their characters dimension" (Novak 17). Other reviewers saw that the film was "first and foremost, a showcase for wonderful acting" (Boyar 18; see also TV Guide Staff). Ernest Mathijs, on the other hand, thinks that ensemble casts are more likely to exhibit a kind of groupthink in their performance style, which he calls referential acting ("Referential Acting and the Ensemble Cast"). The connectivity stressed in such filmmaking may make actors more likely to reach for popularly recognisable types, and distribute them to colleagues through the sheer pressure of achieving an artistic unity, or some kind of osmosis of technique that produces homogeneity:

> The tools of polysemous expression, ostentation and referentiality collapse into one set of devices … Referential acting involves the self-conscious design of a performance on the basis of a previous one, often by the same actors, but also based on archetypes, exemplary models or clichéd stereotypes. (ibid. 91)

In the *Parenthood* DVD production notes, Howard's emphasis on unity would appear to support this analysis: "I've had two very good experiences with ensemble casts," he says. "First, as an actor in *American Graffiti* and then directing *Cocoon*. Both experiences taught me that the director has to balance and coordinate the acting styles. If not, you're left with pieces of a film, not one that is complete" (np). What Howard refers to here is not deference to culturally produced types, but the very nature of constructing a diegesis that makes sense to the viewer – disparate performers with a variety of techniques and backgrounds will need to appear as part of the same film world. Despite Mathijs's speculative claims, this process need not oblige retrogression to types, removal of nuance or the flattening of an actor's more personal-behavioural observations. Referential acting theory colonises the work of the thespian, denying their expertise by presumption of their naivety, or their ignorance of broader issues relating to acting technique and practice. It might be kinder and more generous to begin instead from a presumption of the worker's knowledge of their own craft, accepting that a majority of actors might be entirely aware of potential stereotypes in the worlds they present, and may choose to work with, ignore, or subvert them. The acting in *Parenthood* is a perfect example: a range of styles still appear as part of the same diegesis, but simultaneously demonstrate a range of character acting, with diverse personalities and behaviours rarely slotting into pre-existing character moulds. For example, Phoenix's naturalism can sit peaceably alongside Reeves's comic teenager performance (familiar from the *Bill & Ted* movies), and both manage to communicate surprising nuance. Another intriguing mix of identities occurs as many of the known actors were cast against type, such as Martin and Rick Moranis (at the time not known for serious roles) and Robards (known for playing wiser and more sympathetic figures), whose stagey, classical style (Gehring 105) had to sit alongside the adept naturalist performances of actors like Steenburgen.

In the years prior to *Parenthood*, dramatic ensemble casts were usually associated with art filmmakers including Altman and Sayles, but intergenerational multi-cast narratives were much more rare. Howard, Ganz, Mandel and producer Brian Grazer's innovation was to explore the social network of four – and eventually five – generations in one suburban family,

and in so doing, survey the conflicting motivations and desires of people at different times in their life, as well as a matrix of personality features that somehow come together to make an endlessly problematic, but occasionally rewarding whole. Other multi-cast films that had looked at family life tended to the histrionic, like *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), which of course focussed on more severe family pathology, in particular psychopathy and Machiavellianism. *Parenthood* attempted to equalise the concerns of all characters without such hysterical excitations: the idea was to capture something of an everyfamily of America. This introduces the problematic of normativity in the everyday. Having noted some of *Parenthood*'s representational methods, I now turn to explore the politics they are used to address.

The Politics of Parenthood

Freud, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have perhaps most famously explored the problematic of the everyday, with more recent revision by figures like Ben Highmore (*Ordinary Lives*). Yet the white male dominance of writings on the supposed "everyday" has been noted as colonising and presiding over the lives of others, who must then fit into an elite vision of the everyday and what it should mean. Theorists including Ágnes Heller (*Everyday Life* in 1984) and Laurie Langbauer ("Cultural Studies and the Politics of the Everyday" in 1992) have reclaimed the philosophy of the everyday, and since the millennium there have been many more women making interventions in everyday theory: Rita Felski ("The Invention of Everyday Life" in 2000), Claire Colebrook ("The Politics and Potential of Everyday Life" in 2002), Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd (*Sentenced to Everyday Life* in 2004) and Bryony Randall (*Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* in 2007). Christian Karner also reclaimed the space of *Ethnicity and Everyday Life* in 2007. Everyday theory has broadened to challenge and counterbalance some of the originating normative presuppositions. In the narrative arts, however, claims related to the everyday may be less grand, signifying a much more practical distinction: we do need to separate films depicting extraordinary or supernatural circumstances from attempts to understand ordinary life, the day-to-dayness of a handful of people.[141] One must be able to focus on the everyday of

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[141] It is important to note, too, that this is not a description of genre, realism or otherwise – many filmmakers focus on the everyday without resorting to realist representation – but a description of the film's primary subject.

fictional characters without normalising the world they are presenting. In discussing a film like *Parenthood*, perhaps it makes little sense to turn to *the* everyday as discussed in theory; this is just *someone's* everyday, a microsociology of personal interactions and phenomenology rather than an encompassing theoretical narrative of bell-curve normality. In *Parenthood*, there are enough deviating lives existing in the one family to complicate any notions of a superior or more "normal" everyday.

Still, representing someone's everyday life on film is not without its problems. Selecting the characters whose everyday will be represented clearly has responsibility attached. We become very familiar with the everyday of some at the expense of others. Yet equally, we need to permit people to *talk through* their own everyday in narrative, to reflect upon their own lives and perhaps even learn from the narrativisation of their quotidian selves. As Howard says in the *Parenthood* DVD production notes: "When the four of us started working on the direction we wanted Lowell and Babaloo's script to go, I learned a lot that made me a better parent. Given that there are 15 kids between us, I think we all learned a lot about ourselves" (np).[142] This is not a claim that the audience should be assuming this family is allegorically representative of all American family units, or a standardised measure of families across the nation. The Buckmans are positioned as *a* family, as normal as families might ever get which, as it happens, is not very normal. On the other hand, one of the film's great failings is Gil's complaint that he is not earning enough at his law firm, where he is working overtime for the chance at a partner position, while living with his family in what appears to be a lakeside mansion in St. Louis, throwing lavish parties for their eldest son. EveryAmerica this is not. Clearly many were put off by the film's apparent claim to represent something of an "ordinary" family, with all of the bourgeois standardising politics it implies, leading some scholars to bundle it in with other, more conservative films of the 1980s (Traube 150, for an example of an unfavourable psychoanalytic reading). Suburban scholar Stephen Rowley includes *Parenthood* in a list of films and television shows that "show suburbs as an affluent, happy, sun-soaked background for genial comedies" (113), but this effectively excises half of the film (the melancholy and messy half).

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[142] The filmmakers' initial inspiration for the story was a long-haul flight they took together with their kids during prior production *Gung Ho* (Ron Howard, 1986), which seemed to throw every parenting dilemma together into one contained space, and quickly spiralled out of control (Gehring 100; Gray *Ron Howard* 140).

Steve Martin's persona as a performer thereafter became somewhat synonymous with this context: consider the suburban mansions of *Housesitter* (Frank Oz, 1992) and Charles Shyer's remake of Vincente Minnelli's *Father of the Bride* in 1991. Reflecting on the latter, Richard Porton pointed out that:

> Martin's character once again opens the film by extolling the virtues of his suburban town - this time an upscale, southern Californian town not far from Los Angeles. Again, Martin enshrines his white clapboard house, the site for a lavish wedding that is as retrograde as it is silly. Despite an occasional trendy reference, the film tries its best to rehabilitate the lily-white suburban myth of Minnelli's film and sitcoms of the *Leave It to Beaver* variety. ("American Dreams" 14)

It is indeed ironic that Martin's subsequent roles ended up reinforcing some of the same chimeric perfectionism that *Parenthood* positions as an unworkable (and in many cases damaging) ideal. While we may empathise with Gil just as we do with the rest of the extended family, the Buckman family's attempted protection of uninterrupted normative family narratives is itself under scrutiny, and the film's drama arises from their initial inability to admit changes and challenges to their envisioned suburban-familial perfection.[143] *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Dave Kehr wrote:

> The thesis of *Parenthood* ... holds that the current child-rearing generation is caught in an unwinnable conflict with the idealized past, determined to better their own parents in terms of sensitivity and support while providing even more of a material paradise than they themselves knew as kids in the mythic '50s. (2)

Challenges to normativity and class presumption are central to the conflicts explored throughout the film: for Gil, the happy, healthy family as devoid of any pathology, anxiety or "mess"; for Helen, the ideal of the unbroken nuclear family, and especially revision of her classist attitudes toward Tod; for Susan's partner Nathan (Moranis), of intellect and normatively defined achievement milestones as a measure of personal worth. Like the best

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[143] Nobody is present with whom we have no empathic relationship, except for those who completely reject or deny consanguineous responsibility such as Garry's absentee father, and they are excluded from the film: "With cinematic justice, the film mirrors the father's absence from Garry's life by absenting him from our view, never showing his character on screen" (Kupfer 105).

ensemble works, *Parenthood* shows characters working to relinquish these ideals and resolve moral dilemmas with respect to the difficult mental work they must undertake, examining the conflicts and social obstructions that prevent simple moral conclusions.

Lorraine Sim makes the distinction when looking at later ensemble dramas:

> while *Short Cuts* presents one of the most sophisticated instances of ensemble style and technique, for all its formal emphasis on interconnection and its political and moral provocations, it somewhat cynically refuses to work through the social and moral issues it presents and portrays a social landscape of moral apathy and disconnection … Whereas *Short Cuts* refuses meaningful emotional connection between characters or the resolution of inter/personal conflicts, *Magnolia* works to resolve the personal and interpersonal crises it explores. (np)

In *Parenthood*, kindness, generativity, altruistic impulses and inclusivity mostly win out against normative narratives that may keep us discontented and apart. Thus the film suggests a progress reliant on our better natures – in fact, it is the very simplicity of these interior narratives the film takes aim at. *Parenthood* makes a running joke of the way we internalise procedural scripts, making life less complex than it is. Gil's increasingly cinematic daydreams involve the possibility of his son becoming either a perfectly, self-avowedly "well-adjusted" valedictorian (for which he takes the credit), or a "screwed up" gunman attacking a crowd from a belltower (blaming his father for making him play second base in a Little League baseball match), a comic depiction of all-or-nothing thinking (sometimes called "dichotomous thinking" or "splitting") in our ordinary daydreams.[144] While searching for Kevin's lost retainer after an abortive and disastrous family trip to a gaming arcade, Karen makes a realist intervention against Gil's perfectionism: "Gil, what'd you think? That you'd dress up like a cowboy and coach Little League and Kevin would be fine?" He admits he was clouded by the narrative of simple progress, and continues, "You know, when your kid is born, they can still be perfect. You haven't made any mistakes yet. Then they grow up to be like—like me." Yet even the self-reflexivity in this sentiment demonstrates the possibility for incremental progress. As we see by the end of the movie, if Gil cares this much, he will put in the effort

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[144] We might note, too, that such dichotomous thinking is correlated with narcissistic personality traits (Oshio 736-737). These daydream sequences similarly register cognitive associations between perfectionism, existential and catastrophic thinking (Graham et al. "The Existential Model of Perfectionism").

despite its personal costs and uncertainty, and some sort of progress of demonstrative care will gradually be made. No one turns out emotionally perfect.

These problems point to some of the politics of sentimentality that would surface in later suburban ensemble dramedies. *BBC*'s Nick Hilditch wrote:

> In amongst the cuteness of Ron Howard's 1989 feelgood movie there are some pretty bleak visions of parenthood … Howard combines this multi-generational suburban soap almost effortlessly, considering the number of parents or would be parents we're expected to care about … While the film mocks its own sentimentality, it also believes in it wholeheartedly. (np)

In this case, we should be careful to delineate the objects of sentimentality and satire within the film. *Parenthood* clearly authorises sentimental feelings toward our nearest and dearest, and family life in general. Its satire arises when that sentimentality is conducted toward an ideal family rather than the complicated and "messy" people we live with, or any specific notion of what a family should be (for instance, a family that fails to accept newcomers like the multi-ethnic Cool, the working class Tod, or those struggling with mental health issues). Even while we struggle with issues of acceptance, feelings of sentimentality toward our family are still endorsed as authentic, as the film respects the effortful juggling act that is caregiving, and familial idealism is presented as an understandable (yet ineffective) method we turn to in order to simplify expanding responsibilities. This creates an overlap of sentimentality and satire, drama and humour, optimism and cynicism that Ganz and Mandel see as inseparable in life, and so attempt to replicate in their scripts (Schanzer and Wright 161). Howard has echoed these concerns in interviews, indicating that celebration of people's earned achievements can exist alongside knowledge of the darkness they simultaneously produce: "I'm always interested in characters so there's sort of a humanism. I'm inclined to celebrate. To create moments of honest, earned celebration. I'm not afraid of the darkness. Of expressing the darkness that exists out there" (Idato np). This humanism of both abject and affirmation – a cohesion amongst the suburban ensemble films – is borne out in the film's blended affect, which we will return to throughout the reading.[145]

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[145] Many scholars find even the rendering of a family's affective space on film a troubling, tyrannical normative sentimentality, reaching back to Foucault's cynicism regarding familial sympathy in his oft reiterated claim that "the affective intensification of the family space" is culturally produced and by extension, we might presume, somehow inauthentic (*The History*

Finally, Larry presents another kind of case study: someone for whom the very notion of having a family, norms of office work and care for a dependent, are scripts he has half-heartedly tried and failed to conform to. It is simply not possible for Larry to live the normative suburban life; as in many of the later suburban ensemble dramedies, *Parenthood* also depicts those who do not fit into the suburban domestic experience. Larry is one of the truly interesting characters in a study of normativity, especially as he introduces the film's one black character: his son Cool. Cool's presence in the narrative represents the agency a family black sheep might have in testing boundaries of acceptability. At times this agency might introduce truly damaging behaviour, such as Larry's high-stakes gambling with his father's assets, but at other times the impetus for exploration (like embarrassing his family's tacit acceptance of class and racial segregation in the suburbs) might open opportunities for hybridity and positive cultural change. When we first meet Larry, Gil notes that he is no longer wearing his turban, signalling Larry's experimentation with non-Christian religious affiliation, but also his compulsive transience. Like many others for whom such domesticity is inadequate, he cannot stay put; Hulce's performance of nervous energy and compulsive fidgeting also communicates something of his sensation seeking restlessness. Sensation seeking personality traits are associated with impulsivity (Hur and Bouchard "The Genetic Correlation") and high-risk sexual behaviour (McCoul and Haslam "Predicting High Risk Sexual Behaviour"), both of which match Larry's conduct. Larry laughs off the turban jibe, says "yeah" and quickly moves on. His discomfited response to Gil's wry reminder of his ephemeral religio-cultural appropriations shows both self-awareness and wilful amnesia around the problems his lifestyle inaugurates.

Larry's experiments in social mobility destabilise assumed boundaries within the family when Cool is introduced. The name Cool, which initially introduces a joke regarding the

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of Sexuality* 109), or "a continually contested fiction that masks its own histories of becoming" (Taylor "Foucault and Family Power" 202). Foucault's largely historical argument about sovereign and disciplinary power floats a moral regard (especially in its homogenising consideration of any kind of familial "biopower" as regulatory fabrication and subjugation rather than a practical need for guidance) that has been elaborated by subsequent scholars into hostility toward a concept too broadly designated as "the institution of family." I completely reject the notion that kindred sympathetic affect, and the problems it introduces, is anything other than organic and essential not only to human flourishing, but our very evolutionary survival. It is fine to take the family unit seriously on film, whether that family is nuclear and unbroken (as in Susan or Gil's family), or otherwise (as in Helen or Larry's family).

Buckman family's embarrassment at the very impropriety of Larry's lifestyle and values, also speaks to how Larry would like to see himself: with an openness to the vanguard, embracing the kind of social change that characterises the era. The trend of progressive hybridity he embraces outside of the suburbs is clear in his reported biracial romance with an *Elvis on Ice* showgirl. Cool's mother is allegedly on the run following a homicide (although this is never confirmed, and given Larry's pathological lying, we have good reason to doubt the story). We see that a character such as Larry is not completely morally bankrupt: he brings the wonderful Cool into the world, and goes some small way toward breaking down barriers between people of different backgrounds. However, the film never glorifies any one character or disposition. Larry, like everyone, has positive and negative effects on those around him. In the end Frank sees that Larry's arrival, and the drama circulating around him, may have been in service of concocting a reason to leave his son behind in the care of the Buckmans. Roger Ebert observes that Larry "betrays [Frank's] trust because what he really wants is not help, but simply the freedom to keep on losing" (Rev. of *Parenthood* np). Larry's gambling is not merely a cautionary narrative device. It points to the struggles for self-determination and sovereignty of identity we all have with our families, but also how its resistances can come to absorb us, and concurrently services an earnest look at addiction by focussing on those implicated, or on "the tragic results of Larry's disease rather than on his gambling itself" (Dement 101). Larry has searched for a sense of self in many different identities, represented by the breadth of his experiences in cultures unfamiliar to the Buckman family – the turban, the showgirl, the bookies, and so on. He is ultimately unable to adjust his lifestyle to childrearing, a conventionality he cannot reconcile with a self-exonerating ideology of his own uniqueness, which is at times positively disrupting of normative family narratives, and at times clearly irresponsible.

Larry's abandonment of his son has clear consequences, although Cool expresses relief amidst the sadness to have the opportunity to stay put in a stable home environment, and by the end of the film, has also clearly brought more love and warmth into the lives of Marilyn and Frank. However the film's diagnostic rather than retributivist ethic requests us to understand Larry's psychology and circumstance more so than settling a moral position on his behaviour. Larry's attitude is inherited from his father: "Frank's failure to see Larry for what he is springs from Frank vicariously projecting dreams of fabulous wealth onto him. Larry's quest for the big score is the result of Frank feeding him a diet of unrealistic expectations" (Kupfer 116). Kupfer draws an intriguing connection between Larry and Patty

(the daughter of Susan and Nathan, played by Ivyann Schwan), both being the subjects of parental vicarious projection. As a result, neither possesses their own sense of self (ibid. 117), but rather act out their parents' fantasies of the life they could have had. Larry's adventurousness is revealed as an attempt to live up to his father's favouritism, but at the same time escape its pressures and own his decisions. Favouritism has not just compromised the less favoured children, but perhaps has an even more detrimental effect on the favourite himself, bestowing upon Larry as it does an unreachable filial identity to live up to, and distancing him from his siblings.[146] Ricky Finzi-Dottan and Orna Cohen found in 2010, for example, "that paternal unequal treatment moderates the link between narcissism and perception of sibling warmth" (19). Gil in particular harbours resentment toward his brother; his sisters never seemed to expect favoured treatment, being exempt from the male competition encouraged by their father. Frank's daughters have responded to their father's neglect in different ways: Helen has overachieved in defiance, and Susan has found a partner exhibiting some of the authoritarian, at times chauvinistic qualities of her father. At the same time, they appear free of the rivalries produced when Frank explicitly compares his sons, commenting openly on how they measure against the dreams he dispenses of a better, wealthier life. As Frank perceives Larry as more like himself, Larry received the brunt of Frank's unrealistic expectations while Gil received the brunt of his neglect. Frank does accept this in the end. Parental wedge politicking – playing children against one another, engendering sibling rivalry – is what Frank finally must confront when Larry yells, pathetically, "I am *not* Gil." This spurs Frank's epiphanous moment: Frank accepts his own responsibility in his son's irresponsibility, and will no longer bestow an identity on Larry that he cannot match. Of this particular redemption narrative, Gehring writes that Frank simultaneously recognises the inter-dependence of neglected responsibilities to both his sons: "Frank's quick action on [Cool's] behalf is realistic, despite his spotty past record as a dad, since he finally seems to recognize his own metaphorical abandonment of the young Gil" (104). Frank accepts Larry's plan to run away again and is honest with Cool about his father's impending disappearance from his life.

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[146] It is not just that Frank has indulged Larry, making him spoiled and irresponsible; *Parenthood* suggests that in his (mostly fiscal) high hopes for his youngest son, Frank has achieved the very opposite of the liberation he had envisaged: he has restricted meaningful, self-determined identity options for Larry by putting them out of reach. Larry's listlessness, itinerancy and self-protective hubris are testimony to the unviability of the identity bestowed upon him in the family, and at worst this manifests as self-destruction. His identity is built upon escaping his identity, and this is how addiction comes to consume him.

Reactions to characters like Tod and Cool show people moving through the difficulty of accepting hybridising changes to their family culture. Importantly, the film demonstrates trust in this suburban family's ability to shift their sense of inclusion over a period of time. In 1989, such a hope was timely, propelled by the momentum of American hybrid suburbia: at the time the film was made, the hybridisation of the American suburbs, once considered a zone of white exclusivity, was nascent although the rate of change was increasing (Palen 132-133).[147] The focus of this narrative, however, is not on the historical conditions of such a change, but personal psychological challenges to acceptance of change, and our concurrent extension of empathy networks. In a chapter largely focussing on *Parenthood*'s second nominal television serial spinoff in 2010,[148] Catherine R. Squire labels the Frank of the originating film "a crotchety old white guy" whose redemptive narrative arc presents an endorsement of white paternalism (106). I think this would be a misreading in a film in which adaptability is central, and that has so thoroughly deconstructed attempts at a provision of some kind of pure paternal care. If one of the key social competencies explored in *Parenthood* is adaptability, Cool represents the need for a more political adaptability: the way black and hybrid identity must be a part of American visions of domesticity, family life and the suburbs, a hope for a change that sees these identities as less segregated. As young people represent the possibility of change, Cool's symbolism can also be seen as a response to real demographic shifts in American suburbia, a reflection of developing desegregation and ethnic spatial mobility – in other words, emergent attempts to modify the accepted narrative of exclusion in American suburbia. Cool instead could present the precipice of the vast changes in ethnic diversity about to hit the suburbs. Similarly to characters in later suburban works such as Destiny (Yara Shahidi) in *Butter* and Eloise (Jillian Estell) in *Black or White*, the young Cool becomes an exploration of developing demographic shift, the inevitability of positive, inclusive change, and the various reactions to such a change. There is no opportunity for any of the Buckmans to ignore, forget or exclude Cool – they are all part of the same family, so adversarial attitudes to race simply do not make sense. Cool's ethnicity bursts the family bubble by wordlessly and

[147] As we have already seen, in later decades this trend would sadly reverse toward a new spatial resegregation, with whites dominating city centres and ethnic minorities inhabiting less thriving suburbs (Wells et al. 128; Freilich et al. 9). This may represent something of a failure to maintain the narrative of positive hybridity that we see as pivotal in films like *Parenthood*, and a regression to the divisive attachments of adversarial identity politics.

[148] An initial serial adaptation aired for one season in 1990 and was disowned by its creators, including Howard.

powerfully pointing toward its exclusions, which are easily forgotten as we become absorbed in our own lives.

If we are to read Cool purely as a symbolic character, the symbol appears to signal an approach to hybridity: that relinquishing authoritarian paternalism will assist a kinder and more inclusive version of American family life. Yet the symbolic nature of Cool's ethnicity is minimised by the Buckman family, and so too by the film: "Although the family is shocked when Larry presents Cool to them, they seem to react more to the fact that their unmarried son has a child rather than to the child's race … The unseen mother is irresponsible not because she is African-American but because she is a Vegas showgirl, which is linked to Larry's equally irresponsible gambling obsession" (Thompson *Storytelling* 385). This minimisation of the importance of race relations, bundling it into a more general commentary on the need for hybridity and adaptability, may be what critics like Squire object to, but the intrinsic inclusivity ascribed to the Buckmans also embodies a hopefulness for the future that the film attempts to convey. It suggests that as most people express an instinctual goodwill to others in their vicinity, we will see eventual progress if we can achieve less spatial segregation. This is no myth of a post-racial America or disavowal of ethnic inequity in America, but it does locate the family as one site in which the work of inclusivity is performed.

So Frank's authoritarianism is under critique here and is by no means endorsed by the film. Like everyone in *Parenthood*, he has to adapt to become more open to human otherness. The film suggests that it is precisely those in a position of relative status who have to adapt, who have to share, who have to awaken their responsibility to others, and crucially, in Frank's narrative, who have to allow spaces for new ethnic identities in the rapidly hybridising suburban spaces they call home. This is equally true of the gender politics circulating Frank's subplot. He must relax his paternalistic egoism to listen to and learn from his wife Marilyn, and especially her more demonstrative exhibitions of care for loved ones. On witnessing his youngest son's fall, Frank embraces his responsibility to Cool with more warmth than any other character bar Marilyn, who until this point has rallied Cool's father and grandfather to participate in his childrearing with little success. The voices of Marilyn and her mother (Helen Shaw, referred to as Grandma) are two that are unfairly relegated to the background by the more dominant men in the family, yet are revealed to be integral to the family's health by the film's conclusion (Grandma's climactic rollercoaster monologue provides the metaphor that eventually helps Gil embrace his lack of control over the turmoil of family life). The film does

not use their wisdom merely to dialogise morals and politics, but instead focuses upon gendered inhibitions to respecting the views of older women.

Each family narrative contains its own commentary on gender politics. Hannah Hamad, for example, includes *Parenthood* in a list of "family comedies centred upon the pitfalls of male parenting in a domestic environment with recently rethought mores regarding domestic division of labour and the gender specificity of parenting roles" (104), and Ganz has verified that these concerns informed the writing process: "Men have a different role and responsibility than they did in another time. All of us felt that, as dads, we did not have the license, even if we were inclined, to say, 'I'm doing my part by bringing home the check'" (Easton 5). In some plots these re-evaluations are more explicit than in others, as with Gil and Karen's open conversations regarding work and parenting responsibilities. The gender components of other plots, such as Susan and Nathan's marriage breakdown, are more subtextual. At the same time, a number of codes for masculine identities emerge throughout the picture – cars, cowboys and baseball – and each presents a more symbolic interrogation of different problematic traits associated with maleness.

Cars are present in Tod's drag racing ambitions, Frank's daily work on his trophy car, and Gil's highway crash scene. Thompson recognises this comparison, but misinterprets its meaning: "Tod's irresponsible obsession with race cars is compared with Frank's devotion to restoring his own classic car—both of which make them bad husbands" (*Storytelling* 249). For each man, cars are sites of negotiation between work and play, the right to a fantasy life and exploration of the bounds between male fantasy and lived reality. Despite the film's scrutiny of the problems embedded in these male automotive fantasies, the negotiations happening here do not make them "irresponsible" or "bad husbands." They are, in a sense, necessary indicators of our internal life through which we discuss our identities. By the end, it appears that most of the men in the narrative had to transition through an exploration of alternative lives they had imagined in order to accept and embrace the life they have. *Parenthood* makes an appeal for less censoriousness than Thompson's reading suggests; testing the boundaries of our fantasy lives can be productive, as we learn what we really care about when we separate the more fanciful elements in our fantasies from the reasonable, as Tod discovers after his foray into drag racing. These are open questions, not a closed value judgment on their worth as husbands: what are these "obsessions" providing in their self-identity as men, and when are they truly impinging upon kindred duties? When are fantasies of uncomplicated

masculinity a necessary time out, and when do they become avoidant behaviour? And finally, when is avoidance understandable, when is it irresponsible, and when do we assert our fantasies to obstruct a more frank negotiation of domestic roles? As Kupfer points out, *Parenthood* looks at caregivers "submerging their identities within the family and its requirements. Parents who are uncritically accepting of their children demand too little for themselves apart from their role in their children's lives" (Kupfer 94), with Gil standing as a primary example. It is difficult to read the film as presenting some sort of moral barometer measuring how much each individual values their family and its responsibilities. Responsibility is much more dynamic here: we do also have a duty to look after ourselves – our own ambitions and identities – and there are consequences if we do not. Some manner of healthy fantasy comprises a relief from myopic focus on family and its responsibilities that each group benefits from.

Frank is perhaps the most avoidant of all of *Parenthood*'s fathers, and Thompson's assessment here is apt: "As soon as Larry, the youngest, had left three years before, Frank apparently began to avoid his wife's company, spending all his time fixing up his beloved car. His nostalgia for his youth and especially his association of the car with his sexual initiation suggest a perpetual immaturity" (*Storytelling* 261). For example, while in the garage with Larry, Frank snaps at Marilyn after she recommends the pair spend time with Cool. Here we see Frank's fantasies of wealth and male power as irresponsible and avoidant. Frank's politics are embedded in a fantasy – a life of hard work has left him imagining a possible world of leisure that precludes labour, and he imagines his favourite son as having access to it: "What's wrong with getting rich quick? Quick is the best way to get rich!" For Kupfer, Frank embodies grudging acceptance, a disposition lying in the moral ground between overzealous and unreflexive parenthood: "it is an attenuated or truncated variation on interpersonal adaptability. In grudging acceptance, we bemoan our fate but don't disown our responsibilities … it's as if the individual dimly recognizes the value of interpersonal adaptability but resists the wholehearted effort it requires" (95). The projection of Frank's distant juvenile fantasies through his vintage trophy car is contrasted with the younger Tod's more present motor sporting ambitions. Tod is put in a position whereby he has to adopt responsibilities he is ill prepared for in his late teens: marriage and fatherhood. Julie figures his drag racing as irresponsibility, although perhaps if he did not explore the limits of his motoring fantasies, they would calcify in a destructive way like those of Frank. Tod clearly needs time to imagine a number of different lives his newfound responsibilities have closed

off to him, and in particular volatile and risky vocational pathways like racing cars. His attempts to have others listen to his plea for time to explore these parts of his identity are mostly thwarted, but he shows clear devotion by pushing through this aversion instead of resenting his wife and mother-in-law (and they in turn show him similar kindness and leniency by the film's close). Ultimately, Tod does manage to balance his fantasies with loving attentiveness to Julie and her family (especially as he provides surprisingly insightful counsel to Helen and Garry regarding Garry's own developing male fantasies). So it is possible to find a truce between one's fantasies and responsibilities.

At certain points in the narrative, cars are substituted for another mode of transport that also speaks to male status: horses. Equine symbols similarly provide commentary on problematic masculinity and the traits necessary for positive parenthood. For example, Thompson observes that during a scene in which Gil's boss Dave (Dennis Dugan) passes him over for a promotion, ostensibly because Gil's rival Phil (never seen onscreen) privileges work over other responsibilities, "Dave seems not to be a family man; the scene begins with a shot of a photo of him standing next to a sleek race horse which contrasts with the pony Gil had ridden while trying to make Kevin's birthday party a success. Another photo shows Dave by a race car, suggesting a parallel with the irresponsible husbands Tod and Frank" (*Storytelling* 273), and Larry too given the gambling references inherent in horse racing. Howard clearly thought that Dave's association with horseracing and competitive modes of transport was important: the scene opens with a close-up of the horse photo, and Dave remains ghosted by the image in various angles throughout the first half of the scene. By the end of the sequence, Dave has manoeuvred to stand in front of another photo of himself in which the horse is replaced by a sports car, drawing a direct parallel between the two. These juxtapositions of horse and car, equine sports and dragster racing, gambling and gaming stand for male tendencies to turn playful or leisure activities into work or serious competition, which is similarly explored across the cowboy and baseball motifs.

We have already seen how male automotive fantasies come to be associated with sex in Frank's recurring "the first time I got laid was in a car like this" monologue and a scene in which the association of driving and sexual contact fails to appeal for Gil: he crashes the car when Karen attempts to relieve his stress with fellatio (a technique Susan advocates earlier in the narrative with reference to her husband Nathan, establishing that male fantasies are not universal but personality-bound). However during Kevin's party, the pony Gil co-opts into his

impromptu comedy routine bridges the gap between cars, horses and another symbol of male fantasy: the cowboy. In *Parenthood*, the cowboy becomes a symbol of male sexuality's relation to play and youth. This association is established early on in the picture when the Buckmans arrive home from the opening ball game. Their youngest son Justin (Zachary Lavoy) enters naked except for a gun, holster and cowboy hat, and Gil quips, "hey what do you say later,

Dave is ghosted by Dave – and a sports car

when the kids are asleep, I wear this outfit?" He will end up wearing a cowboy outfit later in the narrative at Kevin's party, and this moment primes the audience to consider the film's associations between cowboys and sexuality.

The cowboy motif introduces two central concerns regarding the importance of play in sexual loving, and the proximity of childhood play to adult sexuality. Confusions between the sexual world of the adult, its vital playfulness (Huizinga 43) and the developing sexuality of dependents remain relatively subtextual in *Parenthood*, although these concerns establish thematic ground that would be elaborated throughout the millennial suburban ensemble

films, becoming a primary theme in pictures like *Little Children*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *American Beauty* and *The Oranges*. Our confused attempts to deny any propinquitous relationship between our sexual values and the young people who are absorbing them remains an undercurrent throughout the film. A number of plot points make connections between the convolutions and shame of an adult sexual world, and the way they inform children's development: Cowboy Dan works for the same entertainment company as a stripper, leading to an administrative error that sees Cowboy Dan "beaten severely" as male aggression overwhelms its proximate playfulness and sexuality; Gil needs to "get clients laid" to achieve promotions, and when pressured to take his job back opines to his wife, "I hope you don't mind if I bring a few prostitutes home honey, cause that's what it takes to get anywhere and I'm not getting anywhere"; Cool's absentee showgirl mother has allegedly been involved in a homicide, and the story conceptually links sexuality and crime; Garry, on the cusp of adulthood, hears the sexualised anger of his cohabitants and silently imports its shame inside the home when he smuggles pornographic videos into his otherwise boyish room.

The family bubble never completely excludes complicating sexual shame, even while we try to model a happier and safer world of healthy sexual respect to dependents. However, where these worlds overlap, there is still the possibility of deflating its influence by identifying the incongruity and silliness of shame: "Kevin uses Gil's 'hubba-hubba' phrase on Karen, and if it had had an inappropriate sexual overtone earlier, it now seems the sort of childish comment that Karen takes it to be" (Thompson *Storytelling* 268). The initial "hubba-hubba" exchange is juxtaposed immediately with a successive scene in which Frank holds himself back from divulging the "first time I got laid was in a car like this" story to a very young Cool. In *Parenthood*, this discomforting propinquity is explored through scenes in which older men teach their dependents conflicting messages about sex. Here, Gil and Frank are looking to do two things: reinforce the importance of sex in male identity, but also a playful attitude toward sex. In so doing, they teach sex as joyful while at the same time problematically minimising the seriousness of objectification – so it matters how our sexual nonseriousness is directed. A playful attitude toward sex need not encompass lenience toward sexual objectification; there is space for a pre-emptive deflation of sexual shame in caregiving, yet parents still must ask what gender politics are being reinforced by our silence on relatively serious sexual matters, and in particular the minimising function of male-oriented jokes.

This is where the central party scene requires closer attention to uncover its gendered and sexual connotations. Kevin's birthday is another pivotal family function in which the cutaway reaction shot is integral to comprehending its relevance. When Gil dresses as Cowboy Gil, his performance takes a while to kick off, and is initially embarrassing before he wins the kids over with flamboyant gallows humour. In coverage that moves primarily between Gil's performance and the children's responses (with special attention to Kevin's repulsion followed by his growing delight), the first cutaway to an adult shows Karen's apprehension, as she clearly wants the best for her husband, and features Helen, Susan and Grandma reacting similarly in the background. The next cutaway shows us this same trio of women as the first to support Gil by laughing openly. The third cutaway is even more telling. The first man we see reacting is Gil's father Frank, who raises his upper lip in disgust as Marilyn excitedly comes to join him; his mood infects hers and her face falls. We then jump forward in time to a tracking shot following a throng of kids chasing Gil with water pistols. Adults are at the fringes: Marilyn and Helen are seen at the beginning documenting the event on a camera, and at the end Nathan is visible skulking in the background, annoyed by the water and disdainfully attempting to avoid the action. The remainder focuses on Karen's (and to an extent the other women's) concerns of the event getting out of hand as Gil, evidently caught in the rush of the performance, attempts increasingly dangerous tricks, and then Karen's coy delight when Gil incorporates her into the performance before an assemblage of enchanted children. In fact, the last time we see any male reaction occurs as Frank runs over, concerned that Gil might be hurt after falling off a horse (Frank's expression of care only emerges in serious scenarios in which his progeny are not thriving, but may be in danger).

Gil's vulnerability has paid off and he is aware of the romantic aura afforded him by the character's success, and Karen's demurely spellbound response seems intrinsic to her self-effacing character. The key here, though, is that the expression of vulnerability in gender performance and play impresses women and not men. The adult men present can only comprehend Gil's ludic intervention competitively, not playfully, reading its spontaneous *paidia* or unstructured mimicry as intrinsically agonistic (c.f. Caillois *Man, Play, and Games*). This observation underscores the difficulty we face in rejecting gender norms amongst same-sex peers – the vulnerability of making one's vulnerabilities visible to those who see us as competition, including father-son antagonisms – yet also what we stand to gain by rising above the gender expectations we place on one another. Thematic linkages between the cowboy and sexuality are used in this sequence to locate a male desirability as Gil's cowboy

fuses performative playfulness, risk-taking and selflessness, and reignites a sense of passion and goodwill between Gil and Karen. Here we see the genesis of their "deep, unspoken rapport" (Holden 234); they are both capable of being vulnerable together, a manner of compassionate self-sacrifice. Gil's ability to imaginatively project himself into the children's world of play similarly impresses women more so than men. Vulnerability here becomes its own healthier and more democratic kind of power that is opposed to the restrictive and domineering power often associated with maleness.

This moment is mirrored by a similar expression of curative vulnerability, also performed in front of children, at the climax of Susan and Nathan's narrative arc. The scene in which Nathan sings their wedding song "Close To You" at Susan's school features another kind of performative and romantic vulnerability – that of artless singing. At Kevin's birthday party, Susan explains her attraction to Nathan during a conversation with Karen: "I was a little wild, I was a little out-of-control and he kind of … took me in hand. I liked that, he's very … commanding. He got me into teaching, he got my shit together." The suggestion is that her wild youth was a reaction against her father's authoritarianism, but that she may have escaped her father's dominance by finding another familiar situation in a new relationship. As the pair have grown together, those very ideals of maleness that once attracted Susan by now have manifested in Nathan as a controlling obstinacy. None of their life decisions are mutual, and Nathan not only refuses to compromise, but also routinely tells her, "I'm not discussing this any further." He regulates the lives of his wife and daughter, including Susan's reproductive and dietary choices (Traube 152), eliminating possibilities for spontaneity, fun or play. The source of Susan's earlier attraction is reversed when Nathan demonstrates his willingness to renounce these traits and win back his wife after she leaves him. Where a young Susan was enthralled by Nathan's performance of male dominance and intellectual power, life experience and changing needs have altered her appetite, and she is now attracted to his performance of vulnerability. Claudia Gorbman points out:

> Artless singing in scenes with two characters most commonly has as its mission to get the characters together, to bond them through song, quite like the conventional musical number does in musicals … the camerawork, with its increasingly flattering framings of Nathan and Susan, and its gliding tracking shots, as well as the rhythm of Susan's spoken punctuations every two lines, all enhance our reception of the scene as a veritable musical number. The students as the onscreen audience start out with sceptical looks,

emitting a realistic level of diegetic noise and making disbelieving faces; by the end, they are completely enveloped in the romantic gesture they witness. The charm of the scene is that Nathan does what heroes in musicals routinely do: they take a risk and proclaim their love in song. But in *Parenthood*, the prosaic setting, the lack of an orchestra, and the very real danger of failure create tension; Nathan really is risking rejection and public embarrassment. (162-163)

Nathan demonstrates an understanding of the qualities he lacks: imaginative play and vulnerability, but also due deference. The realist qualities of the scene reinforce what precisely is at stake for him if he fails. With an orchestra the vulnerability would be conceptual only, and therefore no longer demonstrative. He needs to make himself vulnerable before any deference will be believable, and before his request to rekindle their partnership will make any sense. In singing a song, Nathan has also chosen to do something he is demonstrably bad at, signalling that he is willing to revise his obsession with control, virtuosity and achievement. Susan has asserted that Nathan needs to listen to her terms in order to negotiate their relationship, and Nathan uses a display of vulnerability to recognise her needs. After he accepts the need for change, their mutual faith in one another's ability to adapt wins out over any underlying narrative of gender essentialism or normativity that their relationship may have been founded on.

    Parenthood is invested in upsetting gender paradigms we continue to rely on that are out of date or simply untrue. For example, the film subverts notions that men are more interested in sex than women and women more invested in childrearing, as a majority of women in the narrative work to distract their spouses from quotidian concerns to allow a space for valuing intimacy and a sex life. This is especially true of Susan, whose husband rebukes her requests for childless vacations and time alone together; Nathan is more concerned with Patty's education. Early in the film Gil cannot focus on an intimate encounter with Karen, as he is fixated on Kevin's schooling woes. After a lingering close-up of an exasperated Karen rolling her eyes, she ultimately agrees to engage in a conversation she knows is important, but has replaced the possibility of an intimate encounter.[149] Helen's vibrator is initially introduced in a comic reveal, after which the family variously attempts to diminish its importance amongst curious youngsters, but in ensuing scenes its significance is

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[149] In fact, *Parenthood*'s fathers are seen to be overly concerned with childrearing problems – to a fault.

revealed as more serious. The vibrator comes to be used between Helen and Julie to discuss their attitudes to sex and each other. Helen craves intimacy, but her confidence has been eroded by her former husband's lack of interest; Julie uses the vibrator to insult Helen's sexual pride and this brings to the fore a number of their conflicts, including Helen's attempt to stem Julie's sexual experimentation with Tod by teaching her the virtues of continence. Helen's attitude is in turn motivated primarily by her hopes that Julie will not become distracted by her sexual needs, will go to college, work hard, and live up to her intellectual potential to become more like her mother, whose ethic of abstinence and resistance has by now been bundled into her self-identity of successful womanhood.[150] Eventually they will learn that these values are harmonious: Helen and Julie can both be sexual and successful and they need not be pitted against one another. This mirrors attitudes to work and play that characterise many of *Parenthood*'s fathers, and it is no coincidence that they come from a hardworking single mother: *Parenthood* strongly suggests that current work cultures leave little room for relaxed relations with our families, and that when work overwhelms play, we will bring these attitudes home and they will be applied self-defensively to other relationships in our lives. In a way, the vibrator can also be seen as a counterpart to the cowboy motif, exploring feminine youth and sexuality, seriousness and play.

Susan and Nathan's subplot focuses more upon Susan's needs than Nathan's, but it is still Nathan who must adapt – Susan has a need for more intimacy and more play, but it is being denied. Nathan focuses all his energy on his daughter, and "in trying to turn his child into an adult, Nathan is driving his wife into childish behaviour" (Thompson 262).[151] The comedy in Nathan's early scenes exaggerates his over-application of achievement-centric psychology, sometimes to slapstick proportions (for example, he is slugged by his daughter during a martial arts lesson). Thus Nathan's narrative begins looking like an argument in favour of a child's need for noninterventionist play. However, by the conclusion of his character arc, we see that this more obvious dilemma has cloaked another for which he must take responsibility: the lasting need for purely autotelic play (without a particular end in

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[150] Helen's position is also reinforced by unexpressed anger at the thanklessness of single motherhood, and envy – these, again, are the problems of vicarious projection that have been associated with the film's fathers. Helen has invested so much of her time and effort in providing a specific pathway for Julie that Julie's independence is now deeply threatening.

[151] Presenting demanding parents as "more infantile than their children" (Denby 79) is a common theme in the intergenerational suburban ensemble film (see in particular *The Kids Are All Right*).

mind) later in our lives. We might associate the ludic with children, but perhaps as adults we need playfulness even more. Ganz and Mandel have made a clear connection between aptitude for the relief of play and healthy relationships, including – and perhaps most of all – intimate partner relationships.

Kupfer recognises the relation between Nathan's artless singing and Gil's cowboy performance as demonstrations of a playful attitude, which both men are lacking as they become overwhelmed by the seriousness of parenting responsibility (and this is especially true of attitudes toward sex and sexuality):

> In the scene of Nathan's schoolroom singing, *Parenthood* seems to propose that playfulness, and leaps of the imagination, are also needed to heal breaches in our deepest relationships. Family itself cannot survive unless the spirit of play informs it. Family needs play for jolly times like Gil's improvised role as a cowboy at his son's birthday party, as well as for such crises as Susan's rejection of Nathan and his martinet style of rearing Patty. (101)

Gil's triumph of ludic modelling at the party, however, is short-lived. From cowboys, the Buckman narrative soon moves back to baseball, and this motif is used to further explore the impingement of male social aggression upon play. Baseball again symbolises a male imperative for work to overwhelm play, turning potentially nonserious gaming into serious competition. Male play is associated with competition through baseball from the outset. Kupfer recalls the film's opening scene: "The baseball context will also be replayed in Gil's son's life. Kevin will play ball, not very playfully, and Gil will be taking an active, coaching role, unlike his handsoff father" (100). However Gil discovers that improving on the caregiving role of his absentee father is not as simple as being more active in his children's lives. One can demonstrate more care, be around more, but still impart anxiety and a serious rather than playful disposition. This becomes magnified in team sports: its social interdependences highlight our physical and emotional shortcomings, signalling them to others and compounding existing anxieties, and the conjunctive challenges of team sports become instrumental in the formation of group identity (Bruner et al. "Interdependence and Social Identity in Youth Sport Teams"). In other words, as an introduction to the twin social pressures of unanimity and competition, the sports pitch is where young men learn the seriousness of play, which will be thrashed out later in their lives.

In the terms of play theorist Roger Caillois, baseball again demonstrates a male capacity to transform the playful instinct of *paidia* into competitively structured *agon* (27-36). There is indeed a difference between Gil and Nathan's problems with play: "Whereas Gil's vigilance over his children is often exhibited in a manic playfulness, Nathan's vigilance produces stifling seriousness" (Kupfer 103). Gil might be obsessed with play, but the play must be controlled, never dangerous, never open to darker possibilities – that is why the rollercoaster metaphor becomes important to him at the end of the film, and it is also why the Little League games are really about his own ego. Unfortunately for Kevin, this means that the competition on the pitch follows him home. He not only has to contend with the competitive aggression of peers like Matt (Jordan Kessler), learning sports field bellicosity from his own father (Clint Howard), but its extension and abstraction into the object of Gil's own private competition: "creating" a successful son in Kevin. Gil is addressing his child's and his own culturally inherited problems through baseball (Gehring 102) but also "Gil's rage at his own inadequacy" (Travers np), as he remains unrealistic about the extent of his influence over Kevin's life outside of the home.

As cars are contrasted with horses, baseball is contrasted with video games. In video games, the opponent is a machine, and so when Kevin loses there are no social consequences. Gil can encourage his son to laugh it off: "Ah well, they're bad dudes, that's why they call the game *Bad Dudes*," he quips. This makes the competitiveness of video gaming more benign: at the arcade, Gil and Kevin can easily dismiss failures in a way they cannot in baseball, which carries with it a particularly male social stigma of physical prowess and the kind of interdependence that mandates ingroups and outgroups. Similarly, when Gil's family later visit an arcade with Frank, problems arise not from the games themselves but from Frank's insistence that Kevin stand up to a bully with a show of force, a violent demonstration of physical superiority to reassert his maleness which to an extent the aimlessly ludic, socially unthreatening video games have offered Kevin respite from. Even Grandma is found playing Nintendo toward the end of the film – a gag recognising the intergenerational and less gendered appeal of video games.[152]

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[152] Although in 1989 the prevailing image of a gamer may still have been the isolated white male, *Parenthood* is percipient in its observation here: later studies have revealed that the gender balance of video game players is roughly equal ("What is a True Gamer?"), and revised the association of gaming culture with masculinity.

So in *Parenthood* cars are a cypher through which men negotiate their work and class statuses; horses extend the class components of a masculine obsession with modes of transport; cowboys link with horses and speak to sexuality, youth and play; vibrators offer a female counterpart in thinking through the use of sexual symbols; baseball introduces a continuum along male propensities for frivolity and serious competition; and video games, meanwhile, appear to relieve the comparative social competition of team sports, being introduced as a more gender-neutral counterpart. These all function as motifs with complex symbolic interactions throughout the narrative, but also become practical devices for measuring and discussing male ambitions, values and responsibilities. One of the overarching concerns across these motifs is the difficulty in maintaining a sense of lightheartedness and nonseriousness in the face of male cultures of aggression and competition, which impinge upon our attempts at modelling healthier attitudes for our children, and mediate a fluctuating sense of responsibility to self and family. Male fantasies are presented as one place where these issues are dealt with.

The Ethics of Parenthood

These sexual politics extend to an open ethical question: how are we to deal with gender identities in flux? As Thompson points out, the six fathers of the film are responsible for a majority of problems the Buckman family faces (*Storytelling* 264),[153] yet trying hard to

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[153] The existential components of male self-scrutiny have been a recurring interest for screenwriters Ganz and Mandel (see in particular *City Slickers*). As Kupfer points out, "the male emphasis is not laudatory, and it indirectly serves to highlight Helen as the most interesting, stalwart parent in the film. With the exception of Larry, all the parents at least embark on moral improvement, but Helen comes further, more quickly, and in more trying circumstances than any other parent" (104). The point is that it is men who must change and adapt to new domestic roles in a world of unbound gender identities increasingly distant – and thankfully so – from that of Marilyn and Frank. Ganz also commented: "There's no question that the script is angled a little bit more toward the dad. We questioned that, but we felt it was more honest to write from our point of view" (Easton 5), yet perhaps the film's most interesting subject matter emerges when they extend such an introspection into consideration of others' circumstances, like those of Helen and Julie. Still, a central consideration regarding paternal guilt and failing continues to lead many scholars to brand the film as one of the patriarchal narratives of 1980s cinema (Coughlin 106; McManus 22); this manner of criticism focuses our analytical work on subject choice rather than what a narrative might then achieve with that subject.

be a good parent and partner still supplies relatively happy outcomes for all: humanistically, it is the trying that matters, no matter what obstacles must be overcome. Although it is largely the men who need to adapt, their partners confront problems of their own. For one, the Buckman women all have difficulty puncturing these masculine self-absorptions, and encouraging their spouses to own up to the inter-dependency of domestic and vocational responsibilities. When Gil quits his job Karen reveals that she is pregnant, which thwarts her plans for returning to work. Gil becomes sheepishly quiet and defiant when he tells her, offhandedly, "well that's the difference between men and women – women have choices, men have responsibilities." She chides him, telling Gil she "chooses" for him to go through the stresses of childbirth and early childrearing. Self-absorption in his own anxieties has made Gil blind to the stresses under which others in his family are operating. (Later, while Karen is sewing a costume for a play and pricks her finger, he fails to notice and goes on divulging his own woes.) Gil ends the conversation exclaiming, "My whole life is *have to*," and leaves to entreat a reluctant Kevin, off-screen, to get ready for Little League. The camera remains trained on a melancholy Karen as Gil tells Kevin: "If I have to, you have to." While the film studies a sad pedagogy of male competition and attitudes to labour, it is chiefly concerned with those who are impacted by the severe and uncompromising family environment it cultivates – not just the children, but the women who live with it, their strategies for coping with its restrictions, and struggles to have their own desires heard and accounted for. Yet as *Time*'s Richard Schickel puts it, "Gil's wise and patient wife can deal with the pressure his anxious idealism generates, but his eight-year-old son cannot" (54).

One of the problems encountered here is that we often do not know our own desires, and this problem is especially acute living in a climate of female identity binaries. Chatting with Helen at Kevin's party, Karen details the pressure she feels from others when asked if she is returning to work: it is clear she is being asked to pick a side between the working mother and devoted housewife. Helen and Karen currently occupy these two roles but find much accord between them. Helen empathises when Karen describes the pride she feels in her work at home, however she also details the reaction of her peers: "people make me feel embarrassed like I don't have goals or something, oh like I sit around here eating bonbons all day, right?" Domestic labour remains underappreciated, but Karen feels good when she is parenting, and at the same time feels the allure of returning to work – her path is not clear, but she is asked to be sure about her role. In these moments *Parenthood* echoes literature that recovers legitimacy for the everyday practical ethics of women's domesticity, such as Sara

Ruddick's works (see "Maternal Thinking"). When Gil tells her to make these decisions on her own, he is avoiding the negotiation of gender roles because they are difficult and, in his words, "messy." The pretence that we deal with our own gender-bound issues in isolation is inherently conflict-avoidant (as Gil also tells Karen regarding the prospect of abortion, "that's a decision every woman has to make on her own"), but also symbolises the difficulty we have in owning up to a lack of certainty in what our collective future should look like.

Uncertainty here is key: the first step in reaching resolutions to our open relational problems is accepting that both men and women face social pressures to live up to identities that do not match their experience in an era of gender role negotiation. But crucially, these negotiations have no clear end in sight, they are ongoing and precarious; the belief that we can or should have consistent clarity and certainty about our own needs and how to meet them is revealed as avoidant, or a way to skirt conversation and compromise. Ultimately, sex roles are a way for the film to address one of its primary ethics: how to achieve openness and accept uncertainty.

One of the uncertainties the characters are asked to accept is a foundational moral scepticism. The film represents a number of key ethical tensions with no specified resolution, which I will now turn to analyse: the tension between a search for universal virtues and the intrinsic relativism of adaptability; the tension between moral responsibility and moral hyper-responsibility; and the tension between accepting our lack of control over moral outcomes and admitting our moral interdependence. In this way, *Parenthood* covers ambiguous moral ground more than it dispenses virtues. *Parenthood* is concerned with moral self-worth – living up to our own standards of moral conduct – rather than refereeing or castigating those who falter against the film's moral schemata (who, as we have seen, are mostly absent from the action onscreen).

In his chapter on *Parenthood*, Kupfer comprehensively details many of the personal qualities the film presents as virtuous, offering a moral map of the film with adaptability at the centre. Kupfer recognises that *Parenthood* is mostly concerned with moral nuances and ambiguities, yet the virtue of adaptability remains key (93). It is important to keep in mind, however, that *Parenthood* is humanistically notable in not quite settling for any morals without their complication. It is not as didactic as might be construed from exclusive focus on the behaviours and beliefs positioned as virtuous, and the obstacles of parenting vice. The film

more closely studies the problems that keep us from realising the virtues we know we could or should embody as parents.

Parenthood's emphasis on virtue ethics might seem to work somewhat against trend in ensemble cinema, the multi-focalisation of which tends to stress local contingencies or morally relative differences within a given social milieu (Sim np), but we should begin by disengaging the characters' search for a stable moral identity from the film's endorsement of any objective virtue. In fact, *Parenthood*'s pivotal philosophies of vulnerability and adaptability are precisely how it navigates the problem of relativity: quandaries particular to each character's situation require different responses and transform the ethics we apply. In settling on adaptability it simultaneously advances a kind of moral relativism. For example, Helen conveys a virtue ethic of women's career achievement to Julie but recognises that in Karen's circumstance it cannot be so easily applied; virtues cannot be universal but rather should speak to aptitudes, culture and circumstance.[154] The qualities each parent wants for their children are reasonable – "Gil tries to bestow confidence, Susan and Nathan try to bestow intelligence, and Helen tries to bestow happiness" (Mithaug 47) – but where they become fixed ethics, they deny human difference and social variation. Adaptability, then, is a kind of humanistic relativism: in its apprehension of people as changing, evolving and dynamic, it admits that our virtue ethics must adapt as we do. In effect, relativity is the beginning of the film's ethical questions rather than its ends; given a kind of instinctual inclusivity and noninterventionism each character maintains as a matter of goodwill, how do we then succeed or fail to live peaceably with one another? *Parenthood* registers the domestic procedures of people living closely, with different values and moral trajectories, finding ways to get along. Those thrive who can locate a moral coping rather than a moral perfectionism. If adaptability is the film's key virtue, it entails moral adaptability.[155]

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[154] Howard expressed his own views on parenting in an interview, and they match the philosophy imparted in the movie: "It's all kind of a big experiment. Every kid is different. It's sort of the chaos theory on display in certain ways" (Sheridan C1).

[155] This also goes to the heart of the antihumanist challenge: that is, the fear that attempts to locate universal human morality and values will obliterate cultural difference. Yet *Parenthood* presents a clear example of how humanism can register human similarities and differences at the same time. Its narrational scope – different lives in the same family – shows the compatibility of an interest in human similarity and difference. Markedly different lifeworlds develop even for those who share many psychological traits, like the Buckmans.

Each character's sensitivity to others in their environment (rather than rigid principles) eventually leads to mutually acceptable outcomes: no definitive "success" as they might have envisioned it, such as a perfect child, but a tempered happiness that is mutual rather than individual. Gehring positions this narrative strand as a trope of populist filmmaking in the Capra legacy: "sensitivity leads more to future sacrifice than to success" (Gehring 102). So one thing both vulnerability and adaptability allow us to do is focus on the needs of others. Attentiveness to the needs of others supports the reciprocal health not just of our intimate social spheres, but is also as essential for our own mental health. We have long known that when we altruistically address the needs of others, we also feel better about ourselves (Dunn et al. "Prosocial Spending and Happinesss"), and this is equally true at a more personal (Post "Altruism, happiness, and health") and familial level (Schwarze and Winkelmann "Happiness and Altruism within the Extended Family"). Happiness is collective, whether giving is public or private. At the same time, though, researchers such as Carolyn Schwartz have found that "feeling overwhelmed by others' demands had a stronger negative relationship with mental health than helping others had a positive one" (Schwartz et al. 783). These are the liabilities of hyper-attentiveness and hyper-responsibility. Attentiveness to a particular family member – usually a child – can calcify into hyper-responsibility: "In its portrayal of Gil, the film suggests that parents who felt neglected as children may compensate by becoming hyper-responsible for the well-being of their own children" (Kupfer 96). Hyper-attentiveness reveals conflicting levels of responsibility in time-poor social structures – to spouse, progeny, workplace and self. In systems that make these conflicting commitments impossible to manage, we are asked to choose between our moral commitments to others. For example, when we are asked to stay back at work, we then have to choose who will most benefit from the limited time we are able to spend with family, but this in turn affects other relationships, usually adversely: "In general, the narrative strongly suggests that being a good parent necessitates being a good spouse" (Thompson *Storytelling* 258). To avoid addressing these problems, we might become distracted by hyper-responsibility extended toward a particular member of the family.

Hyper-responsibility clouds a realistic notion of our limited effect on others. When we fixate on our obligations to an individual, we might conceive of their wellbeing (or ailments) as causally determined by our sole influence, distorting the humility of altruism into the solipsism of hyper-responsibility:

Gil's hyper-responsibility for his son's happiness masks, but nevertheless manifests, a lack of humility in that Gil falsely believes that he can make Kevin happy. Helen, on the other hand, struggles with the conflict between trying to protect her teenage daughter, Julie, and accepting the limits of her control over Julie's life. Only when Helen is able to realize parental humility is she able to plumb her considerable resources for interpersonal adaptability and actually help Julie. (Kupfer 97)[156]

The reduction of one's field of moral responsibility to immediate family and household members is one of the moral minimalisms associated with suburban isolationism, and the social divisions (fences, walls and hedges) of medium-density living (Baumgartner 132). Similarly, Nathan maintains a myth that he can preserve sole influence over the women in his life and the paths they will take, and like his avoidance of open-ended play, the myth couches him from any dialogous acknowledgement of complications he and Susan face in raising Patty (although sometimes he lectures others on best parenting practices). This is another gender politics the film recognises, as Thompson writes, "Karen has heart-to-heart chats with both her sisters-in-law, while Helen talks with Julie and Susan … In contrast, the men seldom talk among themselves [about parenthood], and Nathan angrily refuses to discuss the issue of a second child with Susan" (Thompson *Storytelling* 270). The difference here is that women are regularly seen to be discussing the difficulties and uncertainties of childrearing, while when the men discuss parenthood, they are less comfortable admitting emotional problems and so tend toward conveying ideological statements that disavow contradictions, confusions and the unstable future thinking that all parenting decisions rely upon. Research suggests that these gendered differences in family narrative construction are often transmitted to our progeny, too: in reminiscence, adult women favour relational (Fivush et al. "Personal and Intergenerational Narratives") and emotional information (Bauer et al. "Representation of the Inner Self in Autobiography") while their male counterparts tend to emphasise strength of achievement and themes of personal autonomy (Fiese and Skillman "Gender Differences in Family Stories"). By the end of the narrative most of the film's fathers have learned to accept

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[156] Ironically Gil is also passing this same attitude onto Kevin. Consequently his daughter Taylor and youngest son Justin are more free and impulsive, and have more of a rapport, as his fixation on Kevin relieves them of his anxious attention. Their bond is evident in the film's climactic sequence, in which Justin fails to recognise the fiction of a school play and yells, "they're hurting my sister," before running onstage to fend off her assailants. Toward the end of the scene, despite the calamity, we see Taylor embrace Justin onstage – the camaraderie makes more sense to her than any deference to the schoolteachers attempting to restore order.

some of the "mess" of life that challenges their dogma, but to do so they needed the humility of listening to alternative views proposed by their partners.

When Nathan forfeits the intellectual control of relational dogma in favour of vulnerability, it becomes possible for him to admit that there is no ethical principle – not even adaptability – that will stop us from encountering new and unfamiliar problems, or totally end all of our woes. A humanism of existential management applies: we must accept that human complexity and dynamism will always be beyond our grasp, and so we will never have the silver bullet to end our problems. The vulnerability of moral scepticism entails honesty about our epistemic and imaginative fallibility – just as we cannot see at once all meaningful human and social causalities, nor can we always predict what new challenges our progeny or significant others will face. Dogma presumes that we can; vulnerability and openness know that we cannot. So admitting some lack of control over the personality and wellbeing of dependents and spouses is a vulnerability that has practical effects on the lives of our family members.

Kupfer points out that where the effect parents have on their children is the subject of much study and analysis, *Parenthood* instead addresses the dialectic interplay of childrearing, considering how parents and children affect one another, often emphasising the way children might impact upon the moral character of their parents (91). We have seen how admitting social interdependency buttresses any realistic response to open moral questions such as gender role negotiation, and this ethic is equally reflected in the film's structure. Balancing all of these characters' perspectives requires the spectator to move their moral attention from individual virtue to broader social-causal structures, and thus the spectator is asked to go through the same process of ethical sense-making across large networks as the characters who are immersed in its convolutions. Thompson notes, for example, that, "Gil's initial criticisms of Frank resonate through all four of the plotlines and cue us to speculate about why each of Frank's offspring turned out so differently" (*Storytelling* 251). This is typical of a kind of rippling effect of moral behaviours and consequences discernible across the various narratives. *Parenthood*'s structure models a close attention to the details of human striving in individual domestic settings, and within the social politics we see in reaction cutaway shots, the art direction of personal and common spaces, and edits between narrative strands that bear witness to social contagion. At the same time, we are seeing characters lost within its causal dispersions and ethical diffusion, struggling to achieve clarity, or a mutual

understanding of ethical causality that is communicable, and which we need to begin any work of conflict resolution. In this way, the film demonstrates the difficulty of achieving equilibrium between individual and social concerns: we must balance close listening to the needs of intimate others with a more broad-minded attention to inevitable changes in culture and circumstances that produce a complex social multi-causality, and thus a complex (and confounding) network of ethical co-responsibilities. This is sublimely difficult, and we should not admonish those who struggle with or fail to live up to these incredible demands – this is the generosity and openness of humanism, in that it values striving toward these ideals rather than their completion, or their use in judging another's moral character.

Grandma, the eldest character in the film, possesses all of these qualities and introduces another structural element that the film works with: she unites everyone almost imperceptibly. She is roundly ignored by her family most of the time despite possessing insight and perspective that would be able to help them better understand their own situations and their own foibles. Her perspective is regularly dismissed or forgotten on the grounds of her gender and age.[157] Hence she is, as she tells us comically, "shrinking." Ferried between homes and making wry or non-sequitur comments on the unfolding drama, generally cheerful and playful with an appetite for Nintendos and rollercoasters, she is the one who offers the metaphor that finally helps Gil order his own trials into a meaningful, and therefore surmountable, problem. As Kupfer notes, "The film keeps Grandma's parable from assuming biblical proportions by being as playful with her as she is in her life. Gil asks an off-screen Karen, 'If she's so brilliant, how come she's sitting in our neighbor's car?'"(115). Gehring also commented that this moment minimises the sentimentality of the anecdote (105). Other invisible positive influences Grandma has on her grandchildren are evident in casual comments that are easy to miss, such as Helen offhandedly remarking that Grandma recommended George Bowman (Paul Linke) to her as a suitable date. Howard biographer Beverly Gray suggested that the character was somewhat modelled on the director's mother Jean, whose health was in decline during filming (*Ron Howard* 145-146). The theme of Grandma's invisible virtue is echoed in Howard's reflections on the time he spent with Jean following her heart bypass surgery: "It was very moving for me when I saw her face these things with the kind of courage and commitment to life that I didn't know she had" (ibid. 146).

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[157] Frank and Gil both express contempt for Grandma when she speaks up at various points in the narrative, and Nathan speaks of a positive "multi-generational influence" while condescending Grandma and mandating the specific influence she will have on Patty.

Grandma keeps moving to stay with each family throughout the narrative, but her movements are such subtle narrative events that Thompson believes "most spectators probably do not notice this motif" (*Storytelling* 258). This barely perceptible narrative thread serves the theme of the invisibility not just of Grandma's generation or the cause and effect of caregiving in family networks, but also of her calm and noninterventionist wisdom. Grandma knows her wisdom is largely invisible, but also appears to understand that the rest of the family have to live through their own trials. Closer intergenerational listening might help unravel each character's psychological and ethical dilemmas, but this is something they have to decide to do. Ironically, it is her quiet acceptance of messy circumstances that keeps her from being heard much of the time, yet this is also what keeps calmer perspectives like hers lacking, as the most anxious voices remain the loudest in the family. Grandma's noninterventionism points quietly to some of the ethics embedded in *Parenthood*.

Parenthood makes the case for a number of ethical positions that seem to be applicable across a multiplicity of domestic circumstances, but then puts them into conflict: adaptability and openness to change, vulnerability and attentiveness to the needs of others, acknowledgement of moral inter-dependence rather than sole responsibility, and nurturing a perspective of nonseriousness in the face of these most serious internal undertakings. *Parenthood* does not so much build a case for these virtues, it instead starts from their presumed knowledge and progresses to other problems: how do they clash, how are we impeded from living up to these virtues, and how do we affect one another's expression of them? Ultimately the film is less concerned with proselytisation than with understanding the social and psychological impediments we face as we try to live up to that better and more virtuous version of ourselves, weighing heavily upon our minds as we proceed through our daily trials.

The Psychology of Parenthood

Later in the film, when Larry has revealed that his gambling debts put him in mortal danger, Frank approaches Gil for advice. Frank will need to use his retirement fund to help Larry. Gil is initially shocked that Frank would ask for his counsel, but Frank tells Gil, "I know you think I was a shitty father … and I know you're a good father." Gil does possess many of the virtues positioned as vital to childrearing, and at this point he demonstrates another

quality: he empathically listens to his father despite their ongoing disputes, and allows Frank to come to his own solution instead of intervening with moral certainties. Afterward Gil opines, "Who's to say who's a shitty father?" He lists some of his own woes back to Frank, and the tables are suddenly reversed. Frank reveals one of his strengths, his own resilience, when he tells Gil, "You worry too much – always did." We can possess all the virtue in the world and still struggle with ourselves and our responsibilities to loved ones.

So if the film's virtue ethics are not its end point or its answer to the problems of parenthood, and if it presents moral idealism as inherently fallible, what solutions does *Parenthood* arrive at for conflict resolution in family contexts, and how are practical interpersonal ethics resolved? Even if we accept the film's ethic of adaptability, immediate family groups must still develop methodologies to actually address their respective problems internally. In *Parenthood*, conflict resolution appears to occur when characters are able to recognise and work through their own psychological difficulties. It is not so much differences of opinion that create conflicts in *Parenthood*; it is interior issues that cloud our will to compromise, and let loved ones lead their own lives. I turn now to look at how *Parenthood* manages a resolution to its psychological issues.

Many of the film's primary psychological problems are explored through Gil: excessive and obsessive worrying, all-or-nothing thinking, dysfunctional perfectionism and feeling overwhelmed. A range of other problems attach to the rest of the characters, for example Garry's sexual shame, Nathan's excessive seriousness and dogma, Frank's resentfulness, Larry's addictions, Helen's defensive anger and need for control, qualities that Julie is by turn translating into her own relationship. Addressing these interior matters is the film's principle method for resolving conflicts with spouses and family members. The will to compromise is simply crowded by caustic thought processes – much as in cognitive behavioural therapy, when we challenge those thoughts, the need to uphold conflict dissipates and compromises are much less effortful. The film focuses on these impediments as a barrier to realising our more generous and virtuous selves. We have seen that the politics of *Parenthood* largely focus on those in positions of relative control who must adapt to include the needs of others; the film dissects pressures, internal and external, that keep us from adapting.

Meanwhile, in the scene of Frank and Gil's tentative reconciliation, Frank speaks of his aversion to the pains of parental sympathy and his realisation that the affective work of

parenthood never ends – even at sixty-four, he keeps caring, he keeps assisting, despite identifying with neither of these qualities. In his own words, "you never cross the goal lines, spike the ball and do your touchdown, never." Sheila Benson wrote of this line: "How many sighs will float through the audience at that moment, validating a sentiment that seems to come from one parent's very corpuscles" (np). Indeed, the audience is able to experience the validation both men enjoy on co-authoring a narrative of their parenting trials, and if they are parents themselves, their own validation of an anxiety vocalised that we are rarely comfortable broadcasting outside of fiction. Much of the research on family narratives and intergenerational perspective taking looks at a process of values induction during childhood and adolescence (Fivush et al. "Personal and Intergenerational Narratives"), but this scene shows the benefits of intergenerational perspective taking as they progress later into life. Both men are enriched as they push through their inhibitions to share some of their private trials that go on to form a more complex (and thereby more robust and generous) causal and moral family narrative. Fivush et al. stress the benefits of an inclusive and transactional family history, and they posit that wellbeing arises, "perhaps because these stories provide larger narrative frameworks for understanding self and the world, and because these stories help provide a sense of continuity across generations in ways that promote a secure identity" (ibid. 50). Families can co-author notions of complex multi-causality, and this is how a more realistically considerate morality comes to be embedded in the family narrative. But again, the film will not let this moment be uncomplicatedly positive. Frank still transmits some anxiety back to Gil, and lets slip a remark that he "never should have had four" children. He does not know that Gil is currently discussing this very prospect with Karen, and his remark connects directly to Gil's own insecurities. Using a sporting analogy, Frank also holds onto his self-defeating rhetoric of winners and losers in parenthood (Novak 17) even as he enjoys the bonding catharsis of co-confession with Gil.

This kind of values contagion across family narratives and networks points to the connection between ethics and affect. Our ethical standards and projections are inextricable from the emotions that mediate them (Haidt *The Righteous Mind*), and our emotions will inform any attempts to live up to the morals we distribute amongst the family. Some of them pass subliminally, like Frank's extemporaneous "fourth child" remark to Gil. On the other hand, when expressions of care exhausted a younger Frank to the point of resentment and avoidance, Frank became part of a family narrative as the "shitty father" and to an extent lived up to the moral identity it bestowed – but he also has the opportunity of challenging it. Family

narratives bestow moral statuses that can be negative, and we can live up to or match that negative appraisal (conferring again something of a golem effect, the damaging adverse of the Pygmalion effect), and at the same time derive from those narratives the comforts of identity consistency. Identifying our agency for identity change within these structures is a demanding task. The stresses of achieving clarity in such environments can give rise to generalised anxiety, and in order to cope we might turn to dogmatic principles, all-or-nothing thinking, or perfectionism simply because they appear to obliterate such challenges. Yet in their unrealistic reduction of complexity, they only compound our problems every time they rub against a more "messy" reality. They can therefore be thought of as defective coping mechanisms.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, one of the most effective coping mechanisms employed by the characters of *Parenthood* is a sense of humour, which helps us to keep perspective in the face of overwhelming familial drama, but it is worth considering how the film itself *embodies* humour as a coping mechanism. One of *Parenthood*'s most striking structural components is a refusal to separate its own gags, play and emotional release from its probing moral-psychological questions: "Within its humorous incidents and dialogue, *Parenthood* manages to cover a great deal of moral ground" (Kupfer 92). So morals are embedded in the film's humour and humour is embedded in the film's depiction of moral quandaries. As in later suburban ensemble dramedies, satire mediates sentimentality and vice versa to achieve an affective realism: "*Parenthood*, heartfelt and howlingly comic, also comes spiced with risk and mischief. Just when you fear the movie might be swept away on a tidal wave of wholesomeness, a line, a scene or a performance pokes through to restore messy, perverse reality" (Travers np). Humour here is not just a coping mechanism to deal with harsh realities, but a reminder of the dimensionality of our problems so that we do not fall prey to the reductions of sentiment.

So the humour of *Parenthood* has a satirical component, too. Various commentators have claimed the object of *Parenthood*'s satire as both out-of-date normative family structures, and new family structures that respond to changing domestic circumstances. Wendy Kline wrote that, "movies and television series of the late 1980s and 1990s suggested that the breakdown of the modern nuclear family is to be laughed at as much as mourned" (157), including *Parenthood* as a primary example, while Angela McRobbie found that, "*Parenthood* doesn't try to role [sic] back the carpet. Instead it pokes gentle fun at these new

combinations and suggests that, for the good of the child, we adults lower our expectations" (McRobbie 44). The film does not request or enforce normative family structures, but promotes adaptability to what Kenneth MacKinnon (205) and McRobbie refer to as "new combinations." *Parenthood* is interested in the ways we might come to accept and embrace such changes instead of maintaining an elite vision of what our families can be. It suggests that dogma and militancy are less likely candidates for developing familial inclusion than a lighthearted disposition and a liberally applied, playful humanistic empathy. Militancy, the film suggests, is anathema to openness, and so will not provide the same reciprocally beneficial results (including in gender relations) as open-minded listening. It also causes us to miss opportunities for change, as dogma is static and fixed, training us to see circumstances as uniform rather than dynamic. Lowering our expectations for a direct and directly visible impact on others' lives (a narcissism of distilled causality) need not preclude our fight for gender equality, it just reframes the question to ask how this is achievable within the scope of our everyday lives. This applies to everyone: "When Kevin doesn't immediately shape up, Gil goes stiff with disappointment, as if every effort he makes should instantly be answered by an improvement in the kid's mood" (Denby 79). In a way, one of the primary targets of satire is the narcissism of dogma that requires current and visible representations of power over our circumstances rather than faith in the incremental change of striving to do the best by our loved ones.

In interviews, Ganz and Mandel have reflected on the fine line between comedy and drama both in their personal lives, and in their writing work. A scene written as a drama could easily be tweaked to play as a comedy, and vice versa (Schanzer and Wright 161). They conceive of the overlapping functions of narrative drama and comedy as a product of honest reflection on the way these things are also indivisible in life. Says Ganz:

> *Parenthood* has several scenes that have no comedy in them, none whatsoever, and several other scenes that could just as easily stand up as valid structural scenes with no comedy in them. You know, if you're talking to us about our families … we'll talk seriously. But comedy is very much part of life. Whether you like the style or not, it's very honest. (ibid.)

Reviewers were able to see how the film used these affective structural qualities as part of its commentary on life's "mess." Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote:

The complex mix of comedy and seriousness in its treatment of the pitfalls of parenthood steadily grows in feeling and power. The movie may wind up being as messy as it argues that family life is, but it commands admiration and respect. (Rosenbaum np).

Likewise, Roger Ebert labelled the movie, "a delicate balancing act between comedy and truth … where we eventually acknowledge that there is a truth in comedy that serious drama never can quite reach … each hides in the other so successfully" (Rev. of *Parenthood* np). But we can ask here: what about humour's potential misuse? What about minimising a conflict to avoid it, or to tell another loved one that their concerns are less serious than our own? At times, Gil uses humour as a deflective device to avoid dealing with Karen's concerns (about their division of labour, or whether she should have an abortion). There is some manner of affective responsibility at work here. Thompson agrees that, "One of *Parenthood*'s strengths is that it manages to balance comedy with melodrama" (*Storytelling* 259), and this is equally what the film tells us about parenthood – the best results come when we balance genuine care for one another's emotional space with good humoured play. Gil has this impulse, as Ganz and Mandel provide him with some of the most pointedly humorous lines during times of high drama; yet even though he misdirects his sarcasm at times, this more light-hearted impulse furnishes him with the tools to make steps toward recovering from his moral perfectionism. Sarcasm is clearly inherited from an acerbic father whose influence Gil would like to renounce and distance himself from, yet where Frank's sarcasm is regularly deployed to mollify responsibility, Gil's more often makes light of the load of responsibility he is struggling under, and can thus be cathartic and confessional more than corrosive.

There are benefits when we listen to another's emotional world and work with it, whether in telling a story or living our social lives, especially when we can find the positive affect within a tense or difficult situation. This is the "coping" function of humour. We might read a situation as personally violating or threatening, but when we highlight its benign elements through creative analogy, humour is produced and the violation is minimised. Schickel writes:

There is something brave and original about piling up most of our worst parental nightmares in one movie and then daring to make a midsummer comedy out of them. It

really shouldn't work, but it does. The movie does not linger too long over any moment or mood, and it permits characters to transcend type, offering a more surprising range of response to events. Martin, for example, gets to do distraction as well as obsession, and Robards is allowed sentiment as well as cynicism. (54)

If Gil is learning to relinquish some of the more derisive uses of humour he has inherited from his father, then we can see Kevin, the eldest male child of his own generation, as the next in line of humour's heredity, and his attitude to play seriously fluctuates throughout the narrative. Gil attempts to introduce fun into Kevin's life with too much seriousness. He knows the kind of light-heartedness he wants to teach, and thinks of play as intrinsically virtuous, but he has no model for achieving it as, using his father as a benchmark, he has defined himself by what he will *not be* rather than what he *can be*.

We have already observed how hyper-responsibility can overwhelm playful attitudes, and produces in Gil a "manic playfulness" that is at least in part informed by a competitive attitude to gaming passed between men. Fortunately, however, Kevin has two parents, and we are not completely subject to gender role inheritance. During the film's title sequence small character details are foreshadowed while the family leaves the baseball game, and this is where we first witness what Thompson calls, "Karen's devoted but relaxed attitude toward her children … as she tries unsuccessfully to clean Justin's face, then makes a gesture of resignation" (Thompson *Storytelling* 252). Later, Gil seems surprised as "Justin's head-butting behavior leads Kevin to joke, 'And *I'm* the one in therapy'—suggesting that he is developing a sense of humor about his plight and hence is improving" (ibid. 278). Gil's efforts likewise are not wasted, and again we see the utility of striving rather than realisation. In trying to teach playfulness, even where Gil fails, he passes on an attitude that Kevin may or may not adopt – Kevin's own growing agency.

Attitudes to sex – and especially sexual development – present perhaps the film's most challenging intersection of agency, morality and mixed affect. As such, sex is perhaps the area that most requires the sense of perspective provided by humour and play. So how are concerns regarding sexual shame resolved in *Parenthood*? Garry and Tod's narrative arc represents the film's primary example of modelling healthy attitudes to sex and sexual relations between men, and deflating shame. Garry's narrative begins in earnest after Julie's relationship breaks down, and she returns home to be consoled by her mother; during their

conversation, they both agree that "men are scum." This may form part of a necessary moment of bonding for mother and daughter, but we soon see that Garry has been standing nearby, absorbing their conversation. Until now, Garry has flown under the radar. Like Helen and Julie, the audience is jolted into consideration of the oft-silent and -absent Garry, and the attitudes expressed in their conversation become more dimensional as we see others implicated: an overheard conversation like this (in a household where it is hard to avoid one another) informs Garry's growing sense of induction into the world of male sexuality as serious, dark and shameful, and these responsibilities as his alone. The contagion of adversarial gender identities also explains part of his investment in living with his father, and why he is relieved to have Tod in his life – he finally has someone who knows his situation and is willing to talk to him about sex.

When Helen finds some pornographic videocassettes in Garry's room, she asks her son if he would like to talk to Tod. After a brief shot-reverse-shot of Tod playing nonchalantly with the toys Garry has held onto from his boyhood – and the pair's ambivalent reaction – Howard, Hanley and Hill cut forward to Tod's debriefing conversation with Helen in which Tod explains how he soothed Garry's fears that frequent masturbation meant "there was something wrong with him, you know, like he was a pervert or something." This is followed by Tod's marvellous line: "and I told him, that's what little dudes do," which at once humorously punctures the projected problem of shame, offering insight through casual understatement, and demonstrates how Tod is able to generously translate his own knowledge and experience (in this case of male puberty) into a sensitivity of language which is his own and has its own intelligence. Helen recognises this, in turn denting her classism – Helen's prior ambivalence toward Tod is, at this moment, revised. Tod's chat is effective: Garry smiles. In Tod's words, "I never even knew he had teeth." His personality changes, a weight is lifted, and a more playful Garry graces the remainder of the movie. *Parenthood*, by and large, deals much more openly and candidly with sexual politics than most films, using practical situations to talk about the way gender problems actually play out in our lives.

Yet this is not the end of Tod and Helen's conversation. When Helen again raises the notion of a positive male influence, Tod complicates the presumption of a man's presence as inherently good by pointing to his own adversative experience – an abusive paternal influence. "Depends on the man," he says, and launches into a sensitive and considered philosophical monologue about abuse. When he is done, he physically shakes the philosophy

Tod physically shakes the philosophy out of himself

out of himself, and returns to going about his day as before. Reeves plays this gesture as comic, again displaying the kind of broad physical humour engendered by observation of teenaged mannerisms that he made famous in the *Bill & Ted* series. Humour is also part of the healing, as signalled earlier when Tod is playing with the toys in Garry's room: "The humor is crude in that Tod is clowning around while Garry and Helen are dealing with a crisis. But the humor is also subtle in that it captures the way we cannot always tell from appearances who, or what, is going to be effective in meeting a crisis" (Kupfer 106). In pointing back to Tod's modest and laidback resilience, these gestures cause reflection: we now understand how hard won these qualities are, and so does Helen. When she thanks him, she means it, and she is thanking him for more than talking to her son. Tod has almost instinctively improved her family's relationships, and all she had to do was include him; Tod had graciously overlooked the classism that inhibited these positive relations. Helen is thankful for both his input and his patience. Wiest's performance of this single line, "Tod... thanks," is loaded with extenuatory feeling. Tod's aptitude for deep thinking is revealed when he is entrusted with environments

through which it can flourish – his very different experiences of family trauma have caused him to be necessarily reflective. These differences make his perspective unique, and thereby all the more valuable in families as they come to encompass considerably divergent backgrounds.

Helen's acceptance of Tod presents the first of the Buckman parents to make a breakthrough in their psychological inhibitions to adaptability. As Kupfer has it, single working mother Helen could be considered *Parenthood*'s superior parent, emerging as the most adaptable. She is the only one who is not a fantasist: "Helen is upset with Julie's disregard for her feelings and also is facing the weight of being a lone parent. But she is realistic – missing male companionship, distraught that Julie is throwing away college and a productive future, and upset with her son's reclusive behaviour" (102). Directly after her resolution with Garry, however, Howard, Hanley and Hill cut to Frank as he goes to polish his prize car, and finds it gone. His problems are just beginning. The next cut moves us later in the evening, and Frank brings his foul attitude to a games parlour where Gil is in the middle of dealing with his own son's crises; Frank infects those around him who are already struggling with their own anxieties. The causal network of extended family is vast and confounding, its positive outcomes come riddled with negative side effects, and its negative outcomes are often motivated from genuine care. It is, thus, perfectly natural to feel overwhelmed. The existential components of anxiety – often addressed by the characters as life's "mess" – are perhaps the film's binding psychological concern.

In a way, *Parenthood* is interested in the difficulty of living up to narrative humanism's demands: using stories to understand social causality as realistically complex. Again, this is borne out in the film's very structure. The climaxes in each plot do not quite match up, resolutions and breakthroughs for each character occur at different times rather than being massaged into a traditional three acts that coincide epiphanies, and this is what makes *Parenthood* feel alive. Some have noted that this structure also permits sad endings to certain narratives even while the film remains positively sentimental: "Larry's story does, in fact, end sadly, but the *film*'s ending is still upbeat and happy" (Dement 101). Its counterintuitive structural realism points to the uncertainty of parental responsibility in its unsynchronised resolutions, which often catch the characters themselves off-guard. For example, Gil does not expect Grandma's rollercoaster monologue, Helen does not expect Tod's help with Garry, and Susan does not expect Nathan to appear in her classroom singing a song. These minor

resolutions do not follow from one another, but are staggered throughout the feature's running time. Nor does *Parenthood* have the emotional trajectorial unity of most ensemble cinema. It does not start humorous before herding all of its characters as a unit through their allotted dramas and back to good cheer. The affect is blended throughout, such that the narrative never quite coalesces into any obvious way to feel about the action.

The amalgamation of positive and negative affect, humour and drama is not merely a matter of happy and comedic scenes following sad scenes and vice versa; it is the filmmakers' attempt to explore more nuanced and complex emotional landscapes, as rarely in life do we find ourselves dealing with circumstances so clearly defined by affect as they are at the movies. We live with an infinitely miscible range of emotions, blending and changing inexorably rather than following logically or separably. Attempting narrative representation of such inconsistent changes can be one aspiration of realist genres. Lowell and Mandel may have their characters crack jokes in situations of high tension to attempt to stem the negative affect that has taken hold, mixing bittersweet uplift into anger or grief or confusion, but at the same time drama intervenes unhelpfully throughout a happy occasion. At Kevin's party, children yell, scream and play, but while playing, Justin gets his head stuck in a banana lounge and Patty, who finds it hard to connect with other children through play, is terrified by one of Gil's magic tricks; in the same space adults are exploring their gender role confusions, Susan and Nathan argue about childrearing, and a stripper wanders into the mix. The film registers the pains of happy occasions so common and omnipresent they usually go unremarked. For example, Ebert lists as one of the film's key observations: "when kids at a party refuse to have the good time that has been so expensively prepared for them" (Rev. of *Parenthood* np). When these dramas intervene, we have complex reactions to them, and here the film's reaction cutaways serve yet another purpose: blending in different emotional responses to convey a more complex affective scene, one that records the push and pull of micro emotional contagions. This all sits back-to-back with some of the film's most memorably funny moments, such as Martin's performance as Cowboy Gil, entertaining a party of children with gallows humour and bad puns. Denby writes of the depth of affective and personality detail within his comic performance: "Martin has often used his explosive clown's skills to suggest pent-up hostility; it's fascinating to see him do it to express love … At the same time, he brings out the deeply foolish narcissism in Gil's drive" (79).[158] Even in triumphant comic moments like this

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[158] Gehring called this performative style "populist implosion" and likened the performance to the comedy of Eddie Murphy, who, similarly to Martin, has a wild, comic hostility playing

one, where Gil's ludic sensibility comes to the fore, there is still the complicating detail of one's ego, as Gil "turns himself almost inside out seemingly to will happiness into his insecure son" (Gehring 102).

Our own emotions are rarely dominated by one clear affective source, and then they come into contact with the emotional mix of proximate others. In parenthood and caregiving, one is required to consistently confront inconsistent affect: elders and children rarely occupy the same emotional space despite their propinquity. When Gil quits his job, he arrives home miserable to a hive of happy youngsters who covet his playful attention. The locus of Helen's anxieties may be worlds apart from her son's, but they create between one another a formidable and contagious emotive ambiance; something dark, sad, nostalgic and yet new to both of them. In Mary Douglas's view, "The mixture of nostalgia and resistance explains why the topic [of the home] is so often treated as humorous" (287). This is the pivotal inextricability of narrativised affect that the suburban ensemble dramedy relies upon: beneath the happy-sad binary there is another more nuanced emotional palette that always rewards closer attention. It is one variety of storied empathy directed towards complex causality, in this case acknowledging the complex ways we affect one another emotionally. At Kevin's party, Gil is able to tap into that empathy. He is clearly anxious after turning away the stripper, but he also implicitly understands the children's world of play and performs best as a parent when he is able to put himself, emotionally, in their shoes – a methodology of close listening.

We are thus delivered back to the close listening and attention to the lives of others we began with, but it is more informed and richer thanks to the information gathered through political, ethical and psychological enquiry. One of the film's primary means of close listening to domestic emotional contagion is its soundtrack, and in particular Newman's score. Newman biographer Kevin Courrier suggests that the composer channelled Howard's "unusual gift for shifting moods, from the comically endearing (*Night Shift*, *Splash*), to the unbearably sentimental (*Cocoon*, *Willow*), to the demonstrably dark (*Ransom*, *The Missing*). In *Parenthood*, Howard used a little of all three elements" (217). As Christian Clemmensen notes, "the disparate emotional pulls in *Parenthood* required Newman to write a score that covers a significant amount of territory" as musical ideas and motifs are transposed between

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dynamically against a more light-hearted surface (102). Later, he makes a connection between Martin's physical humour and Charlie Chaplin's Tramp (ibid. 108); this is a testimony to the actor's ability to combine the innocent and acerbic, the joyous and the sad.

sentimental, comedic and suspenseful backing (np). Peter Travers also wrote of the film's affective symbiosis with its score, in that the music and action are not always so unified, but rather talk back to one another: "*Parenthood* prevails when the script takes its cue from the rude and rowdy Randy Newman score and packs its observations with a sting" (np). Newman and orchestrator Jack Hayes sometimes link thematically disparate scenes by blending the affect between them, projecting from a moment of unified emotion into a contrast of emotional spaces, and then ending in more complex sequences without music, commanding no particular emotional response.[159] Kevin's party scene, with its sexual overtones of adult male shame (the stripper) subdued by Gil into harmless play (the cowboy), is followed directly by Garry's assault on his father's office, and a sentimental string score turns spiky, matching Garry's fear and anger. The strings then follow Helen bursting through the house and into Garry's room, blending his anger into her distress, and a piano intervenes against the drama of the string section, at times reflecting her trepidation (she is afraid she might find illicit drugs in the mysterious brown bag he carts around), and at times reflecting her hope that she might instead find an answer to Garry's unhappiness.

When she discovers the videocassettes, the score disappears; we are asked to withhold an emotional response along with Helen. Susan and Grandma arrive while Helen is watching one of the tapes, clearly gathering her thoughts, and their comic response plays against a backdrop of the unconvincing angry grunts (rather than gratified moans) of a pornographic film that seems to emphasise sexual conflict rather than pleasure. While these sexual noises continue, Grandma makes a series of remarks that demonstrate some level of awareness of the situation, and yet she ends by light-heartedly commenting, "you know one of those men reminded me of your grandfather." Garry turns up furious, and the sounds of the porn film are dismissed along with Susan and Grandma. Helen has to work with this strange emotional atmosphere in order to have a serious conversation with her son (yet despite herself throws in a joke that seems inherited somewhat from her grandmother's attitude: "I guess you have these because you're interested in sex… or filmmaking"). Tod appears, and like Grandma he brings with him a breezy disregard for the emotional weight in the air; when Garry and Helen turn to Tod for assistance, in a way they are also agreeing to forfeit some of their heavy emotional space and let the new member of the household affect their mood. There is no

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[159] Jeff Smith writes of film music as performing three dramatic functions: it signifies character emotions, sets an emotional tone or mood, and attempts to inspire emotion within the viewer (167). The score here blends these expressive capacities together, too.

music throughout Tod and Helen's conversation, or then Frank's transitional missing car scene, and the only music at the games parlour that evening is the overlaying bang and crash of a million concurrent noise-making machines, too loud to ignore and unconducive to calming a distraught Kevin or Gil. Sound and action perform their own causal dance in *Parenthood* that informs the emotional trajectory of the characters, and the film.

The film is not primarily about the politics of the everyday, and it does not primarily preach sacrosanct virtues; *Parenthood* is primarily about the existential psychology of feeling overwhelmed, and this is the effect of piling love and rage, caution and abandon, tenderness and resentment, excitement and fear on top of one another. We need to find ways to accept the affective mess and circumstantial uncertainty of life, or we cyclically fail to resolve even its most trifling conflicts and challenges. When we feel no control over our lives, we also feel helpless, insignificant, and closer to oblivion (Rowe *Beyond Fear*); small problems tap into an overarching insecurity or generalised anxiety, and become catastrophic to our sense of self (Meetan et al. "Investigating the Effect of Intolerance of Uncertainty on Catastrophic Worrying"). When we are overwhelmed, we reach for a sense of conceptual control, but this often entails a reduction of life's mess or its ineffable causal complexity; to strive to understand complex causality is to accept that we will never master it. Our efforts to maintain models of self-control that reach beyond what we can possibly control will produce anxiety. Generalised anxiety in turn produces understandable selfishness, as we become absorbed in a cycle of dealing with our own woes by ineffective means. If we are able to gain some perspective using light-heartedness, jokes and play, we might be able to put our anxieties aside to hear from others, and this outward-listening in itself presents a solution to most conflicts as our ire is stemmed by a contagion of empathic goodwill; even if we listen with empathy and still disagree, we are thereafter endowed with the resources for meaningful compromise. Helen and Garry's narrative provides one of the best examples of empathy contagion in the film:

> She sees Julie's marriage to Tod for the frail thing it is and doesn't hide this from Garry … As if his mother's self-conscious concern for her children's well-being has struck a resonating chord, Garry expresses his wish for Helen's welfare. He tells her he's glad she's going out with the biology teacher, Mr. Bowman, remarking how "he's funny and he's the kind of guy that'd be nice to you." The movie hints at the possibility that parental devotion and attention to children may engender in them a regard for their

parents as people with lives and interests of their own. Such regard could be the seeds in children of social adaptability toward their parents. (Kupfer 108)

Likewise, the film addresses potential audience members in their late teens, and equally asks them to consider what their parents might be going through (Robledo np; Orndorf np). This reciprocal "close listening" is a learned and learnable process that the humanities, since Niethammer and Humboldt, have attempted to cultivate and liberalise. Humanism is a kind of base level of respectful kindness we begin from in conflict resolution. So one thing that relieves our overwhelmed, existential feelings is refocussing outward to look at others in our vicinity (suburban, familial, domestic) with acceptance and humour. Providing the demonstrative care of close listening, we give one another courage to overcome the daunting nature of life's problems and attend to them not separately, but together.

As much as this humanism is a personal conflict resolution method, a storytelling method, and a politico-ethical interrogative method, it is a hermeneutic method too. While I was busy penning this close reading, I battled my own feelings of being overwhelmed in these attempts to order *Parenthood*'s multi-causal complexity into a meaningful, essayistic argument. Whenever I began to write on a scene or a topic, countless mediating factors from within the same scene or others would come flooding in, threatening to obliterate the clarity one could achieve in writing out the implications of each event. This is what led reviewers to describe it as a "multifaceted essay in fiction form" (Rosenbaum np) combining "sociology and sitcom, making it into one perceptive, delicious whole" (Benson np). Ebert praised, "The complexity of the movie … so many scenes were thought through to an additional level. Howard and his collaborators don't simply make a point, they make the point and then take another look at it from a new angle, finding a different kind of truth" (Rev. of *Parenthood* np). When writing about sexuality in one scene, for example, unexpected lines of dialogue and later events that speak to sexuality would always complicate any clear "message" to be derived, simply by pointing to other circumstances that affect the one we are currently focussed upon – it would simply point to too rich a multitude of causal connections, political, ethical, psychological, social. Because of its complex connections, I could never retain and record all meaningful detail arising from a single scene, a single theme. Rather than frustrating, though, this was hermeneutically exciting, an alterity and sublimity produced by realism rather than metaphor or abstraction, an ineffability that truly fulfilling narratives can provide, with so many scenes, themes, motifs and dialogues silently causal, silently drawing

from each other, silently upsetting a holistic or comprehensively clarifying reading of any given moment.

Parenthood attempts honesty by investigating the relationships between so many complex social psychological concerns: politics, ethics, causation, gender, inheritance, interiority, attitudes, behaviour, pathology, contagion, suburban domesticity and so on. In so doing, it produces in the attentive viewer the overwhelming feelings that it speaks to, complicating its own ethos of close listening, and then resolves these for the viewer by asking us to accept its central challenge: to observe, to comprehend but never to master this complexity. This is how hermeneutic writing processes provide comparable humanistic work to good fictions, and it is also one reason why the final rollercoaster analogy works. It is not just that life is a rollercoaster; it is that we have no option of getting off, or having it any other way. We can also know this all along, just like we know the cliché that "life is a rollercoaster," but fail to accept it as Gil does. We can have someone put it in front of our very faces with poems and light and play and joy – as Grandma does for Gil – but still refuse to listen. And it is not until later, when this wisdom of complex acceptance has preconsciously settled in, that it comes through and makes sense for us, as when Gil finally realises he was listening to and empathising with Grandma despite himself, and in a moment when he could despair, instead her message becomes real and changes his world. When the film itself briefly becomes a rollercoaster during the climactic school play scene, with the camera and soundtrack both adopting its giddy chaos, Howard echoes the interior fantasy of Parenthood's opening scene (Gehring 105), but its attention has shifted from Gil's earlier control of the world (instructing the amalgam on his role in the daydream and dispensing assured childrearing advice) to his lack thereof. In effect, our fantasies and daydreams can signal our mental health. Our sense of interior control is parsed through fantasy and imagination, and given a socially generous nature we might instinctively let in the wisdom of others like Grandma to affect our daydreams; paradoxically, when we relinquish control over our external circumstances, we must first do so internally.

Parenthood uses its character study of loving kinship to diagnose necessary pain even in the striving of humanism. The film, for example, explores a humanistic paradox: avoidant parenting and relationship behaviours may be motivated from genuine care. Frank tells Gil that he was excessively anxious when he thought Gil had contracted polio as a child, and all that worrying conflicted with his self-schema: "it wasn't for me," he says. Likewise, when Tod

crashes his car, Julie threatens to walk away, crying, "I can't! I can't! This is too intense!" Both of these responses are borne from the pain of genuine care, not just affective empathy but affective sympathy, when we adopt another's goals and wellbeing as our own, the kind of sympathetic relations a family requires of us. We will then also feel their pains as our own; a load that compounds our existing troubles and can threaten to overwhelm the unprepared. Gil finally admits to his similarities with his father, as he recognises the motivating emotions of parenthood yet sees too the opportunity to respond to aversive affect differently.[160] Helen indicates her support for Julie's marriage even while she recognises from her own marital experiences the threat posed by an impulse to retreat from confrontation. Although we may push others away in times of crisis, perhaps in attempts to simply reduce the sheer quantity of concerns and complications that cloud us, we need loved ones to look past our reactionary impulses and foster this kind of empathy and support – precisely what family, at its best, can provide. In the psychology of *Parenthood*, some of our most problematic and harmful behaviours are motivated from our most genuine concerns for the wellbeing of others. Denby writes of the film's eponymous parents:

> Haunted by child-rearing theories they only half understand, vaguely resentful and vaguely guilty, mortifyingly self-conscious, they hang on to the tiller with baffled determination … [Howard] certainly gets onscreen, as no moviemaker before him has, the teasing, taunting complexity of child-rearing, the perversity of a job that flummoxes even the most intelligent and self-composed people. (79-80).

Part of accepting the mess of life is accepting one's own failures. With this acceptance comes new hope, and the film's penultimate rollercoaster scene emphasises the difficulty of finding hope despite fragmentation and confusion (Gehring 104). Howard, Ganz and Mandel then turn to an enduring populist trope to close the film: the hope evident in new life (ibid. 105).

The final scene of the film appears, for the most part, to be a sentimental conclusive montage, showing the extended family together at a happy time – Helen has given birth to a new child – played over images suggesting each character's personal development toward

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[160] There is some circularity to the narrative structure here. Gil extends sympathy to Frank right from the opening scene, explaining that Frank had no positive model for fatherhood, being thrown out of the house at fifteen; his subsequent efforts, despite all of his shortcomings, were still a kind of progress, and two generations hence produced Gil, an even more caring father who is able to reflect on the generational changes that have paved some manner of progress in male caregiving.

overcoming their particular challenges. But there is a darkness here, too. Astute reviewers noted melancholy undertones (Novak 17; Gehring 107), suggested both in the piano score's minor changes and subtle vignettes at the edge of the frame: the existential anxieties never fully subside. The film's final image is of Karen, overwhelmed, perhaps unable to match the sentiment asked of her at the occasion, brimming with tears and turning away. Gil notices, approaches, and puts his arms around her. Where she has helped him with his anxiety throughout the picture, now he comforts her. The final images speak to the inextricability of these emotions even from the joyous times shared with one's family, the exhaustion and uncontrollability inherent in the family experience, the pain we must navigate even within hopeful new beginnings, and the reciprocity of care demanded in a family, where one's responsibilities are rarely easy to identify, but ever present. Life's bittersweet affective tightrope extends, daunting as ever, in front of us, but as long as we attempt to help each other through, we find a way.

AFTERWORD

In my final year of writing this thesis, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Like so many others at my university and within my peer group, especially those working in some manner of American studies, I went through a brief period of crisis: what was I doing to countervail the growing influence of the alt-right at home and abroad, was my work just more intellectual dithering while Rome burned, and why should I be writing about ordinary lives in American suburbia at a time like this? What interested me, however, were the campaigning voices of intellectual left: Slavoj Žižek, John Pilger, and new digital age libertarian heroes like Julian Assange all threw their support behind the Trump presidential bid; their reasoning? Despite the vast corporate wealth and influence that make up the American political system, Trump was somehow positioned "against the system" and would positively shake things up (Monbiot np). This connected with much of what I had been reading in antihumanist scholarship: a rather simple notion that *anything* radical or transgressive is necessarily good, because the world we have at the moment is bad. In Pilger's words, "Donald Trump is a symptom of [Americanism], but he is also a maverick … The danger to the rest of us is not Trump, but Hillary Clinton. She is no maverick. She embodies the resilience and violence of a *system*" (np).

This seductive idea has become a careless new progressive politics, and we are now seeing the dawn of a major political ideology that unites the far right with leftist intellectuals (somewhat like the bipartisan libertarianism that birthed it): a request for anything destructive, no matter the cost. This is careless politics in that it values impact upon concepts, mindspaces and "the system" more than investigating impact on people's lives. An eventual positive impact on human lives is speciously presumed, abstracted into a chimeric and unspecified future that will arise after the maligned minorities have undergone allotted violence, and paid for our distant utopia. It is a rarefied and removed ethical illogic, in that it chooses to be blind to its most basic outcomes of pain and injustice not inflicted on the philosopher himself. This is how Žižek can make absurd distinctions between humanist and antihuman terror, justifying extreme violence (that he will never be party to himself) in the name of theory (674).[161] It is time to return to some foundational principles that have stood

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[161] As Patrick Stokes puts it, "Political violence unavoidably reduces the life and body of another human being to a means to achieve a political end. There are desperate circumstances

the test of humanism's long journey through various theisms, secularisms, pedagogies, canonical protectionisms, and so on, and they are found in Karl Popper's famous summary of Immanuel Kant's humanist perspective on ethics: "Always recognize that human individuals are ends, and do not use them as means to your end" (*The Open Society* 102). This mandates our attention be turned to human outcomes rather than ideal or morally perfect ones like toppling "the system."

What I ultimately concluded was that more than anything right now, the world needs the kindness of humanism. In order not to forget the people on which our theories are predicated, or to lose sight of their lived experience, we need to tell their stories; filling this space in our theoretical accounts is what fiction, and other humanist narrative styles like humanistic anthropology (Gardner 167), can offer. Our adversarial identity politics – pointing out one another's silent and nascent bigotries, naming and shaming one another – only seems to calcify regressive positions on sexism and racism, entrenching pride in nationalism and prejudice. From Brexit to Trump, bigotry appears to have grown. Humanistic scholarship instead appeals to scholars to write of social consequence, not of villainy; the humanism of storytelling is a means by which we counterbalance any limits placed on our notions of accountability, and who we see as human and therefore equal. Humanism is regularly under fire for being airy-fairy, vague or not militant enough (Torrance 165), not offering a distinct program for change, or eschewing interventionist political prescription (Eagleton 207). But in the aftermath of wars, periods of oppression and resistance, what remains are the stories, and if, as Jablonka and Lamb suggest, a distinctive quality of human evolution is symbolic inheritance, then we are provided a unique opportunity to learn from these stories as they accumulate – storytelling could be the greatest responsibility of all.[162]

I hope my thesis has demonstrated that although this philosophy is unfashionable, it is feasible. I hope, too, that I have demonstrated that such a focus can be political, and generous

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in which that becomes necessary. But in those instances one does not avoid guilt - rather one takes *on* the guilt of violence for the sake of preserving the moral life we share. Violence may become necessary, but that does not make it good, merely least-worst" (np). There may indeed be political circumstances under which violence is both understandable and necessary, but it is far from clear that constituents of Western liberal democracies are living in one of these circumstances – although consistent theoretical focus on subject positioning, governance, and the worst abuses of power will certainly make it seem that we are.

[162] Humanism, thus, is longitudinally political, and morally concerned without being moralistic.

close listening can reveal the inculcation of values – within contexts of privilege just as in contexts of disadvantage – that affects others in the world. Humanist storytelling is its own kind of ethical intervention (Moss-Wellington "Humanist Ethics in John Sayles" 119), yet Booth believes that reading the ethical language of fiction has fallen out of vogue, and our theories are forced to be indirectly ethical: "It is practiced everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, and often badly, partly because it is the most difficult of all critical modes, but partly because we have so little serious talk about why it is important, what purposes it serves, and how it might be done well" (19). Any ethical conversation will be better informed the more perspectives and contexts it is willing to encounter, and I have tried to demonstrate what attention to a multiplicity of perspectives might look like both in narrative and in my own scholarship. Those perspectives I have included here – a mode of ensemble filmmaking, or scholarly works that inquire into human difference – in turn demonstrate their own close attention to a multiplicity of perspectives. The work of integrating perspectives treats one another's narratives as living, mutable, changeable, and thus stasis in one's own personal beliefs never seems like a viable option – that is to say, humanism is one way to never stop inquiring, to never (as in canonical humanism's inbuilt inertia) assume we have among us the unassailable end point of learning.

Suburbia, as we have seen, is a place of overlap and tension between lifeworlds; in its polymorphic nature, American suburbia has been a site of shifting perspectives and cultures, and when those lives are investigated, we might understand the transactions between classes and cultures where everyday politics are developed, and then later taken to the polling booth. I have made the case that antisuburbanism and dystopic suburban cinema often take the form of a cultural classism. Antisurbanism can present as leftwing or progressive critique of a political status quo, but it takes aim at the inheritors of a problematic culture rather than its purveyors (breaking down in its wake a historic alliance between the material interests of the working classes and the more abstracted goals of an intellectual leftwing class, often expressed through identity politics). This is why we need humanistic understanding of the broad ideologies that emerge therein – from self-destructive consumerism to outwardly destructive neo-Nazism – not just their distanced condemnation. From the outset, suburban ensembles like *American Beauty* were invested in asking questions of the lives of repugnantly intolerant characters: neo-Nazis like Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper). This goes to the heart of humanism's challenge: that there is a difference between understanding and indulging. For many of those working in fields like anthropology, collapsing the distinction between

cognitive and affective empathy makes little sense – it is the foundation of ethnographic work to empathise deeply while retaining a critical perspective on the emergence of cultural phenomena. We cannot truly reject that which we do not first comprehend. If we are to condemn a culturally produced ideology, we should first understand the context in which it arises so that we also understand how it will change. How do we expect to understand and challenge the Trump phenomenon without first doing the work of empathy to understand the conditions in which it arises?

By now it is evident that I keep coming back to another central theme – the benefits of thinking generously about others. We should remind ourselves that situations of desperation produce the need for competition, and that competition will in some cases be expressed as bigotry. In a less equal world, more conflict, resentment and bigotry simply make more sense.[163] We should take aim at those with the means to relieve the artificial scarcity that creates such cultures, not turn our backs on the social echelons caught in its throes. This care *in no way* necessitates adopting *any* bigoted views.[164] These are all the problems of humanism and the abject, and point to the need for further articulation of an "abject humanism" – that is, a humanism that accounts for the place of narrating human ill. For example, we can ask how one might attempt humanistic close readings of antisocial narratives, both fictive and non-fictive, such as those distributed by neo-Nazis like Fitts. A notion of abject humanism would be necessary in any extended reading of the Tom Perrotta adaptations *Election* and *Little Children*, engaging as they do with issues of sexual abuse, Machiavellianism, mob impulses and human cruelty. Although intriguing, a sustained consideration of abject humanism remains beyond the scope of this thesis, and a project for another time.

There are two other key areas of concern that I would like to flag for future research before closing. Firstly, the problem of abject humanism causes us to reflect on the possibilities for admitting personality variation into humanistic research; in particular, how we might account for those who have little appetite for complex cognitive tasks, for social reasoning, or

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[163] The same generosity of thought could be extended to interdisciplinary antagonism between scholars attempting to make their mark in a field of limited employment opportunities.

[164] We can have cognitive empathy without affective empathy, affective empathy without sympathy, sympathy without identification, and then identification without adopting the same goals as the identified. These distinctions are too often blurred.

those who simply do not empathically respond to others through narrative (c.f. the Interpersonal Reactivity Index in Davis "Measuring individual differences in empathy"). Any recommendation for a general ethic of narrative, for instance, must take these personality variables into account, as we cannot expect everyone to display the same aptitudes or appetites in reading narrative. This is a broader issue going to the heart of all hermeneutics, which necessarily rely on some conjecture or versions of the hypothetical audience member. Even in the more quantitative methods within audience studies, we infer general types of audiences and trends in spectatorship from gathered data.

Secondly, there is a cluster of terms – insight, nuance, subtext, subtlety, and so on – that have recurred throughout this thesis with limited exposition. They all express some of the narrative qualities a humanist may value, and they all describe something different about the observation of human psychological and social complexity. Humanism holds pride of place for the forward-looking vulnerability of the new (insight, imagination, discovery), for attention to micro-causal details (nuance, subtlety), and for a connotative realism that replicates the mental work of our attempts to understand social connections at the level of inference (subtext). As life itself provides no inherent tools for crafting a specific meaning from any social scenario, all of these qualities come together to create a sense of "eudaimonic" purpose. Oliver and Raney write of eudaimonic motivations for narrative engagement as our desire to derive a sense of meaningfulness which, for some, can be more important than hedonic motivations: "this broader conceptualization of the entertainment experience may assist in untangling the seeming paradoxes of 'sad' or 'tragic' entertainment by suggesting that greater insight or meaningfulness is the more important and sought-after outcome from consuming such fare" (1001). There can also be a selflessness in the pursuit of the eudaimonic in fiction:

> eudaimonic motivations (as we have defined them) reflect a need for greater insight into or understanding of the human condition more broadly than the fulfilment of needs focused on the self ... Additionally, though grappling with issues of human poignancies and life meanings may be gratifying in terms of added insight, we also believe that such insight may, at times, be somewhat painful. (ibid. 989)

Clearly there are some narratives that impress upon us a vast cognitive map of intentional agents, but beyond these complex connections have no case to put forward that we might

read as a specific meaning or insight. Some television shows, like *Lost*, have become famous for constructing mysteries of human interaction that are never solved – the authors not only failed to come up with a solution to their narrative puzzle, but also a "meaning" to these instances of human interaction by which we might identify and evaluate a broader perspective (the hedonic has come at the expense of the eudaimonic). So ensemble casts and the multi-causality of multiple intentional agents are not enough to make a narrative humanistic: both can still fail to illuminate anything about human interaction, and simplify or fail to accurately represent human interaction. Our judgments of a story's level of "insight" require another more sustained theoretical inquiry, perhaps drawing again from experimental psychology, which I will leave for another time.

The humanist hopes that exploring human nuance is more likely to achieve a longer lasting grounding in inclusive politics and generous thinking than more militant approaches. Some of these broader questions of humanist generosity are encapsulated at the conclusion of Jim Henson's television series *The Storyteller*, written into a retelling of "The Heartless Giant" by Anthony Minghella. The heartless giant in question discovers his long-buried empathy at the narrative's conclusion (in the form of a fragile egg), yet those he has tormented cannot forgive him for what he has done – they crush his heart and kill him. But the protagonist who found and returned the giant's heart lives on to become a storyteller himself, and amends the original narrative to highlight the villagers' capacity for mercy, negotiation and peace. One can ask if there is a reinforcing power in telling of our facility for goodwill to other living things; however, if we value realism above all, to what extent may we be selective about the spotlight we shine on human existence to retell, and hopefully reinforce, its best qualities?

Humanism was the beginning of the humanities disciplines, and there remains today a call to good-naturedness at the heart of humanities scholarship even in its more militant iterations. If, as so many of us do in one form or another, we are to insist on exhibiting generosity toward others, we would probably best achieve this by thinking generously of the people we write about; in this way, through story, we can demonstrate the world we want to live in.

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How Do You Know. Dir. James L. Brooks. Columbia Pictures, 2010. Film.

The Ice Storm. Dir. Ang Lee. Good Machine; Canal+, 1997. Film.

I Heart Huckabees. Dir. David O. Russell. Scott Rudin; Fox Searchlight, 2004. Film.

The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Davis Films; Grosvenor Park; Telefilm Canada; Centre National de la Cinématographie; Canal+; UK Film Council, 2009. Film.

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In Good Company. Dir. Paul Weitz. Universal, 2004. Film.

Inside Out. Dir. Peter Docter. Walt Disney; Pixar, 2015. Film.

In the Land of Women. Dir. Jon Kasdan. Warner Bros., 2007. Film.

The Intruder. Dir. Roger Corman. Pathé-America, 1962. Film.

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Jud Süß. Dir. Veit Harlan. Terra Film, 1940. Film.

Junebug. Dir. Phil Morrison. Sony Pictures Classics, 2005. Film.

Juno. Dir. Jason Reitman. Mandate Pictures; Mr. Mudd, 2007. Film.

Kath & Kim. By Gina Riley and Jane Turner, et al. ABC TV; Seven Network. 16 May 2002 – 14 October 2007. Television.

The Kids Are All Right. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko. Focus Features, 2010. Film.

The Kids Are Alright. Dir. Jeff Stein. New World Pictures, 1979. Film.

The King of Marvin Gardens. Dir. Bob Rafelson. Columbia, 1972. Film.

Kramer vs. Kramer. Dir. Robert Benton. Columbia, 1979. Film.

Labor Day. Dir. Jason Reitman. Indian Paintbrush; Mr Mudd, 2013. Film.

La Jetée. Dir. Chris Marker. Argos Films, 1962. Film.

Lakeview Terrace. Dir. Neil LaBute. Overbrook Entertainment; Screen Gems, 2008. Film.

The Last Picture Show. Dir. Peter Bogdanovich. Columbia, 1971. Film.

Limbo. Dir. John Sayles. Anarchist's Convention Films, 1999. Film.

Lions for Lambs. Dir. Robert Redford. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; United Artists; Cruise/Wagner Productions; Andell Entertainment; Brat Na Pont Productions; Wildwood Enterprises, 2007. Film.

Little Children. Dir. Todd Field. Bona Fide; Standard Film Company, 2006. Film.

Little Miss Sunshine. Dir. Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Big Beach; Bona Fide; Deep River; Third Gear, 2006. Film.

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Lost. By Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof et al. ABC. 22 September 2004 – 23 May 2010. Television.

Love Actually. Dir. Richard Curtis. Universal; StudioCanal; Working Title; DNA Films, 2003. Film.

Love the Coopers. Dir. Jessie Nelson. Groundswell Productions; Handwritten Films; Imagine Entertainment; CBS Films; Lionsgate, 2015. Film.

The Lucky Ones. Dir. Neil Burger. Lionsgate; Roadside Attractions, 2008. Film.

Lymelife. Dir. Derick Martini. Screen Media Films, 2008. Film.

Magnolia. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. Ghoulardi Film Company; JoAnne Sellar Productions; New Line Cinema, 1999. Film.

Margaret. Dir. Kenneth Lonergan. Gilbert Films; Mirage Enterprises; Scott Rudin Productions, 2011. Film.

Margot at the Wedding. Dir. Noah Baumbach. Paramount Vantage, 2007. Film.

Married Life. Dir. Ira Sachs. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007. Film.

The Martian. Dir. Ridley Scott. Scott Free Productions; Kinberg Genre; TSG
    Entertainment; 20th Century Fox, 2015. Film.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show. By James L. Brooks, Allan Burns et al. CBS. September 19,
    1970 – March 19, 1977. Television.

MASH. Dir. Robert Altman. 20th Century Fox; Aspen Productions; Ingo Preminger
    Productions, 1970. Film.

Matewan. Dir. John Sayles. Cinecom Pictures, 1987. Film.

The Matrix. Dir. The Wachowskis. Warner Bros., 1999. Film.

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Me and You and Everyone We Know. Dir. Miranda July. Film4; IFC Films, 2005. Film.

Melancholia. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa; Canal+; Arte France Cinéma; Sveriges
    Television; Film i Väst, 2011. Film.

Men with Guns. Dir. John Sayles. Anarchist's Convention Films, 1997. Film.

Men, Women and Children. Dir. Jason Reitman. Paramount; Right of Way Films, 2014. Film.

Modern Family. By Christopher Lloyd, Steven Levitan et al. ABC. September 23, 2009 –
    present. Television.

Modern Times. Dir. Charlie Chaplain. United Artists, 1936. Film.

Mother and Child. Dir. Rodrigo García. Sony Picutres Classics, 2009. Film.

Motherhood. Dir. Katherine Dieckmann. iDeal Partners Film Fund; Freestyle Releasing,
    2009. Film.

Mr. & Mrs. Smith. Dir. Doug Liman. 20th Century Fox, 2005. Film.

Mr. Mom. Dir. Stan Dragoti. 20th Century Fox, 1983. Film.

Mumford. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. Touchstone, 1999. Film.

Muriel's Wedding. Dir. P.J. Hogan. Miramax, 1994. Film.

Nashville. Dir. Robert Altman. Paramount; ABC Entertainment, 1975. Film.

Nebraska. Dir. Alexander Payne. FilmNation Entertainment, 2013. Film.

Neighbors. Dir. John G. Avildsen. Columbia, 1981. Film.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Image Ten; Laurel Group; Market Square Productions; The Walter Reade Organization, 1968. Film.

No Country for Old Men. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Miramax; Paramount Vantage, 2007. Film.

No Down Payment. Dir. Martin Ritt. 20th Century Fox, 1957. Film.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? Dir. The Coen Bros. Universal, 2000. Film.

Once Around. Dir. Lasse Hallström. Universal, 1991. Film.

One True Thing. Dir. Carl Franklin. Universal, 1998. Film.

The Oranges. Dir. Julian Farino. Olympus Pictures; Likely Story, 2012. Film.

Ordinary People. Dir. Robert Redford. Paramount, 1980. Film.

Our Mutual Friend. By Julian Farino et al. BBC Two. 9 March 1998. Television miniseries.

Over the Edge. Dir. Jonathan Kaplan. Orion Pictures, 1979. Film.

Parenthood. Dir. Ron Howard. Imagine; Universal, 1989. Film. Screenplay by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel.

Parenthood. By David Tyron King, Ron Howard. NBC. 20 August 1990 – 11 August 1991. Television.

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Parents. Dir. Bob Balaban. Great American Films Limited Partnership; Vestron Pictures, 1989. Film.

Passion Fish. Dir. John Sayles. Miramax Films, 1992. Film.

The Passion of Martin. Dir. Alexander Payne. Student film, 1991. Short.

Peep World. Dir. Barry W. Blaustein. Occupant Films; IFC Films; Madman Entertainment, 2010. Film.

People Like Us. Dir. Alex Kurtzman. Touchstone; DreamWorks; Reliance Entertainment; K/O Paper Products; Walt Disney, 2012. Film.

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Peyton Place. Dir. Mark Robson. 20th Century Fox, 1957. Film.

Pieces of April. Dir. Peter Hedges. United Artists, 2003. Film.

Pleasantville. Dir. Gary Ross. New Line; Larger Than Life Productions, 1998. Film.

Please Give. Dir. Nicole Holofcener. Sony Pictures Classics, 2010. Film.

The Private Lives of Pippa Lee. Dir. Rebecca Miller. Screen Media Films, 2009. Film.

Rachel Getting Married. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. Film.

Rachel, Rachel. Dir. Paul Newman. Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1968. Film.

Raising Hope. By Greg Garcia et al. Fox. September 21, 2010 – April 4, 2014. Televison.

Rashomon. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Daiei Film Co., Ltd., 1950. Film.

Rear Window. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount, 1954. Film.

Rebel Without a Cause. Dir. Nicholas Ray. Warner Bros., 1955. Film.

Red Dog. Dir. Kriv Stenders. Screen Australia, 2011. Film.

The Return of the Secaucus Seven. Dir. John Sayles. Salsipuedes Productions, 1979. Film

Revolutionary Road. Dir. Sam Mendes. DreamWorks; BBC Films, 2008. Film.

The Romantics. Dir. Galt Niederhoffer. Falcon Films; Paramount Famous Productions, 2010. Film.

The Room. Dir. Tommy Wiseau. Wiseau Films, 2003. Film.

Roseanne. By Roseanne Barr and Matt Williams, et al. ABC. 18 October 1988 – 20 May 1997. Television.

The Rules of Attraction. Dir. Roger Avary. Kinsgate Films; Roger Avary Filmproduktion; Lions Gate Films, 2002. Film.

Safe. Dir. Todd Haynes. Sony Pictures Classics, 1995. Film.

The Safety of Objects. Dir. Rose Troche. IFC, 2001. Film.

See You in Valhalla. Dir. Jarret Tarnol. Tarnol Group Pictures; ARC Entertainment, 2015. Film.

Serial Mom. Dir. John Waters. Polar Entertainment Corporation; Savoy Pictures, 1994. Film.

A Serious Man. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Relativity; StudioCanal; Working Title; Mike Zoss Productions, 2009. Film.

The Sessions. Dir. Ben Lewin. Such Much Films; Rhino Films; Fox Searchlight, 2012. Film

Shadow of a Doubt. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Universal, 1943. Film.

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Sharknado. Dir. Thunder Levin. Syfy Films; The Asylum, 2013. Film.

Shortbus. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Fortissimo Films; Q Television; THINKFilm, 2006. Film.

Shrek. Dir. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. DreamWorks Pictures, 2001. Film.

Sideways. Dir. Alexander Payne. Fox Searchlight, 2004. Film.

Singles. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Warner Bros., 1992. Film.

Silver City. Dir. John Sayles. Anarchist's Convention Films, 2004. Film.

Silver Linings Playbook. Dir. David O. Russell. The Weinstein Company, 2012. Film.

The Simpsons. By James L. Brooks, Matt Groening, and Sam Simon, et al. Fox. December 17, 1989 – present. Television.

Sin in the Suburbs. Dir. Joe Sarno. Jovin Films; Lojeare Productions, 1964. Film.

The Skeleton Twins. Dir. Craig Johnson. Duplass Brothers Productions; Venture Forth; Roadside Attractions, 2014. Film.

Slacker. Dir. Richard Linklater. Orion Classics, 1991. Film.

The Slums of Beverly Hills. Dir. Tamara Jenkins. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1998. Film.

Smart People. Dir. Noam Murro. Grosvenor Park, 2008. Film.

Smullyan, Raymond M. *The Lady or the Tiger?* New York: Random House, 1982.

Soap. By Susan Harris et al. ABC. 13 September 1977 – 20 April 1981. Television.

Some Came Running. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1958. Film.

Soul Food. Dir. George Tillman Jr. 20th Century Fox, 1997. Film.

Souvenir. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko. Student film, 1994. Short.

Splash. Dir. Ron Howard. Touchstone; Buena Vista, 1984. Film.

Splendor in the Grass. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Bros., 1961. Film.

The Squid and the Whale. Dir. Noah Baumbach. Sony, 2005. Film.

The Station Agent. Dir. Thomas McCarthy. Miramax, 2003. Film.

The Stepford Wives. Dir. Bryan Forbes. Columbia; Palomar; Paramount, 1975.
    Film.

Stepmom. Dir. Chris Columbus. 1492 Pictures; Columbia, 1998. Film.

The Storyteller. By Jim Henson, et al. HBO. May 15 – July 10, 1988.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the Lowly.* Boston: John P.
    Jewett, 1852

Strangers on a Train. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Warner Bros., 1951. Film.

Strangers When We Meet. Dir. Richard Quine. Columbia, 1960. Film.

Suburban Commando. Dir. Burt Kennedy. New Line Cinema, 1991. Film.

Suburban Mayhem. Dir. Paul Goldman. Icon, 2006. Film.

Suburban Roulette. Dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis. Argent Film Productions, 1968. Film.

Suburbia. Dir. Penelope Spheeris. New World Pictures, 1984. Film.

SubUrbia. Dir. Richard Linklater. Castle Rock; Sony Pictures Classics, 1997. Film.

Sunshine. Dir. István Szabó. Solopan, 1999. Film.

Sunshine Cleaning. Dir. Christine Jeffs. Big Beach; Hallway Films; Overture Films, 2008. Film.

Sunshine State. Dir. John Sayles. Anarchist's Convention Films, 2002. Film.

The Swimmer. Dir. Frank Perry. Columbia, 1968. Film.

Thank You for Smoking. Dir. Jason Reitman. Room 9 Entertainment;
    ContentFilm, 2005. Film.

Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her. Dir. Rodrigo García. United Artists, 2000. Film.

Thirteen Conversations About One Thing. Dir. Jill Sprecher. Sony Pictures Classics, 2002. Film.

This is 40. Dir. Judd Apatow. Universal, 2012. Film.

This is Where I Leave You. Dir. Shawn Levy. Warner Bros., 2014. Film.

Time Bandits. Dir. Terry Gilliam. HandMade Films; Janus Films, 1981. Film.

Timcode. Dir. Mike Figgis. Screen Gems; Red Mullet Productions, 2000. Film.

'Tis Autumn: The Search for Jackie Paris. Dir. Raymond De Felitta. Hangover Lounge
    Inc., 2006. Film.

Titus. Dir. Julie Taymor. Fox Searchlight, 1999. Film.

Top Gun. Dir. Tony Scott. Paramount, 1986. Film.

Traffic. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Universal, 2000. Film.

Transamerica. Dir. Duncan Tucker. TWC; IFC, 2005. Film.

The Truman Show. Dir. Peter Weir. Paramount, 1998. Film.

Trust. Dir. David Schwimmer. Nu Image; Dark Harbor Stories; Millennium Films, 2010. Film.

Touchy Feely. Dir. Lynn Shelton. Magnolia Pictures, 2013. Film.

Towelhead. Dir. Alan Ball. Scott Rudin Picutres; Indian Paintbrush; This is
    That; 2007. Film.

Toy Story. Dir. John Lasseter. Walt Disney Pictures; Pixar Animation Studios; Buena
    Vista Pictures, 1995. Film.

Troll 2. Dir. Claudio Fragasso. MGM, 1990. Film.

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    Company, 1885.

Tyler, Anne. *Saint Maybe*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

Twister. Dir. Jan de Bont. Warner Bros.; Universal; Amblin Entertainment, 1996. Film.

Two Family House. Dir. Raymond De Felitta. Lions Gate Entertainment, 2000. Film.

Two Weeks Notice. Dir. Marc Lawrence. Castle Rock Entertainment; Village Roadshow
    Pictures; NPV Entertainment; Fortis Films; Warner Bros., 2002. Film.

Up in the Air. Dir. Jason Reitman. DW Studios; The Montecito Picture
    Company; Rickshaw Productions, 2009. Film.

The Upside of Anger. Dir. Mike Binder. Media 8 Entertainment; New Line Cinema, 2005. Film.

Vantage Point. Dir. Pete Travis. Columbia; Relativity Media; Original Film, 2008. Film.

Vertigo. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount, 1958. Film.

The Virgin Suicides. Dir. Sofia Coppola. American Zoetrope, 2000. Film.

The Visitor. Dir. Thomas McCarthy. Participant Media; Overture Films, 2007. Film.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Delacorte, 1969.

Waitress. Dir. Adrienne Shelly. Fox Searchlight, 2007. Film.

The Walking Dead. Telltale Games. 2012. Video game.

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WALL-E. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Walt Disney Studios; Pixar, 2008. Film.

The Way Way Back. Dir. Nat Faxon and Jim Rash. OddLot Entertainment; Fox
    Searchlight, 2013. Film.

We Don't Live Here Anymore. Dir. John Curran. Warner Independent Pictures, 2004. Film.

Welcome to the Rileys. Dir. Jake Scott. Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2010. Film.

We're the Millers. Dir. Rawson Marshall Thurber. Warner Bros., 2013. Film.

What Goes Up. Dir. Jonathan Glatzer. Sony Pictures, 2009. Film.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape. Dir. Lasse Hallström. Paramount, 1993. Film.

What to Expect When You're Expecting. Dir. Kirk Jones. Alcon Entertainment; Phoenix
    Pictures; What to Expect Productions; Georgia Public; Lionsgate, 2012. Film.

The Whole Nine Yards. Dir. Jonathan Lynn. Warner Bros., 2000. Film.

Willow. Dir. Ron Howard. Lucasfilm; Imagine Entertainment; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,
    1988. Film.

Win Win. Dir. Thomas McCarthy. Fox Searchlight, 2011. Film.

Women in Trouble. Dir. Sebastian Gutierrez. Screen Media Films; Myriad Pictures, 2009. Film.

Wonder Boys. Dir. Curtis Hanson. Paramount; Warner Bros., 2005. Film.

World's Greatest Dad. Dir. Bobcat Goldthwait. Magnolia Pictures, 2009. Film.

You Can Count on Me. Dir. Kenneth Lonergan. Paramount Classics, 2000. Film.

Young Adult. Dir. Jason Reitman. Mandate Pictures, 2011. Film.