

Election — Conformity, fantasy and "destiny" in middle America

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Carver High School. All seems fine at this middle class school in middle America, until we peer beneath the surface. *Election*, directed by Alexander Payne, is a somewhat unsettling look—at times subtle, at others not so—at the lives, fantasies and failures of the students, faculty and their families of this Omaha, Nebraska school. Like his 1996 film *Citizen Ruth*, a satire on the rarely discussed subject of abortion, Payne attempts in *Election* to challenge the notion that all is well in America in the 1990s.

Matthew Broderick is Carver High's American government teacher Jim McAllister—"Mr. M." He ineffectually seeks to impart to his students the wonders of the US political system. He wants to make a difference. Year after year he writes the "balance of powers" triangle of the "legislative, executive, judicial" branches on his classroom blackboard, but most of the students are semi-comatose; nobody seems to care.

Mr. M's physical self exudes a combination of stress and mediocrity. He dresses in a variety of short-sleeved plaid shirts, tucked in over a somewhat flabby physique. He brings his brown bag lunch every day, and has to clear out spoiled food in the teachers' refrigerator to make room for it. He drives a tiny blue car, littered with trash.

He describes his wife Diane (Molly Hagan) as his "best friend." They sit across from each other at dinner in the kitchen of their depressing home, barely speaking. ("My wife and I have never been closer.") When Diane asks Jim if something is bothering him, he replies, "Nothing, just school stuff." The couple have continually put off having children, waiting for the time to be right, but things like mortgage payments and Diane's nursing career keep getting in the way.

Student Tracy Flick, played by Reese Witherspoon, would appear to be a model student. The consummate overachiever, she is involved in all aspects of school life—year book, drama, Spanish club. She is the first (and

sometimes only) one to raise her hand in McAllister's class; she is so eager it's frightening. She is a tireless go-getter, whose activity has no real content. She is propelled by an entirely uncritical response to the notion that she should "get ahead." There is something sad about her, or should be. In class McAllister does all he can to avoid calling on Tracy to answer his question about the difference between "morals" and "ethics," but nobody else seems to have an answer. Now Tracy has set her sights on the ultimate goal, the student body presidency, and every conception of morals or ethics seems to evaporate in the heat of the campaign.

Tracy lives with her mother, a flight attendant turned legal secretary with a hair-spray plastered up-do, who writes letters to Connie Chung and Elizabeth Dole (perfect choices!) about her daughter, seeking advice. A year before the election, Tracy has had an affair with teacher Dave Novotny (Mark Harelik), Jim's best friend. Dave is convinced that his relationship with the teenager is based on "mutual respect and admiration." He woos her with sentimental and childish love letters, and at the moment of seduction, puts on Lionel Richie's "Three Times a Lady," a diet root beer in hand. He is the picture of childish, middle-aged self-delusion. He tells Jim that Tracy is the only one who can understand his "first novel." When Jim reminds him that he hasn't written anything, Dave responds, "That's just the point."

The affair is ultimately discovered by Tracy's mother. As Novotny sits sobbing in the school's office, Principal Hendricks (Phil Reeves), a wonderfully drawn character, questions him, "Did you cross the line with this girl?" As punishment for their affair, Novotny loses his job, and his wife kicks him out of the house, not giving him a second chance. He ends up in another city working as a clerk in a hardware store. It's hard not to make a connection at this point, and later in regard to Jim McAllister's own transgressions, with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal: the

high-minded piety and indignation that these relatively minor affairs evokes. Somehow one cannot help thinking that this pathetic affair between Tracy and Dave is not the most serious offense being committed at Carver High. The smothering of all creativity and individuality is a far greater crime.

Mr. M, the student government advisor, can't stomach the thought of Tracy Flick winning the election. So he encourages Paul Meztler (played by Chris Klein) to run against her. Paul is a harmless jock, wildly popular, good looking with a kind smile and nothing much to offer intellectually. Tracy—who approaches the election as the first step on her way to a career in politics (she ends up as an aide to a Republican congressman)—responds to Paul's challenge with a blood-curdling war cry that we hear in her head.

When Paul's younger sister Tammy also enters the race he accepts this happily and with little question. (Never mind that she does this to spite him because her love interest Lisa, played by Frankie Ingrassia, has dumped her and taken up with Paul. He is oblivious.) Paul runs such a laid-back campaign that he can't even cast a vote for himself, and votes for Tracy instead.

Most of the characters in *Election* are trying in their own way to “do the right thing,” but they are caught up in a world which is stifling and lacks humanity. Emotionally starved by his marriage, Jim has a “one morning stand” with Dave's ex-wife Linda, after paying her a before-school visit to unplug her drain. His preparation for an afternoon tryst with Linda at the “American Family Inn” is one of the best parts of the film. His frenzied preparations for their rendezvous are hilarious and pitiful. We watch him dash off to Walgreens to buy chocolates and flowers and cheap champagne in anticipation. Suffice it to say that the outcome of their relationship is less than successful. But Jim is so convinced that they are in love.

Almost everyone in *Election* is looking for love and fulfillment, but nobody finds it, or they fool themselves that they have. Sex in this film has little to do with love or pleasure. Its main function is procreation (when Jim and Diane finally do decide to try to conceive a child she calls out “fill me up!” during sex, and “good job!” afterwards.) Love making for pleasure exists only in a fantasy world—either with porno flicks, an illicit affair between a teacher and student, or a fling between two emotional desperadoes.

Paul's sister Tammy is the only character who offers a breath of fresh air in this suffocating environment. She experiments with her sexuality—“It's not that I'm a lesbian,

I'm attracted to the person”—and she wants to be truly happy, or at least feel some true emotions. She sits on a hillside watching the girls soccer team from the local parochial school and thinks to herself how much more fun it would be to attend there instead of Carver.

Tammy is not afraid to challenge authority. Hence her “anti-election” speech to a school assembly, where she states, to thunderous applause, “Vote for me—or don't vote for me. Who cares about this stupid election, anyway?... Will it make any of us smarter, happier, nicer?” The mood in the school as presented in the film inevitably brings the Columbine High School tragedy to mind.

The reaction to Tammy's assault on the status quo at Carver High is met with cynicism by the school administration. Principal Hendricks tells Jim McAllister afterwards: “That little bitch made a fool out of us.” They decide it would be undemocratic to remove her from the race, so they suspend her—a punishment Tammy is more than happy to receive. While the majority of students and faculty are caught up in the rat race to get good grades, get into “good schools” and make lots of money, she isn't interested. (Incidentally, she gets her wish as her parents “punish” her by sending her to the Catholic girls school.)

Election's ironic approach is uncommon in American cinema today. The ability of audiences to appreciate its subtleties may be weakened by too many over-the-top gags and lapses into facetiousness. But the film's value lies in its relatively clear-eyed and perceptive glance at the conformity, banality and mediocrity that lies like a foul cloud over so much of American life. What are the choices offered the film's characters? Either submit to this conformity, or challenge authority and become an outcast. “Destiny” is a recurring theme in the film. (Tammy and Lisa: We were “destined to be together.” Tracy Flick: “Don't mess with destiny.”) Perhaps the best thing this film has to say is that we should be a bit less willing to accept this “destiny,” and somewhat more critical of what life has to offer.



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