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PLEASANTVILLE?
The Suburb and Its Representation in American Movies

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The authors study the representation of the U.S. suburb projected by movies and trace the development of these suburban images from the early movies of a century ago through the 1990s, noting how films have influenced and reflected public discourse on suburbs. Suburbs have evolved, becoming more varied and complex, more self-sufficient and more interdependent, the dominant mode of U.S. residential living, and the most widely embraced path to the "good life." Yet postwar intellectuals have long dismissed the bourgeois utopia as inauthentic consumption centers and conformity factories. Moviemakers have taken these critiques to heart, initially with friendly satires and later with aggressive, often vicious attacks.

> Everyone likes to live in the suburbs. Everyone pokes fun at the suburbs. . . . Everyone respects those who made the suburbs. Everyone hates the kind of people who live in the suburbs. Everyone wants bigger and better suburbs. Everyone thinks there is just too much suburb. You and I believe in the suburbs—it's lovely to have a nice home in the suburbs. The whole idea of the suburbs fills us with dismay, alarm, and frustration. Almost everyone's business is dedicated to making life in the suburbs more enjoyable. The suburbs are a crashing bore and desolating disappointment. The suburbs are exactly what we asked for. The suburbs are exactly what we got.
>
> —Humphrey Carver (1964, 3)

"SUBURBIA RULES GLOBES," proclaimed a headline in America's most famous daily tabloid. A hasty reader glancing at the words might be forgiven for assuming that they referred to the advancing dominance of suburbs, region by region, nation by nation, continent by continent, enveloping the en-

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tire planet. But, no, the headline referred only to the 57th annual Golden Globe Awards, where depictions of suburban life won the top prizes: *American Beauty* for the best feature-length drama, director, and screenplay and *The Sopranos* for best television drama.

American Beauty, which went on to win five Academy Awards, including best picture, was the latest in a series of movies at the close of the twentieth century which trained their lenses on the American suburb: *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), *Happiness* (1998), *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Ice Storm* (1997), *Wonderland* (1997), *Judy Berlin* (1997), *SubUrbia* (1996), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), and *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), among others. In *fin de siècle* American moviemaking, the suburbs emerged as a cinematic fixation.

There is nothing odd about this. With most Americans living in suburbs by the mid-1990s—and many more hoping to—preoccupation with suburbia is natural. Yet substantial questions remain: What are today's dominant narratives and visual images of the suburb in American movies? How have these representations evolved over the decades? How accurately does the reel suburb reflect the "real" suburb? These are the issues this article pursues.

MOVIES AS CULTURAL TEXTS

To understand and explain the rise (and then dominance) of the suburbs, Americans have engaged in public discourses that explicate what is taken to be reality in the form of comprehensible stories. Narratives, replete with tensions and contradictions, have been constructed to describe and analyze the allure, the joys, the shortcomings, and the very nature of suburban life. The conversations and analyses have taken place in a multitude of social settings, and have been transmitted through a variety of media: in the deliberations of government, in scholarly treatises, in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television. And in the movies.[1]

Movies reflect their time and thus—like fiction, art, even maps and landscapes (Barthes 1987)—are cultural texts (see, e.g., O'Connor 1987; Hughes 1976). These texts, parts of larger and even more open-ended narratives (Barnes and Duncan 1992, 2-8), contribute to discourses, which themselves are not objective reporting of incontestable reality but a congeries of unstable, contentious interpretations (Foucault 1978, 1967; on cultural texts and discourses in the context of urban studies, see Rotella 1998; Beauregard 1993; Fainstein 1993).

As cultural texts, movies are extraordinarily rich. One reason is that because they combine sight and sound, they offer a very high concentration

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of information in an easily accessible format. To capture a single scene that a viewer could absorb immediately, an author would have to spend many pages delineating the details, and the words would always seem to some extent inaccurate and incomplete—and perhaps boring and, after a passage of years, bafflingly dated.

Movies' cultural richness is also a function of their costly commercial character. Unlike most traditional labor-intensive, solitary art forms—painting, drawing, sculpture—movies are capital-intensive, cooperative, expensive undertakings. Movies, particularly those produced in Hollywood, are therefore directed less at expressing an artistic or political statement than at finding a market and generating a profit. Their commercial nature thus forces them to become what a pioneering film critic called "visible hieroglyphs [that] are more or less characteristic of the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge" (Kracauer 1947, 7), for otherwise they would have no audience and make no money. Built on the truism that "people want entertainment" (LeRoy 1953, 39), movies, as a legendary studio head declared, "must be topical" (Thalberg 1929, 60). This commercially enforced topicality means that films are unusually useful warehouses for their age, storing records of how people talk, love, work, dress, and dream. It also means that, when considered in a historical sweep, movies can reveal continuities and changes in themes, images, styles, and myths, for all of these can be located in the mélange of visual signs and symbols, mise-en-scène, dialogues and plots, and even music and sound effects.

Films, like other historical documents—diary entries, personal letters, newspaper accounts, or public records—must be analyzed with reference to both their surface content and their deeper implied meanings. A movie must be considered in relation to the specific conditions that led to its production, the broader social and political contexts from which it sprung, and the audience for which it was produced. Movies must be understood in their relationship to other texts; the analysis of movies must be, in the vocabulary of literary theorists, "intertextual" (Barnes and Duncan 1992).

The study of movies thus contains several elements. First is the content of the film—the images, sounds, and relationships between them. What information can be gleaned from what appears on the screen? Second is the cluster of intentions of the filmmakers, chiefly the directors. (Intention—the filmmaker's aesthetic, political, and other purposes—differs from motive—the desire for profit.) What were the filmmakers seeking to convey, and what influences—personal, ideological, institutional, and so forth—shaped their intentions?[2] Third is the audiences' readings of the film. How was the film received by critics and the public? How viewers attach meaning to the images and sounds before them is a complex matter, involving physiology,

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psychology, technology—plus larger socioeconomic and political circumstances prevailing at the time of the viewing (O'Connor 1987). Thus, different audiences in different places or different periods can see the same movie in very different ways. Indeed, individual members of a single audience can see the same movie in different ways. And audiences sometimes construct meanings at odds with what the movie's creators intended; the text can escape its author (Barthes 1987).

As consumers of movies, audiences are absolutely critical to their commercial success. Hollywood filmmakers have rarely needed reminders of this, having given over their careers to a competition for potential viewers by reflecting their values, concerns, and perceptions (see, e.g., Dunne 1998; Gans 1957). This competition is accentuated by its extraordinary unpredictability. Movies are highly perishable, usually with shelf lives of only a few weeks, and during this period they must vie with an ever-changing array of entertainment options. And once the movie has been made, its success depends much less on what studios can do—that is, on marketing hype and booking strategies—than on audience word of mouth. By then, as one producer put it, the movie is "in the hands of the people" (Evans 1983, 20). Notwithstanding the armies of Hollywood experts, screenwriter William Goldman declared, "Nobody knows anything" (Goldman 1983), and leading economic analysts agree (De Vany and Walls 1997, 1999; Vogel 1990).

The audience, therefore, is very much an active player in the life of a movie. It is the audience, who, for its own sometimes indecipherable reasons, determines the commercial success of a film. More basically, it is viewers who ascribe meaning to what Gorky called the "kingdom of shadows" displayed before them, bringing them to life (Combs, 1990, 13). Every spectator, in the words of the great Russian director Sergei Eisenstein (1957, 32), "creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author. . . . This is the same image that was planned and created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself."

Movies, however, are not only shaped by society but also help to shape it. Films and other forms of cultural expression aid in structuring the context within which American urban affairs take place, are perceived, and are studied. By reinforcing ideas and images, by providing information to people with little direct experience on the subject, by legitimating values and practices, and by sparking trends—in all these and other ways, movies influence how we view and respond to our world. They also influence how we operate in it (Biskind 1983). Of course, in this they typically tell us only what we already knew. But in confirming these beliefs, they also reinforce them and add to their momentum.

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SUBURBAN MOVIES[3]

Suburb is a contested concept. Most Americans, however, would probably define it as "any kind of settlement on the periphery of a large city" (Fishman 1987), although small cities also claim suburbs, and the population blips at the intersections of major highways go by the name of suburbs, too.[4]

A suburban movie is, first of all, set in a suburb for all or a major part of the action, and its characters relate significantly to a suburban ethos, real or imagined. The cinematic suburb typically features universally recognizable icons, such as "picture windows, patios, barbecues, power lawn mowers, the problems of commuting, . . . armies of children manning their mechanized vehicles down the sidewalks" (Donaldson 1968, 195), tree-lined roads, single-family detached houses (often in tract developments), and, more recently, shopping malls. Although the stereotype "never described more than a portion of the suburban experience" (Harris 2001, 259), overwhelmingly, movie suburbanites are portrayed as white and middle class.

Most suburban movies could have been set elsewhere, usually in a conventional small town, without much difficulty. For instance, *Father of the Bride* (1950) and its sequel, *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), take place in a suburb (and chuckle at commuting), but their main theme is middle-class respectability, which could easily have been satirized in another locale. Among more recent examples are *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead* (1991), *Brothers McMullen* (1995), *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie* (1995), and *Meet the Parents* (2000). We call this type of movie *suburban set*.

On the other hand, sometimes suburbia is so essential to a film's nature that it could not take place elsewhere without being fundamentally altered. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), about a Madison Avenue executive moving up in the corporate world, requires a suburban base if it is to work. Among more recent examples are *American Beauty* (1999), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), *Daytrippers* (1996), *Trust* (1992), and *Unbelievable Truth* (1990). We call this type of movie *suburban centered*. For both suburban-set and suburban-centered movies, Hollywood's suburbs tend to be interchangeable—no suburb features a unique image such as the Statue of Liberty or the Capitol—and stereotypical. (Suburban films are almost always shot on back lots, for these movies have little to do with actual suburbs.)

Yet although suburban movies need not be realistic—some, such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) or *Coneheads* (1993), are unambiguous fantasies—substantial verisimilitude is ordinarily the goal. Suburban movies achieve the appearance of reality to the extent that they conform to our preexisting

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conceptions of the suburb, which, like the city or the small town, is a social image, a state of mind whose cognitive maps (Suttles 1972) guide us in our perceptions and actions. These maps are constructed from direct experience and from vicarious experiences provided by, among other sources, movies themselves. There is an element of self-validation, even of circularity: Movies seem realistic to the extent that they portray suburban life consistent with expectations partially generated by movies and other forms of popular culture. These images, in turn, are partially generated by moviemakers' understandings of what audiences believe reality to be.

Of course, viewers recognize that movies do not present unfiltered reality: The characters are actors, the speech is scripted, and probably most of the artifacts are phony. Nor does the audience want to watch unfiltered reality; indeed, the desire to replace the unfiltered reality of the mall or the sidewalk or the living room is precisely why viewers go to the movies. Temporarily suspending disbelief in the darkness of the theater, viewers construct the meaning of the images and sounds before them, assigning them varying degrees of reality or plausibility.

FIN DE SIÈCLE CINEMATIC SUBURBS

Fin de siècle movies generally portrayed the American suburb as a den of dysfunction, an inside-out Hillsdale (the home of the 1950s TV's Nelsons), and as a teenage wasteland (see Gaines 1991 on suburbia as teenage wasteland). Most of these movies offer a tour of the suburban heart of darkness, presenting clichéd and ironic images of the suburbs and their denizens. Suburban life is a twisted nightmare of repressed desires and shattered hopes.

SUBURBS AS ANTI-SITCOMS

Millions of Americans grew up in the company of half-hour situation comedies that celebrated the goodness, wholesomeness, and fun of the idealized suburb, glorifying such bourgeois virtues as honesty, courtesy, cheerfulness, obedience, and neatness (Leibman 1995; Himmelstein 1984). *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *My Three Sons*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Happy Days*, and dozens of imitations dominated American evenings for parts of three decades. Among the vast audience were future filmmakers, who subsequently discovered—from what they present as scarring traumas—that their lives did not match the Cleavers' on *Leave It to Beaver.*

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Less about a place than about stories of that place is *Pleasantville* (1998), a fantasy featuring contemporary suburban twins who are transported across several dimensions into an ideal suburb of the 1950s—or at least to a television sitcom's saccharine-coated ideal. Life in *Pleasantville*, the TV show, is cozy, perky, and clean, and no problem is too big not to be resolved within a half hour, usually after a gentle talk with pipe-smoking Dad. Emblematic of the shallowness of this vision, *Pleasantville* is literally black and white until the 1990s intruders colorize it by introducing truth (which is seen to entail creativity and sexuality). The repressive, conformist old guard resists but eventually is won over, and everyone becomes colored.

The film is not so much a satire of the 1950s as a critique of Americans' hunger for nostalgia (that is, those who now call for a return to family values) and bloodless, soulless, lifeless puritanism generally. (The voiceover to the Nickelodeon-like 1990s rerun promises "family values," "safe sex," and a "flashback to kinder, gentler times.") Along the way, TV's old-time version of suburban life is revealed as literally ridiculous. In an early scene, one of the twins is watching the *Pleasantville* shows, where the breadwinning father, after a "swell" day at work, is greeted with a martini by the perfect homemaking mother, whom he affectionately calls "Pumpkin." Mother's delicious meatloaf is the focus of their conversation, while their two gee-whiz children enter the scene to announce that Bud has won first place in a science fair. Meanwhile, back in the 1990s, the twins' mother argues over the phone with her ex-husband, who reneges on his pledge to take the kids on the first weekend of the month. As she exasperatingly resigns herself to forgoing her weekend with her boyfriend, the TV mom exclaims, "What's a mother to do?"

TV satire took a friendlier form in *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), a spoof of and homage to the program that ran for five years (1969-1974) and spawned an animated series, two follow-up series, several TV films, and a stage production. The film (produced by the originator of the TV series) parodies the cuteness of the perfect suburban sitcom family. The movie centers on personal plot lines presented in the original series (e.g., having two dates for the same dance) plus a *soupçon* of societal concerns (an obnoxious real estate agent wants the Bradys' land for a huge subdivision). Both *The Brady Bunch* (implicitly) and *Pleasantville* (explicitly) contrast a caricature of the suburbia of an earlier era with the more enlightened, sophisticated suburbia we currently enjoy.

The Truman Show (1998) depicts life in an idyllic suburb that, unbeknownst to the protagonist, is an artifact created for a long-running television program called *The Truman Show.* Literally born on camera, Truman Burbank has spent his first 30 years entirely among actors, whom he mistakes for family, friends, and acquaintances. Even the sky and the sun are fake. In

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wholesome, spotless, conflict-free Seahaven, Truman is happy and content. Eventually, though, he grasps the truth. Confused, then angry, he flees his televised home for the real world. An audacious film with multiple targets—television, voyeurism, commercial America—*The Truman Show* seems mainly about suburbia. If our ideal living place can be purposely built for television, how shallow must it be—and if we love it and consider it home, how shallow must we be!

SUBURBS AS DENS OF DYSFUNCTION

In the cinematic suburbs of the 1990s, a serene facade often conceals human relationships that fail at everything, except breeding shame, guilt, pain . . . and worse. *American Beauty* (1999) opens, as described in the shooting script, with the following: "We're FLYING above Suburban America DESCENDING SLOWLY toward a tree-lined street" as the protagonist, Lester Burnham, says, "This is my neighborhood, this is my street" (Ball 1999). The marketing tag line of the movie, however, warns, "Look Closer," for down every perfect street and in every perfect home and behind every perfect family lies the Truth.

American Beauty follows the lives of a suburban family—an advertising man who loses his job; his wife, a realtor who cannot sell a house; and their daughter, a high school girl who detests them both. Lester's marriage is a "commercial for how normal we are when we're anything but" (Ball 1999). Caught in a web of obligations, hatred, and self-hatred, the little family ping-pongs from New Age epiphanies to hysteria to death. Meanwhile, the characters that seem to epitomize success (a real estate super-salesman, a teenage femme fatale) instead are revealed as representing only selfishness and unscrupulousness.

The movie seems like a sermon on the evils of upscale suburbia, which offers its true believers—with the exception of a gay couple, who are the only well-adjusted adults in the movie—merely envy, disappointment, and emptiness. Ostensibly a comedy, the film centers on adults who can be viewed as so imperiled by their socioeconomic milieu that they seem to be trying to escape adulthood itself: The father, driven by a crush on a high school cheerleader, tries to remake himself (even physically) into a youth; meanwhile, the mother, like a naive adolescent, embarks on a hot and heavy affair with the local "King of Real Estate." There seems, however, to be some hope for the younger generation (particularly, the saintly drug dealer next door)—if they are smart enough to abandon suburbia. Suburbia in *American Beauty* represents the highest stage of bourgeois inauthenticity.

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An even darker portrayal of contemporary suburbanites is *Happiness* (1998), written and directed by suburban-raised Todd Solondz, which follows the intertwined blighted lives of the members of a contemporary suburban family. Although sometimes humorous, the film tells sinister stories of alienation, betrayal, humiliation, and perversion. An apparently decent man, to take the most extreme example, drugs and rapes his young son's classmate. Is the movie about suburbia, or is its locale merely incidental? Solondz seems only the tiniest bit ambivalent. "As a child in the suburbs, I did think it was the ugliest place on the planet," he recalls, "the embodiment of banality, an esthetic void. . . . Nonetheless, I do believe that if you grow up loving and feeling loved, even a sludge farm can have its charms" (quoted in Hirschberg 1998, 39). The point of the movie, he suggests, is to explore the humanity of perpetrators of monstrous acts. The suburban setting, in its very normality, highlights the abnormality of the acts that are depicted. Or is the suburban sludge farm in some sense responsible for the horrors that bloom there?

Happiness followed Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), a coming-of-age tale about a painfully plain 11-year-old and her suburban New Jersey family. Teased by her schoolmates and ignored by her parents who favor her two siblings, she finds that idyllic middle-class suburbia is a prison of misery and a fraud. Solondz's suburbia remains the paradigmatic site of American family life, but this site points not toward human fulfillment but in the precise opposite direction.

Coming of age in suburbia is darker still in *Apt Pupil* (1998), based on a Stephen King novella, in which a suburban schoolboy learns that the local recluse is a Nazi war criminal who has evaded capture. The boy promises to keep the secret if he can "hear about it. The stories. Everything. Everything they're afraid to tell us in school." The canny Nazi, however, uses the stories to manipulate the boy, who we learn is not nearly as wholesome as he at first appears. The contrast between the handsome, comfortable, affluent suburb and the unexpected horrors dwelling there is unmistakable. Evil is contagious, and upscale suburbia affords no immunity.

Family dysfunction takes a ghoulish turn in *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000). Mom is a high-strung adulteress and Stepdad is a self-pitying alcoholic. Enraged after their marriage breaks up, he terrorizes the mom and rapes her teenage daughter, who eventually dispatches him with an electric carving knife. Serial voiceovers and showy cinematography reinforce the impression that this is not yet another ode to blood and violence but rather an attempt to comment on the defects—cruelty, hypocrisy, loneliness—of an upscale suburb that outsiders might mistake for paradise. It is, of course, not a new message.

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Ice Storm (1997), based on an acclaimed novel of the same title, sets its portrayal of the stifling conformity and vacuity of upscale suburbs on Thanksgiving Day 1973, when the roads freeze and two families become undone. It is the time of Watergate and Vietnam, when the counterculture with its pot smoking and free love are contesting with the old verities for suburbia's soul. The affluent adults, bored, repressed, and self-absorbed, resort to alcohol, drugs, joyless sexual affairs, and even pointless shoplifting. Sophisticated but dense, they are only dimly aware that their children are engaged in parallel experiments. Events move toward inevitable bathos—someone has to pay for the sins of suburbia—with a wife-swapping "key party" and an accidental electrocution of the most sympathetically portrayed adolescent.

SUBURBS AS TICKY-TACKY

Ticky-tacky housing developments, as lifeless as rows of tombstones, are recalled in *Wonderland* (1997), a nasty documentary about Levittown, Long Island, the Model T of American postwar suburban tract developments, on its 50th anniversary. The film presents interviews with inhabitants of quintessentially ticky-tacky suburbia, with the apparent purpose of demonstrating their stupidity, shallowness, and lack of sophistication. Former residents who grew up in Levittown recall the suburb as "like living in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*," and a well-known pop music performer recalls, "I escaped, I got out." Most current and "pioneer" residents, however, cannot distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic or see the point of doing so.

SUBURBS AS TEENAGE WASTELAND

SubUrbia (1996), based on an acclaimed off-Broadway play, opens with the strains of a 1960s teenage anthem, "A Town Without Pity," as we are driven through the iconic American suburb: an endless stream of strip malls, gas stations, fast-food joints, gated developments, ugly tract housing, and construction sites that will spawn more of the same. The movie takes place mostly in the parking lot of a strip mall convenience store on one summer night in the suburb of Burnfield, Texas, where a quintet of stereotypical slackers—the intellectual, the cynical jock, the party animal, the popular girl, and the misfit—have gathered to meet an escapee, who has hit it somewhat big as a rocker.

Although the characters are preoccupied with condemning suburban vacuity and describing their environs as a "moshpit of consumerism," they are doomed to pointless lives, too. Their parents' suburban dream of comfort

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and security has left them trapped. Ceaselessly restless, they feel they have nowhere to go. They are not stupid, but, bedeviled by fantasies, ennui, and resentment, they are stupidly wasting their lives. As they begin to understand this, they become even more immobilized.

Exploring a similar theme, *Mallrats* (1995) depicts a day in the life of teenagers gathered at that cathedral of consumption (Zepp 1997), the suburban mall, "who don't come here to work and shop but hang out like you live here." On entering the mall, one of the mallrats exclaims, "I love the smell of commerce in the morning!" but it is only the love of the spectator, for the mallrats are too lazy and purposeless to work or even to experience alienation. Their apocalypse is not now, probably not ever. While they talk, scheme, and fight an ever-encroaching boredom, the film pokes fun at staples of the modern mall: food courts, cookie snack bars, security guards, and shoppers with anti-mall pretensions. The same mall that houses shoppers and employees serves as the suburbs' answer to the urban street corner.

Virgin Suicides (2000) is much more enigmatic. Based on a novel of the same title, it follows five pretty teenage sisters in a wealthy Michigan suburb in the 1970s. Raised in a strictly disciplined home, the girls are the object of the local boys' desires but do not succumb. And for reasons that are unclear, they all kill themselves, leaving everyone (including the audience) confused and lost. This may well be the point: In real life, suicides are often incomprehensible. To what extent is the girls' lonely suburb culpable? Does its life of privilege and its innumerable shields from reality leave them too inexperienced, too innocent, too vulnerable to cope with that reality? Or would they, even in a different locale, have met the same fate?

"POSITIVE" PROJECTIONS

Not all portrayals of the American suburb at the close of the twentieth century were unrelievedly negative. *Judy Berlin* (1997), set in Babylon, Long Island, is a sometimes affectionate, sometimes bleak meditation on the paralyzing power of conformity and monotony. The movie opens with images from the iconic suburb—identical houses lined up neatly in rows, a commuter train—and then focuses on a family of quiet (father and son) and talky (mother) desperation. The comfortable middle-class setting cannot dispel the gloom, epitomized by the total eclipse of the sun that consumes much of the film. Indeed, the zestiest character, Judy, is about to leave to seek her fortune as an actress in Los Angeles. She puts in one last day as part of a "living display" at an ersatz 1857 Long Island farm that contrasts the hard life of the old days with the soft life of today. For all its conveniences, the film seems to say, the modern suburb can be equally dull and spiritually emptier. Before she

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leaves, she encounters a high school acquaintance returning from Los Angeles after having failed to make it as a movie director. His secret yearning? To make a documentary about daily life in an American suburb, something celebratory, "nothing sarcastic." Meanwhile, his sadly ditzy mother wanders around, murmuring a phrase over and over: "I wish, I wish, I wish in vain." Although not patronizing or hostile to the characters and the lives they have constructed, the movie points to the frustrations that beset and await them.

GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF SUBURBS

Most Americans, it is obvious, have always liked suburbs. It was they, after all, who, voting with their feet (or their cars), created them. Nor is this a love affair that has ended. A recent poll of prototypical suburbanites from Southern California, for example, revealed that an overwhelming majority are happy where they live. They understand that suburbia is not perfect, but their reservations—too expensive, too much crime—are mundane and clearly not unique to suburbs (Kelley 1999).

Public opinion on suburbia, however, does not exist in a vacuum but must be placed in a context of opinion on country and city living as it has evolved. The pursuit of happiness, Jefferson believed, ended on the small family farm. But however wondrous the agrarian ideal, the reality was hard: rough, tedious labor; isolation from the variety and opportunity that only sizable communities could provide; and futures that seemed mere extensions of the present, which in turn seemed mere extensions of the past. As a consequence, men and women ceased living on the land, fleeing from it by the millions. They may have retained an attachment to the agrarian/village ideal, which perhaps "gained power as it was losing pertinence" (Donaldson 1968, 211). Yet actions speak louder than words, and the mass movement from the countryside suggests if not rejection, then at least a profound ambivalence toward the way of life it represented. How could the "idiocy of village life" (Marx and Engels 1935, 27) compete with the opportunity and sheer excitement of the city?

It was against this background of widespread ambivalence toward urban and rural life that the American suburb developed. By the late eighteenth century, dependent, peripheral suburbs could be found outside Boston, New York, and Philadelphia (Bridenbaugh 1938). The early nineteenth century saw the growth of the first prosperous American suburb, Brooklyn Heights, a Whitmanesque ferry ride from Manhattan, and the Jacksonian era witnessed a clearly "recognizable outward movement" away from city centers

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(Schwartz 1982, 492). By 1850, a third of the metropolitan population resided outside central cities, mostly in an urban fringe (Gardner 2001, 298), and in the latter part of the nineteenth century, "streetcar suburbs" (Warner 1962) arose, as the nickel trolley allowed the upper middle and upper classes to ride from suburban homes to work and back.

The main pull was jobs, as dispersed employment opportunities encouraged dispersed residential patterns (Harris and Lewis 2001). Still, suburbs represented the Jeffersonian paradise regained and transplanted into modern times, a mix of arcadia and technology that millions found simply irresistible. The "momentous aspect of the suburban dream" was the wish to reinstate or establish the emotionally satisfying bonds of community and neighborhood (Strauss 1961), as suburbanites, looking to the past for their values, were very reluctant to part with the ideal of the country village (Wood 1958). The automobile seemed destined to bring this dream to life, and by the 1920s, streetcar suburbs had been superseded by more far-flung developments for the "better" classes (Stilgoe 1988). Meanwhile, as early as 1850, the proportion of lower-status residents in the urbanized fringe equaled that of the central city (Gardner 2001). By World War I, working-class suburbs had proliferated in the form of satellite cities. By World War II, industrial suburbs were nearly as numerous as middle-class suburbs (Harris 1943).

Post-1945 America was the "Age of Great Suburbs" (Fishman 1987, 182), as mass-produced subdivisions organized around the car became ubiquitous. In 1940, a fifth of Americans lived in suburbs; by 1950, it was a quarter; by 1960, it was a third; and by 1970, more Americans lived in suburbs than in either cities or nonmetropolitan areas. And by about that time, changes in suburbia had begun to attract attention. Newsmagazines (e.g., *Time* ["Suburbia" 1971]; *Newsweek* ["The Battle of the Suburbs" 1971]; *U.S. News & World Report* ["New Role of the Suburbs" 1972]) and academics (e.g., Masotti and Hadden 1973; Downs 1970, 11) pointed to the suburbs' evolution, and the multicentered model featuring intersuburban interaction displaced the old core–periphery construct (Muller 1976, 1991).

Before long, certain suburban zones, characterized by high-technology industries and connected to each other by freeways, started to be called "urban-village cores" (Leinberger and Lockwood 1986), "outtowns" (Goldberger 1987), or "technoburbs" (Fishman 1987). Later, Garreau (1991) termed employment/commercial centers that arose near major highway intersections "edge cities." More recently, some analysts have "downplayed the issue of city-suburban difference" (Harris and Lewis 2001, 284) or wondered aloud whether suburbs were not really a new form of city (Fishman 1999). The debate on the new suburbia focused on matters of values (i.e., are suburbs a praiseworthy adaptation to changing circumstances?) and of degree (i.e.,

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how interdependent are suburb and city?). What was rarely denied was that suburbs had, indeed, substantially evolved.

CRITIQUES OF THE AMERICAN SUBURB

At the same time that millions were abandoning the city for the suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s, many intellectuals (particularly city-dwelling intellectuals) attacked the suburbs with a venom whose bitterness and rage seem toxic even decades later. These critiques resonated in nonintellectual venues, such as mass circulation magazines (with articles exposing "The Crab-Grass Roots of Suburbs," "The Ugly American") and middlebrow novels (e.g., J. P. Marquand's *Point of No Return* [1949], Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* [1961]).

For these critics, the postwar American suburb combined the worst, not the best, of city and country. Suburbia may have been conceived as a bourgeois utopia, but it was a snare and a delusion, born in greed and nurtured by materialism, that degraded all it touched. "Confronted with the spectacular folly of our people," wrote the Goodmans, "one is struck . . . by their bafflement about what to do with themselves and their productivity. . . . We have a standard of living that is in many ways *too* high" (Goodman and Goodman 1947, 6, 11). The bourgeoisie might be clever at making money, but as a class they were spiritually vacuous, culturally philistine, preoccupied with the opinions of others, insensitive to their own defects, and boring.

Intellectuals, of course, were not unanimous in their hostility. Gans (1967) in *The Levittowners*, for example, denied that an easily definably "suburban way of life" existed. He found Levittowners to be much like hard-working people anywhere in the world. If his Levittown were no utopia, it was no spiritual wasteland either (for defenses and counter-critiques, see also Donaldson 1968; Wood 1958).

Still, intellectual discourse was overwhelmingly negative. The critique of the suburbs took two main forms: (1) suburbs as inauthentic/consumption centers and (2) suburbs as conformity factories.[5]

That suburbs were viewed as deliberately constructed artifacts, not as phenomena that arose naturally like cities or rural villages, in the eyes of the critics implied the curse of inauthenticity. And this was heightened by the suburbanites' vulnerability to the purveyors of ersatz: faux Tudor homes, faux Louvre lawn sculpture, faux Main Streets in shopping malls, etc., etc., etc. Thus, suburbia, as if a triptych by Bosch on a theme by Veblen, was viewed by its critics as little more than the sum of obsessive, derivative, consumer exertions. Whereas the old life in city, countryside, or small town, whatever its

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shortcomings, had a certain depth, purpose, and humanity, the new inauthentic suburban preoccupation with consumption was trivial, self-defeating, and sad.

When directed at the lower middle or working class, the conformity factory critique derided Levittown-type suburbia as mindless, ugly, and put together without thought or care for residents who knew no better. Typically, critics contended that the similarity among the units of tract housing was reflected in a deadening similarity of their dwellers, who occupied

> a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus, the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our own times is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible. (Mumford 1968, 5)

Nothing seemed natural, real, human.

When directed at the prosperous suburbia of the professional and managerial classes, the conformity critique was given academic respectability in a number of sociological polemics. William H. Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man*—first a book, then a label, and finally an accusation—dissected the pressures and incentives to fit in and get along, to muffle personal aspirations in favor of the needs of the corporation. A best-seller, it attacked suburbia for betraying Jefferson's self-sufficient, individualistic vision. One part of the book dealt with modest new subdivisions that temporarily house junior executives on the way up. These suburbs are supposed to facilitate business advancement, Whyte wrote, chiefly by emphasizing the importance of adjusting to group demands. Privacy and the desire to be alone are stigmatized as antisocial, schoolchildren are taught the virtues of life adjustment, social life and religion aim for a shallow togetherness, and individual distinctiveness is treated as grime to be washed away. *The Exurbanites*, A. C. Spectorsky's (1958) popular account of communications industry executives who commute to New York, contrasts a highly competitive and uncertain workplace with a comfortable home-as-refuge. Complicating the picture is the costliness of suburban living, the housewife's dissatisfaction with her grueling and boring days, and the husband's inability to separate social life from career goals. Instead of suburbia ameliorating anxieties, Spectorsky concluded, it actually makes them worse. Popular novelists and playwrights made similar points, some seriously—for example, Sloan Wilson's (1956) *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and, most prominently, John Keats's

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(1957) *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957)—and some with friendly humor—for example, Jean Kerr's (1957) *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* and Max Schulman's (1957) *Rally Round the Flag, Boys*.

Decades later, tributaries from all these critiques continue to flow. The dullness, philistinism, and intolerance that Sinclair Lewis (1924) had ridiculed in *Main Street* now is said to render suburbia the crabgrass of American life (see, e.g., Suarez 1999; Barrett 1996; Katz and Sculley 1993).

Notwithstanding the ubiquity and virulence of these critiques, what is most striking is how little immediate impact they had. Not only did no reverse exodus from the suburbs take place, but the ongoing escape to the suburbs actually accelerated. For from the point of view of the millions racing to the suburbs, the critiques missed the point: In offering apartment dwellers in crowded cities a good job, a home with some grass, a parking place, and no worries about schools or crime, the suburb seemed "not merely an alternative lifestyle—it was paradise" (Gates 1987, 124).

THE SUBURBAN MOVIE: TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THROUGH WORLD WAR II

The suburban movie is nearly as old as movies themselves. Indeed, movies were born in the suburbs, specifically the New York suburb of Fort Lee, New Jersey (American Movie Classics 1992). Near the turn of the century, *The Suburbanite* (1904) and *The Suburbanite's Ingenious Alarm* (1908) were brief comedies. Later, in *Dancing Mothers* (1910), the mother in a rich family pines away on a suburban estate, while her husband and daughter live the high life in the city. Determined to escape ("I'm going to live"), she runs to the romantic life of city nightclubs.

More substantial films—almost all comedies—were to follow. *The Commuters* (1915), a tale of mistaken identity, depicts a suburban life that is too frenetic for a high-strung big-city orchestra leader. In *The Cheat* (1915), a restless wife tries to escape the suburban blahs while her husband is endlessly at work. *Putting the Bee in Herbert* (1917) concerns a bank clerk's efforts to win a raise, so that he can cope with the high cost of suburban living. *I'll Get Him Yet* (1919), a Dorothy Gish vehicle, tells how a newspaperman learns to live with his heiress wife's riches. *Let's Be Fashionable* (1920) follows a newlywed couple who move to a suburb, where harmless affairs are in vogue. After little dalliances, they return to old-fashioned true love. All of these movies could be classed as suburban-centered movies. *The Six Best Cellars* (1920), a suburban-set movie, focuses on rich suburbanites known for their expensive wine cellar. When they learn that they have only a few bottles left,

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the husband embraces sobriety and is nominated to Congress on the Prohibitionist ticket—but then his aunt discovers 21 cases of fine wine in the cellar, and he cannot decide whether to choose public office or social success. In *Skinner's Dress Suit* (1925), a beleaguered male has just married and moved to the suburbs. At first, he commutes to New York and gets lost in the crowds; he punches time clocks and works in robotic routine. Meanwhile, his wife consumes conspicuously, buying stylish clothes and new furniture and enrolling in charm and dancing classes on the installment plan. Skinner undergoes a transformation when he gets a big break because he knows how to dance.

The young talkie era saw this steady trickle of suburban movies continue. Suburban-set movies, however, dominated. *Six Cylinder Love* (1931), a Spencer Tracy comedy, focused on social climbing and status seeking, showing how living beyond one's means can lead to financial and domestic problems. *The Night of June 13* (1932), a drama about marital jealousy in a suburb, was followed by *Mama Loves Papa* (1933), a mistaken identity comedy, which in turn was followed by *Thirty-Six Hours to Kill* (1936), a police drama about a crooked couple who are bored with suburban life, win a lottery, and try to cash in their ticket. *Three Men on a Horse* (1936), based on a Broadway comedy, was perhaps the first film to take place in what was to be called ticky-tacky suburbia. *Mama Runs Wild* (1938), a domestic comedy, was set in a suburban development named Paradise Park. Both are emphatically suburban-centered movies.

None of these films achieved much commercial or artistic success. And although the suburban movie existed as a genre, suburban movies were neither numerous nor prominent.[6] It is fair to say, therefore, that until the 1940s, the movie alternatives to the big city were the small town and the country. For generations, the small town bridged the gap between rustic (and dull) rural life and the exciting (if dangerous) city. Often, the small town was idealized, like Andy Hardy's Carvel, as friendly, pretty, and safe, with no problem larger than the logistics of putting on a teenagers' song-and-dance show.

However, as the suburbs began to boom after World War II, especially in the 1950s, they began to push the existing prototypes aside. The simultaneous zooming popularity of television produced a crisis. Movies that had attracted 90 million customers a week in the immediate postwar years of 1945-1948 attracted only 60 million by 1950 and 43 million by 1953 (Belton 1994). Hollywood, forever searching for commercially viable projects, made movies that dealt with the new lifestyle. However, with few exceptions, the portrayal of suburban life was almost from the beginning an object of criticism, moving from light satire in the early 1950s to heavier criticism in the late 1950s to outright scorn, ridicule, and condemnation in the 1960s and 1970s. Suburban

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films became darker, edgier, and more ironic as part of a general trend in American intellectual life.

POSTWAR SUBURBS IN AMERICAN MOVIES

The earliest postwar movies dealing with suburbs—*It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947)—were neither suburban-centered nor suburban-set movies, although both presented the suburb with its single-family, owner-occupied house as an escape. In *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), George Bailey runs a small-town savings and loan, never getting rich but finding solace helping his neighbors buy their own homes. His proudest achievement is a suburban division of tract houses, Bailey Park. In one scene, an immigrant family, the Martinis, disparaged as "garlic eaters" by Bailey's vicious antagonist, are packing their belongings. "Martini, you rented a new house?" the father is asked. "Rent?" Martini responds, "I own the house. Me, Guiseppi Martini. I own my own house." The Martinis are moving to Bailey Park—a Levittown-like development of small (but not identical) houses, with new lawns and young trees. Later, when the development is completed, one of the antagonist's flunkies observes, "Fifteen years ago, a half dozen houses stuck here and there. . . . Look at it today. Dozens of the prettiest little homes you ever saw."

Miracle on 34th Street, another Christmas perennial, focuses on a Macy's Santa Claus. But its real miracle is its happy ending: a city-dwelling, career-oriented single mother marries the man in the apartment next door and moves into the home of her daughter's dreams—a single-family house in a suburban Long Island subdivision—delivered as promised by Kris Kringle.

As early postwar suburban movies were intended to appeal to suburbanites, most were sympathetic, gently satirizing everyday problems, as if to imply that only these minor blemishes marred the scene.[7] *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), based on a 1946 best-seller, starred Cary Grant and Myrna Loy in a comic portrayal of the travails of upper-class New Yorkers trying to renovate a country house in exurban Connecticut. Although hardly typical of the postwar suburban experience, the movie and the book struck a chord among those buying new houses in the suburbs in record numbers (Jackson 1985, 282). Similarly, *Father of the Bride* (1950)—one of the 10 most popular movies of the year (and based on a widely read novel)—and its sequel, *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), poke fun at weddings, commuting, and middle-aged parenthood.

Please Don't Eat the Daisies (1960) sees a New York theater critic and his family move to the suburbs in the hope that he would "get some perspective . . .

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make friends with people . . . be himself again. . . . Put down roots for us in the community. . . . From now on we're going to belong somewhere." In *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961), Bob Hope, the only bachelor in Paradise Village, is told, "You'll find this truly *is* paradise. Schools, churches, country club, playground, pool, shopping center. . . . As we say, a family can live a full and happy life and never leave." To which Hope wisecracks, "But they're allowed to, aren't they?"

By the mid-1950s, however, more critical films also began to be produced. At the outset, they did not reflect the ticky-tacky critique, whose condescension and lack of sympathy could hardly win a suburban audience. But the conformity theme—the suburb as a straitjacket—appeared with frequency.

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956), based on Sloan Wilson's best-selling novel, concerns a young executive goaded by his wife's demands for creature comforts and his own guilt for wrongs committed during the war. Switching to a better paying public relations job, he decides to tell his boss "exactly what he wants to hear." But his wife, now fearing that he will "turn into a cheap, slippery 'yes man,' " persuades him to speak his mind—and his boss inadvertently persuades him not to sacrifice his family for his career. The other-directed man triumphs over the inner-directed man (Riesman, Denney, and Glazer 1950). All this takes place against a background rich in suburban iconography—commuter trains, station wagons, martinis, three kids, and a dog. The good life of suburbia can ensnare the unwary, with ambition alienating the breadwinner from those who love him and denuding him of his integrity. But for those (like the protagonist) aware of the trap, ambition can be modulated in the name of more human values. The semi-upbeat lesson: Suburban life is dangerous to the soul but need not be fatal.

No Down Payment (1957), another of the suburban movies based on a popular novel, depicts a lower-middle-class suburban community for young couples on their way up the economic and social ladder. The story is set in the immediate post–World War II era in a Los Angeles suburban tract, Sunrise Hills, complete with a huge development sign proclaiming, "Sunrise Hills Estates, The Happy Ending Homes." The movie's musical score suggests a radical, liberating transition from the crowded stultifying city to the spacious, sun-filled suburbs. But the liberation, of course, is only a sham that cannot survive close scrutiny. There is racial exclusivity, as Sunrise Hills bars for a time a Japanese-American war veteran; conspicuous consumption joins with pecuniary emulation, as each couple tries to outdo the other in backyard cookouts, cocktail parties, and getting ahead financially; and claustrophobic conformity at Sunrise Hills is everywhere. A husband tells his wife, "We are what insurance companies call 'an average family,' " and a wife tells her husband, "You're just another guy, like I'm just another housewife. Nothing big

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or wonderful is ever going to happen to us." Barren and joyless, Sunrise Hills rings false in every particular, even its cheery name. The suburban pursuit of the American dream, the movie teaches, imperils the suburbanites' humanity.

The theme of inauthenticity and materialism is repeated in *Wives and Lovers* (1963), where a carefully decorated suburban living room tells us nothing about its owners, except that they are insecure. Afraid to trust their own instincts, they rely on the judgment of a decorator they hardly know. They may not like the result, but they like what it represents—tangible evidence of good taste and success—and that is what counts.

By the late 1960s, a large portion of the American public—especially the public of primary movie audience age—began to embrace authenticity and sincerity with a zeal that could not be denied. "Do your own thing!" became a mantra for a generation. The bourgeois virtues, all variations on self-restraint, were savaged as anti-life or ridiculed as silly (e.g., Roszak 1969; Reich 1970).

In movies, much of the hostility toward inauthenticity, insincerity, and bourgeois virtues fell on suburbia. In *The Graduate* (1967), a recent college graduate returns to the wealthy Southern California suburb where he was raised. Benjamin is at first confused and then alienated from this environment, whose tawdry hypocrisy is symbolized by his seduction by his girlfriend's mother. The corrupt and vacuous older generation is solidly grounded in a suburban lifestyle that meets all material needs . . . and nothing else. When at a party Benjamin is given the most memorable career advice in American movies—"Plastics"—the celebration of phoniness is complete.

The Swimmer (1968), based on a John Cheever short story, follows a character as he swims home from one upscale suburban Westchester pool to another. On the way, we learn that he is unemployed and detached from his family; the people he encounters become steadily nastier; even swimmers at a public pool make fun of him. Losing his mind, he finally reaches his home to discover that his family has departed; the house stands lifeless and empty, a metaphor for suburbia itself.

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (1969) tracks the antics of two prosperous suburban couples, who, searching for personal growth and understanding, attend a New Age institute and end up swapping spouses. The humbuggery of *haute bourgeois* suburbia may not be disastrous, the film says with a throaty chortle, but certainly is ridiculous.[8]

The Stepford Wives (1975) carried the inauthenticity theme to its logical conclusion. The beautiful wives who live only to please their husbands, it turns out, are merely androids, created as a result of a conspiracy among the husbands and some mad scientists. In this, the film built on the feminist critique of Betty Friedan (1963), who argued that suburbia took educated,

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intelligent women and assigned them the menial role of housewife, which naturally left them bored and frustrated. The ideal suburban housewife, according to this sci-fi satire, literally is not human.

A much softer and (not coincidentally) much more commercially successful look at inauthenticity is *Back to the Future* (1985), which uses time travel to refute the success of the new suburbia. The McFlys are stagnating in a monotonous modern suburb, complete with prototypical fast-food joints. The son goes back 30 years, finding in place of the tract houses he knows an artist's rendering of an American dream brick house surrounded by trees, with a family of four standing beside their Cadillac. The sign beckons, "Live in the Home of Tomorrow, Today"; he replies, "I can hardly wait." Meanwhile, the audience observes the classic small town that will be sacrificed for this false promise: big front porches and white picket fences, tree-lined streets, birds chirping, dogs barking, and crickets serenading with their knees. The warmth and comfort of the small town—a sign announces, "Welcome to Hill Valley: A Nice Place to Live"—are traded for the come-hither look of suburbia, and the consequence is hollowness and despair bred by burgeoning inauthenticity and commercialism.

Everybody's All American (1988) is a cliché-driven tale of the failed marriage of a football star and his gorgeous college sweetheart. Successful, they outgrow Baton Rouge for cushy suburbia, where life—babies, financial pressures, a general loss of innocence—destroys the relationship. With the good times set in the 1950s and the bad times in the 1960s, the movie seems to be making a point about the nation itself, as well as the triviality and evanescence of suburban rewards.

Avalon (1990) chronicles three generations in the life of an Eastern European Jewish immigrant family who settle in Baltimore and eventually leave their row houses for the suburbs. When a child wants to know what the suburbs are, he is told, "The suburbs . . . a nicer place to live . . . lawns and big trees . . . you kids are going to love it . . . it's beautiful . . . we're going to have more room for the whole family." What happens, of course, is that the family is dispersed, never to be reunited again, and what made it unique and authentic simply fades away.

Countering the theme of inauthenticity, dreariness, and conformity were movies flaunting flamboyant revelations that, beneath the veneer of suburban ordinariness, strange things are going on. In the 1970s and 1980s, this was manifested in frankly scary films, such as *Carrie* (1976), *Poltergeist* (1979), *Amityville Horror* (1979), and the various *Nightmares on Elm Street* (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989). In the late 1980s and 1990s, these terror fantasies were joined by tongue-in-cheek satires that poked fun less at suburban life than at its bland, banal, media representations: In *Heathers* (1989), one Heather

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murders three others to solidify her position as the prettiest and most popular girl at her high school; *Meet the Applegates* (1991) features nonhumans intent on replacing one family at a time until everyone is an insect; *Parents* (1989) focuses on an archetypical suburban Mom and Dad, who dine on human flesh; and *Serial Mom* (1995) concerns a killer who seems like Beaver Cleaver's mother but whose victim list would make a Ted Bundy envious. *Coneheads* (1993) tells of another suburban family from outer space. They do not even look normal.

Eccentrics also abound in *True Stories* (1986), a film about Virgil, Texas, an edge city in the middle of nowhere that is sprouting instant suburban subdivisions in every direction. The theme song, "People Like Us," proclaims, "We don't want justice. We just want someone to love." Yet Virgil seems less interested in Eros than in . . . shopping. The mall has replaced downtown as the heart and soul of the community, for shopping is the one activity that now brings people together—"shopping is a feeling."

Everyone in Virgil is at least a little strange, like the Lying Woman, who claims affairs with Burt Reynolds and the "real Rambo" and declares that Mike Wallace is after her body, and the Laziest Woman in the World, who never gets out of bed, where she dines from an automatic feeder, plays the stock market, and watches TV all day. These folks seem normal despite their weirdness and weird despite their normality. According to the main character, "There's something special about people like us," perhaps suggesting that there is something special about everybody. The director, David Byrne, believes that "there are a lot of places like Virgil—the way people live, the places they work and the kind of community they experience when a new industry is taking over." Rebutting the ticky-tacky critics, *True Stories*' narrator lauds the tract architecture's "multi-purpose shape—a box . . . who's to say it isn't beautiful?"

Meanwhile, Steven Spielberg generated suburban-set movies with his characteristic mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the sacred and the profane. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), a major commercial success, saw an ordinary lower-middle-class suburban family meet with a passenger from a UFO from another world. Even more profitable was *E.T.* (1981), which portrayed an extraterrestrial's visit to an upscale suburban family. Standard suburban images are everywhere: a lighted nighttime grid of a housing development, littered construction sites, a suburban home with a wide driveway, generous kitchen, and big backyard. Nearby, though, is a forest of dense, sylvan beauty.

Strangeness in suburbia is also the subject of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), which opens with a shot of a gothic castle atop a hill next to a look-alike bedroom community of pastel Cape Cods, a 1950s candy cane Levittown

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of middle-class tackiness. The husbands all commute to work and return at exactly the same time, and town life consists of the gossip, recipes, and intrigues the housewives exchange between breakfast and dinner. People who are different—like Edward, who has razor-sharp scissors where his fingers should be—may at first be coveted as curiosities but are eventually shunned. They are what they are, and their authenticity prevents them from fitting into an inauthentic environment.

More playful are *Neighbors* (1981), *Compromising Positions* (1985), *Married to the Mob* (1988), *The 'Burbs* (1989), and *My Blue Heaven* (1990). *Compromising Positions*, a satiric look at upper-middle-class suburbia (and at whodunits), follows a plucky Long Island housewife as she solves the murder of her philandering periodontist. In the course of the investigation, many apparently conventional lives are shown to be anything but. *Married to the Mob* takes an old clichéd character, the unhappy suburban housewife, and adds the twist that her husband is a gangster. He dies, and she flees with her son to New York to start her life afresh. Again, suburban propriety is not what it seems; indeed, it is the urge to build a wholesome life that leads her to leave for the big city. A typical block in a typical suburb is the locale of both *Neighbors* and *The 'Burbs*, where typical suburbanites must deal with decidedly atypical neighbors. *My Blue Heaven* is set in a postcard-pretty Southern California beachfront suburb, which is the new home of a gangster placed in the federal witness protection program. He is surprised and pleased to encounter a number of Mob associates, who have been located nearby.

Later 1990s suburban movies were also notable for satire, often with an attitude. In this, movies paralleled a similar development on television. The paradigmatic TV suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s by then seemed as out of date as colonial Williamsburg—*Father Knows Best* became father knows nothing. With this in mind, television—particularly the upstart Fox network that began by targeting young audiences—developed outrageous comedies that lampooned the earlier conventions. *Married with Children*, for example, featured not a prosperous professional, a dutiful housewife, and their playful children but a ladies shoe store salesman, his bon-bon eating and soap opera watching wife, and their nyphomaniacal, idiot daughter and cranky, virginal son. *The Simpsons* departed from the old norms, relying on animation to attack myth and convention.

There seems little doubt that television, by demonstrating that there was a large market for over-the-top suburban portrayals, helped push movies into a more radical direction. With this, television was returning the favor, for it was movies that had earlier adopted a much more challenging stance than television, which called itself "a guest in America's home."

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THE REEL VERSUS THE REAL AMERICAN SUBURB

Suburbia—in truth, perhaps, "a new kind of peripheral, low density city"—has become the "true center of American life" (Fishman 1987, 249, 248). For decades the dominant mode of residential living in the United States, suburbs have evolved, becoming more varied and complex, more self-sufficient, and more interdependent. But however they have changed, they remain for most Americans the most feasible path to the good life. Yet postwar intellectuals have long dismissed suburbs as esthetically banal, spiritually empty, and materialistically obsessed. Said to extinguish individuality, ticky-tacky houses reflect the homogeneity of their occupants, and even prosperous suburbanites cannot escape the heavy grasp of conformity.

Once American movies outgrew their preoccupation with big cities and small towns, they began to take these suburban critiques to heart. At first, these movies were friendly, tongue-in-cheek satires, but by the mid-1950s, the conformity theme began to be explored, sometimes rather aggressively. By the late 1960s, when authenticity was as popular as marijuana and conformity as popular as the military draft, attacks on suburbia became commonplace; the focus on authenticity and conformity has remained paramount to this day. This is reflected not only in small-budget independent movies but in large studio pictures as well.

The dominant cinematic representations of the American postwar suburb have been dim, without regard to genre, director, whether produced by Hollywood or independently, fiction feature or documentary, or directed at a mass audience or niches. Indeed, suburban-centered movies have been even more likely to adhere to negative stereotypes than suburban-set movies.[9] And as serious American films have become increasingly dark and ironic (see Muzzio 1996 on the steadily grimmer images of the American city), this anti-suburban tendency has become even more pronounced.

Movies represent an important element in the nation's ongoing discourse about the nature of suburbia and, indeed, about the nature of America itself. Who is doing the talking? The filmmakers, with their rat-a-tat of negativity, berate the suburbs, what they represent (bourgeois America), how they are popularly depicted (television), and what they lead to (shallow, narrow, hollow lives). The irony is delicious. A medium that is entirely about artifice scolds suburbia for its inauthenticity.

Meanwhile, not only were filmmakers taking notice of the suburbs, but scholars were also taking another look, offering portraits at odds with the prevailing dominant representation in popular culture and the arts, including movies (Baxandall and Ewen 2000; Kelly 1993). The suburbs, according to revisionists, expanded the American Dream rather than perverted it; the

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suburbs may not be paradise—there is no paradise on earth, they remind us—but they are emphatically not hell, either. At the same time, affectionate portraits of suburban life began to appear in well-received memoirs (e.g., Goodwin 1997; Waldie 1996). Academics called for liberating the suburbs from stale stereotypes; some targeted moviemakers as the chief offenders (see McCrummen and Rothfield 2001), and others blamed scholars themselves (Harris and Lewis 2001; Sies 2001a, 2001b).

Who is listening to all this talk? It does not appear that the sermons of filmmakers resonate widely. In an ever more prosperous America, it seems churlish and stupid to nag those who seek happiness or salvation from shopping, backyard barbeques, or weekend home improvement. Filmmakers, heirs to the anti-suburbia intellectuals, may speak—but the current audience seems as impervious to their message as an earlier audience was to the message of their progenitors.

However it was viewed a half century ago, suburbia is certainly not seen today as heaven on earth or a panacea. Rather, it is simply the way life is—and, therefore, imperfect. Yet with all its imperfections, it still appears to most of the country—those who like being there and those who would like to live there—as the best alternative today's America can offer. It is no wonder, then, that although anti-suburban movies have frequently generated attention, few have found big audiences, and none has been a blockbuster. Indeed, suburbanites may well believe that the suburbia of the movies—with their parade of predictable icons and their attacks on predictable targets—resembles the one they know only in superficial ways. Like the suburbs of antediluvian sitcoms, movie suburbs may have speckles of reality here and there but are best seen as geographically sited cliché clusters. For although the audience recognizes the effluvia of the movies as true—the familiar surroundings, the petty inconveniences, the mundane chores—it does not recognize suburban life as ridiculous, depressing, or life denying. The problem is not that the movies' suburbia departs from the scholars' suburbia; for moviemakers are not scholars, and no one turns to movies for scholarship. Instead, the movies' suburbia departs from the audience's suburbia. The reel is not the real.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE STUDY

This study represents a reconnaissance of the terrain of the American cinematic suburb. The movies discussed here and the themes addressed are illustrative, not exhaustive. Among the topics unaddressed are the following: Why the continuing negativity toward suburbia in films, while American society becomes ever more suburban demographically and culturally? If

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current audiences of suburbanites seem impervious to the anti-suburban messages, what accounts for the recurrence of this theme in fin de siècle movies? That is, why do filmmakers, with their obvious desire for finding a market and making a profit, continue to return to this anti-suburban theme in light of the American public's longstanding preference for suburban living? The studios, after all, are corporations seeking profits, not patrons of the arts. But our concern here is not the movies but rather how they illuminate American suburbs, and so we leave this question for others.[10]

NOTES

1. In this study, we employ the insights of film theories but not their specialized vocabularies. Film theory has been broadly preoccupied over time with authorship, text and intertextuality, and audience. Proponents of mass culture theory, stressing the economic contexts in which popular movies were produced, claimed that Hollywood movies were so easy to consume that they required no effort on the part of the audiences. This view was challenged by auteur theorists, who contended that individual filmmakers were able to express rich and complex personal visions while working within the studio system. Genre theorists, in turn, challenged the privileging of individual filmmakers, emphasizing the textual structures and conventions in subject matter and the values within which moviemakers operated. Other theorists analyzed stars and star images; still others focused on intertextuality and semiotics (Hollows and Jancovich 1995). There are also Marxist, psychoanalytic, and feminist film theorists.

2. Sometimes the intention is easy to infer from the material. Any viewer of *Dead End* (1937), for instance, would say that its purpose is to indict the American political, economic, and social system for the suffering and pathologies of its slum dwellers. Often, however, there seems to be more than one intention, and they need not harmonize. *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Little Caesar* (1931)—and their genre descendants—appear both to celebrate (as a success story) and to condemn (as vicious and immoral) the careers of their gangster protagonists (Munby 1999).

3. Given the scores of American movies set at least in part in American suburbs, the choice of movies to be analyzed is necessarily selective. One criterion we used for post–World War II films was popular and critical success. Popular success was operationalized as ranking among a year's top 50 films in box office receipts. Box office figures are drawn from *Variety*, which began tallying box office performance in 1942. *Variety* has also estimated the top box office hits from the silent (1912-1929) and early sound eras (1930s). Critical success was operationalized in terms of major awards/award nominations (Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, New York Film Critics Circle Awards, National Board of Review Top Ten Films, National Society of Film Critics Awards, Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards, Cannes International Film Festival Awards, and the U.S./Sundance Film Festival Awards), listing in the *National Film Registry*, and recognition by the American Film Institute as among the top 400 American movies. We also included movies that were neither popular nor critical successes but seemed to us cinematically or thematically innovative (e.g., *No Down Payment*) and/or illustrative (e.g., *The Brady Bunch Movie*).

4. There is no agreed-on definition or set of characteristics of the American suburb. See, for instance, the 1999 dialogue on the H-Urban discussion list (H-UBAN@H-NET.MSU.EDU), as

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well as Sharpe and Wallock (1994), Harris and Lewis (2001), and Sies (2001a, 2001b) and the sources cited therein.

5. A third critique depicted suburbs as refuges from race or class "undesirables" (see, e.g., Kirp, Dwyer, and Rosenthal 1995, 6; Massey and Denton 1993). But attributing the rise of suburbia to bigotry would alienate potential suburban audiences far more than the anti-bourgeois critiques, and so it has always been avoided by filmmakers. Aliens—the outer space kind, such as E.T. and the Coneheads—are the only minorities in the reel American suburb.

6. Perhaps the most widely viewed and influential film on America's conception of the pre–World War II suburb was not produced by Hollywood but by the American Institute of Planners. *The City* (1939) ran for 55 minutes and was shown several times daily at the Theatre of the Science and Education Building of the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. The script, cowritten by Lewis Mumford (and based on his *The Culture of Cities*) and regarded as "a turning point in American film history" (Engle 1965), presented an ideal agrarian past, castigated the dangerous and oppressive urban present, and looked toward a communitarian suburban future modeled after the form and rhythm of rural America. But this possible future, the film tells us, is not just a simple update of small-town and rural America. It is an improvement.

7. Dramas could honor suburbs too. *The Desperate Hours* (1955) saw escaped convicts commandeer an idyllic suburban home and the paterfamilias fight back. The comfort and security of suburbia are made more potent by their interruption, and the heroism of the father shows that the good life need not breed softness.

8. The suburbs were also featured in adults-only movies, such as *Sin in the Suburbs* (1965), which told lurid tales of explicit sex, and *The Lifestyle* (2000), a documentary about middle-aged, politically conservative suburbanites, whose only apparent departure from utter conventionality is group sex.

9. Table 1 presents a filmography for this essay, including top 50 money-grossing status and critical awards, as well as positive/negative ratings from +2 to –2, which suggest the depth, breadth, and sharpness of the images of the suburb presented in the film as considered by the authors. Clearly, such ratings have inescapable elements of idiosyncrasy. They are meant to be evocative, not exact.

10. One answer may be that American filmmakers, heirs to a fashionable intellectual tradition of hostility to suburbs, have incorporated these views into their films. By expressing their contempt for bourgeois society, they may hope to establish their intellectual and moral superiority to it.

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TABLE 1: Postwar U.S. Suburban Movies

Title	*Year*	*Suburban Centered or Set*	*Positive or Negative (+/– 2)*	*Awards Nominations*	*Top 50*[a]
American Beauty	1999	Centered	–2	AA, GG	Top 50 (29)
Pleasantville	1998	Centered	–2	BFCA	
Apt Pupil	1998	Set	0		
The Truman Show	1998	Centered	–2	BFCA	Top 25 (13)
Happiness	1998	Centered	–2	NBR	
Ice Storm	1997	Centered	–1		
Judy Berlin	1997	Centered	–1		
Wonderland	1997	Centered	–1		
Suburbia	1996	Centered	–2		
Mallrats	1996	Centered	–1		
Daytrippers	1996	Centered	–2		
Welcome to the Dollhouse	1995	Centered	–2		
The Brady Bunch Movie	1995	Centered	–1		
Clerks	1994	Centered	–2		
Trust	1992	Centered	–2		
Serial Mom	1993	Set	+1		
Coneheads	1993	Set	+1		
Meet the Applegates	1991	Set	+1		
Edward Scissorhands	1990	Centered	–2		Top 50 (40)
Avalon	1990	Centered	–1	AA	
My Blue Heaven	1990	Set	+1		
Unbelievable Truth	1990	Centered	–1		
Parents	1989	Set	+1		
The 'Burbs	1989	Centered	–1		
Married to the Mob	1988	Set	–1		

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Everybody's All American	1988	Centered	–1		
True Stories	1986	Centered	+1		
Back to the Future	1985	Centered		AA, AFI 400, NBR	Top 25 (1)
Neighbors	1985	Centered			Top 25
E.T.	1982	Set	+1	AA, GG, LAFCA	Top 25 (1)
Carrie	1976	Set	–2		
Poltergeist	1976	Set	–1		Top 25 (8)
Stepford Wives	1975	Centered	–2		
Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice	1969	Set	0		Top 25
The Swimmer	1968	Centered	–2		
The Graduate	1967	Centered	–1	NBR AA, AFI 100	Top 25 (1)
Bachelor in Paradise	1961	Centered	–1		
Please Don't Eat the Daisies	1960	Centered	+1		Top 25
No Down Payment	1957	Centered	–2		
Man in the Gray Flannel Suit	1956	Centered	–2		Top 25
Father's Little Dividend	1951	Set	+2		Top 25 (10)
Father of the Bride	1950	Set	+2	AA	Top 25 (6)
Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House	1948	Centered	+2		
Miracle on 34th Street	1947	—	+2	AA	Top 50 (45)
It's a Wonderful Life	1946	—	+2	AA, AFI 100	Top 50 (26)

NOTE: AA = Academy Award for Best Picture, Director, or Screenplay; AFI 100 = American Film Institute top 100 films; BFCA = Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards; GG = Golden Globe Awards; LAFCA = Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards; NBR = National Board of Review.

a. Given the scores of American movies set at least in part in American suburbs, the choice of movies to be analyzed is necessarily selective. One criterion we used for post–World War II films was popular and critical success. Popular success was operationalized as ranking among a year's top 50 films in box office receipts. Box office figures are drawn from *Variety*, which began tallying box office performance in 1942. *Variety* has also estimated the top box office hits from the silent (1912-1929) and early sound eras (1930s). Critical success was operationalized in terms of major awards/award nominations (Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, New York Film Critics Circle Awards, National Board of Review Top Ten Films, National Society of Film Critics Awards, Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards, Cannes International Film Festival Awards, and the U.S./Sundance Film Festival Awards), listing in the *National Film Registry*, and recognition by the American Film Institute as among the top 400 American movies. We also included movies that were neither popular nor critical successes but seemed to us cinematically or thematically innovative (e.g., *No Down Payment*) and/or illustrative (e.g., *The Brady Bunch Movie*).

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