Introduction:
Scenes from the Suburbs

As America moves to the suburbs, the motion pictures move with it. In the past two decades there have been more films and television programmes set in suburbia than ever before. Films such as *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), *Far From Heaven* (Haynes, 2002), *Brick* (Johnson, 2005), *Juno* (Reitmann, 2007) and *Lakeview Terrace* (Labute, 2008), and television shows like *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–6), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–12), *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005–present), and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–present) have won commercial as well as critical acclaim, drawing large audiences to the cinema or the couch, picking up nominations for Oscars and Sundance Awards, Emmys and Golden Globes, and almost without exception receiving glowing reviews. ‘There is’, as the social theorists Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper have remarked, ‘nothing odd about this. With most Americans living in suburbs by the mid-1990s – and many more hoping to – preoccupation with suburbia is natural.’ Indeed, the only thing that is odd is that the artistic fascination for suburbs has so far appeared to have passed by media scholars and film critics unnoticed. To date, only a small bookshelf of books, articles and reviews have been published that discuss suburban narratives; moreover only a very small percentage of that bookshelf exclusively concentrates on film and/or television. ‘In the still-developing history of the postwar United States,’ the historians Kevin Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue point out, ‘suburbs belong at center stage.’ But they rarely do. This book is concerned with redressing this injustice by looking at the representation of suburbs in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century film and television across a variety of genres and contexts.

One of the reasons, perhaps, that suburban film and television have thus far been given such short shrift is that there is a sense among scholars that the tradition is as uninteresting, as mediocre as its subject was long thought to be. As the literary scholar Catherine Jurca has observed in her canonical study *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century*
American Novel, the suburban canon is commonly associated with ‘tropes of typicality and ‘mediocrity’, and a focus on the ‘safe, shallow and shadowless’. Indeed, a browse through some of the critical literature on suburban fiction quickly renders terms like ‘two-dimensional’, ‘limited’, and ‘boring’. Another word that keeps popping up is ‘clichéd’. The otherwise so nuanced film scholar Andrew Britton has even gone as far as describing suburban fiction as ‘anaesthetic’: a tradition that is as distasteful as it is desensitising. The typical view of the suburban story is that it critiques the pretence of the middle classes – their taste for the tacky, their social conformity, their blandness, the absence of a moral compass. It is the kind of tale in which the pretty white picket fence secretes a graveyard, or the spectacular picture window hides abuse in plain sight. As Robert Beuka remarks:


Franco Moretti has written that ‘each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story.’ If one is to believe the critics who have written about suburban stories over the past century, the suburb encourages a two-dimensional, dualist story that finds it fit somewhere between Dante’s purgatory and Sigmund Freud’s thesis on civilization and its discontents.

Over the past few years numerous scholars have sought to problematise these kinds of assumptions. The most common response has been to simply turn the attention to other kinds of stories and other kinds of suburbs. Beuka, for instance, has argued for closer examination of suburban narratives that divert from the typical route so as to show that there is more to the suburban story than Dante, Freud or Marcuse. Film scholar Shaun Huston has pleaded for research into different types of suburbs, such as post-suburbia, edge cities and exurbs. And the historian Benjamin Wiggins has suggested that numerous suburban texts are concerned with ethnically diverse sets of characters that deserve further critical investigation. Such studies are certainly imperative for broadening our appreciation of the tradition. They show us that the typical view of suburban stories is selective. But they do not fundamentally deepen our understanding. They are not concerned with demonstrating that the standard view is also reductive. On the contrary. When Beuka writes, for
instance, that he only discusses texts that ‘offer compelling evidence of the heterotopic nature of suburbia’ in contrast ‘to the more simplistic visions of suburbia from postwar television and the recent spate of antisuburban films’, he draws attention to the extent to which the typical view is selective whilst acknowledging that it does apply to many texts. In order to deepen the understanding of the suburban story this book therefore does not so much look away as look awry. It looks at the clichéd suburban story but from another point of view. As Slavoj Žižek has demonstrated in his discussion of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), perspective is corollary to meaning. Seen frontally, *The Ambassadors* is simply a portrait of two learned diplomats. Viewed from the side, however, a skull appears. From this angle, the intellectual pursuits of the diplomats are less a celebration of life than a contemplation on mortality. Merely by taking a step to the side, the viewer completely changes the meaning of the painting. Thus far, most scholarship that has looked at suburban film and television has scrutinised the tradition’s thematic concerns and dualist plot motifs. But film and television are more than novels with illustrations. Meaning is produced not simply by dialogue, but by the relationship between dialogue, colour, composition, editing, rhythm, acting, space and so on. Sidestepping, I wish to look at the tradition’s stylistic register more broadly in order to see how the typical suburban story’s tropes interact with, are related to, the tradition’s broader aesthetic palette.

This does not mean that I wish to reconceptualise the notion of the suburban ‘anaesthetic’ into something of a *vulgari eloquentia*, a celebratory poetics of the everyday, of the commonplace, as is increasingly common. Over the years, the suburb has encouraged texts both ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’, complex and simplistic, challenging and clichéd – just as any other environment has. While being sympathetic to the aims of such eulogies (for these gestures often prove necessary for rendering a cultural practice a ‘worthy’ object of study) and while certainly being sensitive to the particular aesthetic qualities and quirks of the suburban narrative, I am not interested in canonising the suburban narrative, writing it into the broader literary or cinematic annals, but rather in capturing its nature within its own possible terms (which comes closer, perhaps, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s project of minor literatures).

It is also not my intention to compare the historical or geographical development of the suburban narrative to processes of suburbanisation – or, for that matter, post-suburbanisation. I certainly appreciate the merit in relating cultural practices to the economical, political and socio-cultural realities they emerge from – I will, indeed, situate a number of films and series within western modern and postmodern discourses – and naturally
I am aware that such practices in turn inform those realities; yet I do not see the point in measuring representations to ‘reality’ along the lines of true and false, objective and subjective, ‘realistic’ and unrealistic, and so on. Representation and ‘reality’ dialectically influence each other, but are not of the same order. As years of Derrida-, Barthes- and de Saussure-inflected film studies have established, the qualities of texts should be measured as differences within the discursive realm, not through their similarities to referents in the phenomenal realm commonly referred to as ‘reality’. (Either way, I feel the latter kind of research, the kind of research prevalent in suburban studies, would be more befitting of a cultural historical, sociological or anthropological study.)

In this book I examine the ways in which the space of the US suburb is produced in the stories it produces. I look at five types of texts, each of which is industrially, medially, generically, topically, and geographically distinct from the others: Gary Ross’s 1998 top-grossing Hollywood family film *Pleasantville*; Todd Solondz’s independent ‘smart’ film *Happiness* (1998); the popular ABC post-feminist drama *Desperate Housewives* (2004–present); FOX’s postmodern animated sitcoms *The Simpsons* (1989–present) and *King of the Hill* (1997–2010); and the three high school noirs *Brick* (Johnson, 2005), *Chumscrubber* (Posin, 2005), and *Alpha Dog* (Cassavetes, 2006). I look at the ways in which the suburb is produced in suburban narratives through three distinct yet overlapping lenses: the suburb as fictional world (Chapter 1); the suburban mise-en-scène (Chapters 2 and 3) and the cultural geography of the suburb (Chapters 4 and 5). Throughout the book, I will also take into account issues of transmediality and medium specificity (all chapters, but particularly Chapters 1 and 3), texture (Chapter 3), genre (all chapters, but particularly Chapters 1 and 4), geography (Chapter 2), ethnicity (briefly in Chapter 4) gender (Chapter 4), and age (Chapter 5). In what follows below I elaborate on the particular scope of the book, explain my methodology, account for my choice of films and television programmes, and give a brief outline of each of the chapters.

**Some Notes on the Book’s Scope**

One of the key reasons for concerning myself exclusively with contemporary suburban narratives is that thus far, the few studies that have engaged themselves with suburban stories have been histories. To my knowledge, there has been no in-depth study of contemporary US suburban films and television programmes. From Jurca’s canonical study of the suburban novel to Beuka’s account of the suburban habitus, from Edward
Dimendberg’s excellent study of the suburbanisation of film noir to Martin Dines’s equally insightful account of suburban queer literature, and more or less all books, essays and reviews in between, discussions of suburban stories have been almost exclusively historical, tracing the development of the suburban chronotope across the nineteenth and twentieth century. To be sure, such historical studies have been invaluable in establishing the suburban narrative as a canon worthy of critical examination, and have provided insightful historical contextualisation of contemporary trends and tendencies. One widespread belief that Jurca especially has proven wrong and that deserves special recognition here is that the suburban critique originates in the 1950s. As recent studies by Mark Clapson and Muzzio and Halper show, this belief remains particularly persistent. In his otherwise impressive 2002 study Suburban Century, Clapson still begins his history of suburban criticism by citing Lewis Mumford’s 1961 now clichéd polemic against the ‘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’ before discussing Lionel Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd and William H. Whyte’s The Organization Man. Muzzio and Halper, too, cite Mumford (and, unsurprisingly, the same segment), after which they mention the likes of Richard Yates, Sloan Wilson and John Keats. With respect to film, according to the film scholar Stanley Solomon, ‘[m]ovie attitudes towards the suburbs turned negative in the 1950s’. John Archer has suggested that ‘Hollywood [. . .] offered darker takes’ only from Nunnally Johnson’s 1956 The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit onwards.

In White Diaspora Jurca has traced the historical roots of the thematic preoccupations and representative categories that the critiques of the likes of Riesman, Yates and Johnson are typically structured around – architectural homogeneity, class uniformity, racial exclusion, gender inequality, alienation and despair – to discover that they go back as far as the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the earliest works she discusses are Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt from 1922 and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan of the Apes, published in 1912. As she concludes, resistance to the suburb is nothing new. [. . .] [V]eneer stripping has been a mainstay of the suburban novel since the twenties. Suburbanites have long been characterized by alienation, anguish, and self-pity. The literary treatment of suburban masculinity, in other words, has never really had a bright side for contemporary novelists newly to refute. Writers since the 1960s have not invented a tradition so much as carried on and reworked the legacy of suburban homelessness that emerged so insistently in Babbitt.
I do not intend to write a history of suburban film or television here, but I suspect that further study would reveal that suburban films and television programmes, too, ‘never really had a bright side’. Edmund Goulding’s 1939 melodrama *Dark Victory*, for instance, already meditates the vicissitudes of suburban life through tropes of mundanity and repetitiveness, while Frank Capra’s screwball comedy *It Happened One Night* (1934) is themed around status anxiety, conformity, boredom and alienation. I feel one might even convincingly contend that a number of suburban films and shorts produced in the 1920s and 1910s were covertly critical of their subject. William A. Seiter’s 1926 comedy *Skinner’s Dress Suit*, for example, presents the suburbanite as an undistinguished, emasculated commuter; in an earlier melodrama like Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* (1915), the suburban wife is portrayed as bored, isolated and (sexually) frustrated. Indeed, criticism of suburbia had already been so widespread in the years before the Second World War, that by the time the poet Phyllis McGinley wrote her wonderful appraisal of suburbia in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1949, the condemnation of suburbia (as ‘a symbol of all that is middle-class in the worst sense, of smug and prosperous mediocrity’) had already become something of a ‘cliche’.

Another reason I will concentrate on films from the last twenty-five years, one that I already touched upon, is that the relatively short time span allows me to look in more detail at issues of style. Jurca has rightly noted that most criticism of the suburban canon, perhaps precisely because it has been historical, has been characterised by an emphasis on sociology rather than aesthetics. Critics read the suburban text as parable of the American Dream, as an allegory of the bourgeoisie, or a study of human frailties. But they rarely take into account the stories’ particular poetic and aesthetic qualities. In ‘reviews and popular references’, Jurca writes, ‘the significance of *Babbitt*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and the Rabbit novels, among others, has been cast in terms of the truth and utility of their insights into assessments of American Society rather more often than in terms of aesthetics.’ Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*, for instance, is praised for its ‘anthropologist’s tenacity’ and ‘invaluable gloss on Middletown’, while *Babbitt* is described as a ‘portrait of an American Citizen’, ‘fiction only by a sort of courtesy’. Unfortunately, Jurca herself does little to redress this critical imbalance, nor do any of the other critics. But just as Jurca deems it pertinent to ask whether in suburban prose and poetry there is such a thing as a suburban rhythm, form or vocabulary, I think it rather relevant to the study of suburban film and television whether there is such a thing as suburban editing, a suburban cinematography, a suburban colour palette, or a suburban mise-en-scène, a suburban performance,
and so forth. In this book I consider suburban television programmes and films not merely as illustrations of or reflections upon a certain Zeitgeist, but also as a particularly salient moment in a larger aesthetic tradition.

Methodology (Between the two Lefebvres)

[Every society produces a space, its own space . . .

Henri Lefebvre28

Over the past few years, the number of studies within the field of film and television scholarship that have set out to integrate one or another tradition of textual analysis with a particular strand of thinking about or through space has increased exponentially. Indeed, I think it is legitimate to speak of a ‘spatial turn’ in film studies and to a lesser extent television scholarship comparable to that in cultural studies a quarter of a century ago. Some of these studies turn to space in order to examine film or television. Scholars like Deborah Thomas, Gilberto Perez and George Wilson, for instance, examine space in order to understand the epistemology and fictional ontology of the cinematic apparatus,29 while the likes of Edward Dimendberg and Lynn Spigel have examined space primarily so as to comprehend the aesthetic of a genre or representative modus.30 Others turn to film or television so as to interrogate space. Film theorists such as Charlotte Brunsdon, Mark Shiel and Paula Massood examine textual elements so that they can come to grips with the spatial representation of a place, most often a city but sometimes the country.31 Although I have written this book in the latter tradition, and certainly do not wish to give the impression that this study holds its own as an integration of the two disciplines, I do have the hope that this study – my analyses of Pleasantville (Chapter 1), Happiness (Chapter 2), and The Simpsons and King of the Hill (Chapter 3) in particular – will be as helpful in thinking about cinematic and televisual space as they will be in contemplating the nature of media, genre, texture and style.

Methodologically, this study oscillates between two analytical discourses: on the one hand the kind of close textual analysis proposed by the likes of V. F. Perkins, Robin Wood and Laura Mulvey in Movie and more recently critics like Sarah Cardwell, Andrew Klevan and Martin Lefebvre (the first of the two Lefebvres); and on the other hand, what the Anglo-Saxons call cultural geography and on the continent tends to be referred to as spatial theory, linked to the work of Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Edward Soja, and above all Henri Lefebvre (the second Lefebvre). However, there is much between these two discourses, among
them fictional world theory (Chapter 1), urban studies (Chapter 4), architectural theory (Chapter 4), phenomenology (Chapter 1), and thoughts on narrative space (Chapter 2). I discuss the two extremes of the continuum below, but one should not assume that these theorists and theories are the only ones I will draw on throughout this book. Indeed, although this book is held together by a shared theoretical concern – cinematic and televisual spaces of the suburb – it is not held together by an all-encompassing methodological framework. I hope that part of the strength of this book is precisely that each of the individual discussions makes use of a different set of tools in order to consider the spatiality of the suburb.

The work of the late French philosopher Henri Lefebvre has been indispensible to my thinking about space. As Foucault has remarked, academia – and film and television studies are no exception – has traditionally been preoccupied with time.32 Up until the 1980s, if there was any notice of space at all, it was as an existential a priori at the least or a mathematical formula at the most. Lefebvre was among the first thinkers to turn his attention to space as a social construct, anticipating what is now commonly referred to as the spatial turn in cultural studies. The social, Lefebvre argued, is intrinsically spatial, while, vice versa, space is social: ‘[s]ocial relations [...]. have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the space itself.’33 What Lefebvre means by this is that space is both the condition for social relationships, in the sense that space concretises the relationship, and its consequence, in that the space is shaped in the image of those people controlling it. As Edward Soja, who calls space spatiality, has put it:

Spatiality is a substantiated and recognizable social product, part of ‘second nature’ which incorporates as it socializes and transforms both physical and psychological spaces. [...] As a social product, spatiality is simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationship. [...] The spatio-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship [...] are materially constituted, made concrete.34

In his magnum opus The Production of Space Lefebvre ponders the possibility of what he terms ‘spatiology’ or ‘spatio-analysis’35 – a ‘unitary theory’36 of the construction of space.37 Lefebvre’s definition of spatiology differs from chapter to chapter, from paragraph to paragraph, and requires much more attention than I am able to devote to it here. For argument’s sake it suffices to describe it here simply as the attempt to come to an understanding of the ways in which social reality (usually the domain of the field of sociology), space (a concept exclusive to studies of
geometry) and one’s everyday experience of the world (the sine qua non of phenomenology) presuppose and produce one another. As Lefebvre puts it himself, spatiology should provide a ‘language common to practice and theory, as also to inhabitants, architects and scientists’.  

I share Lefebvre’s aims to come to, if not a unitary, then at least a prismatic understanding of ways in which the space of, in my case, the cinematic and televisual suburb is constructed. I seek to provide a language common to film and television studies and critical theory and spatial studies; a language that allows for studies of the ontology of a particular spatiality (Chapter 1) as much as for analyses of the editing, cinematography and mise-en-scène connoting space (Chapters 2 and 3) as for observations of social discourses and performativities inferring a certain sense of place (Chapters 4 and 5).

I realise that the discipline of spatial studies has developed since the publication of *The Production of Space* in 1974. Even today, however, Lefebvre’s writings remain something of a *lingua franca* in spatial studies. Each of the contemporary critical theorists and cultural geographers I engage with in this book, for instance, from Massey and David Sibley to Michel de Certeau, still return to Lefebvre in order to, respectively, come to terms with the socio-economic, ethnic and gendered differentiation of space, understand postmodern spatialities, or rethink the spatiality of everyday life in general and the relationship between place and space in particular. I, too, albeit mostly implicitly, return to Lefebvre’s writings, not as a book of rules or, to use a spatial metaphor, a route planner by which to review space, but rather as a map outlining the numerous ways in which one may or may not approach the construction of space in film and television. Each of the chapters is informed by and interrogates numerous theories of space. In Chapter 1 for instance, I take into account theories of fictional world making, while in Chapters 2 and 3, I consider theories about cognitive mapping, rhythm and graphic space.

The other Lefebvre the title of this section refers to is the French film scholar Martin Lefebvre. While Henri Lefebvre represents the critical...
Discourse of spatial theory, I take Martin Lefebvre to represent the critical discourse of textual analysis. I purposely use the phrase ‘critical discourse’ to describe the practice of close textual analysis here, because there is, as I come to discuss shortly, much debate about what the practice might entail. In his essay ‘Between Landscape and Setting’, Martin Lefebvre distinguishes between space as landscape and space as setting. With setting he intends ‘above all else the space for story and event: it is the scenery of and theatre for what will happen’. One might think here of, say, the whole of the fictional world of the American Pie trilogy (1999, 2001, 2003), as well as of specific ‘sites of action’ such as the school, the home, the bedroom, and so on. Lefebvre describes a landscape, on the other hand, as ‘space freed from eventhood’. A cinematic landscape is a space that is presented not merely as a condition and container for presence, but rather, as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has put it elsewhere, is ‘itself the entire presence’. With landscapes one might think of the prairies in Terrence Malick’s Badlands (1973), but also of the temps morts in Antonioni’s films. In this book, I concern myself exclusively with texts that present the suburb not merely as setting, but also as landscape.

Thus far I agree with Lefebvre. I too believe there are shots that further the plot and shots that do not contribute to the development of plot. I disagree with Lefebvre, however, with respect to his treatment of setting and landscape as narrative principles. According to Lefebvre, setting ensures narrative progress, while landscape ‘halts the progression for the spectator’. He further suggests that shots that do not further the plot can only be interpreted as spectacles or moments of contemplation. What Lefebvre and I disagree on is that, for Lefebvre, plot and narrative are one and the same thing, whereas for me plot refers purely to the Aristotelian concept of structuring actions whereas narrative relates to the film’s complete development, including tone, rhythm, the audio-visual field, sense of place, and mood of the world. In this sense, I would suggest that although they might not further the plot, landscape shots do contribute to the narrative’s unfolding. For instance, I would be inclined to assert that in Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow Up (1966), one of the films Lefebvre talks about, the landscapes are never merely moments of spectacle or contemplation, but rather narrative instruments in creating a rhythm and a ‘mood’ that contribute to the film’s project.

My disagreement with Lefebvre may seem like semantic pernicketiness but it is, in fact, a disagreement about the ontology of the cinematic apparatus as such. For Lefebvre, working within the tradition of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, space and narrative, which here
resembles plot, are distinct categories. As Gary Cooper has written in a commentary on Bordwell, this tradition treats plot as a ‘dramaturgical’ entity abstractly distinguishable from the medium, and the story we infer on its basis even more so. Thus, although Bordwell takes pains to point out that no movie story could exist without spatialization, he leaves the impression that such tales are not themselves immanently spatial. They happen to occur ‘in’ space, but film narrative itself may be defined otherwise.

Another tradition, however, linked to the work of Movie critics such as Perkins and Klevan, suggests that narrative encompasses space and plot and everything in between. Here, narrative space is not necessarily plotted, but plot is always spatial. As John Gibbs has noted, space is not merely a container for plot, but also the condition for it: without space, a story cannot take place. Indeed, Katherine Shonfield describes narrative simply as ‘the story of how a space is used’. As again Cooper writes:

Rather than simply happening ‘in’ the time and space of its single shot, the plot springs from the juxtaposition of discrete spaces, from the unfolding relationship between regions of the frame that communicates cause and effect. The story does not happen in space so much as to space.

As I stated at the beginning of this section, I intend my writing about space to constantly oscillate between the vocabulary of the various spatial theories and the idiolect of mise-en-scène criticism. I use the word ‘oscillate’ very deliberately here. I feel that scholarship should not be modelled, as it so often is, on a balance, distributing weight evenly across the various critical discourses, methods and insights making up the argument. Rather it should be modelled on a pendulum, fluctuating between the numerous constituents, now following this observation, then tracing that line of thought. I do not simply wish to apply the spatial theories of Lefebvre or De Certeau to close textual analyses, or employ analyses to illustrate theories. Instead, throughout my writing, theoretical inquiries will be informed and interrogated by close textual analysis, while, vice versa, analyses will be contextualised and cross-examined by theories.

Daniel Rubey complained in his preface to Redefining Suburban Studies: Searching for New Paradigms, an edited collection of interdisciplinary research published in 2009, that there should still, at this moment in time, be no perspective that studies suburbia in its own right and not simply as a sub-field of urban studies. [There is a need for] scholarship that no longer simply saw the suburbs as bedrooms for urban workers but as a valuable culture in its own terms. [..] Our vocabulary and conceptual
frameworks for understanding suburban issues had become dominated by the subordination of suburb to urb; terms such as sub-urban, ex-urban, exo-burbs, urban sprawl, and edge cities kept us from approaching suburbs as multifaceted phenomena in their own right.50

In this book I aim to provide such a language for contemporary US cinematic and televisual suburbia. At times, this language resembles the conclusions the New Suburban Historians have come to in their research into actual suburbs; at times it vindicates the assumptions of all those critics dismissing the suburb as a two-dimensional dystopia. But a language is never a closed system with fixed meanings; by putting into words the suburban films and television programmes’ choices in style and syntax, I hope to provide a language that has thus far remained unwritten, which complicates the above conclusions as it enables them, and which also allows for alternative interpretations.

Choice of Texts

I should say a few words here about the texts I have chosen to discuss in this book – as well as about those I have chosen to omit from the discussion. As I indicated above, I will discuss eight texts: Pleasantville, Happiness, The Simpsons and King of the Hill, Desperate Housewives, and Brick, Chumscrubber and Alpha Dog. I feel that together, these texts, which are all structured around what industry and press have termed a suburb, represent the most prevalent or pervasive trends within contemporary suburban film or television. I take Pleasantville to represent at once the suburban time travelogue, which includes films like Blast from the Past (Wilson, 1999), Back to the Future (Zemeckis, 1985), and Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure (Herek, 1989), and what one might call the suburban ‘mise-en-abîme’ narrative, including The Truman Show (Weir, 1998), Far From Heaven (Haynes, 2002), Bewitched (Ephron, 2005) and the sitcom Honey I’m Home (Nick @ Nite, 1991–2). Happiness for me represents the suburban ‘smart’ film (a postmodern genre of film which approaches its subject from an ironic distance), a label that also applies to films like American Beauty, Election (Payne, 1999), Trust (Hartley, 1990) and The Safety of Objects (Troche, 2001). The Simpsons and King of the Hill represent, as may be obvious, the postmodern suburban animated sitcom. Desperate Housewives represents the suburban postfeminist narrative, other examples of which are Weeds (2005–present), Roseanne (ABC, 1988–97), the remake of The Stepford Wives (Oz, 2004), and perhaps even The Last Seduction (Dahl, 1994). And finally, the three high school noirs
represent the popular suburban juvenile delinquency film in particular, and the ever-present suburban teen film in general.

I realise that my selection of films and television programmes by no means represents all current trends in suburban cinema and television. It does not account, for instance, for suburban subgenres like science fiction, fantasy or horror, nor does it account for suburban semi- or non-fiction texts such as reality shows, game shows and documentaries. It only intermittently accounts for films that are set in deprived suburban neighbourhoods or peripheral housing projects, like *Boyz 'n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) and *Quinceañera* (Glatzer and Westmoreland, 2006). It rarely accounts for suburban gay and lesbian narratives. And it only very sporadically accounts for films and television programmes centred around ethnic minorities, the integration of ethnic minorities, and/or the ethnic divide, like *Lakeview Terrace* (Labute, 2008), *Nothing Like the Holidays* (De Villa, 2008), and *Guess Who?* (Sullivan, 2005).

Here, the selection process has been less one of preference than of practicality. To include films representative of all trends within suburban fiction would broaden the scope of this study beyond the space of a single book. It is especially unfortunate, however, to exclude films and television programmes set in deprived suburban areas, and texts centred around ethnic minorities. It is unfortunate in the first place because it would be interesting to look at the extent to which the chronotope of the diverse suburb has itself become diversified over the past few years. I would be keen, for instance, to compare a suspense thriller about a wealthy, well educated, mixed couple living in Los Angeles, like *Lakeview Terrace*, to the web series *The Suburbs* (2008–11), documenting the lives of middle-class African-American teenagers in Mount Vernon, Westchester. The second reason why the exclusion of these texts is unfortunate is that there is always the risk that by excluding working-class people or ethnic minorities from representation, one is simply mimicking the exclusion they face in so many suburban films and television programmes as well as in actual suburbs. As Andrew Wiese put it, by and large ‘historians have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even white suburbanites’.

I hope this is a lack I might be able to address in a subsequent research project.

As the reader will understand by now, this book takes into consideration both suburban films and televisual suburban narratives. I do not have the space to focus in detail on the similarities and differences between the media of film and television. It seems self-evident that their respective medium-specific qualities have at least some bearing on the nature of the narrative. Film, for instance, can expect and cater for a more intense
audience engagement (although this distinction is, of course, problematised by a recent spate of both visually and cognitively demanding television shows), while television tends to have more time to pick out and unpick various plot developments and character traits. It is often assumed that television is an essentially suburban medium: like the suburb, television is perceived as a product of 1950s consumer culture; it is considered to diffuse the boundaries between the public and the private sphere; it is thought to differentiate between men and women; and, finally, it is felt to promote a withdrawal from social life, and promulgate a detached, disembodied, isolated and anxious view of the world. Film, in contrast, is thought to have much more in common with city life. Indeed, if postwar suburbanisation boosted the sales of television sets, it also halted the ticket sales at inner-city cinemas. One may therefore have expected that film and television approach the suburbs in rather different ways – as some would argue they did throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with domestic sitcoms providing an altogether more forgiving picture of suburban life than family melodramas did. Surprisingly, however, the films and television programmes under discussion here appear to differ very little in their approach to suburbia. There are films that are particularly complex, like Brick, and there are television programmes that are somewhat less intricate; there are slow films, like Happiness, and hurried shows, like Desperate Housewives; films that are sympathetic towards their milieu, and television series that seem to hate it, and so on. Whatever their medium specificities, suburban film and television each seem characterised by the same kind of ‘structure of feeling’: a tentative yet firm, judgmental yet understanding attitude towards its own material. Throughout the book, I pay attention to the qualities of the respective media; but I will always do so through the lens of this structure of feeling.

Chapter Outline

In this book I discuss five films and three television programmes. In Chapter 1 I concern myself exclusively with the Hollywood fantasy Pleasantville. Chapter 2 considers the indie ‘smart’ film Happiness. Chapter 3 concentrates on FOX’s popular animated sitcoms The Simpsons and King of the Hill. Chapter 4 focuses on the allegedly postfeminist dramedy Desperate Housewives. And Chapter 5 looks at three recent ‘highschool noirs’: above all, Brick and Chumscrubber, but also Alpha Dog. I should state clearly here that although I have chosen texts that I feel are each representative of a principal or particularly pervasive discourse or trend, I discuss each film or television programme exclusively on its own merits.
The obvious problem such an approach poses is that by forsaking too many comparisons or too much contextualisation, the analyses might be seen to have little validity beyond their individual application. I have, however, intended these analyses less as claims about the trend they represent, than as examples of how close textual analysis and theoretical reasoning might help us gain a more thorough understanding of our experience of certain trends within suburban fiction as well as of fictional suburbs. As I have suggested on numerous occasions throughout this introduction, I feel that studies of suburban fiction have thus far devoted too little attention to close textual analysis of individual poetic and aesthetic qualities. By taking the time to analyse each film and each television programme in detail, by devoting an entire chapter to one or at the most three texts, I hope to make a start on redressing this critical imbalance.

In the first chapter, I examine how *Pleasantville* presents the nature of the suburban fictional world. Each film or television programme postulates its own fictional world, which in turn delineates the possibilities for, and limitations of, the plot. The fictional world of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001), for instance, allows for very different plot developments than the fictional world of *Sense and Sensibility* (Lee, 1995). In the former, plots may come to include wizards, elves and hobbits, resurrections and afterlives, whereas no such creations can ever populate the story world of Jane Austen. In this chapter I look at what kind of world the cinematic suburb might be: what are its natural laws, what is its internal logic, what can and cannot happen there? Looking at the relationships between genre and style, temporality and worldhood, I argue that Pleasantville, the film’s eponymous suburb, is characterised by an intrinsic ontological instability that renders narrative by definition unpredictable, contradictory and essentially open-ended.

Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the suburban mise-en-scène. In the second chapter I examine how Todd Solondz’s 1998 controversial ensemble film *Happiness* uses editing, composition and tone to create a particular spatiality – which I will call, following Peter Sloterdijk, foam – as well as a particular sense of place. Suburbs are often criticised for lacking a sense of place. In this chapter I argue that in *Happiness* placelessness functions precisely as a distinct and unmistakable sense of place. In the first section I look at the ways in which editing is used to maintain narrative coherence and visual consistency while simultaneously creating a sense of geographical dislocation, discontinuity and isolation. In the second section I analyse two scenes in terms of their composition. I show that these scenes are composed visually, as well as in terms of the plot, in such a way so as to create a space that is at once communal and isolated,
transitory and permanent. Finally, in the third section I discuss how the film negotiates stylistic register and diegesis in order to create a particular tone, or feeling, that the film associates directly with its environment.

The third chapter looks at two animated sitcoms – *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*. In popular culture as much as in criticism, the suburb is often perceived as a sort of flatland. For many people, the suburb literally lacks dimensions: it is culturally bland, socially conformist, emotionally shallow, or architecturally homogenous. Taking my cue from the philosopher David Kolb, I take issue with these assumptions. By looking at the ways in which two explicitly two-dimensional programmes negotiate the generic properties of the sitcom with the medium-specific qualities of animation, such as flatness and elasticity, I examine how they problematise the correlation between flatness, superficiality and simplicity, and open our eyes to another figuration of complexity.

In the public mind, there is a correlation between women and suburbs. ‘Women and suburbs,’ Susan Saegert notes, are thought ‘to share domesticity, repose, closeness to nature, lack of seriousness, mindlessness and safety.’ Sociologist Barry Schwartz has even suggested that suburbs are an essentially feminine environment. In the fourth chapter, drawing on close textual analysis of camera movement, plot and performance, I present a reading of the gendering of space and the social construction of womanhood in the popular dramedy *Desperate Housewives*. Often praised as a prime example of a liberated postfeminist culture, I argue that, on the contrary, *Desperate Housewives* naturalises the suburb as a female retreat, restricts and manipulates the movements of its female protagonists (and explicitly condemns those who are mobile), and stimulates an inhibited performativity and self-consciousness.

In the fifth and final chapter I look at the ways in which three teen suburban noirs – *Brick*, *Alpha Dog* and *Chumscrubber* – engage with the suburban environment. Drawing on the work of Marc Augé and Michel de Certeau as well as close textual analysis, I argue that these films, each in its own way, present the suburb not as a static, depthless non-place, but on the contrary as a space that can be experienced, extended and appropriated – in short, as a lived space.

**Questions and Answers**

Finally, there are two questions which I have thus far assumed but neither explicitly asked nor straightforwardly answered. These questions are: what do I understand by the suburban narrative? And what do I understand by the fictional suburb? The reason I have not yet attempted
to come to terms with these questions is that they are the two questions this book is concerned with, and it would seem disingenuous to suggest I have an answer already, especially since part of my argument is that the suburb produced by the suburban narrative is less a consistent and coherent iconographic structure than a complex and oscillating ‘structure of feeling’. Let me, however, at the outset give two working definitions. By the suburban narrative I understand, as I hope has become clear by now, narratives that are not merely set in, but also structured around and by, the suburb. By the suburb I simply mean, for now, cinematic and televisual settings that have been described as suburb by those involved in making the film or the television programme, by those involved in distributing and marketing the film or the television programme, and by those reviewing them. For indeed, what interest me is what it is in the rendering of these places that denotes them as suburbs in terms of space, in terms of mise-en-scène, in terms of cultural geography, and, as I discuss in the next chapter, worldhood.

Notes


13. Similar attempts have legitimised the study of media – such as television’s ‘qualitative’ turn, cinema’s inscription into artistic discourses, photography’s alleged problematisation of representative discourses and the novel’s turn to a ‘descriptive realism’ – and genres – from the soap opera to daytime television, melodrama to the blockbuster, the snapshot to the novella etc. – in the past.
15. I will come to explain what I mean by each of these terms – ‘smart’ and ‘quirky’, postmodern and postfeminist – throughout the book.
23. P. McGinley, ‘Suburbia: Of thee I sing’, Harper’s Magazine (December 1949), pp. 78–82. McGinley added: ‘I have yet to read a book in which the suburban life was pictured as the good life or the commuter as a sympathetic figure’.
25. Ibid. p. 15.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p. 48.
33. H. Lefebvre, The Production of Space, p. 129.
35. H. Lefebvre, The Production of Space, p. 404.
36. Ibid. p. 11.
37. It is not unthinkable that Lefebvre’s use of these terms is slightly ironic, since elsewhere in The Production of Space, as well as in his previous work The Urban Revolution, Lefebvre takes elaborate issue with linguistic (‘semiology’) and psychoanalytic theories of space. See H. Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), especially pp. 45–76.
38. Ibid. p. 64. My emphasis.
39. Ibid. pp. 11–12.
41. Ibid. p. 22.
44. M. Lefebvre, ‘Between Setting and Landscape’, p. 29.
55. Ibid.