

Rage Against the Machine in the Garden: Television, Voyeurism, and Hyperrealism in American Suburban Film

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Introduction

Following the Second World War, living in the suburbs has been connected to the American Dream. The suburbs appeared to be the perfect place to raise a family and enjoy the benefits of both urban and rural conveniences without the exposure to harmful influences of the city. Ebenezer Howard argues that the town and the countryside exert a magnetic pull that draws urban citizens in, eventually resulting in a balance between the two in a hybrid environment: the middle landscape, or the suburbs (166-69). Everyone strives to own a suburban home and everyone wants to fulfill their dream of a perfect life with a perfect family and perfect neighbors. However, once people have started to move, some realized that reality did not live up to the utopian expectations of the project. The magnet that has drawn them to the suburbs in the first place, began to tear them apart through conformity, social pressures, and paranoia. People started to scrutinize the suburb's universal claim of an ideal reality. It is no surprise that these doubts were most fervently raised by scholars, poets, authors, and movie makers who, often originating from an urban background, detested the values of the middle landscape.

In this article, I will explore the American suburban movie from the post WWII era until 9/11, which marked a turning point in the portrayal of suburban life. The purpose of my work is to analyze how screenwriters and directors grappled with the conflicting disparity of the utopian vision versus reality of the suburbs and how they produced a picture of the faulty design and constructed-ness of the middle landscape. This design not only subordinated nature, but also subverted and deconstructed human nature by the initial introduction of technology. That is, the introduction of artificial structures in a natural environment caused human nature became artificial and

mechanical itself. "Life in a garden is relaxed, quiet, and sweet, [...] but survival in a howling desert demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of the forces of nature, including, of course, human nature" (Marx 43). What techniques do filmmakers use to convey their message? What are the similarities in their perception and, moreover, what are the differences? What solution do the artists propose to deal, cope, and overcome the ills of suburbia? Finally, why does Hollywood produce negative movies about the suburbs in the first place, considering the success of the suburban project and the film industry's main objective of making money would suggest that the ideology of the suburbs would work in tandem?

This article does not make general claims or statements. Given the large number of movies on this topic, this would not be feasible. Instead, I will provide one qualitative account on the larger trend of the suburban movie genre and how these movies are mirroring and exposing society by using them as cultural texts placed historically. The focus will be on three movies: *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Douglas Sirk's prototype of post-WWII suburban criticism, *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Lynch's exploration of voyeurism and dirt in the final moments of the Cold War, and *The Truman Show* (1998), an existential portrayal of a man who lost grip on reality. My working angle for this critique of technology and the common denominator in the contextualization of these movies is the practice of *watching the suburbs* and the ironic doubling of perspectives and instances. It manifests in a growing TV culture, voyeurism, and the lack of privacy, substantiating deeper implications on how societal decline, loss of community, and the loss of coping mechanisms to differentiate the real from the fake; this can be linked to scientific progress and the introduction of technology into the middle landscape. Scholars such as Robert Putnam are firmly convinced that the suburbs are responsible for the decline in social capital, and TV seems to be an additional reason for this.¹

The Machine and the Mirror

At first sight, the negative depiction of the suburbs in movies seems counterintuitive. Over the past decades, the percentage of Americans living in the suburbs has increased from about 25% in the

¹ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, especially chapter 12, Mobility and Sprawl, and chapter 13,

Technology and Mass Media for a detailed account on the decline of social capital from a sociological perspective.

1950s to more than 50% in the 1990s (Muzzio, Halper 544, 555). Hollywood – built on the virtues of profitability, sustainability, and growth – should think twice before producing films that shed a negative light on the homes of more than half of the population if they intend to make a profit. Yet the success of suburban movies suggests otherwise. The suburban project was supposed to combine the best of both city and country, enabling a timely approximation of the Jeffersonian pastoral ideal of happiness found on a “small family farm” without having to give up the perks of a steadily progressing society (554-555). Moviemakers and intellectuals believed that the opposite to be the case. Instead the suburbs 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” (556). Relating to some of the critiques, suburbanites were slowly beginning to question the suburb’s claim of perfection as they walked into the theaters. Unlike the ideal, the suburbs are not a safe haven from the ills of the city. Crime and poverty are just as apparent in the suburbs as in the cities. The failure to extend the “dramatiz[ation of] the human condition” (Wunsch 644) outside city limits, further contributes to the conflicted view on the supposed bourgeois utopia (656).

Concerns over the disparity between ideal and real in a technological world were not first voiced during this period of suburbanization, but rather began at the time of America’s industrialization. *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) by Leo Marx explores major works in American literature, delivering a blunt verdict of the introduction of technology into nature. Given its intention to not only be an account on the past, but also with implications of alienation and anxiety in the post-nuclear present, I will use this book as a template to apply it to my critical argument of technology in suburban cinema (380). Nostalgia for the return to the pastoral ideal, being closer to nature, is a way to “mask the real problems of an industrial civilization” (7) and, quoting Freud, a means to attain “freedom from the grip of the external world” to “maintain the old condition of things which has been regretfully sacrificed to necessity everywhere else” (qtd. in Marx 8).

The suburbs tried to approximate the utopian ideal; but in reality they have become a middle ground where “felicities and miseries can be

reconciled together” (Strachey qtd. in Marx 45). Michel Foucault calls these places that aspire to be the approximation of utopian places heterotopias, an important concept in our so-called “epoch of juxtaposition” (par. 1), for they “[are] in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (par. 10); they are real places not only approximating utopian places, but also exposing and de-masking the contradictions behind these real realities and ideals. For Foucault the mirror is as an intersection between utopia and heterotopia, simultaneously sharing both characteristics (par. 12). In my essay, I will apply this metaphor of the mirror to the Suburban film and role of the TV/movie screen. Just as the suburbs relate to the pastoral ideal and reality as a heterotopia, movies juxtapose the physical unreality of the images with the reality of the audience. The screen serves as a literal and figurative mirror to expose, reflect and compensate for the illusions of “perfectibility and progress” (Foucault par. 26; Marx 88).

Suburbia in 20th Century American Film

All That Heaven Allows and the visuality of the frame

The critique of technology was largely limited to the realm of literature. Following the boom of the Second World War, the rise of the suburbs, and especially the nationwide success of television in the 1950s, critiques began to take shape in film. One could argue that the creative minds in Hollywood were just as concerned as Putnam about the decline in community by sitting alone in front of the television. Though, the more pragmatic approach would argue that a growing television culture would just undermine revenue opportunities of movie theaters (Muzzio, Halper 559). Nonetheless, the point of replacing a social with an often solitary activity still holds to be valid and is reiterated in many motion pictures. One of these movies is *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) by director Douglas Sirk.

All That Heaven Allows revolves around Cary, a recently widowed housewife who seeks self-fulfillment in the relationship with her much younger gardener Ron. However, she feels constricted by traditional family structures and expectations from society, which is following and observing her every move. She has to face many

challenges, before she can find peace in the arms of her “man in the red flannel shirt” (Biskind 323). One of the most interesting elements of Sirk’s cinematography is his expressionistic use of suburban architecture. For him, architecture is not just part of the setting; it is a tool (McNiven 38-39). Sirk argues that the suburban environment which surrounds Cary and her home of Stoningham is a mere construct of artificiality that corrupts everyone that comes close to it with inauthenticity, shallowness, and superficiality; it leaves you suffocated and unable to act freely. The only way to escape this confinement is to live the pastoral ideal to the fullest and refrain from society that attempts to recreate and isolate the advantages of the country by subordinating nature to humankind (51).

Sirk accomplished this by contrasting the artificiality of Cary’s home and neighborhood with the naturalness of the rest of the environment through stylistically juxtaposing them with the architecture and different cinematic techniques.² Many scenes are not filmed directly, but through reflective surfaces such as mirrors, as if he wanted to ontologically separate the artificial image in the mirror from the naturalness surrounding this image, like the branch that was handed to Cary by Ron in one of the first scenes and placed next to the mirror on her make-up table. Roger McNiven explains that through the framing by window frames, mirrors, doorways, the background distinguishes itself “from the more ‘real’ foreground space.” In the convention of 1950s movies, the framing of the background scene is supposed to represent the ideal of family harmony. Cary, on the other hand, trying to “escape into the foreground space”, feels entrapped by it (40). The suburban house, symbol for financial stability and a happy life, becomes a tomb for Cary, which after Egyptian custom is for “walling up the widow alive in the funeral chamber of her husband along with his other possessions” (*All That Heaven Allows*).

The solution to suburban claustrophobia and an “‘other-directed’ [life] in tedious conformity with suburban neighbors” (Wunsch 645) seems to be Ron’s independence from society, realized with his cabin in the woods. The movie is not very subtle about which philosophical tradition Sirk is referring to. When Cary and Ron visit two of his friends,

Cary finds and picks up the book Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, reading a few passages out loud:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured far away. (Thoreau qtd. in *All That Heaven Allows*)

The message is simple: “To thine own self be true” (Shakespeare qtd. in *All That Heaven Allows*). Hollywood expert Peter Biskind concurs that “Thoreau is right; Cary’s life is one of ‘quiet desperation’, and the utopian alternative represented by the people gathered around her can only be realized outside society” (328). Marx talks about the “cultural malady” of “pointless, dull, routinized existence” (247).

[They] perform the daily round without joy or anger or genuine exercise of will. As if their minds were mirrors, able only to reflect the external world, they are satisfied to cope with things as they are. In Emerson’s language, they live wholly on the plane of the Understanding. Rather than design houses to fulfill the purpose of their lives, they accommodate their lives to the standard design of houses. (247)

In short, “men have become the tools of their tools” (Thoreau qtd. in Marx 247). People are trapped. They fall victim to the machines that were supposed to serve them by subjugating them into a system that serves only itself; it only nurtures a dependency on man-machine relations, i.e. consumerism, rather than social relations (Marx 248). Instead of receiving support, the all-watching eyes of her neighbors only hold contempt for her deviation from their conservative conventions, enviously pressuring her for her individuality and self-realization in this hyper efficient environment.

Cary’s societal entrapment becomes final after she received a TV set as a Christmas present, the ultimate symbol of confinement and the center of Sirk’s criticism of the corrupting force of artificial structures in nature. This technological novelty, from the start dismissed by Cary as the “last refuge for lonely women,” now frames her

² For an exploration of an architect’s perspective of how ill-design contributed to the deterioration of human nature in the suburbs, see Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and*

Decline of America’s Man-made Landscape. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, especially chapter 13 “Better Places.”

appalled face on the screen, trapping her in the reflection (see fig. 1). “All you have to do is turn that dial and you have all the company you want - right there on the screen” (*All That Heaven Allows*). The TV serves as Cary’s “consumer compensation in exchange for an active pursuit of her desire,” enclosing her “in a haze of consumerism, impotent spectatorship, and televisual hyperreality” (Joyrich 45-46). She leaves the house immediately for the woods.

Her return to Ron, culminating in the obligatory melodramatic ending, might be seen as a happy ending for Cary and Ron; in the end, the audience realizes, however, that even Ron was not safe from the intrusion of artificiality. Ron remodeled his home to make it more appealing to Cary, eventually trying to subordinate his nature as well. This is seen in the large window framing the exterior, degrading nature as merely a picture hanging on the wall, a post card scene, or a still film frame. The *frame within a frame* is essential to understand what Sirk is trying to convey about the ill-constructed middle landscape. The love between the two, their emotions, are the only natural things left, after artificiality has pervaded everything. Sirk’s scathing verdict makes it clear that he thinks that the suburbs are a corrupting, dehumanizing influence and their claim of providing the perfect middle ground is merely an illusion constructed and perpetrated by its advertisers (55).

Blue Velvet and the pleasures of the voyeur

The 1960s through early 1980s would produce further change to the perception of suburbia, continuing and intensifying Hollywood’s critique of inauthenticity and artificiality. The rise of the Beat Generation not only coincided with the emergence of protest movements, but Hollywood also restructured. ‘New Hollywood’ as an innovative platform for criticism was not reliant on happy endings, large budgets, or on achieving commercial success. *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) became movies for a whole generation revolting against the previous generations’ dated ideals and world views. *The Graduate* (1967), a suburban movie that deems the superficial and artificial old guard simply ‘plastics’ seems to be as much in line with the argument of dehumanization as *The Stepford Wives* (1975), which takes it another step further by having the idealized housewives be actual robots, for the lone purpose of subservience (Muzzio, Halper 562).

Noticeably, the spread of horror movies did not stop at the gates of suburbia. The bipolar battle between good and evil was not only fought in Cold War proxy fronts overseas, but also in the small suburban settlements. Paranoid surveillance and the Red Scare extended their influence to the movie theaters through films which emphasized on the evils behind the façade of the supposedly peaceful neighborhood. This era spawned movies such as *Amityville Horror* (1979), *Nightmares on Elm Street* (1984), and *Carrie* (1976), which have all had recent remakes. According to David Lynch, one tradition in the American gothic movies is “about things that are hidden — within a small city and within people” – exemplified Lynch’s own *Blue Velvet* (1986) (qtd. in *New York Times*).

Blue Velvet starts off with the familiar establishing shots of showing the idyllic peacefulness of red rose petals and white picket fences in supersaturated colors. However, when the camera takes closer look into the very ground of the suburbs, it reveals what lies behind the outside image of this perfect suburban scenery: a swarm of bugs crawling in the dirt – a recurring metaphor for the evils underneath the surface. Lynch said himself, “I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are *always* red ants underneath...I saw life in extreme close-ups” (qtd. in Bainbridge 3). Leo Marx helps to qualify:

Most literary works called pastorals [...] do not finally permit us to come away with anything like the simple, affirmative attitude we adopt toward pleasing rural scenery. [...] [T]hese works manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture. And it is this fact that will enable us, finally, to get at the difference between the complex and sentimental kinds of pastoralism. (25)

Protagonist Jeffrey Beaumont, who found a severed ear on a walk following the introductory scene, sets himself to find the truth behind the mystery of the cut-off ear with the help of a detective’s daughter Sandy. Curious about Sandy’s story that a suspicious woman might be connected to the case, Jeffrey tries to gain access to her apartment disguised as a pest controller. What follows is a net of events ensnaring Jeffrey between the two worlds of superficial idealization on the outside and myths and symbols of violence on the inside, a story about

“kidnapping, murder and torture, all juxtaposed against an adolescent romance” (Bainbridge 4).

Besides the theme of figuratively looking through the façade, Lynch takes on the literal act by playing with Freudian voyeurism. Already in *All That Heaven Allows* we were able to make out this curiosity in the behavior of the disapproving townsfolk, leering at and condemning Cary’s efforts to achieve self-fulfillment. It is the desire to remain in control of one’s environment that is being commented on and which is further elaborated in sadomasochist power relations in Lynch’s film. However, this time the audience actively participates in it, blurring the lines between subject and object with camera shots through closet door slits following Jeffrey’s eyes and turning back on him, making him the observed (Bainbridge 7).

In this particular scene the camera alternates between close-up shots of Jeffrey in the closet, point-of-view shots through the closet and outside views of the closet. The audience is not only forced to participate in the sadistic act of voyeurism, but becomes victim of being watched themselves. According to Freud, the perversion of voyeurism manifests in two co-occurring features – the ‘active’ role of the observer and the ‘passive’ role of the observed (32-33). Usually, the audience of a movie theater does not face the danger of being seen by the object of their voyeurism; they remain impotent observers, since they cannot reveal themselves to the characters in the film. In the case of *Blue Velvet*, however, they not only watch Jeffrey on the screen and Dorothy through the eyes of Jeffrey, but Jeffrey repeatedly looks *into* the camera, exposing the audience, and contributing to the suspense of the scene and the *Schaulust* of the viewer (see fig. 2).

For Freud, voyeurism remains ultimately passive, since actual goal of acting is being delayed, suppressed, or replaced (23). The anxiety or reluctance to act is deeply rooted in the depictions of suburban culture; watching, so you do not have to do it yourself. It is easier to criticize and condemn someone for trying to realize one’s full potential than taking a leap of faith and trying to accomplish something themselves. They live proxy lives, trying to maintain control over their neighbors and their own feelings. This tendency of avoiding to assume responsibility cannot only be seen in *All*

That Heaven Allows; it actually traces back to the Middle Passage, and has already rooted deeply in the mind-set during the industrialization. Marx quotes D. H. Lawrence when he says that “the most idealist nations invent most machines. America simply teems with mechanical inventions, because nobody in America ever wants to *do* anything. They are idealists. Let a machine do the thing” (Lawrence qtd. in Marx 145).

The consequence of Jeffrey’s voyeurism is the corrupting influence of Frank, who serves as evil incarnate. Witnessing Frank engage in sadistic behavior (while yelling “Don’t look at me”) transforms Jeffrey throughout the movie. Once innocent, the protagonist himself transforms through interconnection between active and passive forms of perversion and gives into his urges to exercise force on others, hitting Dorothy and eventually killing Frank (60-61).

The plot concludes in an ironically melodramatic, happy ending. David Lynch would later perfect this technique in his TV drama series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991).³ Marx comments with the stylistic device of “ironic juxtaposition” by giving a literary example which intends to restore “the sickly sweet, credulous tone of sentimental pastoralism” in fiction upon realizing that ideal does not match reality (275, 277). As Lynch sees life in close-ups, he urges his audience to do the same with his film. Not only are they participating in his play of voyeurism and sadomasochism, but they are also encouraged to question the logic of the story and look behind the façade. The robin on the window sill eating the bug in the final scene is a symbol for love prevailing over evil; Jeffrey, the “bug man,” fights Frank, who wears a bug-like gas mask during the closet scene. In a previous scene, Sandy recalls a dream of robins spreading love in a dark world full of evil. Jeffrey, the robin, acts out of love, eradicates the evil bug Frank. However, the dirt, the disruptive force in the suburbs remains. The lesson is it may be important to find the truth by digging through the dirt. What you find though does not lie in your control and may not be as rewarding as anticipated. “Dirt sticks. Jeffrey is forever changed and so is our perception of the suburbs” (Bainbridge 8).

³ *Twin Peaks* is a TV series about the rape and murder of a teenage girl in a small town in rural Washington. The connection between the invasion of technology into nature analogous to *The Machine in the*

Garden as represented by the lumber mill cutting trees in the intro sequence, and the social corruption of the persons behind the lumber mill might be even more striking than in *Blue Velvet*.

The Truman Show and the loss of reality

As the 80s waned, so did the Cold War with its defining East-West dialectic. It appeared that the Rambos and Rockies of the Reagan era who fought so bravely against the dangers of encroaching Communism were victorious and decided once and for all who the winner was in the ultimate battle between good and evil. However, the lack of an ideological antithesis plunged the US in an abyss of insecurity and self-doubt (Laist par. 2). What happens to bipolarity once the enemy is overcome and gone; the enemy who helped Americans maintain their sanity, their grip of reality; the enemy who fed into their feeling of superiority and confirmed their belief of being on the right side of history. Don DeLillo put the problem famously in his novel *Underworld*:

[We] need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your bloodstream. You will no longer be the main point of reference. (qtd. in Laist par. 2)

There was no McCarthyism, no Red Scare, no communism left that could fill the void of the time between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terror attacks of September 11. The 90s were the "modern interwar period", the "lost decade" (par. 2). This was also the time when the suburbs became the dominant form of housing in the US. Meanwhile, technological innovations, like cloning, the Internet, and computer effects challenged our thinking of what is real and what is illusory, authentic, and artificial. It became increasingly difficult to differentiate reality with its representations. The 'era' between 11/9 and 9/11 has therefore spawned a new type of suburban movies. The concept of hyperreality was not new in the 1990s but it is in this period it regained momentum – a time that made it so simple to edit and manipulate data to forge a new reality that is realer than real, because it does not possess any actual reference to reality anymore. The representation or the simulacrum replaces reality and therefore becomes hyperreal (Baudrillard 527-528). Jean Baudrillard talks about a "copy without an original" (qtd. in Laist par. 6).

Suburbia, as focal point of artificiality, is predestined to be a center stage for movies depicting the hyperreal anxiety of not being able to distinguish authentic from artificial. *True Lies* (1994), *Pleasantville* (1998), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), and *Donnie Darko* (2001)⁴ represent the most notable movies analogous to this particular school of thought. The movie which gets closest to Baudrillard's original idea is *The Truman Show* from 1998.

Truman Burbank lives a seemingly content life in a small, quiet suburb Seahaven. He is popular, everybody likes him, and the whole world appears to revolve around him. Little does he know that it actually does. Everything and everybody he knows, his perceived reality is just a construct, from the dome arching over him like an artificial sky to his friends and family who are all paid actors. A whole life orchestrated solely for the entertainment of a world-wide audience; a life in absolute control of the producer Christof, who deliberately misleads and manipulates Truman through fake stories in the Orwellian sense, forged news reports, and TV shows to prevent him from trying to leave the confines of the studio. Truman's *life of quiet desperation* is ridden by restlessness and boredom, for he hears a *different drummer*. Despite all efforts, Truman eventually comes to realize of his existence and the 'real' reality, as he touches the inauthentic sky. With him recognizing his artificially constructed boundaries and *transcending* them by leaving the studio, he "reaffirm[s] [...] the truth of reality and the escapability of artificial social structures" and "the shackles of Plato's cave" (Laist par. 10).

The critique of this movie is clear, it condemns the manipulative power of the media which is able to distort and produce reality to its liking, becoming indistinguishable from fiction. The exploitative relation between Truman, his in-film television audience, and the actual movie audience leads to Lynchian style voyeurism ad absurdum: Truman watches a television show, who is also being watched by a fictitious TV audience that is again being watched by the real movie audience. In a critical scene, Truman looks at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, not knowing that the semi-permeable mirror is also equipped with a camera (see fig. 3). The setup of multiple screens and

⁴ Donnie Darko, released on October 26, 2001, technically belongs to the post 9/11 era, but it was obviously filmed and produced before

the incident of the New York terrorist attacks and therefore still resembles the style of the 1990s

mirrors is reminiscent of Jacques Lacan's discovery of the mirror stage, which describes a stage in early childhood where the child is beginning to recognize that its mirror image is a reflection of the Self (502). From Truman's naïve point of view, he finds himself in a self-aware position in a play of "jubilant activity" (502); the omniscient audience looking at the TV screen dismisses this false awareness through laughter. On a meta level, however, the scene is more about the fake TV audience and, by proxy, the real movie audience itself. If we assume that the semi-permeable surface is not only a window, but *actually* a mirror, the TV screen or movie screen become the other half to reflect our own image. Laughter enables the audience in the mirror stage to overcome personal deficiencies through pleasure; in essence, the look in the mirror is a critical engagement with the self (Reichert chapter 6). For Lacan, the process of identification goes through a stage where the *I* projects its own reflection onto the mirror as an "Ideal-I" before becoming aware of the self (503). The image in the mirror, the Ideal-I, or in this case Truman, is the defining aspect to reach self-awareness and the transformation from a "specular *I*" to a "social *I*" (507). "Narcissistic scopophilia" in film is therefore the desire to find oneself in the sublime image of the other approximate it in the imaginary (Reichert chapter 7). The audience becomes aware as a result of first identifying with the other and then alienating oneself from it again through *reflection*.

Interestingly, the movie stops after Truman leaves the set. The producer in the movie explains to Truman, "There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. Same deceptions." (*Truman Show*) It is as if the film wanted to say that the outside world as well is just a construct of "more layers of domes;" 'deterrence' is the term used by Baudrillard to explain the phenomenon of the audience getting distracted by the artificiality of its reality by watching a fake world on television (Laist par. 10). Truman disappears, because he has got a grip on the meaning of his existence, a sense of self-awareness, and knowledge about the true nature of his surroundings. He is filled with both curiosity and anxiety when he exits the stage. Leo Marx relates Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Ethan Brand* about the protagonist's search for the "Unpardonable Sin," which is "the great sin of the Enlightenment – the idea of knowledge as an end in

itself" (266, 273). The result is Brand's demise as he realizes that his "cold philosophical curiosity" has made him cold and mechanical inside (266-267). He becomes insane and disappears by throwing himself into the fire. Truman Burbank, our modern-day Ethan Brand, has found the truth around him. He has left the mirror stage at the price of what Lacan calls "paranoic knowledge" (502, 505). He does not kill himself, but by leaving the set knowing, he equally withdraws both physically and mentally from our scope of perception, "where the real journey begins" (507, 509).

The audience in the Truman show, however, oblivious of its situation simply changes the channel and asks, "What else is on?" (Laist par. 10). They are stuck in the mirror stage and the real audience is to believe that they have seen through the scheme, that they overcame the mirror stage when, in fact, knowledge of our situation does not mean deliverance from it. This raises the question whether this hyperreality is really less real than reality. Christof makes a valid point about Truman's world and our society when he says, "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented" (*Truman Show*). The two quotes from the producer of the show are perfectly in accord with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, which makes this movie exemplary for this time of American uncertainty, because "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Ecclesiastes qtd. in Baudrillard 524).

Conclusion

While most suburban movies share a stock of tropes and motifs to criticize America's favorite middle landscape, through its superficiality, inauthenticity, or conformity, some do reveal a more elaborate argument of the failures of this 'imagined community.' One underlying trend in the discussed movies is the concept of truth, of exposing the social constructs behind the physical construct that is suburbia. This truth may take many forms and names such as the 'Unpardonable Sin' or 'Enlightenment', but they are all concerned with looking behind the artificial façade of the inauthentic bubble they call home. The movies discussed in this paper have dealt with the quest for the transcendentalist truth and a return to the countryside, the inconvenient truth about the nature of humanity leading to homicide, or the hyperreal truth of living in a staged reality confined in a dome

within domes. The project to create a 'perfect middle ground,' a realized pastoral ideal in 'perfectibility and progress,' a heterotopian approximation of a utopia has failed and with it all hope of salvation.

It discloses that our inherited symbols of order and beauty have been divested of meaning. It compels us to recognize that the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied in our traditional institutions. It means that an inspiring vision of a humane community has been reduced to a token of individual survival [...] [I]n the end the American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless. [...] And if, at the same time, he pays a tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter. (Marx 364)

All movies discussed in this article conclude with 'happy' endings. They seem to be happy on the outside; they try to restore the idyll at least ironically in fiction. A look behind the curtain of illusion, however, will reveal the truth. There is no "real" happy ending without the distortions of reality. There is no perfect middle landscape. Many directors attempt to trace the vices of civilized society back to their origin and find them in technological progress itself; it is the *Machine in the Garden*, which transformed modern society to a superefficient apparatus filled with plastic consumers unable to engage in genuine human relationships. This hyper-efficiency and the urge to make everything look perfect from the outside while subjugating humanity (*Menschlichkeit*) made suburbanites keep social interactions to a minimum; they try to maintain the façade out of fear that anybody could *see* what lies inside them, the fear of being scrutinized for pursuing this aspect of realizing the self. If you need your grass to be cut, you are not asking your neighbor for their lawn mower, but you get one yourself. If you are depressed, you do not talk it over with a friend but seek help from a professional (Goudreau 24). Essayist Thomas Carlyle interjects on the effects of industrialization:

Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the

fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster. Men have crossed oceans by steam [...]. There is no end to machinery. [...] For all earthly, and for some unearthly purposes, we have machines and mechanic furtherances; for mincing our cabbages; for casting us into magnetic sleep. We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude Nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils. (Carlyle qtd. in Marx 170-1)

They have in turn become "mechanical in head and heart," reducing themselves to the calculable aspects of life at the expense of the imaginative facet of the psyche (175). Movies help to readjust our perception of ourselves and surroundings; they recalibrate our reference position; they serve as Foucauldian mirrors to expose the faults of society and the self, aiming to overcome our "organic insufficiency in [our] natural reality" (Lacan 505). The nature of television makes it a perfect point to discuss and mediate the divergence of ideal reality, real reality, and fabricated representations.

Watching television and movies keeps the viewers sane; they try to overcome their state of "Hegelian 'self-estrangement,' a dichotomy of 'social' and 'natural' self" (Marx 177). They may even want to watch a reality show to get a grip of their own 'real' reality that got lost in the process of the information age. Christof from *The Truman Show* comments on this as follows:

We've become bored with watching actors give us phony emotions. We are tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, there's nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life. (The Truman Show)

Perhaps it is watching these movies that enables suburbanites to live *happily ever after* in their conformity centers, even if the scopophilic voyeur ultimately remains impotent by only suppressing and replacing the desires, instead of acting out on them. The voyeur is forced to watch without recognizing the self in the mirror. This is also part of the irony of this story. Movies which are criticizing suburban dwellers for resorting to professional help instead of socializing or preferring passive pleasure gain through television are a

product of technological progress themselves; they are part of the machine they criticize. They have gone full circle and become a cogwheel in a self-perpetuating industry that is both problem of and solution to the decline of social capital.

Since my analyses focused on the period between the post WWII era and the end of the 90s, I did not consider movies produced after 9/11. This is due to the change in the conversation about hyperreality after the *real* event of 9/11, the conversation about hyperreality took another turn and was dismissed as trivial, while the suburban movie has been slowly disappearing from the big screen ever since. Suburbia had to clear the way for the reemergence of the American hero. The long yearned-for bipolarity returned and with it the superhero movie, as well as the biographical blockbuster of era defining historical films focused on real heroes such as Abraham Lincoln. The increasing role of surveillance for safety at the expense of personal freedoms and privacy has contributed to the discussion about claustrophobia, paranoia, and voyeurism. Being under constant supervision is not new to suburbanites. In the past years the reach of surveillance programs has extended to camera monitoring throughout metropolitan areas and most recently to warrantless Internet and phone surveillance by the NSA. The suburbs have not completely disappeared after 9/11, but they have taken over another primary medium. They have reclaimed their target of choice to introduce to us a new breed of suburban anti-heroes on television; they are unrestrained by fear, outside pressures, or the law; they act out on their urges and fantasies without the suburban audience having to face the consequences itself. Television series like *The Sopranos*, *Weeds*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men* all exhibit characteristics of this new type of suburbanite. Even 'fake' reality shows, like *The Osborne's* or *The Real Housewives* share some of these aspects, diluting again our sense of what is real and counterfeit. From an ideational perspective, the suburban project has failed. If we look at their presence in our minds, the suburbs are now more successful than ever. On this occasion, I would like to refer to the research studies of the Research Unit "Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice" at Freie Universität, sponsored by the German Research Fund (DFG), which is currently examining the dynamics and functions of serial structures in American culture. The seriality of the suburbs in television, as well as in its literal,

physical manifestation found in suburban sprawl, has shown that they remain a lasting concept in American popular culture.

Appendix



Fig. 1. Cary looking at her reflection on a television screen: a TV frame within the movie theater frame. *All That Heaven Allows*. Dir. Douglas Sirk. Universal International, 1955. DVD.



Fig. 2. Jeffrey breaks the Fourth Wall and makes the audience victim of his voyeurism by looking through the key hole of the camera lens. *Blue Velvet*. Dir. David Lynch. De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986. DVD.



Fig. 3. The semi-permeable mirror shows how the audience tries to assume the ideal image of Truman Burbank in a return to a Lacanian mirror stage. *The Truman Show*. Dir. Peter Weir. Paramount Pictures, 1998. DVD.

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