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Pastoral Paradises and Social Realism: Cinematic Representations of Suburban Complexity

I never wanted to get into this rat-race but now that I'm in it I think I'd be a fool not to play it just like everyone else plays it.

(Gregory Peck as Tom Rath, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 1956)

The cinema in its literal sense has been both a landmark of the suburban-built environment and staple source of popular culture in the post-war era: with the Regals, Gaumonts, UCGs and ABCs offering relatively cheap escapism from everyday mundanity and routine. The cinema has served the function of a venue for suburban courtship for couples and entertainment for fully formed family units with the power to move audiences to the edge of their seats in suspense or to tears – be that laughter or of sadness. While the VHS and advent of domestic video recorders was seen to threaten the very existence of the cinema, many suburban areas have seen the old high street picture palaces replaced/displaced/succeeded by out-of-town complexes where suburbia has sometimes been the subject on the screen as well as the setting of the multiplex they are screened in. In the United States the suburb has variously equated with idyllic family dreamhouse, horror-laden land of dark undercurrent and stomping ground for adolescent angst in films from which changes can be tracked from the innocence of the suburbia of the all-American goodlife in the 1950s to its more recent portrayal as shopping mall-dominated territory from the 1980s onwards overrun by slackers by the 1990s. British cinema has tended to pride itself by being in a more ‘slice of life’ social realism vein. This chapter turns to the silver screen (or DVD release) to discuss full-length feature films featuring suburbia. The consideration of suburbia onscreen will continue in Chapter 5 addressing televisual (small-screen) representations.

'Suburban film' is not usually a categorization that is common to film studies. In discussing genre in film Monaco, (2000:306) names film noir, gangster movies, horror films, musicals, science fiction and the screwball comedy among others while noting that 'In the seventies, the Western fell into decline as increasingly urbanized America lost its zest for wide-open spaces.' Into the space vacated we can see an increasing number of films taking the suburbs as their source and setting which cut across genres. Indeed the suburban films of recent years have included retreads among their number. In 2004 the 1975 classic the *Stepford Wives* based on the 1972 book of the same name underwent a zeitgeist-chasing remake. *The Simpsons*, discussed in the following chapter and Chapter 6 as a television series, merited their own film in 2005 *The Simpsons Movie*. Ali G from Staines in Berkshire to the west of London the anti-hero of indeterminate ethnicity (the character speaks in Jamaican patois, has an Asian-sounding name, is played by a Jew and comes from an area once seen as fairly ethnically 'white'), who first appeared as a comedy insert of a Channel 4 talkshow graduated to his own series and then cinema-released feature film *Ali G In da House*. The trajectory had been followed earlier for example in the film *Bless this House* (1972), an extended film spin off from the popular television series, starring Sid James and an early outing for Terry (Scott) and June (Whitfield) who later got two subsequent spin off long-running programmes in their own right: *Happy Ever After* (1974–79) and *Terry and June* (1979–86) set in Ealing and Purley respectively. The plot emphasized the principle of defensible space and included the theme of generational difference and the two middle-aged suburban couples the film revolved around traded hostilities over the garden-fence while their respective offspring (both rebellious with hippie tendencies) were romantically involved with one another unbeknown to the parents. Many other suburban films are dramatizations of suburban novels as mentioned in the previous chapter.

SubUrbia and *The Burbs* are two US films which ultimately disappoint in content if one is looking for clues as to suburban lifestyles even if their titles suggest that they will address the subject. *The Burbs* (1989) opens with an aerial shot of the earth turning on its axis before the cameras close in on the neighbourhood in which it occurs. It is a 'there's more to things than meets the eye' tale that unfolds. The film can be classified as a screwball comedy with elements of thriller/suspense. It is largely about the neighbourhood's self-appointed upstanding residents taking their suspicions of the newly moved-in Klopek family to be murderers into their own hands. There is not much on display concerning the suburban lifestyle apart from eccentricity. None of the characters are seen going to work and there are few female characters. The Universal Studios set in which the house exteriors were filmed has been used as

the location for *The Munsters* and *Desperate Housewives* among other examples. The film was a commercial flop. In *SubUrbia* (1996) a bunch of dead-end kids hang around a petrol station and eat fast food. One of their former members who 'got out' and became a pop star comes back and violence is perpetrated against the heavily accented Indian owner of the hangout. This film was seen as part of the 'slacker' wave of cinema depicting the despair of a downwardly mobile post-baby boom generation. The setting appears to be the type of suburbia suggested by Donna Gaines (1991) but there are no real trends from which one can draw conclusions about suburban living discernable from the 24-hour timespan of the events. These Generation X protagonists' self-absorption can be explained by how they are too satiated by the trappings of consumer culture to have any major material injustices to rebel against. Yet at the same time they are not satisfied with their lives. Muzzio and Halper (2002:252) observe: 'Their parents suburban dream of comfort and security has left them trapped.' In the current circumstances of economic downturn, youth may do well to emulate their parents' suburban ideals: the stalling of the growth model means that the automatic expectation of having higher standards of living than their parents is in doubt.

History and memory: Depictions of suburbia of and from the 1950s and 1960s

In terms of location it is London that looms largest in UK suburban films. Gardner (2003) meanwhile notes that in American suburban films it is often Connecticut that is the by-word for the all-American suburb for its easy commutability to New York. Onset of family responsibility is often seen as ushering in a move to suburbia. Consequently US suburban-set films have frequently placed a great emphasis on idyllic family life. Dines (2009:9–10) remarks that this post-1945 middle-class suburban family fascination was 'in part a reaction to the sustained hardships experienced by most families throughout the years of the Depression and Second World War, but was also a response to Cold War anxieties about Soviet takeover'. Early antecedents of the suburban film include *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) more accurately about American small town life than suburbia *per se* but setting a trend in its promotion of wholesome all-American values (Beuka 2004; Halper and Muzzio 2011). Based on the novel by Jean Kerr *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* has a family headed by acerbic film critic David Niven and dutiful wife Doris Day escaping their increasingly cramped apartment in New York city to a rambling house 'on the Hudson' and with it accepting a 'long life of commuting'.

One of their offspring is so unaccustomed to seeing flora he attempts to eat the daises growing in the garden, from which the film gets its title. Niven tells the new local school that he will not volunteer when they ask for him to help out as he considers their request to be 'moral blackmail' whereas his wife happily plunges herself into a pivotal role in the school play in what is on the whole an upbeat, sunny film. It later became the basis of a television show from 1965 to 1967. The post-war suburban mindset with a slightly more dramatic edge is seen in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) based on the novel by Sloan Wilson starring Gregory Peck as a family man experiencing flashbacks on the daily commute to New York from Westport, Connecticut. His wife seems more driven than him so as a result of her ambitions for a better quality of life Peck's character lands himself in a new pressurized work environment (advertising on Madison Avenue). She chides him for turning into a 'cheap slippery yes-man' while he himself harbours wartime secrets and pent up frustration – most explosive of all to his wife that he fathered an illegitimate child. His resolve to do right contrasts with his workaholic boss who is a stranger to his family, long ago sacrificed for their father's climbing the corporate ladder in a television network. When Peck laments that his children are constantly glued to the television, the boss suggests smashing it in. They seem to watch westerns with shoot-outs heavily featured. 'That's seven dead already' his young daughter exclaims at one stage numbed to the carnage, Peck's character is even more unmoved: he has seen this all close up as he killed 17 people in action. The film is more a picture of suburban masculinity rather than the portrayals of female suburban neuroses that are dealt with in Chapter 6. *The Graduate* (1967) has been described as a suburban film (Beuka 2001, 2004; Gardner 2003) for showing Ben's reaction to the suffocating confines of his parents' suburban parameters. Perhaps we can trace the 'turning' of popular culture away for its initially rosy positive picture of suburbia from this point of roughly in the latter 1960s onwards.

More recent suburban films are often self-referential nostalgically harking back to previous stereotypical images of suburbia from 'the good old days'. Questioning the 1950s versions automatically signalling the way to perfection and the 'good life' are encapsulated in the film *Pleasantville* (1998) which punctures the nostalgia-fuelled myth of the good old days of American suburbia and what 'a kinder gentler nation'. The trailer describes the film's fictional setting as 'a place as far from reality as we can imagine' and plot as 'about the loss of innocence and the power of change' has generated a notable degree of academic interest (Muzzio and Halper 2002; Dickinson 2006). The film takes its name from a 1950s television show in the story, that has at time of its taking place is being re-run on an oldies

satellite channel where its wholesome image and catch phrases like 'Hi Honey I'm home' have mesmerized the teenage boy lead character who finds himself trapped in the family television set and transported to *Pleasantville* an eerily black and white (literally monochromatic shots) world of repression. Gradually despite the efforts of the old guard to cling on to how it was, Technicolor engulfs Pleasantville with a positive message advocating rebellion and creative culture in suburbia over routine and belief in the acquisition of consumer durables. At the end of the film a hip hop mural gets painted on a wall in Pleasantville leading to a court case in which the Town Hall committee's wish to 'hold on to those values that made this place great' proves untenable. Rock and roll is allowed to stay. As for the future, it seems nobody knows with any certainty what it holds anymore. Time travel was also the theme of teen hit *Back to the Future* (1985) which spawned a number of sequels and the more adult *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). In both films the main protagonist is able to change events relating to relationships of their parents and own destinies. In the former a suburban 1980s high school student is transported back to his pre-suburban 1950s existence when the same surroundings were a small town yet to become swallowed up by the nearest city of which it became a suburb. The questioning of old suburban values is raised by Spigel (2001a:408–9) who details the plot of a 1999 made for television Disney film *Smart House* in which 'computer-powered versions of an imaginary 1950s housewife . . . [a] full time mother who lives in a suburban dream house and . . . looks after everybody's needs' gradually develops into a nightmare scenario and 'a zillion evil retro mothers, all bent on keeping the family trapped inside'. The imagined suburban perfection of the 1950s and 1960s displayed is more exaggerated than the versions portrayed in the films from the actual era itself.

The rewriting of history to highlight the faults of suburban repression are dramatized in *Far from Heaven* (2002, Todd Haynes), a film styled as a melodrama which is heavily derivative of director Douglas Sirk who was active in the 1950s when the film was set. Things begin by drawing us into a seemingly textbook case of an idyllic affluent suburban scenario: the devoted mother with a respectable standing in the community is married to a successful executive who upholds the standing of 'the company' and works hard to provide financial security for the family, for example ballet lessons and station wagon vehicle. However this world begins to collapse before our eyes with two main transgressions presenting themselves: the secret homosexuality of the husband (who visits a doctor to see if he can be 'cured') and the twin taboo of the (chaste, non-sexual) friendship developing between the film's housewife and her young black gardener across the racial divide. This 1950s depicted is socially conservative and deeply divided.

People use words like 'charming' as a positive adjective, the children respectfully address their father as 'sir', there is a black housemaid and when the son of the family utters the word 'Jeez' as an exclamation he is reprimanded for blasphemy. At Frank and Cathy's cocktail party civil rights unrest discussed: one guest states that the race riots that occurred in Little Rock could just as easily have occurred 'here in Hartford'. Another rejects the proposition because 'for one thing, there's no Governor Faubus in Connecticut. But the main reason [is] there are no Negroes'. The exchange is all the more shocking as it is uttered as the speaker is served a drink by a black domestic servant. The film ends with a divorce being sought and the gardener, a widowed single father, leaving town with his daughter to escape town gossip and disapproval from both whites and blacks. The temporal moment of the 1950s as a golden age when wholesome nuclear-family oriented suburban life was seen as a norm to aspire to in civilization's best interest is punctured. As with *Pleasantville* and *Mad Men*, it can be stated with certainty that these retro-representations of the 1950s/1960s are quite unlike the actual films from the era which tended to portray suburban perfection.

Social realism: Slice of life depictions of British suburbia

The suburbs were not the dominant setting for films in the costume drama period productions of the early twentieth century that helped seal the popularity of the cinema in the early twentieth century. Big costume dramas were often set in country homes or at smart central London addresses rather than mundane districts on the edges. Again the United Kingdom has spawned a number of stylistic film categories: the comedies of Ealing studios were made in the suburbs and consumed by suburban audiences. Elstree studios in Borehamwood, Pinewood and Shepperton were also significant production sites of British cinema located in the suburbs of north-west London. The 1944 film *This Happy Breed* (directed by David Lean from a play script by Noel Coward) portrays the vicissitudes of a stoic south London family between the wars – although its Clapham setting is not a location now regarded as 'suburbia', occupying a Pooterish distance from central London. A broad sweep of history is encompassed from demobbing after 1919 via the General Strike, appeasement and then to the outbreak again of war in 1939. The character that seems to stand out most with the rest is Queenie who rails against the confines of suburban mediocrity in two memorable soliloquies when she declares that she wants more than living in a house identical to hundreds of others making the same tube journey as everyone else. The film has

obvious overlaps with the better-known *Brief Encounter* (1945), a tale of repressed suburban desire, by sharing the same writer-director team and actors Celia Johnson and Stanley Holloway. In *Brief Encounter* Johnson's character despite outward appearances as leading a life of respectable middle-class contentment (wife, mother, comfortable home, etc.) falls for a mysterious married hospital doctor (Trevor Howard) in a station refreshment room that develops into an illicit affair which is cut short when she realizes her 'mistake' and ends up back in the bosom of her suburban family, her husband being completely unsuspecting. Every time the lovers meet there is a running subplot of Holloway and Joyce Carey flirting with one another on the other side of the café providing comic relief around, rather patronizingly, the theme of 'how the working classes conduct themselves' in contrast with the more formal register of the central pair. In the decades that followed the best-known British films dealing with everyday life situations (outside period drama) tended to oscillate between ribald comedy (e.g. the popular *Carry On* series of films or the *Confessions* films) and realist drama.

By the 1950s and 1960s the popular wave of 'angry young man' fiction had translated into film with a number of screen adaptations. Directors such as Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger and Karel Reisz dramatized the work of John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe and others contributing to what amounted to the most sustained engagement between working-class British life and the big screen to date, only at all challenged in the early 1980s with the birth of Channel 4. The sometimes depressing images pictured in these 'kitchen sink' dramas often included back-to-back housing and washing hanging up while children played in the streets before the mass ownership of cars filled up roadsides. The semi-detached swathes of the suburbs fell between two stools in British cinema typology. They were (i) not bodice-ripping yarns or (ii) slums ripe for films incorporating social conscience or social commentary meaning that they largely escaped the gaze of film-makers as their ordinariness offered no escapism or statement to the viewer. Sometimes there are references but often constructed in opposition to the more dangerous inner city. In Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1968) based on the best-selling Nell Dunn novel of the same name, the ironically named character 'Joy' is married to a crook who gets sent to prison. She inhabits a succession of seedy flats inside terraced multi-occupancy Victorian houses, getting into which means negotiating treacherous flights of stairs with her toddler son Jonny in tow (one is in Wandsworth and we are told that she herself is from a pre-gentrified Fulham). At the start of the film is a flashback to better times 'When Tom was in the money the world was our oyster and we chose Ruislip'.

Their time there is not dwelt on in any great detail but in snatched conversation on prison visits Tom implores Joy that Jonny and her can 'do better' than lodging at her Aunt's flat in cramped conditions where they are forced to move to after his incarceration when the money runs out. Her joyless existence leads her to take part-time jobs in pubs and modelling, in the course of which she falls in with other bad company. The film concludes with her trapped in the inner city.

In veteran director Mike Leigh's films suburbia does nudge its way into the narrative although most typically as seen through the eyes of inner-city dwellers. In *High Hopes* two joint-rolling lefties Cyril and Shirley who live in a tenement block overlooking Kings Cross station are befuddled at the gentrification that has taken place around his elderly mother's crumbling Victorian terrace (filmed in Bow) when they pay her a visit. Looking at her moneyed next door neighbours' smart window boxes Cyril remarks wistfully 'it was a completely different street when I was a kid'. He observes how the houses' function has changed to an investment not dwelling remarking how people 'buy them for sod all, sell 'em for a fortune . . . it's a capital investment'. Meanwhile his sister Valerie is presented as *nouveau riche* suburbia personified with her affected speech and tastelessly decorated house located deep in what Brunsdon (2003:68) calls 'semi-detached vulgarity'. She gets to see the inside of the yuppies' home when she turns up (deliberately late) to collect her mother who has ended up there after getting herself locked out, exclaiming with obvious condescension 'amazing what you can do with a slum'. Brunsdon (2004:69) asserts 'Valerie and Martin live in the no place which is the suburbs.' The surprise birthday party they throw at their house for the mother goes horribly wrong who cannot wait to leave – we are told it will be a £15–20 cab fare back. These characters are a revisiting of John and Barbara in Leigh's earlier film of unemployment and desperation *Meantime* (1983) who live on a modern estate 'about twelve miles' from the city. Barbara offers her jobless nephew Colin money for painting and decorating at her home there. When she gives him directions to their house from Chigwell tube she asks 'you'll recognise it won't you?' rhetorically for reassurance only for Colin to retort 'yeah it's just the same as all the others'. Uncle John only shows a slight flicker of imagination when he enthuses about getting a picture window fitted for the reason that is 'just one big pane', a reference to the couple's strained marriage and sad suburban existence. In both films the city is painted as authentic while the suburbs are characterized as spaces of dull monotony and deadening pain underscored by the loveless marriages both these suburban couples seem to be in – Martin seeks solace in a mistress and Barbara is driven to drink.

Rather than highlighting class differences *per se* it seems (in a situation that chimes with Bourdieu's theory of distinction) here the divide is between the working class inner city worthies versus the tasteless suburbanite ones. The yuppie couple next door to Cyril and Val's mother in *High Hopes* have lived in inner London out of choice, not constraint, and are also portrayed as shallow and inauthentic – their pretentiousness is derided rather than their geographical location. As Shirley comments to Cyril 'what do they wanna live round here for?' Indeed conforming Cyril's theory the materialistic wife Laetitia tells Mrs Bender 'you've been sitting on a gold-mine' not realizing that she is a council tenant. Carney (2000:96) quotes a review of Leigh's earlier much celebrated television drama *Abigail's Party* by Dennis Potter that accuses the director of anti-suburban prejudice. Certainly Leigh films do seem to communicate a sense of 'them' versus 'us' often mocking suburban inhabitants for their depthlessness and narrow-mindedness, for example Valerie for her tastelessness. In the 2010 film *Another Year* we see Mary, an emotionally unstable and needy gibbering woman who we laugh *at* rather than *with*, a family friend of Tom and Gerri the pivotal couple who live in middle-class London suburbia. Another fairly cardboard cut-out-like suburban character of Leigh is Wayne from *High Hopes* who appears at the beginning of the film from Epsom as remarkably un-streetwise. He is described by Brunsdon (2004:67) as 'the ingenue from the countryside' and stumbles into the story when Cyril and Shirley put him up in sympathy. A further example of Leigh taking a condescending view of suburban pretensions can be seen in 2008's *Happy Go Lucky* when central figure the Poppy, who lives in Camden, visits her married sister in the sticks. The house has dated decor, a flat-pack table and a doormat husband. Again the suburbanites are derided for submitting to a conformist routine rather than the carefree spirits of the inner city who visit them.

The social realism tradition in a fusing of fact and fiction occurs *par excellence* in the 1994 film *London* and its follow-up *Robinson in Space*. These films feel documentary like: in them the director Patrick Keiller through the narration in deadpan delivery describes the travails of central character Robinson (who we are told teaches at the University of Barking, itself a suburban outpost of East London)¹ around the metropolis. The first film traces a journey in the footsteps of Daniel Defoe taking in locations from Stoke Newington to Brentford. The tone is almost despairing, evoking a hollowed-out capital city and diverting our attention to fairly neglected unglamorous places and spaces. His project of an anti-road movie continues in *Robinson in Space*, which retraces Defoe's *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* from the mid-1700s in which Robinson and

friend set out on a further odyssey this time from Reading. Among bus-shelters, DIY superstores and motorway service stations the picture that emerges again is a privatization of space and interestingly general flow of cultural resources from the core of the city to the peripheral zones. The narration dryly intones 'We imagined a scenario in which the centre of the city continued to decline and activities previously thought of as occurring in the centre began to take place in the suburbs.' Anger is expressed but in such an urbane way that its impact is not as cutting as the say in a Sex Pistols song. The first two Robinson films were produced under the dying days of Conservative rule although the second had a post-1997 release, the third was *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). This notion of the city way of life under threat from suburban-fixated government seems to have been more applicable to Tory rule than under New Labour who very much prioritized arts-led city centre regeneration. Terrence Davies' *Of Time and the City*, the director's memoir of Liverpool has some similarities in its invective heard in the narration although the film is largely stitched together nostalgic archive footage of working-class popular culture: football matches, seaside outings to New Brighton, etc. The scenes of back-to-back housing in the Hovis advertisement mould make this film more city-focused than suburban but nonetheless it offers a fascinating historical document of evocation of place.

Minorities and the suburban feelgood film

A different image of women and suburbia emerges from female writer/director Gurinder Chadha's films where received ideas of Asian femininity are too on display returned to in Chapter 7. In earlier eras ethnic characters in films were present only to provide comic relief, one of the most striking examples can be seen in the classic light and fluffy 1961 (city rather than suburban-set) *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. New York looks like a candy-store while a heavily cosmetically yellowed-up Mickey Rooney plays Mr Yunioshi, the upstairs killjoy neighbour of indeterminate oriental origin to lovebirds Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard. The portrayal is astonishingly crude and its portrayal of race is one that is cringeworthy to watch; the character is a small man with slitted eyes who barely speaks English, has stick-out teeth and thick lensed spectacles leading one *Times* commentator to remark 'it makes *The Black and White Minstrel Show* look like a government ethnic minority recruitment campaign' (Sanghera 2009). In *Harold and Kumar* it is second-generation ethnic minorities we witness. The stereotypes have changed (having now mastered English language) although the stereotyping

hasn't. The title pair are two stoners on a quasi-road trip through suburban New Jersey as they seek a White Castle burger bar in a post-marijuana binge comedown (the follow up was the wrongful imprisonment tale *Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay*). Kumar is a smart Alec Indian who has strayed from his parents' chosen path of a medical career for him while Harold is his long-suffering 'nice guy' Asian achieving friend of Korean heritage, employed as a stockbroker. In their quest they must outwit suburban police officers, students at Princeton (dividing into sexually willing whites and studious orientals), Kumar's heavily Indian-accented doctor father and older obedient brother (no accent) as well as the 'assholes' a white-trash gang from whom the pair are confronted with various popular cultural and ethnically coded insults – their name unwittingly recalls the ear'oles of Paul Willis (1977). Harold gets called 'Mr Miyagi' after the Japanese martial arts instructor of 1986 teen-film *The Karate Kid* and Kumar is referred to as 'Apu', the name of the of the *Simpsons* grocery-store owner by the bullies. His brother by going into the family trade (medicine) like Puppy's brother in the novel *Tourism* as seen in Chapter 7 represents conformity whereas Kumar/Puppy have chosen a path of rebellion. In a soliloquy delivered at the hospital after Kumar's disastrous failed medical interview his brother delivers a speech in praise of suburban values: 'What the hell's wrong with you, Kumar? Look at me. I own my own house. I drive a beamer [BMW]. And I get laid whenever I want. You can have all that too, if you'd just get off your ass and go to med school . . . When are you gonna grow up and stop with this post-college rebel bullshit?' Meanwhile towards the end Kumar delivers a sermon equating burgers with all that the United States and its immigrants have held dear. He tells Kumar 'Our parents came to this country, escaping persecution, poverty, and hunger . . . they wanted to live in a land that treated them as equals. A land where their kids could study and get into good colleges. A land filled with hamburger stands. And not just one type of hamburger. Hundreds of types with different sizes, toppings, and condiments. That land was America. You think this is just about the burgers? No. This is about achieving what our parents set out for. This is about the pursuit of happiness. This is about the American dream.' The implication is that this has become hollow: Harold's cell-mate when he is imprisoned is a sage-like black man who turns out to be a professor who is there simply 'for being black'.

While the *Harold and Kumar* films portraying Asians were the work of a Jewish scripting and director combination (screenwriters Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, and directed by Danny Leiner) interviews with Gurinder Chadha often impress upon the reader the fact that the director is a Southall-raised Punjabi conferring them with authenticity. A number of US films appear to have

convenience store owner as a new mode of Asian stereotype in suburban film: in addition to Apu and the example in *Harold and Kumar* the films *Falling Down* and *SubUrbia* also all include a put-upon small businessman who is under siege from racist violence. Chadha's film deals more with femininity. Her best known work is *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) which was taboo-busting for taking a football playing Asian girl as its chief subject. *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) is a story that looks at the intertwined lives of three different generations of Asian women and the decisions that they face in life including accidental pregnancy. A daytrip to Blackpool is the nucleus of the story. This downmarket kiss-me-quick slapstick seaside location becomes the scene of escapism and even exotic retreat. The scenes where old-fashioned elderly gent Ambrose romances the demure be-saried Asha are particularly memorable for their replaying of familiar Bollywood Indian film aesthetics in a faded English seaside town. In Hanif Kureishi's work, characters often cavort around the metropolis they are attracted to the centre having broken free of the shackles of suburbia; London is their playground. Kureishi's 1991 film was entitled *London Kills Me*, demonstrating an ambivalent love/hate relationship towards the capital.

Trade union organization is not a common theme of feature films as a rule but the 2010 film *Made in Dagenham* was a tale of industrial strife in the east London industrial suburb that for years housed the Fords motor works. British cinematic social realism is combined with comedy in a film based on real life events from 1968 when crippling strike action was taken by women sewing machinists at the Ford plant demanding that they be reinstated onto a pay grade that recognized the skilled nature of their work. Women take centre stage: in all the shots. In reality the action led to the 1970 Equal Pay Act. There is a sense that Swinging London's influence was slowly creeping into the ostensibly encapsulated community of Dagenham – there are references to Biba, Mary Quant, C and A, Babycham and Berni Inns – the latter is the eatery of choice for an expense-fiddling union baron. Despite subject matter of some gravity being its central focus the film is very much a feel-good movie. The women portrayed are heroic in standing up for their rights but we are also shown their softer side. Motherhood is portrayed across the social divide as both the strike leader Rita and wife of the Fords boss find their paths crossing at the school gates of the local grammar school where Rita's son appears to be facing difficulties for being from the estate and not fitting in. The shop steward is a carer for her elderly war-veteran husband. The youngest member of the striking group dreams of being a model only to have her dreams regularly shot down by workers with lines such as 'This ain't Knightsbridge it's Dagenham.' The housing pictured is

not the vast acreage of the Becontree estate that Dagenham is often associated with but the early 1960s Mardyke Estate, in the neighbouring borough of Havering which looks futuristic in the film and at the time of its setting would have housed many Ford workers. By 2007 the Mardyke was named by a BBC website as 'Havering's most run-down estate, with a reputation for crime and anti-social behaviour' (Diseko 2007). Its scheduled demolition was held off until filming had taken place. The outside world is represented by the 'brothers' at the TUC (Trade Union Congress) Council in Eastbourne and Whitehall where the machinists visit Employment secretary Barbara Castle. People go 'down the dogs' for kicks. The dramatization of real events has been a running theme in British cinema: the runaway success of 2011 was *The King's Speech*. Further London suburban-themed examples include Twickenham-set *Hope and Glory* (1987) based on film-director John Boorman's childhood memories of the blitz and *Personal Services* (1988) based on the story of Cynthia Payne who ran a brothel for VIPs from suburban Streatham. In some cases real-life examples have been poorly received, for example the film *Buster* (1988) based on the Great Train Robbery of 1963 was criticized by the victims' families for making light of a brutally violent episode and making loveable heroes out of criminals.

Dysfunctioning suburbia and suburban alienation

Suburban films have been numerous; reception by their fans are shaped by their eras. For those who were teenagers in the 1980s, *Heathers* (1989) is an iconic angst-filled suburban high school-set comedy with liberal amounts of irony and cynicism. The opening scenes show a genteel suburban setting as a group of girls play croquet on the lawn in a back-garden of a well-to-do house. The plot unfolds with our introduction to various classroom cliques including the 'geeks', again reminiscent of Willis' 'ear-oles' and the fashionable Heathers including the sceptical Veronica (Winona Ryder). Into this picture enters the mysterious JD (Christian Slater), the dark and brooding new kid in town who has attended 'Seven high schools in seven states and the only thing different was my locker combination', with a father in the construction industry who watches videos of his firm doing demolitions of towerblocks for pleasure. After JD and Veronica become an item he leads them into a systematic murder campaign in which the school's most 'popular' students die one by one with each case staged to look like suicide. Veronica increasingly questions the killings and ensuing climate. After each death, television camera crews roll in to Westerberg High

to record vox pops. 'Heather, how many networks did you run to?' Veronica says reproachfully to Heather Duke after Heather Chandler's murder. When Veronica's mother chides her for not getting her face in front of the cameras she exclaims with horror: 'All we want is to be treated like human beings, not like guinea pigs to be experimented on and not like bunny rabbits to be patronized.' Her articulation of suburban angst are mocked by her parents. Her dad retorts: 'I do not patronize bunny rabbits' and her mum mocks her as 'little Miss Voice of a Generation', seemingly more rebel without a clue than *Rebel without a Cause*. The film parodies the fiction of suburban perfection and the media saturated age that it came out of: although noticeably it was before mobile phone use as we know it and the internet. JD celebrates the carnage that he has created: 'Chaos is great. Chaos is what killed the dinosaurs, darling, and it's what's going to make Westerburg a purified place to get an education. Face it, our way is the way. We scare people into not being assholes.' The rejection of the conventional dictates of what one must do to be 'popular' is part of a low-on-realism outright repudiation of suburban values. This follows a 'suburban outsider' tradition running through the *Graduate* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) and later *Donnie Darko* (2002) beginning with *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) whose poster proclaimed that it was about 'the bad boy from a good family'. All are about generational conflict with youth rejecting the suburban idyll at the heart of the American dream that their parents bought into.

The darkly comic films of Todd Solondz and Sam Mendes purport to expose the uncomfortable side of life in the comfortable suburbs and hypocrisy of suburban mores. Paedophilia, real and imagined, is present in both. Solondz' *Happiness* (1999) takes the women in a New Jersey family to contrast their fates; the mother's marriage has failed after her daughters have grown up. One of these is a housewife, another teaches English to foreign students and the third a would-be writer. The more mainstream Mendes' *American Beauty* is a tale of what goes on behind closed doors in a seemingly unthreatening generic suburban street. We hear opening narration from Kevin Spacey's character Lester Burnham, a middle-aged middle-ranking advertising office staffer who lives with his family in a tidy villa which from the outside resembles many others we have seen in suburban films before. The picture perfect scenario of the opening title sequence is shattered as a picture of that hackneyed cliché 'midlife crisis' unfolds; he is revealed to have fatalist tendencies and adolescent sexual fantasies. Themes such as incest makes this un-family viewing despite dreamy visuals. We are told in setting the scene 'Both my wife and daughter think I'm a gigantic loser . . . and they're right. I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure

what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this . . . sedated.' The cast also includes a gay couple and the homophobic ex-military man who lives next door with Ricky, his drug dealer son who later becomes Lester's supplier. The film has elements of comedy, tragedy and mystery. The deadpanned voiceover and some sharp-tongued ripostes also weave satire into the dramatic mixture. For example on losing his job the following exchange occurs at the dinner table:

Caroyln Burnham: . . . but you don't want to be unemployed.

Lester Burnham: Oh well, alright, let's all sell our souls and work for Satan because it's more convenient that way.

In the later film *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000) the father of the family similarly answers 'Spent my day chained to my desk surrounded by scychophants' when asked over dinner by his wife how work was. *American Beauty* invites us to sympathize with Lester who is pictured as being put-upon and hampered by his overly driven, materialistic wife (the same role was played earlier by Betty Rath in *Man in a Gray Flannel Suit*) who is a cut-throat suburban estate agent who has an affair with a male competitor. Completing this all-American dysfunctional family is Jane his sullen, narcissist teenage daughter who longs for more. Lester has desires awakened in himself directed at her cheerleading classmate Angela, initially seen as a dumb blonde but later revealed as a vulnerable virgin. When the girls are bragging about their sexual exploits, which we later learn are more imagined than real, Angela patronizingly retorts 'That's how things really are. You just don't know 'cause you're this pampered little suburban chick', when of course she also is such a specimen. Visually the film has some memorable moments including a wafting plastic bag gliding around in the wind. Even this is artifice. Ricky shows Jane video footage of it which he declares is 'The most beautiful thing I've ever filmed', with a wistful monologue: 'this bag was just dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things . . . Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it.' The incident proves to be a bonding experience for the couple. The film is mostly shot in neutral colours but there are injections of bright red as roses, rose petals and blood all appear to break up the almost monochrome monotony, for example when he is pursuing Angela. By the end of his opening prediction, 'This is my life. I'm 42 years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet . . . and in a way, I'm dead already', comes to fruition. The film has been described by Muzzio and Halper (2002:550) as 'a sermon on the evils of upscale suburbia . . . envy, disappointment and emptiness. . . . Suburbia in *American Beauty* represents the

highest stage of bourgeois inauthenticity.' It was widely seen as being an attack on the vacuous sterility of the suburbs. Yet while tantalizingly presenting the viewer with the possibility of subverting the supposedly suffocating norms of suburbia the film ends with these same values intact.

British director Sam Mendes reprised his role as chronicler of suburban dysfunctionality in *Revolutionary Road* of 2009, a dramatization of the 1961 Richard Yates novel of the same name. In the 'making of the movie' extra feature from the DVD version Kate Winslett (actress of the lead character April Wheeler) has described the film as a 'suburban battle'. Mendes has remarked 'I grew up in the suburbs so it's familiar territory to me even though it's American suburbs and it's period' although he has insisted that the film is principally about marriage claiming that 'The suburbs and city are a background.' He has claimed that the book is the 'grand daddy' of suburban fiction. The film cannot even claim that it reveals suburban nastiness behind a happy facade: almost from the outset we see the film's central couple at war with one another. At all times however the film is brightly shot with glistening lawns and immaculate white picket fences. It serves as a cautionary tale all about being stifled by suburban conformity: a young couple who briefly resuscitate their earlier newly-wed ambitions of European travel and bohemianism eventually shelve their dreams of escape because another one is on the way. Suburban materialism, social climbing, parenthood, adultery and suicide are all elements of the story. The film's stark ending takes April Wheeler's suburban malheur to its logical conclusion. Indeed the accompanying documentary on the DVD release borrows a phrase from Betty Friedan (returned to in Chapter 6) in its title *Lives of Quiet Desperation*.² In sum the film is about the perils of suburban sell-out: in this instance trading youthful dreams of living a bohemian existence in Paris for middle-management mediocrity in the conveyor belt of marriage, kids and being a wage-slave/ beholden to a mortgage. As in both versions of *Stepford Wives* and in the film *Revolutionary Road* (both originally novels) it is the wife who expresses misgivings about moving to suburbs which was the husband's idea.

Many of the same acting personnel appear in these portrayals – Julianne Moore has been mentioned in Chapter 1 for example. Kate Winslett played the long-suffering *Mildred Pearce* in the HBO mini-series of the same name and while this was first aired on television it had a sweeping cinematic take on its subject faithfully reproducing the book it was named after and with Todd Haynes directing. The film adaptation of the novel by Tom Perrotta's *Little Children* (directed by Todd Field, 2006) again starred Kate Winslett as a dissatisfied suburban American housewife although set in the present day. We

are told at the outset by the eerily voiced narrator (with echoes of the 1999 film *Virgin Suicides* derived from the 1994 novel of Jeffrey Eugenides) that as she sat in the playground area of the local park Sarah imagined herself to be 'a researcher studying the behaviour of typical suburban women, not a typical suburban woman'. We only get flashes of 'the remnants of her former self', that is her existence before suburbia wore her down. The story is a study of adultery to compensate for the promise of suburban utopia unfulfilled by two people trapped in loveless marriages. There is a further backdrop of a local felon being released into the community after a period in prison. This character lives with his elderly mother and in his own words has 'a psycho-sexual disorder'. News of his arrival spreads to engender a lynchmob mentality from the locals who believe he should be castrated. The scenario has flashes of *The Crucible* the 1953 Arthur Miller play which takes the Salem witch trials as its subject. Inter-textual references and reminders of the world outside are rare but present. At a meeting of their local book-club that Sarah has reluctantly been cajoled into attending, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is under discussion. Whilst the other the gossiping wives are divided on whether Bovary is a liberated woman discovering her sexuality or a 'slut', Sarah, who we discover studied for a PhD in English literature, has the last word declaring that Bovary is commendable for having escaped from the confines of her strait-jacket of a situation and following her heart which she describes as 'Hunger for an alternative, refusal to accept a life of unhappiness' which of course describes her own situation. The film's spatial positioning in the suburbs can be seen in the way Brad the handsome young stay-at-home dad and student lawyer that Sarah has an affair with gets dropped off at the station from the arms of one woman (wife) to another (lover, as soon as it's safe to do so) when the day of the bar exams he is studying for arrives. The wider world is hinted at in the film where Brad's wife is making on children who have lost fathers in the Iraq war. There is a train line that rattles past the ground where Brad plays baseball. The only black character is a police officer. The book allows more detail into Sarah's lesbian past at college and her husband's indiscretions, explaining that he already had a failed marriage with teenage children but that she married him to escape her job as a Starbucks waitress.

A further example of a community turning on an individual is seen in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) a film about a creature created by an inventor literally with scissors for hands. Here the predominant suburban motif is the hedge, a marker of territory and privacy rather in the same way that net curtains demarcate space with the added advantage of allowing you to look out but not letting passers-by look in. The message conveyed is that difference has its limits. At first, as a new

arrival in an idyllic pastel painted suburb, Edward is welcomed by the locals and admired for his topiary and hairdressing skills. He even appears on a television talkshow. However when he is taken by Peg, the middle-aged mom who adopts him, to the bank to discuss get a business start-up loan they advise him to get a social security number and driving licence (adding that he could also get an 'invalid permit' and park anywhere – a rare mention of disability in a film) and thus become simply another cog in the machine. Such regularization threatens to destroy his uniqueness; a movement that has already been in train since Edward's arrival, for example Peg dresses him in cottons to fit in with his new peers, disguising the goth aesthetic of his original black leathers. Tasker (2002:74) sees elements of fantasy as a standard tactic of the director Tim Burton, seen clearly in the dream-like shots of the suburban surrounds but events take a turn. Edward's vilification and ostracization by the status-conscious local community starts after he fails to respond to the sexual advances of one of the frustrated wives so as revenge she spreads rumours about him. His downfall is cemented by his deliberate framing in which he is caught breaking and entering a house on the estate. Before long the suburban busybodies are out in force demanding blood, shattering the tranquillity of the film's opening.

Postmodern inter-textuality and dreaminess can be seen in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) which seals the deal with a golden oldies style soundtrack including the hypnotic sounds of the title track from crooner Bobby Darin and 'In Dreams' a Roy Orbison song lipsynched from a ghetto blaster cassette. Like the suburbia of *Edward Scissorhands* the images at the film's opening are ostensibly a wholesome, comforting idyllic suburban landscape where red roses sway in the breeze and white picket fences bound the green grass all under a dazzling blue sky yet there is an eeriness to this perfection hinted at by the insects beneath. Human life is seen in cheery waving firemen, a school crossing patrol and a man watering his plants collapsing on the spot. For O'Day (2002:250) the assembly of film visuals and soundtrack is evidence of Lynch's postmodern cynicism in adopting 'a tone at once naively innocent and mockingly self-knowing'. Todd Solondz also documents imperfection beneath the surface of suburban America but in a more realist 'warts 'n' all' way than the surrealism of *Blue Velvet* or *Edward Scissorhands*. He has been hailed as an exponent of "'New Geek Cinema": an emerging body of work that . . . give[s] voice to outsiders and the brutalized' (DeFino 2002:314). *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) uses some element of pastiche in recalling the 1987 Guns and Roses track 'Welcome to the Jungle' translated to the tranquillity of the suburbs and shows the unfolding of events experienced by a non-conformist junior high school girl who is bullied

by family and schoolmates. Again the suburban landscape is similar to *Edward Scissorhands*. The suburbia pictured in both cases is one of neat lawns, pastel pinks and sunshine although the themes dealt with are unremittingly dark. Other films' examples of in-text references are more direct, for example *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000) billed as 'a contemporary fable loosely based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*'. Dostoyevsky finds himself the subject of classroom discussion in *The Ice Storm*.

The lynch-mob mentality of vengeance-seeking angry suburban dwellers in *Edward Scissorhands* and *Little Children* is seen across other genres. A suburban backcloth has been almost the default setting of many well-known horror films. The pioneering 1968 zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* was shot in black and white adding to its eeriness zombie and set in a Pittsburgh suburb people before attacks take hold all over the eastern United States. The story sees people under siege from zombies seeking human flesh and in many ways shows how with the hippie movement underway, the American dream coming under attack. The setting was not outer space, there were no aliens or ghouls from eastern Europe but under threat was mainstream suburbia. *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* made twice (1956, 1978) also shows a small town encircled by alien forces which by the remark was a suburb. As one-by-one once dependable locals fall under their spell only one person is left untouched and on the run, prefiguring the same sense of urgency conveyed in *Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004). *A Nightmare on Elm Street* again evokes the terror felt by a small, close-knit community under siege from a child-killing psychopath's posthumous revenge. *Scream* and its sequels are set in California in a suburban area, the first film of the series in particular demonstrates postmodern traits as the teenagers of the story are initially unimpressed by the murders engulfing the locality as they do not measure up to previous films that they have seen. A suburbanite on the rampage is the simple premise of *Falling Down*. McCarthy (1998:42) sees the film as symbolic of 'a general subordination of the interests and desires of women and a pervasive sense that life in the urban centers is self-made hell'. Pfeil (1995) had also used the film as an example of white masculinity in crisis. The film is 'centered around a protagonist, a kind of proto-normative, anomic individual who [can be described as] "out there"', according to McCarthy (1998:41). The film serves as illustrations of a suburbia which has strayed from the rosy picture once seen of wholesomeness or even muted frustration (*American Beauty*, *Little Children*, etc.) to become intolerant and impatient. It seems that while suburban culture was once celebrated in film it has now become an open goal for potshots. Science fiction takes the horror genre even further and some analyses see the

dystopia inherent in it as corresponding with some of the negative features of standardization and suffocation that have been attributed to suburbia. Indeed science fiction novels have included reflections on the suburbs since H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. While space (no pun intended) precludes a close examination of this film type, examples include *Invaders from Mars*, *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as examined by Latham (1995). *The Truman Show* (1998) showed the eeriness of modern suburbia as imprisoning and isolating with CCTV surveillance technology dominating life.

Perhaps the most extreme version illustrating the cautionary tale of submission to the suburban ideal is seen in the horror cum science fiction of the *Stepford Wives* (1975) based on the 1972 novel by Ira Levin, itself reportedly inspired by Betty Freidan. The film follows a young family moving to Connecticut from New York in search of a better life. As Walter the husband reminds his wife aspiring photographer Joanna it will be 'perfect for the kids' itemizing: 'Good schools, low taxes, clean air.' From the beginning however both she (and their daughter, unable to sleep at night) are doubtful of the move but suspicions are confirmed as Joanna notices how all the fellow housewives one-by-one become robotic vacuous, drones: devoid of any soul or personality and instead becoming perfect (i.e. submissive) housewives in what can literally be described as a clone-town. The only thing they can enthuse about are recipes and cleaning. Odd repetitive behaviour ensues when they are in any way physically struck, causing their circuits to short, as seen with one neighbour whose car is bumped while she's reversing out of the supermarket carpark and later her best friend Bobby when Joanna sticks a knife into her on realizing that has also 'turned' to have the suspicion confirmed when she doesn't bleed. Both mechanically begin repeating the same phrase. It gives a new meaning to her psychiatrist's warning that 'a city to suburb move for a woman with interests other than children can seem like a jolt to Siberia'. As the realization dawns on Joanna that the women are being programmed by the husbands and their shady 'mens association' to become androids, after a visit to a psychiatrist insisted on by Walter she becomes next in line. Despite attempting to fight the system it ultimately wins. The film has the hallmarks of science fiction. A Mr Big masterminds the takeover from a central control room at the club. However the shots of Stepford itself show the visual perfection of the idyllic US suburb: white picket fence, picture windows and immaculately manicured lawns. Director Bryan Forbes has described how he wanted to shoot a thriller in sunlight rather than a dark house. The trailer calls it 'a modern day horror film'.³ This is a depiction of surrealism in the suburbs, a world where the nightmare of women as domesticated dummies is realized

to its logical conclusion. The title has perhaps even more than the expression 'gray flannel suit' entered our everyday lexicon. In 1997 on the election of 101 women Labour MPs who swept to power with a New Labour government and provided with pagers to remain 'on message', many commentators negatively remarked them as 'Blair's babes'; these were effectively parliamentary Stepford wives programmed to mindlessly accept leadership instructions.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked into cinematic representations of the suburbs although the cinema as a physical presence as an actual building in the suburb is also worthy of mention in recessionary times where suburban high streets are increasingly hollowed out with the collapse of chainstores and small businesses alike. West London's Southall was once home of four cinemas . By the late 1970s, while cinemas elsewhere had shut down or changed function to become bingo-halls in the post tv age, all were showing Bollywood films to cater for an audience who had migrated from the Punjab region of India with samosas as well as popcorn on sale. The Himalaya lasted longest; styled like a Chinese Palace it variously closed and re-opened its doors before shutting for the last time in 2010. In the 1980s it was video rentals and more recently in its second incarnation (following Arts Council restoration) DVDs and multiplexes that hit this 'decaying beauty' (Gates 2010) hard enough to be no longer viable. Chambers has remarked of art deco styled cinemas across the United Kingdom: 'Such "picture palaces" were themselves like film sets, in dramatic contrast to their location in the working-class and suburban areas of Britain's major cities.' Southall with its sometimes chaotic and always vividly diverting Asian commerce in shopfronts and spilling out in stalls onto the pavements has always been more than just another dreary suburb: its proximity to Heathrow airport explaining why Asians opted for this suburban location as opposed to earlier ethnic settlers around the docks that had been their point of arrival. The same applies to Hounslow as the quote of Malkani in Chapter 2 illustrated. Today futuristic multiplexes have alongside hi-tech retail and business parks have supplanted the role of many suburban cinemas; some were subsequently turned into bingo halls which themselves atrophied before long, for example Kingston's Gala Bingo once a Regal then ABC cinema which shut in 2010. Up the road from Southall three miles along the A4020 Uxbridge Road later, Ealing, home of the world famous studios that spawned 'Ealing comedy' at

the time of writing has no cinemas at its centre. Nonetheless the cinema has provided representation of and escapism from suburbia in various ways.

When determining what it is we look for when we identify a 'suburban film' the answer is multiple things. Generation is portrayed in many ways for example. The older generation of suburbanites are figures of fun in numerous youth audience-oriented films although in *Ali G Indahouse*, a suburban youth of indeterminate ethnic origin becomes figure of fun in a film drawing on the resources of black youth culture and aesthetic from hip hop. The implication is that the suffering implied cannot translate to the affluent leafiness of Staines-upon-Thames. The actor is Jewish and slang used is adapted Jamaican Patois. Ali G is a masked player, we do not know who he 'really' is. James Dean and Natalie Wood of *Rebel without a Cause* both died young (Dean particularly so) sealing their longevity as anti-suburban cultural icons whereas Mathew Broderick has aged from playing a freewheeling 1980s suburban kid thumbing his nose at suburban parental values in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* to a fully paid up subscriber of these and stalwart of the sinister Mens Association for local husbands by 2004's *Stepford Wives* comic remake. The UK sitcom spin-off *Bless this House* is another film where middle-aged suburban domesticity and the pompous snob values of the parents generation are contrasted with the hedonistic liberation of their offspring who represent youth. *Revolutionary Road* seems to be a warning against squandering the inheritance of gilded youth for the suburban treadmill. More recently *Fishtank* (2009, directed by Andrea Arnold) is set both in an inhabited and an abandoned council flat in non-descript blank East London suburbia which feels very cut off from anything in the film, bisected by dual carriageways. The main character Mia diverts herself from everyday existence by truanting from her pupil referral unit to try out dance routines by herself. Her mother's latest on-off lover Conor tells her 'You dance like a black.' She follows him home: a Barrat-type newbuild house near what looks like an industrial landscape bordering wasteland.

Portrayals of suburbs in cinema seem to oscillate between the dichotomous representations of utopian promised land or dystopian hell. De Fino (2002) claims that Solondz was motivated by the saccharine 1980s/1990s popular television series *The Wonder Years* which was an affectionate depiction of growing up in an unnamed non-descript suburb through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy. The two can then sometimes overlap in their practice or form a dialogue. Solondz among other things is a Jewish film-maker. In his film *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, the central Weiner family of suburban New Jersey are Jewish although this is not explicitly stated in the script. Solondz has decried what he calls 'a part of society,

that's lapsing from the Jewish faith but also wanting to have the cake and eat it too' (Applebaum 2010). Jewish characters have been a mainstay of his work just as suburbia has been home of Jewish residents in the United Kingdom and United States. Golders Green in North London or Prestwich in the Metropolitan Manchester borough of Bury are both now established 'Jewish' suburbs where residents often made outward journeys, for example from London's East or North Manchester's Cheetham Hill. Solondz' interview with the *Jewish Chronicle* includes the following line with interesting implications for the burden of representation: 'On the one hand, people say, "Yes, I'm Jewish and pro-Israel", and at the same time they're getting the nose job and trying to camouflage any signs of Jewishness as best they can.' The same could apply to Asian-inflected popular cultures. The burden of representation is then another consideration that becomes particularly acute in dealing with minority subjects as film-makers must wrestle with to what extent their portrayals of, for example ethnic groups should convey a sense of realism or just be included for purely entertainment/aesthetic value.

There is an ever-lengthening list of films that are either set in the suburbs or that take suburbia directly as subject matter. Yet while some examples thrive others are written out from the wider narrative. A distorting effect can occur as some films are stubbornly resistant to receive wider airings. The film *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970), which was set on Long Island while the husband worked in Manhattan, has never had a DVD release making rare VHS copies sell on this outmoded format for disproportionally high prices on Ebay. Given the advance of technology and the accelerated culture that follows in its wake perhaps it is only now a matter of time that the content is uploaded onto YouTube democratizing it for all. Unlike the British urban kitchen sink epics *Cathy Come Home* and *Up the Junction* which have prided themselves in close-up gritty topicality and realism, American suburban-set drama often contains elements of surreality and fantasy as well as straightforward sensibilities of a mission to entertain: *Edward Scissorhands* seems to be a prime example in its pastel utopia which provides the setting for what is a late twentieth-century fairytale. *Revolutionary Road* and the *Stepford Wives* (both versions) are very different films which share as features wide angle shots and being brightly lit where everything looks sunny at a surface level lending an almost dreamlike quality to the proceedings. Throughout the decades a number of directors including Mike Leigh and Todd Solondz have engaged in what Loukides and Fuller (1991:181) call 'attacking suburban mediocrity, empty affluence, and the ugliness of the rat race' and instead advocating 'the challenge of an adventurous, and ambiguous, rather than pre-planned future'. YouTube

Table 4.1 Suburban-set feel-bad movies: an alternative slice of American pie?

Title	Theme	Year
<i>American Gun</i>	US love affair with firearms.	2005
<i>The Babysitters</i>	Teenage prostitution passing for babysitting service highlighting middle-aged lust practised by suburban men for high school girls.	2007
<i>Burning Palms</i>	Dark comedy, interlacing four separate stories united only by the fact that they take place in different suburbs of Los Angeles.	2010
<i>Crime and Punishment in Suburbia</i>	Teen drama 2000 update of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's <i>Crime and Punishment</i> with a murder committed in the plot recalling <i>The Postman Always Rings Twice</i> (1946 and 1981).	2000
<i>Den du frygter</i> (<i>Fear Me Not</i>)	Move his family into his wife's childhood home in the suburbs; dark psychological thriller addiction in middle-class Copenhagen.	2008
<i>A Dirty Shame</i>	Suburban sexual fetishism and nymphomania receives a comedy treatment as the underworld of sex addiction in suburban Baltimore is uncovered following a bump to the head by a lawnmower in a film pillorying repression in the suburbs, starring Tracey Ullman and Chris Isaak in a 1950s-looking film.	2004
<i>Falling Angels</i>	Exposes the falsehood of security of the fifties and sixties Canadian, coming of age of three daughters, Saskatchewan alcoholism, underage sex, homosexuality; based on the novel by Barbara Gowdy.	2007
<i>Five on the Black Hand Side</i>	Barbers shop chauvinism, Harlem.	1973
<i>Ghost World</i>	Set in a suburban neighbourhood and based on a comic book; looks at frustration of suburban living and the taboo of a teenage girl in an intimate relationship with an older man.	2001
<i>The Hillz</i>	California: sex and drugs.	2005
<i>I'm Losing You</i>	Mortality, adultery, AIDS, and deceit, based on book by Bruce Wagner.	1998
<i>The Joneses</i>	The expression 'keeping up with the Joneses' taken to its logical conclusion in an indictment of American consumerism as we witness the seemingly perfect American family located in a perfect suburban neighbourhood as mere agents of product placement. Big budget with David Duchovny and Demi Moore.	2009
<i>Life of the Party</i>	Alcoholism dashes suburban dreams.	2005

Table 4.1 Continued

Title	Theme	Year
<i>Lifelines</i>	A day in the life of the Bernstein family who all have issues and are in therapy.	2009
<i>Lymelife</i>	1970s-set suburban rites of passage, Long Island.	2008
<i>Masters of Horror: Season 2, Episode 2. . . . Family</i>	John Landis-directed new neighbours discover psychotic murderer next door, Blugeoned bodies television.	2006
<i>Me and You and Everyone We Know</i>	Quirky story of suburban romance.	2005
<i>Reckless Indifference</i>	After suburban drug deal goes wrong an examination of the controversial California statute that mandates life imprisonment for those who commit murder during the commission of another felony takes place.	2000
<i>Risky Business</i>	While the cat's away (i.e. parents go holidaying vacation) the mice will play – cue teen sex comedy hi-jinks for suburban Chicago teenager (played by Tom Cruise) and his associates.	1983
<i>The Safety of Objects</i>	Intersecting tales of four suburban families, based on short stories, begins with aerial shot of suburban landscape.	2001
<i>Serial Mom</i>	Outwardly perfect Baltimore housewife takes revenge on neighbours who transgress suburban codes, for example flytipping, not wearing seatbelts, etc. and becomes a murder suspect. Directed by John Waters.	1994
<i>Society</i>	Beverly Hills Mansion, body horror lurks behind not all that it seems as central character; Bill uncovers cannibalism and vampirism behind the veneer of his daily suburban serenity.	1989
<i>Smile</i>	Film about suburban California Young American Miss Pageant behind which lurks suburban dysfunctional themes of depression, alcoholism and sexual frustration.	1975
<i>Zero Day</i>	Two troubled adolescents chronicle events that ultimately lead up to Columbine-like shootings terrifying assault on their school suicide bomber video.	2003

has helped illuminate much of the suburban history present in film with its multitude of freely available stream-able clips. DVD re-releases have also helped bring suburban film to successive generations, usually accompanied by extensive DVD features including retrospective documentaries to contextualize the films themselves. Of course suburbia was always more complex than stereotypical

perceptions had it. Recent years have seen a growing number of films presenting dysfunction in suburbia and departing from the old accepted 'happy families' template (see Table 4.1) to the extent that in years to come perhaps to see a functioning harmonious picture of suburban existence might be a welcome novelty.

Notes

- 1 One assumes that this refers to the Barking campus of University of East London, since then in disuse now that the Docklands campus has been developed.
- 2 In the words of Betty Friedan: 'But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, 'the problem'. And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name' http://web.viu.ca/davies/H323Vietnam/Friedan_FeminineMystique.1963.htm.
- 3 Both as seen as an 'extra feature' of the DVD release.