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Suburbia on the Box

Whenever some blowhard starts talking about the anonymity of the suburbs or the mindlessness of the television generation . . . we know that inside everyone of those identical boxes, with its Dodge parked out front and its white bread on the table and its TV set glowing blue in the falling dusk, there are . . . families bound together in the pain and the struggle of love.

(Closing speech of Kevin Arnold, *The Wonder Years* episode 1, 1989)

This chapter addresses the subject of how suburbia is pictured on television: both underwent a growth period in the twentieth century. Indeed at the same time as marketing campaigns for new suburban housing the television was, alongside the labour-saving devices of refrigerator and washing machine, one of the luxuries that was dangled at new suburban dwellers to furnish their home with after the shackles of post-war austerity were being shaken off. Spigel (2001b:388) has looked at early print advertisements for television sets and finds that these offered and fed into 'utopian visions and middle-class anxieties about the future of family life and in particular, the future of gender and generational relations in the home'. The ideal lifestyle presented in many examples depicts families around the box which is positioned hearth-like as the focal point of the room emitting a rosy glow. From Queen Elizabeth II's coronation when whole British streets seeking a sighting of this hitherto unprecedented spectacle would cram into the homes of those, at the time rare, families who possessed a set, to its present near-universal penetration (with albeit fragmented viewing habits) via the era of mass audiences and prime time, television has attained a ubiquity and attendant promise of escapism to a far greater degree than the more discerning and arguably stratified or at least more specialized publics for literature, cinema and music.

When assessing how suburbia is portrayed on television, different trends can be discerned in the United Kingdom and United States. The trajectory of British television on all channels cannot be separated from the guiding principle of public service broadcasting and the ethos of the founding father of the BBC Lord Reith to 'inform, educate and entertain'. This was criticized from the commercial sector by Rupert Murdoch who claimed in 1989 that 'This public service television system has had, in my view, debilitating effects on British society, by producing a television output which is so often obsessed with class, dominated by anti-commercial attitudes and with a tendency to hark back to the past' (quoted in Holland 2000:18). Generating advertising revenue has always been a US concern. Other considerations are common to both, for example balancing high-quality outlet with remaining popular or the continuing viability of the prime-time popular storytelling medium as it struggles to compete for attention among the proliferating numbers of reality television and lifestyle shows. Certain stylistic conventions apply particularly to commercial television such as the staging of mini-cliffhangers to not lose the audience during the break for advertisements. Channel 4 arrived in 1982 with the explicit stated aim of social commentary providing 'gritty' drama, for example *Brookside* and hard-hitting documentary. More recently a number of remakes and revisitings of previous 'classics' have been screened with a suburban central theme on the small and big screen. During the twenty-first century it seems that on more than one occasion in recent years BBC output has been criticized as 'too white and middle class', for example the corporation's 2005 annual report which referred to *Keeping up Appearances*, *Fawlty Towers*, *My Family* and the classic suburban comedy *The Good Life*. As suggested in the previous two chapters the line between small and big screen has sometimes blurred with spin-off television series from what were films or vice versa, for example *The Brady Bunch*, *Sex and the City*, *Bless this House* or *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, or between screen and page in films and television programmes that had been books.

Critics of suburbs decry them for their shallow value system of materialism and their boring uniformity yet how interchangeable are suburbs and are television programmes about them meant to uphold or question the status quo? In the United States the suburbs of New York have featured disproportionately, mirroring the heavy skewing of United Kingdom leaning towards London suburbia. There are also examples of less definable suburban territory. *The Wonder Years* (1989–93) was a warm coming-of-age drama series which never revealed its setting. Todd Solondz, well known as director of films of geographical suburban dysfunction has cited it as key to his artistic development stating 'The catalyst

[for *Welcome To the Dollhouse*] was when I saw an episode of *The Wonder Years*, and I was struck at how little it resembled my memory or understanding of childhood. And when I thought more, I couldn't think of any American films that dealt in any serious way with childhood . . . there are European films like *The 400 Blows*, *Los Olvidados* and *Shoeshine*, but little else. In any films about American kids they were either cute like a little doll or evil demons.²¹ The show is being lambasted for its lack of risk taking and comfortable setting. Indeed it was unlike contemporaneous programmes which offered a variation of the usual domestically blissful white family suburban sitcom premise, for example *The Cosby Show* (1984–92) about the successful middle-class black Huxtable family, *Family Ties* (1982–9) in which the teenage son is a right-wing yuppie driving his ex-hippie parents to despair and the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–6) in which a streetwise Philadelphia kid played by Will Smith escapes the ghetto for life with rich relatives in the exclusive Los Angeles suburb of Bel Air, home to The Playboy Mansion of *Playboy* magazine founder Hugh Hefner among others. Yet according to the *New York Times*, *The Wonder Years* was resistive at its origin in being 'a response to urbanites' superior attitude' (Strickland 1996). Like the later *Desperate Housewives* the show used an off-screen narrator (the chief character Kevin as a grown-up reminiscing back) to open and close episodes, who delivered the quote at the top of this chapter. The words hint at the idealism at the show's core which suggests a muted admiration for the passing of a bygone era. Certainly this plea for normality or hymn to the average is unlike the quote of Marc Cherry creator of *Desperate Housewives*: 'I love the values of the suburbs, loved my family, our neighbours. It's just that stuff happens. I don't romanticize that life at all . . . I remember the husbands leaving with their suitcases and my parents saying, "You're not allowed to ask them what's going on." I remember the custody battles. The full range of human experience was there.'²² The *Wonder Years* original director wished Long Island to be the situation as he had grown up there but this was vetoed as potentially limiting its appeal. Robert Thompson, associate professor of television and film at the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University has stated (Stickland 1996) of the location: 'Something about that postwar, newly created universe just reeked of Levittown, but to have it suspended in geography was a good esthetic decision. It created a universal representation of any suburb without all the baggage of a particular place.' This lack of specificity was designed to give the universal theme of childhood an everytown universal setting unlike say the British sitcoms *Terry and June* and the *Good Life* closely identified with Purley and Surbiton respectively or even *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* which had its setting in the title.

Its executive producer has stated 'Everybody felt *The Wonder Years* was set in their home street' (Strickland 1996). While television allows us to be voyeur it also can be comforting and reassuring – there is room for both tropes.

Even in an age when the media is exponentially increasing in form and size, the cathode ray tube and its LCD flat screen equivalent still have unparalleled power in shaping attitudes and exposing viewers to ideas and images. The rise of television encouraged a national shared culture. Television in this sense can act as leveller, it can enable access to a spectacle like a royal wedding, sporting event or historical moment. There is no need as John Lennon once did to differentiate between those in the boxes and those in the 'cheap seats'. Television can reflect, reinforce and challenge dominant norms or even create new ones. Certainly in the days of networked programming and a smaller number of channels (until 1982 there were only three in the United Kingdom) family life adapted to its schedules as television adopted suburbia making the suburban family both audience and subject matter of much television output. In both the United States and United Kingdom, post-war advances in living standards and local planning policy created in a rapidly suburbanizing population a thirst for accompanying consumer durables. Television was probably the most significant among these new labour saving acquisitions – although academic treatise have been written on the iconic status of the washing machine (Redfern 2003) and of Tupperware (Clarke 1997) in defining suburban living. The rise of television meant less time spent in cinemas, restaurants and watching or participating in sport and an increased domestication or privatization of the leisure sphere. Arguably however we are seeing a fall in its influence as a mass audience medium as one household may have several television sets or access programmes via other devices such as computers, smart phones and tablets via catch-up digital services allowing viewers to watch programmes free of their original scheduling shattering the old assumption of audiences sitting down together in family viewing.³

No laughing matter? Suburban sitcom

In some ways the sitcom as written extensively about by Mills (2005) is the *de facto* setting for portrayals of suburbia on television. Clapson (1998) even usefully provides a table of different British titles. Dean (2009) has written 'The snobbery, eccentricity, small-mindedness and proximity to larger, more dynamic, towns all lend suburbia an air of entrapment and plain daftness that make it ripe for comedy.' The suburbanization of the United States was also reflected in early

situation comedies with titles such as *Father Knows Best* which placed a value system of traditional gender relations, traditionalism, small-c conservative (i.e. not Conservative Party) values and the importance of family and suburban ideals at their core. Some immortalized the very journey that their viewers were making rather than setting up 'the suburbs' as the situation for the comedy: in 1957 the celebrity couple of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo (who the sitcom vehicle *I Love Lucy* was conceived around) made the move in the storyline from their city base of Manhattan to Westport, Connecticut, an hour's commute away. The drama serial *Mad Men* which first aired in 2007 depicts the same era, but with less of an idealized picture and instead if not exactly modern sensibilities of some adult themes. Adultery, hard-drinking and heavy smoking seem to be a constant presence in the series, set in the pressurized environment of a New York advertising agency. We get occasional glimpses of the outside world – Don Draper's rural upbringing and the way that Betty Draper, a former model who we usually only ever see in a domestic setting, occasionally mentions her previous life in Manhattan, followed by 'I don't miss it' said more to convince herself. The show has paid great attention to period detail in its costumes, props and sets and contains moments of history: we see the election of Kennedy, death of Marilyn Monroe. Although humour is at times present the show is probably best described as a period drama. Unusually for a television programme the characters do watch television but this appears to be either something that the children do, only to be chided by their parents at bedtime or more usually a device or historical anchor for present-day viewers to get a sense of situating where in time the episodes are located, for example the 1960 Presidential campaign or 1962 Kennedy assassination.

For a number of years a veritable litany of UK situation comedies have portrayed the suburbs as entirely white, middle class and conservative. Indeed the BBC's own internal processes have highlighted the Corporation's failure to reflect contemporary Britain in its programme roster ('Governors say comedy output is still too white, middle-class and cosy', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2005). The situation comedy genre reinforces how the dullards of suburbia have all too often been the object of ridicule. Matters usually centre on the intact nuclear family unit which is usually always presented as a desirable ideal. *Terry and June* lived behind net curtains in Purley. The show has recently enjoyed a revival with the BBC dusting off its 1982 Christmas special to re-show in December 2010 and ITV2 re-running entire series of the show. The series can be located in a long tradition of British comedy narrating insularity and narrow-mindedness. Rojek (2007:155), for example writes: 'Victor Meldrew, from the popular BBC comedy

One Foot in the Grave, is the grumpy, choleric, suburban successor to Fawlty', referring to John Cleese central character the waspish Basil Fawlty in 1970s hotel sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. The sitcom genre has mainly tended to reinforce small-c conservative values of what constitutes the suburban lifestyle, but there are also exceptions to these predictable portrayals: the sitcom has sometimes thrown a curveball, teasing its viewers periodically by offering from time to time a break from the norm. Ahead-of-their-time eco-warriors the Goods of the *Good Life* experimented with sustainable living in Surbiton, South London bordering Surrey, described by Wagg (1998:19) as 'signifier of semi-detached suburban conformity'. By abandoning the rat race they had rejected society's dominant norms, or at least adapted them, to follow an alternative family structure.

The suburbs may not have traditionally been the scene of open revolt, when taken in a collective sense they have never been particularly 'angry' places in cultural cartography, but simmering resentment at the suburbanite's lot has been portrayed repeatedly in sitcoms. Here suburbs play host to the interfering busybody/put-upon 'angry of suburbia' who writes outraged letters into the *Radio Times* in a Mary Whitehouse-esque way. This character is often present in the British suburban sitcom. Rojek (2007:156) muses: 'What is it about life in Britain that makes the characteristics of anger and repression recognizably "British"?' Certainly there seems to be a malcontented, dissatisfied bent to the nosey suburban neighbour behind their twitching net curtains, waiting to oppose the next planning application, their pen (or keyboard) ready to fire off another missive expressing their disgust as is their right in complaining culture. Youthful suburban frustration can be seen in the teenage fumbblings of Channel 4's *The Inbetweeners* (2008–11) that also became a successful film (2011) which unlike the wholesome *Wonder Years* showed failed sexual experimentation, unrequited love and drunkenness.

Manifold examples exist: Reginald Perrin who lives a life of repetition including an identical daily commute and 'ravioli followed by ravioli' or Peter Barnes of *A Sharp Intake of Breath*. Also named by Rojek alongside Victor Meldrew the retired husband of the 1980s/1990s *Keeping Up Appearances* is Martin from *Ever Decreasing Circles* from slightly earlier, played by Richard Briers who passed away in 2013 having become almost embodiment of suburban everyman in different tv 1980s and 1970s sitcoms.

In Briers' earlier show, the now iconic 1970s series, the *Good Life* his character was an optimistic one; Tom Good, taking the old adage 'life begins at 40' had chucked in his mindless, meaningless, repetitive soul-destroying job in order to live off the land in his suburban lair with ever-supportive wife Barbara who does

not work either. The *Good Life* presents a situation where the expected template we have come to associate with suburban living – laughs frequently derived from a long-suffering couple and their ungrateful children – is subverted. This can be seen clearly in the contrasting portrayal of the idealistic Goods who are counterposed with their more conventionally suburban middle-class next-door neighbours Margot and Jerry Leadbetter, caricatured as social climbers who are fully paid up members of the rat race and associative social life offered by suburbia. She is doyenne of the local operatic society and he is a frustrated employee at the same workplace where Tom previously worked at before rejecting this role for his new-found life. Even the name of the programme *The Good Life* seems significant as it conjures up the promise of a better world. So too are the lead couple's names: the Goods living up to being virtuous as contrasted with the allegorically named Leadbetters who literally see their mission in life as to 'lead better'. Neither couples have children which is usually a defining characteristic of suburban settlement. In an interview on the BBC documentary *Comedy Connections* the show's first producer explained that this decision was taken as the programme would not have worked with them. From 1988 to 1997 the US sitcom *Roseanne* also showed a suburban household scrimping and saving but the couple in the programme were blue and 'pink collar' workers (Betti 1995),⁴ Roseanne and Dan Conner, who had three unruly kids. Family fiscal belt tightening was a running theme of the show: economies were enforced by their economic situation rather than playing at rejecting the trappings of middle-class life as a lifestyle choice in the way that the Goods were. Lippert (1997:22) has called the Conners 'the poster family for the diminishing expectations crowd . . . the economy size embodiments of the working class the last gasp of un-Gapped America'. Mention of class here is interesting as in the United States the pervasive ideology of the American dream has rendered the term largely redundant with 'blue collar' being a more widespread term. The series was the product of an earlier economic recession.

On an internet forum discussing whether *Roseanne* is 'Most Realistic Sitcom Ever' a poster named Rodgers01 weighs in 'The vast majority of sitcoms are incredibly unrealistic: a shoe salesman can afford a huge house in the suburbs? (*Married with Children*); 20-somethings can afford to live it up in big apartments in Manhattan? (*Friends* and God knows how many knock-offs). Suburban families are photogenic and polite and cheerful? (just about every family sitcom ever made)?⁵ *Roseanne* is contrastingly celebrated for its conveying of more recognizable traits of suburban living than idealized examples which are itemized as 'the surly kids, the money troubles, the messy house, the neighbors [*sic*]. The

parents were fat; one of the kids was a trouble-maker and semi-goth; one was bright but whiny'. Suburban disorder is rarely seen onscreen just as characters rarely themselves watch television. *Roseanne* is not the only sitcom to portray suburban disfunctionality with wisecracking philosophy. While the literally larger than life figures of the physically weighty Connors and their rebellious offspring made them appear almost as cartoon characters.

The Simpsons is a cartoon suburban family of a similar working-class stock where characters sometimes say the unsayable. It began in 1989 and its first series was rated alongside the fall of the Berlin Wall as a significant event in a *Time* magazine retrospective of that year. The show took the familiar familial but added several postmodern twists. Poniewozik (2009) remarked how it was 'a show about everything. Through insufferably wholesome next-door neighbor Ned Flanders, the show became about religion. Through fatuous local news anchor Kent Brockman, it became about the media. Through Springfield's venal Mayor Quimby, it became about politics . . . No institution was safe: there was a jaded reverend, a doughnut-gobbling police chief, an ambulance-chasing lawyer and a stoner school-bus driver.' It is the dialogue that the motley cast of characters speak which rewrites the suburban rulebook. Framing devices include school where the staff from the clueless principal to layabout janitor are imbecilic, *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*, a cat and mouse cartoon of extreme violence and the nuclear power plant where Homer works kow-towing to a corrupt boss with obsequious henchman in tow, symbolizing impending environmental catastrophe. In 'Eight Misbehavin', the seventh episode of the eleventh season (1998) Homer watches a black and white film that parodies *Rebel without a Cause* in which Jimmy repudiates his parents' suburban values. After Homer learns that the childless grocery store owners Apu and Manjula are trying to conceive he congratulates them and exclaims 'Kids are the best, Apu. You can teach them to hate the things you hate. And they practically raise themselves, what with the Internet and all.' This outrageously feckless attitude is what no other respectable suburban television character would ever dare to say is a running character trait. In the 2000 episode *Insane Clown Poppy* (season 12, episode 3) when Krusty the clown discovers he has an illegitimate daughter conceived during the first Gulf war Homer lectures 'Fatherhood isn't easy. Like motherhood. But I wouldn't trade it for anything.' In the episode 'Take My Wife, Sleaze' episode 8 of season 11 (1999) when Marge is kidnapped by a gang of hells angels she tries to persuade them to mend their violent ways and promote to them 'the dream of a good job, a loving family, and a home in the suburbs'. The words are almost identical to the opening proposition of Betty Friedan in her still much cited work *The Feminine*

Mystique (2010:60) revisited Chapter 6 which talks of ‘what every . . . American girl wanted – to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb’. Again despite all the taboo breaking of the programme in portraying working class family imperfection the suburban ideal is seen as something to aspire to, imperfections and all in the *Simpsons* own case.

In a lather: Suburban soaps

In soap opera narrative storylines continue from one episode to the next, they are usually structured around dramatic hooks reeling in viewers and compelling them to tune in next time to see how this cliffhanger will resolve itself. Whereas situation comedy can centre on one family or given situation, soap opera is usually set in a geographic locale be it Weatherfield, the Salford home of *Coronation Street*, the fictional E20 postcode of *East-Enders* or *Beverly Hills 90210*. Soaps are a televisual format that prides itself on reflecting real life: the United Kingdom’s longest running examples *Coronation Street* (1958–present) and *East Enders* (1985–present) are both located in fictional surrounds – Weatherfield in Greater Manchester and Walford in London. Both locations are largely self-contained. The United Kingdom’s most prominent home-grown popular soap set in suburbia was *Brookside* which took place on a Liverpool new-build housing estate and ran on the newly formed Channel 4 (1982–2003).⁶ The show contained some moments of postmodern interweaving of other texts, for example the *Magic Rabbits* show-within-a-show, often watched by the characters if they were housebound in the day, in which pink fluffy bunnies of the Duracell advert variety would be seen wiggling about to high-pitched electronically processed uptempo background music. *Brookside* itself had been intended to be titled *Meadowcroft*, a name evoking the pastoral dimension of suburbia but when this name was vetoed by Channel 4 for having too close a similarity with the station’s *Meadowlark* programme, *Brookside* was settled on. ‘Meadowcroft Park’ became a fictitious soap opera within this soap (Kibble-White 2002:13) typifying postmodernism. These imaginary programmes operate in the same way as the *Simpsons*’s running *Itchy and Scratchy Show*, which exists to parody television violence. Such examples are rare as usually in most suburban television shows the characters do not spend their time in front of the box. As Monaco (2000:514) puts it, ‘The single most irresistible fact about the television families with whom we spend most of our time is that they don’t watch television. If they did we’d be as boring as they are; we’d turn them off as quickly as we do ourselves.’ *Brookside*’s

pioneering jerky hand-held cameras and left-leaning political stance exemplified Channel 4's initial amateurism and edgy remit. The willingness to feature a younger largely untrained and untried cast and tackle hitherto televisual taboos departed from that the *Coronation Street* norm that had dictated British soap since 1960 and arguably set the template for *East Enders* launched three years later on BBC1. Both had modern sensibilities compared to the comparative nostalgia of 'Corrie' – as Britain's oldest soap is affectionately known. Whereas *Coronation Street* had never particularly tapped into the permissive society instead opting for older cast members and established community structures (principally the pub) *Brookside* ran on issue-led storylines which included rape, lesbianism and a hostage-taking siege to name but three with a nightclub as an alternative setting to the housebound action. Founder Phil Redmond has commented (Kibble White 2002:7) that the programme's mission statement was 'to tell many different stories from varied viewpoints: stories of people on the way up and people on the way down; stories from across the class, gender and age ranges, and often providing different perspectives on the same subject'. Unemployment had equally hit both Paul Collins, a middle-aged middle-class ex-executive and school-leaver Damon Grant, son of a union official whose family living opposite saw moving to 'the close' as having 'made it' off their former council estate. Redmond embodied the prevailing Thatcherite logic of enterprise culture by setting up his own production company and purchasing the entire street in the realization that this would be cheaper than traditional set and props design/manufacture/maintenance. It was 1980s in spirit for dealing with the crises of de-industrialization and emasculated trade union power (in the character Bobby Grant). The built environment of new-build boxy houses serenely facing a green belied the modern in-yer-face hard hitting content and production techniques.

One of the 1980s most successful examples of suburban soap opera of recent years aired on British television was geographically located as far from blighty as it was possible to be. The Australian show *Neighbours* ran on BBC1 from 1986, at its height in two daily screenings, before moving on to the smaller-audience terrestrial broadcaster Channel 5. Although the programme no longer enjoys the popularity it once did its continuing effects are widespread and were seen the way that the actress Kylie Minogue who played the apprentice mechanic Charlene went on to become almost pop royalty in the United Kingdom, a national treasure in her adopted nation. Stratton and Ang (1994:6) have remarked 'As the decline of the British empire became an increasingly unavoidable fact in the daily experience of the British themselves, recently emphasized by the

prolonged recession/depression in the post-Thatcher era, the ex-colony Down Under has become a focus for fantasies of a better life. The success of *Neighbours* can be understood in this light.' The plot centred on three generations of the Daniels family in the suburb of Erinsborough (itself an anagram of the word 'Neighbours'). Familiar situations were presented to a British audience with a sunny backdrop that was comparatively rare in the United Kingdom's own soap operas. Stratton and Ang (1994:6) quote Stephen Croft's identifying of 'good neighbourliness and wholesome, traditional, suburban values . . . moral certainties of hard work, decency and compassion' as explaining the show's appeal. They do not see this as representative of turn of the century Australia. Perhaps the declining audiences for the show illustrate changing attitudes as reality shows and talent competitions seem to have become increasingly popular in both the United Kingdom and United States. During its 1988–9 heyday (when Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan starred), *Neighbours* was able to command an audience of 14 million UK viewers. By 2008 this had shrunk to 2.4 million prompting its sale to Channel 5. Initial ratings after the switch were relatively high for this minority channel. Shifting formats reflecting changing tastes are evident in the reality programme *A Place Down Under* (2004) in which families relocating from their (typically suburban) UK surrounds to Australia were followed coming to terms with climate and local life-forms (including insects).

Genre-bending

The Simpsons itself unlike the hi-tech CGI (computer-generated image) animation that followed from Dreamworks and Pixar in its wake, centred around (with apologies to Damon Gough) the 'badly drawn boy' of Bart Simpson and family. All are bright yellow, perhaps explained by the proximity of the family dwelling to a nuclear reactor where Homer the father is employed. Kutnowski (2008:599) has commented that the programme captures 'the physical, behavioural, and psychological profiles of the five family members plus the suburban American culture that surrounds them in the town of Springfield'. Although the opening titles were cut short in later series, commenting on the theme music Kutnowski (2008:601–3) finds that this changes in order to fit characters: for 'idiotic Homer' we hear a tuba 'dissonant, loud and crudely simplistic in rhythmic terms . . . which reinforced his anti-hero features' whereas for Marge it is 'gentle legato in the strings . . . [reflecting] the fearful challenges of daily life – juggling groceries in one hand and child in another . . . this activist-hippie turned mother figure is

presented almost as a saintly vision.⁷ It was not for nothing that President George George H Bush expressed the desire that America be more like *the Waltons* and less like *the Simpsons*.⁷ The claim was the same sort of cultural canutism that John Major was guilty of in the same decade. Harking back to *the Waltons* (1971–81) was a reference to a Hicksville small-town agrarian clan in a show set in the 1940s which presented viewers a mythical golden age where wholesome family values permeated. In *The Simpsons* suburban life is far from polite and passive, it is complicated. The family constantly fight with one another (lazy Bart versus vegetarian intellectual Lisa or any combination of the kids against their parents who themselves are often warring against each other) and subsequently make up. There are ethnic minority characters present which were not there in earlier suburban portrayals, for example Apu the Indian grocery store owner one of a new US media stereotype (also seen for example in the film *SubUrbia*).

At the start of its sixth series *The Guardian's* television listing (Skegg et al. 2010) conveyed a sense of boredom at what *Desperate Housewives* had become: 'Dear Wisteria Lane resident, sorry you were out, but your order of 1x family-with-a-dark-secret has been left with your neighbour . . . They're still furiously pumping the plot dispenser, but there's hardly anything left.' Yet when it began in 2004 the programme was seen as genuinely genre-straddling; a drama following a weekly instalment and cliffhanger soap-opera format also including off-camera narration, comic moments of absurdity, elements of horror/suspense and plot devices such as twists and critical-trigger happenings that lead to chains of events and unintended consequences. Associated press (2004) describes the show as 'comically dark'. The Facebook group 'Addicted to *Desperate Housewives*' describes it as 'A primetime soap with a truly contemporary take on the happily ever after, *Desperate Housewives* takes a darkly comedic look at suburbia.' Channel 4 (undated) describes the programme's subject matter as 'exploring the complicated reality behind the apparent domestic bliss of a group of housewives in a fictitious American suburb'. This description highlights the dual nature of the show. A constant theme of the programme, which ran to eight series before ending in 2012, is that all is not what it seems. The book's official companion volume (Anon 2005) restates on its back flyleaf a comment made by the character Bree Vanderkamp in the first episode 'Ah, But Underneath': 'It's the age old question: how much do we really want to know about our neighbours?' The dichotomy between public lives and private worlds is apparent from the start and unusually it is the men who are under-written as characters. From the outset the show is narrated beyond the grave by a central character who commits suicide in episode 1 as a voice-off. As the Channel 4 summary of the first episode

explains 'One day, in her perfect house, in the loveliest of suburbs, Mary Alice ended it all. From her unique vantage point beyond the grave, Mary Alice can now reveal the secrets behind the closed doors of her friends and neighbours . . .' It is this character who we never see as a fully fledged cast-member who narrates the homilies through which the show hangs together. The first series is a murder mystery but subsequent series throw up new central themes with series 7 of 2010 revisiting this murder.

Desperate Housewives has been subject of a media studies book-length dissection from Akass and McCabe (2006) containing 16 essays on different aspects of it. The show has also featured as a case study in the media studies textbook of Devereux (2007). Despite a cast of beautiful women leading comfortable lifestyles on a fairy-tale like set on which the sun seems to always shine, the programme contains macabre elements, uncovering some dark themes: loneliness, drug dependency, isolation and boredom as well as one-up-manship, or rather *womanship*. None of the cast seems to have achieved happiness despite their privileged lifestyles. Material possessions cannot compensate for stifling boredom and money can't buy them love. The show's creator Marc Cherry, a gay Republican, has been quoted as defending the genre and denying that it is satirical: 'Satire sounds like you're making fun of something. And the truth is I'm not making fun of the suburbs. I love the suburbs' (ABC 2004). In the 'teaser' at the start of every show there is a moral from Mary Alice. Constructing a list of these could almost serve as a handbook for suburban living. Conflict and Keeping up with the Jones are recurring issues. In 'Running to Stand Still' originally aired in 2004 (season 1, episode 6), 'Suburbia is a battleground, an arena for all forms of domestic combat. Husbands clash with wives, parents cross swords with children, but the bloodiest battles often involve women and their mothers-in-law.' In 'You Could Drive a Person Crazy', the twenty-fifth episode from series 2, the opener is 'Beautiful lawns, spacious homes, happy families. These are the hallmarks of suburbia. But if you look beneath the veneer of gracious living . . . you will see a battle raging, a battle for control. You see the combatants everywhere, engaged in their routine skirmishes . . . fighting fiercely to have dominion over the world around them, all the while knowing . . . it's a battle they will lose.' The idea of the unending quest to keep up with the Jones or even power-struggles within the household are hinted at here. The suburbs are home to unequal relations between couples and scene of intergenerational strife. The elderly characters are often stereotypical battle-axes, for example Mrs McCluskey and we sense their desperation through isolation. Outer tranquillity belies inner turbulence.

As seen in the previous chapter, the shattered illusion of suburban serenity with an undercurrent of humour has been seen in cinema productions of the 1990s including *Edwards Scissorhands*, *Blue Velvet* and *American Beauty*. Particularly in its first series *Desperate Housewives* echoes these with its dreamy visuals conflicting with dark subject matter. The episode 'You'll Never Get Away from Me', series 2 and episode 3 (2005), closes with the voice-over of Mary Alice intoning: 'Yes, each new day in suburbia brings with it a new set of lies. The worst are the ones we tell ourselves right before we fall asleep. We whisper them in the dark, telling ourselves we're happy . . . Yes, each night before we fall asleep we lie to ourselves in a desperate, desperate hope that come morning . . . it will all be true.' Another television series that followed this principle was *The Sopranos* set in New Jersey, dealing with a mafia boss and his secret double life of suburban calm respectability by the proceeds of crime. De Stefano (2007:142) remarks on this mismatch: 'Relocating the mob narrative from urban mean streets and social-clubs also links *The Sopranos* to other pop-culture works about suburban *malaise*.' He concludes: 'The pertinent pop-culture referents for suburbia have changed, as now *The Stepford Wives* has been supplanted by *The Sopranos*' (De Stefano 2007:143). The programme ended its run in 2007 but ever since the same notion that all is not what it seems in suburbia has been repeated in other US comedy series depicting happy families with a twist. The suburban theme was explicit enough to be used in the opening credits of the series *Weeds* in which a widowed mother resorts to pot dealing (although not drug-taking) to fund her two sons middle-class upkeep. In *Breaking Bad* a mild-mannered suburban chemistry teacher and one-time science whizz becomes increasingly machiavellian crystal-meth-maker to fund his family's complex medical treatment needs. There is then an impulse of suburban anxiety from which escape is sought by illegal means and/or chemically but also spiritually in suburban drama. For the sister of Peggy Olsen in *Mad Men* and *Desperate Housewives*' Gabrielle, the confession box of the Catholic church serves as an outlet for pent-up suburban frustration guilt. In the *Sopranos* Betty Friedan's 'problem with no name' applies to men too (Tony Soprano) who take anti-depressants like Prozac and Zoloff.

The emergent 'reality tv' at the turn of the decade fused drama and suspense with old style documentary positioning the viewer ostensibly 'fly on the wall' observing the general public rather than professional actors. In a sense the mundane is elevated to the level of the Victorian freakshow which audiences lap up. This further forum for the presentation of suburbia exemplifies the observation that 'Television wants to go beyond the role of witness, beyond upholding definition. It wants nothing less than to give the viewer the feeling that he or she is "there"'

(Dyan and Katz 1987:184). Numerous echoes of the past and intertextuality have pervaded reality television in retreads of earlier formats – befittingly given the historic body of work that exists in television history. When Channel 4 dusted down the pioneering 1970s BBC series *The Family* for a 2009 version, the original white working-class Reading bus-driver and his brood were substituted by an extended Sikh family in Maidenhead, which now effectively is a suburb of London despite lying outside it. In 2010 the BBC series *Giles and Sue Live the Good Life* was screened with presenters Giles Coren and Sue Perkins testing the original self-sufficient suburban dream adding a celebrity dimension to an earlier series ITV *The Real Good Life* commented on by Thomas (2008) as an example of ambivalent consumerism within mainstream media. The fact that celebrities were enlisted for this second *Good Life* experiment shows how the famous have pervaded this genre. In the old documentary journalists were relatively absent or passive, maybe just voicing over the action. The prominence and visibility of the presenters in reality shows such as *Giles and Sue Live the Good Life* show how they have moved centre-stage. Experimenting with sustainability indicates how once comfortable suburbia was seen to feeling the economic pinch with shows such as *Make Do and Mend* and *Superscrimpers* tapping into a vein of thrift culture. This meta genre promising close up, unscripted action and access to witness private moments of intimacy is ostensibly factual in nature, although the participants of such shows often complain of unfair editing that has left them portrayed in a bad light. Dicks (2004:22) remarks that these are ‘game-shows which place the quotidian idiosyncrasies of other people (who are, simultaneously, like us and not like us), under the camera’s microscopic eye . . . we gain sight of a contrast between their lives and our own, which in turn allows us to see our own lives as “other”’. The everyday becomes spectacle, sometimes putting people into situations outside their usual daily routine and normal comfort zone and we are all voyeurs. Many initial UK examples were located in the moment of positive economic growth-fed interest in the sense of well-being bred by rising property prices. The humble suburban house was an asset for financial gain and a canvas for designing on. Home improvement programmes in the space of a decade have ranged from interior décor (*Changing Rooms*, *House Invaders*, *Home Front*) and DIY tasks (DIY SOS) to wholesale structural remodelling (*Grand Designs*) to house-price value aggregation (*House Doctor*, *Property Ladder* and *Location, Location, Location*) including at auction (*Homes under the Hammer*). Even the domestic chore of dusting and polishing was turned into entertainment in Channel 4’s *How Clean is Your House?* Suburbs were often the settings for these programmes although they were often naturalistic settings, that is ‘real’ peoples’ houses not commissioned

sets. Rather than relying on a series of storylines to communicate a narrative, the genre of reality usually takes the documentary form as its template although we are invited to assume that the suburban cast members are not hamming it up as they are members of the public supposedly 'warts 'n'all' and 'acting natural'. The shows are comparatively inexpensive to produce as they require no expensive sets or star actors. In Patrick Keiller's film *London* of 1994 the narrator states 'It seems everyday we were served with a new reminder of the absurdity of our circumstances.' Reality television provides endless examples.

Changing depictions of ethnic suburbia

In the United States Latinos and Italians are examples of ethnic diversity that do not feature in as significant numbers on the UK cultural landscape. *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) has attracted attention from inside and outside academia including several scholarly articles and book-length accounts.⁸ There is an inherent duality in the Italian catholic family at the show's centre headed up by a patriarch figure who on the surface lives a peaceable life in plush New Jersey surroundings working in waste disposal whereas actually this is a front for his true calling as a mafia boss which has paid for a luxury lifestyle with its ill-gotten gains. Tony Soprano craves suburban respectability and longs for the family values experienced by his own father who despite less material trappings had a stronger value system. 'In a lot of ways he had it better than me,' Tony muses, 'he had his people, they had pride, today whadda we have?' Tony is however in the words of the 1988 film 'married to the mob' evoking numerous *Godfather* or other gangster movies. His wife Carmela enjoys living in a large house with a swimming pool but turns a blind eye to how these trappings of success have been financed, she comforts herself with the attentions of the family priest to compensate for her sense of Catholic guilt. Their angsty teenage daughter Meadow longs to get out of her suburban surroundings right from episode one; this character is cut from a similar cloth as the sarcastic daughter of *Roseanne* Darlene or *Daria* (the droll animated MTV teen who began as a character on *Beavis and Butthead* before getting her own show from 1997 to 2002). In the very first episode Carmela Soprano wants mother and daughter to 'drive into New York' to have tea and scones at the Palace Hotel, only to be rebuffed. On expressing dismay that this is an annual tradition that was supposed to continue long after Meadow eventually marries, her daughter snaps back 'Hopefully I won't be living anywhere round here by then.' Meadow's caustic riposte contrasts with a name that suggests

pastoral innocence. Family dysfunction extends across the generations: Tony tries to have his own mother the widowed Livia rehoused in what he calls a 'retirement community' but she does not want to rot away in a 'nursing home' as she sees it. The violence witnessed also contrasts with outward suburban perfection. A fight to settle an old score spills out into a car chase and punch-up occurs, a Czech rival waste merchant has his brains blown out and a restaurant is blown up: this is all during the first episode. The programme takes the form of day in the life of Tony as (selectively) related to his psychiatrist Dr Melfi, also of Italian heritage. Tony, although sceptical of the benefits of psychoanalysis, remarks that his parents would have liked for him to marry an achiever like her – a generation behind him she represents ethnic embourgeoisement through graft, an education embodying the American dream.

The ethnic deficit of *Desperate Housewives* is largely realized by the Latino Solis family (Merskin 2007). According to Ricardo Antonio Chavaria the actor of Carlos the attraction of the part was that it was the Latino family that were 'the richest family on the block [b]ut they don't beat you over the head with the fact the Solises are Latino. They could have been any race' (Anon 2005). Gabrielle sometimes refers to her time as a New York catwalk model, the same 'could've been' character that we often see in portrayals of suburban women who showed great promise before settling down to a humdrum suburban life, for example April in *Revolutionary Road* and Betty Draper of *Mad Men*. Nonetheless in series 7 Mexican illegal immigration became a storyline, corresponding with the fourth element of Román's (2000–1:39–40) typology of the modes in which Latinos are seen onscreen.⁹ This arguably falls foul of burden of representation arguments by presenting a rather clichéd portrayal. Despite Marc Cherry's stated aim from 2005 'I wanted the Solises to be Latino because it was important to me that not all the families in the show be white', black characters have only featured since rather fleetingly: series two saw the Applewhites enter, seemingly a single mother and her teenage son, although it later transpires that another son is kept incarcerated in their Wisteria Lane basement as part of a family secret. The family lasted a single series, leaving an all white cast again. In season 3 Gabrielle marries the town mayor Victor Lang only to overhear Victor tell his father on the wedding night that the only reason they wed was so he could win the Latino vote in his run for state Governor. In *Mad Men* no black characters are seen in the first series apart from the lift operative and Drapers' home help Carla who is a completely undeveloped character with no hint at any life or her own until series 3 when we learn of her regular church-going (in contrast to her employers) and see her visibly upset at the death of President Kennedy whose

civil rights programme she had invested hope into. The show has featured gay characters (Salvatore who is also Italian from the suitably creative/effeminate art department rather than engaged in hard-nosed business) as has *Desperate Housewives* with a make gay couple in later series to a limited extent redressing the balance after earlier criticism of the show as 'desperately straight' (Chambers 2006). In the *Mad Men* episode 'Candle in the Wind' of series 2 we hear Don and Roger casually remark and express surprise that a rival agency has hired 'a black guy'. The character Paul Kinsey has a black girlfriend who Sally Draper confuses as his maid. Black characters are not seen as comedy material as they have been in other series but they do not seem to be present on their own terms and do not seem to be part of the genteel suburban landscape of manicured lawns and station-wagons as envisaged by American suburban shows. With many declaring that Obama's election symbolized the move to a 'post-racial' America the invisibility of black America may be unsustainable and while the blogosphere has raged with posts from those decrying the lack of black characters who have parts that are more than extras in the programme there is speculation that series 5 (not yet aired at the time of writing) will reverse this state of affairs with *Mad Men's* first substantial black character imminent.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at a set of representations of suburbia onscreen on the 'idiot box' of the television. The examples cited demonstrate a series of particular cultural constructions of the suburb each connected to specific representations of national identity, place and space which are all rooted in their context. To some extent they have reflected my own viewing habits and which American shows have been exported to the United Kingdom. Needless to say the case-study source material is not exhaustive. What has been outlined is highly subjective, in keeping with Williams' outline of structures of feeling. Watching *Desperate Housewives* from suburban West London I will take away similar and different conclusions from say a viewer on Long Island or anywhere else that the programme has been exported to. This is consistent with the way structures of feeling are culturally determined and bound up with the values of the contexts they emerge from and are subjectively experienced. According to Williams they 'can fail to be fully understood by living people in close contact with it' (1977:49), but they are still 'very deep and very wide' (1977:48). At the same time many of the examples cited could be described as polysemic texts of multiple overlapping

and interlocking messages and meanings. Each of them can be read as a text but they are not self-contained, the point of emergence is also an 'event'. They can be analysed for their audience effects or according to production values.

Fictitious mass-media depictions have contributed to the images of places as well as communities in the popular imagination. In the 1980s the Liverpool-set BBC sitcom *Bread* by longstanding Liverpoolian sitcom author Carla Lane played out the trials and tribulations of a working-class Irish-Catholic descended scouse family of assorted ne'er do-wells ducking and diving in recession-hit Thatcherite times in a densely populated corner of the city on a weekly basis – in some respect contributing to the city's image of failure. The series was criticized by Liverpoolians at the time for its over-concentration on negative stereotypes such as dole-cheats and the cardboard cutout characterization, for example the no-nonsense mother presented as a matriarch figure who ran the household. The BBC's realist comedy-drama *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982) scripted by playwright Alan Bleasdale also helped to create a cultural construction of the same city but was seen as a 'quality' production likened to the classical work *Ulysses* and has had been academically analysed for its 'hard-hitting' portrayal of life on the dole (Paterson 1987). For the 1990s we can substitute *The Royle Family* or *Shameless* – both portraying slothful, indolent Mancunians. Vesna Goldsworthy (quoted in Dines 2009) has also argued that it is from 1970s sitcom that many negative stereotypes about suburbia derive with the genre's unrelentingly beige and brown-coloured sets.

There is evidence that the cultural contours are shifting. With therapists, confessionals and anti-depressants recognizably present the new realism of suburban US television portrayals we see in *Desperate Housewives* and *The Sopranos* to name but two show family life as imperfect and suburbia a place that is, as the title if the 2002 film has it, far from heaven. The same themes pervade screen representations of earlier times written in the present day, for example *Mad Men*. In the United Kingdom the theme of suburban rampage as seen in the latter and films like *Falling Down* was seen in Channel 5's satirical series *Suburban Shootout*. In 2011 the in-house journal of middle-class middle England *The Daily Telegraph* reported 'BBC to introduce more working class comedy' (Gammell 2011) in a story outlining a direction from the top of the corporation to try to counterbalance the glut of series that revolve around 'affluent suburban families'. Of the programmes cited the semi-improvised *Outnumbered* is set in a suburban London home (filmed in Wandsworth) to a family of five. In 'A family Day Out', episode 1 of series 3 (2010), the clan and maternal grandmother take a trip across London on a sightseeing bus, thus are pictured as tourists in their

own city, a reminder that not all suburbanites journey to the city centre for work or use its resources daily. The mother and grandmother discuss familiar suburban parental concerns (how to get into a good secondary school: bribery? moving to a better catchment area? feigning religiosity?). The youngest son Ben meanwhile plays 'spot the chav' [pejorative term for lower class youth] theorised by Jones (2011) from atop the upper deck of the open-topped vehicle. The class superiority of the family vis-a-vis the uncouth city population is clear.

Suburbia on television often has a 'them' and 'us' theme to it. From the 1950s onwards when United States shows such as *Ozzie and Harriet* or *Leave it to Beaver* still aired throughout the 1970s when the United Kingdom showed *Terry and June* and the *Good Life*, television has relentlessly depicted comfortable and spacious middle-class living conditions of harmonious middle-class suburban families even if the reality for many of the viewers would have been cramped and possibly broken homes. Class mobility has been subtle: for example, the shift from *The Likely Lads* (1964–6) the tale of Newcastle factory workers Bob and Terry to *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (1973–4) in which the social climbing of Bob via engagement, white-collar job and move to suburbia is evident. Channel 4 was also groundbreaking, for example for the mixed suburban estate *Brookside* and also screening the US shows *Roseanne* and the *Sopranos* showcasing the uncouth and corrupt. However for the most part despite the differentiated nature of suburbia it is largely the historical middle-class variant we have seen time and again onscreen. There have also been other notable omissions in some of these programmes: racial and ethnic difference has tended to be marginalized or in early examples seen only from the perspective of 'majority' white culture, for example the sitcoms *Mixed Blessings*, *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Mind Your Language* (set in an English for Speakers of Other Languages class). Here we see a more subtle type of racially coded imagery in stereotyping rather than outright racist statements on screen, although the three were also framed from the viewpoint of the white majority audience and some of the content of these programmes sail dangerously close to the wind. Of *Mixed Blessings* the BFI (undated) remarks of the racial taunts "'coon", "sambo" and "honky" recurring with distressing regularity, to the apparent hilarity of the studio audience.' As Bowes (1990:136) puts it, 'The closer the black families came to fitting into [dominant white] culture and society the less of a threat they appeared to present.' In the same way on *Desperate Housewives* gayness has frequently been a laughing matter (e.g. Carlos unwittingly becoming a gay basher when assaulting a homosexual television repairman he suspects of having an affair with Gabrielle or the day that the new gay couple move in

during series 4) seen through the prism of straightness, despite the show having a gay executive producer in Marc Cherry.

Recurring themes can be traced in the programmes under discussion. In the United States the suburbs in television shows often seem to service the ultimate urban setting of New York. The UK examples discussed have been resolutely London-focused with their settings in Purely, Surbiton, etc. and more recent examples have followed this trend, for example *The Inbetweeners*, a Channel 4 sitcom about sexually frustrated teenagers in a London suburb and *Friday Night Dinner*, a Jewish-themed North London suburban situation comedy. In 2011 when it was announced that the *Inbetweeners*, a title that refers to both the liminal status between childhood and adulthood and geographical positioning of the central characters, was to be remade in the United States where it was felt its suburban ethic would make it perfectly suited (OK 2011). Just as the suburbs themselves have not stayed still, there has been progress from the cultural myopia of early suburban portrayals as resolutely ethnically white. Indeed mixed race is the fastest ethnic category on the United Kingdom and is projected to be the largest single group in due course (Wohland et al. 2001).¹⁰ Malik (2002:74) has rightly warned: 'British broadcasting can no longer sustain itself, on a local or global basis, if it continues to model itself on a simple homogenised nation-state paradigm. The increasing number of "mixed-race" and hyphenated identities means that audiences are becoming more and more ethnically and culturally diverse, placing new pressures on the medium (including Black programmes) to move away from its prevailing White versus not White binary logic.' Apart from the questionable term of 'Black programmes' this statement has important implications. The cumulative effect of BBC statements about their lack of diversity and the furore over *Midsomer Murders* in 2011 (e.g. Brooker 2011) make it feel a long time ago that programmes where black people were the butt of the jokes were accepted mainstream favourites as Hornby (2008) reminds us:

Remember that sit com *Love Thy Neighbour* about a white couple finding themselves living next-door to a black family, with 'hilarious' consequences? Bill Bryson's foggy memory of the period, as he recollects in *Notes From A Small Island*, is coming to England and finding us all giggling at something called 'My Neighbour is A Darkie'. Its intrinsic racism was considered fine at the time and it got worryingly high ratings in the 1970s. Now, of course, it is looked back on with horror.

It seems reality shows have been quicker to incorporate mixed-race cast members than scripted drama (particularly *Big Brother* line-ups). Audiences are

increasingly drawn from this demographic so television has a duty to reflect this. Media literacy dictates that the viewing public are far more knowing than their comparative unsophisticated 1970s counterparts. To view earlier television programmes alongside contemporary counterparts one can sense shifting production styles, for example the contemporary reality show with its rapid delivery, fast cut editing and constant reminders of what is to come in the remaining content renders it precursor to the documentary even from the 1990s as comparatively languid in pace.

The power of television in the post-war era cannot be underestimated. Its outreach is near-universal and it is able to bring subjects from being 'out there' into people's front rooms and thus social acceptability and vice versa. There are many examples that have not allowed a discussion of in this chapter due to lack of space. Children's television, for example is a genre that academia has been relatively silent on. Here too suburban values have been historically reinforced in drama series. Of recent UK offerings *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, a spin-off from the long-running BBC science fiction series *Doctor Who*, was based in Ealing. Part of the show's attraction was that such storylines of time travel and aliens could be unleashed in such an unlikely setting as a strait-laced, upstanding and ostensibly boring location. *The Guardian* columnist Dittum (2010) stated: 'It makes sense that children would feel comfortable with the character, investigating intergalactic menaces from a comfortable suburban house.' Although this West London suburb was once home of Ealing studios which gave its name to Ealing comedy, the redoubtably British genre of old stiff upper lip values, the children of *The Sarah Jane Adventures* who formed the main nucleus/gang of time-travelling investigators included a black Caribbean boy and an Asian girl befitting contemporary Ealing's multi-ethnicity. Two of the three (and in series one all three) were from single-parent families, also an increasingly common feature of the suburban landscape countering the old assumptions of suburbia equating with nuclear families (see Chapter 6). As well as junior drama and cartoons since the 1990s the genre of 'adult animation' has flowered. The best-known example screened internationally but set in the US suburb 'Springfield' is the *Simpsons* (to be looked at further in Chapter 6) which has been described as 'animated sitcom' (Mills 2005). The format was continued further with *South Park* (edgy for the liberal swearing coming out of children's mouths), *Family Guy* the slacker chronicle *Beavis and Butthead* and the more ethnically attuned *Boondocks*: all aimed at the adult-viewing public with late night slots to match. Having started life as a newspaper strip cartoon the *Boondocks* was about young black brothers who live in suburbia with their grandfather rather like the earlier *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Their anxiety about

losing their Afro-American side results in programme content parodying blaxploitation culture by referring to gangsters, pimps and hoers with the word 'niggaz' used repeatedly which might make viewers uncomfortable. *Monkey Dust* and *Crapstone Villas* with their wry commentary on the foibles of life in turn of the century Britain were the nearest that the United Kingdom got to this genre.

With increasing media platforms fighting for the consumer's attention it seems that soundbites are ever shortening and within programmes are constant reminders of what is yet to come in order to keep audiences there. Messages are increasingly spelt out for audiences rather than to let them read between the lines as in earlier times. This can be seen in the way captions are onscreen through reality programmes or at its most extreme in *Desperate Housewives* with its narration throughout (Feeney 2005). Suburbia has variously been represented as conformist, bland and mediocre or as a place for experimental living or as a location on television that harbours hidden secrets. Crucially just as there is no singular suburbia this chapter has shown that there is no portrayal of the suburbs that can claim to be definitive or completely authoritative. Both television and suburbia were criticized at their outset for instilling suffocating passivity into those subjected to them and duping the public into unquestioningly accepting unchallenging blandness in everyday life and new ways of watching television with interactive catch-up services and reacting via other media such as the digital playgrounds of blogs, Facebook and twitter mean that the future allows viewers to move beyond pure observers to more active control, filtering and responding to what they watch. Critics of the suburbs saw them as, for those who could afford them, exclusive enclaves in which to flee from the unruly city with its pressures of ethnic mix, built-up landscape, post-industrial economy and fragmenting society. Yet in the twenty-first century it is now the suburbs that are characterized by these same issues that early advertising hinted, if not promised, that the suburban-dweller could leave behind. It would be facile to claim that those in the suburbs took the problems of the city with them or that those problems followed them when the 'suburbanizing out' model does not necessarily follow. Suburbs are constituted of multiple ways of life; they always were. Many of those currently living in the suburbs were not necessarily city dwellers moving out in self-improvement, many would love to be closer in to the city but cannot afford to be. As we move to a post-mass audience era the series of representations described then offer a solid set of reflections which between them say much about the transformations in suburbia in the United Kingdom and United States in the television age. We now turn to an application of these by considering women's portraits onscreen, on the page and in pop.

Notes

- 1 Undated interview at: <http://toddsolondz.com/welcome.html>.
- 2 Associated Press (2004) Suburbia sizzles in 'Housewives': Creator says he doesn't romanticize suburbs at: <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/6133690/ns/today-entertainment/>.
- 3 There are still occasional spikes, for example the Royal Wedding of April 2011 was reckoned to have commanded an audience of 25 million in the United Kingdom and a much wider (and less easily calculable) worldwide figures.
- 4 She has been bartender, telemarketer and shampoo girl.
- 5 <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/archive/index.php/t-347864.html>.
- 6 It is not the only example; Channel 5's *Family Affairs* ran from 1997 to 2005 purporting to be in Charnham, an invented West London suburb. *Hollyoaks* of the same production team as *Brookside* takes its title from a fictional suburb of Hollyoaks affluent Cheshire city Chester in north-west England.
- 7 The quote attributed to Bush 'We're going to keep trying to strengthen the American family; to make them more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons' was cited as reason number one in an article by Freguson (2003) entitled '300 reasons why we love *The Simpsons*'.
- 8 Examples include Regina Barreca, ed., *A Sitdown with the Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on TV's Most Talked-About Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), David Bishop, *Bright Lights, Baked Ziti: The Unofficial, Unauthorised Guide to The Sopranos* (London: Virgin Books, 2001), David Chase, *The Sopranos Scriptbook* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), Glen O. Gabbard, *The Psychology of the Sopranos: Love, Death, and Betrayal in America's Favorite Gangster Family* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), *The New York Times on the Sopranos*, introduction by Stephen Holden (New York: ibooks, 2000), Allen Rucker, *The Sopranos: A Family History* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2000), Allen Rucker (Recipes by Michele Scicolone), *The Sopranos Family Cook Book as Compiled by Artie Bucco* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002) and David R. Simon, *Tony Soprano's America: The Criminal Side of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO and Oxford: Westview, 2002). Also journal articles and academic contributions include: P. Keeton (2002) 'The Sopranos and Genre Transformation: Ideological Negotiation in the Gangster Film', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 10(2), pp. 131–48; C. Vincent (2008) 'Paying Respect to *The Sopranos*: A Psychosocial Analysis'; D. Lavery McFarland (ed.) (2002), *This Thing of Ours: Investigating the Sopranos* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- 9 These are: (1) the hot-blooded sexy character, (2) the gangster (3) the snazzy entertainer and (4) the (often illegal) immigrant.
- 10 Also see United Kingdom in 2051 to be 'significantly more diverse', Leeds University Press release on 13 July 2010 at: www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/853/uk_in_2051_to_be_significantly_more_diverse.