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Women on the Edge? Representations of the Post-War Suburban Woman in Popular Culture to the Present Day

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’

(Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 1963/2010:1)

It’s bad enough having to live amongst all these damn little suburban types . . . without letting ourselves get hurt by every little half-assed – what’d you say?

(April Wheeler after her disastrous in an amateur drama production

(Yates 1961:24))

As the chapters up until now have demonstrated, ‘suburbia’ is not only a topological construction but also connotes a set of attitudes, mores and values. It is ‘safe’ space. In the popular imagination, it exists as gendered space: where a code of good housekeeping prevails as women tend to the nest (i.e. household and children), while their men are out in the big bad city earning a living. Suburbs were seen as a space of ‘ideal home . . . for women and children first’ (Pile et al. 2000:31). Clapson (2003:125) notes the feminine suburbs have tended to be pitted against the macho-thrusting city for they ‘signify domesticity, repose, closeness to nature, lack of seriousness, mindlessness, and safety’. Chambers (2001:78) has spoken of how the advertising campaigns for home electrics in the leisure and domestic spheres represented a utopian American suburbia in which the family was sacrosanct. The stereotypical suburban daily routine established in 1950s-set suburban television shows sees besuited males kiss goodbye to their wives and kids en route to the daily commute to office leaving her to cheerfully perform household chores, for example baking sometimes with a housemaid/cook. The weekend consists of car washing and barbecues. Cast members are

almost always all white whether the broadcast be sitcom or soap opera – a genre named after its original function of selling washing powder to housewives via daytime broadcast drama (Brunsdon 1997). Ethnic minorities, single mothers and divorcees were largely absent. This chapter turns away from considering popular culture in typological fashion to the theme of suburban women across types and in particular the character of the suburban housewife in popular culture. It considers key feminist sociological work *The Feminine Mystique* by feminist author Betty Friedan and tests some of its claims in exploring of changing representations of women and the suburb.

John Updike revisited the Rhode Island suburb Eastwick first introduced to us in his post-Vietnam seventies-set book *Witches of Eastwick* of 1984 in his last ever novel *The Widows of Eastwick* published shortly before his death in 2009. The women of the post-9/11 version of the town are described by Updike (2008:139) as: ‘toned-up young mothers driving their overweight boys in overweight S.U.V.s to hockey practice 20 miles away, the young fathers castrated namby-pambies helping itty-bitty wifey with the housekeeping, spending all Saturday fussing around the lovely *home*. It’s the ‘50s all over again, without the Russians as an excuse’. It seems as if everything has come full circle cancelling out progress of feminism that had allowed three divorcees to enter a world of suburban sorcery in the original story. The suggestion is that the cars may be people carriers instead of station wagons but the notion of keeping up appearances is still paramount. The three slip into their old ways when they return to Eastwick after all going their separate ways on remarriage. Even though they have been away, suburban habits die hard. They tut-tut at one house for being an ‘eyesore’ and ‘dragging the neighbourhood down . . . ruining . . . property prices’ (178–9). More dramatic is the nightmarish cautionary tale *Safe* (1995) exposing us to future fears on a global scale although set in the 1980s. The film closely follows the trajectory of a well-heeled if somewhat characterless suburban housewife who finds her comfortable lifestyle turned upside down when she starts experiencing medically unexplained illnesses and allergies which is seen in the film as symptomatic of an intolerance of twenty-first-century living and its chemical after-effects. The familiar portrayal of the unfulfilled contemporary post-war suburban housewife that persists in contemporary representations can be traced back to the novel *Madame Bovary* which constructs marriage as social norm and adultery as violation of the usual moral code that is commonly associated with suburban normality. The early examples arguably helped set the template for the ‘what goes on behind closed doors/ net curtains?’ curiosity that has informed much suburban-set popular culture ever since.

The problem with no name: The post-war suburban housewife and classic portrayals

By offering a critique of the patriarchal system whereby girls were socialized into accepting marriage and motherhood as their natural gender role with any deviation considered improper, Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* became pivotal to the emerging second wave feminist movement. It suggested empty promise behind the prevailing ideal of 'the suburban housewife . . . [as] the dream image of the young American woman' (1963/2010:3) requiring them to ferry their children to and from school, be expert at baking and master domestic technology designed to make life easier. The book was based on a survey of 28 women graduates. For Friedan, 'the chains that bind . . . are not easily seen and not easily shaken off' (1963/2010:15). Friedan called this suburban state of affairs 'the problem with no name', and indeed at the time of her writing, feminism was in its infancy and sexism not a commonly understood term as today. It is claimed, 'Many suburban housewives are taking tranquillizers like cough drops' (Friedan 1963/2010:19), and in the study's sample of educated housewives in their thirties and forties, 18 were taking such drugs, 16 were undergoing psychological treatment and 'several' had attempted suicide. The revelations were all the more shocking as in the United States the suburban environment had been sold as idyllic and equated with the 'American Dream', other pillars of which were patriotism/ national pride, Christianity, self-reliance, domesticity, fear of big government, Cold War-fuelled anti-communism and opposition to social agitation.

Although many critics of suburbia see them as trapping women in futile lives of dull domesticity, suburban living was aided and abetted by the rise of consumer durables and the entree of many families into the car-owning classes, leading Britain's aristocrat prime minister Harold Macmillan to declare in the run-up to his successful 1959 election campaign 'you've never had it so good'. According to Jackson (1985), US suburban development was fertile particularly under President Eisenhower with favourable local planning policy, rising home ownership (from 40 per cent of the population at the start of the Second World War to 60 per cent by 1960) and gross national product (GNP) that grew by 250 per cent from 1945 to 1960. Many early suburban-themed cultural products appear to have an undercurrent of moralism at their core. Indeed Richard Hoggart's landmark lament to the passing of the richness of organic culture *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) named 'canned and packed provision' as a nail in the coffin of organic working-class culture which was being replaced by mass-produced

models making the ritual of the family gathering around a meal cooked from scratch to eat together now a rarity. For Ritzer (2004:56), this has declined further with the spread of the microwave oven reducing food preparation time to 'minutes, seconds even' and rendering the most culinary inept children capable of whipping up ready meals. Of course tinned foods and microwaves are not just confined to suburbs but their impact was felt in suburban households among housewives in the same way as the Rolling Stones' sentiments in tale of housewifely depression *Mother's Little Helper* which referred to prescription drugs rather than her eagerly attentive offspring mucking in with chores: 'Cooking fresh food for her husband's just a drag/ so she buys an instant cake and she buys a frozen steak/ and goes running for the shelter of her mother's little helper.' The implication was similar to Freidan's questioning 'is this all?' suggesting a lack of fulfilment despite the state of affairs where advances in living standards and labour-saving devices provided all mod cons. The newfound spoils of consumer capitalism included the washing machine (Redfern 2003) and Tupperware (Clarke 1997), but television was probably the most significant among these new acquisitions in defining suburban living leading to an increased domestication or privatization of the leisure sphere.

Pile et al. (2000:31) have described how suburbs were intended to be 'places where women could take control of their lives, rather than their being inescapable prisons.' However, there is evidence that many original inhabitants found that their suburban surrounds did not live up to their initial promise. In series 1 of *Mad Men*, Betty Draper tells her psychiatrist, 'We thought it'd be a nightmare to raise kids in Manhattan so we moved to Ossining. Suddenly I really felt so old.' The solution for women who dared to express any disquiet at their lot in life was usually diagnosis of mental illness, hence both Betty and April Wheeler in the novel *Revolutionary Road* (Yates 1961) are persuaded by their husbands to receive therapy as they come of terms with trading formerly carefree youthful existence for adult responsibilities including children and suburbia. The Wheelers constantly justify the latter as a necessary sacrifice and a compromise between their former bohemian existence and the 'real' country side which would be too difficult with young children. The estate agent promises, 'Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children' (Yates 1961:29). The couple try to convince themselves, 'The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms, among these trees' (Yates 1961:30). The UK physician Dr Stephen Taylor (1938, 1958) in a pre-war *Lancet* article identified the condition of 'suburban neurosis' borne out of frustration, loneliness, boredom and false values which he later revisited applying the term equally to new towns.

Physical symptoms included backache, weight loss, loss of breath and insomnia from this depressive anxiety-related illness. The condition is directly referred to in the now cult 1970 film *Diary of a Mad Housewife* set on suburban Long Island which began as an unhappy marriage/rebellion novel (Kaufman 1967).

Friedan's famous 'is this all?' passage above voicing realization that suburbia was not all it was cracked up to be is echoed in the novel *Little Children* (Perrotta 2004:29) in a passage that takes place at the playground among the smug mums:

Underlying Mary Ann's every utterance was an obnoxious sense of certainty, of personal completeness, as if she'd gotten everything she'd ever wanted in the best of all possible worlds. *This?* Sarah wanted to ask. *This is what you wanted? This playground? That SUV? Your stupid spandex shorts? Your weekly roll in the hay? Those well-behaved children who cower at the sound of your voice?*

Sarah used to be a someone, having studied feminism at college when she was in a lesbian relationship, but now she is trapped in a loveless marriage to an older underwear-fetishist man who seeks kicks in internet porn, and her own identity is consequently fading as she must consort with snobbish status-seeking women that she would not normally have anything in common with apart from their children. Indeed at the start of *The Feminine Mystique*, the suburban homes that stifle are described by Friedan (1963/2010:244) as 'comfortable concentration camps' in which 'American women are not, of course, being readied for mass extermination, but they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit'. The book's profits were donated to the National Organization of Women, the pressure group that she founded. These feelings of being trapped have been heard time and time again by suburban women in fiction but are more prevalent in more recent fictitious accounts than historic ones where suburban life is often akin to an out-of-body experience. At the start of *Little Children* in both book (Perrotta 2004) and film versions, Sarah tells herself that she is an anthropologist conducting a study into suburban mums allowing herself to step outside her ascribed role. In the 1940s, Mrs Brown in the *Hours* tells herself as her husband clumsily blows out the candles on his birthday cake spraying it with spit, 'She herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife . . . in these rooms, with nowhere else to go. She must please; she must continue' (Cunningham 1998:205). Eventual suicide is the fate of the character of Mary Alice who appears as off-screen narrator of *Desperate Housewives* and of April in *Revolutionary Road*, although Laura Brown does not meet this fate, but by abandoning her children and leaving them to live in another country in some ways commits a worse sin.

Pop music's teasing references to suburban women, such as those of The Rolling Stones' 'Mother's Little Helper' on 1960s housewives pill-popping propensity have largely been produced by men. The Jagger family roots in the London commuter hinterland of Kent are evoked by Philip Norman (2002:27) alongside typical suburban clichés, for example 'Their small house in Denver Road, Dartford, was scoured by Eva into a spotless state the equal of any neighbour's. Joe and Eva's whole life was dictated by consideration of what those ever vigilant neighbours might think.' We are also told of 'Their mother's house-proud fastidiousness' (Norman 2002:27).¹ More indirectly, while 'I Want To Break Free', the 1984 comeback single from Queen does not have lyrics that particularly deal with the concerns of housewives, the video depicting the band in drag in a suburban sitting room (with Freddie Mercury doing the dusting) suggests that it is from a cycle of domestic drudgery that the protagonist wishes to be liberated. Similarly, the lyrics of the Pet Shop Boys' 'Suburbia' do not particularly refer to the condition of women (apart from possibly 'Mother's got "mother's hairdo to be done"'), but the song's live rendition during the band's 1991 tour was accompanied by a slickly choreographed dance routine featuring women vacuuming (Zuberi 2001). Men onstage mowing grass in synchronicity in identical chinos and open-necked shirts would have served the same purpose but were not on display presumably as they would not be eye candy in the same way although there is a scene of lawns being sprinkled with hoses in the first pilot episode of the 2011 ABC comedy *Suburgatory* from the United States shown on E4 in the United Kingdom. Joni Mitchell's 1976 album 'The Hissing of Summer Lawns' returns to the theme of the downside of suburban existence for women who end viewed as objects in its lyrics. In 'Harry's House/Centerpiece', a frazzled mother can be heard admonishing 'Get down off of there, I said get down off of there!' to her children, inviting the comparison with to freeing oneself from the repetitive cycle of suburban conformity. On the track 'Harry's House', a disillusioned wife is uncomfortably trapped in comfortable suburbia with offspring, while her materialistic husband who views her as an object to service his needs is away on a business trip:

Battalions of paper-minded males
 Talking commodities and sales
 While at home their paper wives
 And paper kids
 Paper the walls to keep their gut reactions hid.

'9 To 5' sung by Dolly Parton and 'Manic Monday' written by Prince, then popularized by The Bangles, both also capture dissatisfaction with the working routine, although this is waged labour rather than unpaid domestic work in the house. In sum, most reflections on suburbia in song and in interviews with song-writers seem to be about the male protagonist's restless desire to escape the suburban surrounds that their parents had chosen which they had no decision-making stake in.²

Television can reflect, reinforce and challenge dominant norms or even create new ones. As we have seen the television set itself was a vehicle for promoting and propagating suburban family lifestyles; often placed at the centre of the sitting room akin to a hearth radiating out or serving the function once reserved for the piano in communal gatherings. Certainly in the days of networked programming and a smaller number of channels (until 1982, there were only 3 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. The suburbanization of the United States was also reflected in wholesome programmes with titles such as *Father Knows Best* and the much cited and YouTubed *Leave It to Beaver* which followed an all-American value system of traditional gender relations, traditionalism, small-c conservative values and the importance of family and suburban ideals at their core. A clip from the latter for example shows the father taking charge of the barbecue and explaining to his son that woman's place is in the kitchen where she has domestic appliances at her dispersal, whereas it is mens work to cook outdoors with fire as this is 'rugged' and requires the skills of a 'caveman'.³ Some of these series 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 of the sitcom *I Love Lucy* made the move in the storyline from their city base of Manhattan to Westport, Connecticut, an hour's commute away, thereby playing out the inherently US suburban imperative of seeking out freedom beyond the frontier and taming the wilderness, as mentioned in the opening chapter. Although this has been seen as a masculine desire, Pfeil (1995:172) writes, 'the emphasis on wildness . . . manly individualist spirit which resists both the suffocatingly blandishments of womanly domestication and homogenizing, rationalizing tendencies of industrial society', in suburbanization to have the dutiful wife and family at the side of the primeval, neo-colonial male was almost a requirement, and as we have seen critics saw that her fate was to become trapped in what Weber might have called an iron cage of rationalized suburban existence.

The personification of the ideal woman on-screen can be seen in cultural referents to actual or imagined examples who personify domestic prowess as attentive child-rearers and expert cooks. *Desperate Housewives*' (2005–12) uber-perfect housewife Bree Van der Kamp has been repeatedly likened on blogs to Martha Stewart, the US figure who became a brand for her television and cookbook empire with herself centrally positioned as the original 'domestic goddess'. Betty Friedan disapprovingly refers to Stewart in her 1997 rewritten introduction to *The Feminine Mystique*, even though her full commercial potential was realized after Friedan's death in 2006. Bree's character is presented from the first very episode as concerned neighbour and champion baker when she arrives with freshly baked muffins at the wake of Mary Alice for her grieving husband and son, but stipulates rather icily that she will need the baskets returning. In the first episode, her son pillories her, likening her to the robotic cold-hearted characters from 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* and her husband fails to defend her, showing to what extent she is taken for granted:

- Andrew:* Mom, I'm not the one with the problem, all right. You're the one who's acting like she's running for Mayor of Stepford.
- Bree:* [turning to her husband for support] Rex, seeing that you're the head of this household I would really appreciate it if you said something.
- Rex:* Pass the salt?

In later series, Bree begins a catering firm taking on the role of businesswoman. Similarly in *Mildred Pierce*, originally a novel (Cain 1941), then an Oscar-winning 1945 film noir and eventually a 2011 HBO mini-series, baking is the film's main motif and the way that the central character (who has been played by Joan Crawford and Kate Winslett) lifts herself out of penniless single motherhood to become a successful restaurateur while her lover Monty is a loafer. Role reversal, that is deviation from expected gender norms is rare in these portrayals. In Perrotta (2004:144), Todd has become a student supported by his wife contrary to his original expectations: '[When] she got accepted into film school, he figured that she was just killing time until they could begin a conventional middle-class life in the suburbs: i.e., he'd work his ass off every day. . . [with her] picking up the kids at day care.' The reality has not lived up to this. When he runs away with lover Sarah, he has nightmares about checking products on a conveyor belt at the quality control in a factory, hinting at a desire to step out of line or freeing himself from the shackles that are expectations of suburban perfection. As Sarah waits at the end of book for Todd, so that they can make their final flight from the imprisoning suburb, she fantasizes about being breadwinner: 'Todd

could stay home, ferry the kids back and forth to school and music lessons and soccer practice, take care of the cooking and the housework if that was what he preferred' (Perrotta 2004:338). Todd in the event does not turn up, injured in a skateboard accident and paralysed by inability to leave his wife.

Revolting moms

On-screen depictions of suburbia as haven for the housewife seem to show a collapse of the suburban dream as having occurred over time. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s Tom Rath and *Mad Men*'s Don Draper have extracurricular sexual exploits on the CVs and work in the high-pressured environment advertising on Madison Avenue of which their dutiful wives, both named Betty, are only dimly aware. In both cases, their unhappiness precludes us from using the expression 'blissfully' unaware to describe their condition. Their husbands keep them and their (increasingly rebellious) children in the style they are accustomed to, but they both seem to yearn for more. Betty Draper is a one-time model and anthropology major turned mother of three who develops a nervous condition necessitating psychiatry sessions. At times she appears to accept her fate, telling Henry who becomes her second husband in an early meeting that although Ossining was not her first choice after living in Manhattan, 'it's grown on me'. At others, she voices what we sense are her inner feelings in an echo of Betty Rath. After returning from a business trip to Italy in series 2, after Don's question to her 'what's wrong?' she rails shrilly, 'What's wrong? I hate this place, I hate our friends. I hate this town'. By the end of the series, the couple are divorcing. We see her in season 1 episode 11 fantasizing about the door-to-door salesman in rhythm to the juddering vibrations of the washing machine – consumer durable taking on sex-aid properties. In episode 9 of series 1 'Shoot', troubled by their birdsong, Betty both administers revenge on her pigeon-training neighbour who earlier threatened to shoot the Draper family dog and vents her multiple frustrations by taking a gun and gunning down the pigeons, one by one. The accompanying extra features of the series 2 DVD includes a documentary on the changing status of women which refers liberally to Betty Friedan. In the film *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Betty Rath describes the family house in Connecticut as 'a graveyard' and the cause of her unhappiness. Based on the Sloan Wilson novel, this was a rare cinema treatment at the time for showing the 'dark' side of suburbia. Of novels negative of the suburban way of life that were contemporaries, *The Crack in the Picture Window* was not filmed, while Yates's

Revolutionary Road (1961/2001) only made it to cinematic version four decades later and *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* and *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* were feel-good comedies reinforcing expected usual gender roles.

As the situation comedy got more adventurous, programme makers had to go further than making 'the trials and tribulations of a family in the suburbs' the situation alone. There needed to be a twist present too: *The Brady Bunch* were a reconstituted clan drawn from two earlier fractured families (having each lost a parent) producing a total of six children, with Alice a maid to attend to them. In *Bewitched*, the housewife at the show's centre possessed powers of sorcery. Even later, cartoons saw more and more of a departure from the original formula of suburban family plus dog, but even these reinforced the usual nuclear familial set-up: the *Jetsons* were a suburban family in space and the *Flintstones* were a *prima facie* standard-issue television 1970s family unit (commuting breadwinner Fred, wife Betty and cute baby Pebbles), except they lived in a cave and this was the Stone Age. Aimed at children, the cartoon allows disbelief to be further suspended as in the social satire of the *Simpsons* which began a trend towards adult animation followed by *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill* and *American Dad*. The *Simpsons* episode 'Little Big Mom' (episode 10 of the series 11: 9 January 2000) addresses how difficult the actual job of housewife is. Marge is hospitalized leaving Lisa to assume her role in taking charge. After unsuccessfully attempting to get the rest of the family to help her with the physically exhausting tasks of housework, a chaotic situation descends with unwashed plates. Overnight the ghost of Lucille Ball appears at Lisa's bedside to teach her how to get revenge on Bart and Homer who have been slobbering around playing out general sitcom male buffoonery taking her for granted watching endless reruns of *I Love Lucy* (the show she starred in). The role of the men is to enjoy the fruits of the women's labour. As with Mr Cheever in *Leave It to Beaver*, men are expected to do 'rugged' gardening, DIY and light the barbecue, but the interior of the home is the woman's domain where it is the space to nurture the kids. The alpha-male Neanderthal Bart and Homer Simpson are poor role models of even these limited household tasks. In this way, the show pokes fun at and challenges accepted gendered normative behaviours. Musically, punk thumbed its nose at conventional rock structure, and prominent women in the scene included Siouxsie Sioux who was far removed from the dolly birds of previous pop in the urgency of her delivery and refusal to conform to traditional gender roles. The rejection of a life of submissive domesticity can be heard in the track 'Suburban Relapse', the story of an adult female/housewife who 'snaps one' day while doing the dishes and throws consumer goods at her neighbours.

While a woman's place was squarely in the home according to traditional gender relations shown in early portrayals of suburbia on television (in the role as housewife and mother), the rise of the working woman signalled a change ushering in more modern values of equality alongside declining deference to authority including a range of institutions: the church, monarchy, political leaders and the patriarchal family. Dissenting visions of the suburban housewife were hinted at for some years, although it took until the 1970s and the 1980s for them to filter through to television series. The sarcastic wise-cracking and physically weighty rotund *Roseanne* also contradicted earlier all-American versions of the suburban housewife and the wholesome hearth. Like the *Cosby Show*, the series derived its title from an already popular comedian rather than the family in the story: Roseanne Barr as lead was far removed from the suburban beauties with compliant kids of earlier shows. Indeed in Western society to be fat is to be uncouth and slovenly suggesting a poor junk food diet as opposed to in Third World nations where to be overweight can connote wealth and being well fed. Betti (1995:132) has commented, 'Roseanne is rude, insubordinate, and rarely a passive victim, on either class or gender grounds. The show routinely provides a fantasy response to working-class women's attempts to sustain self-control in a world where they have little control'. In *Rosanne*, rather, the suburban affluence we are used to seeing time and time again where characters in series inhabit spotlessly clean homes, economic hardship formed a backdrop to the series with a family also arguably lacking cultural capital, for example by living in a catalogue-furnished house that is often a mess. The nearest UK equivalent was *Butterflies* (1978–83) showing the general domestic ineptitude of demure suburban housewife Ria played by Wendy Craig (Andrews 1998). Unlike Roseanne, the earnings of her dentist husband played by sitcom regular Geoffrey Palmer allowed her to not have to work leaving her and her two teenage sons to fire dry asides about, or just despair at, her unpaid labour within the home for example cooking. The audience was invited to sympathize with Ria's reveries of escaping quotidian reality and being swept away by a stereotypically tall, dark and handsome stranger (Leonard) for whom extramarital activities were suggested using fantasy dream sequences but were never realized. The butterfly's wings were clipped: conventional expectations of the suburban housewife to be ideal homemaker remained intact and had only teasingly been undermined but not seriously subverted.

Boredom or suburban *ennui* is a consistent theme that can be seen repeatedly in portrayals of women in suburbia. Of Virginia Woolf in the book *Hours*, we

are told that she recognizes living in suburban Richmond is a better and safer alternative to London given her history of depressive illness ‘and yet she is dying this way, she is gently dying on a bed of roses’ (Cunningham 1998:169). In the commentary that begins, the *Desperate Housewives* episode ‘Suspicious Minds’ (season 1, episode 9) narrator Mary Alice intones: ‘Gabrielle was waiting for her next great idea . . . Before she knew it, she had jumped off the runway [catwalk] and moved to the suburbs. Her most recent great idea was borne out of her boredom with her new life. That’s how she came to start an affair with her teenage gardener, which was cut short by a tragic accident.’ This same divide of the generations is also present in the *Graduate* where again the sexual prowess of a young man provides escapism for a suburban housewife (and vice versa). This rebellion is a specifically youthful middle class, one against parental value systems not inequality. *Desperate Housewives* off-screen narration (which has been condemned as ‘preachy and dull’ by Feeney 2005) frames episode 7 from series 1 ‘Anything You Can Do’. Proceedings begin with a shot of the novel *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert lying on a table at Bree’s house, the latest subject of study for the Wisteria Lane Book Club. Mary Alice’s voice-over comments on this ritual as there are intercut shots of the characters trials and tribulations:

Mary Alice: We found the problems of literary characters so absorbing . . . the way they dealt with adversity . . . [Lynette swallows some of the twins AHDD tablets] . . . conducted illicit affairs . . . [Gabrielle and John pass one another with a hint of a frisson between them] – ‘. . . endured domestic dramas . . .’ [Rex leaves the house with wife Bree looking frustrated behind him] . . . and planned romantic conquests. [Susan circles a date in her calendar that reads ‘Date with Mike!’] But since my death, my friends had lost their interest in fiction. Their own problems had become absorbing enough.

The book – set *en province* a French expression of all that is not Paris – is mentioned in the novel *Revolutionary Road*. In Flaubert’s plot the eponymous heroine conducts a series of affairs to escape the boredom of her vacuous provincial existence and loveless marriage to a dullard. This parallels Gabrielle’s situation in *Desperate Housewives* – here in *Revolutionary Road* and in *Madame Bovary* itself possibilities are presented as limited and suburbia/life *en province* stifles dreams.

Creator Mark Cherry has repeatedly cited the 2002 case of Andrea Yates, a Texan housewife who drowned her five children as an inspiration for the series. He has stated that the catalyst or ‘light-bulb moment’ when he heard his own mother had expressed some sympathy for Yates’s actions: ‘it was shocking to find out that

she indeed had moments of great desperation . . . And I realized if my mother had moments like this, every woman who is in the suburban jungle has. And that's where I got the idea to write about four housewives.'⁴ At times, the characters harbour underlying resentment at their role as homemaker. When one-time high-flying executive turned mum Lynette Scavo meets a former colleague in the supermarket by chance towards the end of series 1, she is asked how she likes full-time motherhood. The question is of course heavily loaded. Accordingly, she replies with the socially acceptable answer, 'It's the best job in the world!' with a weak smile that belies her supreme exhaustion at having four unruly kids. To give a more accurate or balanced answer might invite suspicions of being a 'bad mother' after all. The episode comes close to saying the unsayable and the viewer to hearing anti-motherhood sentiments voiced. McCabe and Akass (2006:12) talk of 'the cardinal television rule that women should not express dissatisfaction with housewifery and motherhood'. The title of the first chapter of Perrotta's novel *Little Children* (2004) is 'Bad mommy' which can be used as shorthand for the fictitious characters that think the unthinkable in their dissatisfaction with their caring role. At the start of the book, opprobrium from the fellow mothers at the playground is upon Sarah for forgetting to bring a snack for her 3-year-old Lucy, but her transgressions go further as she embarks on an affair with a handsome stay-at-home dad who frequents the same circuit of daytime toddler haunts. We also learn of her lesbian past. To counterbalance her 'bad mommy' role, Hatten (2007) brands Todd her lover a 'boy-man' who is exponent of 'retrograde masculinity'. He has failed at his breadwinning responsibilities leaving his wife to do the earning, and his main outlet for enjoyment is either the camaraderie of the fellow jocks in his amateur baseball team or watching local teenagers skateboard: another youthful passion of his that he yearns for. Sarah's 'bad mommy' status is sealed when Todd's wife begins winning him back with her adeptness at sex, something that the comparatively amateur Sarah is not as skilled in. He ends up crippled with inertia, not quite able to follow through the plan of running away together with Sarah and literally injured in a skateboard accident the day of the planned escape – again underlining what a boy-man he is.

The idea of liberation is a common one that occurs in fictional portrayals of suburban housewives be it real, imagined or thwarted. In *The Widows of Eastwick*, Updike's final novel, the accusation is made that the hard-won gains of the 1960s have been squandered (Updike 2008:160) '*This generation*, Alexandra thought. They watched us rebel against our pious upbringings and in reaction have reverted to the old sentimentalities, family and home and such tyrannies'. Indeed she goes as far as to justify the witchcraft that she practiced with two

other friends before leaving Eastwick in the 1970s as an escape from suburban housewife routine mapped out for them at the time. She lectures her dowdy daughter Macy who has ended up as full-time homemaker with two kids and a conventional husband, 'Girls your age just can't realize how few opportunities there were for women when I was young. Our job was to make babies and buy American consumer goods. If we fell off the marriage bandwagon, there was nothing much left for us but to ride a broomstick . . . it was *power*. Everybody needs power. Otherwise the world eats you up' (Updike 2008:160–1). In *Little Children* (Perrotta 2004:89), as Sarah dresses more and more flirtatiously, adopting a red bikini bought from the internet to attract Todd at the town poolside, she rationalizes her actions as those that the enlightened Madonna would have no qualm with: 'Madonna didn't say, *Oh no, I couldn't possibly wear those cones on my chest. Oh no, I couldn't pose as a nude hitchhiker*. She just said yes to everything. *Cowboy hats – sure! Sex with Jesus – why not? Motherhood – that's cool, too*. When one role got old, she just moved on to the next one. That was a form of liberation in itself.'

In the film *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), Tom has more depth than any of the female characters who are comparatively one-dimensional, for example his hectoring wife Betsy and the childrens' shrill nanny. Tom's brief wartime fling is presented as understandable given the pressure he was under, whereas wife's freak-out is futile. She speeds off in the family car but has to be bailed out by her husband from the local police station after running out of fuel. In the *Graduate*, Ben's affair with the older Mrs Robinson is widely seen as not only a tale of the children of suburbia for whom the promise that lured their parents in has become empty but it is also illustrative of her own lack of fulfilment as an unhappily married woman who practices rebellion in being open about her alcoholism and being of an overtly sexual neediness. The confrontation towards the end with Mr Robinson makes clear that prevailing ideas positioned suburban wives as existing to be attentive to her husband, rather than having any character or desires in her own right.

New formats and retreads

The rise of suburban-set reality television revolving around the single family unit was satirized in *The Simpsons* episode 'Homer Simpson, This Is Your Wife' from series 17 which first aired in the United States on 26 March 2006,

featuring a guest appearance from Ricky Gervais as 'Charles' adopting the same voice and job description as in his portrayal of David Brent of popular United Kingdom and later Americanized series *The Office*. When Homer announces his plan to take part in a *Wife Shop* show, Lisa exclaims, 'I don't understand dad. Our family has so many flaws, why do we have to share them with the world?' Quick as a flash Homer shoots back, 'Because we get to go on tv'. The episode was the highest ever rated *Simpsons* in the United Kingdom of 2.8 million after heavy promotion by Sky television. A familiar reality television format is the placing of people in situations outside their regular comfort zone, for example, the *Wife Swap* programme that the *Simpsons* episode parodied or *Big Brother* placing strangers to live in a house together. In the United Kingdom, the late contestant Jade Goody had a remarkable rise and fall, becoming a star in her own right before death from cervical cancer in 2009, while benefit claimant *Wife Swap* star Lizzy Bardsley who was later sentenced for benefit fraud for not declaring her media appearance fees and was found guilty of child cruelty. Mirroring *Desperate Housewives* have been the well-known US series *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* filmed in the environs of New York as well as similar shows set in Orange County, New York City, Atlanta, Beverly Hills, Miami (United States) and Vancouver, Canada (United Kingdom). *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* in particular has a title sequence and name obviously derivative of its ABC near-namesake. In the United Kingdom have been the semi-scripted docu-soaps *The Only Way is Essex* and *Desperate Scousewives*. Another vein of reality programmes frequently with domestic life and homemaking at their core which have a self-help imperative at their core where 'expert help' is called in to improve people's unmanageable situations. There is frequent reinforcing traditional gender roles: in *Changing Rooms* it is a woman who presides over transformations of family homes presenting participants with the results after they have been redecorated (either comforting them if the final result is not according to their taste or popping open the champagne when it meets with the householders' seal of approval). By contrast, it is the men who do the physical work. A woman superficially dresses the home for resale to maximize profit in *House Doctor*. Domestic chores of dusting and polishing are performed by two women on *How Clean Is Your House?* And parenting experts are always women, Dr Tanya Byron in *The House of the Tiny Tearaways* and in *Supernanny*, Jo Frost. Reality television is some ways the small-screen's answer to cinema vérité. Despite the relative newness of the reality show, subjects under the microscope are also at times rather old-fashioned.

The remakes of earlier outings of suburban housewifery usually have zeitgeist-chasing details in their rewrites. The 2005 film *Bewitched* was derived from a long-running US sitcom (1964–72) in which a suburban housewife who with a twitch of her nose becomes skilled in witchcraft. This character, Samantha, has married a mortal and has a meddling mother who sets the template for interfering in-laws. In its Big Screen update four decades on however the story turned into one about the making of a remake of a 1960s show. The opportunity for an intertextual satire on recycling culture and/or an indictment of the star system was somehow missed, and the suburban sets looked fairly generic as if they had been seen hundreds of times earlier (which they probably were). The 2005 *Bewitched* star Nicole Kidman also played the leading part in 2004's update of Bryan Forbes 1975 *Stepford Wives* from Frank Oz. The central plot remains in which a wife realizes that something is amiss with the idyllic suburb of Stepford she has moved to with her family. The town's women lead lives of such bland perfection that they appear to be devoid of any character. The film's originating book by Ira Levin was inspired by Betty Friedan (1963/2010:248–9) who had predicted: 'The comfortable concentration camp that American women have walked into . . . denies women's adult identity . . . away from individual identity to become an anonymous biological robot in a docile mass.' The remake includes the sinister men's club who reprogram the women into docile, cupcake-baking, robotic clones who are sexually compliant, and lack all personality. There are some variations from the original though: including a gay couple. The main exception to the expected rules of wifely conduct is the independent-spirited, chaotically untidy, wise-cracking Bobbie who Joanna teams up with (as in the earlier version) to get to the bottom of what on the DVD commentary calls the 'insane quest for perfection' of Stepford. By 2004, Bobbie has been given the surname Markovitz (Bette Midler) and is Jewish in a nod to multiculturalism but there are still no black characters. Even such twists, for example the detail that Joanna has had a breakdown after having been fired from her high-powered job in television, could not prevent the film being critically panned. It seems that irony can easily backfire in this type of remake given the all-knowing media-literate nature of the modern audience.

Revisionism and postmodernism are also present in the rewriting of earlier eras in popular culture. In the time-travel film *Pleasantville*, which starts off shot in monochrome the twins' 1950s mother home-cooks their meals including waffles laden with syrup which their modern palettes find too heavy in cholesterol content to bear, and she and the 1950s father sleep in separate beds. At the instigation of the sexually liberated 1990s sister, the whole town seemingly

discover recreational sex, neighbourhood housewives begin answering back to their husbands using as their weapons the iron or husband's dinner as bargaining tools and the town is awakened to the idea of art and literature. Gradually, Technicolor engulfs Pleasantville despite the efforts of the old guard to cling on to how it was. In the present, the dutiful son David ends up having to comfort his (single) mother who has had to change her plans due to the unreliability of his father who has failed to respect the access arrangements again. This is a generational reversal: unlike the all-knowing happily married parents of earlier screen families, it is the son who provides emotional stability to his parents who we see as having difficulty keeping life together. In *Far From Heaven*, another retro look at the 1950s, Cathy is initially presented as a conventional housewife, but as the plot develops, she emerges as more enlightened than her peers who see a fundamental incompatibility between other cultures: her best friend displays homophobic tendencies in commenting how she likes her 'men to be all men', while it feels like the whole neighbourhood stares disapprovingly when Cathy and black companion Raymond accompany one another out. The viewer is presented with the dilemma of which is more transgressive: the husband's homosexuality or the wife's befriending a black man? Homosexuality is present in all of the three parallel plots of the *Hours* referred to on p. 36: Mrs Brown makes a pass at her neighbour in the 1940s, and in the contemporary section of the story, Clarissa lives in a lesbian partnership and even 'Richard told her, thirty years ago. That under her private-girl veneer lay all the makings of a good suburban housewife' (Cunningham 1998:16), and her one-time lover who makes this observation is gay. In addition to this is the story of Virginia Woolf. While a largely affectionate glance at 1970s suburban values emerges from the 1995 gently mocking film *The Brady Bunch* which was marketed with the strapline 'They're back to save America from the '90s' (i.e. greed of corporate developers), the 1990s penned books *The Ice Storm* and *The Virgin Suicides* which later both became films suggest between them that there was more to suburbia in the so-called decade that taste forgot than simply light fluffy good-naturedness including sexual swinger parties, child neglect and depression.

In Friedan's study, making ones own bread was a marker of how 'good' a housewife would be. Indeed, in the remake of *Stepford Wives* (2004), cake baking recurs as an ideal standard for women to aspire to. Dave chides Bobbie for her inability to make cupcakes when he says through a freshly baked mouthful, 'Why can't you make stuff like this?' Bobbie retorts: 'Why don't you?', to which Dave shoots back, 'Because I have a penis'. Postmodern pastiche is heavily laid on in the scene where Joanna throws herself into baking which

seems uncharacteristic which her two allies who are respectively Jewish and gay remark on:

Bobbie: You kind of look like Betty Crocker.

Joanna: I know.

Roger: At Betty Ford.

Betty Crocker is a brand-name for baking products personified by a smiling woman adorning the packets who has been updated over the years but was not based on reality. As the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (n.d.) state, 'One of the best-known women of the interwar years – *Betty Crocker* – never existed.' The character has become a byword for home-baking but was contrived to incorporate the last name of a retired company executive William Crocker, with the first name 'Betty', which was thought of as 'warm and friendly'. Betty Ford is the widow of former US president Gerald Ford who after a period as an alcoholic later gave her name to the Betty Ford alcohol treatment centre and drug rehabilitation clinic for families suffering from narcotic and chemical dependency. In the film *Hours*, Laura Brown played by Julianne Moore in part realizes the failure of her suburban existence when the cake she bakes for her husband's birthday goes wrong which she later redeems with a second successful cake. Friedan (1963/2010:15) claimed that juggling 'the enormous demands of . . . wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur; expert on interior decoration, child care, appliance repair, furniture refinishing, nutrition and education' resulted in women's identity that is submerged by this mass of mindless, meaningless, repetitive and soul-destroying routine. In *Little Children*, when hatching a plan to escape her loveless marriage and routinized drudgery with Todd, Sarah daydreams of leaving behind the usual list of domestic chores: 'they'd have nothing to do but eat, sleep and make love whenever they wanted to, free from the banal responsibilities of childcare, the ceaseless petty time pressures of family. The sweetness of the prospect was almost too much . . . to contemplate' (Perrotta 2004:297).

It seems that certainly for the three Betties, Friedan, Rath and Draper, the reality of being a suburban housewife did not live up to the promise of the prospectus. Betty Crocker's ever-smiling unquestioning expression appears to have more in common with the women of early suburban television series who were contented homemakers rather than these unsatisfied examples who raise questions about the bland representations we are more used to. Her features no longer appear in the instant cake and pancake mixes now readily available at UK supermarkets. Instead there is an authenticity-affirming signature in white

lettering on a stylized cartoonish red spoon bowl as the current logo. ‘Betty Ford’ is barely remembered as a person anymore but the two words are synonymous with breakdown and rehab, two things that most depictions of suburbia only teasingly hint at as stoic women carry on. Advanced capitalism has meant that some of the certainties of the traditional suburban set-up have faded: under present economic circumstances and for some years now in many major UK cities, two incomes would be needed to purchase a home. The now normality of the dual-earner household means that the wife cannot be consigned to a life of suburban *malheur* and the husband parcelled off to the city as two incomes would be needed to service most suburban mortgages, for example in London. Cohabitation, what was once quaintly called ‘living in sin’ has lost its stigma and divorce/partnership break-ups help to keep the property market moving – helping avoid near-stagnation of transactions in the recent downturn. Later examples of representations of women in suburban context show that women’s lives do not have to be determined (by patriarchal power structures) but can also be determining (of their circumstances), a state of affairs that has been helped by legislative advance, for example the UK Equal Pay Act of 1976.

Discussion and conclusion

The suburbs have been the backdrop to musical, film and television products straddling a range of genres between them with women often central in these portrayals. Just as suburbia and mass-produced popular culture have come of age, so has feminism now spanning three decades of demands. The ways of receiving music, television and films have changed with self-scheduling, possible via web resources, music downloading and television catch-up services. By taking a range of case-study material with diverse depictions, this chapter has attempted to counteract the view envisaged by Thorns (1973:118) when he declared, ‘The society of the suburb . . . is, for the most part, female dominated and narrow and insular in its outlook.’ Indeed many of the examples cited could be described as polysemic texts of multiple overlapping and interlocking messages and meanings. They can be analysed on many levels, for example their audience effects or according to production values. Each of them can be read as a text but they are not self-contained, the point of emergence is also an ‘event’. For Kutnowski (2008:603), in being a comedy ‘these gags ultimately address the dysfunctional life of the *Simpsons*, and portray an updated, naturalistic, disenchanted version of the American Dream that offers an alternative to

decades of television shows portraying suburban family life as something neat and stable'. The same could apply to *Desperate Housewives*, *American Beauty* or the UK's *Outnumbered* in which the strains of modern middle-class parenting are presented. Even children's shows accept that what were once pejoratively called 'broken homes' are not now uncommon: CBBC's *Sarah Jane Adventures* briefly touched on in the previous chapter centred on a single mother and time traveller combating aliens with her adopted son and his friends from her attic in suburban Ealing. Some of the women's lifestyles we see, for example the decision to stop work when one has small children, is frequently forged by necessity, not choice; although public policy is finally and frustratingly slowly playing catch-up with legislation on nursery entitlement and flexible working.

Ordinarily, one would assume that the portrayal of women in 1960s popular culture as compliant housewives to be tame by modern standards but contemporary examples of cultural depictions of earlier eras reimagine these periods with modern sensibilities: *Mad Men*'s 1960s is written from 2007 onwards, so it does not shy away from unwanted pregnancy and extramarital affairs. The US television series and 1957 film *Peyton Place*, although set in a small town rather a suburb *per se*, helped speed up the portrayal of suburbia as an ideal haven for the compliant wife as seen for example witnessed in the sunny disposition of Doris Day in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* to the dark secrets behind in women's lives of *Mad Men* or *Desperate Housewives*. Luckett (1999) claims that *Peyton Place* was groundbreaking for showing female sexuality *outside* marriage and defining women's identity and selfhood in the process, even if the programme was criticized for eroding moral standards. Of course what is acceptable over time changes. In *Mad Men*, the fact that the cast almost all smoke seems to be the most immediately shocking aspect to the twenty-first-century viewer. When Peggy, the secretary who rises to the level of copywriter, goes on the pill, the doctor who prescribes it smokes throughout the appointment while raising doubts about authorizing the medication as she is not married. When Betty is expecting her third child Eugene (accidentally conceived), she smokes throughout the pregnancy. In series 2, Don's mistress Bobbie Barrett tells the dowdy Peggy: 'no one will tell you this, but you can't be a man. Don't even try. Be a woman – powerful business when done correctly.' By series 3, Peggy's transformation from conformist secretarial staff to powerful corporate woman is sealed when she moves to Manhattan (the city) because of the stress of commuting from the suburbs (Brooklyn). In *Far From Heaven*, the *mise en scene* is 1950s but a woman negotiating race and homosexuality would never have been seen in a popular film of the time: modern-day sensibilities

interpret a previous age. Context of the era of a media text's cultural production is intrinsic to it, as the past undergoes continual rewriting as it ends up reflecting present times. Similarly, representations become more daring over time: *Desperate Housewives*' subversion of the age-old US soccer mom cliché was later bettered by *Weeds* in which a widow in the sterility of the suburbs becomes involved in the murky underworld of drug-dealing after being forced to provide single-handedly for two sons. The 'cover' for this illicit income stream is a bakery that outwardly conveys the veneer of suburban respectability. The first episode of season 1 shows the hypocrisy of her trying to ban carbonated drinks from the school canteen as they are harmful to children while she supplies gear to their parents.

Some of these examples suggest that it is not just women who are stultifying in suburbia but that masculinity is in crisis too. Both mature student Todd and the disgraced cop Larry in *Little Children* busy themselves with sports and involvement in a committee to oppose the local resettlement of a convicted sex offender to compensate for their failure to live up to the usual bringing-home-the-bacon role of suburban males and inability to keep together their respective marriages. Todd also embarks on an affair as it makes him feel like a teenager rather than suburban head of household with attendant responsibilities. In the 2004 pilot episode of *Desperate Housewives*, Rex delivers a speech cataloguing Bree's faults despite her outward perfection: 'I want a divorce. I just can't live in this detergent commercial anymore. I'm sick of the bizarre way your hair doesn't move. I'm sick of you making our bed in the morning before I've even used the bathroom. You're this plastic suburban housewife with her pearls and her spatula who says things like "we owe the Hendersons a dinner." Where's the woman I fell in love with? Who used to burn the toast and drink milk out of the carton? And laugh? I need her. Not this cold perfect thing you've become.' In subsequent episodes, both of the couple attend marriage guidance counselling, suggesting that they both accept some responsibility for the relationship breakdown. Rex is dead by the series' end, although he does come back to narrate one later episode in ghost form. He expresses disdain for suburban values in his monologue which gives a male perspective of Wisteria Lane intoning:

Take a drive down any street in suburbia . . . know what you're going to see? A bunch of guys wearing the same expression, it's a look that says 'oh crap, my dreams are never going to come true' . . . yeah, the suburbs are filled with a lot of men who have given up hope. Of course every once in a while you do come across some lucky SOB who's dreams have all come true. You know how to

spot them? They're the ones who can't stop smiling. Don't you just hate those guys?⁵

This world-weary tone seems to demonstrate that men too can suffer from suburban melancholy, though most portrayals of this condition are focused on women often having a breakdown while the men are out in the city being breadwinner, for example, *Revolutionary Road* which ultimately is a tale of suburban self-destruction.

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. Suburbia has variously been represented as conformist, bland and mediocre or as a place for experimental living or as a location that harbours hidden secrets. Much has changed since *Feminine Mystique* in 1963: contraception, abortion and divorce have made women less biologically determined. The age of marriage and that women have their first child has been delayed and the two are not both simultaneously needed at once. Women are not now simply defined through their partners being reliant on their husband's salary, the reverse situation is also possible and also households of single women or single parents of either gender. The gains of earlier generations in the United Kingdom arguably peaked with the New Labour government's equalities bill continuing in the governments' recognition of the state's role in childcare and extending maternity and paternity pay. All of these developments have changed suburban society. Rising divorce rates have helped to keep the property market from total stagnation at the 'downsizer' end of the spectrum. Liberal feminists would claim that the success of the advances made by the women's movement can be seen in the way that many demands that were once the site of extreme struggle are now a given. Radical feminists by contrast would conclude that there is a long way to go when pay remains stubbornly unequal and there are so few women in leading stock exchange company boardrooms, the argument known as the glass ceiling. Some point to post-feminism and the so-called 'third wave' of feminism as undermining the hard fought gains of the women's movement that Friedan paved the way for. In her article on the subject, Mc Robbie (2004:259) worries that feminism's advances are undermined by the tendency towards 'laddism' and mass-produced garments with slogans advertising porn aimed at very young girls. Women's studies and feminism are now integral to sociology syllabi, so have become part of the accepted academic canon as have media representations, making us more aware of stereotypes with their tendency to overlap with prejudice and the labelling of deviance.⁶ Crucially, just as there

is no singular feminism or agreed definition of suburbia, this chapter has shown that there is no single portrayal of women in the suburbs that can claim to be definitive or completely authoritative. However, the series of representations can be described as a set of reflections of the transformations in suburbia in the United Kingdom and United States in the post-war era in which the situation of the suburban woman and family life has changed on a number of fronts.

Women in the twenty-first century are not chained to the kitchen sink as earlier clichés dictated. Gentrification of the inner city has seen the middle classes take up residence in such areas away from the suburbs they grew up in. McRobbie (2004:261) states that education for women has ‘loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to earn an independent living without shame or danger’, citing the case of Bridget Jones, the *Independent* column character that became a hit film showing an outwardly emancipated woman who is still plagued by self-doubt, although perhaps this can in part be explained by the fact that the story was loosely based on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* which revolved around the theme of marriage. Friedan’s research subjects (and characters such as Sarah in *Little Children* and *Mad Men*’s Betty Draper) were college educated however and had problems accepting life with a role reduced to breeder and maintaining a spotlessly clean household. In Friedan’s introduction from 1997 to the reprinted edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, she concedes that the situation has improved for women citing the role model of Hilary Clinton. Friedan (1963/2010:20) claims, ‘women are no longer the passive victims they once felt themselves to be’. She does express regret that family mealtime has declined. In an era where women feel time pressured and society is ever atomized, this decline has continued. Although Jagger and Richards decried the frozen steak, even that may look like a relatively labour-intensive food preparation method in the twenty-first century. Ritzer sees food zapped and nuked in the microwave as symptomatic of altering the family ritual of sitting down together to eat. He claims that ‘the spread of microwave cooking as well as the wide variety of foods available in that form, makes it possible for family members to eat at different times and places’ (Ritzer 2004:111). Media representations often show that ‘having it all’ is not all that it is cracked up to be. ‘Marrying well’ (as we heard the Southall-raised Carole Middleton criticized for doing in the lead-up to the Royal Wedding) is something the characters of *Footballers Wives* have all done as well as having it all, but in the storylines they are still fundamentally unhappy. More positive past imagery can be seen in *Made in Dagenham* where confident women sewing machinists win an egalitarian battle if not the war.

Much suburban drama is peopled by one-dimensional characters in utterly predictable situations, but the examples raised have shown a diversity of practice and gone some way to illustrate the subtle shifts that have occurred in the way that women have been depicted in suburban settings from the late twentieth century to the present day. A very particular discourse of femininity with categorically defined gender roles where the woman/wife was a domestic foil fulfilling the main familial functions while the man/husband performed the role of protector and provider historically played a key role in defining how suburbia was culturally constituted from the 1950s onwards. Much of what these early portrayals depicted is now lost; even in the 1970s, programmes such as *Terry and June* seemed to be showing us a disappearing world, that if not quite sepia-tinted was one coloured seemingly in one of 50 shades of beige. This is not a cause for mourning, it is an undeniable fact and the diversity of contemporary suburbia is one of its most positive attributes. Past pictures are of use mostly for historical use now: today's suburb is complex, dynamic and in an era of economic downturn contrasts with received notions of suburbia as equating with simplicity, security and safety, life there is sometimes precarious. Many city tendencies are present in the present-day suburb including population churn that makes it more than just the stomping ground of neurotic, bored, pill-popping housewives. What the future may hold for women in an economic downtown where those who expected to enjoy rising living standards with improving on the material living conditions of their parents as a given and buying into the property-owning democracy of suburban dream as a birthright when they may have their hopes dashed remains to be seen. Popular culture needs to chart these changes, the 'better' examples, however these are defined, can offer a powerful mirror to complement social scientific empirical data. More work from women writers would be welcome: working-mother guilt is rarer in popular culture than bored housewife, yet it is a feeling very acutely felt by many suburban women, particularly those working round the clock to pay the mortgage and keep up the suburban lifestyle and whose children are asleep by the time she gets home.

There are also multiple references to outside events in these films and series. In *Mad Men* season 1 episode 3, an illicit, well-thumbed copy of the banned racy novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is passed around by the office girls from Joan via Marge of the switchboard to Peggy. In the first series of *Desperate Housewives*, Bree Van der Kamp ends up telling her therapist Dr Albert Goldfine her views on Freud:

He grew up in the late 1800s. There were no appliances back then. His mother had to do everything by hand, just backbreaking work from sun-up to sun-down, not

to mention the countless other sacrifices she probably had to make to take care of her family. And what does he do? He grows up and becomes famous, peddling a theory that the problems of most adults can be traced back to something awful their mother has done. She must have felt so betrayed. He saw how hard she worked. He saw what she did for him. Did he even ever think to say thank you? I doubt it.

Bree here speaks up for the unsung role of Freud's mother as housewife. Indignation and rage also states that the women of the suburbs are capable of. In *Revolutionary Road* (Yates 1961), wifely anger is tempered with her familial responsibilities. After an epic argument with Frank towards the end of the book she resumes the dusting. In J. G. Ballard's *Millennium People* we encounter a mother of two from Kingston at an animal rights protest and of whom we are told, 'Angela stared across the road with narrowed eyes and all a suburbanite's unlimited capacity for moral outrage' (Ballard 2003:36). Meanwhile, the novel *Madame Bovary* seems to be a favourite of the suburban book clubs: being a choice for discussion both in the film *Little Children* and the first season of *Desperate Housewives*. Here the reading is used as a device to suggest under-the-surface sexual tensions and draw the viewers attention to infidelity that lies beneath conventional exteriors of suburban propriety and decorum. However, the coming of the dual-earner society has given women financial independence free of the spousal shadow and in turn freed suburbs from their stereotypical role as cosy, indeed suffocating, confined spaces that trap women into their expected gender role as breeder and homemaker. Whereas suburbia was once seen as comfort zone of predictable stability, it has since the recession become at times highly unstable and prone to multiple anxieties covering financial and emotional dimensions. The suburbs are increasingly diverse ethnically and in terms of family formation, being home to singleton households, reconstituted families, single-parent families as well as couples and nuclear families which may contain married, unmarried or civil-partnered couplings within them. Perhaps the tried and tested titles under discussion at suburbia's fictitious housewives book clubs are in need of revision as are portrayals of women themselves, the updated *Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963/2010) with new introduction might be a candidate.

Betty Friedan's seminal 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* propelled second-wave feminism from academic obscurity to the best-seller lists of popular reading matter. Can the overall representational tableau vivant that

emerges from the examples discussed above add up to something that is larger than the sum of its parts which can be coded in terms of the politics of the women's movement? Obviously, given the different genres dealt with and varying stances within each one, a mixed picture emerges. Way back before Mumsnet, there have long been associations with women and suburbia and by extension the family. There are also anxieties about what all of these three things are mutating into: gender, location and family all might once have been described as structuring structures but have undergone rapid transition and continue to do so. The church too has declined in importance over the past century. In its place, there are fears of modern society and its wider effects. There is for example a worry of twenty-first-century children as overprotected and living a chauffeured, caged and commercialized existence. Portrayals of the fairer sex in the suburbs in films in particular have increasingly shown female discontent at comfortable, even emotionally numbing, suburban surroundings resulting in mental breakdown, suicide, vengeance and 'playing away' in marital infidelity, the notion of women on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Yet the daily lived reality of most suburban women – juggling work with caring for children and ageing parents – is far from the representation. It is about 'getting on' with it. One could argue from a Marxist perspective that the history of women's representations in popular culture is one of compromise and limitation imposed upon them by the logic of late capitalism. The recession has undermined some of the certainties that the Fordist settlement was founded on leading to fears surrounding the accessibility of the American Dream and the UK ideal that an Englishman's home is his castle. Some of these themes will be returned to in this book's final chapter. Sharp (2006:12) has referred to 'our culture's deep ambivalence and contradictory attitudes towards housewifery and the homemaker'. This seems to have been forcibly depicted as trivial and/or unsatisfying. Yet the post-industrial suburbs are increasingly under pressure calling into question their comfortable status. This confused stance, oscillating with sometimes sympathizing with the suburban female condition but more often seeing it as a source of laughs, only mirrors confused treatments of suburbia at large.

The suburbs have been variously seen as the territory of (i) idyllic family dreamhouses, (ii) horror-laden land of dark undercurrent and (iii) stomping ground for adolescent angst. Linking these portrayals has been the insistence on the norm of nuclear family revolving around the woman of the house left behind while the man is breadwinning in the big bad city. In this traditionally feminine space we have seen depictions of wifely suffering from suburban anomie when

reality does not live up to the promise. Yet suburbs do not stand still. The dual earner economy that requires two salaries even to buy modest property in once unremarkable suburbs thereby necessitating couples working round the clock, add up to a state of affairs whereby in many ways suburbia has gone from paradise to pressure cooker. Lone parent mothers too in suburbia also face the reality of what is termed the 'triple shift' combining paid employment as well as the expectation to perform housework and childcare which are both hugely time-consuming and totally unremunerated. The arrival of ethnic groups into the suburban mix is another shift into suburbia's presumed traditional form. This is turned to in the next chapter which shifts the focus to Asian suburban London.

Notes

- 1 The song is broadly empathetic of housewives conditions. Nonetheless, other songs of theirs of the same decade were less easy to sympathize with for their denigration of females, for example, the outright misogyny of 'Under My Thumb'.
- 2 Other examples of songs looking at 'women and suburban sadness' identified by Clapson (125) are Siouxsie and the Banshees' 'Suburban Relapse', Suede's 'The Power' and Marianne Faithful's 'The Ballad of Lucy Jordan', two of the three were performed by women and the third by Suede came from a group whose early appeal rested on lead-singer Brett Anderson's pronounced androgyny and links with the gay scene.
- 3 'Before Woman's Lib . . .' at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pq_9wu-KjTk.
- 4 This anecdote is both quoted in the DVD extra features of the first series and also at B. Weinraub (2004) 'How Desperate Women Saved Desperate Writer' 23 October 2011 in *New York Times* at: www.nytimes.com/2004/10/23/arts/television/23cher.html?_r=1&ref=bernardweinraub.
- 5 The episode 'My Husband the Pig' (series 3, episode 16, originally aired 3 April 2007) which is narrated by Brie's then-dead ex-husband Rex from beyond the grave.
- 6 Although one wonders with the combination of current savage cuts being inflicted on the higher education sector in the United Kingdom and the trebling of fees for students whether the discipline of womens studies can survive in its current form. Indeed there has already been a cutting back of such courses, see McRobbie (2008).