film urbia

Screening the Suburbs

Edited by David Forrest,
Graeme Harper and
Jonathan Rayner

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Editors

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David Forrest is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sheffield, School of English. He has published widely in the areas of British cinema and television drama research, with a particular interest in issues of class, region and nationhood. His first book was entitled *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics* (2013) and his current research project, a collaboration with Sue Vice, explores the work of the author and screen-writer Barry Hines.

Graeme Harper is Professor and Dean of the Honors College at Oakland University, Michigan, USA. He has held professorships in the UK, the USA and Australia, and been a research assessor for projects in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia and the USA. Publishing on film, new media technologies, medical humanities, history and creative and critical practice, he has also previously published, with Jonathan Rayner, on the nature of cinematic landscapes. He is also a fiction writer under his pseudonym Brooke Biaz. Brooke's latest work is *The Japanese Cook* (Parlor, 2017).

Rachel Joseph is an Assistant Professor at Trinity University. She earned her PhD in Drama from Stanford University. Her current book project, *Screened Stages: Representations of Theater Within Cinema*, analyzes filmic representations of theatre, theatricality and performance as they have occurred throughout the history of cinema. Her essays have been published in *Octopus: A Journal of Visual Studies* and *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. Her article, 'The Haunting: Screened Stages and Turbulent Collisions,' has recently been published by Performance Research. Other works, '"Eat My Fear": Corpse and Text in the Films and Art of David Lynch' and 'The Screened Stages of Slavjo Žižek: The Surplus of the Real', are forthcoming from *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* and *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies.*

Matthew Kerry 's research interests are primarily in British film and representations of leisure. He teaches film and media at Nottingham Trent University and at the University of Derby. He has spoken about British social realist films at the BFI for the organization *Inside Film* (2012) and

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Jonathan Rayner is Reader in Film Studies at the University of Sheffield, School of English. His research interests span Australasian cinema, genre films, auteur studies, naval and maritime films and the interaction of landscape and the moving image. His previous publications include *The Films of Peter Weir* (1998/2003), *Contemporary Australian Cinema* (2000), *The Naval War Film* (2007) and *The Cinema of Michael Mann* (2013). He is the co-editor of *Mapping Cinematic Norths* (2016) with Julia Dobson, and of *Cinema and Landscape* (2010) and *Film Landscapes* (2013), both co-edited with Graeme Harper.

Vincent Ros graduated with honours from the International Research Master program in Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Groningen, with a thesis on narrative complexity in film noir and contemporary cinema. He currently works as a research assistant and junior lecturer for the department of Arts, Culture and Media studies at the University of Groningen. His research focuses on the cognitive and hermeneutic dynamics of film interpretation and on questions of representation and authenticity in documentary.

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Rohini Sreekumar is pursuing her PhD from the School of Arts & Social Sciences at Monash University. She had her Master's Degree in Mass Communication and Journalism from Mahatma Gandhi University, India with a gold medal. Rohini is the recipient of National Merit Scholarship and Junior Research Fellowship from the University Grants Commission of

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John P. Taylor is a PhD student in English and Film Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His major research interest is in representations of conservatism in the film and television of the USA and their role in shaping political and national identity (either through identification or through opposition). More specifically, he has focused on the rise of Ronald Reagan and *new conservatism* in the 1970s and 1980s, through case studies of cultural icons ranging from Rambo to Rodney Dangerfield. His current research concerns movements and manifestations of independent conservative cinema in the USA, as well as the relationship of US cinema to suburban and rural locales.

Tom Ue was educated at Linacre College, University of Oxford, and at University College London, where he has worked from 2011 to 2016. His PhD examined Shakespeare's influence on the writing of George Gissing. Ue has held visiting fellowships at Indiana University, Yale University and the University of Toronto Scarborough, and he was the 2011 Cameron Hollyer Memorial Lecturer. He has published widely on Gissing, Conan Doyle, E. W. Hornung, and their contemporaries. Ue is the Frederick Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English at the University of Toronto Scarborough and an Honorary Research Associate at University College London.

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Introduction. Filmurbia: Cinema and the Suburbs

David Forrest, Graeme Harper, and Jonathan Rayner

This volume is devoted to discussions, debates and analyses of the cinematic suburb—the outer city, the urban edge field, the margins of metropolitan activity and existence that international film has mapped, defined, celebrated and denigrated across the full spectrum of realist, narrative, formalist, artistic, dramatic and documentary film. While film's unrivalled capability in the rendition of photographic reality might suggest the potential for socio-historical recording of the suburb's post-war development, the strength of its contribution lies more constructively within the socio-cultural construction and interpretation of the concept and experience of suburbia. Therefore the essays in this collection reflect not only the moving image's ability and responsibility to document and portray the burgeoning of outer city life since the mid-twentieth century: it also acknowledges and revels in cinema's capacity to interrogate, theorize and construct the suburb as a filmic and wider popular cultural concept—a filmurbia.

The modern cinema has always been intimately wedded to the modern city. In the allegorical and imaginative terms of, say, *Paris Qui Dort* (René Clair 1925), *Playtime* (Jacques Tati 1969) or *I am Legend* (Francis

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Lawrence 2007) and the immediate realist ones of *The Crowd* (King Vidor 1928), *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica 1948) or *Collateral* (Michael Mann 2004), the city has given to cinema some of its most enduring and epigrammatic renditions of modern experience as connective and communal, alienating and isolated, empowering and annihilating. If, therefore, the city becomes the cinematic zone of opportunity, the suburb suffers in comparison because of its connotations of conformity and retreat. If the city is an energetic, opportunistic attack, the suburb is a metaphorical and spatial surrender. However, if the cinematic city was built quickly as a site of capitalist aspiration and cultural conflict in gangster films such as *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman 1931), the suburb rapidly replaced it as the newly contestable terrain for generational schisms and social ruptures in teen films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray 1955). The post-war exodus to the suburbs in the USA did not simply signal a flight from an urban environment (perceived and portrayed as the crowded, unhealthy, crime-ridden living space of the lower class) to the space, affluence, safety and privacy of the extra-urban, or the substitution of high density, fast-paced urbanity for the supposed stasis and unvarying repetition of suburban life. It was the cinema's images and narratives that helped to contradict as much as concoct the notion of the suburb as a conservative setting, marked by political, behavioural and gender conservatism. While neither backward, rural backwater nor hectic, cut-throat metropolis, the suburb was not simply a location for the lassitude of middle-age and the middle class either. By the 1960s suburban narratives such as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols 1967) and *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry 1968) has become parables of the entrapment and emasculation of both youthful and mature American males alike (Beuka 2000: 14). Suburbia's distance from the city's centre of gravity could suggest dislocation, its affluence could imply insatiability, its privacy could become redolent of secrecy and deviance, and its very nondescript-ness assume the status of a universally relevant and all-encompassing representation of the vagaries of post-modern existence. Suburbia's supposed difference from the inner city, both in lived experience and pervasive cultural representation, may appear misleading or non-existent (McCarthy 1998). At the same time, despite the commonplace-ness of positive and negative stereotypes of suburbia these have not as yet amounted to a consistent critical inquiry and interpretation of the polarized concepts and value judgements which suburban life seems to inspire:

There remains limited sustained work done on the dialectics of the suburban cinematic utopia and dystopia. This is despite the fact that the topic—which has been of obvious interest to Hollywood since the 1950s—exploded during the 1990s to become a staple of contemporary Hollywood and of popular television—with films like *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir 1998), *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross 1998), *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes 1999), *The Stepford Wives* remake (Frank Oz 2004) and TV shows including *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–) and *Weeds* (2005–). A common critical response to works such as these is to lament the way that popular culture continues to peddle an overdetermined image of suburbia. (Perkins 2008)

These patterns retain their sway and significance in the vocalization of difference in ethnic, cultural or gendered terms even where a cinematic precedent might appear incongruous or inappropriate. For example Gurinder Chadra, director of feature films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), which examine the lives of contemporary Asian women, has identified *This Happy Breed* (David Lean 1944) as 'a major influence for its proto-typical, realist, inter-generational portrayal of British suburban family life'(Huq 2012: 6). Consequently one objective for the present volume must be the recognition of, as much as the raising of challenges to, such abiding frameworks for the articulation and meaning of filmurbias, in the minds of filmmakers and audiences alike.

When seeking a definition of the suburb it has been said that 'the rise of modern suburbia has ... been encouraged by the appeal of the suburban lifestyle, often characterized by an image of urbane society living graciously in an idyllic setting, where neighbourhoods of single-family houses on large, private lots are combined with convenient proximity to the city's business and employment opportunities and cultural attraction' (Columbia University 2016). Were such a description entirely accurate the suburbs would probably only be a foil for more energetic and interesting film-making occurring within cities and rural locations. In essence, filmurbia would be dull. Filmurbia would be the place of the mundanely gracious and the large, private yawn. Filmurbia would, of course, be an ideas wasteland. It would be an idyllic absence in our cinematic cultures, but in truth, none of this is the case.

The cinema of the suburbs delivers to us themes and subjects, stories and characters, attitudes and philosophies that are distinctive not only in their

suburban origins but also in their relationships with other themes and subjects, stories and characters, attitudes and philosophies that are presented more often in and about cities or the countryside. In this sense the films of the suburbs, and from suburbs, form the substance of a national cinema in a way that is distinguishing and significant, and yet so far rarely considered. Suburban film, we could say, grounds urban and rural film. We could even say that without suburban film, urban film and rural film could not fully function in terms of their common themes and subjects, their discourses, and their appeal to audiences. The suburb, as middle ground, as transitionary space, as familial home and frequently as contemporary reference for historical socio-economic context is at the core of how we relate to film itself.

Of course, this is a big claim. But consider that while we most often critically approach the suburbs by considering relatively contemporary phenomenon such as the invention and rise of the automobile, and changes in social demographics based on new and more pervasive forms of national global migration, and manifestations of commercial enterprise seeking space unavailable in built up cities, and even with changes in leisure patterns, suburbs are not a contemporary phenomenon. There were suburbs in the ancient world too. What *is* contemporary, however, is the way in which suburbs have been shaped and reshaped, particularly in the period corresponding interestingly with that encapsulating the invention of film and the emergence and spread of cinematic culture.

For this reason, it is possible to wonder, and perhaps even to claim, how suburban film is the reference point for film audiences and film-makers even when they are not watching or making films set in the suburbs or directly relating to the suburbs. By simple demographic trends, and here offered but unsubstantiated, it could be that the majority of those people in film audiences today know the suburbs better than they know the urban or rural areas around them. It could be too, and again this is a hypothetical suggestion, that the majority of film-makers are well aware their core market is made up of suburbanites and that while they might reference the city and the countryside in their films they must in some way relate these things to suburban ideals, to a suburban way of life.

If suburbs are therefore not only contemporary but also ancient, and if their contemporary guise is one in which just over a century of economic movements, new transport and communication technologies, and changes in migration patterns have coloured how we approach and view the world, then these changes have mapped exactly onto the birth and history film, and

thus have brought the suburban past into play with its distinctive present. With this in mind it might not be such a big claim after all to suggest that suburban film exists at the very core of film-making and film viewing.

Even if just potentially films of the suburbs and about the suburbs incorporate some core filmic values that cross boundaries of geography, narrative, subject or theme, and in that they represent notable human concerns, say in the developed world, and say to the portion of the population who are regularly film watchers, why then have we not yet widely critically explored manifestations of suburban film and made a case for its importance? That single question is what drove us, and our contributors, to create this book.

The reasons for the relative scarcity to date of critical exploration of suburban film are simple. They are fourfold. *Firstly*, while the suburbs might in many countries have the status of the population heartland it is the cities of those countries that have most iconic political, economic and architectonic strength. For example, while New York is both city and state, both urban and suburban, and its boroughs and neighbourhoods are globally known in themselves, it is still the concept of the city not that of the suburb that is primary in the political, economic and architectonic engagement with the nature, style and importance of New York. Even films that could be defined as suburban New York films are most often approached as films of a city. *Secondly*, even if the suburb is seen as the contemporary population heartland it is the countryside, the rural environment that is pictured as holding much of national history, national resource and established national identity. Much as the city and economic and political power are linked so rurality and history are strongly bonded and the suburb, as being neither one nor the other has been treated not as having elements of both but as having little of either. *Thirdly*, there is not entirely a critical consensus on exactly what constitutes a suburb. Opinions on this are most often determined by the disciplinary background of the opinion holder and often by the reasoning behind critically approaching a suburb in the first place. So, is it a physical entity or is it social area? If both, what determines the shape and weight of components in your definition? Is the suburb defined by its relationship to the city, on the one hand, and the countryside on the other? Or is a suburb a singular entity; a transitional space perhaps but not in fact 'the other' in a city-country split. Consensus has not yet been reached on such questions, if it ever will be. *Finally*, and this might only account for *some* absence of the critical absence, the suburbs are not natural homes to film genre that often rely on spectacle and excess. Where they are

depicted in, say, the thriller or the comedy or the pornographic film it is their shockingly ordinary conditions that are highlighted in order to make the thrill, the joke or the sexual encounter all the more astonishing. The suburb is thus treated as a foil not a focus, and it is not surprising therefore that it is the spectacle or the excessive that is focused upon critically rather than the supposed ordinariness of the suburban.

Critically, the idea of 'middle-ness' appears in an attempt to examine suburbia in a variety of notable ways, and often distracts from a deeper analysis. Middle-ness suggests a combination of inability to reach an agreed definition, ordinariness or the condition of being uninteresting, transitionary in the sense of only being on the way to something or somewhere else, and disengaged in being unable to reach beyond because of being embedded rather than at the edge. There is, of course, the geographic middles-ness already mentioned, the characteristics of the suburb being literally situated between the city and the countryside. This kind of middle is the middle depicted as not geographically central, the notion that the suburb can claim no power because of its location, even if it can claim the power of being home to much of the population. The suburb can perhaps also claim the middle of being middleclass—though this not a universal trait and in many ways ideas about the working-class suburb or industrial suburb or elite suburb are just as strong as that of being middle-class. Films set in or about the suburbs show that to be true also. And yet, there is an association of the suburban with the middleclass, not least in referring to the suggestion of suburbs representing 'an image of urbane society living graciously' (Columbia University 2016). Middle-ness also occurs in relation to the modern suburb in that you need to travel through it, often by automobile in the global context, in order to reach the wonders of what lies beyond. So not only is it the geographic middle it is the journey's middle, effectively a somewhere that is nowhere. In the suburbs you are not there yet. If you are in the suburbs you have barely begun, not reached your destination, failed to advance.

In looking at the cinema of the suburbs, much of the notion of middleness is challenged. The cinematic suburb is both pervasiveness of suburban representations and inherently malleable. Accordingly, our contributions are diverse and dynamic. Drawn from a range of geographical, methodological, and political perspectives, and focusing their analyses on examples of disparate aesthetic and formal strategies, the examinations of cinematic suburbs in this book are nevertheless united by an interest in the ways in which suburbia is imagined as a marker of quotidian iconography and

experience. To this end, we have sought to organize our chapters in sections that enable and encourage divergent but complementary definitions and applications of the suburb across multiple national boundaries.

The chapters in our first section, 'Suburban Realisms', are united by a shared examination of films and filmmakers that challenge and interrogate existing and deeply inculcated cultural narratives of suburban space, through a range of social and national contexts. They also explore in parallel the aesthetic traditions and significances of realism in the work of directors from varying film cultures, which in themselves respond to differing manifestations and interpretations of suburbia. John Taylor's work on Penelope Spheeris's challenging portraits of suburbia examines and celebrates the ways her early films offer resistance to dominant Reaganite idealizations of suburban space as rigidly familial and conformist. In directly invoking the rhetoric of Reagan-era Republicanism, and contrasting Spheeris's disconcertingly documentary realist approach with the neat narrative resolutions of John Hughes' contemporary teen dramas, Taylor throws into sharp relief the disturbance of form, content and ideology that the cinematic portrayal of suburbia can offer, even within one of the most conservative of decades of US film. Julia Dobson explores the Parisian banlieue on screen and looks beyond its political and, by extension, generic anchoring points, to explore divergent definitions of the outer city in French cultural and cinematic terms. In her analysis of two outstanding contemporary films, Celine Sciamma's *Girlhood* (2014) and Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* (2015), she identifies aesthetic strategies that acknowledge the sociological specificity of Parisian suburbs in contemporary French society, while also registering their transformative, lyrical potentials in terms of ethnicity and gender. The poetry of overlooked, every day and apparently mundane spaces also concerns David Forrest in his chapter on the films of the key realist filmmaker Mike Leigh. Forrest argues that the director's individualistic and sensitive approach to the portrayal and performance of the suburb offers a way of transforming this much-maligned space within the English imaginary.

The chapters of our second section, 'Suburban Nations' further probe the question of the suburb as a characteristic reflection of national identity and consensual ideology. In the formal and narrative norms of British social realism, Clive James Nwonka finds a problematic and politically conservative treatment of the iconic British council estate, wherein well-trodden generic and aesthetic strategies can be seen to perpetuate powerful discourses of abjection and marginalization. Like a number of our contributors, Nwonka suggests that generically hybrid texts, such as Joe Cornish's

Attack the Block (2011), offer more progressive means of articulating contested suburban spaces. Elizabeth Ellison's chapter on Australian cinema reminds us of the limitations of the town/country binary, exploring the ways in which the ambiguous space of the beach, so prominent within the Australian cultural imaginary, functions to produce a very different kind of suburbia. As a distinctive and culturally specific construction of the peripheral city space or extra-urban environment, and one defined for and by extra-curricular activities, the Australian beach represents a unique manifestation of the suburb which, as Ellison observes, can nonetheless become inflected and articulated cinematically by mainstream generic mores. In the final entry in this section, Tom Ue's work on David Bezmozgis' portraits of suburban Toronto draws on a recent interview with the filmmaker himself and examines the ways in which the cinematic suburb is both familiarly foregrounded as a platform of escape and embedded within specific, localized geographies. Within the Canadian societal and film cultural context, Bezmozgis discusses the particular interplay of film production and environmental change as manifested in his films shot in Toronto.

In the third section, 'Slumurbia and Social Order', the documentary examination and formal representation of existence inside the underclass suburbia of the slum unites our next three contributions, despite their geographical, cultural and temporal divergences. Annelies van Noortwijk and Vincent Ros concentrate in detail on Leonard Retel Helmrich's trio of documentaries on the Sjamsuddin family of the Jakartan slums. They unearth within these films a sensitive and responsible record of a rich 'living landscape', which also provides a much-needed, individually focused human rendering of marginalized spaces and their inhabitants that are all too often dismissed or homogenized. The authors show how these films' unique representation of the familial and wider cultural life of the Jakarta *kampong* grows organically from the film-maker's carefully evolved shooting style. Similarly, Sony Jalarajan Raj and Rohini Sreekumar's chapter on the cinematic representation of Dharavi in Mumbai challenges limited imaginations of this frequently represented environment, by contrasting the depictions of Bollywood productions with those of Western film-makers' approaches to the area. The divergences discernible within national and international depictions of the Mumbai slums underline and parallel the contradictions that lie behind the modernization and urbanization of India as a whole. In the third chapter in this section, Albert Elduque transports us to the Colombia of the 1960s and the films of Jorge Silva. Elduque's rich, wide-ranging account of Silva's films shows the ways in which surrealist and more

figuratively concerned aesthetic strategies (such as the apparent influence of Italian Neo-Realism upon the director's films) can work to register the multiple layers and textures of marginalized suburbia within culturally specific and individually pursued documentary subjects.

Our fourth section, 'Suburban Genres' begins by returning to the subject of the Parisian banlieue. Within her chapter, Janina Schupp takes a complementary approach to Julia Dobson's contemporary environmental and cultural focus by adopting a selective historical and thematic perspective. She reconsiders the filmic suburb from the point of view of its manifestation of industrialization and art, and as tangible signifier of architectural, leisure and gang cultures. While the French suburb seems to contain within it a set of recurring generic expectations, the same might also be said of the Australian suburbs that concern Jonathan Rayner in his chapter. Rayner's analysis of the gothic tendency within Australian cinema moves us away from its more familiar associations with nature, the rural community and outback environment to find—through deliberate intertextual dialogue with Hollywood cinema and its categorizations of suburbia—a distinctive suburban articulation of Australian horror. Matthew Kerry offers our third essay in this section on suburban genres with a focus on post-war Britain, and finds in the films of the Children's Film Foundation a number of hitherto unrealized progressive qualities. Kerry's consideration of indicative examples of this distinctive thread of British film shows how, with their production spanning the decades of post-war urban rebuilding, the CFF's films were able to respond to and record an unrepeated era of national youth experience, geographical reconstruction and cultural change.

Perhaps fittingly we conclude with our fifth section, 'Suburban Imaginaries', that is dedicated to examples drawn from US cinema. Graeme Harper uses the contested representation of Detroit to explore suburban film as a 'cinema of proximity', revealing in the process the intersections between our lived experiences of suburban spaces and our cultural familiarity with Hollywood's selective or skewed treatment of them. Our final two chapters, by Cody Lang and Rachel Joseph respectively, take as their starting points canonic suburban films: for Lang, the cinema of Douglas Sirk, and for Joseph, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999). These films and filmmakers perhaps represent the most immediate and influential answers to the question of the representation of the US suburb, contemporarily and retrospectively. Lang shows us how the suburbia that so fascinated Sirk can be retrospectively reread (and reclaimed) as a queer space. In relation to Lynch's famous and disturbing

exploration of a deliberately timeless, supposedly harmless environment, Joseph's application of the concept of the Lacanian Real is similarly disruptive, identifying the moments of 'eruptions of violence and desire' that undercut our expectations of order in the US suburb. The acknowledgement of entirely different readerly responses to the definitive depictions of 1950s suburbia in Lang's consideration of Sirk, and the revelation of suburb's role as an acted, thought and read location of unsettling national and psychological undercurrents in Joseph's interpretation of Lynch, both conclude and exemplify the cinema's potent ability to construct parallel and overlapping suburban psycho-geographical and profilmic spaces. If suburbia implicitly acknowledges and is defined against the urban and the rural, then filmurbia, epitomized by these examples and explored by all our contributors, drifts and plays inventively, generically, historically and culturally, as well as cinematically.

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Suburban Realisms

'Society Stinks': Suburban Alienation and Violence in the Early Films of Penelope Spheeris

John Taylor

Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign ad, 'Prouder, Stronger, Better,' is better known by the slogan it popularized: 'It's morning again in America' (Medvic 2013). The gentle but masculine narrator speaks these words as the commercial opens on a montage of an urban centre at dawn, alive with economic activity: well-dressed men and women going to work, boats pulling into a harbour. But shortly after these images of industrial economic revival the scene shifts to a suburban landscape. A paperboy bikes down a verdant, tree-lined sidewalk, and a man in a suit walks to his car, bound, presumably, for the prosperous urban centre we just saw. We see a station wagon pulling up to a stately suburban home, where a father and son carry a rug into their impressive new house. Over this activity, the narrator proudly boasts '2000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future.' Suburban homeownership, material consumption, and the nuclear family are situated at the centre of not only an economic revival, but also a spiritual renaissance (Prouder, Stronger, Better 1984).

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In her 1983 film *Suburbia*, Penelope Spheeris presents suburban imagery of another kind. Two teens, Evan Johnson and Jack Diddly, ride in a rusted Ford past decaying houses, failing businesses, and dead grass. Evan reads an entry from his mother's diary, dated 1968, it reads: 'Mark and I are going to be very happy here. The air is clean, the sky is blue, and the houses are all brand new and beautiful . . . Suburbia is a great place for children.' Jack rips the diary from Evan's hands and throws it out the window of the moving car, its scattered pages joining the rest of the trash strewn about the streets. Produced within months of each other, *Suburbia* and 'Prouder, Stronger, Better' offer contradictory views of suburban life. One is presented as evidence of an economic and spiritual revival; the other preserves a record of unfulfilled promises and social self-destruction. At a time when Reaganism turned to suburbia as a place of refuge and renewal, and Hollywood turned to it as a source comic relief and social reparation, Spheeris's suburban films tell a counter-narrative that points to suburbia as the locus of social decay and violence.

Spheeris was born and raised in California's Orange County, the birthplace of US suburbia as well as Reaganism.[1] Her unique trajectory as a filmmaker began at UCLA, where as a student from 1968 to 1972 she made films that critiqued social indifference and authoritarianism; as well as radical films documenting the lives of transgender and queer people in southern California.[2] In the 1980s Spheeris began to direct feature-length films, beginning in 1981 with *The Decline of Western Civilization*, a documentary concerning the punk rock scene in southern California. After *Decline*, she went on to produce a number of films about young suburban men, showcasing the potentials for frustration and violence in the space that Reaganism posited was key to the stability and survival of the US economy and the US dream (Cole and Dale 1993: 216–217). Her two earliest feature films, *Decline* and *Suburbia*, serve as powerful counter-narratives that resist the dominant conception of suburban existence in the early 1980s.

The Decline of Western Civilization is possessed of a triumphal irony, a gleeful schadenfreude at the exhaustion of the myth of suburban utopia. *Western Civilization* seems to imply the idyllic future of the American morning, as well as the bucolic suburbia of Hollywood filmmakers such as John Hughes, whose teenage rites of passage would become inscribed as a dominant image of US suburbia. While Reagan and Hughes looked to suburbia as the insurer of continuity and social reparation, Spheeris's suburbia situates the conditions of suburban existence as an obstacle to stability and social understanding, and produces teens who refuse to participate in its

continuity. The film is composed of concert footage as well as interviews with fans, bands, and important figures in the Southern California punk rock scene between December 1979 and May 1980. While the film is shot primarily in colour, Spheeris's interviews with teenage punk rock fans take on an almost clinical tone, shot in black and white against a pale backdrop. The teens' voices echo as though in a doctor's examination room. The film opens on one such interview with a teen named Eugene, a skinny youth with a shaved head wearing military fatigues who says he loves punk rock because 'It's not bullshit. There are no rock stars.'

Then, the music begins. The camera is immersed within a frenetic crowd, jostled back and forth by a mass of indistinguishable limbs smashing against one another in extreme close-up. The camera slowly pulls back far enough to allow the viewer to see that the mass is made up of a multitude of individual bodies, but never ceases to be violently jerked back and forth. Spheeris situates us within the crowd, forcing us to experience its violence. It is only after we have been positioned within the crowd that the camera reveals the band, who are playing a mid-tempo song that sounds almost bored with itself, and it is this boredom that incongruously gives rise to the violence and rage of the crowd.[3] As the opening credits run, we see a montage of faces in the crowd that alternately mug for or scowl at the camera, ambivalent toward the idea of their visibility. The film then cuts from the darkness of the club to the hazy daylight, where club owner Brendan Mullen appears on a high cliff overlooking a smog-covered sprawl, with the L.A. skyline visible in the distance. He explains that violence inevitably attends the performance of punk rock. 'Nowadays I think the kids are more desperate, or more bored. Yelling about how the air in utopia is poisoned,' he says as he gestures to the landscape below, in a shot that symbolically links industrial pollution, suburban expansion and teen violence. These opening scenes set the stage for the rest of the film, which reveals punk rock and its culture as the products of a growing fury that lurks beneath the façade of prosperity.

The film has drawn criticism from some of the fans and musicians featured in it.[4] In an interview, John Doe, a member of the band X, remarked, 'the movie didn't show the true picture of the Los Angeles scene at the time. Penelope was very selective in the bands that she chose … she picked all the really hardcore bands, the element coming out of Huntington Beach,[5] and everyone in the original scene hated that crowd because it was all about uniformity and pointless violence' (Spitz and Mullen 2001: 263). Such criticisms assume that Spheeris was attempting a comprehensive artistic

assessment of punk rock during this period, when in fact her film is more poignant as an index of teen alienation and societal disintegration.

Huntington Beach, maligned in the quote above, is one of Orange County's largest suburbs and Spheeris's hometown, and her films reveal a pervasive fascination and obsession with the suburban milieu in which she was raised, and its many contradictions. While its assessment of the southern California punk scene may not be comprehensive, *Decline* makes a desperate social condition visible and in doing so upsets the sense of ease that was so important to the suburban renaissance depicted in 'Prouder, Stronger, Better.' Jacques Rancière's conception of 'consensus' helps us understand this presentation of social ease as an effort to 'dismiss politics by expelling surplus subjects and replacing them with real partners' (Rancière 2010: 71). The suburban renaissance of the Reagan Revolution renders invisible the violent and alienated teens of Spheeris's suburbia, and in doing so renders invisible the possibility of suburban failure. The teens featured in *Decline* are depicted (through their unacceptability and unwillingness to accept) as outside the capabilities of consensus or reparative relationships, thus forcing a Rancièrean politics (a politics of social difference) upon suburbia. The conditions of suburban living, it is revealed, are the source of these pathologies, making the milieu itself not a locus of reparation but an obstacle to it.

If the film did upset certain elements within the L.A. punk scene it may have been because of the ambivalent picture Spheeris presents. While Spheeris does not condemn her subjects, she certainly does not flatter them. Punk rock's nobler virtues—anti-authoritarianism, individual autonomy, progressivisim—are displayed alongside its most pernicious vices: homophobia, misogyny, occasional Nazism, and senseless violence. The film does not tell us that punk is any one of those things, but shows us that the scene and its constituents are characterized by these contradictions. Spheeris's interviews with individual teens demonstrate the way in which the suburban milieu contributes to a sense of confusion and contradiction that ends inevitably in violence. Eugene says, '[my aggression] comes from living in this city, and seeing all the ugly, old people, and the buses, and just the dirt ... That's what I see all the time, I'm just fucking bummed. So when I go to [to punk rock shows] I can get out some aggression maybe by beating up some asshole.' While at first glance the punk rock show appears as a therapeutic catharsis, it is in fact is self-destructive, a therapy that is never intended to resolve. As Jennipher puts it, 'It seems like crowds they'll be dancing and then they'll start punching and going back and forth ... and then you can't dance.' Spheeris's teens describe an unbreakable cycle of