CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: IN PRAISE OF BABBITTRY. SORT OF. SPATIAL PRACTICES IN SUBURBIA

Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontiers*, one of the key histories of American suburbia, marshals a fascinating array of evidence from sociology, geography, real estate literature, union membership profiles, the popular press and census information to represent the American suburbs in terms of population density, home-ownership, and residential status. But even as it notes that "nothing over the years has succeeded in gluing this automobile-oriented civilization into any kind of cohesion – save that of individual routine," Jackson's comprehensive history under-analyzes one of its four key suburban traits – the journey-to-work.[1] It is difficult to account for the paucity of engagements with suburban transportation and everyday experiences like commuting, even in excellent histories like Jackson's. In 2005, the average American spent slightly more than twenty-five minutes per day commuting, a time investment that, over the course of a year, translates to more time commuting than he or she will likely spend on vacation.[2] Highway-dependent suburban sprawl perpetually moves farther across the map in search of cheap available land, often moving away from both traditional central

[1] In the introduction, Jackson describes journey-to-work's place in suburbia with average travel time and distance in opposition to South America (home of siestas) and Europe, asserting that "an easier connection between work and residence is more valued and achieved in other cultures" (10).

[2] One 2003 news report calculates the commuting-to-vacation ratio at 5-to-4: "Americans spend more than 100 hours commuting to work each year, according to American Community Survey (ACS) data released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. This exceeds the two weeks of vacation time (80 hours) frequently taken by workers over the course of a year" ("Americans Spend").

cities and newer, suburban Edge City nodes. Indeed, the United States Census Bureau now gathers information of "extreme commuters" – those who spend at least ninety minutes per day commuting. The suburban character of the United States – a majority-suburban nation since 1990 – explains in large part how Americans can find extended commutes so common that David Givins, winner of Midas Muffler's 2005 contest to find America's longest commute, can express *surprise* that his 372 mile round trip took the prize.[3] Though he is an extreme example, Givins embodies the physical and discursive subjugation of transportation to business and *especially* housing that the suburbs demand. But suburbs hold more than tract houses and office parks. The post-War pursuit of the American Dream gains its increased suburban house privacy by inflating work time with longer commutes. And while the auto-based journey-to-work is definitively suburban, the suburbs depend on and demand auto-based transportation in general to shore up their everyday life, making the experience of transit a substantial part of the suburban experience of space and time. But exactly what do suburbanites *do* as they drive through the suburbs every day?

The Trouble With All-Consuming Babbittry

In this dissertation I argue that the experience of the space and time between origin and destination is never empty or insignificant in its planning or its use, even in goal-oriented realist narratives. In *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, Franco Moretti traces travel itineraries in the natural and built environment in

[3] Gary Richards' 4 May 2005 *Seattle Times* article, "Your Commute Is Bad? Try 186 Miles Each Way" tells Givins' story. In terms of suburbanization, the US went from 25% suburban in the 1950s to more than a third suburban in the 1960s.

Mary Mitford's work to show that fictional narratives are symptomatic of contemporary conceptions of social morphology.[4] In the walks through the countryside that Mitford describes in *Our Village*, for example, Moretti notes that the "'rough circle…in which the villagers work and move' is rewritten as a space of leisure rather than work. Slow easy strolls, thoughtless, happy, in the company of a greyhound called May; all around, a countryside full of picturesque natural views, but where very few people are actually doing anything" (39). In works pitched to relatively comfortable urban middle-class readers of the nineteenth century, the spatial uses and meanings of agricultural lands are re-imagined and colonized for urban leisure. Moretti's insight that the rural England of *Our Village* "has been thoroughly gentrified; as if Mitford had traveled forward in time, and discovered what city-dwellers will want to find in the countryside during a brief weekend visit" (42) locates the generation of meaning in the experience of passing through space – not only in terms of the person moving, but also in terms of the shifting identities and uses of the space through which that person moves. Barbara Eckstein's perceptive reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the introduction to *Story and Sustainability* locates the ways literary representations of space and the people in it can productively unsettle strategic views of that space. In one compelling sentence she reveals the spatial critique embedded in Ellison's novel:

> [the] man with the cart full of blueprints acts as a metonym for the burden borne by the poorest (chronically, minority) urban residents, who disproportionately have carried the weight of all the social reforms and

[4] Moretti does so to argue for maps as key to literary studies. My interest in this project is less overtly cartographic. What *does* interest me is the representation of the experience of space and time between suburban origins and destinations – a space contemporary American maps usually represent as a red or blue line, not as a collection of sensory experiences.

> urban renewal projects meant to manage their lives, and of all the wasteful economies designed to benefit other people elsewhere. (2)

In much the same way that Moretti argues that the lack of visible work in Mitford's representations of walks figures the rural as leisure rather than work space, Eckstein locates the wages of urban planning within the historical context of early-post-War "renewal" programs in marginalized places like Harlem. Eckstein and Moretti track space by not only reading the first, literal, layer of spatial representation, but also by reading the second layer of representation about space. Mitford describes a rural setting where little work is done: her city readers understand the country as vacation space for them, not agricultural land for farmers. Urban renewal as a systemic failure drives Eckstein's analysis: A man pushes a shopping cart through Harlem, a cart that holds a discarded version of Harlem in the form of discredited blueprints that did not achieve their desired ends. Imagining a future with a different, non-suburban development pattern – whether it more closely resembles Peter Calthorpe's transit-oriented development or the New Urbanists[5] or some other model – begins with a reconsideration of everyday suburban spatial practices like the experience of transit during the commute.[6]

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[5] See Peter Calthorpe's *The Next American Metropolis* and Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck's *Suburban Nation*, as well as the Congress for New Urbanism's *Charter of the New Urbanism.*

[6] With *Story and Sustainability's* investment in praxis in mind, such attention to community organizing proposal-writing narratives makes sense, especially since a some contributors are not trained in the humanities. However, Eckstein's reading of *Suburban Nation* – "Duany et al. have lost me as a conscriptee [to the New Urbanist cause] because I have lived my life in strict avoidance of auto traffic jams. I will walk a mile – two – to work or wait with equanimity for a bus, train, or plane, but I will not take a job, home, or vacation that puts me in an auto traffic jam (32) – trades the force of her symptomatic reading of *Invisible Man* for smug personal virtue. This unsatisfying argument by anecdote trade-off occurs throughout the collection, which, as I hope this project shows, is unnecessary when American film and literature present such a variety of engagements with the unsustainability of suburbia.

I begin with Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel *Babbitt* for its consistent interest in representing the emergence and solidification of the suburban-American way of life as discourse and as built environment. *Babbitt* and Babbittry have become a shorthand for the conformism of thought and consumption that remade the ideological and visual identity of America into a suburban nation. In general, in histories such as Elizabeth Stevenson's *Babbitts and Bohemians: The American 1920s*, "the timid likemindedness of Babbittry" represents "a numerous, shallow, widespread type of American businessman, an eager, persistent, and inescapable type" associated with the suburbs (Stevenson 186, 101).[7] The majority of histories of the growth of the American suburb deploy *Babbitt* as a negative example within their critique. *Crabgrass Frontiers* concludes a section on the growing necessity of private motor cars in the suburbs as early as the 1920s by invoking *Babbitt* as a definitively suburban literary example (161). John Stilgoe's *Borderlands: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939*, maps an especially dim view of suburbia's car-centered ideology and morphology onto *Babbitt*, "a long novel ordered about the narrow life of a real estate developer" (287). Stilgoe rightly notes that *Babbitt* represents suburbia's blithe disregard for the nature it claims to make accessible by destroying natural landscape contours and flora to build highways. Robert Fishman's seminal *Bourgeois Utopias* positions Babbitt as a key type in the changing appearance of America through suburbanization, going so far as to claim that Babbitt's layout of a new subdivision encapsulates the main shortcoming of suburbanization:

[7] In *Babbitt*, Stevenson writes, Sinclair Lewis "made the shapes of these lives cruelly visible, showed their sharp corners, their angles, their sparse limitations, the way of people in a new society, lonely and rattling about upon their large continent, huddled together in sudden new towns, how they talked, moved about" (101). Mencken does note that the South before mass air conditioning, however, was not amenable to Babbittry.

> this group of bureaucrats and Babbitts has, as collective regional designers, been far more revolutionary in the replacement of traditional urban form than any purported architectural avant-garde. (xii)

Stevenson, Jackson, Stilgoe, and Fishman deploy Babbitt as the embodiment of consumption habits that found a home in towns that physically and discursively bridged the rural and the urban. In addition to the middlebrow go-along consumerist attitude Lewis ironizes in *Babbitt,* these histories describe the suburbs as the spread of parcels of ersatz-rural domestic bliss very much distinct from the hustle-bustle of the business-oriented city. One strong undercurrent to the history of suburbia bemoans the wages of expanding the suburban form across the country, confronting this expansion as buildings that spread like fungus – houses followed by strip malls and office parks – rather than in terms of the continued expansion of the transportation infrastructure – the network of interstate highways that link those buildings.[8]

By using Babbittry as a term of dismissal, critics who rightly decry the wages of sprawl evacuate the novel – and the suburban way of life it describes – of its complexity of experience, oversimplifying suburbanites by confining them to offices and houses that are homes only to anti-intellectualism and go-along consumerism. Such a totalizing

[8] Critiques of traffic and auto-dependence are not rare – see *Asphalt Nation* and *Still Stuck in Traffic* and Tom Vanderbilt's *Traffic* for examples from the mass-market press. In literary studies, a series of excellent critical accounts of film and literature in the suburbs – Jurca's *White Diaspora*, Hoberek's *Twilight of the Middle Class*, Graham Thompson's *Business of America*, Boozer's *Career Movies*, Beuka's *SuburbiaNation* – retain the home-work distinction of the separate spheres model – the in-between-ness is mostly figurative. Hoberek's, Thompson, and Boozer are about the suburban experience of work at work and sometime at home. Jurca and Beuka deal with how home life and work life inform and feed each other as distinct experiences. But none of them dedicate more than a paragraph or two to a world beyond and between the two spheres – one example might be leisure, and another might be transit. The in-between space of transit is a figurative and literal expression of the blind spots in the separate spheres model, and a trans-regional way of analyzing American culture at its borders.

approach not only ignores the increasing diversity in suburbia over the decades since *Babbitt* appeared – in terms of class, race, and sexualities – but also neglects the time suburbanites must spend in transit, a time and space that reveals that critical interventions with the suburban built environment and its ideologies take place not only in home and work spaces, but also in the in-between spaces of a transportation infrastructure that connects suburb to city, suburb to suburb, and suburbanites to American culture. Luckily, because it pointedly represents not only the forces of consumerism but also the in-between *spaces* that drive real-world sprawl at a very early point in their development (before the post-War interstate highway system, the GI Bill, VA housing loans, and so on), *Babbitt* can help us begin to trace a path for critical interventions in representations of sprawl and suburbia beyond attacks on consumption.

Babbitt and other suburbanites have other habits besides consumption, notably the increased need for transportation to and from work and leisure. The distances covered in the home-work-leisure tripod were far shorter for Babbitt than for post-War suburbanites – consider, for example, the model Ernest Burgess uses to describe urban form in the 1920s: rings. The farthest-out zone Burgess describes, Zone V, the Commuters Zone, is home to residents of places like George Babbitt's fictional Floral Heights and suburbs like Oak Park (11 miles to downtown Chicago) and Cicero (9 miles). In the subsequent eighty-plus years, metropolitan regions have sprawled ever-further from city centers. Much has changed since Burgess's and Babbitt's 1920s; by the late 1990s, "instead of having one or two rings of suburban decline like Minneapolis, Chicago has over seven rings of declining suburbs on its south side, five to the west, and a thin ring of social

change to the north" (Orfield 160).[9] Tripling the distance between city and suburb does not necessarily triple transit time – not only do jobs follow populations to what Joel Garreau calls Edge Cities, but limited-access highways and commuter rails ensure easy, quick access to the jobs that remain in the central city – but it does increase the amount of space passed through (in time) in the everyday experience of what it is to be a suburbanite. In this dissertation, I rehabilitate "Babbittry" as a new term for a spatial practice – a (sometimes) critical engagement with the built environment during transit, an engagement that makes possible not only a reconsideration of the naturalness and inevitability of continued suburbanization.

The *Babbitt*-suburbs-consumerism syllogism is so strong that Robert Beuka, surveying the suburban landscape in *SuburbiaNation*, argues that *Babbitt*, "despite its indelible sendup of suburban manners…provides little sense of a national landscape in transition, which was as much the case in the 1920s as it would be again in the post-World War II years," because of the power of its investment in a critique of the "banal world of convention and creature comforts" to the exclusion of any other realm (25). Lewis's representation of Babbitt's tour of suburban Floral Heights in the novel's first quarter reveals an essential tool to undoing the literal and discursive damage consumer-driven sprawl creates by representing the role increased transit through the region plays in the creation of suburban identity and ideology. That is, while *Babbitt* may offer an extended treatment of the worst sort of consumerist, uncritical acceptance of de-urbanization, suburbanization, sprawl, and environmental exploitation and destruction,

[9] Sprawl progressively adds new rings of commuter zones, extending into towns like Carpentersville (39 miles, major expansion in the 1950s) and Gurnee (45 miles, major expansion in the 1990s).

George F. Babbitt's spatial practices – his everyday interactions with Zenith's built environment – do not necessarily or ineluctably lead to consumerism and sprawl.[10] Instead, Babbitt's spatial practices reveal the potential for a larger reconsideration of suburban form and ideology, a re-examination that can occur most fruitfully within the common and yet, in studies of suburbia, mostly unexamined time and space of transit.

Babbitt uses the quotidian dread of getting out of bed, marital squabbles, parenting gaffes, and closely-observed trips to work in its first quarter to sketch ironically a day in the life of a representative suburbanite, George F. Babbitt, a man H.L. Mencken called "America incarnate" (120). In the first two chapters of the novel, Lewis exhaustively represents the banal everyday activities in the Babbitt house, pointedly condensing the suburban way of life into the behaviors that occupy the Babbitts' morning routines. Gerard Genette calls this approach, "in which a single narrative assertion covers several recurrences of the same event or, to be more precise, of several analogical events considered only with respect to what they have in common," an iterative narrative ("Order" 32). As an iterative narrative, chapter 2 of *Babbitt* makes clear that George *always* sees the paper before Myra, and that Tinka *always* uses too much sugar (17). Everyday moments such as breakfast and the journey to work rarely appear in literary and film narratives because they have little to do with the achievements of a goal-oriented character – they get between a conflict and its resolution. The careful description of the time and space of Babbitt's morning routine hints that these actions are, in fact, key to Babbitt overcoming the obstacles he faces, in large part because they resemble what

[10] The problems of suburban life and ideology that Lewis satirizes (and so many critics bemoan) already have quite clear recognizable names – consumerism and anti-intellectualism, for example – so I will use those when appropriate.

Genette calls pseudo-iterative narratives, which offer "such a wealth of precise detail that no reader can seriously believe that they could have taken place repeatedly in this way, without variations" ("Order" 33). A rarity such as Myra seeing the paper first – "In twenty-three years of married life, [she] had seen the paper before her husband just sixty-seven times" (Lewis 17) – bears mentioning; but Lewis makes clear over and over how "familiar" and unmistakably routine Babbitt's commute actually is.[11] The presumption of suburban banality explains this zero point – the precision of detail in Babbitt's commute, as well as his brief but densely described three-block trip to the club, runs counter to the vision of suburbia as a house-centered space located within a cloud of placelessness, especially when suburbia becomes "America incarnate" in the post-War era.[12] But the suburbs are never so boring as their critics believe. Babbitt's extensively described commute appears as a pseudo-iterative narrative par excellence, since previous experience with suburban narratives teaches that no commuting trip "could have taken place repeatedly in this way, without variations" as it does for Babbitt. Home, for Babbitt, and for suburbanites in general, is not the house in Floral Heights, nor even the office in Zenith, but rather the in-between space of the roads and highways. Babbitt is never more suburban, for good and ill, than when he is on the road, interacting with his fellow suburbanites and his built environment. In his car, Babbitt is "the perfect office-going executive….in him some genius of authentic love for his neighborhood, his city, his clan" (Lewis 24). Though his house is not a home, Babbitt is very much at home in

[11] The Babbitt morning routine is an iterative narrative to the extent that Myra has seen the paper first a statistically insignificant .7% of the time throughout her marriage.
[12] See, for example, James Howard Kunstler's anti-suburban polemics *The Geography of Nowhere, Home from Nowhere*, Lewis Mumford's suburbanization/conurbation critique in *The City in History*, and Jane Jacobs' preference for the character of cities as opposed to suburban "characterlessness" in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

his car, looking out with more than consumerist interest on Zenith's suburbanizing built environment every day.

The critical potential in Babbitt's experience of transit and the built environment accrues throughout the "day in the life" iterative narrative that opens the novel. The first page of the novel, like a cinematic establishing shot, sketches Zenith as made of "towers of steel and limestone…shining new houses…[and] lines of men with lunch boxes clumped toward the immensity of new factories" in "a city built – it seemed – for giants" (Lewis 1). After this brief strategic view of the area, Zenith's ironic "giant," George Babbitt, appears and moves about tactically. The textual break between sections I and II of the first chapter shifts to Babbitt's pseudo-iterative narrative, and the novel remains focalized through Babbitt until the end of chapter seven, when Lewis once again looks out over Zenith as informed by the people and ideas with whom Babbitt interacted during his daily peregrinations, people and ideas who are not uniformly kindly disposed to suburban – that is, consumerist, anti-intellectual, conformist – Zenith. However, in all his trips throughout Zenith-Floral Heights, Babbitt does not deflate or ironize the built environment; rather, he animates it through his experiences of the time and space of *all* of Zenith, including not only its houses and businesses, but also its connecting streets. Babbitt's various trips tie the town together to the extent that Section V in chapter seven ends the first day of the novel's story by breaking away from Babbitt to once again represent an image of Zenith, only now as a series of tactical, lived experiences. Lewis moves from the Babbitt-centered narrative to a montage of Zenith *after* Babbitt's everyday experience of interacting with the built environment during his morning

commute and lunch break makes Floral Heights and Zenith familiar, arguing for a textual reading that critically engages the experience of transit.

After more than eighty pages of a narrative intensely concentrated on Babbitt, Lewis sketches a few brief vignettes of the rest of the town, connecting Babbitt not only to consumption, but also to an ideology that understands consumption as the key to the pacification and control of Floral Heights. For example, during a conversation between Seneca Doane, "the radical lawyer," and Dr. Kurt Yavitch, Doane plays booster to the charms of American suburbia in terms of standardization of consumer objects like engines and housing: "Standardization is excellent *per se*," he says,

> I remember once in London I saw a picture of an American suburb, in a toothpaste ad on the back of the *Saturday Evening Post* –an elm-lined snowy street of these new houses, Georgian some of 'em, or with low raking roofs and – The kind of street you'd find here in Zenith, say in Floral Heights. Open. Trees. Grass. And I was homesick! There's no other country in the world that has such pleasant houses. And I don't care if they *are* standardized. It's a corking standard! (Lewis 89)

Doane, Babbitt's beau ideal for rebellion through much of the novel, makes the case for suburbia as a home for high-quality standardized commodities while completely de-coupling those commodities from a way of thinking. In this regard, Doane lets slip the ways in which consumption can trap both "middle-road liberals" (as Yavitch describes him) and "revolutionist[s]" in suburbia. For all the local concern over socialist agitator Doane, his love of the view of suburban housing from an assembly-line car points to the obvious form of mass-produced consumption; similarly Yavitch's desire for bootlegged alcohol equally commodifies anti-suburban dissent. In other words, consumption generates a suburban cage of gilded bars. As Guy Debord writes, "Everyday life, policed and mystified by every means, is a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern

society running without understanding it" (qtd. in Macdonald 73).[13] However, a change in spatial practices can re-imagine the geography of the reservation.

Far more than merely representing the movement between house and office, *Babbitt* places Babbitt's experience of the time and space of transit at the center of its ironic vision of suburbia as more than the product of simple consumerism. Later in the novel, Babbitt certainly takes an interest in Tanis Judique, Zenith's bohemian set, and Seneca Doane's flavor of socialism, which leads Catherine Jurca to note that that Babbitt "is not so much alienated from his labor as from his house, which is to say, that while he never stops working, he does run away from home" (53). The novel's accomodationist ending – Babbitt was only dabbling – certainly invites (and validates) such a reading.[14] However, the novel's primary introduction into what it means to live in the suburbs – nearly its first third – does not find Babbitt running away from home into the melodrama of a clumsy affair, or even into fumbling political action. Rather, in the novel's first third, Babbitt distances himself literally and figuratively from twenty pages of commodity-centered domestic space through seven pages of pleasant, refreshing, everyday commuting between house and office.[15] Lewis's representation of the commute

[13] To adapt Soja's terminology to Debord, escaping the reservation occurs in Firstspace and Secondspace: "The most general goal must be to extend the nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible. One could speak of our action as an enterprise of quantitatively increasing human life" (qtd. in Macdonald 80), or, as Soja would have it, Thirdspace.

[14] Georg Lukács, in section II of *Theory of the Novel* section II, uses the term "novel of education." From this starting point, Kristin Ross deploys the term "novel of accommodation" (135-8).

[15] Cameron Hawley's *Executive Suite*, a business novel that lavishes attention on boardroom behavior, shows middle management figure Don Walling's dedication to his job by omitting transit – Walling has almost no existence outside of business spaces. Chapters begin, "As Don Walling entered the black marble lobby of the Tredway

equates excitement and escape with the very process of getting to work – "The office was his pirate ship but the car his perilous excursion ashore. Among the tremendous crises of *each day* none was more dramatic than starting the engine" (Lewis 21 emphasis mine). After a morning of dealing with the consumerism of his house, "The familiarity of the rite," that is, commuting, as well as the signal landmark of the "tall red iron pump, the hollow-tile and terra-cotta garage" fortifies Babbitt much as it does Nick Carraway (Lewis 24-5 emphasis mine). For Babbitt, the "soft" domestic interactions and arguments at home disappear in the commute's time and space of "an ecstasy of honest self-appreciation," which ends with "a virile adventure masterfully executed" – also known as that gender-affirming task of parking (Lewis 26, 28). Because of the iterative nature of his domestic life, the "drama" for Babbitt comes not in his consumption, but in the action that literally starts his drive to work, and yet the importance of commuting and in-between spaces has gone almost entirely unremarked in criticism of suburban fictions like *Babbitt*.

If Babbitt is a typical case, then 1922 suburbanites did not yet treat their journey-to-work as a sacrifice paid for home ownership; instead, a drive in the car still feels like a pleasurable activity unto itself, with its iterative nature only adding to the pleasure. Babbitt's commute provides him a daily escape from domestic and business repetitions in the interactions with his surroundings on the way. Even the excitement Babbitt feels in his home life – during his bath, he experiences "a moment of gorgeous abandon, a flash of melodrama such as he found in traffic driving" (Lewis 84) – he understands in terms of transit. Because "the realtor must know his city, inch by inch, and all its faults and

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Tower," and, "Don Walling had been at the Federal Club for a full half-hour," indicating that for Walling the business of business occurs in businesses (61, 121).

virtues," Babbitt certainly engages his surroundings as developable real estate during his commute (Lewis 38). But he does not see his trip to work as a toll to be paid for living in Floral Heights. He not only does not forget sociality and leisure during his commute: sociality and leisure actually constitute the content of his commute. As Babbitt pulls out of his driveway he thinks about his neighbor Samuel Doppelbrau, then pauses to chat with his other neighbor, Howard Littlefield, Ph.D., about politics. The experience of transit even occupies conversation within the narrative, as when Sylvester Moon at the service station chats amiably with Babbitt about the street car line. After this series of chance encounters of the road,[16] as Babbitt drives,

> He admire[s] each district along his *familiar* route to the office: the bungalows…the one-story shops…groceries and laundries and drug-stores…The market gardens…Billboards…The old 'mansions'…Across the belt of railroad tracks, factories…Then the business center, the thickening darting traffic, the crammed trolleys unloading. (Lewis 27 emphasis mine)

An unmistakable sense of ritual emerges in Lewis's representation of Babbitt's commute – "each day," "familiarity," and "familiar" recur throughout – a ritual invested with meaning, since Babbitt does not passively let the city wash over him but rather "admire[s]" each district as he passes through. Writing in 2007, eighty-five years after *Babbitt*, Nick Paumgarten defines commuting as "an exercise in repetition" (59). The meaning of what happens during the commute changes very little as well. Paumgarten observes that, "The will to efficiency varies, but it expresses itself in the hardening of commuters' habits, as they seek to alleviate the dissipation of time and sanity….The pros have their routines" (59). Babbitt's routine *is* his frequent stops to chat; his frequent

[16] The leveling potential in chance encounters, as in Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope of the road, appears in Babbitt's commute. See the chapter "Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (84-258).

buttonholing of neighbors and passersby during his commute serves a very real purpose. Though Babbitt may cast a realtor's eye on "groceries and laundries and drug stores [that] supply the more immediate needs of East Side housewives" as well as "wooden castles turned into boarding houses" (Lewis 27) as he drives to work – he also makes time for personal, social business on the way – either as a small-talking good neighbor or as a Good Samaritan felicitously speeding up a working man's trip to work (Lewis 26). In other words, Babbitt's stop-start commuting is not an inefficient trip to work, but rather represents a balancing of time and space that makes the journey to work serve more than one end, an approach that decreases Babbitt's alienation from his surroundings by bringing the time and space of transit into the realm of the social, rather than an extension of work for the sake of the domestic.

Babbitt's experience of the time and space of his commute indicates potential for resistance to the planned uses of space, since his engagement with the built environment as he uses and inhabits road space during his iterative-narrative commute and trip to the club need not exclusively concern property costs, but may also generate oppositional interactions with the built environment.[17] The troubling tendency to elide the commute, which I develop in detail in chapter 4, foregrounds the manner in which fictional texts deploy highway spaces function as what Henri Lefebvre calls abstract space. "Within this space, and on the subject of this space," he argues, "there is very little to be said – and even less to be 'lived', for lived experience is crushed" (51). Although he is, "to the eye, the perfect office-going executive – a well fed man in a correct brown soft hat and

[17] Babbittry enables not only engagement with the suburban built environment, but also a model for a spatial critique of the suburbs, as evident in the novel's representations of Babbitt's transit.

frameless spectacles, smoking a large cigar, driving a good motor along a semi-suburban parkway," Babbitt repeatedly slips in – and out – of the "crush" of his commute (Lewis 24). And so, when Babbitt pauses at the service station to buy gas, his thinking takes flight into not only an admiration of the exchange taking place in tokens of "progress" like "the ingenuity of the automatic dial, clicking off gallon by gallon…the smartness of the sign: 'A fill in time saves getting stuck'…the rhythmic gurgle of the gasoline as it flowed into the tank" (Lewis 25) but also the aesthetic experience his fill-up provides. Commuting occupies abstract space to the degree that the highway connects house and office; it has no spatial identity outside of its connecting function, or "nothing happens there," except, as Babbitt's example makes clear, when something like a quick detour – literal or figurative – does or at least might happen.[18]

To elide moments of transit like the commute accepts uncritically the highway's singular role in perpetuating a version of suburban sprawl that occludes the world between the house's front door and the parking lot at the office.[19] Edward Soja, following Lefebvre's example, configures space as made up of three components, which he conveniently labels Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace.[20] Literal physical spaces, those literary and cinematic representations that are "fixed mainly on the concrete

[18] Road movies certainly embrace the space of the highway, but the space of the *open* highway, not the traffic-clogged highway between city and suburb. Albert Brooks's *Lost in America* represents this distinction by scoring David and Linda Howard's "escape" from Los Angeles with Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild," only to reveal they have not even left Los Angeles County, rendering the song ironic.

[19] See my chapter 2 on Jack Lemmon as the Normal Suburbanite. Parking at the downtown office is a very real narrative concern: In *Save the Tiger*, Harry Stoner tells his wife at some length about the stress his fraught relationship with the man who parks his car at the office causes him.

[20] Soja's formulation echoes the spatial triad Lefebvre presents in *Production of Space*: representations of space, represented space, spatial practices.

materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped," constitute Firstspace (10). However, Firstspace only becomes meaningful, "in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms," that is, through discursive formations, what Soja calls Secondspace. For the most part, suburban Firstspace appears in the form of domestic and office park architectural sameness gussied up with mass-produced commodities through the Secondspace of conformist consumerism. In *Babbitt*, the Firstspace of Babbitt's drives spur desire for commodities, a reaction very much in line with the capitalist, houses-filled-with-commodities suburban Secondspace. However, suburbia, for all its faults, is not the land of spatial determinism. As much as transportation routes and experience direct attention away from the wages of suburbanization, Babbitt's short drives outside his normal routine, like the walks Friedrich Engels took through Manchester, reveal the troubling corners of the city: "As they drove back through the outskirts of Monarch, down streets of small brown wooden cottages of workmen, character-less as cells, as they rattled across warehouse-districts which by drunken night seemed vast and perilous, as they were borne toward the red lights and violent automatic pianos and the stocky women who simpered, Babbitt was frightened" (Lewis 156). Babbitt's self-recrimination in transit reveals that the suburban built environment provides ample time and space for contemplation of the merits and perplexities of the many pieces of suburban ideology – consumerism, as well as aestheticism and bohemianism – provided he (as the prototypical suburbanite) engages the built environment as he passes through it.

The American suburbs repeat the urban design principle that Engels describes in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels writes that the heavily industrial Manchester of the 1840s

> is peculiarly built, so that a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily without coming into contact with a working-people's quarter or even with workers….This arises chiefly from the fact, that by unconscious tacit agreement, as well as with outspoken conscious determination, the working-people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle class; or, if this does not succeed, they are concealed with the cloak of charity. (57)

Manchester's built environment enforces class distinction and segregation, which Engels notes is not an aberration exclusive to the north of England: "this hypocritical plan is more or less common to all great cities" (59). In suburbia, as in Manchester, transportation planning, both conscious and unconscious, reduces the visibility and accessibility of residences to accentuate the commercial. The suburban street system moves from high-capacity and residence-free limited-access highways to collector roads packed with commercial developments and multi-resident apartment units, to the low-capacity residential streets that physically, visually, and even sonically insulate suburbanites from the central city, other suburbs, and other suburbanites with subdivision street layouts that only take residents to their houses and frustrate through-traffic. The American suburban transportation system, which for all intents and purposes means highways, moves drivers through a landscape of consumption – stores line the strip, billboards line the interstates. *The Great Gatsby's* Nick Carraway, for example, sees tokens of consumerism – the billboard of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg's eyes and the spot in the

road "where new red gas-pumps s[i]t out in pools of light" (21) – as the built environment's border zone between New York and its suburban satellites.[21]

Babbitt, through George Babbitt's frequent disquisitions on the virtues of the Zenith and Floral Heights, indeed represents the suburban experience as defined substantially by enactments of Secondspace discourse such as consumption linked to houses and automobiles. Early in the novel, Babbitt speaks at the Boosters' Club about the importance of developable real estate, or "Homes for Folks" as the company letterhead puts it. Lewis introduces the speech satirically, writing that, "Babbitt spoke well – and often – at these orgies of commercial righteousness about the 'realtor's function as a seer of the future development of the community'…which meant that a real-estate broker could make money by guessing which way the town would grow. This guessing he called Vision" (38). Babbitt's Vision manifests itself at the intersection of real estate and transportation, in the commodification of land as simply a source for profit. Although he is offered patronage positions in the local government, "he preferred advance information about the extension of paved highways, and this a grateful administration gave him" (Lewis 161). Such inside information about the appropriate time and space to make purchases leads to his involvement in a scheme to profit from suburbanization in Glen Oriole and Dorchester (Lewis 40, 210). However, to equate Babbitt's behavior exclusively with consumption and acquisitiveness ignores the key role the built environment plays in highlighting the problems inherent in the suburban way of life Babbitt so embraces. Lewis locates the insufficiency of suburbia-as-consumption in the shortcomings of the built environment: early in the novel, for example, Babbitt profits

[21] I would add that the ash pile – garbage – also functions as a marker of excessive consumerism.

from the sale of new houses in Glen Oriole. Unfortunately, though Babbitt "righteously put in a complete sewage-system….the only flaw was that the Glen Oriole sewers had insufficient outlet, so that waste remained in them" (Lewis 40). Infrastructural deficits make concrete the problems inherent in the suburban valorization of privatized consumption, calling attention to the importance of the spaces between home and work.[22]

However, Lewis also pointedly represents transit in general, such as Babbitt's lunchtime trip to the club, as an unmistakably iterative consumption narrative keyed to an engagement with the built environment. On his way to the club, Babbitt "glanced with the fondness of familiarity at the buildings," at which point, Lewis relentlessly links the built environment to consumption: the Parthenon Shoe Shine Parlor ("Gosh, ought to get my shoes shined this afternoon"), the Simplex Office Furniture Shop and the National Cash Register Agency ("he yearned for a Dictaphone, for a typewriter"), Nobby's Men's Wear Shop ("he thought well of himself as one who bought expensive ties"), United Cigar Store ("Wonder if I need some cigars"), and the Miner's and Drovers' National Bank ("how clever and solid he was to bank with so marbled an establishment") (46). For all the desire Babbitt shows for commodities, something other than consumerism appears in the middle of his drive to the club, when he perceives part of his built environment by ignoring it (or, formally, Lewis represents it as an absence): "His high moment came in the clash of traffic when he was halted at the corner beneath the lofty Second National Tower…*As always* he ignored the next two blocks, decayed blocks not yet reclaimed from the grime and shabbiness of the Zenith of 1885" (46-7 emphasis

[22] In drives through Zenith and its suburbs, Babbitt encounters Firstspace through more than a suburban Secondspace of consumption, as in his experience of the workmen's shacks and their connection to rough sociality.

mine). That is to say, while Babbitt-the-driver may neglect a section of Zenith's Firstspace, the decay predates Babbitt's Secondspace "suburban" discourses of a preference for private motorcar and consumerism. Unable to connect the two out-of-time blocks to a consumption-ready Secondspace, Babbitt chooses to ignore them, to erase them from his cognitive map of the downtown.[23] Coming on the heels of his shop-by-shop consumerist progress to the club, the conscious bracketing off of particular pieces of the built environment appears to accentuate consumerism as the organizational strategy of a suburbanite behind the wheel. Building on Wolfgang Schivelbusch's description of train travel, architectural historian Mitchell Schwarzer describes the effects of increased speed of transport on perception:

> since rail passengers perceive specific objects poorly, they tend not to look closely or carefully. Speed anesthetizes vision. Sight becomes absentminded….Fast speeds turn the track's environs into a forgotten zone. Often, panoramic perception leads to boredom. Viewers learn, during many trips down the same tracks, how not to look. (54)

Seen in light of Schwarzer's articulation of the power of Secondspace – one *learns* the ability not to see – Babbitt's turn away from economically decayed Firstspaces reveals not only the Secondspace of suburban mass-produced consumption but also the critical (Thirdspace) power latent in interactions with the built environment during transit – Babbitt simultaneously enacts and refuses the ability to not see his surroundings during his drive.

[23] Fredric Jameson's description of the Bonaventure Hotel in *Postmodernism* 38-44. For an interesting account of the emotions associated with a mental map of the city, see, for example, Koslowsky et al's description of Seattle commuters in *Commuting Stress.* While alternative routes, traffic reports, and fellow drivers figure as stress factors, at no point does the built environment enter, as positive or negative stress.

Turning a blind eye to the spaces that do not adhere to Secondspace formations comes at the cost of severing both the literal and figurative connections between Firstspaces. Not only do train passengers "see the productive backside of cities, their copious groupings of factories, warehouses, storage lots, and rear yards, all of which usually deteriorate faster than other parts of the metropolis" (Schwarzer 33), but, as Babbitt's example shows, car drivers might also experience a similar Thirdspace re-familiarization with the built environment. Myron Orfield, a former state legislator in Lewis's home state of Minnesota, repeats Engels's description of the planned invisibility of the working-class in the context of the Minneapolis-St. Paul transportation network at the end of the twentieth century.[24] Orfield places the importance of highways at the heart of his argument:

> The massive oversupply of developmental infrastructure in restrictively zoned communities has created land use patterns across the United States that are particularly low density, economically inefficient, and environmentally dangerous….When older communities are taxed to fund the massive supporting infrastructure for this new, more exclusive development, they are further enervated, and the process accelerates. (72, 74)

To follow the construction of new infrastructure, he claims, is to trace the escape route of the more-affluent residents from urban centers.[25] This flight not only handcuffs declining cities by depriving them of a tax base, but also binds entire regions by putting all of their transportation eggs in the highway basket. The phenomenon Orfield describes in terms of suburban sprawl is not so much white flight as it is green flight. Dense, mass-transit-

[24] Zenith is generally considered to be based on Duluth, Minnesota.
[25] For example, Boston's Jewish and Italian-American North End was cut off from the city by the construction of I-93. Construction of the Dan Ryan in Chicago similarly cut through multiple neighborhoods. And, as I note in chapter 4, E.L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* represents the damage done to ethnic enclaves by the Cross-Bronx Expressway.

amenable cities lose their residents, tax base, and environmental quality of life as one cost of auto-dependence. And, in addition to the structural conflicts of city-suburb and sustainability-sprawl, the migration of suburbs and new jobs into the suburbs severs the connections between city and suburbs. Orfield's politic assessment of sprawl – "As the privileged have less and less contact with those less fortunate, their attitudes harden" (38) – understates the importance of what happens during the drives along highways. The uncanny non-goal-oriented presence of Babbitt's commutes and car trips – he "feels at home in his car as nowhere else; often melancholy [at home], he feels almost cheerful when he gets into his motorcar and rides around the city" (Schwarzer 94-95) – reveals moments of transit in general that generate a critical, Thirdspace, view of the relationship between the Firstspace "backside" of highway-dependent suburbia and its Secondspace spatial practices. In this reading strategy, re-assessments of and alternatives to consumerism, economic inequality, and automobile and fossil-fuel dependence should emerge from Babbittry: Thirdspace interactions with the built environment that come on the fly, in transit.

While explicitly anti-suburban texts will figure in my argument, I want to track representations of interactions with the suburban built environment through predominantly pro-suburban productions. I look to wide-release films and middlebrow fiction like *Babbitt* because, as Fredric Jameson argues in *Signatures of the Visible*, about works of mass culture, they

> cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated….anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness, even if their function lies in the legitimization of the existing order – or some worse one – [they] cannot do their job without

> deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice. (30-1)

Suburban fictions concern the utopia of discursive normalcy available through a connection with a particular built environment; that is, the Secondspace that equates suburbia and normalcy depends upon the creation, expansion, and maintenance of suburban Firstspace. As the continued use of Babbittry as a facile term of opprobrium makes clear, the normalization of commodity fetishism has made a virtue of consumption, but this virtue is not only not exclusive to suburbia, and often depends on far too narrow a definition of consumption. Fixating on consumer objects prevents a full accounting of the wages of sprawl. To use "Babbittry" as a synonym for consumerism makes too much of a sin of the consumption of commodities like, "the best nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks" (Lewis 3), deflecting attention from sprawl as the consumption of land and natural resources. The newest highway exit may indeed offer affordable housing, or a job, or a shopping center – but sprawl consumes farmland and "nature" land like forests and prairies to build those houses and highways and malls. To conceive of and analyze suburbia as spatial practice unmasks the occlusion inherent in the "fantasy bribe" on which suburban expansion depends, and draws attention to the ways in which cultural productions begin to imagine Thirdspace praxis in the built environment that imagines more sustainable and humane built environments for the suburban future.

While critics like C. Wright Mills quickly identified the Organization as key to post-War suburbia and normalcy, in the first chapter, "The Suburbs! Starring Jack Lemmon," I sketch out the ways in which American cinema represents a normal

American through his (and, in mass culture, a Normal American is a man) relationship to the suburban built environment. Jack Lemmon – or, more accurately, his star persona – stands in for a sense of post-War normalcy that, with the help of the GI Bill, VA loans, and the Federal Highway Act of 1956, moves into the growing suburbs. Lemmon, early in his film career, plays Organization Men who are unsatisfied by their place within the Organization and see more potential for happiness in the normalized domestic spaces of suburbia. In the search for Secondspace normalcy, Lemmon films consistently expand and alter Firstspace, but, as Lemmon ages, those same suburbs cease to function as "home" for its aging, early settlers. Later in Lemmon's career, the spaces between the Organization/city and home/suburbia reveal the ways in which the discursive maintenance of suburbia necessitates a changed relationship to the built environment to retain suburbia as a livable place for Normal People like Jack Lemmon.

While Lemmon acts *on* his built environment in films like *Good Neighbor Sam* by physically altering his surroundings, the texts in chapter 2, "Finding yourself on the way: Détournement and the suburban transportation infrastructure" represent suburbanites acting *in* their built environment. That is to say, Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Phyllis McGinley's poems and essays in *A Short Walk to the Station*, and Jean Kerr in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* and *Penny Candy* all manage relationships to the advantages and shortcomings of suburbia in terms of what suburbanites using the transportation infrastructure think during moments of transit. Within the Firstspace of highways and train lines, Sloan, McGinley, and Kerr recognize a time-space that allows its users to confront and sometimes to critique (or to reify) suburban Secondspace. Since sprawl not only expands the physical boundaries of suburbia but also generates more

transportation infrastructure to link these suburbs to the city and each other, suburbanites begin increasingly to recognize and confront their unhappiness in transit. As metropolitan regions grow and transit times increase, the potential for highway and train space to function introspectively ironically links greater sprawl and Thirdspace praxis against it, turning the tangled suburban infrastructure begun in the 1950s into golden chains that endure into the 1970s of *The Stepford Wives* and the 1980s of *Falling in Love*.

Casting spaces of transit like the commute out of narratives – both narratively and formally – indicates that such everyday interactions with the built environment (roads) throws into relief both the similarities and distinctions among the multiple suburban types, which I argue in chapter 3, "This ain't so bad": The Creative Class and the escape from the suburban furrow." In this chapter I redirect critical attention to temporary and common (in both senses of the word) spaces of transit rather than private spaces to locate the ways in which what Richard Florida calls Creative Class members engage in Thirdspace relationships to their suburban built environment to overcome its narrow confines. The representation of commuting itineraries – or their strategic elision – in the well-worn tracks between suburb and city reveal one way in which the suburban form asserts its hegemonic Secondspace power over Firstspace. Middle-class status offers no permanence, for the late-twentieth century Americans in *The Family Man, American Beauty, Office Space,* and *subUrbia*. The usual suburban American solution to problems – starting from scratch Farther Out on the development frontier – solidified after WWII, locating the utopian potential in increased access to the suburban way of life through a geography of sprawl. However, the infrastructural and psychological costs begin to carry too large a price tag. In the films I analyze, we can see that by becoming more gay- and

minority-friendly, that is, by behaving more like the city of the future George Bailey wished to plan and haltingly established in *It's a Wonderful Life's* Bailey Park, the suburbs might make themselves a more sustainable place where we might re-build and rehabilitate.

Sustainability and ecology move to the fore in "Running out of gas: On nostalgia, the energy crisis, and the dead end of the suburban form," in which I analyze *Back to the Future I* and *II*, Rick Moody's novel *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides* – both Jeffrey Eugenides' novel and Sofia Coppola's film adaptation. Although these texts concern the energy-crisis suburban America of the mid-1970s, they absolve the suburban development pattern of guilt by disconnecting the existing, 1950s-vintage suburban form from its true energy and ecological costs. In these texts, energy and ecological crises greatly unsettle suburban comfort at what Francis Fukuyama once called the "end of history." However, rather than finding guilt in sprawl's land use patterns, these texts rescue the American Way of Life by constructing strife as something generated by the appearance and agency of fortuitous or catastrophic "acts of God" like lightning strikes, ice storms, and tree diseases rather than by Secondspace ideologies that perpetuate an investment in the creation of more and more suburban-style Firstspace.

Finally, in "Clear a path…I'm going home," I conclude this dissertation at the edge of the continent, in the crumbling infrastructure of *Falling Down's* Los Angeles region. While acknowledging the film's obvious white male rage narrative, I see the more or less reactive and banal police-procedural portion of the film as the key to understanding a latent sense of a Thirdspace-generated reform program for the LA area. The problems of a highway-driven sprawl repeatedly appear in *Falling Down* as close-

mindedness and violence based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. The presence of abstract Firstspace – maps that appear on screen – and the ways in which Officer Prendergast re-orients the perception of and interactions with those spaces begins to solve these problems through a spatial turn. In *Falling Down*, too much devotion to the strategic view of Los Angeles as spaces between highways stands impotent in the face of inequality and crime written onto the decaying built environment. The physical organization of Los Angeles's Firstspace – the intricate netting of highways that criss-cross and subdivide the region – informs and perpetuates a Secondspace of racial tensions, homophobia, class-based violence, and misogyny. Rather than locate ameliorative measures in a refinement of the car-based status quo, Prendergast's actions throughout the film open up a relationship to the built environment that positions beat-cop spatial practices in the often ignored pedestrian- and mass-transit-oriented back side of the city as the route to creating a livable Los Angeles for the future.

The suburbs are not going anywhere; they are here to stay. The rapid expansion of suburban Firstspace across the map testifies to the power of suburban Secondspace's allure, often abetted, as Frankfurt School thinkers would quickly declare, by mass culture texts. However, in the critical engagements with suburban spaces throughout post-War American literature and cinema, we can see the emergence of a critical awareness of the shortcomings of the suburban form and ideology, and some of the first steps toward the multiple paths we might follow to build more sustainable and livable suburbs.

CHAPTER II

THE SUBURBS! STARRING JACK LEMMON: STAR STUDIES, NORMALCY, AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

When Jack Lemmon died in 2001, obituaries described him as "just our size," and noted that "few performers equaled him in communicating and indeed personifying, both comically and tragically, certain moral dilemmas of postwar American life," echoing *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment* director Billy Wilder's description of him as an "everyman" who could do everything (Crowe 109-10).[26] Given that Lemmon grew up comfortably upper-middle-class in late-Depression Boston, graduated Harvard, and was the biggest box office draw of 1963 and 1964, to consider him the embodiment of normalcy seems counterintuitive. All the same, Lemmon's star persona positions him as the illustrative figure of post-War normalcy taking up residence in the suburbs. The arc of the Lemmon films from *The Apartment* (1960) to *Good Neighbor Sam* (1964) to *Save the Tiger* (1973) and *The China Syndrome* (1979), through *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) and *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) shows how the average American relocates to the suburbs, ambivalently confronts what passes for success, and ultimately discovers an uncertain future for old age in suburbia. In this trajectory, Lemmon's star persona traces the ascent and decline of the normalizing force of the post-War American suburb – especially for the wave of post-War suburban pioneers and their Baby Boom children.

[26] The first quote comes from an obituary written by Laura Miller for *Salon.* The second comes from David Walsh on the *World Socialist Web Site,* which figures Lemmon's star persona as the embodiment of Post-War normalcy.

To describe Jack Lemmon as The Average or Normal, of course, figures the white, heterosexual, middle-class male as the default American identity. Stories in mass-audience periodicals like *Time* described the suburbs as the ideal setting for white veterans to raise their families in VA loan-backed houses. Precisely because Lemmon represents this vision of normalcy better than her other film examples, Julie Andrews and Dustin Hoffman, Judith Butler can cite Lemmon's role as *Some Like It Hot's* Daphne as an accessible, concrete example of gender performativity, even though Daphne acts as a figure of hegemonic rather than subversive gender performance.[27] Indeed, Lemmon's normalcy is so self-evident as to be invisible, if the well-worn anecdote about Lemmon and Tony Curtis testing their costumes in the women's room – and easily passing – is to be believed. While critics such as Butler and, for example, Judith Halberstam delineate the ways in which figures like Lemmon/Daphne marginalize non-normative identities, in this chapter I look to Jack Lemmon's star persona and film career to redefine one facet of the hegemonic American suburban identity: its fraught relationship with the built environments. Lemmon complicates the sociological problem David Riesman identifies in *The Lonely Crowd* – "increasingly, *other people* are the problem, not the material environment" (18 emphasis in original) – by confronting the sprawling infrastructure of post-War suburban sprawl that houses and supports the corporate, Organizational interpersonal structures. In this chapter I argue that Lemmon's star persona and film performances stage the limits of suburbia, as Lemmon strains against a Firstspace that physically excludes along the lines of class, race, sexuality, and also age, anxieties over

[27] Butler writes, "such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task" (126).

contemporary and future of suburban Secondspace appear in Lemmon's (Thirdspace) interactions with the built environment. Jack Lemmon's star persona is central to my argument, and so it is where I begin.

Jack Lemmon: Star. Everyman. Normal.

Though he worked in bars, legitimate theaters, television sitcoms, Hollywood drama, and Hollywood comedy, "Jack Lemmon," the star persona built on films such as *Mister Roberts, Some Like It Hot, The Apartment, Days of Wine and Roses, Good Neighbor Sam,* and *Save the Tiger* presents a coherent figure[28] of someone who struggles mightily – emotionally and physically – to achieve and maintain the appearance of normalcy. At least as early as 1960, in *The Apartment,* through 1973, in *Save the Tiger,* and into the early 1990s, Jack Lemmon films consistently feature their star as the embodiment of American norms. Jack Lemmon *is* the Average American who not only lives out the tensions of post-War American suburbia but also painfully exposes them as the century wears on.[29] Lemmon's roles trace a trajectory that coincides with the suburbanization of the World War II generation: Organization Man leaves the city to become a harried but successful suburbanite, at first struggling at entry level in old urban

[28] "Just our size" Lemmon exhibits one of the contradictory traits that Dyer recognizes in the production of stars: "Finally, stars represent what are taken to be people typical of this society; yet the types of people we assume characterise our society may nevertheless be singularly absent from our actual day-to-day experience of society; the specialness of stars may be then that they are the only ones around who are ordinary!" (*Stars* 43).
[29] This phrasing is adapted from Dyer's on Marilyn Monroe: "Thus she seemed to 'be' the very tension that ran through the ideological life of 50s America. You could see this as heroically living out the tensions or painfully exposing them" (*Stars* 31).

office towers, and finally finding upper-management success in the suburbs.[30] The interaction between Lemmon's films and his biography generates a coherent figure of normalcy: "Jack Lemmon." In the capsule biography to accompany their Lifetime Achievement Award, the American Film Institute notes the overlaps in middle-class American social trends and Lemmon's roles:

> In the '60s [Lemmon characters] began to settle down. He was now an aspiring executive fighting to fit in. From *The Apartment* to *The Days of Wine and Roses* he showed us the struggle of a basically decent man trying to hold on to his dignity and sanity in a world gone slightly askew…By the 1970s he seemed to have it all figured out. But then circumstances would force him to question the rules he had learned. The middle-class hero of *Save the Tiger*, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, and *The China Syndrome* was now fighting a system he once thought he was a part of. ("1988")

The AFI award copy reveals the slippage that occurs when a star persona solidifies: the actual person begins to recede as the roles take precedence in the star's identity. Even when Lemmon the actor moves outside of Hollywood, to take on stage roles, stage directors like Charley Baker tweak the normalcy that Lemmon represents while simultaneously enjoying the visibility Lemmon's presence affords.[31] In the end, Jack Lemmon disappears, replaced by a growing amalgamation of CC "Bud" Baxter, Harry Stoner, Jack Godel, Shelley Levine, and John Gunderson.

A 1964 *Playboy* interview introduces Lemmon as a Big Star in terms of his box office appeal, acting skill, and, finally, his personality: "In two recent film-industry

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[30] In chapter three, see, for example, Tom Rath in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.* Similar to Rath is Frank Wheeler, in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. In chapter six, *The Ice Storm's* Benjamin Hood similarly faces down ennui in suburbia.

[31] Baker recalls that simultaneously using and hiding Lemmon was the great triumph of his production of *Face of a Hero*: "We opened in total darkness and nobody knew whether that was Jack Lemmon up there. Even if they could have seen him they wouldn't have wanted to, because this wasn't the Lemmon they knew; this was a character full of guilt, soul-searching, not knowing which way to turn" (Widener 186).

surveys, Jack Lemmon was named the nation's number-one box-office personality, comedian and dramatic actor" (57). In 1964, Lemmon was big enough to host the Oscars, but he seemed less than enthusiastic about his fame as a personality.[32] Lemmon repeatedly disavows personality-driven stardom to argue ambivalently for the way in which his hard work – acting – makes his too normal.

> We've already seen a decline in the mystique of the star system – but this I don't welcome at all. I think the old diehards may have something when they mourn the passing of the golden era in films, when the star was the Olympian antithesis of the guy next door, almost a mythological figure, unattainable and unapproachable. It's all gone, especially for actors like me. I've played most characters who are identifiable to the average guy. I'm considered on the same level with Sam in the office rather than as the kind of celebrity whose presence makes people keep their distance and whisper, 'Gee, that's Georgie Fafoof-nik.' So the average guy, someone I've never met before, feels he can talk to me. (148)

Lemmon's ambivalence over stardom – he distrusts celebrity, and yet finds the financial awards of that celebrity attractive – recurs throughout his career. Lemmon understands his stardom as distinct from an earlier mode of stardom; unlike glamorous stars such as Fairbanks or Cary Grant, his success – like Jimmy Stewart's – depends on an everyman-sameness with the public. However, Lemmon locates this accessibility – a definitive facet of his public personality – in the characters he works so hard to portray, not in himself.

Will Holtzman's biography similarly sketches out the progression of Lemmon's suburban normalcy in terms of his film roles: "where others had looked upon Lemmon as a serviceable leading man, a sprightly character actor, or simply a winsome clown, Billy Wilder saw the articulation of an era. Here was a consummate figure of repression, a white-collar casualty: fidgety, tense, ingenuous, putty in the hands of corporate America"

[32] Previous Oscar hosts: major stars like Douglas Fairbanks, Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra,

(Holtzman 74). That Jack Lemmon exudes normalcy and accessibility operates as a given in appraisals of his film roles, even contemporaneously. In *The Apartment*, "he's a phony Horatio Alger, and knowledge of this fact weighs on his idealistic conscience" (*Variety 1959-1963*). In the mid-1960s, "Lemmon was a smash as 'the guy next door'; that's what the public adored and that's what it would get" (Widener 205). This continued for nearly ten years, until Lemmon consciously broke character, taking union scale to make the decidedly un-optimistic *Save the Tiger*. *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby notes *Save the Tiger's* decidedly sour tone, but nevertheless determines the parameters of normalcy with Lemmon as his polestar, writing that the film falls short, "in spite of [a] very good performance[e] by Mr. Lemmon, who projects a lightweight bitterness that is a sad fact of homogenized American culture" (Canby "Save").

One key to the replacement of "Jimmy Stewart" with "Jack Lemmon" as a marker of American normalcy is, in short, mass suburbanization. On the stage and screen, Lemmon's physical presence holds out the promise buried in his star persona. However, the brute physical reality of Jack Lemmon functions as a marker for what Lemmon himself calls the "wisps of emotion" associated with contemporary notions of normalcy. As Richard Dyer, one of the earliest star studies critics, puts it, stars act as "embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives – categories of class, gender, "ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on" (*Heavenly* 18). In post-War America's white, middle-class default identity, Lemmon's star persona, as elaborated in the combination of his film roles and public activities, embodies white middle-classness the same way Jimmy Stewart did for the previous generation. Whereas Stewart represents both the pre-War urban yearning for

small town America that spurred suburbanization (*It's a Wonderful Life, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) and a post-War apprehension toward the urban (his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock) and the lost frontier (Westerns like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*) that fed the massive growth of suburbia, Jack Lemmon arrives on the scene with suburbia's ascendance.[33]

Lemmon's lack of outsized (any?) sex appeal, with Stewart as its model, validates his essential normalcy – both Lemmon and suburban design signify hard work through plainness, something Lemmon frequently identifies as the secret to his star persona and his success.[34] In fact, Lemmon turns plainness to his advantage in much the same way developers turned ticky-tack houses to theirs – the inability to measure up to Rock Hudson or Troy Donahue or architect-designed villas verifies that in post-War America, hard work pays off for regular and regular-looking people. Lemmon's star persona registers hard work paying off in terms of the Rock Hudson world of image, complete with romantic interests against whom Lemmon struggles to retain his credibility as a suitable partner. For example, a review to *Under the Yum Yum Tree* offers the praise that Lemmon "looks like a boy scout playing Bluebeard. And his satyr is a satire: a Pan in deadpan, a caricature of every young goat who can't say naaaaa" ("Two Hits"). The review highlights the apparent contradiction between Lemmon's performance of excessive masculinity and the physical package that signifies in opposition to that performance, This performance creates the screen onto which their cultures project

[33] While *It's a Wonderful Life* was released in 1946, the changing identity of Bedford Falls invokes a pre-War small-town identity which the film optimistically lays over an ethnically-diversifying post-War suburbia (see chapter 4). By the same token, *Mr. Smith* plays Smith's small-town decency against Washington DC. In addition, both *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* are unthinkable films outside of their urban settings.
[34] In his *Playboy* and *Film Comment* interviews, for example.

dreams and aspirations. Stars, whether Marilyn Monroe or Jack Lemmon, are fantasy figures, who, as Dyer notes, fascinate

> because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organisation of life into public and private spheres. We love them because they represent how we think that experience is or how it would be lovely to feel that it is. Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. (*Heavenly* 17)

As a star, Jack Lemmon does not initiate behaviors that then become typical.[35] Rather, his star performance makes visible and solidifies such behaviors. In this way, his star persona accumulates a belief in the essential benevolence of the system and the manner in which bad actors cause it to misfire: *Mister Roberts* has the Navy, *Some Like It Hot* gender roles, *The Apartment* and *Good Neighbor Sam* the Organization. The second half of Lemmon's career – represented here by *Save the Tiger, The China Syndrome, Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Grumpy Old Men* – trades on his persona's earned position of authority within organizations and the pro-suburban status quo to trouble forcefully the sustainability of suburbia.

Like the expectations for gender performance that he labors to fulfill as Daphne and Jerry, a Lemmon film rests on the difficulty in bridging the gulf between the promise of normalcy and the difficulty of achieving and enjoying it. The San Francisco Film Festival organizers centered their 1988 Lemmon retrospective not in terms of cinematic quality – by 1988, a settled mater – but in terms of the sensibility underlying both his stardom and its shortcoming: "But perhaps what outshines all the awards and accolades,"

[35] Lemmon as a gauge of normalcy appears in an anecdote Joan Rivers tells to assert her bona fides as a subversive comic along gender lines. "I never thought I was pushing the edge. But I was saying things you dare not say. Jack Lemmon came to see me at the Duplex, thought I was disgusting, and walked out. I was so hurt" (Zoglin 185).

they write, “is Lemmon’s reputation as a good and decent man” (“Great Moments”). This reputation rests on the ideological premise that Laura Miller calls “the American penchant for believing that there exists a set of rules which, if followed, produce a satisfactorily successful life” (L. Miller). This satisfactory life – upward mobility moving from apartment to starter home to a house with servants – emerges out of Lemmon’s “nebbishy characters [who] were forever trying on new personalities – from up-and-coming vice president to flapper femme fatale – only to lapse back, disappointed, into their obdurately ordinary lives” (L. Miller), as well as his own biography’s story of student productions to piano bars to television to film to movie stardom. Miller also moves toward a sense of the performance of masculinity as a thwarted promise of class mobility evident in the standard Lemmon role of

> men profoundly baffled by the failure of convention to deliver on its promises and the unexpected despair that can ambush even those who play it safe….Lemmon's characters are among the saddest in the movies because they are squandering, or have squandered, their formidable ferocity and brains on what's typically a paltry vision.

A great deal of this reading’s force stems from its connection of the disappointment inherent in the pursuit of normalcy which Lemmon represents. But I want to take part of her analysis quite literally: the “paltry vision” is the suburbia to which Bud moves at the end of *The Apartment* and stays in through *Good Neighbor Sam, Save the Tiger, The China Syndrome,* and *Grumpy Old Men* – and finally sells in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The paltry vision Lemmon’s characters aspire to reveals that normalcy is a full time job on its own; a job that requires constant vigilance to keep up and in – literally and spatially – a space of normalcy. Suburbia is where normalcy resides, but an old suburb is where old normalcies go to die and, as *Grumpy Old Men* will make clear, because old age and death

make you leave the suburbs, it remains a central concern of "normal" suburbanites throughout their years in suburbia. Sometimes a heart attack or nuclear fallout literally wipes you off the map; sometimes financial death, whether Harry Stoner or John Gustafson's bankruptcy or Shelley Levine's unemployment, pushes you out of suburbia into the decaying Firstspaces of inner-ring suburbs or even the inner city, dead to the outward-sprawling world of American suburbia.

The Apartment: "Be a Mensch"

The Apartment runs like an advertisement for post-War suburbanization. For Lemmon's C.C. "Bud" Baxter, city life means inhabiting a built environment which not only puts him in contact with ethnic others like his neighbors the Dreyfusses, but also makes monogamous heteronormative coupling nearly impossible to achieve, or even to believe in. Bud's frustrations stem not only from his need for a suitable romantic partner or lack of professional advancement, but also from his lack of access to adult-appropriate private space: an apartment might serve for a young man, but a contemporary grown man lives in a house with a yard, since only aging ethnics remain in tenements. In the film's world, for Bud to be a mensch – a human being – he must not only settle down with a nice girl, but he must settle down with that nice girl in a house in the suburbs.

During *The Apartment's* opening sequence, Bud describes his apartment in terms potential suburban house-buyers would recognize. As Bud slowly walks down a city sidewalk, he describes his place as "just right for a bachelor," but, "the only problem is, I can't always get in when I want to." Bud, as he looks up ruefully at the window of his tryst-facilitating bachelor apartment, accepts the post-War preference for suburban home

ownership rather than urban tenements, if for no other reason than he wants a place to rest. Bud might get to his building, but he cannot always go home. Apartment life is tenuous at best; like a lease, comfort can disappear without warning, as when Consolidated Life executive Kirkaby hustles Bud out the door with the faux-apology that, "these things don't always run on schedule like a Greyhound bus." Although Bud tries to assert dominion over his domicile by declaring "It's private property! It's not a public playground!" his self-defense functions as an ironic description of his built environment. The problem with an apartment is that the building is, in fact, the landlord Mrs. Lieberman's private property; that it is shared by renters renders it at best a quasi-public space. Bud's ambition to climb the corporate ladder by subletting his apartment to philandering execs compounds the problem of turning his dwelling into a shared, quasi-public space. Bud can't – or won't – say no because it would jeopardize his job; he subjugates private space to work, which the suburbs do not do. Forced into the corner of the frame, Bud impotently watches Kirkaby and his date scamper up the stairs, pushing Bud out of the apartment, onto the street (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1

Temporarily evicted, Bud sleeps on a public park bench and takes sick. *The Apartment* opens with the lesson that living in an apartment generates not only a feeling of homelessness based in living in someone else's building or, in Bud's case, ceding that space to others, but sometimes unexpected literal physical homelessness. The psychological and physical fragility of apartment life makes not only literal sickness, but a metaphorical sickness one stroke of bad luck away.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman notes that other-direction is most at home in service industries, like insurance and accounting, that privilege interpersonal interactions. "*The goals toward which the other-directed person strives"* he writes, shift according to external guidance, and "*it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life*" for an other-directed individual (21, italics in original). Part of the social sickness inherent in *The Apartment* comes from Bud's overdeveloped sense of "other direction," exacerbated, in part, by the need to stay in the good graces of landlords, neighbors, and bosses just to retain a place – both literally (an apartment) and figuratively (the corporate hierarchy). Perhaps the most explicit example of Bud's other-direction appears after he sleeps in the park, when he must seek the permission of five superiors to sleep in his own apartment. Rather than simply tell his office superiors no, Bud shuffles the availability of "his" apartment to ensure every executive retains a night there, demonstrating one other-directed inter-office phone call at a time that he is, as Mr. Dobish puts it, a team player worthy of promotion. Bud begins *The Apartment* as the definitive example of an other-directed character, and the main obstacle that he overcomes in the narrative is an urban-identified other-direction run amok, the very

problem his apartment parallels: once Bud becomes self-directed, he moves out to the suburbs.

For all the population diffusion that the insurance game demands and even spurs, Consolidated Life, like so many corporations, keeps its headquarters in a metropolitan center – New York – but its middle-management employees like Sheldrake and Kirkaby live in the suburbs. For the striving other-directed man, life, like his dwelling unit, is not his own, something Bud glumly realizes one night in a barroom. Exiled from his own apartment, Bud spends nearly the entirety of his drunken conversation with Margie MacDougal circling around the pitfalls of his other-direction in terms of his living arrangements. But it is Bud's too-perfect other-direction toward Margie that leads to his necessary disavowal of city-apartment living. Early in their conversation, Bud ironically tells Margie that, "I said I had no family. I didn't say I had an empty apartment." Shortly after, when Margie asks "Where do we go, my place or yours?" Bud returns to the unstable condition of the renter's sense of private property, "Why don't we go back to my place" he asks. "Everyone else does." Not only does Bud take his behavioral cues from his co-workers in terms of deferring to their time demands, but he also begins to take cues from his co-workers on sexual matters, finding quasi-anonymous and adulterous partners in the city. While he kills time in a bar, waiting for older married men to leave their rendezvous with young single women, singleton Bud dances around the possibility of picking up a married woman. Bud finally does act on Margie's less-than-subtle hints and takes her back to his apartment. However, by throwing Margie out the moment he sees Kubilek (Shirley MacLaine), the elevator operator from work with whom he is infatuated, passed out in his bed, Bud at long last exhibits some trace of inner-direction as

he casts aside an urban ethnic for a striving on-to-suburbia ethnic. By ignoring Margie's request to stay so that he might care for Kubilek at the risk of his own career safety, Bud finally acts according to an internal sense of right and wrong that resembles the behavior of a husband – outgrowing his bachelor's apartment and, accordingly, taking the first necessary steps toward a happy, coupled-off suburban life.

The figures that turn Bud away from other-direction appear in the contradictory form of his neighbors the Dreyfusses, who represent not only flamboyantly ethnic urban neighbors, but also the lack of spatial privacy that apartment living offers. Bud's unbroken performance of "bad neighbor," even when the truth would vindicate him, points to the sway that other-direction holds over middle-class office workers; it seems as though Bud cannot bear to tell his neighbors that he is a meek, lonely man and not the louche figure they imagine. Partially informed by what they hear through their shared apartment walls, the Dreyfusses consider their young bachelor neighbor a callow youth in need of the grounding rooted in the traditions held by older, wiser, and medically accredited neighbors such as themselves. Mildred's furious complaints about "Bud's" lack of concern for her sleep patterns go hand-in-hand with the good-cop concern Doctor Dreyfuss expresses for Bud's liver. As urban, that is, Jewish, as the Dreyfusses are, when Bud needs help, they offer not a blind urban eye, but rather the helping hand of the ethnic ghetto, the sort of community desired but not found in newly-born suburbia and disappearing from the shrinking urban centers. Doctor Dreyfuss's passive-aggressive "you're welcome" to Bud, "as your neighbor I'd like to kick your kiester clear around the block….Live now, pay later. Diner's Club! Why don't you grow up Baxter? Be a

mensch!" eulogizes the Upper East Side while simultaneously abjecting Bud, his proto-suburban neighbor, from the tenement collectivism the Dreyfusses represent.

The Apartment, in the end, ambivalently locates the mensch not in the multi-ethnic almost collective city the Liebermans and Dreyfusses call home, but in the suburbs the Sheldrakes inhabit (and exploit). Or rather, used to inhabit, as film historian Paul Monaco's symptomatic reading, makes clear:

> Precisely because its underlying and unrelenting moral bleakness meshed with the sardonic and pessimistic mood that a great many films would cultivate in the later 1960s. THE APARTMENT was produced in the standard medium of classic Hollywood cinema, black-and-white film, but its trenchant portrayal of the emptiness of middle-class American life and values was 'late sixties' to the core. (158)

In this account of the film, the men to whom he loans the apartment, first Kirkaby, and finally and most powerfully boss-heel Sheldrake embody the emptiness of Organization Man Life that Bud must overcome.[36] When Sheldrake's wife learns of his infidelities, she exiles the former family – suburban – man to the bachelor-city. Cast out of his suburban paradise, Sheldrake falls into a distastefully public living arrangement. "I'm staying at the Athletic Club," he explains to Bud, "and it's strictly stag." As Sheldrake gestures for the key to Bud's, the relative merits of metropolitan living arrangements fall into relief. Apartments are bad – read immoral – although there are worse options: Sheldrake's club and the park bench the often locked-out Bud knows. Thus the reward for the responsible and the respectable is the suburbs, a place in White Plains, a multi-story single-family house like the one Sheldrake once occupied. Bud reminds Sheldrake how a man occupies his built environment; Bud's first goodbye to the city combines his

[36] I disagree with Monaco's optimistic reading of the film, which sees a strong critique of the status quo in Bud. I do agree that some critique of contemporary mores appears; however, I see it as confined to the renters.

unsuitability to the Dreyfusses' ethnic enclave neighborliness and Kubilek's marriageability as not-so-gentle prods to leave the city to be a suburban man. In the moment he takes control of his apartment, Bud graduates from it, telling his boss "Just following doctor's orders. I've decided to become a mensch. You know what that means? A human being!"

Bud says his second goodbye to the city when he admits to Dr. Dreyfuss, "all I know is I gotta get out of this place" as he wanders around his suddenly-foreign apartment, haphazardly putting things in boxes until a domesticizing wife, that is, Kubilek, appears. Sitting next to Kubilek on the couch, Bud finally makes the connection between growing up and the suburban; to become a human being he must head for the suburbs, equating the other-direction and sexual openness of city apartment life as something not quite appropriate for a real mensch, who is stable, married, with children. Bud tells Kubilek he's moving to "another neighborhood, another town, another job," which the film places in the suburbs with Kubilek's promise that they'll send Sheldrake that forced token of suburban neighborliness, "a fruit cake every Christmas." The place to be *responsibly* married is in the suburbs – the place where you engage with actual people (i.e., wife and kids) and not the abstractions like the ones Bud rattles off as he introduces his Organization life in the city in the film's opening. That is, the best kind of city people – the kind of people that the Dreyfusses want as neighbors and Mrs. Lieberman wants as tenants – are the married couples found in the suburbs.[37]

[37] Mrs. Lieberman connects apartments to not-quite mensches: "This is a respectable house! Not a honky-tonky!...This is what you get for renting to bachelors!"

Good Neighbor Sam Bissel in God's Own Junkyard

Before he could become *Good Neighbor Sam's* Sam Bissel, CC Baxter had to turn away from what we might call *Apartment* living, a life of extensive coordination and cooperation. For all its anxiety, Sam enjoys suburban life once he pushes work pressures like a big new account and a sham marriage back into the city to make room for what matters – family life – in the suburbs. *Good Neighbor Sam,* in the end, turns away from the sort of shared residential facilities that require an engagement with neighbor schedules and desires, whether in the city or in the suburbs. In doing so, it locates the solvable problems of suburbia in the maintenance of "nature" in common spaces like highways, less in the normalized domestic space of "dormitory suburbs" and more in shared spaces revealed in transit's Thirdspace. If the ugliness of billboard-dotted highways were addressed, the film seems to say, then things would be much better.[38] In this sense, *Good Neighbor Sam's* quarrel with billboards stands in for a concern of the intrusion of business/work into the space of the city-suburb connector, the highway.[39]

Good Neighbor Sam rejoins a CC Baxter-like Organization Man, Sam Bissel, a few years after he's left his apartment and generally settled into the life of an *Apartment*-endorsed suburban mensch – married to a Kubilek-figure, with two kids. *Good Neighbor Sam* presents a detailed expression of the claims Herbert Gans makes in his work on

[38] Granted, the billboards that Sam and Janet attack are located in the city, but as 1960s voices such as Blake's, the architectural society's, Vance Packard's (in *The Hidden Persuaders*) and even Robert Moses indicate, the anti-billboard movement was most powerfully concerned with the uglification of billboards on non-urban landscapes – even Moses hated to see his extensive highway and park system cluttered by billboards.
[39] This approach resembles the model for urban policing and governance articulated by George Kelling in *Fixing Broken Windows* that New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, as well as (in a less belligerent manner) Chicago mayor Richard Daley, implemented during their tenures in the 1990s and later.

Levittown, in which he argues that the placid suburban façade of get-along conformism hides much of the underlying variety of interests and activities in the average suburbanite. Sam Bissel, for instance, in addition to his day job as an adman, moonlights as a billboard-targeting graffiti-artist bigamist (one for family and one for money). In one sense, this is a self-congratulating gesture. The suburbanite can consider him- or herself exceptional in the middle of what seems to be rampant suburban conformity, something the film highlights in its sci-fi flourish of the glasses Sam wears to reveal the truth behind the suburban surface.[40] On the other hand, Sam's utter and total "normalcy" at first papers over but ultimately makes visible a larger cultural dissatisfaction with the suburban built environment, locating suburbia's need for reform in the in-between space of transit that simultaneously links and distinguishes, decorates and uglifies.

Good Neighbor Sam trades on Lemmon's star-guaranteed normalcy to accentuate the farce inherent in an insurance-scam second marriage hatched in a suburban family room. Sam Bissel combines Bud's obsequious other-direction with Sheldrake's suburban debauchery in one perverse promotion-seeking package. Sam exhibits nearly every token of 1960s suburban normalcy: military service during World War II, a white collar job, a GI Bill-supported education, a VA loan house in the suburbs, a wife who does not work outside the house, and two kids. This is not to say that Sam does not struggle against his near-perfect enactment of suburbanity. For all his tokens of conformity, Sam spends a great deal of time working on found-object "motion sculptures" at home as well as at the office. However, Sam assembles his sculpture in the back yard (and in a dark office

[40] This resembles the "sanctimonious suburbanite" argument in Jurca's *White Diaspora.* However, I want to emphasize that my interest lies less in the domestic and/or work space Jurca so ably discusses, but rather in the in-between space of the highway.

corner), leaving the well-tended front yard as the normal façade the Bissels present to the neighborhood. It is only when the sculpture is jostled that Sam's hidden token of difference makes its presence known, in the form of a cacophonous riot of noise – and yet the sculpture is never visible to the neighborhood, hidden as it is by the house on one side and privacy fences on the other. Keeping Sam's uniqueness visually hidden and sonically rare, the long shots that serve as establishing shots and cutaways during the suburban portion of the film cover the same visual terrain bemoaned in the American Institute for Architects short film from 1965, *No Time for Ugliness*.[41] As *No Time's* camera travels around the San Francisco suburbs, the narrator describes housing in San Francisco's suburbs: "deadening in its regularity, saddening in its misuse of natural features. Too often the suburban tract seems to have come out of a mimeograph machine." The pans and tracking shots of tract housing function as iterative narratives for any ugly drive through suburbia; the town names are unimportant – suburban ugliness is uniform.

Mr. Nurdlinger's request for a good family man to direct his account imagines that Sam, like his house, can be pulled off the organization's mimeograph machine. And yet Burke & Hare Advertising – whose name recalls the 19th century Scottish body snatchers and mass murderers – does not so much pull Sam off the mimeograph machine as reach far into the corner, past dozens of very-junior account executives to locate him and try to smooth out the wrinkles. The firm's president, Burke, introduces Sam to Nurdlinger with the assurance that Sam is "the genuine article," a "good husband, good

[41] *No Time for Ugliness* treats ugly suburbs as a monolith but singles out for praise the San Francisco suburbs that "overcome" suburbanity through better – closer to urban – design.

neighbor, a clean-living family man if ever you met one," the kind of man whose "whole life revolves around his family." Sam, however, does not elevate family life to such a position. On the way to work that very day, crossing over the Golden Gate Bridge, Sam's wife Minerva (Dorothy Provine), asks him, "Are you depressed about something?" and Sam can only answer, "No I'm just bored I guess…It's the same job and the same people, same faces and the same community pigpen for an office." Minerva reminds Sam that, "we do have two beautiful children and we have to make a home for them" to encourage him to fight through the boredom. Sam agrees with a guilty smile, but even the pinnacle of perceived normalcy at Burke and Hare does not breathe every breath for the family. Work, not family, colonizes Sam's mind, as in his concern over his shared "pigpen" office, reversing the usual concern over the homogenizing force of suburban living. In fact, the standardization of the office occupies his thoughts not only at work, but in the shared space of the highway *to* work. As he explains his life to Minerva,

> I've been in the same traffic jam going to the same job every day for six years. And so have they [his fellow commuters] Every day all the husbands, we get up and we take the same road into the same job – we even dress alike! We put on the gray suit and hat and that button-down shirt…like sheep.

Minerva, whose name invokes the goddess of heroes, directs Sam's mid-commute thoughts away from work and back toward family, telling him, "that's not true. You're not like everybody else. You're not a sheep, you've got character. And I love you," reassuring him of his heroic, suburban nature. Thus, on his way to work on the day where he will be held up as the best example of a family man, Sam engages the highway as the concretization of the slow creep of work from its city base to the suburbs, family's

sanctuary, conceiving of the in-between space of transit between home and work as the sole province of work.

The literal (Golden Gate) Bridge between city and suburb affords Sam and Minerva time and space discuss the home-based reasons Sam has not to be depressed. While medieval cities had one particular entry point, modern, auto-based cities do not. And yet the bridge that brings Sam into the city is the Golden *Gate*: a bridge *and* an entry point to the city. This physical transition – signaled cinematically through a progression of shots moving from the Bissel driveway to a stock shot of the Bridge to the car interior – also functions as a moment for the Bissels to transition mentally, to take stock of their lives in the pause the narrative's traffic scene provides.[42] These moments and spaces of physical and mental transition form the backbone of architect and planner Mary Otis Stevens' work.[43] As she writes, in *World of Variation*,

> on a larger scale, the concept of transitional zones might include ways of distinguishing between what is of permanent and temporary value in a culture. The task is to create environments that are open in the sense of being capable of absorbing new information and hypotheses, and of relating innovations to fruitful traditions of a society. (24)

Starting with the bridge conversation between Minerva and Sam and moving into the characters' many interactions with the built environment, I want to consider two sources of new information in the suburban built environment – billboards and tract housing. The "permanent" value of family takes form not in the tract house Sam shares with Minerva and their kids, but, rather, in the "temporary" (that is, short-term rental) form of the billboards and tract house Sam shares with his fake wife, Janet (Romy Schneider).

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[42] In chapter 3, I consider this tendency in terms of situationist geography's sense of *détournement.*

[43] Stevens shares writing credit for *World of Variation* with Tom McNulty.

Good Neighbor Sam's opening commute sequence introduces not only Sam's day-to-day routine and its settings, but also the key to unsettling it: his glasses. Frustrated with the predictability of his life, Sam puts on his glasses and looks out the passenger-side window to see not the four men he recognizes from sharing the same traffic all these years, but four sheep, dressed in suits and hats, sitting in a car. Sam's heavy black-framed glasses magically unmask his surroundings intermittently diverting the film into the fantastic to deconstruct the normalcy on which its sex farce depends. Not much later at the office, Sam's glasses reveal a series of gray flannel suited look-alikes who offer the same greeting in succession – as the same kind of suited sheep present in his commute. Not only do the glasses narratively defamiliarize the highway space between work and home, but they also gesture toward obscuring Lemmon-as-Sam, making concrete Sam's distance from the normalcy of his narrative surroundings and cinematic construction. In Sam's magical realist Thirdspace, not even sheep act like sheep: Sam sees not total conformity, but three Dorsets and one Shropshire, showing that decrying conformity is, in itself, conformity and that suburbanites aren't *that* conformist anyway (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

That Sam distinguishes himself from his sheeplike co-commuters should be no surprise, since disavowing one's suburban-ness by displacing it onto all suburbanites *except me* generalizes across a major portion of suburban narratives.[44] What distinguishes *Good Neighbor Sam* appears when this nearly standard, facile critique moves from sheep-commuters to the appearance of billboards that advertise the wrong kind of information, displacing the problem from people to the built environment. Accordingly, spatial practices in relation to the built environment's billboards, and not with other suburbanites, can help suburbia live up to its utopian promise. Sam, it turns out, not only manages the Nurdlinger account, he *is* the account. Family Man Sam is the image Nurdlinger's wants to project. The only problem is, Family Man Sam has also

[44] This tendency, central to Jurca's *White Diaspora*, is not monolithic – filmmakers like Stephen Spielberg and novelists like John Cheever quite like the suburbs.

been posing as husband to his wife's best friend as part of an inheritance scheme. And it is as part of *this* domestic-realm-free family, with this coworker-wife, that Sam shares ad space. When Sam looks out on the new Nurdlinger billboards wearing his magic glasses and sees not his wife Minerva sharing the billboard with him, but his "wife" Janet, he screams out in frightened recognition. Sam's reaction testifies to the film's sense that the normalcy suburbia advertises is shocking, especially in the out-of-scale, visually polluting form of billboards. Glasses that previously revealed the sheep beneath the surface also reveal that the billboard equates wholesome normalcy and bigamy. Sam's truth-revealing glasses offer both a sanctimonious reading – marriage to Minerva becomes appropriately heroic when she is "confused" with Janet, which means the suburbs are not the end of the good life – and a more critical reading, that suburban normalcy is a sham performance moments away from exposure.[45] What *Good Neighbor Sam* creates in Sam's interactions with the built environment is a sense of Sam's escalating panic around his own inability to experience First- and Secondspaces as anything *but* the normal and suburban. Although I by no means want to dismiss the sanctimonious reading, since the suburban self-regard in such a reading presumes the social capital of achieving normalcy, with the film's climax as a guide, I want to focus on the potential in Sam's attempts at generating a critical Thirdspace.

One element of the suburban landscape that *Good Neighbor Sam* exposes as un-natural is the proliferation of billboards along American highways. Peter Blake, in *God's Own Junkyard,* latches on to the portion of anti-billboard sentiment likely to generate

[45] In addition to the obvious punning of Sam and same, the name of the "fake" wife provides the banal-suburbia pun of "Sam and Janet evening" and "some enchanted evening" to play up the sense that suburbia isn't that dreary after all.

results, rooted not in a refusal of suburban consumerism, but in the illusion of a connection to nature that suburbia offers, something unavailable in the city and, thanks to billboards, less and less available in the suburbs. "What manner of people is being reared in these infernal wastelands?" Blake asks.[46] One answer, he replies sadly, "people who no longer see" (33). Sam's magic glasses are an index of the emergent Secondspace of anti-billboard sentiment in suburbia: taught to see, to really see, Sam begins noticing the intrusive and troubling role of billboards in his life.[47] For example, as Sam drives the bribe-seeking private investigator Shiffner around, the dialog of the scene is at best secondary to Sam's slapstick reckless driving through the streets of San Francisco to avoid the omni-present billboards that would provide Shiffner the evidence to expose Sam and Janet. In Blake's terms, Shiffner, like too many Americans, no longer knows how to see. But Sam sees too much; that is, he sees the overwhelming visual presence of billboards. While the American Institute of Architects exhorts citizens to demand "effective ordinances to regulate signs and billboards" as part of a long-range plan for responsible development, Sam doesn't have the time to wait for a metropolitan development plan. His anxious drive with Shiffner pushes him to act more directly: vandalism.[48] The montage of Sam and Janet not de-facing but re-facing a series of Nurdlinger billboards with clown and Frankenstein's monster faces reveals the façade of

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[46] Bradley Macdonald notes in his historical overview of Marxism that by the late-1990s, "the ongoing work of Kalle Lasn and the magazine, *Adbusters*, has intentionally drawn upon the situationist practices of *détournement* to level successful forays in what Lasn calls 'culture jamming'" against commercialism's visual and discursive pollution (85).

[47] Blake begins his polemic by engaging suburbanization – "Our suburbs are interminable wastelands dotted with millions of monotonous little houses on monotonous little lots and crisscrossed by high-ways lined with billboards" (8) – but concentrates his critique on the negative aesthetic value of billboards, regardless of location.

[48] *Good Neighbor Sam* precedes Edward Abbey's billboard-torching environmentalist novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* by eleven years.

performed suburban normalcy that Sam/Lemmon represents, but not by peeling away the layers of consumerism and ugly, unsustainable development, but by papering them over with another, more aesthetically palatable performance that suburbanites might still see (see Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4).[49]

[49] *No Time for Ugliness* asks, "will we have disorder or design? Ugliness or beauty? More than ever, the environment we live in, the America we see, is a matter of choice – and of shrinking time." As the narrator makes his claim for technocratic solutions by planners, the image of a planner overlaps with an extreme long shot of a city and its outskirts, visually coding the architect/planner as a sort of benevolent deity looking over the city and suburbs, ensuring that things not only work, but also are beautiful.

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

Billboard placement hinges on the visibility roadsides afford, in the form of the open space of the right of way or the unused sides and roofs of city buildings visible from the interstate highways cutting through the city, where ads enjoy captive, traffic-stalled targets. Billboards and post-War interstate building go hand in hand to squelch a sense of cohesion, since, as Blake notes, "as these highways cut across our cities, they form massive walls that mutilate our communities by chopping them up into disconnected bits and pieces" (109). Likewise, in a series of images of cars clattering down highways in front of a visual riot of signs and billboards, *No Time for Ugliness* defines sprawl as "the big loud sell on the march. Clutter." The physical boundary of the highway pairs with another, smaller-scaled boundary, the billboard, to cut the metropolitan region up not only in Firstspace – as in the isolation of Red Hook after the construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and the four-lane highway that feeds it – but also visually and discursively, in Secondspace. The highway becomes disconnected from its surroundings by a ring of billboards that insulate spaces surrounding the highway from connections with the highway users. Only Sam and his magic Thirdspace glasses can bridge this divide by recognizing the physical and discursive links between home and work must be rehabilitated to make the transition recognizable and pleasurable.

However, the money and careers Minerva, Janet, and Sam enjoy comes not from an instantiation of more egalitarian gender relations, but from the exploitation of those relations and a brief peek, for Sam, into how women experience suburban space, thus drawing out the need to confront the billboard blight to make the transition between city and suburb effective. The exploitation of gender roles is fairly plain: Janet only inherits if she's a married woman; Sam only advances if he's a married man. In neither case do

Janet or Sam actually live out those expectations; rather, they put on a public performance of the gendered roles of "husband" and "wife." The one exception to this is written on the built environment. Once the sham marriage performance begins, Sam's experience of the shift between home space and work space becomes very muddled. To sell the charade of his job as Janet's wife, Sam stays the night at her house. The next morning, Sam leaves one job (Janet's "husband") to go to another (ad man). That night, he goes back to Janet's house in the suburbs for his second job, and must sneak away from work – the performance of married life – finally to arrive "at home" with Minerva The transition zone familiar to suburbanites – the highway space full of commuter sheep – disappears from Sam's view (and from the film in its madcap final third). To punctuate this total unsettling of Sam's spatial experience, his real wife kisses him goodbye – at night – as he goes next door, to work as another woman's husband. Dashing between marriages and jobs, between city and suburb that both represent work space, Sam experiences the Problem With No Name, in that his built environment does not grant a space where he is not on the clock, working.[50]

Sam's interactions with the commuter-sheep and the billboards show that he is much more attuned to his built environment than is "normal," and in his moments of heightened awareness to his environment he generates Thirdspace critiques that at least momentarily imagine alternatives to suburban First- and Secondspace. Because Jack Lemmon plays Sam Bissel, Sam represents the everyman and his concerns, no matter how much they reify the status quo, also offer insight into what middle-class suburbanites

[50] As Betty Friedan puts it, "A man, of course, leaves the house for most of the day. But the feminine mystique forbids the woman this" (245-6). Success in his sham marriage will only make money for Janet – thus Sam's labor at "home" with Janet is unpaid.

considered troubling – but fixable – in their suburban landscape. In this manner, *Good Neighbor Sam* functions as a how-to manual for 1960s discussions of the cultural and aesthetic blight of billboards. As articulated in *God's Own Junkyard,* a very real middle-America ambivalence over billboards and what they have to say about "us" exists in suburbia and *Good Neighbor Sam.* It bears noting that New York Parks Commissioner (among other job titles) Robert Moses railed against billboards as ruining his New York thruways, and that Vance Packard, popularizer extraordinaire, also detested the billboards used by hidden persuaders. While the expanding suburbs may be cluttering up the nation, these voices seem to say, suburbanites can address the aesthetic problems of suburbanization, cloaking suburban expansion in the trees and shrubs of the yeoman tradition, rather than gaudy billboards of consumerism. Removing billboards makes way, in a "best case" scenario, for the in-between highway space to feature not the creeping city of advertising, but a link to the rural, in the form of trees. These trees, in turn, will hide further monotonous suburban development with tokens of nature, rather than advertisements identified with the city – and with Sam's line of work, at that. But once Jack Lemmon moves to the Los Angeles area in 1973's *Save the Tiger,* anti-billboard ideology has, for the most part, been defeated, and Levittowns have grown into their trees, making suitable alternatives more difficult to imagine in the face of such hyper-normalcy.

Save the Tiger from The China Syndrome

Save the Tiger begins in the same manner as *Good Neighbor* Sam: in bed with Jack Lemmon and his wife, (in this case, Patricia Smith). However, while Sam and Minerva play comic footsie in *Good Neighbor, Tiger's* Harry Stoner shoots up out of bed

screaming, wakened by another nightmare. And while Sam and Minerva's young children barrel into the room, interrupting their parents' cuddling, Harry laments to his wife that since they'll be away from each other for a few days, "I wish we would have made it last night." What distinguishes *Save the Tiger* most strongly from *Good Neighbor* is the immediate undercurrent of social upheaval, which appears as soon as Harry gets out of bed to turn on the television news that abounds with disasters natural and human-made and, quite tellingly, the crumbling infrastructure of the Los Angeles area.

The infrastructure in *Save the Tiger* dwarfs those who navigate it as it falls apart, serving cars more than drivers but neither particularly well. Cars enjoy such importance that Harry confesses to his wife that the man who parks his car at the office – and thus controls Harry's ability to make his escape from the office – causes the majority of the stress that ruins his sleep. As Harry leaves the house and pulls out of the driveway, we follow along as he drives past houses in his suburban Los Angeles home town – Beverly Hills – that are copies of established architectural styles, just as the Capri Casuals Harry sells are knock-offs of prestigious clothing labels, continuing the undercurrent of work concerns colonizing the transitional road space between work and home.[51] Harry's commuting trip is not elided; in fact his trip to work takes up more than five minutes of screen time through a town that,

> thanks to earthquake legislation, is literally a topless city. It grows by creeping through valleys, up hills, stripping earth and then reclothing it in Western-pastel, a muddied blend of low Spanish and low modern styles. Up on the freeway, one crosses this discolored carpet of a town without

[51] Woody Allen makes the same jokes about LA housing four years later, in *Annie Hall*. In 1963, Lemmon described the paucity of beautiful buildings in LA: "The fact is, 80 to 90% of it is terrible. It's the ugliest city in the world." (*TIME* 19 April 1963).

> seeing much of it. Railings, poles, signs make a tunnel. Downtown buildings are hidden by the placards that mark exits and bifurcations and irrevocable chances to weave out of one freeway or another. (Wills 151)

Harry uses the in-between-ness of his car trip to work to relax: he listens to music, gets lost in thought at a red light, and even picks up a hitchhiker, Margot. Interspersed throughout these pleasurable on-the-fly engagements with his surroundings, cutaway shots of the metropolitan landscape insist on the presence of sprawl and the tyranny of an infrastructure designed for cars, placing a car in the foreground while cramming the background of the image with the spread of houses along the hills of the Valley. While the opening-week Variety review claims that the film "has fun with the local landscape" (Variety 1971-1974), when Harry picks up and drops off Margot, these landscape shots make clear that Margot, who hitches up and down Sunset all day, is out of step with the surroundings. As Harry's car pulls away from the curb, the only buildings in the shot are the hundreds scattered far away, in the rear of the image. The foreground, where Margot stands, holds only a piece of sidewalk and a light pole, placing the activity and vitality of the area within reach only with a car, effectively writing the pedestrian out of the equation.

Figure 2.5

The disappearance of the human scale in Harry's suburban life takes form as Harry, at the end of the film, wanders into a park and watches from the outfield fence as a group of children play baseball A boy hits a home run, and Harry picks up the ball. As he recites his litany of great unappreciated forgotten players, Harry heaves the ball far over the infield, out of the park in the other direction. The children shrug their shoulders at Harry, chase down the ball, and keep playing. The last shot of the film, which runs for the entirety of the credits, leaves Harry a tiny figure at the outfield fence, watching the kids play on the diamond, with a group of houses massing on the other side of the road behind the park. Harry overthrows the infield because the park is so small – his wild throw from the outfield lands the only place it can land: the road that feeds the houses that consume all the space around the park. Harry's nostalgia spatializes itself as the baseball field hemmed in on all sides by highways, office parks, and sprawling housing developments, which will soon be paved over and forgotten like the craft he and Meyer idealize. While early reviews of *Save the Tiger* located its social critique in Harry's inability to maintain an unsustainable *personal* level of consumption, it seems to me that

the excesses of the built environment make the same critique of out-of-control consumption far more eloquently in the images of southern California sprawl writ large, starting with Harry's commute, and terminating in his ambiguous surrender at the ball field hemmed in by a culture of sprawl of which Sam feels less and less a part (see Figure 2.6).

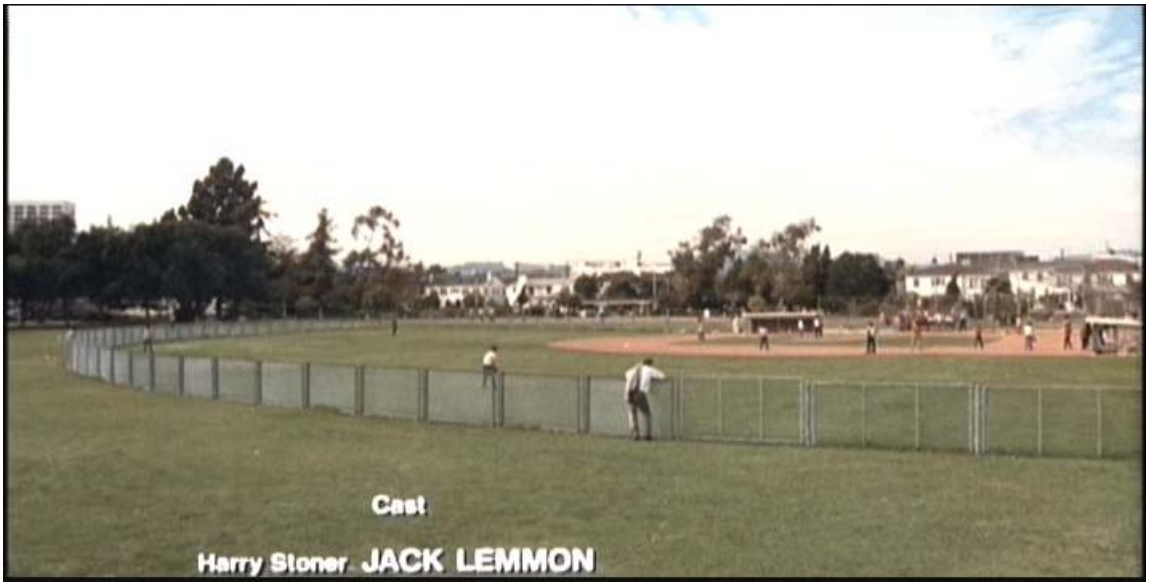

Figure 2.6

Sprawl motivates the construction of not only the highways that hem in Harry's ball field, but also the construction of power plants, nuclear in particular, to light up the ever-growing suburbs.[52] Harry does not misapprehend Los Angeles' growth – between 1950 and 1980, the LA region more than doubled in population, growing from nearly five million to more than eleven and a half million by the start of the eighties. *The China Syndrome's* meltdown scenario locates the end point of suburban expansion's ability to overcome bad individuals like *The Apartment's* Sheldrake who control the public infrastructure that feeds sprawl. Where once Lemmon's eager young Organization man

[52] After seventeen nuclear plants went online in the 1960s, sixty went online in the 1970s, more than tripling the number of nuclear plants in the United States. Worldwide, between 1967 and 1979, eighty-one nuclear plants went online worldwide.

could strive and escape to the suburbs to grow up, late-career Jack Lemmon appears as static within the Organization that has become synonymous with suburban life. *China Syndrome's* Jack Godel has little hope for promotion because his job – head safety engineer - rests at the high end of the Organization chain; similarly, Godel couldn't be any more sub-urban: he lives in what appears to be a newer development on the expanding suburban fringe powered by his nuclear plant. In both senses, a meltdown marks the end point of both sets of expertise, the last moment of Jack Lemmon's usefulness to suburbanization. Historian Garry Wills describes the route to Richard Nixon's boyhood home in Wittier, California as, "the crumbling roadbed, that is Nixon's forgotten America" (186), and the film begins with a camera wandering over the southern California highway system, trailing a car that arrives at the Ventana power plant. Surveying the plant's control room, a cynical television news cameraman Richard (Michael Douglas) notes that the men he sees barely look old enough to know what they're doing, an observation verified when Jack must emerge from his office to stave off a meltdown. Just as much as the narrative's resolution of Kimberly Wells's (Jane Fonda) education as an investigative journalist, the repeated close-ups of Jack as he becomes progressively more aware of the dangers of nuclear power as represented by Ventana's near-meltdown personalize the necessary radicalization of the Average American to guide the viewer through the film's plea for political awakening. However, the novice Kimberly's education starts from zero, while Jack is the expert, slowly coming to realize that the massive expansion of suburbia – based in the kind of everyday activities his co-workers chide anti-nuclear protestors for taking for granted, like turning on the hairdryer

or flipping on the lights – is based on a system that values the profits that mass-consuming suburbanization generates, potential environmental costs be damned.

While the environmental costs are great, Kimberly and Richard can find no one to give their well-founded concerns a hearing because they do not enjoy the credibility and access needed to do so. But Jack Godel, who has worked at the Ventana plant since before it was open, does have that kind of credibility. And so, when Jack commandeers the control room, demanding a televised interview to make the public out there in suburbia aware of how dangerous nuclear power can be, it's not cheesecake ratings magnet Kimberly or scruffy ideologue Richard making the claim, but, as nuclear plant employee Ted puts it, "the sanest man I know." Kimberly and Richard can crusade all they want, but it takes Jack Godel to verify their claims. Or, put another way, Michael Douglas (the film's producer) and Jane Fonda (above-the-title star, activist) can crusade all they want, but the cooperation of that paragon of normalcy Jack Lemmon strengthens *The China Syndrome's* political resonance and relevance beyond the activist population.[53] *China Syndrome* showed on American screens in the weeks leading up to and after the accident at Three Mile Island, and while Lemmon was already environmentally engaged – he narrated the environmentalist television documentary *The Slow Guillotine,* directed by Don Widener, in 1969 for almost no pay because he believed so strongly in the issue's importance – he validates the politics of *China Syndrome* – deploying his everyman star persona to generate the credibility needed to forcefully sell

[53] My account bears some resemblance to Peter Lev's in *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*, but his interest in Jane Fonda as a star and the tendency of her films to follow a melodramatic arc for the female lead leaves Lemmon as a side note.

the culpability of nuclear power in the martyrdom of Jack Godel.[54] As David Ingram notes in *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*, Godel's "radicalization is, paradoxically, an act of loyalty to the nuclear industry" (169) that profits from the perpetuation of the sprawling suburban Firstspace that continues to generate Organization jobs like nuclear power plant engineer for Jack Lemmon.[55]

No Country for Grumpy Old Men: Jack Lemmon gets old for the suburbs

In the later portion of his career, Jack Lemmon appears in roles that confront the question, what happens when we get old? Lemmon in the nineties, in *Simpsons* cameos, as Shelley Levine in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and as John Gustafson in *Grumpy Old Men*, locates a significant shortcoming in the sprawling suburban built environment for a graying population. As Levine in *Glengarry Glen Ross* – and *The Simpsons'* take on Levine, Gil Gunderson – Lemmon hawks houses, honing in on the commodification of the very token of suburban life valorized in *The Apartment*. Sam Bissel shows that his house is not so much an asset to be flipped than a place to call his own by individualizing it with found-object sculpture and a pet duck, not the sort of things that add to property value. Such a sense of a house as a dwelling and not an investment is a million miles removed from the sell-or-starve *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and even its *Simpsons* parody, for a near-retirement suburbanite.

[54] Lemmon narrated a television documentary, *Plutonium: Element of Risk* (Ingram 168).
[55] In contrast to the problematic relationship between energy politics and suburbia in the economically difficult 1970s that Lemmon/Godel represents, Rick Perlstein, in *Nixonland*, describes the version of political activism Jane Fonda represents as, "the tragic, otherworldly naiveté of Hollywood celebrities in politics: as if the world were a Henry Fonda movie, in which the pure-hearted idealist always won the day" (705).

The monolog that establishes the Cadillac or unemployment conflict of *Glengarry* – the only scene David Mamet added for the film version – features the man from Downtown, Blake (Alec Baldwin), delivering a hyper-macho, homophobic pep talk to the assembled salesmen. When Blake steps behind his briefcase to produce the "brass balls" he claims it takes to sell real estate, leaving the balls dangling in front of his crotch, the scene cuts to a reaction shot of Levine, who covers his face and looks away from Blake, less because of the bad language and more because of his pompous self-inflation and belligerence. This reaction opposes the suburban normalcy and squareness associated with Lemmon's star persona to Lemmon-as-Levine back in the city. Levine not only dangles at the end of his rope, but swings out over the abyss of the suburban houses that hold out the potential for his rescue. *Glengarry* does very little to hide its roots on the stage, keeping its settings to a minimum: Chinese restaurant, office, the street between the restaurant and the office, the parking lot behind the office. Levine's patter during cold calls carries his years of experience in its polish – his usual tone of scratchy resignation switches to a higher-pitched voice full of glad-handing smoothness, turning telephone booths into imaginary offices, where he frequently pauses his spiel to ask his phantom secretary "Grace" to make first class reservations. Of all the salesmen, only Levine leaves this claustrophobic city block – to go to a sit, his chance at a sale and a spot on the board to save his job. Upon arriving in his lead's suburban house, Levine behaves in an antic, avuncular manner, full of practiced chumminess and small talk tilted to sales. But Larry, his quarry, firmly and repeatedly says no. Levine's failed last-chance sales pitch restages the story of suburban sprawl on the small scale: as the new version of Successful Young Man, Larry, escorts him out the door, Levine has no answer, just a

slouch rooted in the failures of his sales pitch and his wife's budget-busting health problems. Levine and older, inner-ring suburbs are discarded for something newer, further along the highway.

Beaten down by his failure in the suburbs, Levine returns to the city to steal the hot new leads that will give him a second chance at success. Although his burglary fails, Levine has one tiny moment of success, acting as Jack Lemmon to help hotshot sales leader Ricky Roma (Al Pacino) improvise his way through re-closing a sale with a reluctant mark, Lingk. Roma describes Levine's fictional character to Lingk as "Jack Lemmon": "It's funny you know, you get a picture of it. Corporation type. Company man, all business." While the ends of the performance Levine puts on with Roma are corrupt, it is Levine/Lemmon's persona of normalcy and rectitude that carries through even into the fiction of *Glengarry.* The film ends with Levine caught and arrested, unable to maintain the Lemmon persona Roma conjures for him – "put out of my misery," as he puts it – and the Chicago elevated train rushing past in a noisy blur, wiping him out of the picture and leaving success to Levine's inheritors, the next generation of Blake and Roma.[56]

The children in *Grumpy Old Men* will also inherit the suburbs, or the idealized small town on which the suburbs are based (in this case Wabasha, Minnesota), but only after their parents, Lemmon's John Gustafson and Max Goldman (Walter Matthau), find places to live. Wabasha is introduced in a series of exteriors – a train station, a frozen lake dotted with fishing shacks, and snow-covered streets lined with well-kept houses.

[56] This inheritance occurs in the film narrative as well as in industrial history: *Glengarry Glen Ross* seems to pass the Serious Actor torch from Lemmon to Pacino, although they are fairly close in age.

Walking up to one of these houses, a bill collector looks for Gustafson to collect a sizable tax debt. As nimble as Gustafson is in avoiding his bill collector – climbing out of second-story windows, sneaking down icy paths – his health, and the health of the elderly in general, is one of two obsessions he and Goldman share, the other being mock-hostile one-upmanship of each other. The grumpy old men speak approvingly of death, going so far as to envy their friend Chuck. Upon hearing the news that Chuck died in his sleep, Goldman sighs, "lucky bastard," and Gustafson nods his head in agreement. This welcoming attitude toward death stems from the tenuous housing stability suburban Wabasha offers its elderly; for example, Gustafson's father – at more than ninety years old – lives in a fishing *shack* on the lake. The more the bill collector looks for him, the more Gustafson turns to *his* fishing shack for sanctuary, and when one of Goldman's pranks goes overboard, sinking Gustafson's shack, Gustafson finally admits to his financial troubles, having no housing options left.

The pathos inherent in *Grumpy Old Men* has very little to do with the narrative resolution of Gustafson's romantic pursuit of Ariel (Ann Margaret), which is, at best a secondary though still telling concern. Rather, *Grumpy Old Men* generates its pathos – and its appeal – through Goldman's rescue of Gustafson from penury and homelessness. Or, to put it even more clearly, *Grumpy Old Men* rescues Jack Lemmon, Everyman, from the disaster of disappearance urban ethnic enclave-dwellers like *The Apartment's* Dreyfusses experienced. To rescue Jack Lemmon is to salvage an inhospitable post-War suburbia for the elderly. *Grumpy Old Men* locates the problem of an aging suburban population in their inability to consume as suburbanites must – even at the baseline level of maintaining their residence. Lemmon's Gustafson shows that the graying first wave of

Organization Man pioneers no longer has what it takes to have a house, much less a life in the new Information Age suburbia. The gallows humor Goldman and Gustafson show in their repeated desire to die without lingering considers sudden death preferable to a burial in medical or property tax debts, or exile to the city from which they graduated long ago. *Grumpy Old Men*, like a good comedy, ends with a wedding, but it also ends with Gustafson leaving his house to live with his new wife Ariel. This ending ambivalently maintains suburban housing continuity in that it not only retains the Gustafson house for family raising – the mixed family of Jacob (Max's son), Melanie (John's daughter) and Melanie's daughter – but also perpetuates the sense that only still-employed people might have a house and a place – in the suburbs. Ariel, after all, still actively teaches at Winona State, leaving Gustafson in a position akin to Harry Stoner at the end of *Save the Tiger* – fenced out of the suburban baseball field, left with no other option than watching younger people play the game on a field that used to be his.

CHAPTER III

FINDING YOURSELF ON THE WAY: DETOURNEMENT AND THE SUBURBAN TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

John Keats – the mid-century American polemicist, not the Romantic poet – paints his vision of the post-war suburbs in broad, acidic strokes. Keats wrote two extended critiques of American suburbia, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), a book-length indictment of suburban housing, and a brief on the suburban love affair with the automobile, *The Insolent Chariots* (1958). In *Chariots*, Keats frames the dollar costs of cars with the arithmetic of predatory lending and corporate malfeasance, which, in his account, drives the prices ever upward. For Keats, the explosion of interstate highways facilitates a degraded aesthetic touring/tourist experience in a rapidly homogenizing culture. While he frequently loses sight of a possible critique of the structural problems in suburban planning to focus on reformist better-business issues like price gouging and shoddy construction, Keats beautifully pinpoints the rapid normalization of a car-based suburban culture in one short paragraph near his conclusion. "There's a man in Connecticut," he writes,

> who drives to his New York City job every day. He knows he averages 20 miles an hour in rush hour traffic at the best of times. He knows the train averages 14 miles an hour faster. He knows it would be cheaper to take the train, because his automobile costs him nearly 12 [cents] a mile to own and use. Yet, he drives to work. Why? 'Mainly,' he said, 'I don't like public transportation. If there's going to be public transportation, let's have it private. Besides, my car is a lot more comfortable than any seat on that square-wheeled railroad.' (216)

Keats leads with a cost-benefit analysis of transportation modes that presupposes that a rational actor would choose the cheaper, train, option. However, Keats's summary of

post-War transportation choices, economics loses out to the charms of spatial privacy. In spite of Keats's desire for transportation choices to be informed by clear-eyed cents-per-mile analysis, he recognizes that suburbanites overwhelmingly choose car commuting for personal, affective, and sensual reasons.[57]

The preference for private car commuting carries hidden costs that Keats adds to the per-mile bill – reduced work productivity as well as false consciousness. The average car commuter

> comes to the office badly in need of coffee, jittery and irritable from his mutational bout with the traffic, but still thinking he's been more comfortable in his car than he would have been on the train. He thinks that driving his car means he's not part of a public transportation system, when in fact the sole difference between himself and a train rider is that the one is fighting traffic every inch of the way while the other spends the same miles reading the morning paper. Otherwise, neither has real privacy nor freedom of action. Both are sitting in New York-bound machine, with other sitters in the endless line before and behind him. (Keats 216)

In other words, not only does the car commuter arrive at work less ready and able to work, he (for Keats the commuter is almost certainly a man) also mistakenly believes that he is a paragon of rugged individualism, unlike the sheep on the train. What Keats's commuter fails to recognize, however, is the extent to which, while train riders certainly share public space and sacrifice their personal convenience for the collective, so too do car drivers. The United States interstate highway system is, after all, the largest *public*

[57] Nick Paumgarten's 2007 *New Yorker* article "There and Back Again: The Soul of the Commuter" observes this very phenomenon, in that commuting "reflects the notion that many people, who are supposedly rational (according to classical economic theory, at least), commute even though it makes them miserable. They are not, in the final accounting, adequately compensated" (64).

works project in the history of human civilization.[58] But the preference for car commuting that Keats locates in 1950s American culture is by no means monolithic. In fact, texts that resist the purported omnipresence of the suburban car-commute not only make plain the allure of the suburban logic of commuting but also reveal the beginnings of an alternative to car-centered development and.

Post-war suburbanites use not only house and office environments, but also the in-between spaces of the metropolitan infrastructure to consider their lives. The texts I examine in this chapter share a preoccupation with the experience and management of the time and space between home-suburb and work-city. I want to posit that suburban narratives from the 1950s crystallize three enduring trends in using the suburban infrastructure to juggle what Wilson calls, in *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the "four worlds" of suburban life – the domestic past, the work past, the domestic present, and the work present – by engaging, to a greater and lesser degree, in what Situationist geographers call *détournement*, a spatial practice that reuses "preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble," creating "a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression" (Debord "Detournement" 55).[59] In other words, a re-enchantment of the

[58] The highway more closely resembles what Jürgen Habermas calls the public sphere – "the sphere of private people com[ing] together as a public" (27) – than that other embodiment of suburbia, the shopping mall, which is a privately owned space of consumption where the "general rules governing relations" are *not* open for debate.

[59] I analyze *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Phyllis McGinley, and Jean Kerr because of their status as works of what Georg Lukács calls acculturation: "The novel of acculturation," he writes, is "the exemplary bourgeois cultural project…lead[ing] a character through a variety of encounters and experiences and brings him or her out the other end a change and generally morally [re]formed figure….The alienated youth is reintegrated and accommodated to a generally conservative moral and social order" (K. Ross 48). Or, as Fredric Jameson argues in *Postmodernism*, "If there is 'realism' in the 1950s…it is presumably to be found there, in mass cultural representation, the only kind of art willing (and able) to deal with the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family

everyday built environment. Radical geographer Guy Debord argues that to counter the Modernist rationalization of urban regions into single-use zones, "a renovated cartography seems appropriate for immediate utilization" ("Introduction").[60] For Debord, resistance to hegemonic spatial practices starts at the tactical, street level "using the elements or terrain of the dominant social order to one's own ends, for a transformed purpose; integrating actual or past productions into a superior construction or milieu" (K. Ross 42). To begin, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* reveals that satisfaction with suburban domestic Firstspace depends not only on its difference from work space, but also on its distance from the city, which creates opportunities for Thirdspace introspection and decision-making in the time and space of transit.[61] The Rath approach depends on the time and space of transit to provide more than mere physical transportation, to provide a time and space for contemplation, and thus inch toward *détournement*. When Tom Rath rides the commuter train and Betsy Rath drives the highway, the lived space of the city-suburb infrastructure facilitates the reconciliation of home and work in an idealization of a suburban domestic-centered life. Phyllis McGinley's work reifies hegemonic spatial practices and representations, idealizing the domestic-centered suburban life with an infrastructure that insulates suburbia, both physically and ideologically, from any *détournement* that would hinder the perpetuation

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in the small town, of normalcy and nondeviant everyday life…[of] the misery of happiness" (280).

[60] Because this project is concerned with American culture, I draw the city-suburb distinction along these lines, even though the city-suburb distinction in Debord's Paris is quite different.

[61] Sociologist Peter Rossi rightly notes that, "the problem with location as an attribute of housing is that the issue is location with respect to what?" (40). That is, is the suburb close enough for convenience, safety, and the kind of Thirdspace I describe in this chapter and throughout this project?

of that gendering. Finally, Jean Kerr's relationship to suburban space and commuting shares with Tom Rath the desire to use the train for its potential therapeutic use, but directed toward the city, maintaining and valorizing urbane Secondspace, and toward a destabilization of the gendering of suburbia present in *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and McGinley's work. Kerr's train trips between city and suburb represent alternative physical and ideological itineraries between city and suburb, functioning as *détournements* that refuse the representation of early post-war suburbia as an infantilized domestic Secondspace the comfortable middle class uncritically genders as feminine by ceding it to feminized servants and children. If, as Guy Debord writes, "everyday life, policed and mystified by every means, is a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it" (qtd in Macdonald 73), then the spatial practices inherent in all three approaches will illustrate the importance of an occlusion of transit in the management of suburban identity and ideology. This association between the spaces of transit and self-analysis in 1950s narratives valorizes the maintenance of the distance between suburb and city, between houses and public spaces, as a benefit, effectively making denser suburban development, which would minimize such moments of transit, less desirable and less likely. These texts create the world that later texts like the films *The Stepford Wives* and *Falling in Love* inhabit, where both the urban and suburban offer work and family stress, while the time and space of transit between and through them delivers on the suburban promise: a calm spot away from work.[62]

[62] In their article "Stress that Doesn't Pay: The Commuting Paradox," economists Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer define the commuter's paradox along the strict house-office binary that therapeutic Thirdspace confronts: "According to economics, the burden of commuting is chosen when compensated either on the labor or on the housing market so that individuals' utility is equalized. However, in a direct test of this strong notion of

Following the Tire and Train tracks of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit

Although ostensibly concerned with the suburban ideology that separates the world into the distinct realms of "suburb-home-female" and "city-work-male" connected by a commute, *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* imagines its protagonist Tom Rath's life as constituted by *four* spatial and temporal parts:

> There was the crazy, ghost-ridden world of his grandmother and his dead parents. There was the isolated, best-not-remembered would in which he was a paratrooper. There was the matter of fact, opaque-glass-brick-partitioned world of places like the United Broadcasting Company and the Schanenhauser Foundation. And there was the entirely separate world populated by Betsy and Janey and Barbara and Pete, the only one of the four worlds worth a damn. (Wilson 22)

Tom's new job at the United Broadcasting Company, the job he considers the key to a better life, does nothing to connect the worlds. Likewise, Tom's grandmother's death does not so much reconnect the past and the present, as it improves home life. Once the estate is settled, combined with Tom's UBC salary, the family will be able to live in a new, bigger, and better house. Writing in *The New Yorker's* "Annals of Psychology," Malcolm Gladwell, with the benefit of fifty years of hindsight, notes that *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* "is supposed to be an argument for the importance of family over career. But Rath's three children – the object of his sacrifice – are so absent from the narrative and from Rath's consciousness that these days he'd be called an absentee father" (75), highlighting the importance of bridging the gaps among the four worlds as much as satisfactorily inhabiting them. Before Tom starts his new job with UBC, the first ten chapters of the novel move between Connecticut and New York in textual gaps,

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equilibrium, we find that people with longer commuting times report systematically lower subjective well-being."

enforcing the spatio-temporal boundaries Tom perceives between the four worlds. Tom's last day at Schanenhauser represents this strict distinction in its shift from work Firstspace, "He worked right through the day, unobtrusively making sure that Dick Haver knew it," to home Firstspace, "When Tom got back to Westport that night, he found the house spotless, and an enormous steak dinner in the oven awaiting him" (Wilson 37) in the empty Secondspace of a paragraph break, representing the commute as simultaneously the suburb's constitutive absence and the key to its usefulness.

In *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit's* plot, Tom Rath makes thirteen trips between Connecticut and New York before changing jobs. Only one – an unplanned and irregular trip from New York to South Bay – appears in the body of the text as a represented event.[63] The text's refusal to represent trips between home and work places both the space and time of commuting outside the novel, and renders traveling to and from the workplace as the constitutive absence to the story of Tom's life. Paul Ricoeur, considering the times and spaces that constitute narrative, argues that

> every narrative combines two dimensions [of time] in various proportions, one chronological, the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events. (43)

The episodic dimension of *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* inhabits Westport, South Bay, and New York, stitching together the "significant whole" of the four parts of Tom's life while barely noting the literal spaces between those worlds.[64] Moving Tom between

[63] This trip is treated, to return to Gerard Genette's terminology, as a singulative narrative – it occurs once and is narrated once.

[64] Tom does look out the window on Harlem, but, as an unplanned, irregular trip, this experience is already coded as outside the usual order of operations. Similarly, a non-commuting drive between South Bay and Westport is represented as a novelty.

home and work in textual breaks places the chronological events of Tom's life in either suburban Westport/South Bay or New York; for the novel, neither time nor space exists in between, in the commute. Though the novel is told in third person, it concentrates almost entirely on the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit's, that is, Tom's experiences. Thus, the "significant whole" of the novel's first third, Tom's life story, is a world connected by the "configurational dimension" of Tom's physical *presence* in and relative control of a time and space, not a connecting *experience* of time and space. Betsy, whom the novel never places outside of the suburbs, spurs Tom to change his commute to break the "rut" of a connection maintained only through physical presence. Neither solution changes the commute itself – Tom still moves between Westport and New York City – but each solution does demonstrate an awareness of the experience of commuting. Betsy pushes Tom to de-familiarize his commute – she argues for changing the destination (leaving the Schanenhauser Foundation for UBC in chapter 4) and the origin (she tells Tom to walk to the station in chapter 11), making the events that occur within the time and space of Tom's changed commuting experience narratively and discursively accessible.[65]

Wilson renders the commute invisible both formally and narratively, both through lacunae in the text and through gaps in character perceptions of spatial use. Early in the novel, Betsy renders commuting invisible by not perceiving it as part of the structure of

[65] Malcolm Gladwell puzzles over the fact that *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* privileges Tom fathering an illegitimate child over the accidental fragging of his friend Mahoney as the key War Trauma: "The part of Rath's war experience that leaves him truly guilt-ridden is the adulterous affair that he has with a woman named Maria while waiting for redeployment orders in Rome…Today it is Rath's affair with Maria that would be rationalized and explained away. He was a soldier, after all, in the midst of war" (Gladwell 76). Regardless of *what* the biggest problem is, the interstitial *where* of its address (textually and narratively) remains.

Tom's daily experiences. Evaluating the changes in their lives since Tom returned from the war, Betsy thinks to herself,

> poor Tom has just had to work awfully hard, and he has lots of worries on his mind. And I've been tired, what with taking care of the kids and all. We're both exhausted most of the time – the Tired Thirties, the doctor called it once, the time when people have children, and have to make good at jobs, and buy houses, and all the rest of it. We're both just tired out. That's why nothing seems to be much fun any more. (Wilson 112)

Like Tom, Betsy separates the world into distinct segments – work, home, and "all the rest of it." In addition to taking care of the children, Betsy drives Tom to the train station in the morning and picks him up in the evening. Yet Betsy never names travel time in her list of reasons for exhaustion.[66] Betsy conceives of the house as directing the structure of her experiences, and work directing Tom's. But for Betsy nothing rests in-between home-suburbs and work-city, only a boundary line that reveals the commute the spatial practice that, by unsettling the boundary line, might free up fun and energy – *détournement's* "crisis in happiness."

Even in the commutes represented in *Gray Flannel*, Tom's experience is never entirely transparent – it occurs in the gaps of the text. Filing into the train as part of an anonymous mob, Tom uses the commute to assess the quality of life in his home town: "He joined a throng of men pushing to get aboard the train and, with his chin on his chest, sat thinking about his daughter's school" (Wilson 233). Tom appears to be ready to use his commuting time to work through the difficulties in his life, but access to his thoughts is pre-empted by the chapter break. The next chapter begins, "Two days later, Tom moved into Hopkins' outer office" (Wilson 233). The text's move from Tom, thinking about his daughter's crowded public school, to Hopkins' inner office, implies that the

[66] Phyllis McGinley blames taxes; Jean Kerr blames children.

solution to his problems rests in the work world; a raise from Hopkins would pay for a private school education for Tom's children. But instead of a representation of Tom's thoughts during the commute, the text offers only the trace of textual juxtaposition to imply what Tom thinks, replicating the structure of commuting's on-again off-again significance for Tom.

The repeated elision of Tom's commute between chapters similarly trains *Gray Flannel* readers not to consider the time and space between home and work. When Wilson uses a chapter break differently, it is immediately apparent that something distinct is occurring in Tom's life: Between chapters fifteen and sixteen, the textual blank space that has repeatedly elided home-work commutes instead moves Tom between work and more work. Tom, who gives up an evening out with the neighbors to put in extra hours at the office for his UBC boss Hopkins, ends chapter fifteen thinking, "I always heard [Hopkins] could drive men and make them like it" (115). In addition to the novel's established internal logic for chapter breaks, the late-night timing of the scene and its echo of the commute – Hopkins "drives" men – create the expectation of yet another invisible commute. Chapter sixteen begins, "A week later, just when Tom was forgetting his apprehension about meeting Caesar Gardella, it happened," definitively placing Tom at work in the second sentence: "He had been working late on the speech, and it was about seven-thirty when he rang for the elevator" (115). In much the same way Tom temporarily loses track of the potential of *détournement* in the excitement over his new job, the novel's form recapitulates Tom's engrossment in work. Wilson demonstrates textually that the UBC job has taken over Tom's life by "commuting" the narrative between work in New York and work in New York, momentarily dragging the

previously-drawn narrative boundaries of the gendered-female domestic suburb and gendered male work-city, a gesture which ironically reveals that the domains of home and work are not fixed, but rather fluid.[67]

Suburbia's boundaries are quite evident in the work of Phyllis McGinley, a mid-century poet and essayist whose work appeared in, among other places, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic, Good Housekeeping, Mademoiselle,* and *Harper's,* who wrote light verse about everyday suburban life that uses suburban roads and rails for introspection and protection. *A Short Walk from the Station,* her love letter to the suburbs, in poems like "The 5:32," "Song From New Rochelle," and "I Know A Village," as well as the essay, "Suburbia, of Thee I Sing," elaborates on the power that infrastructure wields in generating a life *inside* suburbia that, for women who work in their houses, appears to expand the domain over which they might exert some kind of control.[68] McGinley, however, experiences moments of transit not as a temporary release from male control of suburbia, as Betsy Rath will in the section that follows, but as a willing capitulation to the reassertion of male control of suburbia. McGinley's poems, by colonizing the spaces between train station and driveway for "home," place the entire built environment – houses, landscape, and roads – of Spruce Manor into a traditionally-gendered, and therefore palatable, domesticized housing bundle that errand-running women maintain and men nightly reclaim not by an engagement with the built environment, but by their

[67] I would also add that, in light of the descriptions of the parties on Greentree Avenue, Betsy "likes" Tom being driven inasmuch as she avoids the liquor-drenched commuter-schedule-beholden party. Betsy's experience of suburban time and space connections appears in a later section of this chapter.

[68] "Suburbia, of Thee I Sing" first appeared in *Harper's* in December, 1949, two years before *A Short Walk* was published.

mere presence.[69] For McGinley, the end of intra-suburban transit experiences pinpoints the loss of women's claim to suburban space without regret – once the husbands return, they retain control.

The trouble that emerges from McGinley's irony-free endorsement of the suburbs is less the class politics (present though they are) Betty Friedan notes, but more the system of suburban spatial practices strictly organized along gender lines. McGinley does mention women leaving Spruce Manor, but such mentions only come after money and men effecting the environment, almost as an afterthought – "Spruce Manor is not Eden, of course. Our taxes are higher than we like and there is always that 8:11 in the morning to be caught and we sometimes resent the necessity of rushing from a theater to a train on a weekday evening" ("Suburbia" 17-8). For the most part, her glowing representation of suburban life depends on travel *within* the suburbs dedicated to illustrating the central position of men. All of the women she knows, for example, can "find time to be friends with their families and to meet the 5:32 five nights a week" ("Suburbia" 20). McGinley eagerly relates a version of the standard image of American suburbia in the early post-War era, what historian Gary Cross describes as, "a family of four happily seated in their comfortable car with a proud dad at the wheel" (*All-Consuming* 181), as a desirable portion of the suburban housing bundle:

> Presently it will be time for us to climb into our very old Studebaker – we are not car-proud in Spruce Manor – and meet the 5:32. That evening expedition is not vitally necessary, for a bus runs straight down our principal avenue from the station to the shore, and it meets all the trains. But it is an event we enjoy. There is something delightfully ritualistic

[69] McGinley briefly lived and taught in New Rochelle before moving to New York City for a job in advertising that she kept until the birth of her daughter. Spruce Manor is based on Larchmont, New York – the town she and her husband moved to after the birth of their daughter.

> about the moment when the train pulls in and the men swing off, with the less sophisticated children running squealing to meet them. The women move over from the driver's seat, surrender the keys, and receive an absent-minded kiss…But, deluded people that we are, we do not realize how mediocre it all seems. ("Suburbia" 21)

It seems plain that the suburban gendering of space, rather than its class associations, carries the most power in McGinley's imagination. Although the husbands do not seem to be aware of the ritualized transfer of power, McGinley's essay provides "less sophisticated children," squealing with delight, to draw a contrast to the collective blasé slip into the passenger seat made by their mothers. The very appeal of this endlessly repeated trip, for the women who make it, rests in first extending the gendering of suburban space as female as long as is possible, and then ritualizing – in the train station's public space, in front of the assembled family – the transfer of power away from female full-time residents to their commuter husbands, even if moving out of the driver's seat and surrendering the keys only receives an absent-minded kiss in return.[70]

McGinley's poem "The 5:32" repeats her claim that a suburban woman's trip to the station to pick up her husband constitutes the ideal enactment of suburbia's appeal in terms of the temporary domain women have over the suburb.[71] "The 5:32" is a short poem, so I quote it in its entirety:

> She said, If tomorrow my world were torn in two,
> Blacked out, dissolved, I think I would remember
> (As if transfixed in unsurrendering amber)
> This hour best of all the hours I knew:
>
> When cars came backing into the shabby station,
> Children scuffing the seats, and the women driving

[70] Here I want to highlight the *spatial* component to the suburban way of life McGinley describes, while acknowledging that Nancy Walker makes a similar argument in *A Very Serious Thing*, but without any engagement with space (68).
[71] It seems as though a suburban woman is also, by definition, a wife.

With ribbons around their hair, and the trains arriving,
And the men getting off with tired but practiced motion.

Yes, I would remember my life like this, she said:
Autumn, the platform red with Virginia creeper,
And a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper
Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head;

And wood smoke lying like haze on the quiet town,
And dinner waiting, and the sun not yet gone down. (*Short Walk* 88)

The poem begins with a hint of Cold War atomic fear, first in the sudden and final tearing of the world, and then in the image of a body frozen in amber as a testament to a far-off future. From this introductory moment, what follows acts as a sort of pre-emptive deathbed offer of thanks for a particular memory. The "hour best of all the hours I knew" that the poem describes *concludes* on a moment of domestic tranquility in the form of a nice dinner, but the middle two stanzas of the poem – a full half of the poem – sound more like a confession of lost chances, and not thanks. The narrator recalls going to the sloppily alliterative "shabby station" to pick up her husband, who, like other husbands, gets off the train "with tired but practiced motion," statements that attempt to push color into the too-familiar images of the iterative narrative of the ride home from the station. Within this routine, McGinley invokes a moment of quotidian reverie: "a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper / Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head." The daily trip "The 5:32" describes figures suburban women as Orpheus figures who, upon reaching the gate to the underworld train stations, daily find their Eurydice. The reunion quickly and quietly reasserts male control of the suburb at the poem's end, switching the gender of the underworld-traveler to manage the temporary claim women

have on suburban space, but the heroism belongs to the women who maintain everyday life while the men are away.[72]

The turn to the final couplet hurries to the redemptive potential of the suburb, fencing its appeal within the domestic realm without representing any of the kids-are-sick-and-I-hate-my-job talk that occupies the Tom-Betsy conversations between station and home.[73] The narrator of "The 5:32" has not only gone to pick her husband up, but, as on every other day, she has dedicated her time in control of suburbia preparing dinner for him; her use of time exceeds self-sacrifice into the realm of self-abnegation. To continue the narrative into the car trip as *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* does is to confront directly the emptiness of female control over suburbia. As Herbert Gans writes in *The Levittowners*, "women seem to be more affected by their husband's journey to work than the men themselves, partly because the men cannot be with the children during the preparation of dinner and perhaps because men take the strain of a long trip out on their wives" (*Levittowners* 222). McGinley's poem basks in the glow of this daily reunion, ending *before* the drive home and its conversation full of the litany of quotidian problems and crises suburban women must solve during the day. "The 5:32" locates its happy ending in the space of transit that ends the temporary "matriarchy," not in the actual experience of the control of suburban space, making the transfer of power a consummation devoutly to be wished, rather than something to defer.

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[72] As in the Jack Lemmon chapter, Minerva – goddess of heroes – Bissel reassures her husband that time in the infernal city serves a higher purpose.

[73] For example, the film version's first conversation between Betsy and Tom takes place in the car between the station and home, with Betsy telling Tom of broken washing machines and kids with chicken pox. In the novel, at the beginning of chapter 21, Betsy alerts Tom to the arrival of a developer.

Not even an exemplary Man in a Gray Flannel Suit such as Tom can easily accustom himself to the incredible daily upheaval his commute presents.[74] For the early suburban pioneers of the first half of the twentieth century, shuttling between city and new suburb, between work and new family unsettled their understandings of the distinct benefits each location offered. Social commentator AC Spectorsky, writing in the same year *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was published, notes that the traditional prescription for the tired urbanite was "a complete change of scene and activity, preferably to rural surroundings" (3). Commuting ritualizes this spatial dislocation into the realm of over-medication: "the commuter undergoes the shock of sudden change as a regular part of his life" (3). At the very least, the suburban spatial organization of careening between city and faux-rural leads Spectorsky to conclude that, "it is a wonder that the commuter is not a raving psychotic. Certainly, the manner of his life is schizoid in the extreme" (3). However, the stress in Tom's life does not stem simply from moving between Connecticut and New York City every day. Rather, it is the routine overlap of his four spatio-temporal worlds during his daily train ride that so unsettles Tom. As Tom explains his problems to Betsy, "One day a man's catching the 8:26 and then suddenly he's killing people. Then a few weeks later he's catching the 8:26 again. It'd be a miracle if it didn't change him in some way." For Tom, the daily train ride provides a

[74] *Gray Flannel's* textual strategies for representing the spatial connection between city and suburb extends beyond the middlebrow to pulp novels and B-films. The pulp novel *Clean Break* (published, like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,* in 1955), uses the time and space of the commute to link the worlds of tenement home and service-sector work in characters' minds. *Clean Break* served as the basis for the 1956 Stanley Kubrick film *The Killing.* Nunnally Johnson's adaptation of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,* which, like *Clean Break-The Killing* went from novel to film in one year's time, signals its desire to inhabit and excavate the importance of the space between city and suburb for suburbanites in its opening scenes.

space for contemplating the bridge past, present, and future, and the worlds of work and home. Tom's commute functions allegorically in the novel, placing suburban Secondspace insistence on continuity within the flux of the commute, where contingency allows Tom to confront social norms like devotion to the Organization that employs him, the family that sustains him, and the status of the spaces in which they belong. For Tom Rath, *détournement* takes the form of acts as simple as the fortuitous discovery of the UBC job occurring not in city space, but on the train, chipping off the ossified city-ness of the work world into another, in-between, location.

The film version of *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* opens *en medias res*, in this in-between location, showing Tom in a train that mediates between the present and the future – a co-commuter gives Tom a lead on a job at UBC – and between the present and the past – a fur-lined collar and an old war bonds poster remind Tom of his time in World War II Germany, leading to an extended flashback (see Figure 3.1) – while moving between suburb and city. Tom's attempts to maintain specific identities in the suburbs (father-husband) and in the city (Man in the Gray Flannel Suit) dissolve during his time on the train, which is full of trips into the past and peeks into the future. The train trip, as *détournement*, shakes up Secondspace and reveals the pattern of self-sameness, continuity, and eternality perpetuated by the literal and discursive boundaries between suburb and city. Careful attention to commuting thus dramatizes the perpetually shifting contexts Tom encounters in his everyday life, the contest among the Four Worlds.

Figure 3.1

Suburbia presents Betsy with problems which are distinct from Tom's problems, owing in great part to her isolation in Westport and South Bay, Connecticut. However, as in Tom's case, the built environment within the suburbs functions in a similarly ambivalent manner, simultaneously restricting and liberating her to see less, but see it better. While Tom predominantly rides the train between the suburbs and the city, Betsy does the bulk of the driving in both the novel and film – significantly, never into the city, but rather throughout the suburbs, often driving Tom home from the train station. The distance between Tom and Betsy stems not from city-suburbs geography – he returns on a regular, essentially tidal, schedule – but rather because he is juggling four worlds in time and space.[75] Betsy, continually beset by chicken pox, child care, and household maintenance, must always remain in the suburbs, effectively cutting her off from one of Tom's four worlds, "the matter of fact, opaque-glass-brick-partitioned" city. The suburban Secondspace that walls in "the only one of the four worlds worth a damn" to Tom does just the opposite for Betsy; what Tom reads as protection, Betsy reads as

[75] In the film version, Betsy, stuck in bed with chicken pox, tells Tom, "sometimes you seem so far away from me." Tom leans over and kisses Betsy, assuring her, "I'm not though. Ever."

enclosure. In addition to the question-mark crack in the wall that opens the novel, Betsy locates the shortcomings of the suburban form in what their neighborhood parties reveal.[76]

> Like most cocktail parties on Greentree Avenue, this one would be an exhausting exercise. On Greentree Avenue cocktail parties started at seven-thirty, when the men came home from New York, and they usually continued without any dinner until three or four o'clock in the morning….It can't be true that the whole street is like that, Betsy thought – it must be just the people we know….As the evening wore on, the men generally fell to divulging dreams of escaping to an entirely different sort of life – to a dairy farm in Vermont, or to the management of a motel in Florida. (Wilson 108-9)

For Betsy the most depressing function of neighborhood parties rests in their ability to demonstrate how little power the suburbs and their full-time residents – women – have over the control of time, in spite of the maintenance claims McGinley makes. First of all, the suburban schedule is driven by the city schedule, which places the women on Greentree Avenues throughout suburbia in a greatly disadvantaged position. Because their commuter husbands trade extensive train time for expanded house space, suburban cocktail parties start at dinner party time, only without the dinner. Second, the much less dense design of early suburbs meant that missing something taken for granted in the city, takeout food, could not appear, much less address the schedule crunch. Lastly, while commuting allows men regularly to escape suburban Firstspace on a temporary basis, suburban Secondspace also drives toward a permanent escape, placing their wives in the unenviable position of acing as place-holders in houses from which their spouses, who go to the city daily, and even though they reclaim control of the suburb every night at the

[76] See Jurca's chapter "The Sanctimonious Suburbanite" in *White Diaspora*

train station exchange, not-so-secretly want to exchange for another, more authentic rural setting or more prestigious suburb.[77]

McGinley defends suburbia by turning the perils of close-mindedness and a lack of intellectual curiosity back on critics, seeing the same traits in urban boosters. Starting with the trend in suburban-bashing that identifies her home town as the "a symbol of all that is middle class in the worst sense, of settled-downness or rootlessness, according to what the writer is trying to prove; of smug and prosperous mediocrity" (11-12), McGinley remembers her move to Spruce Manor as a brave stand against smugness and easy dismissals, recalling that "no one in our rarefied little group [of friends] was thinking of moving to the suburbs except us" (13).[78] Mixing metaphors with self-conscious glee, McGinley invokes the machine-in machine-and-the-garden contradictions of suburbia from the very first sentence of her essay, "Twenty miles east of New York City as the New Haven Railroad flies sits a village I shall call Spruce Manor" ("Suburbia" 9). From the very first sentence, McGinley understands suburbia as attached to a central city by the transportation infrastructure that acts as both connecting thread and life line. Though she calls Spruce Manor "the epitome of Suburbia," McGinley follows her urban-centric opening sentence with more than a page of description of Spruce Manor's infrastructure and its many uses – from its main street and its downtown businesses to its plans for street beautification. After this litany, she admits that "it is a

[77] Tom's war experience, as Jonathan Franzen describes it in his introduction to the Thunder's Mouth edition of the novel, is completely unlike his suburban experience of four time-space worlds. During the war, Tom's world has no past or future or spatial "outside": "Tom Rath as a soldier felt intensely alive in the present."

[78] "These clichés I challenge. I have lived in the country, I have lived in the city…But for the best eleven years of my life I have lived in Suburbia and I have liked it" ("Suburbia" 13). "In a world of terrible extremes, [Suburbia] will stand out as the safe, important medium. Suburbia, of thee I sing!" ("Suburbia" 22).

commuter's town," but the long list of roads and buildings and their local standing allows her credibly to claim that Spruce Manor is in fact, a space that makes a Ricoeur-like "significant whole" life out of the geographically scattered parts of life, "the living *center* of a web that unrolls each morning as the men swing aboard the locals, and contracts again in the evening when they return" (*Short Walk* 10, emphasis mine).[79] That is to say, while men center their spatial practices on New York City and thus insufficiently use Spruce Manor's road system, it is women's extensive use of Spruce Manor's infrastructure that constitutes the life of the town. Herbert Gans, who worked in a suburban house he grew to love while researching *The Levittowners*, similarly recognizes the economic centrality of the city and attempts to sever family from economic life. A suburban town, he writes, "permits most of its residents to be what they want to be – to center their lives around the home and the family, to be among neighbors whom they can trust" (*Levittowners* 412-3).[80] Gans and especially McGinley recognize that suburban matriarchy devolves from constant use of the streets, sidewalks, and front yards by suburban women.

Because suburban women range over the entirety of the suburb, rather than connecting at the single entry point of the train station, they confront the shortcomings of the infrastructure with far greater regularity. Looking at the generation that followed McGinley's, cultural critic Lynn Spigel identifies the trope of driving from non-city into the city in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *That Girl*, *The Doris Day Show*, and *The*

[79] Spruce Manor is an exemplary name for a suburb – it combines a tree name with a reference to established class privilege, subjugating nature to human designs.
[80] Suburban Secondspace generates Firstspace here, in that it attempts to de-couple the family from economics by making the suburbs a family-only space – insulated by the long roads and train lines into the city.

Stepford Wives as a declaration of independence, a therapeutic escape from the shabby constraints of suburbia. "As all of these 'driving' sequences indicate," she writes,

> the widespread disillusionment with suburban lifestyles that began to mount at the end of the 1950s gave way to a newfound fascination with the trope of transportation in the popular media. At least at the level of fantasy, transportation offered a way out of the confines of suburban domesticity and into more exciting locales. ("From Theatre" 227)

Spigel links the undercurrent of escape in suburban transportation to an urban-identified space travel, but my interests here are banal: everyday travel like errands. While Mary Tyler Moore drives into Minneapolis to work, and Betsy Rath can furiously barrel down the Merritt Parkway, McGinley spends *A Short Walk to the Station* enclosed by limited-access highways, train schedules keyed to commuter rush hours, and looping cul-de-sac residential street patterns, her travels limited to Spruce Manor. McGinley codes the suburban transportation network's appeal not in the access it provides to work and culture in the city ("within reach of suburban families if they feel strongly about it" [17]), but rather in the distance and protection from the city that it embodies – "bounded largely by Long Island Sound, curving *protectively* on three borders" (10), the last border being the highway and train line. But even distance cannot cure all urban ills. McGinley describes the treacherous road-crossing at the edge of town that children must brave to get to and from school: "two excellent policemen – Mr. Crowley and Mr. Lang – station themselves at the intersections four times a day and so far there have been no accidents" (10). However, this passage describes more than child safety. In fact, McGinley calls attention

to a location that reaffirms suburbia's commitment to family – a Checkpoint Charlie to manage the boundary between city and suburb.[81]

Monitoring the transition from the city to the suburbs takes the form of living "[a]mong neighbors [you] can trust," which historically has taken the form of the race- and class-exclusive suburbs. These two exclusions work together in Betty Friedan's extended description of writers like McGinley:

> There is something about Housewife Writers that isn't funny – like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. "Laugh," the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, "if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn't it funny? We're all in the same trap." Do real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son – and writes another book. Jean Kerr's plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on *them*. (57, emphasis in original)

While Friedan makes valid points here, her critique of Housewife Writers applies to nearly every form of escapist fiction. I note this because it seems that Friedan's case against McGinley and Kerr rests on their association with the praise for suburbia in occasional, popular writing. Friedan describes the problem as an inauthenticity based in the unseemly passing or slumming inherent in Housewife Writing. To call a Housewife Writer an Uncle Tom, even in an era in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an under-read, dismissed text, hinges on a presumed essential upper-middle-class female urban writer identity to be betrayed. The concern that, "some of the new Housewife Writers *live* the image" (57), makes explicit the equation of literary prestige and the urban, granting

[81] Kevin Lynch, an early post-War urbanist, calls this sort of boundary an edge: "Edges are the linear elements not used or considered paths by the observer….edges may be barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another….These edge elements…are for many people important organizing features, particularly in the role of holding together generalized areas" (47).

second-class literary status to McGinley and Kerr's suburban domestic/everyday writing. Or, put another way, Friedan argues that real literary work takes place in the city, and the occasional stuff not worth paying for takes place in the gendered-feminine suburbs. At least when it comes to literature.

McGinley anticipates Friedan's critique, noting that condemning suburbia has, even by the early 1950s, become a "literary cliché" (12). Early in "Suburbia, of thee I sing," she sketches the standard dismissals of suburban life in terms of class markers:

> I have yet to read a book in which the suburban life was pictured as the good life or the commuter as a sympathetic figure. He is nearly as much a stock character as the old stage Irishman: the man who 'spends his life riding to and from his wife,' the eternal Babbitt who knows all about Buicks and nothing about Picasso.("Suburbia" 12)

Here middlebrow stereotypes of suburbia take the form of transit – Book-of-the-Month entry Tom Rath is one of those eternal Babbitts driving a Buick in a gray flannel suit – and runs headlong into the high-culture prestige of Picasso. The poems in *A Short Walk to the Station* exhibit some of the willful class-blindness that Friedan notes, insofar as they imagine a world free of the drudgery common to the experience of suburban women. And while the class politics in "Suburbia, of thee I sing!" at first appear to substantiate the fear of living the image of an uncultured suburbanite, McGinley's descriptions of everyday life betray a great anxiety of maintaining a balance between mass and high culture. The usual sociality in Spruce Manor combines the suburban "ridiculous" with the Shakespearean sublime:

> Perhaps later the Gerard Joneses will drop in. We will talk a great deal of unimportant chatter and compare notes on food prices; we will also discuss the headlines and disagree….We will all have one highball and the Joneses will leave early. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow the pattern will be repeated. This is Suburbia. ("Suburbia" 22)

The echo of Macbeth's "tale told by an idiot: full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" emerges in the repetition of "tomorrow," which brings to McGinley's summary of suburban social life a hint of the "it's not *me*" smug critique that Friedan describes – especially since the repetitiveness of the Jones visits carries the sense of the "petty pace" Macbeth notes earlier in his soliloquy. However, it seems far more likely that McGinley nods at Shakespeare for his cultural capital, more as a disaffiliation from Babbittry than as a roundabout route to poking fun at suburban rubes. By opening and closing the essay in terms of suburban sociality completely divorced from engagement with the urban while aspiring to retain contact with it, McGinley reiterates her commitment to the suburban built environment as self-contained and complete – "in a world of terrible extremes, [the suburbs] will stand out as the safe, important medium" (22) – but not without its troubles, granting the problems Friedan points out situated within a complex engagement with the attraction of the spatial routines of suburban living.[82]

Jean Kerr is not exactly a suburbanite, but rather what Spectorsky calls an exurbanite; though Kerr is *in* them, she never sees herself as *of* them.[83] This is not to say that she dismisses the suburbs out of hand. Rather, Kerr turns the suburban Secondspace in her everyday routine upside down. When Kerr opts to defend suburbia, she voices her frustration with the spatial chauvinism urbanites exhibit toward the suburbs. Later in her career, Kerr sets the stage for her story about a party by situating her suburb in the New

[82]McGinley is no stranger to self-conscious high culture references: for example, Milton's "On His Blindness" lurks behind her poem "View From a Suburban Window" (Walker 320).

[83] Spectorsky explains the exurbanite: "And why are they called exurbanites? Because they are 'ex' in the sense of 'out of,' 'away from' – and in no other, for they will always be urbanites at heart" (6).

York City region. "We live in Larchmont, a small community about twenty miles from New York," she writes.

> Most of our friends live in New York City, and they invite us to dinner calm in the assumption that we will find our way to the great metropolis in less than forty minutes. To a reasonable person it would appear that the distance between New York and Larchmont is approximately the same distance as the distance between Larchmont and New York. However, when I invite people out here I am left with the feeling that I am inviting them to Ice Station Zebra and that I should offer to provide Sherpa guides for those last tortuous miles through the mountain passes. ("Partying" 68-9)

Much like McGinley's echo of Macbeth strives to disavow suburban Babbittry, Kerr's mocking self-deprecation of Larchmont's perceived isolation defangs Babbittry by ironically ascribing provinciality to urbanites who assiduously avoid the distant wilds of suburbia while suburbanites quite often venture out into the city, turning urban jungle-dwellers into country bumpkins while maintaining the Secondspace myth of the suburbs as connected to nature and renovating the infrastructure's cartography toward a pro-city suburban identity. Physical distance and its attendant spatial practices not only stand in for cultural distance, but also provide an illustration of who uses the infrastructure that links city and suburb. Suburban roads and train lines serve, for the most part, suburbanites heading into the city to work, with urbanites confined, for the most part (by habit, by choice, or by compulsion – it matters little) to the city. Unlike McGinley, Kerr sees urbanites as the ones cocooned within an infrastructure that generates a city-exclusive life somewhat more free from suburbia's spatial gendering.

For Kerr, then, the 5:32 is not a chance to indulge in togetherness with the family, but rather to distance oneself from the children and parenting by leaving the suburb for the pleasures of work and adult friendship associated with the city. On the day her family

moves to the suburbs, Kerr remembers that, "Walter had a show to review that night, so at six o'clock we just dropped everything and went to New York, leaving Mabel – our combination maid, housekeeper, nurse, companion, and friend – to find the children and find the food and find the beds" ("Kerr-Hilton" 86). Unlike the Spruce Manor-bound McGinley, who admits that theaters "are twenty miles away and we don't get to them more than twice a month" ("Suburbia" 18), Kerr finds the distance between suburb and city no impediment to her theater-going. Thanks to Mabel's domestic labor in the suburban house, Kerr calculates that her theater attendance record "is rather higher than the average. This can be explained by the fact that I have those four small children and naturally have to get out a lot" ("One Half" 108), framing her trips as pleasure trips enjoying the city's proximity, rather than as driven by her husband's job as a major theater critic.[84] Although she exhibits a more self-consciously critical sense of suburbs as a domesticized Secondspace, Kerr too gets snagged on the commute. Only the timing changes: to enjoy city culture, Kerr eagerly climbs aboard the late train instead of the morning train that Spruce Manor residents take as the tradeoff for a culture of suburban domesticity. As Friedan might put it, the joke *is* on Kerr, who emerges as the definitive commuter. She lives in the suburbs because of her children even though she would much rather live in the city with her work. Bringing work home to the suburbs – writing about her distaste for the domestic she has chosen (against her will or not) – is hardly compensation. For all Kerr's kidding, her theater-going represents the commute as a trip dependent on the city-suburb boundary, re-asserting the distinction between a feminized domestic suburb and a masculinized working city.

[84] Interestingly, Kerr, like McGinley, lives in Larchmont, but her relationship to it is simultaneously much more ambivalent and critical than McGinley's.

Betsy Rath locates suburban entrapment in the taken-for-granted temporary status of the domestic built environment, not in the petty debauchery of cocktail party behavior – for what else is in new suburbia but houses? [85] In fact, dreams of moving up and away define the post-War suburban mind set, as detailed throughout sociologist William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man,* which summarizes the basis for the party conversations Betsy finds so deadening:

> Always, they will be moving on. For most of its renters Park Forest is a sort of way station, a phase of life, and beyond a certain point continued residence can carry overtones of failure….However glowingly they speak of the no-keeping-up-with-the-Joneses and the other attractions of Park Forest, transients say frankly that they expect eventually to graduate to someplace like Winnetka, the Main Line, or Westchester County. (288-9)

Her neighbors' presumption of the transience of "today" and the inevitable punctuation of cocktail party conversation with dreams of leaving frustrates Betsy to the point that she considers seeking therapy.

> There, I've said it, she thought, and it sounds absurd, but it's true. Nothing seems to be much fun any more. There's nothing wrong with our house, really, and there's nothing wrong with Greentree Avenue or Tom or me. It's just that nothing seems to be much fun any more, and that's horrible, for when you've said that, there's nothing more to say. *Why?* She thought. It probably would take a psychiatrist to answer that. (Wilson 112 emphasis in original)

Defending rootedness, or at least the ongoing value, in the form of a suburban starter house exhausts Betsy, turning first house excitement into expected upgrade anxiety. The keeping-up-with-the-Joneses expectations in terms of upward mobility – what Whyte perceptively describes as relocation – takes such a toll on Betsy that she considers psychotherapy. However, even in the age of the technocratic expert, Betsy dismisses her

[85] While there are certainly schools, churches, and some businesses, the early post-War suburbs in *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* were "bedroom communities," which by definition would be predominantly housing.

original desire as further evidence of her too-ready submission on hegemonic terms: "the psychiatrist would have an explanation, Betsy thought, but I don't want to hear it. People rely too much on explanations these days, and not enough on courage and action" (Wilson 112).

As is the case with Tom's train ride to the city, the transportation infrastructure functions as a therapeutic space where Betsy might actively resist Secondspace spatial practices; upon hearing Tom's confession of fathering a child in Italy during the war she reaches for but in the end fails at *détournement*. To end an argument that ranges from the bedroom to the front yard, Betsy tells Tom, ""Give me some time to think. Go in the house – I'll be in after a while"" (Wilson 268). Tom goes inside and makes himself a drink, but then,

> he had just drained the glass when he heard the car start. In the moonlight he saw the old Ford back violently out of the carriage house….He watched until it vanished into the darkness. After standing there a long while to see if she would come back, he returned to the house and lay fully dressed on the bed. There was nothing to do but wait. (Wilson 269)

Tom's waiting takes the form of a chapter break, which, following the suburb-city chapter break format of the beginning of the novel, simultaneously predicts Betsy's travel into the city. But Betsy doesn't drive to the city. Instead, she phones from the police station in suburban Westport, which is a short drive from their South Bay house. "I was trying to get home as fast as I could," she tells Tom, through tears in the film. In the novel, Betsy explains, "I just wanted to get away by myself and drive for a while. I got everything figured out in my mind and was on my way back home when the engine made an awful noise and stopped" (Wilson 270). A logistical question presents itself in Betsy's description of her drive in both the film and the novel: where, exactly, did she *go* before

turning around? On one hand, it seems fairly plain that Betsy, like Tom, uses the highway as a form of time travel – the "home" to which she refers is both their current house and the one they left behind in Westport – but because Betsy spends all of her time in the suburbs, she uses it for temporary spatial escape as well. On the other hand, the utility of the driving-to-nowhere, driving-just-to-drive trope appears in suburban narratives like *Rabbit, Run* and *The Stepford Wives* and in both cases the drivers – Rabbit Angstrom and Joanna Eberhart – leave their suburb in distress and return with something like a plan to improve their life. But, in the end, Betsy tells Tom, "I've been an awful fool, Tommy. I know that" (Wilson 271).[86] Betsy feels foolish not only because she ran out of gas while wandering the suburban highway system, but also because driving across the suburban boundary crossing the "boundary" of the suburb leaves her without a recognizable function. Even in its failure – Betsy returns home, assisted by the police, acceding to hegemonic patriarchal suburban discourse – her attempt at *détournement* provokes a catalyzing "crisis of happiness." Betsy uses the time and space the highway provides to consider where she belongs in the suburbs, and since, "nothing comes more naturally to the white middle class than feeling unfulfilled" (Jurca 58), the in-between space of transit that reclaims the terrain of "altruistic" family-centered errands for self-analysis where Betsy comes to terms with the limits of her suburban life shows itself to be indispensable to any workable adjustment to that life. The highway pulls double duty for Betsy here: it expresses her frustration with her go-nowhere life, but also provides her

[86] As architectural historian Mitchell Schwarzer describes such trips, "The journeys in *Rabbit Run, On the Road,* and other road novels suggest the dilemmas of a vehicular perception premised on velocity, isolation, and an infinite horizon" (115).

with the time and space, as the train does for Tom, in which she can begin to imagine alternatives to the rigid gender roles enforced by suburban design.

Cocooning in the suburbs, for McGinley, signifies not a retreat, but an achievement. The final poem of *A Short Walk from the Station*, "I Know A Village," represents much of what later suburban critics mock in insular suburbia – "all the streets are named for trees," for example – as comforting. Unlike the chaotic hustle-bustle of the city, McGinley's village features the comforting rhymes of "random houses, safely fenced / With paling or with privet hedge / That bicycles can lean against" (*Short Walk* 174). The village may not offer urban cultural advantages, but it does have the innocent pleasures of "little boats in harbor" with "sails whiter than a summer wedding" and "a hill for sledding" (*Short Walk* 174). But McGinley's love for the suburbs cannot hide the short moments of crisis, the shortcomings written on the built environment. In its quest to be country living for everyone, the little village paved the countryside, but the countryside is not a willing party to the extension of suburban civilization. In McGinley's village,

> …when the roots of maples heave
> The solid pavements that bound them,
> Strollers on sidewalks give them leave
> To thrust, and pick a way around them. (*Short Walk* 174)

In one sense, the villagers show deference to nature that is markedly at odds with the usual trend in suburban development. Frost heaves on sidewalks that redirect pedestrian routines are another step down the route of auto-dependence as people begin to use their cars more frequently and avoid such inconveniences. However, McGinley's poem does not take its residents outside the village; she imagines no confrontation or redress of grievances with quotidian frustrations like crumbling sidewalks outside village

boundaries. And though, for the moment "people visit on their porches" like small-town neighbors (175), the poem ends with an assurance of the village's charms:

> It looks haphazard from the shore.
> Brown flickers build there. And I'd not
> Willing, I think, exchange it for
> Arcadia or Camelot. (175)

Rather than embrace suburbia entirely, McGinley evinces a trace of trepidation in the insertion of "I think" in her disavowal of an exchange for something different. Such an ambivalence over suburbia peppers the laudatory language of her poem, not only in the first stages of infrastructure decay, but also in the form of "water less sullen than the sea's" and "miser children, shrill from class" (174). Running counter to McGinley's praise for suburban life we find the imperfections of the use and condition of the physical infrastructure undercutting such idealizations, without even the temporary release that Betsy finds on the boundary highway (or even, potentially, sailing the Long Island Sound). The self-consciously pro-suburban *A Short Walk from the Station* reveals that the gender-coded threads that stitch the suburb together and connect it to the city – its infrastructure and spatial practices – can't help but fray and undermine the case for a life entirely within the walls of suburbia.

Urbanites cocoon inside the city because, as Kerr makes clear, the city houses the most interesting and rewarding parts of life – work and the arts – and also emphatically provides escape from the child-space of suburbia that is forcefully coded as "feminine." The city enables Kerr to experience not only her own work (as a comic essayist) but also to demystify the husband-work that remains unknown to house-depot suburbanites by attending plays with her theater-critic husband and joining him at the office, where they write together, and on the train home, where they have an adult intellectual conversation.

As Kerr puts it, "after the show, most wives go out with their friends or go home to their peaceful apartments. I tag along to the office because we live in Larchmont and neither one of us wants to make the trip back alone" ("One Half" 110). On the one hand, Kerr echoes her own Sherpa joke in her desire to avoid the long voyage to the suburbs, the very sort of smugness Friedan abhors. On the other hand, Kerr highlights the multiple ways in which moments of transit can be pleasurable, starting with the contemplation of the post-show cab ride – "I wouldn't dream of breaking the cathedral hush that surrounds us. However, if there is one thing a cab driver does not seem to recognize, it is a cathedral hush" ("One Half" 110) – and ending with the last train to suburbia. While Kerr ironizes her suburban-domestic life of overly literal conversations with her sons – Christopher "is interested in the precise value of words whereas we are only interested in having him pick his clothes off the floor" (*Please* 21) – she describes her post-show experience of transit in direct contrast to McGinley's domestic suburbia, where husbands interact with their wives in "tired but practiced motion." Kerr and her husband use their train trip to have, for lack of a better phrase, an adult conversation, albeit one that privileges Walter's point of view. "The fact is," she admits, "that we have many an intelligent discussion of the play coming home on the train, at which time I have a carbon copy of the review to read" ("One Half" 113). Because of the cavalierly-noted work Mabel does back in Larchmont, Jean Kerr can be a writer who lives in the suburbs. But her redemptive version of suburban-ness is not rooted in the house where Mabel cooks, cleans, and minds children. Rather, it is in the *détournement* experience of the time and space between city and suburb – the reluctance of her friends to traverse that space, her

desire to traverse that space, and her experiences on the train at night – that Kerr locates suburban happiness and satisfaction.

Suburban transportation infrastructure in *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, just as much as the progression of houses and offices Tom and Betsy inhabit, acts as a key metaphorical object within the melodrama. The novel certainly reinforces suburban Secondspace by thematizing alienation in terms of consumption and production in both home and office spaces; literary critic Graham Thompson notes that, "as the distance between citizens and consumers in the market economy of mass culture begin to shrink in terms of time and distance, the distance between many workers like Tom Rath and the process of production (if there was one at all) steadily grew" (41). I would add that Thompson's spatialized metaphor of the process of production – the distance of alienation suburbanites feel from their work – expands his claim beyond the bounds of the American business culture that is the subject of his book into the process of commuting between and among Tom Rath's four worlds. In his formal analysis of melodramatic form, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," film critic Thomas Elsaesser connects character psychology with setting:

> The banality of the objects combined with the repressed anxieties and emotions force a contrast that makes the scene almost epitomise the relation of décor to character in melodrama: the setting fills with objects to which the plot gives symbolic significance, the more the characters are enclosed in seemingly ineluctable situations. Pressure is generated by things crowding in on them and life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them, become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolise. (62)

In this version of melodramatic analysis, to name one salient example, the loud and hypnotic presence of the television represents Tom's job leaking into the home and

weakening the suburban family bond. However, building on the spatial component to Thompson's argument by literalizing Elsaesser's metaphor of "pressure," a melodrama like *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* shows that auto-centered suburbia proceeds from its roads and highways; the generation of new suburban built environments – call it landscape architecture in its best form – functions as a decorative scheme. And the psychological pressures that accumulate within suburbia, especially for the women who spend every day within its domesticized confines, can be relieved – narratively and formally – through *détournements* available in the suburban road and rail system that temporarily refigure the roadways to alternate uses and meanings.

As my analysis of *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* makes clear, structural systems throughout the novel – family, work, suburbia – all depend on the complex transportation system that serves (for good and ill) suburbs and suburbanites. The commuter suburb thus generates an commute-infrastructure-dependant narrative in *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, which re-directs one of the tendencies in melodrama, "the aesthetic problem of how to depict a character who is not constantly externalising himself into action" (Elsaesser 54), into an action so common as to be unrecognizable – using the suburban infrastructure, taking the train and/or driving on the highway. Understood in terms of transit amenities rather than housing amenities (as in *White Diaspora*, for example), *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* asserts the post-War suburban concept of the suburbs' allure, even in their less desirable moments. While returning veterans like Tom Rath enjoyed the largesse of the federal government in the home and work worlds, in terms of VA loans that provided easy access to new housing and highway building that spurred job growth and accessibility, those same veterans faced problems in the other two worlds

Tom inhabits – the past of their families and their military service. In the novel, Tom fails to deal with the traumas of the war world – "It's strange I should have to apologize for this. I killed seventeen men. I cut the throat of a German boy eighteen years old, and I killed Hank Mahoney, my best friend, because I threw a hand grenade too fast. I'm not ashamed of it, but for having a child I feel terrible" (Wilson 264) – until he can afford to bracket off the only world worth a damn from its shadow in Italy. The film, on the other hand, accents the war-work worlds' overlap" "I killed 17 people," Tom tells Betsy, people "like you see in the train, in the elevator." Tom can pave over his inheritance and salve his family history wounds with the money generated by his property. But his War-related trauma must be confronted and overcome where he confronts random others en masse – and *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* makes clear in Tom's train ride full of flashbacks and Betsy's self-analyzing drive along the highways that no house or job can truly mitigate the problems of suburban life. Instead, *détounements* within the transportation system – in the times and spaces between (suburb and city, home and work, family and anonymity) – step in as renovated cartographic tools suburbanites might use to come to terms with their sub-urbanity.

Same as it ever was: The Stepford Wives *and* Falling In Love

Although these varieties of infrastructural lived space I have outlined in McGinley, Wilson, and Kerr emerged from the early post-War era, they retained their currency through the Cold War into the 1980s and even into the twenty-first century. Becky Nicolaides summarizes the widely-circulated anti-suburban positions of major urbanists Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, and William H. Whyte, as describing a post-War

American where "Hell, it seemed, was moving from the city to the suburbs – like everyone else" (80). In the 1975 version of *The Stepford Wives,* moving to the suburbs summons the car-dependence that traps (and kills) women in Stepford by severing the connection to the city and even other suburbs. The McGinley-suburbanite prefers such comforting highway-drawn boundaries, but resistant Stepford Wife Joanna Eberhart does not. In the film's opening sequence, the Eberhart family leaves their Manhattan apartment for a house in Stepford and, after stopping at a toll booth to pay an entrance fee to suburbia, enters the wilds of the Connecticut suburbs. In the subsequent shot, the camera pans from left to right as the family station wagon – driven by husband Walter, of course – rambles along a nearly empty highway, the upper half of the frame filled with green trees and colorful flowers. In the lower half of the screen, however, a mass of nearly identical gravestones offers counterpoint to the bloom. The highway slices between these two halves, and cutaways to Joanna find her looking not up toward the foliage, but outward more horizontally, at a suburban future that will quite literally suffocate her in Stepford. In this shot, the highway reveals its promise as an escape route back to New York City, a means to hold off both literal and figurative death. However, for Joanna, the insular suburban conformity she faces in Stepford represents a half-measure of the replaced by robots worst case scenario inherent in the suburban housing bundle.

Joanna's *détournements* within Stepford-suburbia occur in the transportation infrastructure, but such resistance is confined to Stepford and its streets and sidewalks. In their quest to re-vivify the women's movement in Stepford, Bobbie and Joanna walk and drive around the town to talk to women in hyper-domestic kitchens and sun-rooms, with

their *détounrment*-like politically agitating errand-driving relegated almost entirely to shots of a car pulling into a driveway. However, one short series of images connects moving through suburbia and a sudden counter-hegemonic clarity. As Bobbie gives her environmental poisoning theory, she drives past a series of low-slung light-industrial buildings. Shifting between medium close-ups of Bobbie and Joanna in the car and a series of corporate logo signs, a critical suburban point of view emerges from the film's editing: the monotony of sign after sign as seen from the driver's seat becomes emblematic of the omnipresence not of good jobs that make it possible and pleasurable to both work and live in Stepford, but of a literally poisonous environment, which figures escaping Stepford – even if the reason is misdiagnosed – as an imperative. Rather than the second-hand reporting of the return to the house, as in Betsy Rath's case, *The Stepford Wives* pointedly represents Joanna's panicked drive home from the psychotherapist through subjective first-person camera work. Joanna's return trip re-values the same group of corporate signs she saw earlier, with Stepford's "poisonous nature" appearing in the form of signs rapidly flashing past in a shaky, hand-held point of view shots that signifies Joanna's shocked recognition of the ideological poison Stepford's built environment expresses.

Once she moves to Stepford, Joanna struggles against its almost entirely self-contained, circular infrastructure; the entrapment is palpable in the editing -- most of Joanna's experience of transit is elided, placing most of the narrative in an extended version of Betsy's climactic drive on the Merritt Parkway –.[87] After the Eberharts move

[87] In terms of star persona, Katharine Ross plays Joanna, which hints that Joanna's life is what happens to Elaine Robinson *after* she joins Benjamin on the bus at the end of *The Graduate.*

to Stepford, the film does not revisit the space between New York and Stepford. Joanna's trips into the city – two to an art gallery and one to a chemical lab – occur in the space of a straight cut, denying the potential for the highway to bridge the verdant and gray halves of the moving scene. During her final trip into the city, presenting her work to a gallery owner, Joanna hopes that she will be remembered for the photographs she takes, which are instantly nostalgic images of children playing. Immediately after, and without visibly rehearsing the return trip past the graveyard, Joanna arrives at Bobbie's house – now inhabited by a robot version of Bobbie that parrots the appeal of Stepford (and Spruce Manor): "good schools, low taxes, clean air." Joanna drives away accompanied by the atonal noises of squealing tires, horns, screaming kids, and slamming gates, but, like the two previous trips to the city, her experience of the time and space of transit is contained within the suburbs – no evidence of a trip back through that gravestone-trees image, sealing off suburbia from the city.

But even the small measure of McGinley-endorsed intra-suburban infrastructure use offers nothing more than a pleasant prison for not only women like Joanna, but the men who must actively police and manage it. Soon after moving to Stepford, Joanna takes Fred, the dog, out for a walk and during the walk a police officer, in a manner not unrelated to the crossing guards in "Suburbia, of Thee I Sing," stops Joanna to make sure no undesirables use the town space. Frustrated by the restrictions Stepford places on her movement, Joanna claims, "One of the reasons I moved from the city was so I could walk around at night." The police officer's response, "Certainly you and Fred can walk around at night. But I'd stick a little closer to home. Really Mrs. Eberhart, this isn't the best place for you to wander around," not only signals the defense of the Men's Association

Building, but also signals that Stepford does McGinley one better – Joanna shouldn't be moving around town, since the one good reason for that, meeting the 5:32, disappears in Walter's daily car commute. She should be closer to, preferably at, home. The danger of leaving the house and approaching the Men's Association Building returns in the film's climactic chase scene, during which the same police officer assures Walter that the roads out of Stepford have all been blocked off, ensuring that Joanna will be destroyed in suburbia by foreclosing on the possibility of using the infrastructure that connects suburbs to each other and to the city.[88]

The normalization of the Tom Rath approach to commuting and the rarity of even Jean Kerr's mild *détournements* does not feature in *The Stepford Wives'* obvious (but muddled) anti-suburban polemic, but it does in the 1984 Robert DeNiro and Meryl Streep vehicle *Falling in Love.* In spite of what seems to be a clear "meet-cute" opening in a book store in the city, the commute wields such a power of spatial organization in the American imagination of everyday activity that Margy Rochlin's *Ms.* review mistakenly believes that since they are "Westminster commuters" (Canby), Frank and Molly "met while taking the train to Manhattan" (12). Richard Schickel's acid dismissal of the film takes special care to note the disappointing banality of *Falling In Love's* frequent commuter-train car setting, noting that "The name of the picture being knocked off here is *Brief Encounter*, not *Closely Watched Trains*" (Schickel 105). Both reviews fail to note that the film's credit sequence shows that Frank and Molly's are car commuters who take the train as a last resort. Once on the train, they sit in adjoining rows without ever noticing each other. I have belabored the point somewhat because it offers insight into

[88] The same road-closing trap appears in *The Truman Show's* critique of suburban false consciousness.

the power that commuting holds in maintaining the separation of suburb from city, family from work and thus its unsettling *détournement* potential. Frank confesses to his wife, "I met a woman on the train," when, in truth, he met Molly in the city *because of* the train. The sense that the train facilitates a reconciliation of work and home, past and present, into a fully suburban life does not apply to *Falling in Love,* in which neither Frank nor Molly can choose the Jean Kerr celebration of the therapeutic time and space the train offers those who choose to straddle suburb and city. Like noir characters who *must* die to square the film's moral equation, Frank's infidelity costs him his place in the solidly middle-class domestic suburbs – his wife moves to Colorado, leaving Frank in a house decorated with moving boxes rather than the mass-produced consumer objects that his Babbittry would seem to indicate – and Molly's marriage dissolves as well.

The mise en scene in *Falling in Love* encourages the mistaken sense that Frank and Molly spend all their time in a train car as people without proper places in either the city or the suburb, a trend which informs the film's recognition of the allure of something resembling Jean Kerr's sense of the train as an extension of the best parts of city life – non-parental, perhaps intellectual stimulus. While Frank and Molly do not connect until they are in the city, their shared space on the train and in the train station – as in their seating proximity and separate pay phone conversations that overlap to the point that they appear to be conversing with each other – represents the only space where they are at all comfortable, redrawing the region's map as centered not on home or work, but the in-between space. In the suburbs Frank and Molly experience the discomfort of slowly fading marriages in oversized, barely-shared domestic spaces – Frank's wife Ann spends much of her time in her greenhouse and Molly's husband barely enters Molly's home

studio. In the city, the pressures of doing the work they like in a place they enjoy generate the stress of Frank's impending relocation to mega-suburban Houston and Molly's further distancing from the suburbs to improve her chances in commercial design. Because neither suburb nor city space serves Frank and Molly well, they turn to the train space. Schickel registers his frustration with this investment in the in-between, describing the bulk of the film as, "The pair seem to spend most of the picture either searching for each other through crowded trains…or waiting around the station or on street corners" (105). This lack of at-home or at-work incident registers from the first image of Frank and Molly "together" – Molly in a train seat, looking out the window, with Frank seated in the aisle seat a row behind her – to the film's closing image. In the film's resolution, Frank searches for Molly on the commuter train to Dobbs Ferry – and as he squeezes through the crowd, he spots her at the end of the car. They embrace each other, which no one on the train seems to notice, and as Molly smiles and looks up at Frank, the image freezes in their reunion. As the image freezes, a superimposed image of the train running along its tracks emerges from the rear of the image, with another freeze coming as the train's light reaches the center, and on this image, the credits begin to run.

Figure 3.2

Although Frank and Molly could physically close the gap between each other in a borrowed apartment in the city – they opted not to have sex – like the highway that cuts between the healthy trees and the gravestones, the train that rushes diagonally across the frame to conclude *Falling in Love* bridges the gap between them, acknowledging that the best part of the city is where they found a combination of professional and personal success, much like Jean and Walter Kerr sharing the first notices on the way home.

Frank and Molly, imperfectly following the path of the Kerrs, find that the train allows them to slip the bonds of suburban car-dependence and use the time and space of the train trip both as Tom Rath introspection and as *détournement*. To overcome the suburbs, Tom and Betsy Rath, Phyllis McGinley, Jean Kerr, Joanna Eberhart, Frank Raftis, and Molly Gilmore need highways and rail lines to give them the time and space to confront how what Tom Rath understands as the "four worlds" work together and against each other. Tangled infrastructure simultaneously keeps happy suburbanites in, leading to a never-ending growth cycle in which more suburban built environment

benefits those who prefer the circularity of an exclusively suburban life, and helps unhappy suburbanites plot their escape, thinking long and often enough to discover their route out during commute *détournements*.

CHAPTER IV

"THIS AIN'T SO BAD": THE CREATIVE CLASS AND THE ESCAPE FROM THE SUBURBAN FURROW

In *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*, David Brooks does a great disservice to suburbia, even as his "pop sociology" account defends and glorifies it. Brooks sees in the late twentieth century subspecies of the exurb the continuation (he comes close to describing it as the pinnacle) of the American drive to conquer and civilize what passes for the frontier at the end of the twentieth century: the next interstate exit. For Brooks the exurbs are – somewhat paradoxically, as they exist in an imagined future – shrink-wrapped civilization, unlike the messy, chaotic city. The exurbs Brooks describes in *On Paradise Drive* offer an orderly, predictable life, with public services for less tax money and affordable housing on a "middle-class" budget. Stated this way, it is hard to disagree with Brooks and other exurban/suburban boosters. Who would not endorse affordable housing, economically-delivered public services like highways, water treatment, and education, and a greater sense of community decorum? If only Brooks were making such a claim. On the contrary, Brooks explains that people move to the exurbs

> because they want order. They want to be able to control their lives. They've just had a divorce with their old suburb because it no longer gave them what they craved. They've had it with the forty-five-minute one-way commute in northern California. They're tired of wrestling with the $400,000 mortgage in Connecticut. They don't like the houses crowded with immigrants that are appearing in their New Jersey neighborhoods. They want to get away from parents who smoke and slap their kids, away from families where people watch daytime talk shows about transvestite betrayals or 'My Daughter Is a Slut,' away from broken homes, away from gangs of Goths and druggies, and away from families who don't value education, achievement, and success. (46)

Brooks's catalog of suburban ills disturbs not because it shows that the suburbs are far from perfect. Rather, the language Brooks uses to describe the exurban utopia paints it as single-class and monochromatic, with few if any elderly residents, and above all no non-whites, newly-arrived immigrants, or working class residents – at least not after business hours. Even in the future tense, the Ideal Suburb looks a lot like the 1959 Potemkin Suburb of Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*: a fantastic bastion of normalized white middle-class privilege.[89]

This chapter will show that the "undesirable" class-coded behaviors and economic concerns that Brooks notes have not changed much since shortly after WWII, when *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) imagined the utopian potential in increased access to the suburban way of life that prevents such undesirable behaviors in the "lesser" classes, and continue to feed anxieties over the tenuous grasp on middle-class life that suburbia offers, as *The Family Man* (2000), abetted by films like *American Beauty* (1999), *Office Space* (1999) and *subUrbia* (1996), makes clear. Indeed, these films locate class mobility – both downward and upward – in the city, necessitating both a retrenchment of suburban life, as in *The Family Man* (as well as *American Beauty* and, to a lesser degree, *subUrbia*) and suburban expansion, as in *Office Space*, to address the migration of upward mobility to young, well-educated former suburbanites into cities and not new suburbs. At stake is the risk that, if we do not address this shift, we perpetuate the quarter-acre lot white flight version of the Turner Thesis, which is problematic not only because it reinforces American complacency, but also because of its massive social, economic, and

[89] See Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* Chapter 9, "Nostalgia for the Present," especially 279-88

environmental costs, perhaps most forcefully evident in infrastructure. By returning to the best parts of Babbittry – that is, a detailed awareness of interactions with the built environment, especially its roads – we might locate and positively exploit previously unacknowledged political similarities among varying suburban types in their experiences of and in the built environment. To redirect examination of the suburbs toward interactions with the *shared* elements of the built environment – public spaces like highways, bridges, streets, and sidewalks rather than private spaces like houses, couches in front of televisions, the dining room table, and the single-occupant vehicle – shifts focus away from the implicit monolithic suburb of the individual goal-oriented protagonist who embodies the home-suburb work-city boundary and toward an engagement with geographic place and community, debunking the myth of sameness to unearth the latent potential for a transformation of both a relationship to and production of space.[90]

The suburban form appears most tangibly in opening sequences that introduce conflict within taken-for-granted interactions with the built environment such as going to work or heading home. While suburban built environments appear to function as the inert background for the introduction and resolution of narrative conflicts, their looming presence within the interpersonal relations of moments such as the Fitts's trip to school in *American Beauty* and the carpool in *Office Space* marks a particularly suburban set of

[90] Minnesota State House member Myron Orfield's book *Metropolitics* acts as the political (in the sense of legislative) background for my argument. Orfield describes the talk radio-fueled backlash to the 1995 Fair Tax Base Act, which aimed to equalize the property tax burden by redirecting a portion of affluent suburbs' revenue to less-affluent areas in the Twin Cities region as "so broad based and unfair, characterizing the controversy as one between the city and the *monolithic* suburbs, all of a sudden there was acrimony in beneficiary suburbs" (149, emphasis mine).

spatial practices. Cinematic representations of interactions with the built environment as indicative of "suburban-ness" offer clues to what Edward Soja calls Thirdspace, a "potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious – and consciously spatial – effort to improve the world in some significant way" (22, emphasis in original). Thirdspace appears in the unremarked everyday interactions with infrastructure like parking lots and roadways during routine trips to work, school, shopping and leisure, revealing that late-twentieth century anxieties over the lack of viable alternatives to suburban life take on an increasingly exclusionary character. The four late-century films I discuss in this chapter introduce conflict on the fly, or, more to the point, on the road – and while these conflicts certainly address the fraught interpersonal dimensions of suburban life, they are also symptomatic of the ways in which the built environment both reflects conflict over suburban identity as moving away from monolithically white and middle class, and hinders workable, sustainable solutions to the problems of the ascendance and dominance of a diversifying suburbia.[91]

With this goal in mind, I concentrate on two films that represent life in tenuously middle-class suburbs, the early post-War *It's a Wonderful Life* and its end-of-the-century remake (in all but name) *The Family Man*.[92] In his analysis of *It's a Wonderful Life*, literary and film critic Robert Beuka argues that the future of Bedford Falls depends on

[91] As outlined in the introduction, *Babbitt* moves from house to work in an extended road sequence. *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* makes an amenity of Tom Rath thinking in the space between home and work from the outset; Phyllis McGinley figures the house-to-train-depot ride as the essential suburban amenity. *The Apartment*, *Good Neighbor Sam*, and *Save the Tiger* all begin with a trip that shifts the action from work to home.

[92] The suburb in *The Family Man* most closely resembles ur-suburb Levittown, at least among the films discussed here, although its split level and two-story houses are one market segment higher than the two-bedroom-one bath "starter homes" made famous by that suburb in the potato fields.

successfully reintegrating George Bailey, turning economic crises into crises of masculinity. Accordingly, George Bailey

> is able to prove his worth – and thereby reinstate the notion of male subjectivity…through his battles with Potter over the future of the Bedford Falls landscape. That is, George proves his own worth and ability – if only to himself – by emerging as the person who saved the town from devolving into sleazy Pottersville. (Beuka 57)

Working as a walking talking GI Bill for Bedford Falls' working class, George helps ethnic "others" like Martini escape the urban-identified tenement squalor of Pottersville for suburban Bailey Park. George Bailey, the young man who wanted to design bridges and cities of tomorrow, redesigns Bedford Falls in his own inclusive image: Bailey Park brings the ethnic working class into suburban homeownership. *Family Man*, like *It's a Wonderful Life* figures the twenty-first century suburbs as dependent on the reintegration of a lone man, that is, Jack Campbell.[93] Unlike George Bailey, Jack does not choose between two versions of the same suburb, but between a New Jersey suburb and urban Manhattan. *Family Man*, then, demonstrates continuity with *It's a Wonderful Life's* concern over the maintenance of suburban (quietly heterosexual) masculinity, but reveals a late-century anxiety over the changing racial identity of the suburbs, forcefully equating a stable suburban George-Bailey identity with not only masculinity, but also whiteness. This late-century anxiety about the maintenance of suburban identity in the face of a diversifying population appears not simply in the aspiring middle-class suburb Jack Campbell shares with his antecedent George Bailey, but also in suburbia in general. Late-1990s American cinema represents the contest over the racial identity of multiple forms of suburbia – in the affluent, inner-ring upper-middle-class suburb of *American*

[93] See chapter 1 of Beuka's *SuburbiaNation.*

Beauty, in the office park exurb of *Office Space*, and in the aging working-class suburb in *subUrbia* – as a spatial concern. In a powerful sense, moments of transit that might make visible this contest in all suburban types are palpable but invisible in suburban narratives, more talked about than seen.[94] Yet the contrasts between *It's a Wonderful Life* and the constellation of late-1990s films typified by *Family Man* provocatively gesture toward transit and the suburban infrastructure as the key to charting the changing identity of the spaces through which the journey passes and the reactionary ideology that seeks to maintain a white, heterosexual identity for suburbia, be it through conscious Secondspace exclusion or Firstspace extension and expansion.

As in the case of *Babbitt*, suburban critique has honed in on the house and consumerism at the cost of an engagement with other, in-between, elements of the built environment. While, as Beuka argues, *It's a Wonderful Life* "pay[s] careful attention to matters of physical and social terrain, and [its]…treatments of landscape provide compelling evidence that, even before the 'age of suburbia' proper, suburbanization was beginning to shape the imaginative, as well as physical, landscape of the United States" (27), the majority of his argument concerns the domestic and work worlds. The problematic reliance on the insulation afforded by roads and highways to maintain a stable suburban identity runs throughout the films discussed here. In this sense, *American Beauty's* focus on the interpersonal relationships among three houses on a residential street rather than a larger, interconnected town emerges from the insulation an

[94] As Orfield notes, traffic effectively functions as a spatial representation of the inequality that films racialize: "Cars owned by people who cannot afford to live close to their work clog the beltways. As long as most new jobs are created in communities without affordable housing, only coordinated transportation and land use policy reform that promotes such housing will lessen the stress" (7).

established, affluent suburb can afford its residents. *Office Space*, on the other hand, delivers its happy ending in the form of an exurban development pattern that adversely affects residents of *subUrbia's* Burnfield or *Family Man's* unnamed suburb: development hinges on highway funds appropriated from the very towns that will lose jobs and housing to the far edge of sprawl that offers safety through the distance better highway access delivers.[95] This unequal distribution of funds spatially isolates the less-affluent suburbs and the central city more often than not inhabited by the working class and racial minorities (which, in turn facilitates gentrification and further spatial isolation). In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the utopian Bailey Park first appears on screen during the Martini family's move to their new house. As the Bailey car carries the Martinis under the sign that reads "Bailey Park," an Italian song plays on the soundtrack, stamping an ethnic identity quite distinct from Bailey's onto the community where the working class no longer lives "like-a pigs." Potential sites of suburban Thirdspace locate themselves in the tactical signatures that suburbanites like Martini write on the landscape during their transit through the built environment, as in *The Family Man* Jack Campbell's trips between New York and suburban New Jersey.

Commuting an affective death sentence

The problems of the suburban status quo – the major obstacles that characters overcome in Hollywood films – frequently emerge during the near-ubiquitous journey-to-work routine that opens such films. While traffic has a palpable presence *The Family Man's* characters' thinking and dialog, it functions more as a constitutive absence than a

[95] Orfield spends a great deal of *Metropolitics* lamenting this tendency, see 55-65 and 68-73.

fact of life in the film's mise en scene. In the first dialog exchange of Jack's Manhattan life, Paula tells Jack she has to leave Manhattan for family Christmas in New Jersey. Jack incredulously asks, "Jersey? Do you have any idea what the traffic's going to be like?" She answers, "That's why I'm taking the train," the first of many indications that judicious scheduling of travel is not the exclusive preserve of Brooks's bobos, Patio Men, and exurbanites, but something commuters do as a matter of course. Sensible travel planning seems to be the province of women in *Family Man*, for later, when Jack is offered a job that comes with a company-provided Manhattan apartment, his wife Kate remains unconvinced he should take it. For her, the disadvantages of traffic and commuting outweigh the potential benefits of the job. Standing in the spacious upper-story apartment, Jack addresses Kate's lack of enthusiasm for his potential career change:

> Listen, OK. OK you know something? I'm detecting a funky tension here. And this was supposed to be a happy day. So guess what? I don't need this. We don't have to live here. Forget it. I-I'll commute. I'll drive to work.

At the moment Jack proposes a commute, Kate covers her eyes in exasperation. According to Kate, it is not the potential job that should determine his decision, but rather the problems of the suburb-to-city commute. "In traffic Jack," she reminds him, "it's over an hour each way. That's like three hours every day." Kate further presses the film's positive take on the suburban status quo by invoking what *Family Man* relentlessly figures as the main amenity and draw of the suburbs: "When are you ever gonna see the kids?" At stake in both of Kate's examples is the conflict between work productivity and home productivity. In both cases, the time invested in moving between New York and New Jersey is discussed but does not appear on screen, given an affective death sentence driven by a desire to both maximize and privilege "productive time" at home. Rather

than wasting time by fighting traffic, Jack implies that Paula, his no-strings-attached companion in the scene that introduces his city-life, should stay and make productive use of her city time, only to be rebuffed with the efficiency of a less-traffic-prone train trip to a privileged suburban family time. By the same token, Kate places the business productivity of a gratis apartment in Manhattan as secondary to the most important sort of productivity – "productive" family time *in the suburbs* – something that a daily drive between the New Jersey dormitory and New York office would shrink to nil.[96]

The contest between family productivity and work productivity is often waged between the suburbs and the city, with interior personal conflicts rather than traffic patterns figured as the problems to be solved. Traffic patterns impinge on suburban lives to the extent that they set the schedule for family time, but this scheduling causes the category of space to disappear from the map of family interactions. Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, a novel which consistently engages the biological basis for illnesses both mental and bodily, not only defamiliarizes the everyday experience of commuting by representing traffic as a biological process,[97] but also links traffic to the possible perfection of bodily health and productivity to which the suburban Lamberts aspire:

> In the morning the blood was crowded with commuters, the glucose peons, lactic and ureic sanitation workers, hemoglobinous deliverymen carrying loads of freshly brewed oxygen in their dented vans, the stern

[96] *Family Man's* nostalgia for the suburban 1950s here, as throughout the film, bears uncanny similarities to sociologist Herbert Gans's 1967 endorsement of Levittown: "The community may displease the professional planner and the intellectual defender of cosmopolitan culture, but perhaps more than any other type of community, Levittown permits most of its residents to be what they want to be – to center their lives around the home and the family, to be among neighbors whom they trust" (412-13).

[97] Andrew Ross notes the consistent deployment of "the rhetorical image of the city as an immense biological organism, hopelessly overextended, of course, and totally beyond any carrying capacity or sustainable organization of resources" (Ross and Bennett 17).

> foremen like insulin, the enzymic middle managers and executive epinephrine, leukocyte cops and EMS workers, expensive consultants arriving in their pink and white and canary-yellow limos, everyone riding the aortal elevator and dispersing through the arteries. (Franzen 332)

In this example, Franzen's blood metaphor for traffic imagines a car as a self-contained body, isolated from and seemingly independent of its surroundings. Implicit as well is the difficulty of maintaining a shared-blood family when so many factors emerge as essential. And yet, Franzen's metaphor ignores the fact that traffic does not usually function as the ceaseless flow of cars along an interstate. As Lewis Mumford puts it, "good transportation policy…cannot be achieved by aiming at high speed or continuous flow alone;" instead, "a good transportation system minimizes unnecessary transportation" ("Highway" 237, 236). In this manner, the biological metaphor – filled with glucose, lactic and uric acid, and insulin, all of which can be dangerous in extreme amounts – plays up the necessity of moderation in search of productive functioning, with the highway functioning as a release valve for the pressures of both the city and suburbs, as in Tom Rath's experience. *The Corrections*, as a standard family melodrama, concentrates on goal-oriented characters overcoming obstacles. In a novel of acculturation like *The Corrections* – and mass cultural productions like Hollywood films – traffic barely registers as an event worth representing, much less as a significant obstacle to cultural belonging. In this manner, traffic, if it appears, serves as the atmosphere in which other, more significant, problems of adjustment are addressed, problems like family and work productivity. During the summer Denise works with her father, their shared ride to and from work is where the balance of parenting and work– one of the major obstacles of the novel – occurs. During one drive home, Denise and her father discuss the future of their recently-bought-out company less as father and daughter

and more as co-workers, with an abrupt return to circumscribed family roles arriving at the front door of their house:

> On the way out to the suburbs that night [Denise] asked her father if the Wroths were going to merge the railroad with the Arkansas Southern. 'I don't know,'
> Alfred said. 'I hope not.'
> Would the company move to Little Rock?
> 'That seems to be their intention, if they get control.'
> What would happen to the men in Signals?
> 'I'd guess some of the more senior ones would move. The younger ones – probably laid off. But I don't want you talking about this.'
> 'I won't,' Denise said.
> Enid, as on every other Thursday night for the last thirty-five years, had dinner waiting. (Franzen 362)

In this short conversation, the novel's free indirect discourse first focalizes through Denise. But the arrival at the Lambert house is narratively signaled by switching from business to domestic matters, with the narrative focalization shifting away from Denise to a third-person omniscient narrator that first reports Denise's last line of dialog, and finally ends the work portion of the day by ending the car conversation and calling to attention Enid's domestic actions. The "decompression" that the ride home allows – the gradual shift from work to home – appears in this short scene as the shift from Denise's questioning point of view to the parent-associated omniscience of third person narration based in the home. In other words, the narrative enacts the experience of time spent together on the way home from work. For a few moments, Alfred is not distant or unapproachable, as he often is at home, behaving less as Denise's father in the commuting moment, and more as a supervisor-coworker. The shift from the in-car conversation to the diner table narrates no spatial transit, thus eliding a distinction between work and home, and enabling Alfred to act as an effective, engaged father by

using the commute to stay in work mode – where he is most comfortable and expert – a little longer.[98]

Alfred leans on the language of work productivity, rather than the language of affect favored by his wife Enid, to communicate with Denise in the car.[99] On the way home from Denise's last day of work at the railroad, Alfred demonstrates productive – and yet terrifically compromised – parenting, which Franzen introduces, in what verges on free indirect discourse, with one declarative sentence: "Alfred passed along a compliment in the car that night" (377).

> "Sam Beuerlein," he said, "tells me you're the greatest worker he's ever seen."
> Denise said nothing.
> "You made a deep impression on those men. You opened their eyes to the kind of work a girl can do. I didn't tell you this before, but I had the feeling the men were dubious [note: Alfred's catchphrase] about getting a girl for the summer. I think they expected a lot of chattering and not much substance."
> She was glad of her father's admiration. But his kindness, like the kindness of the draftsmen who weren't Don Armour, had become inaccessible to her. It seemed to fall upon her body, to refer to it somehow; and her body rebelled.
> *Denise-uh-why-you-done, what-you-did?*
> "Anyhow," her father said, "now you've had a taste of life in the real world." (Franzen 377, italics in original)

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[98] In *White Noise's* imagination of a similar en-route parent-child conversation – in DeLillo's case, about "rain" – literary critic Lee Rozelle reads not the ecocritically-informed "loss of 'rain,' as critics have suggested, but rather an oddly *arrière garde* desire to test the limits of bourgeois speech, the white noise coming out of Heinrich's mouth" (Rozelle 62). While I do not dismiss Rozelle's reading or the ecocritical "toxic discourse" readings he engages, I wonder about the status the actual Firstspace road on which they ride while they have this conversation. That is, for all the concern over rain turning into acid rain and/or an empty signifier, how else would Heinrich get to school, and why ignore this constitutive element to the Gladney's environment?

[99] See, for comparison, Alfred's argument with his son Gary on 152-3, as well as his tendency to say, "I am dubious" in response to real estate sales pitches (363) as well as the possibility of his children making it home for Christmas (472).

Unlike their earlier discussion of the future of the company, this interaction between Alfred and Denise is not so much a dialog as it is two stifled monologs, one interior and one exterior, which is not to say that neither is ineffectual. Alfred's spoken monolog draws a silent reaction from Denise, but the omniscient narrator makes clear that Denise at least listens to Alfred. On the other hand, while at first glance it may appear that Alfred exhausts his capacity for empathy with a solitary, but mediated, compliment, his retreat comes not in the form of silence, but a self-conscious exit from the language of praise that announces itself quite clearly with "anyhow" and the paternal evocation of "the real world." However, while Alfred equates the real world with the work space he and Denise share in the city, his parenting occurs only on the highway space between the St. Louis workspace and the placid home realm of St. Jude. Denise experiences Alfred's highway-located kindness as inaccessible because it unmoors their suburban house from its purported raison d'être, the kindness and nurturing of parenting.

While the psychoanalytic valence of Denise's silence seems fairly plain, the spatial composition of her commute merits closer attention. For the Lamberts, their daily commute makes eye contact almost unnecessary. This distancing is tacitly understood as a traffic safety measure, but plainly functions as an interpersonal safety measure as well. In this sense, sharing a car ride home closely resembles what David Foster Wallace identifies as the template for most conversations in the television age:

> the truth is that, in younger Americans' experience, people in the same room don't do all that much direct conversing with each other. What most people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions that myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other. (44)

The car set up allows both Alfred and Denise a group of advantages: first of all, and perhaps least importantly to Alfred and Denise, driving and riding in a car presents an ever-changing environment exterior to them, much like the images that flash on the TV screen.[100] Secondly, the drive home, unlike home life, is of limited duration in an unavoidably shared space: the detachable portion of home that the family car represents. Rather than talk to each other during the long hours at home, Denise and Alfred retreat to their own private spaces. Commuting along the in-between space of the highway offers them the half-measure of togetherness that family-TV-time offers: a shared visual experience in front of them, punctuated by brief moments of interaction directed more at the (wind)screen than each other, something the novel acknowledges more or less unconsciously. But, lastly, the car represents a mobile private space on the public space of the highway. For a novel that bases its family traumas in 1970s St. Louis, the severe economic downturn experienced throughout much of the industrial Midwest appears fleetingly in the very specific cases of the deterioration of railroad company for which Alfred and Denise work, and, to a lesser extent, the hard times evident in Don Armour's working-class suburb.[101] Consider, for comparison, E.L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel,* which closes in the shadow of the Cross Bronx Expressway that destroyed Daniel's old neighborhood, causing him to note, as he stands where 174th Street used to be: "It has changed…The old apartment houses, rank upon rank, street after street, stand in their own soot like a ruined city filling with dirt. But people still live here" (315). Franzen,

[100] David Foster Wallace, in "E Unibus Pluram," connects this posture to that other post-War mass cultural habit – sitting in front of the television.

[101] And, it bears noting, the railroad company buyout in fact leads to economic success for the Lambert's neighbors, who use Alfred's insider-trading help to make a timely investment.

like the Lamberts, does not register the fallout of highway construction that cuts through poor, often black and/or ethnic neighborhoods as in *Book of Daniel*, but instead registers it as an abstract problem rather than an after-effect of concrete – better yet, asphalt – causes. In this equation/substitution, the multi-ethnic and –racial city of families *and* business is replaced, in the wake of de-industrialization and suburbanization, with a home-based white suburban family productivity, and the parenting that Alfred attempts in the transit between these two spaces unconsciously compensates by becoming more business-like in character than familial, an approach that appears in *The Family Man* as well. The Lambert's car trip on the highway blocks out, to cite the most exceptional of examples, the literal implosion of the Pruitt Igoe housing developments, and more generally the destruction of inner-city St. Louis as a residential zone throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, cutting a deep furrow between work and home that allows no sightseeing in-between that might register the costs of the racial segregation of post-War suburban life in First- and Secondspace.

The Family Man presents fewer moments of transit between the city and suburb, but their pointed absence from Jack's life-changing experiences reveals a sense of the importance the film places on representing productive time similar to *The Corrections*, in that for all the transit time Jack sacrifices to live in the suburbs, very little of that time registers in his education as a suburbanite. Most of what Jack learns occurs in fixed suburban locations like houses, offices, and convenience stores, not on the highways between them. At the onset of his what-could-have-been "glimpse life," Jack flees the suburbs for the city, but the space between New Jersey and Manhattan disappears in a straight cut. Once in the city, Jack encounters Cash (driving the sports car that once

belonged to Jack) who explains Jack's "glimpse" while showing control over the built environment by masterfully speeding through Manhattan's streets. The subsequent transition *back* into suburbia – Jack's return trip to New Jersey – represents the highway as a disorienting transition zone. As Jack leaves New York City, an extreme long shot shows Jack's silver minivan moving down the four-lane highway, panning right to keep the minivan in frame. As the pan moves right, Jack's vehicle moves through the foreground of the image, as, in the background, the George Washington Bridge emerges and eventually stretches across the entire frame, dwarfing Jack's minivan as it drives out of view. From the image of the Bridge, the scene shifts to Jack at the wheel, fumbling with a map, trying to find his way back to "his house." In this way, Jack's confused retreat to the suburbs finds the physical link to the city casting a shadow over city-suburb transit, leading to frustrating, mediated interactions with the built environment instead of the sort of masterful travel Jack experiences going into and within the city.[102]

[102] The geography of the Bridge scene places Jack's glimpse life somewhere in the northern portion of the Jersey suburbs, near towns in the Bergenfield/Paramus area. However, Jack, in fact, could not have crossed the George Washington bridge into New Jersey, since his approach on the Palisades Parkway is from the north and the bridge's New Jersey end is in front of him as he exits the frame, meaning Jack could only have been so lost as to have crossed the Hudson *much* further north, at the Tappan Zee Bridge. Practically speaking, the bridge is the most recognizable link between New Jersey and New York City – the other connections are the Holland and Lincoln tunnels.

Figure 4.1

What's more, the trips to and from the city generate Kate's frustrated observation that Jack "missed Christmas" while in transit. The obstacle that Jack faces, without ever fully realizing it, is how to generate productive family time – and *The Family Man* formally solves this problem by excising much of the space of transit from its plot time, a choice real commuters do not have. *Family Man's* recourse to cutting from origin to destination is perhaps the most obvious example of narrative and representational strategies in suburban films admitting their inadequacy to solving the problems of suburban life in any but a fantastic, ideological way.

When Jack's suburban education is complete, he awakes to a city life that he flees, rushing to his imaginary suburban wife and kids, with all of the space between city and suburb elided with a straight cut that not only reinforces the primacy of productive family time, but also constructs the near-impossibility of succeeding both in the city (at work) and in the suburbs (with a nuclear family), since cinematic editing (or literary elision) makes possible such a massive jump in time and space. Jack's trip once again bridges the city and the Jersey suburbs in a single cut, as Jack moves from panic in his apartment to the sidewalk in front of his glimpse suburban house. Unfortunately for Jack,

no version of Kate lives in the house, stranding business-first Jack in family-first Jersey. In the midst of a search for family time, work calls Jack away; commuting time takes Jack not only *to work* but also *away from family* – a doubling up of lost quality family time. While returning to the city from his New Jersey "home," Jack is summoned by work, turning his car trip into a commute. Time in transit can be made "productive" for work by adding cell phones, but Jack cannot make his time in transit into family time, setting the value of family time at the top of the ladder. Even without a family, as he races to the Big Meeting at work, Jack sees that the New Jersey-New York commute would have been detrimental to family productivity, and it is better that he turned down the job to which he currently rushes.[103] In this contest for what counts as productive time, the happy ending in *Family Man* glides from the glimpse-life of "wife and kids in the Jersey suburbs" to the actual life of "rekindled-relationship not in the Jersey suburbs." That is, though *The Family Man* presents the New Jersey lower-middle-class suburban life in Jack's glimpse as the best-case scenario of productive family time, the film concludes with an equalization of *all* suburban life, whether in lower-middle-class Bergenfield or tony upper-middle-class Westchester County or Connecticut.[104] The allure of Jack's "have your cake and eat it too" happy ending rests in its ability to suture the massive gaps between the city setting of massive financial success and the suburban home of family life in a seamlessly edited cinematic whole by eliding the commute.

[103] This is the film's twisty logic.

[104] As Joel Garreau notes in *Edge Cities*, "whenever a company moves its headquarters, the commute of the chief executive officer always becomes shorter" (92). If Jack can retain the lessons of his glimpse, he certainly would not forget the problem of traffic, so why move to Bergenfield and fight traffic?

By contrast, *The Corrections*, by *not* hiding the commute, shows the way in which the suburban form stages a choice between work and family productivity as necessary for people like Jack Campbell and Alfred Lambert, and yet the commute does not appear as an obstacle in and of itself, but rather as an opportunity for interiority, as in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.* In other words, moments of transit are often excluded from the problem-solving of the narrative, but, when present, these moments will tend to define their spaces through what they exclude – the physical, Firstspace presence of a Secondspace-infused built environment. In this way, foregrounding of the in-transit conversations of *The Corrections* and the edges of *The Family Man's* frame allows us to seek out the spaces where the praxis of Thirdspace negotiates between apparently ideologically opposed desires, cutting view holes in the furrow between home and work.

Office Space's opening commute sequence presents a sense of frustration and resignation with the inertia represented by gridlock standing in for Peter Gibbon's ambivalence over the triteness and frustration of a life that has taken up residence in a rut like his commute's furrow, in which, he laments, "every day is the worst day of my life."[105] Although he constantly changes lanes in a futile attempt to escape the paralysis of traffic, Peter is left in the dust by a senior citizen using a walker; to accentuate the Sisyphean labor of commuting, Peter's look of resignation paired with the old man's off screen escape indicates that stop-and-go is both the default position and the best-case scenario (see Figures 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5).[106] The end of the commute brings little

[105] "This daily commuter snarl," Peter Rainer notes in his *New York* article, "may be their only occasion to blow off steam. Slotted into look-alike cubicles at work, they peep over their partitions like rodents, sniffing the air for danger" (92).
[106] Peter's co-workers Michael and Samir also appear in the opening sequence, but their frustration is based, strangely enough, in not getting to jobs they hate fast enough.

comfort. After the gridlock sequence, the scene shifts to an office park exterior, where a sign bearing the logo "Initech" occupies the right foreground of the image. Peter emerges from behind the camera on the left of the screen, walking past the Initech sign and toward the building entrance. What at first appears to be an innocuous establishing shot demonstrates that though Peter may escape traffic, even that small victory is tainted by another frustrating interaction with his built environment – the long, impersonal march from parking place to desk. In addition, Peter – his shoulders slumped, carrying his briefcase as if it weighed a thousand pounds – enters the shot from behind the camera, almost appearing from the audience, indicating that parking for Initech employees involves a considerable trek from door to door. This car-centered, alienating development pattern finds its apex in the exurbs *Office Space* calls home, which are so oriented to car travel that the major pedestrian activity involves not sidewalks, but the asphalt lots and grass plots between parking place and office.

Figure 4.2

Figure 4.3

Figure 4.4

Figure 4.5

Much like Peter Gibbons, Jack Campbell experiences significant moments on car- rather than human-scaled roadways that visually cue his suburbanity.[107] One seemingly minor, quotidian example is Jack's dog walking routine. When he knows that his glimpse of suburban life is coming to an end, Jack does a spot of husbandly duty and takes the dog for a walk, walking down the middle of a street. Even with small piles of snow plowed to the side, the street is exceptionally wide and appears to be even wider, since houses and trees are set far back from the street. What distinguishes Jack's street is that it is a residential – capillary – street and not a higher-traffic collector road. The excessive width of residential streets carries two significant risks for *Family Man's* apparent nostalgic endorsement of the safe embrace suburban life allegedly offers.[108] In

[107] *subUrbia's* Jeff also uses the out-of-scale suburban roads as the route to an epiphany concerning his suburban-ness, walking from one side of town to the other after abandoning Pony's limo.

[108] See also the argument between Peter and Joanna in *Office Space*, which Joanna ends by leaving the car on a collector road. The combination of long shot and road width renders her, and by extension her human-scale problems, tiny in relation to the car-directed built environment.

terms of aesthetics, a ratio of approximately four to one (horizontal to vertical) generates a pleasing sense of enclosure: the skyscraper canyons in Manhattan that Jack turns his back on are perhaps the most extreme version of too much verticality generating not enclosure but entrapment. However, the sprawling horizontality of Jack's suburban town does not exhibit the sort of 4-to-1 aesthetics articulated by planners like Peter Calthorpe, Renee Chow, and Barrie Greenbie.[109]

While the best-case scenario for suburban development hinges on a neighborhood "growing into itself" through time as trees grow and create a vertical barrier between the street and house, newer subdivisions suffer from the presence of newly-planted, spindly saplings, creating a wind-swept street – as in the brief shot of the still-under-construction Bailey Park.[110] And yet, the exceptionally wide residential streets, even with established trees well past the sapling stage, dwarf Jack as he takes his last walk through the neighborhood.

Figure 4.6

[109] See Calthorpe's *The Next American Metropolis,* Chow's *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling,* and Greenbie's *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape.*
[110] In "On Suburban Nostalgia for the Seventies," I engage the aesthetics of suburban trees and streets in much greater depth.

In addition to aesthetic concerns, wide streets create safety concerns as well, since wider streets are less safe than narrow ones. The more trafficked the road, the wider the road – the standard description follows a biological nomenclature (as my example from *The Corrections* develops) from capillary/residential to minor arterial/connector to major arterial/highway. As outlined in the professional manual *Transportation and Land Development,*

> The urban major arterial system interconnects such major developments as the central business district, large suburban commercial centers, large industrial centers, major residential communities, and other major activity centers….The minor arterial system interconnects with and augments the major arterial system….[Arterials] should not penetrate identifiable residential neighborhoods. (Stover & Koepke 83, 84)

Transportation planners do not endorse arterial/collector roads in residential areas both for mathematical reasons (dwelling units do not require the high volume collector roads allow) and for safety reasons. In short, since arterials join distant origins and destinations as well as serve large numbers of vehicles, they, by design, permit greater speed and vehicle capacity. Wider streets also create the illusion, for drivers, of a greater field of vision, which in turn leads to increased speeds. Thus, Jack walking his dog in the street, at night, is perhaps the most *un*safe choice he might make in the "safety" of a reified suburban life. And yet it is the last powerful endorsement of suburban wife-and-kids family life that the film makes – both in terms of narrative resolution and in terms of its allusion to George Bailey's "I want to live!" speech that similarly traffics in snow as an index of magic. In addition, the residential cul-de-sac street system fights against the illusion of safety Jack experiences. Since most newer suburban residential neighborhoods now feature a single entry point, the built environment signals the inevitable conclusion that Jack senses. There is only one possible itinerary once you

enter the suburban housing development: the married-with-kids house. The built environment attests to the fact that Jack has no choice but suburban family life, since his town's default suburban single-use zoning and street plans based on culs de sacs in pod developments effectively wall him off from access to his former life's multi-use, intricately connected street design and culture in the city, with the desire for "safety" first trapping him physically, then ideologically in the suburbs.

"There goes the neighborhood" – Suburban belonging and the convenience store

The Family Man demonstrates that nostalgic accounts of suburbia's desirability hinge, in large part, on the maintenance of suburban advantages through the spatial exclusion of African-Americans. The sole non-white major character in the film, Cash, repeatedly destabilizes the space he occupies. For example, Cash's first appearance finds him arguing vehemently over a "winning" lottery ticket in a Manhattan store, an argument which requires Jack's quick thinking to avoid a violent end. While *It's a Wonderful Life's* guardian angel Clarence at the very least fulfills George Bailey's request to see a world in which he had never been born, Cash yanks Jack, without Jack's consent, out of what seems to be a successful, fulfilling life. The glimpse of life that Cash gives single urbanite Jack – married with two kids, living in the suburbs – takes him out of the city of 2000 and places him in a nameless New Jersey suburb that resembles 1950s Levittown not so much in its architecture but in its racial makeup and gender politics – for example, the only time a non-white person appears in Jack's new suburban life, it is Cash in a service-sector job, not behind the wheel of a sports car, as he is when

Jack meets him in New York City; Kate is a stay-at-home mom who volunteers.[111] In fact, Cash acts simultaneously as the driving force for Jack's white flight and as the "magical Negro" slash Clarence figure (*It's A Wonderful Life*) who validates Jack's desire to live in suburbia.

The realization that Jack's best self is his suburban self crystallizes in the form of Cash, appearing as a convenience store clerk in Jack's suburb, notes, "Look at you, went and got all domestic and everything. You really figured some things out, huh?" Jack, accustomed to Cash's presence as a signal for personal upheaval, takes a step back, and defensively tells Cash, "You're not sending me back…I'm not going back, you understand me?" Though he is prone to excess, in this scene Nicolas Cage turns to subtle (for him) mimicry to underscore the connection to *It's a Wonderful Life* and the "redemptive" family-centered ending that should no doubt follow his dawning understanding of the noble life he has been missing in the Jersey suburbs. "You can't do this," he says, sounding more and more like James Stewart, both in voice and in cadence, "You can't keep coming in and out of peoples' lives, messing things up. It's not right." Pulling out of the Stewart voice, Cage/Jack exits, telling Cash, "I've got kids. I'm going home." And yet Cash's presence in suburbia messes nothing up for Jack in the first (or the last) place – his original appearance pushes Jack into a "desirable" suburban life, and his return appearance verifies that Jack's "glimpse" is nearly over and order will be restored to his *real life* of urban affluence and contentment. However, the presence of black male Cash in a *fantasy* of suburbia *does* mess things up insomuch as Cash can be read as a stand-in for African-Americans both in the city, forcing the post-War wave of

[111] True, Kate is a lawyer, which is an improvement on Donna Reed. Nonetheless, her work is pro bono.

white flight, and in the suburbs, feeding the exurban expansion of *Office Space* and the Creative Class return to the city in *subUrbia*. New, suburban Jack wants to work his way from the bottom to the top of the company he once led, parking cars in his knockoff suit if need be. That Cash might show up unannounced, even in a best-case scenario version of suburbia, signals that Jack's suburb is not as solidly middle-class as he thought, nor is suburban success guaranteed. In this film, African-Americans arriving in town are the very embodiment of undesirable instability, the clue that life is about to go downhill quickly.

Faced with the untenability of entry-level work in the city for suburbanites, *The Family Man* turns to the already-successful urbanite Jack and his long-lost opportunity with Kate. Rather than pursue his business merger, Jack pursues a domestic merger, tracking Kate down to her apartment in a refurbished, older building. Once again the mise en scene shuttles Jack from in front of skyscraper offices as he leaves work to a medium close up of Jack in motion, this time in the back seat of a limo. Shuttling from the confusion of the office towers to a smaller scale row house architecture (coded as dangerous, thanks to iron bars on the windows) reinscribes the necessity of Jack's "return" to suburbia as key to stabilizing and normalizing his life.

Figure 4.7

Repeating his gesture from the suburban house, Jack pauses at the entrance and nearly touches the building, only to be interrupted by an all-business mover with his arms full of boxes. Kate's life, much like Jack's is one of great professional status – she is leaving *that very night* to head up her firm's Paris office. Handing Jack a box of his old things, urban Kate tells Jack, "I've moved on…and you should move on too." But moving on, in an ideological system *The Family Man* retains from films like *The Apartment*, entails marriage and a move to the suburbs. In the third-act chase, Jack follows Kate to the airport and catches her with the promise of their own plot of land: "We've got a house in Jersey!" In much the same way Peter Gibbon needs literally to build the suburbs to grow up into a monogamous heterosexual couple, Jack admits that his corporate raider life in the city lacks the desirably solid future of the suburbs:

> I know we could both go on with our lives and we'd both be fine. But I've seen what we could be like together. And I choose us. Please Kate. One cup of coffee. You can always go to Paris. Just please, not tonight.

Implicit in Jack's appeal is that "us" is the house in Jersey, the place where glimpse-Kate imagined growing old together, the place where Jack would never see the kids if he were to work in the city, the place to which Jack ran when he realized that his glimpse was

over and he was not OK. *The Family Man* ending echoes *It's a Wonderful Life,* but in a funhouse mirror. City Jack has no reason to want to give up his already-wonderful life – that is, high-status, high-income and evidently high-satisfaction corporate work – early in the film. Instead, he gets to have both – indeed, *The Family Man* represents Jack's desire to rejoin Kate in the suburbs as another step down the road to home-work balancing success. Even through the magic snow falling behind them as they drink their coffee indicates that Jack and Kate will be moving to the suburbs, because Jack, like George Bailey, learned from the life he missed, what the "happy ending" occludes both that Jack and Kate will most certainly *not* be the suburbs of his glimpse and that Jack makes this decision for the both of them, strangers though they have become [112]. There is no racially- and ethnically-diverse Bedford Falls for Jack. Instead, the class privilege of the two-income senior executive/lawyer child-free family will allow Jack and Kate to move into Westchester County or a Connecticut suburb on the Long Island Sound. Jack and Kate's story runs a shell game that replaces the lower-middle-class New Jersey glimpse suburb with what promises to be a solidly upper-middle-class suburb which will be a space for women and children (and not work), while also remaining free of the disruptive presence of African-Americans like Cash.

The Family Man's racialized vision of traditionally-gendered suburbia appears with a nativist cast in *subUrbia*, in Tim's class-aware critique of Burnfield. The engagement with suburban class politics in *subUrbia* offers a useful and instructive counterpoint to *Office Space, Family Man,* and *American Beauty,* which do not explicitly tackle class in suburbia. However, although Tim can mock Erica's imaginary Bel Air

[112] And it is plainly *Jack's* reward, since Kate would be giving up her professional career, essentially going back in time for the sake of Jack.

"middle class-ness," he explains Burnfield's downturn according to the racialized logic of nativism. After railing against Nazeer and Pakeeza Choudry, the Pakistani immigrant owners of the Circle A where he spends most of his time, Tim laughs at Jeff's suggestion to "Just go home and sleep it off." "What am I supposed to sleep off?" he asks,

> My life? Y'know, I'm supposed to go home and go to sleep and when I wake up what'll I be, Jeff? A pilot? Maybe a Super Bowl Quarterback? Or, no, maybe a fucking rock star. I don't think so….They never hurt me? They hurt me every day with their attitude. Y'know like they even have a right. Who the fuck do they think they are? Lemme tell you something. I was born here, alright? I'm an American. And I'm owed something. They took it from me…What about my feelings? What about my fucking feelings? These assholes they come over here and they have all the answers, right? Well they don't know shit.

Tim imagines economic prosperity as a given for Americans – read: white males – and, for him, immigrants who own stores on the commercial strip endanger and steal that birthright as part of a zero-sum game. Conflating inequality and physical violence, Tim pulls out a pistol as he asks, "they never hurt me?," turning the most self-pitying portion of his speech into an apology for his attacks on Erica and Nazeer, with the white male as the true victim of oppression in Burnfield[113]. No amount of stereotypically suburban American behavior[114] – including their bemoaning the state of "kids today" – can rescue the Choudrys from Tim's by-the-book nativism, "that some influence originating abroad threaten[s] the very life of the nation from within," creating an "intense opposition to an

[113] Robert Franks, in *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, locates the propensity for non-elite whites to vote against their own (quite salient economic) interests in the Republican Party's ability to displace class-based anxieties onto race. Tim, in this case, is the embodiment of the 1968 Wallace voter, the 1972 Nixon Hard Hat, and the 1980 Reagan Democrat.

[114] One version of nativism, Higham notes, is rooted in the "fear of foreign radicals," which looks ridiculous when confronted with the apple-pie Choudrys.

internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections" (Higham 4), such as the behaviors Brooks names as the drivers of continued suburban sprawl.

Though Tim recognizes that Burnfield represents a structural failing of suburbia, he simply and grossly misidentifies the structure. For all his proprietary feelings toward Burnfield, Tim exhibits the telltale sign of the suburban striver William H. Whyte came to know in *The Organization Man's* immediate post-War era:

> Always, they will be moving on. For most of its renters Park Forest is a sort of way station, a phase of life, and beyond a certain point continued residence can carry overtones of failure….However glowingly they speak of the no-keeping-up-with-the-Joneses and the other attractions of Park Forest, transients say frankly that they expect eventually to graduate to someplace like Winnetka, the Main Line, or Westchester County. (288-9)

If staying means failure, then Burnfield's best economic option is, simply, a poor echo of the stability the Organization Man hopes for: no longer a position in a large corporation, but simply franchise rights on the strip. Tim refuses to perceive himself as representative of the Burnfield Nazeer wants to graduate from, to move, as Brooks puts it, "away from broken homes, away from gangs of Goths and druggies, and away from families who don't value education, achievement, and success" (46), because the behaviors strivers like Nazeer abhor are so racially coded in his imagination. *subUrbia* locates its primary critique in Tim's misapprehension, since his racially coded fight for Burnfield ends with Tim leaving the contested space, surrendering to the one token of authority which Tim cannot challenge: (Nazeer's) capital. Tim explains to Jeff that in a place like Burnfield, "There's really only one solution, my friend. Anarchy." However, as Tim intones his solution – "anarchy" – he looks not at Jeff, but at the Circle A building, whose corporate logo, as nearly every film reviewer noted at the time of *subUrbia's* release, consciously evokes the anarchy symbol. It seems to me that Tim, by looking to the store rather than

Jeff as he locates the solution to Burnfield's economically-coded deficits demonstrates that Tim refers not to the banal interpretation – upending of the current social structure – but rather Tim's over-investment in a hegemonic suburban identity that can only be white, male and middle-class, and is threatened by the presence of non-whites with franchise rights in and on the suburban landscape, leaving Tim in the parking lot locked out of the store and the tenuous sense of suburban belonging that it represents.

The tar pit of stupidity: subUrbia and the Creative Class

Unlike *Family Man's* Campbells, *American Beauty's* Burnhams, Fittses, and Two Jims, or even *Office Space's* late-twentysomethings, who all locate satisfaction within the confines of the family or romantic couple in the almost uniformly white suburbs – *subUrbia's* locates an alternative relationship to the suburbs in Sooze, who anxiously looks to the city for the satisfaction her suburb (and the way of life it houses) cannot provide. In contrast to the going-nowhere boys on the corner, Sooze spends the entirety of *subUrbia* planning her escape from Burnfield's cultural wasteland through spatial practices that resist the "intended use" of built forms like parking lots. With the corner gang as her audience, Sooze uses the parking lot of the Circle A to practice a performance art piece she hopes will earn her a spot in the School of Visual Arts, which, she reminds everyone, is in a New York she equates with vibrant cultural and social life. But because "uniformly" middle-class American suburbia disappears class as an identity category, neither Sooze nor Jeff conceives of their position within what demographer Richard Florida counts as the 38 million members of the "creative class." The gravitational pull of New York appears in terms of desires as enacted on the built

environment, with the Jeff-Sooze-Pony love triangle providing the veneer of a gender-appropriate (romantic) relationship reason for Sooze's plainly job-driven migration out of the suburbs – like so many of the younger, well-educated workers who began returning to American cities in the mid-1990s, a phenomenon Florida calls the "rise of the creative class," a search for cultural life present in the city, and not supported by suburban patterns of development or demographics.[115]

Jeff troubles the connection between location and sensibility during an argument with Sooze after she performs her piece, critiquing their surroundings as a way of asserting his difference from Burnfielders. While sitting in a fast food restaurant nursing a soda, Jeff bemoans the state of Burnfield, groaning, "look at these people…like fucking robots…look at that kid." Jeff's reference to an off-screen presence – that kid – does not draw a reverse shot of the kid in question, an editing approach that takes on greater salience later in the scene. Rather, the reverse shot to Jeff's critique is Sooze, who softens her stance for a moment, as she smiles and turns slightly to join Jeff in looking off-screen, drawing attention to the contest of ideas at stake in their conversation, not the embodiments of those ideas. Keeping the most distasteful part of Burnfield off-screen, at least temporarily, hints at the essential agreement between Jeff and Sooze: the thing they least desire is a family in the suburbs. To get at the sorting methods of art school education and physical geography, Jeff asks Sooze, "Why can't you [make art] here? Why is somewhere else better?" Jeff answers his own question when he admits that while New York offers Sooze networking access into the art world, all it has to offer him

[115] In *Rise of the Creative Class* Florida notes that in spite of increasing inequality in cities, because of the influx of the creative class, average incomes in most American cities went up in the late 1990s.

is a set of unappealing everyday experiences – "I could go to New York if I wanted, but what's the point? So I could learn how to order a cappuccino? So I could get mugged by some crackhead? So I could see homeless people up close and personal?" In other words, New York offers Sooze access to a large built-in infrastructure and quality of life, which Jeff patly dismisses as a quest for "status." And yet Burnfield offers Jeff something approaching a status opportunity as well. When Sooze, whose goal is "to create art" in New York, asks Jeff what he wants to do in Burnfield, he answers, "Nothing." Sooze, somewhat aghast at his desire, reminds Jeff that "no one does nothing," to which Jeff replies, "OK. Well then I'm gonna break new ground." Burnfield appears to have stirred a case of suburban Stockholm syndrome in Jeff, as evidenced by his self-satisfied drive to inertia as a response to Sooze's drive to *do* the things New York makes possible with density and low barriers to access.[116]

The distinction *subUrbia* draws between Jeff and Sooze is one of late-twentieth century communities prioritizing barriers to entry. Searching for a reason to stay, Sooze asks,

> Why should I stay here, Jeff? So we can sit on the corner and watch the lights change while you bitch about Burnfield? So I can spend the rest of my life guessing what it would be like to be a real artist? So you and I can *fuck* while your parents are out having dinner at The Sizzler?

To accentuate Sooze's point, the scene finally cuts from Sooze and Jeff to a reverse shot: a forty-something couple hunched over their fast food, looking slightly horrified that Sooze has sworn in public. The dialog-less reverse shot of the forty-something couple, and the subsequent silent shot of Jeff and Sooze, function as the two key images in the entire fast food joint sequence. After earlier *not* cutting to "that kid," denying Jeff's point

[116] See Part Four of Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class.*

of view a place on screen, *subUrbia* provides an unflattering image of Jeff and Sooze should they remain in the suburbs as conjured by Sooze, offering a free indirect discourse point of view shot of "parents…out…at the Sizzler" to show that Jeff and Sooze recognize that suburban life asks them to choose between the extended adolescence of "that kid" and the crushing conformity of chain restaurant eating parents. The subsequent shot of Sooze and Jeff remains silent for a few seconds as both smile and laugh softly at tweaking the squares. Sooze exits the scene with the grave question, "what are we doing here, you and me?" Sooze, in refusing to "settle (down)" in the suburbs, highlights the suburbs' family-centered design. While Sooze hopes to rent in New York, Jeff chooses the tent in his parents' suburban garage because it allows him to adhere to appear to critique the valorization of the Secondspace ideology of "owning your own house" while still indulging in it. In addition, Burnfield affords him the safety of Firstspace negatives – no crackheads, no homeless – as well as the Secondspace status quo, one of the main reasons Brooks lists in his encomium to sprawl. In her attacks on the suburban status quo for its banal predictability and lack of cultural opportunity, Sooze sees that her sex life is as routine as the endlessly repeated green-yellow-red sequence of traffic lights. Rather than this inertia masquerading as stability, Sooze eagerly welcomes the unpredictability urban life offers. As Florida puts it, "[i]n the creative economy, the *quality* of a region's lifestyle has as much to do with its success as its business cost structure, taxes, or physical location. How else can one explain the tremendous success of the highest cost locations – regions like Silicon Valley, the greater Boston area, Washington, D.C., and Seattle?" (*Cities* 68). The only cultural life Burnfield offers is the one the corner gang

makes for themselves at the spur of the moment – whether it be Sooze's "Burger Manifesto," "Pony Unplugged," or Buff's video taped clouds – in briefly poached spaces.

The flight of the Creative Class from suburbia begins with a critical, Thirdspace relationship to the suburban built environment. The film's somewhat stage-bound setting reinforces this contest over suburban Secondspace: Nazeer's policing of the proper use of his parking lot conflicts with the corner gang's precisely because they are ill-suited to suburban Secondspace. To generate escape velocity, Sooze locates Thirdspace potential in the most suburban parts of Burnfield's Firstspace – looking to New York, she turns the car-oriented convenience store into a performance space and looking west her artwork (and personal connections) from a good suburban school lead her to a long bus trip along the highway to Los Angeles. The tapes that improbably earn Buff a chance to work in Los Angeles similarly defamiliarize suburban Firstspaces like malls and parks. Demographer Robert Cushing notes that urban areas like the Bay Area, Austin and Seattle might be "losing lower-income people but [are] gaining high-income people – who are quite likely to be skilled creative workers" like Sooze, Pony, Buff, and even Jeff, and not the in-need-of-control white flighters like Tim (Florida xviii).[117] The same desire for control in a place that values "education, achievement, and success" that Brooks claims pushes "traditional" families like the Choudrys to the suburban fringe also pushes young singletons into the city.

[117] This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. Australian architectural critic Elizabeth Farrelly notes that, "Most Australian and many US cities show recent slowing or marginal reversal of the so-called 'white flight syndrome' that produced all those hollowed-out edge cities in the late twentieth century. Some, like Sydney and Melbourne, have undergone huge inner-city residential booms" (110).

"Here comes the neighborhood": Gay men, gentrification, and class mobility

Finally, *American Beauty* indicts homophobia[118] as cousin to racism and nativism in the maintenance of the imagination of normalcy in American suburbia as exclusively white and middle-class. In the final analysis, *American Beauty* represents suburban normalcy as primarily a product of not only misrecognized sexuality, but also, most powerfully, economic behavior. The two Jims occupy a privileged position in the film's ideological universe. The film does not challenge the right of the two Jims' to belong in the suburbs; Lester finds "Jim and Jim" amusing for their name-sharing, but directs no anger toward them as gay men. When Colonel Fitts mistakes Lester's arch dismissal of his marriage as "a commercial for how normal we are" for a sexual come-on, Lester does not lash out at Fitts for kissing him. And while Lester reserves his venom for Carolyn, not the Jims, his anger over her sexuality is less inflected by its direction toward other men and more toward its connections to consumerism, as when she interrupts an unexpected moment of desire to keep Lester from spilling beer on the couch. Homosexuality is, for lack of a better word, tolerated in *American Beauty's* suburbs. Reflecting larger trends highlighted in, to cite one book-length example, *The Two-Income Trap,* the sole stable family in *American Beauty* does not take the form of the traditional wage-earner father stay-at-home mother (the Fittses) nor the working mother and

[118] In addition, female sexuality in general receives fairly harsh treatment in *American Beauty.* That Carolyn Burnham would want have an affair (with a man her own age, no less) is represented as selfish and cruel, whereas Lester's desire to sleep with his daughter's 17-year-old friend is emblematic of Lester asserting control over his unsatisfying life.

"downsized" father (the Burnhams) but rather the two-income family with no children. The unhappy Burnhams and Fitts are unhappy in quite distinct ways that nevertheless intersect in the figure of the successful gay couple. The Jims – tax attorney and anesthesiologist – verge on parody in their respectable, middle-class professional happiness in suburbia. They are the embodiment of the suburbs as seen by Carolyn (they can afford and keep a nice house), Lester (they have a stable relationship), and Colonel Fitts (they're another part of the world going to hell). With his high and tight hair cut, all-business demeanor, and self-identification as retired Marine Corps Colonel, Fitts places himself in his new home in terms of the reasons Brooks lists for continued sprawl: order, control, education, achievement, success, and most of all, a more manageable mortgage.[119] William H. Whyte and C. Wright Mills would recognize their *Organization Man* and *White Collar* suburbanite in either Jim before they recognized it in the retired military man Fitts or the full-time realtor Carolyn. Were Jim and Jim not a married *gay* couple they would be utterly boring, joining Angela as the embodiment of the painfully ordinary suburbanites Jane and Rickey want to leave behind.

In this sense, the stiflingly uptight and white inner ring suburb in *American Beauty* reaches its sub-urban – as in sub-urbane, banal, drab – peak in the form of the Two Jims, who pointedly do not exhibit the ennui literary critic Catherine Jurca, in *White Diaspora*, identifies as the default white middle-class position. Jim and Jim are ironic suburbanites *because* they are gay – a group who often signal the vanguard of class-

[119] I might also add, contempt for "bad" parenting, although Fitts has no quarrel, as Brooks's exurbanites do, with parents who hit their children.

climbing gentrification of the built environment.[120] Could the presence of Jim and Jim mean that more gay couples will move into *American Beauty's* upper-middle-class suburb, leading to the gentrification of an already-affluent but slightly monochromatic town, the obverse of Jack's fear in *Family Man* and Tim's fear in *subUrbia*? The Fitts' family car trip that follows the Two Jims' early-morning visit to the Fitts' house writes the anxiety over the danger of backsliding out of the solid middle class onto the suburban built environment.

At the breakfast table, Fitts voices the usual suburban concern of declining property values, barely looking up from the paper to tell Rickey that "This country is going straight to hell." As if conjured by the statement, the Two Jims arrive with a welcome basket full of homegrown vegetables.

Figure 4.8

During the drive to school after the Jims' visit, Fitts excoriates his new neighbors in plainly (and pedantically) homophobic terms: "How come those faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?" Ricky barely looks up from his

[120] See, for example, chapters 7 and 9 in Mark Abrahamson's *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America*.

drug-dealing accounting to defend the Jims, but Fitts cuts him off angrily. Rickey, sensing what his father wants to hear, looks directly at his father, saying with palpable irony that Fitts evidently misses, "those fags make me want to puke my fucking guts out." Fitts looks to the road and quietly nods his head, saying "well, me too, son" more to himself than to his son. If Carolyn's sing along drive reveals a subjective landscape rooted in her sex life and Lester's drive after quitting his job shows the business world rolling off his back, Colonel Fitts's drive to school with his son Rickey similarly deploys transit through the built environment to make concrete Fitts's vision of suburbia. Throughout this scene, the Fitts take what must be the same route their neighbors the Burnhams followed in the opening sequence of the film, since both trips were home-to-school from the same starting point. However, rather than Lester's point-of-view shots looking up and out into a mostly empty gray sky, the street behind Fitts is a series of picket fences guarding a corresponding series of brick houses. In every shot of Fitts during the trip, the visual shorthand of 1950s suburbia plays counterpoint to Fitts's reactionary sense of the unacceptable incursion into his suburban retirement – how, in this plainly ideal Ozzie and Harriet setting, can people like the two Jims belong?[121] The background in shots of Fitts and Rickey during their conversation reveals a distinctly nostalgic subjective landscape, with a differently-motivated green and brown blur like the one Carolyn experiences.

[121] As Florida conceives of Creative-Economy metropolitan growth, "Appealing only to traditional families and bashing everyone else may make good propaganda for the culture wars, but as a development strategy, it's a pretty narrow approach" (Florida *Cities* 22).

Figure 4.9

The nondescript streets that rush behind shots of Rickey during the conversation indicate that for a military child who never made solid connections to his surroundings, the built environment is simply a temporary location, not worthy of sharp focus. Colonel Fitts's violent reaction to the apparent omnipresence of gay men in the Ozzie and Harriet picket fence world he imagines his new town to be are without doubt based in homophobia, but I would also identify an economic subtext to Fitts's homophobia, a sense that his town is not slipping toward a Burnfield-like stagnation and downturn, but rather may be creeping *up* the ladder, into not only something not white-heterosexual, but also, significantly, a price bracket he cannot afford on a military pension fixed income.[122]

[122] Fitts's case should not be seen as definitive. In Rust Belt Wilkinsburg, PA, mayor Wilbert Young "is pleased that a large gay and lesbian population has taken residence, helping rebuild Wilkinsburg by investing in homes and becoming involved in the civic life of the community….'It is significant,' says the mayor, 'that diverse elements are placing their bets on Wilkinsburg. They're really making a difference in our community'" (Hudnut 62). That is to say, I do not wish to connect working class mobility aspiration to homophobia; I simply wish to point out the class antagonisms that sprawl exacerbates.

"This ain't so bad" – the false promise of suburban form

The happy ending *Office Space* offers is rooted in the false hope of suburban boosters like Brooks's future tense: *this* suburb may be sub-par, but a fresh start in the *next* suburb will solve the current problems. In this case, not only does suburbanization race across the land, but also the furrow edges are extended – suburbia continues to stretch across the map, going in new directions, creating a multinodal metropolis. But the development pattern continues to assert a car-centered, consumerist ideal. Lewis Mumford, writing in the 1960s, saw in the ascendant multinodal conurbation, "perhaps the only thing that could bring Americans to their senses would be a clear demonstration of the fact that their highway program will, eventually, wipe out the very area of freedom that the private motorcar promised to retain for them" ("Highway" 234). So what does this changing face of the suburbs mean for those who stay? If you are Tim, you rail against the changing composition of the suburbs on nativist lines – that white heterosexual males are native suburbanites and all others are interlopers, working women and non-whites alike. If, like Peter Gibbons, you become much less anxious about race and sexuality, but you still turn away from the territory that's changing to take part in the frantic continued expansion of flight from the urban. If you are Jack Campbell, you retreat into the past, where the disruptive presence of racial others just does not exist, although this means sacrificing the thing that you are choosing the suburbs for – family life in terms of time spent with them with a nice middle-class standard of living – or, in *Family Man's* world, you just make sure to be rich before you go to the suburbs, so that you might insulate yourself. *American Beauty* finds Colonel Fitts finally succeeding, moving into an upper-middle-class suburb, only to find the Two Jims there, which means

that the town will soon either be gentrified and price him out or become too urban, that is, non-white-heterosexual.

Finally, the push-pull of singletons moving to the city – *subUrbia's* Sooze, Pony, and Buff as well as *Family Man's* "real-life-Jack" all live in the city without children or plans for children – and gays moving to the suburbs appears in Brooks's observation that "The geography of work has been turned upside down…This means we have a huge mass of people who not only don't live in cities, they don't commute to the cities, go to the movies in the cities, eat in the cities, or have any significant contact with urban life" (2-3). "Urban life," in this formulation, means two very different things, both of which the four films discussed here refute. On the one hand, Sooze and Buff head to Los Angeles as a cultural and business center, and Jack chooses both New York and London to ascend the international finance hierarchy.[123] Such a migration falls in line with Richard Florida's observation that, "high-skill, high-earning couples are disproportionately concentrated in larger, denser, higher-amenity urban areas (as opposed to suburbs). In other words, places where people are not sprawled out so thinly tend to have more creative economic activity" (*Flight* 52). On the other hand, while "urban" has traditionally meant non-white and/or non-heterosexual, such figures as Nazeer and Pakeeza, Samir, Jim, and Jim behave in solidly suburban, Ozzie and Harriet ways in that their jobs are less in the creative class but in stolid, professional pursuits such as shopkeeper, financial software programmer, tax lawyer, and anesthesiologist.

The Family Man's endorsement of leaving the city for the suburbs rings false because it rests on the presumption that an aging, lower-middle-class dormitory suburb is

[123] From *American Beauty,* Rickey escapes to New York to move up the drug-dealing business ladder and Jane to be at home with the other cultural misfits.

the same as an exclusive, established, inner-ring suburb. The "traditional" suburban life in Bergenfield that Jack promises Kate is not the life they would share should they rekindle their relationship. Rather, executive Jack and partnered Kate would have a life that more closely resembles the Ivy League opt-out trend that started at the turn of the century and gained steam during first half of the decade. Their life would be closer to Jean Kerr's than it would to the Rath's at the conclusion of *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. In this way, *Family Man* imagines suburban life as found not in Bergenfield and other lower-middle-class suburbs, but rather in those upper-middle-class suburbs like Jean Kerr's Larchmont, where anxieties about their tenuous status as solidly middle class creates the sense that Larchmont is Bergenfield. In an oblique way, *American Beauty, Office Space,* and even *subUrbia* also address this concern, showing that suburbs can survive and thrive, but only by consciously escaping the furrow they represent as both as the path of the highway and the boundary it represents. By becoming more gay- and minority-friendly, that is, by behaving more like the city of the future George Bailey hoped to plan and eventually established, at a reduced scale, in Bailey Park, the suburbs make themselves more sustainable in the face of the usual American solution to problems: Farther Out on the frontier, where we can start from scratch, rather than already here in the quasi-urban, where we might re-build and rehabilitate.

CHAPTER V

RUNNING OUT OF GAS: ON NOSTALGIA, THE ENERGY CRISIS, AND THE DEAD END OF SUBURBAN FORM

From the age of dinosaurs / Cars have run on gasoline
Where, where have they gone? / Now, it's nothing but flowers…
There was a factory / Now there are mountains and rivers
There was a shopping mall / Now it's all covered with flowers…
If this is paradise / I wish I had a lawnmower…
This used to be real estate / Now it's only fields and trees
Where, where is the town / Now, it's nothing but flowers
The highways and cars / Were sacrificed for agriculture
I thought that we'd start over / But I guess I was wrong
Once there were parking lots / Now it's a peaceful oasis….
And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention….
Don't leave me stranded here / I can't get used to this lifestyle
"Nothing But Flowers" Talking Heads

After his first successful time travel experiment, *Back to the Future's* Doc Brown pauses to consider the meaning of the thirty years he spent investigating time travel. Standing in the middle of a shopping mall parking lot, staring into the distance, Doc Brown sounds a little like an anti-sprawl activist when he considers how much has changed since 1955, when he began work on conquering time: "I remember when this was all farmland as far as the eye can see." Marty McFly pulls Doc out of his nostalgic recollection, asking a technical question about the time machine – "Does it run, like, on regular unleaded gasoline?" Doc Brown shakes his head. "Unfortunately no. It requires something with a little more kick. Plutonium!" However, the Libyan terrorists who supplied Doc with the vehicle's fuel suddenly appear, forcing Marty to flee into a 1955 he apparently cannot escape, since 1955 sorely lacks for plutonium. Thankfully, a timely lightning strike powers the machine's flux capacitor and returns Marty to a new and improved 1985, when/where Doc takes Marty into the future – that is, a sequel – in a

DeLorean that runs on household garbage. The future in *Back to the Future 2* has the usual *Jetsons* flying cars as well as a villain who runs nuclear power plants and toxic waste dumps. As *Back to the Future's* DeLorean-time machine moves from gasoline to plutonium to lightning to garbage, it charts an ecologically progressive course away from oil-dependence and nuclear power toward safer, more sustainable fuel sources for Marty, its ideal suburbanite, to enjoy in the ever-sprawling suburbs. While the Oedipal narrative and nostalgia for 1950s suburbia of the *Back to the Future* films have been well-covered, my interest rests in the *Back to the Future* films' use of nostalgia for an imagined 1950s suburbia in conjunction with reform-minded sustainable energy use plans that uncritically embrace the development patterns in which this energy is used, precluding the potential for any meaningful, extended critique of the suburban form.

However, even though the time machine ceases to burn gasoline and travel with four wheels on the road, it ensures that the built form of 1950s suburbia retains its utility and desirability for the McFlys into 2015 and beyond; possible fuel sources are of less ideological importance than the built environment the films presume. As many critics have noted, the *Back to the Future* films adhere to the Reagan era's "morning in America" nostalgic vision that, by the late 1990s, was so commonplace and tired that it barely merited the somewhat satirical treatment it received in *Pleasantville* and *Blast From the Past.*[124] Released in late November, 1989, only weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, *Back to the Future 2* crystallizes the "victorious," Reaganite version of 1950s suburbia present in the moment that Francis Fukuyama claimed marked the "end point of

[124] See, for example Susan Jeffords' Oedipal reading of *Back to the Future 1* and *2* in *Hard Bodies.* For the idealized 1950s, see *The Way We Never Were* and Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound*.

mankind's ideological evolution." That is, the predominantly suburban United States emerged from the Cold War as the world's sole superpower; in part, this was a victory by and for the suburban ideology of auto-based sprawl. In this chapter I want to engage the ecological subtext in nostalgic treatments of the suburbs, starting with the first two *Back to the Future* films' deployment of sustainable energy that enables a perpetuation of an idealized 1950s suburban built environment. Both *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Ice Storm* reveal anxieties about sustainability by encoding the multiple ways in which confrontations with contemporary and ongoing energy and ecological crises unsettle the reified 1950s suburban form that comes with "end of history." But the discomfort in the *Ice Storm's* and *Virgin Suicides'* home towns positions the unsustainable suburban form as imperiled by large-scale "acts of God" upon nature rather than by product of human labor upon nature: the sprawling suburban built environment. This nostalgic displacement makes addressing the wages of sprawl a question of personal virtue unconnected to a national investment in the valorization of the 1950s suburban form, representing the continuing failure of late-twentieth-century American culture to address energy and ecological crises through not only large-scale alternative energy but also development patterns that might provide a sustainable way of life in the near future.

Back to the Future

Readings of *Back to the Future* tend to concentrate on Oedipal drama via Ronald Reagan to engage the film's relationship to American history and the ways in which the film represents the suburban United States of 1985 as desirable. Film critic Marsha Kinder, for example, includes *Back to the Future* in a cluster of films like *Big*, *Like*

Father Like Son, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Vice Versa*, and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* that aim at "restoring a bright future to an American family that is threatened by financial, emotional, and moral ruin. These problems are blamed primarily on the weakness of the father" (5). In *Hard Bodies*, a survey of American masculinity in 1980s cinema and culture, Susan Jeffords similarly considers the weak father George McFly, but in conjunction with the strong father figure for the 1980s, Ronald Reagan. Jeffords' account of the differences in Marty McFly's 1985s, like Kinder's many family units on film, predominantly confines itself to house interiors and the familial relations within Hill Valley. *Back to the Future* begins in a 1985 that fills the McFly family with malaise:

> the father was a wimp who delighted in *Three Stooges* comedies, the mother was an alcoholic, the uncle was in jail, the brother worked at a fast food restaurant, the sister could not get any dates, and the house was a cramped collection of junk and trash. But after Marty's intervention in the past, he returns home to find an immaculate and well-furnished house, his parents returning from a morning tennis game, his brother dressed in a suit and tie and heading for his office, his sister not able to keep track of the many boys who call her, and himself with the truck he had coveted parked in the garage. (Jeffords 69)

The utopian 1985 that *Back to the Future* imagines for the finally-normal (read: successful bourgeois) McFlys links class position with occupation and taste within the house rather than outside of it. The McFly children – even the grown ones – still live at home, in the same house, in the same neighborhood, only with prestigious jobs and non-prole cultural tastes and behaviors. However, *Back to the Future* locates Marty's normalcy outside of the house – in that most suburban space of the detached garage and the street that his gas-guzzling 4X4 will cover.

Marty's interactions with the various incarnations of the Lyons Estate subdivision represent his class position in terms of the aesthetics – and, in turn, success and

desirability – of the built environment. In the first shot of the neighborhood, in the malaise-filled abnormal 1985, Marty skateboards down a darkening street lined by slightly bent, half-denuded trees, more an image of a declining part of town than one of a desirable address (Figure 5.1) In his flight to 1955, Marty stashes his DeLorean behind a billboard advertising his future home, and he stands rapt in front of the lost cornfield Doc Brown spoke of "earlier," in 1985 (Figure 5.2). Finally, the Morning in America 1985 neighborhood Marty secured in the corn-field-consuming past has had a face lift: its trees are far more lush, taller, and create a canopy over the residential street, generating a comforting sense of safety and enclosure without changing the houses or street layout (Figure 5.3).[125] While class position and its constituent parts of jobs, tastes, and behaviors may change, what remains consistent throughout Marty's experience of the malleability of American life is the suburban form.

Figure 5.1

[125] The side-by-side comparison of Dutch Elm-ravaged Waukegan, Illinois in Philip Langdon's *A Better Place to Live* presents an exaggerated version of the distinction between the two 1985s. See also Renee Chow, *Suburban Space* and Barrie Greenbie, *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape.*

Figure 5.2


Figure 5.3

Back to the Future 2 portrays the ills of its dystopian 1985 almost entirely in terms of the changes in daily life in Hill Valley: Biff Tannen's success comes because of George McFly's death, and the neighborhood where Marty McFly once lived is an almost entirely treeless, crumbling, crime-ridden ghetto.[126] Jeffords connects the importance of George McFly's death to the geopolitical events of 1973:

> George is killed in1973, the year in which the United States withdrew its final troops from Vietnam. That is the year, the film seems to be saying, in which the nation lost its direction and was given over to a period of destructive liberal values, in other words, the year the nation lost its father….All this began in the devastating year of 1973, when an otherwise

[126] Throughout the first two *Back to the Future* films, Biff and George engage in an ongoing metonymic class war, and every Marty-George wins makes the future more 1950s-suburban and "desirable."

> happy and thriving family/nation was cut off from its source of guidance and leadership by an untimely death. (71, 72).

While *Back to the Future 2's* dystopian 1985 certainly represents the root of its problems in the domestic-politics terms of George McFly's death and the foreign-affairs realm's loss of potency in Vietnam, the burned-out cars throughout the almost completely unlit residential portions of Hill Valley testify to another major shock to the United States' sense of potency: the 1973 OPEC oil embargo and the larger 1970s energy crisis. Jeffords rightly notes the headlines from "1973" and "1985" newspapers that use five terms of Richard Nixon and a re-elected Ronald Reagan as markers of the assertion of a desirable patriarchal figure.[127] However, one key headline appears not in the volumes Doc Brown retrieves from the locked library, but in the newsreel-style biography at the Biff Tannen Museum. As a spinning newspaper trumpets Biff's success, a secondary story with the headline "Hill Valley to get Added State Highway Funds" lurks in the lower right of the above-the-fold page. In 1973, Hill Valley suffers from not only the Oedipal misfortune of George McFly's death, but also from the disaster of a catastrophically-timed push for highway-based expansion. Running underneath the personal histories of *Back to the Future 1* and *2*, rests the fear that an oil-dependent suburban nation without substantial reserves of its own could quickly become unstable should oil be taken away, even for a short amount of time. Hill Valley's built environment is re-fashioned by not only Biff's crimes and casino, but also the oil embargo, which turns once-idyllic Lyons Estate from a residential neighborhood into a

[127] David Halberstam, in his popular history *The Reckoning*, identifies mid-1973 as "the last moment of the old order in the industrialized world" (13).

crumbling, resource-starved war zone that looks more like the riot-scarred cities of the late-1960s than 1950s Ozzie and Harriet suburbs.

Energy crisis

A number of significant 1973 events, like the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, the Watergate saga, and the untimely death of George McFly, provide an active role for Americans in the nation's direction, which might explain their prevalence as an explanatory force in comparison to another, equally important, 1973 event in which the United States played a far more reactive role – the OPEC oil embargo and the energy crisis it precipitated. While the energy crisis was and remains a key facet to global politics, the image that often stands in for the oil embargo and energy crisis is suburban: a line of cars snaking down a long road waiting for a turn at the gas station pump. Historian Edward Berkowitz condenses the last three months of the energy-consuming year into four sentences that lay out some of the causes and effects of the embargo.

> In October, 1973, the nations in the gulf region raised the price of their oil by 70 percent. Then they withheld oil from the United States to protest America's support for Israel in its war with Egypt. In the panic that ensued, the nation's drivers waited in long lines for expensive gasoline. Americans felt themselves to be at the mercy of hostile foreign powers. (2)

After locating the main cause of the embargo as a US Middle East policy that spurred a reaction by OPEC nations, Berkowitz glides from "drivers" to "Americans" in consecutive sentences, as if the two were synonyms. Rather than freely driving the roads,

American drivers must wait in line for gasoline, turning their cars, the symbol of openness and freedom, into traps they are forced into by outside actors.[128]

The oil embargo made a place for energy politics in the national consciousness by linking everyday, taken-for-granted actions like driving to global politics, but an awareness of its importance did not lead to significant changes in the era's transportation or city planning. In *The Making of the President,* Theodore White, nominally writing about the guns and butter issues of the Nixon-McGovern presidential election, links American foreign policy and the perhaps-unintended consequences it generates in the domestic arena:

> In every suburb of America or deep center-city, the energy crisis intruded itself. It intruded itself on those muggy days of August when the air-conditioning failed to work, on those sub-zero days in winter when the oil truck, short of supplies, failed to deliver fuel. The end of the postwar world abroad was at hand from coast to coast, whether Americans realized it or not. (*Making 1972* xxii)

Writing before the 1973 crisis, White locates an emerging sense that any reduction in the amount of available oil or energy would impact far more than daily family-car driving – the rising cost of gasoline would also factor in the increased cost of goods and services in general. Even well after the embargo, in 1979 President Carter, cardigan sweater and all, "reflected on the deeper causes of the gas crisis – the shortages of political and spiritual energy, which he decided posed far greater dangers than the shortfall of oil" (Schulman 140). Such attempts to sever the oil embargo and energy crisis from everyday suburban life worked hand-in-hand with the continued advance of suburbia away from older urban

[128] Berkowitz again connects drivers with the Average American when he writes that "the long gas lines in 1974 and 1979 became the stuff of American legend, the sort of visual symbol that provided an instant reminder of bad times" (56).

centers.[129] While some small-scale energy-conservation measures were passed, like the fifty-five mile-per hour speed limit and daylight savings (except in Arizona and Indiana), no major changes were made in energy policy beyond an ambivalent consideration of nuclear power.[130] Very little changed because "Heavy taxes on gasoline that would reduce the national debt and conserve fuel are still political poison" (Miller 125); the American Way of Life, in a majority-suburban nation, runs on gasoline.[131] Bruce Schulman encapsulates the difficulties of 1973 America when he writes in his cultural history *The Seventies*, "the Arab oil embargo created desperate fuel shortages, drove up the prices of gasoline and heating oil, caused long lines at the gas pumps, and humiliated the nation on the international stage. The world's great superpower seemed suddenly toothless, helpless, literally and metaphorically out of gas" (125).

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[129] See, for example, John Perkins's *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, which understands oil as the key to the energy-profligate American way of life (which he terms corporatocracy). Perkins's analysis of Reagan's 1980 victory over Carter is particularly astute: "A president whose greatest goal was world peace and who was dedicated to reducing U.S. dependence on oil was replaced by a man who believed that the United States' rightful place was at the top of a world pyramid held up by military muscle, and that controlling oil fields wherever they existed was part of our Manifest Destiny. A president who installed solar panels on White House roofs was replaced by one who, immediately upon occupying the Oval Office, had them removed" (181).

[130] Much like *Back to the Future 2's* "fortuitous" release date so close to the fall of the Berlin Wall, *The China Syndrome*, as discussed in the previous chapter, also "benefited" from outside political events like the accident at Three Mile Island to generate considerable interest both in the film and also in its apprehensions about the safety of nuclear power.

[131] David Nye, in *Narratives and Spaces*, identifies five kinds of "energy narratives," including one that matches the early 1970s, the narrative of artificial scarcity, which "assumes that an abundance of energy exists, but it focuses on what are perceived as artificial limitations of the supply. This is usually a melodramatic tale of good and evil, in which natural abundance is cut off or hoarded for personal gain" (80). Oddly, Nye's examples are from the 1940s and then the early 1990s and Gulf War 1. Only in the next narrative type – human ingenuity – he notes that, "In 1974, during the oil boycott, almost 5,000 individual publications in all areas of the American trade press carried special advertising about how to conserve energy" (81).

The Ice Storm and the Energy Crisis

Rick Moody's novel *The Ice Storm* takes place in a 1973 informed not just by Watergate but also by the energy crisis, and establishes its milieu in an extended but superficial greatest hits of 1970s history that downplays the energy crisis for more easily recognizable and representable moments. At first, the novel looks back on 1973 in terms of 1994, the year in which it was published; in *The Ice Storm's* look back, 1973 lacks the electronic gadget-comforts and cool cultural productions of the nineties. Such lack at least offers an escape from the physical and cultural sicknesses like AIDS present in the 1990s. Finally, at the conclusion of the stage-setting, two long descriptive segments of foreign and domestic politics in the Nixon White House – one on the continuing strife related to Vietnam, one on Rose Mary Woods and the missing eighteen minutes of Watergate tapes – are interrupted by a one-sentence paragraph that calls attention to and encapsulates a subtext of 1973-suburban angst just as much as the weakness of leaving Vietnam:

> …The war in neutral Cambodia was heating up. (The Khmer Rouge would take Phnon Penh. Lon Nol would soon be deposed.)
> The energy crisis was getting under way.
> Rose Mary Woods had just *accidentally erased* eighteen and a half minutes of a subpoenaed conversation. (The White House released a photograph… (4 emphasis in original)

The energy crisis intrudes formally on the novel in the same manner that it intrudes on the Hood family's thinking – it seems like a minor player in relation to larger concerns such as Vietnam, Watergate, and even the imploding Hood family. However, *The Ice Storm's* opening chapter, after figuring the energy crisis as a real, if small, concern juxtaposes Benjamin Hood's two marital infidelities in terms that conjure the importance

of energy to everyday suburban life. Before the oil embargo, Benjamin picks up Melody at the office Christmas party and they have sex in his car; in the oil embargo year of 1973, Benjamin walks through the snow to his neighbor Janey Williams's house as penance for his adultery. While the easily recognizable instance of suburban decadence and decline concretizes itself in the novel's key party, the proximity of Benjamin's mistress – in a whisper of the importance of conserving energy, Benjamin *walks* to *Janey's* house – hints that the increasing cost of transportation choices caused by the OPEC oil embargo and the energy crisis cuts deep into everyday experiences like home-heating, commutes, and even marital infidelity.

Like Benjamin, Elena Hood experiences sex as an abstraction – while Benjamin anticipates and remembers it, Elena reads about it in the Hood house's library – in a house that reveals the everyday shadows of the energy crisis in suburbia. Putting down Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response*, she recalls the Thanksgiving dinners of her past, full of arguments and reproach.

> She threw light switches up and down the hall. Because of the oil embargo the British were working a three-day work week, but Elena was uncomfortable in darkness. Duraflame logs. She needed more. The President was pondering special powers to ration electrical resources. Sunday leisure driving was officially discouraged. The market had plunged fifty points this week. *Three percent*, Benjamin had said, *only three percent.* (Moody 61 emphasis in original)

Elena mirrors the financial worries Benjamin expresses, with an emphasis on the financial worry caused by the spike in everyday energy costs – measures like curtailing indoor lights, shortened work weeks, and lines for gasoline, paired with Nixon's address to the nation, generate a sense of lack or at least restriction that reaches even affluent suburban New Canaan. The extensive family-conflict concerns that bookend these

worries situate the energy crisis as a factor in Elena's life understood in terms of containment – slightly altered rituals of consumption, perhaps a three percent-scaled personal gesture like dropping the thermostat one degree – rather than in a larger, structural reconsideration of the wages of the suburban way of life.

The titular Ice Storm, in tandem with the coincident key party, underscores suburban life's inability to address (or to foresee) adequately its crises exclusively in any terms other than incremental changes to personal behavior. With Benjamin sick in the party host's bathroom, Elena proposes that, since she has no "intention of going in there to pick him up," she and Jim Williams should "do what makes sense. Stay warm. Pass some time" (Moody 174). For a suburbanite like Williams, staying warm and passing some time makes sense in the context of a drive, three or four inches of snow and freezing rain be damned. Elena repeats the switching off lights and appliances routine and, in a Cadillac parked in the driveway, she restages Ben's Christmas 1972 sex-in-a-car adultery. Almost a year later, in the midst of the oil embargo, Melody's prediction that marital infidelity paired with drunk driving tends to leave the cheater "folded up on some lane divider" (Moody 18) comes true not for Ben Hood, to whom she addresses her comment, but for Elena Hood. Elena, disappointed with Jim's performance, claims that she needs to get home to check on Wendy and Paul and, it being the suburbs, only a car can take her there. The roads are dangerously iced over, and Jim's Cadillac starts to spin out just as Elena sees cars at the bottom of the hill. During the spin,

> there was time to think. [Elena] didn't notice or care that her screams originated in her own throat. In the second before she imagined death, she recalled many things to be done. The dog was pacing back and forth in front of his bowl. Paul needed a haircut. She wanted to see Wendy wear those lovely new shoes. They, she and Benjamin, were going to replace the curtains in the drafty living room. They were going to find out about

> energy alternatives for their drafty house. They were going to buy a smaller car. The Cadillac landed nose down in a shallow ditch. (Moody 178)

The car accident, which takes place during a neighborhood car trip, provides a version of therapeutic Thirdspace for Elena to consider the multiple worlds of her life: the everyday, perhaps even banal, concerns of family immediately rush into her mind, but they are replaced by a series of thoughts informed by the energy crisis – fixing an inefficient drafty house and buying a more fuel-efficient car. The accident ends with the car lodged in a ditch, and Elena and Jim unharmed but forced to complete the journey on foot, echoing both Benjamin's energy-conserving walk to *his* Williams-spouse affair and the very real dangers the energy-profligate suburban form poses to its users. The cars Elena saw before the accident were abandoned, and Jim's Cadillac, "the front end… accordioned as though it were engineered to do so" (Moody 178) joins them as a token of the dead end of auto-dependent suburbia. As the single street light snaps off to close the chapter, the suburban built environment succumbs not to a Hood propensity for bad choices that lead to car accidents, but to a development pattern that becomes untenable and difficult to navigate without easy access to energy.

Both Benjamin and Elena confront the costs of the energy crisis, but those considerations come in tiny gestures like fixing drafts or in moments in which they appear to make poor individual decisions, downplaying their built environment's inability to adjust to fluctuations in not only weather patterns, but energy flows. The choice seems to be about familial-interpersonal issues when, in fact, the Firstspace structural patterns of the built environment and energy choices drive Secondspace interpersonal relations. Although the oil embargo ended in March 1974, removing its most powerful and present

instance, the energy crisis continued. "In the summer of 1974," Peter Carroll notes that, "two nuclear power plants – one in Massachusetts, the other in Michigan – were cancelled because of the difficulty of raising sufficient capital" (123). Not even a year after *The Ice Storm* ends, in late 1974, "despite higher energy prices, Americans quickly returned to their high-consumption habits – relighting out-door signs, avoiding mass transit, and violating the fifty-five-mile-per-hour speed limits" (Carroll 123). Benjamin Hood ends *The Ice Storm* slumped over the steering wheel of the family car, and Elena, who promised she would address the energy crisis in her home confronts the inertia of suburbanization, her "gloved hand waver[ing] in the air at [his] back as through she were going to set it there. She didn't" (Moody 278). The Hoods live in upper-middle class New Canaan, "the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs. In the wealthiest state in the Northeast. In the most affluent country on Earth" (Moody 3), not the decidedly lower-middle-class Hill Valley of *Back to the Future's* McFlys, but class position does not define suburbia to the extent that energy profligacy does. The stunted realization at the novel's conclusion refuses an easy fix for the ills of the suburban family as understood in the suburban terms rooted in the 1950s, and this refusal pinpoints the suburban form – and US energy policy – as suburban ideology made concrete: an ossified, auto- and oil-dependent "American way of life."

The Ice Storm: The fantastic suburban form

With a wink toward David Riesman and Sloan Wilson, *Ice Storm* represents Benjamin as a figure of continuity in suburban identity, a man "lonely in crowds, lonely at meetings, lonely throwing tennis balls for his dog, lonely playing *Operation* with his

kids. He had been lonely during commuter conversations, lonely during late-night heart-to-hearts with old fraternity brothers" (Moody 6) – a 1970s-vintage Tom Rath in a gray double-knit suit. A version of a fraternity-brother commuter conversation appears in the first pages of the novel's third act, with the admission that, "Dreams retold are a burden, so this will be brief" (Moody 205).[132] However, his "brief" retelling of the conversation is laden with a mass of details that replace the employment leads in *Gray Flannel's* commuter conversations with a concern over the supercession of nature by the built environment.

> In Hood's dream, a special tax had been levied against him because of fruit-bearing trees growing in his front yard on Valley Road. He learned of this tax while taking a drive with Jim Williams (in a station wagon with simulated wood paneling, though Williams actually drove a Cadillac). Hood was trying to explain the presence of government inspectors in his yard, those inspectors in white, lead-lined suits, measuring the size and yield of his plum trees and then blowtorching them. (Moody 205)

The parenthetical description of William's car reaches back to an earlier incarnation of suburbia, since wood-paneled station wagons (also called suburbans) were originally produced in the prewar era . But, as the dream makes clear, the new, 1973 woodie merely *simulates* wood. What real wood remains in Benjamin's dream environment does not protect the suburban idyll but rather reveals how the suburban form refashions the natural environment as a town-making tax on the desired country life. That is, the cost of access to nature – an oil-embargo-endangered car that provides highway access to life in the wooded (even in simulated form) wilds of Connecticut – is creeping out of the Hood price range, replacing his gray flannel with a white hazmat suit.

[132] The novel is divided into three numbered sections.

However, Benjamin's dream refers to more than his particular case in New Canaan, but addresses an ongoing concern of the durability – the pragmatic version of sustainability – of the suburbs. The dream ends as Benjamin becomes aware of his own dreaming.

> -- The thing I can't figure out, he told Jim Williams, is whether this is happening in 1973 or 1991.
> -- Well, pal, Williams said, the past and the future happen in the present moment. *That's just how it is.*
> And the amazing thing about this dream is that Benjamin's son would dream it, too. Years later. Really. (Moody 205-206 italics in original)

While at first the dream seems to specifically engage and critique the suburbs of the 1970s energy crisis, it ends with a universalization of the anxieties over the durability of the suburban form. *The Ice Storm,* written early in the era of call waiting, multiplex cinemas, codependency, AIDS and HIV, perestroika, and a stable supply of energy cannot transform its decade's material advantages into stability for its suburbs.[133] As Fredric Jameson, describing the use of nostalgia, puts it, nostalgia allows us to understand that "the fifties is a thing, but a thing we can build" through assiduous attention to fashion details and other glossy images, and such a construction allows us to "feel and appreciate the transformation and reification of [a text's] readers' present into a historical period" (285). In 1973, Benjamin Hood sees the suburban dream in terms similar to *Back to the Future,* as a gradually disappearing thing of the better 50s; twenty years later, Paul Hood roots his suburban dream in the 70s, and so on. In this endlessly nested dream, the constant remains a simulated wood car moving down a highway through a natural environment destroyed by a rationalized government program that purports to serve

[133] Listed in Moody 3-4.

suburbia. In other words, the sense of besiegement that accelerates the highway-building suburban sprawl I describe in chapter 4.

Even though the Hoods' only once drive outside of New Canaan in the course of the novel, the highway provides a tenuous shield from the rest of the world while it exerts a malevolent influence on the natural environment. While Wendy Hood wanders her home suburb during the storm, the incoming disaster is palpable, but not tangible, in her town. Her experience of the fragility of the suburban form rings throughout the still of New Canaan: "Wendy sank through the rippling, drifting expanses of crystallized stuff halfway to her knees. The crust scored her ankles and calves, drenched through the layers of her socks" (Moody 137). However, because Wendy walks through the residential areas of the town, the highway baffles the roar of the incoming damage, creating the illusion that nothing catastrophic happens in the suburbs: "On the main roads, the state of emergency cranked itself up" (Moody 137). In another suburb, from his seat on the train, Paul looks out on the highway and, as in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* represents everyday suburban traffic flow in terms of human biology: "he had traversed the southwestern part of the state by car on I-95. It was a noxious artery, more like an intestine, really, a bearer of wastes and bacteria" (Moody 195). Unlike *The Corrections'* Alfred and Denise, Paul understands car commuting not as a moment of connection, but as a constant flow of sickness between city and suburb, a moment of emergency similar to the car trip Elena takes with Jim Williams. Paul's awareness of and critical engagement with the spaces between the city and New Canaan, cultivated during his train rides, generates a Thirdspace awareness of the shortcomings of the landscape

while maintaining the sanctimonious suburbanite pose toward the waste and bacteria of those unfortunate enough to drive the emergency on the highways:

> He knew the hotel between Darien and Stamford that had a Nixon banner on it all through the election; he knew the exact location of each and every HoJo's between here and New Haven; he knew Norwalk Harbor and Five Mile River and Cos Cob Harbor, and the bridges there; he knew the way I-95 came down a hill into Norwalk, the way it divided in New Haven, he knew its view of the Baxter Building as the train pulled into downtown Stamford. He knew all this, but it didn't change his situation. His short, privileged life on the golden corridor of Fairfield County made no difference to the storm outside….Now he was stranded. He was a stranded kid on the verge of not being a kid anymore. A kid who would be getting his license soon. A loser from a family of losers. And he was near Port Chester, the only stop on the New Haven line that had a lot of Afro-American residents. (Moody 195-6)

While Wendy walks along the residential streets, the hierarchical street system insures that the arterials "take the brunt" of the storm in that there's no connection between the suburbs and the world around them, seemingly insulating New Canaan from the worst effects of whatever befalls the less fortunate. But as Paul looks out from the train, he not only sees the unused backs of towns and patterns made plain by the strategic distance the train affords, he also recognizes that Fairfield County's built environment – especially its transportation system – is only an illusion of safety and stability, since the same train line that takes him home to tony New Canaan also stops in an "Afro-American," that is, poor, town.[134] Paul's impending driver's license will ambivalently "free" him to become just another suburban loser, one of the germs on the highway in search of the town that can best insulate him from the presence of Port Chesters. In the mid-nineties, Moody trades the Benjamin-and-Elena 1950s suburban ideology of minor adjustments for 1970s

[134] Once again, even though suburbs are not possible without foreign oil, the Libyan eruption makes visible this dependence, and, as *The Family Man's* Cash and *subUrbia's* Nazeer and Pakeeza have shown, *The Ice Storm* represents Port Chester's non-white population as a signal for danger entering the suburbs.

suburbanites Wendy and Paul, who refuse suburbia's usual transportation mode and in doing so attend sensually the world outside the furrows of their usual journeys, listening to and watching the systolic flow of suburban traffic from Thirdspaces of relative calm, to diagnose the root cause of dis-ease in suburbia: the liminal Firstspace of the large intestine highways through which losers pass, and along which suburban Secondspace sprawls and ultimately deposits the refuse of losers – more suburbs.

Dutch Elm and the Dis-ease of Auto Industry Suburbia

In much the same way *The Ice Storm* represents the contest between nature and the built environment as resulting in a suburban form so inhospitable it is best understood in terms of bacteria and ill health, *The Virgin Suicides* – the Jeffrey Eugenides novel and Sofia Coppola's film adaptation – locates its operative metaphor of suburban unsustainability in the elm trees sickened and destroyed by the built environment.[135] The elm tree marked for death with a red placard indeed stands in for the Lisbon sisters in that its inexorable movement toward death mirrors their disappearance by suicide, but the history of suburban development patterns and Dutch elm creates a far more complex relationship than the one-to-one tree-Lisbons rubric. *Virgin Suicides* accepts the volatility of oil and energy crises as facts of life, which in turn gives force to the Lisbon girls' inexorable movement toward suicide as a refutation of the suburban form, a cry against the suburban development pattern's larger self-destructive logic visibly enacted on the street layout as environmental destruction.

[135] This observation is so banal as to be included in the "important quotations explained" section of online "study guide" *Sparks Notes*, but, nonetheless it deserves a thorough going-over to provide a fuller picture of what seems so obvious. http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/virginsuicides/quotes.html Accessed 18 January 2008.

Figure 5.4

Severe outbreaks of Dutch elm in the 1930s as well as in the 1970s, slowly disfigured the suburban landscape. Dutch elm is caused by a fungus most often carried by elm bark beetles – and the natural tendency of elms to grow far apart usually prevents the spread of such blights. Unfortunately, thousands of suburban developments lined their streets with elms planted in every house's front yard, spacing the trees perhaps one hundred feet apart, much closer than elms grow naturally. The proximity of elm plantings in suburban developments enabled and accelerated the spread of the blight. While arborists at first did not know how to slow and stop Dutch elm – cut the tree down and destroy it immediately – even knowledge of how the blight spread could not counteract the planting patterns and prevent the loss of substantial numbers of trees into the late 70s.[136] In practical terms Dutch elm was a national problem because *Ulmus Americana* was the standard-issue tree for new suburbs since it "can stand the stress of a

[136] As many as half of the elms in the United States were killed by Dutch elm.

city environment. It has a wider range than any other American tree" (Mansfield).[137] In aesthetic terms, as one *Time* magazine feature described it,

> Dutch elm disease has denuded whole communities, devastated suburbs, cost billions in neighborhood devaluation and incalculable aesthetic loss that some experts say has markedly altered home environments. (Sidey)

The sensibility identified in the *Time* article emerges from an American suburbia that extensively planted elms, and the near omni-presence of the elm creates a chicken-egg question over suburban aesthetics. As Howard Mansfield describes it in *American Heritage Magazine*, "the elm is a storybook tree….The elm's widely spaced leaves cast shifting shadows that admit enough light to allow a lawn to flourish and enough shade to cover half an acre." The cinematography in *Virgin Suicides* revels in the nostalgic potential elm-shaded suburban streets offer, as throughout the opening sequence, "Ed Lachman's camera roams the peaceful streets and then rolls on its back to look at the trees, the sky, the title" (Fuller) in dappled light that, in conjunction with the spacey soundtrack by the French band Air, to conjure a dreamlike atmosphere out of children playing in sprinklers and Lux finishing a Popsicle in the lush, tree-lined streets of the prelapsarian Lisbon neighborhood.

[137] "It may be a flash in the pan," wrote F.A. Bartlett in *American Landscape Architect* in 1930, but, "inasmuch as the American elm represents as high as 75 percent of the tree growth in many eastern cities and holds an important feature position in landscape design, the question of probable disease attack is one of the greatest scientific, economic, and aesthetic importance" (qtd. in Campanella 150).

Figure 5.5

As in the *Back to the Future* films, a neighborhood's trees function as an index for the health of the suburb. As *The Virgin Suicides* begins, the town and the youth and hormonal overdrive of the collective narrator pushes the camera through the street's canopy of elms, where Lux Lisbon appears in the sky to wink suggestively at the camera. However, the Lisbons live outside of a Detroit that since the end of World War II had fallen from one of the ten richest cities in the world to "a giant suburban donut with a burnt-out hole in the middle," a slide no doubt hastened by the oil embargo's impact on Detroit's native auto industry (*Long Emergency* 251).[138] By 1975, when city workers tag the Lisbon tree for removal, more than half of all the elms in the country were lost. Since many cities and older suburbs lost their trees at the same time, suburban migration away from de-valued properties fed still more subdivision- and highway-building, "the

[138] When Ze'ev Chafets described Detroit, in the wake of its 1967 riots as America's "first major Third World city," "the image of a largely black and very poor city surrounded by a ring of affluent white suburbs gives resonance to the images of Detroit as a center of American apartheid" (Sugrue 270). Such an image recalls Don McCullum's 1967 description of Oakland as ringed by the "white noose of suburbia."

introduction of Dutch elm disease to the United States was an ecological catastrophe unparalleled in American history. The decimation of elms in its wake altered the ecology and the environmental quality of countless city streets" (Campanella 165).

In the end, after all the bad options had their chance, most American municipalities learned how to deal with the blight while maintaining the suburban development pattern, which, sadly, meant sacrificing infected trees to save the still-healthy ones. Elms and their blight operate as *Virgin Suicides'* metaphor for the apparent "naturalness" of the suburban built environment and ideology. This, it seems, is basis for the *Sparks Notes* allegorical reading that views the Lisbon girls' suicides as the psychological outgrowth of their damaged family relations. Such a reading figures consumerism's concentration on the mass-produced home interior as culpable – one neighbor sniffs that the Lisbon girls "just wanted to escape that decoration." The narrators' fruitless investigations into "Exhibits #1 through #97, arranged in five separate suitcases" (Eugenides 246), however, reveals consumerism as an attractive but insufficient explanation. The novel pores over the Lisbon girls' possessions such as the objects in Cecelia's bedroom – "In addition to a zodiac mobile, Lucy found a collection of potent amethysts, as well as a pack of Tarot cars…seven pairs of underpants, each dyed black with Rit…[and] two pairs of immaculate high-tops" (Eugenides 40-41) – as the keys to their ascension out of suburbia. But in Cecelia's diary, a private sentimental object overloaded with feminine associations, the boys discover that the negatively-associated Babbittry of possessions and middlebrow behavioral expectations consumes much of Cecelia's attention, but offers no firm purchase on why Cecelia would leave, would commit suicide. As they look beyond the consumer objects, the boys, themselves

a first-person plural narrator, puzzle over the Lisbon girls' uncanny sameness as a collective – "Cecelia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity…and so we learned about their lives, came to hold collective memories of times we hadn't experienced…. We knew that the girls were our twins" (Eugenides 42-43) – going so far as literally to ventriloquize Cecelia – "We knew portions of the diary by heart now" to make themselves closer to the Lisbons (42). When, in Cecelia's diary, "the fist person singular ceases almost entirely," the effect is "akin to a camera's pulling away from characters at the end of a movie, to show, in a series of dissolves, their house, street, city, country, and finally planet, which not only dwarfs but obliterates them" (Eugenides 44), a final escape from suburbia's confinement.[139] What the diary, in all its unsatisfying everyday details and abstracted memories finally points to is a thread the boys never pursue: the Lisbon girls slip noose of suburbia through motion: not by driving out of town on the built environment's horizontal axis, but along the Virgin Mary cards' vertical axis, while the boys have continued their investigations horizontally after leaving town, by moving to other towns.

Who and What bears the brunt of the wages of sprawl?

While the energy and gas crisis in *Ice Storm* clearly represents a human problem in suburbia – there's drilling and refining and selling and buying and using it in machines – *Virgin Suicides'* deployment of Dutch elm projects this problem onto nature. But

[139] This echoes the youthful grand-scale self-situating Stephen Dedalus does in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Class of Elements / Clongowes Wood College / Sallins / County Kildare / Ireland / Europe / The World / The Universe" (16-17). The Joe Dante film *The 'burbs,* ends on this very progression of images, but as a "continuous shot," without dissolves (the film begins with a similar zoom *in* from space).

abstracting the failings of suburban design onto the "nature" of Dutch elm obscures the source of the narratives' major metaphor – suburban design and planning. Sickness that is written on a large scale in *Ice Storm* in terms of the roads and connections between city-suburb town-town, is miniaturized in *Virgin Suicides* into the Lisbon house's gradual loss of barriers against the street – first the fence Cecelia impales herself upon and then finally the diseased elm that the city removes. The Lisbon girls' deaths are a mystery because the "we" looks for answers in the Babbitt-identifiable tokens of consumerism, from the smallest cards of the Virgin Mary and pop records, to the large-scale Lisbon house that is not a home and the wound of the dead elm stump that the boys contemplate in the film's final shot. Their inability to question their suburban built environment makes the Lisbon deaths an unsolvable mystery mystified to the point of metaphysics rather than materialism. Suburban dis-ease takes its most powerful analytic form in a built environment that causes rather than reflects suburban unsustainability – without the suburban form sprawling across the map, Dutch elm poses no danger. The form of the town design provides a setting that makes all too possible the worst possible outcome for Dutch elm – the rot begins in the de-industrialized city and moves outward, gradually reaching even the more affluent suburbs. In *The Ice Storm* train-bound Paul watches rot in many forms move along the highways that appear to insulate the suburbs from each other and the city, but, as *The Virgin Suicides* makes clear, the suburban form cannot reconfigure itself in response to the rot, which places the solution to problems at the next exit, into the next suburb, spreading the rot along the length of the engineering triumph of the postwar era, the interstate highway, in search of "ripe" land to tame and inhabit and replace the rotten, used-up land.

The Virgin Suicides' voiceover narrator evinces an awareness of the Lisbon suicides as related to disaster in something more than personal terms during his first description of 1975. Speaking over a group of images of a suburban street covered by a lush canopy of trees that other nostalgic films like *Back to the Future* equate with the general health of the suburb, the narrator remembers, "People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped-out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry. Even then, as teenagers, we tried to put the pieces together. We still can't."

Figure 5.6

However, after poring over hundreds of the Lisbons' personal sentimental artifacts, the narrator ends the film with a greatly personalized consideration of the suicides' larger meaning: "It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, and where we will never find the pieces to put them together again." In the film's paean to lost innocence, the narrator retreats from the consideration of a potential causal relationship

between suburban form and decline – pairing a universalized bourgeois sense of "progress" with female objectification to retreat to a version of stifling suburbia as expressed in the Lisbon family's overwhelming suburban cocoon. The boys refuse the equation of the girls with consumer objects, and they also refuse the metonymic relationship of the girls with Elm trees. However, the boys retain the metonymic relationship of girls-innocence. Suburban isolation and the rot in the neighborhood's elm trees creates a textual paradox that the novel solves by personalizing the problem onto the Lisbon girls. But the very facets that make the Michigan of twenty-five years ago so alluring – the Lisbon girls personalize what has been "lost" – also reveal its doom. The Lisbon girls are the constitutive absence of the nostalgic suburbs, but suburban Firstspace is itself an absence of the rural spaces it evokes but consumes as well as the city from which it takes jobs, culture and sometimes even new residents. The proper metonymic relationship thus rests in the built environment – the sub-urban "nature" design that makes Dutch elm possible – in which the Lisbon girls are nature painfully absenting itself from the suburbs, a "pristine" nature the suburban form simultaneously idealizes and consumes.

A re-consideration of the metaphoric relationship between the Lisbon girls and the elm trees reveals a plainly ecocritical critique of suburbia within *Virgin Suicides*. For example, Bert Cardullo, writing in the *Hudson Review*, bases his predominantly negative view of the film on the Lisbons-for-trees substitution: "the deaths of the five sisters are equivalent to the destruction of the elm trees that line their street: they are lovely and it's sad to lose them, but they have no inner life or spiritual depth" (639). The film encourages such a substitution by showing Cecelia taking ownership of the tree, first

impressing her handprint in its surgery wound and later haunting the neighborhood as she perches among its branches, as well by shooting the human shield the remaining Lisbon girls form to protect the tree when workers arrive to cut it down in long shots that elide the difference between the girls and the tree.

Figure 5.7

Strangely, Cardullo's easy dismissal of the Lisbon sisters echoes the standard anti-consumerist critique of the suburban way of life: comfortable, but empty. However, the actual cause of Dutch elm – the proxy for bad parenting and stifling suburban culture – resists the pat substitution of tree-for-Lisbon and Lisbon-for-suburbs. As Thomas Campanella notes in his history of the Elm in America,

> it was human design that stacked nature's deck [Dutch elm] against the tree. Elm Street was, in spite of its natural appearance, a highly artificial creation. *Ulmus Americana* is a solitary tree, and it almost never occurs naturally in pure stands. Planting these trees in such great numbers, and in such close proximity, left them in profoundly unsustainable condition….The ubiquity of the elm tree was its downfall; the tree was loved to death. (164-65, 167)

Like the objectified Lisbon girls, too much of a good thing – be it love or faux-country living in the suburbs – dooms the tree that was mis-planted according to the dictates of suburban form and ideology. In addition to the well-worn (although still valid) critiques of suburbia which operate in the Lisbon-tree metonymy – keeping up with the Joneses, consumerism, rigid gender role enforcement, distrust and fear of sexuality – Dutch elm reveals the costs to nature in a suburban built environment that accelerates its own demise by designing without concern for the ecological costs of perpetual sprawl that invents a unsustainable approximation of nature. Dutch elm changed the visual identity of suburbia, from an approximation of nature to an asphalt void – "Towns once recumbent in the deep shade of trees now shrank in the blinding sunlight, every crack and pore newly visible in the harsh light" (Campanella 167). The dappled light and multicolored costumes in *Virgin Suicide's* opening sequence disappear in its final track down the same stretch of road, replaced by a flat, up-all-night lighting and the black and white tuxedoes the boys wear as they squint and ponder the mysteries of the Lisbon girls. Cecelia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese remove themselves from suburbia as warning against the environmental and ecological wages of suburban sprawl that their neighbors – who soon after stage a debutante ball around the theme of "Asphyxiation" – cannot quite fathom because it demands an explanation outside of the reified suburban unit, the nuclear family, and makes strange the "natural" layout of residential streets and neighborhoods.

Graham Fuller in *Sight & Sound* writes that, "if we watch carefully, *The Virgin Suicides* has a secret to share, that it is only ostensibly a film about teenage wasteland. What, then, is its real meaning?" (Fuller). While *The Ice Storm* takes place "In the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs. In the wealthiest state in the Northeast. In

the most affluent country on Earth" (Moody 3), the harsh light cast on *Virgin Suicide's* suburb, as signaled by the stumps the camera tracks past as it cranes over the Lisbons' street, represents far more than a teenage wasteland kind of lost adolescent "innocence," but rather the more telling – and tangible, historically specific – wasteland of the disintegration of the suburban form in the Detroit area. Detroit, an industrial city in many ways dependent on the auto industry, depends on the highway-centered transportation network to put its products to use for the suburbanites who buy them. Without the connivance of suburban planners and developers invested in planting an elm or two in every lot or the suburban dispersal from the central city over miles of gas-dependent highways, the deep freeze in New Canaan and the rash of suicides in Michigan would be denied a habitat. The Lisbon girls are more than the trees; they signal nature's refusal to be arranged along the road-building lines suburbia desires. The suburban built environment generates its own destruction, either through complicity in the large-scale deforestation caused by Dutch elm or in its unsustainability in the face of the economic pinch of the oil embargo and energy crisis.

What color is your apocalypse? The future of the suburbs.

After eighty-five years, *Babbitt* has more to say about suburban life than its plain critique of consumerism and conformity. Babbitt's spatial practices engage beyond the furrow of commuting and transit routines – which for him are the means to the commodifying end of real estate speculation – and reveal the means to create a suburban Thirdspace, first to perceive and then to seek alternatives to the disposability written on the suburban built environment. James Howard Kunstler, the anti-suburban activist

whose pessimism increases with each book he writes on the suburbs, argues in 2005's *The Long Emergency* that suburbia's utopian promise has finally manifested itself as a dystopia and will only get worse. "The future is now here for a living arrangement that had no future," he writes, adding, in practical, concrete terms, "It's worth repeating that suburbia is best understood as the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world…. More than 80 percent of everything ever built in America was built after World War II, and most of it was designed solely to be used in connection with cars"" (*Long Emergency* 248, 260). *The Virgin Suicides'* narrator apologizes for the twenty-five years of building between the Lisbon suicides and the present with an admission of complicity in nation-wide sprawl that lives parasitically on not just Detroit's cars, but also its people:

> Families moved away, or splintered, everybody trying out a different spot in the Sun Belt, and for a while it appeared that our only legacy would be desertion. After deserting the city to escape its rot, we now deserted the green banks of our waterlocked spit of land. (Eugenides 245)

On the one hand, suburban sprawl like the Lisbons' suburb feeds parasitically on old urban centers, taking jobs and population away from places like Detroit.[140] But, as the narrator makes clear, sprawl's continuing search for more land on which to build newer developments means that older suburbs are also deserted and dumped in the refuse pile that leads to blight. In this sense, *Virgin Suicides'* description of the Detroit metropolitan area invokes older, discarded development patterns in two key ways. In terms of energy, the large-scale migration into Sun Belt cities like Atlanta, Orlando, Houston, and Phoenix

[140] Robert Beauregard calls this "parasitic urbanism" in chapter 3 of *How America Became Suburban*. For the worst-case scenario of parasitic urbanism, see Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*.

consumes vast amounts of energy to move through (and to cool) sprawl.[141] However, in describing the Detroit area as a "waterlocked spit of land," the novel unconsciously points to the transience of suburbia's chosen transportation mode. Detroit's original appeal derived from its "waterlocked" proximity to Lakes Huron, St. Clair, and Erie, not from its exit-ramp accessibility, like many of the Edge Cities in the Sun Belt and sprawling suburbia.[142]

In the wake of the ice storm, the Hoods reach for a nostalgic version of normalcy by staging a McGinley-like car trip into the suburban past to complete the nuclear family, taking the family car to the train station to find Paul. As the Hoods make their way, haltingly, toward this reunion, the narrator reveals that the Hoods experience New Canaan's and suburbia's history in transit:

> They headed down past the Silvermine Arts Guild and the Silvermine Tavern, where a cereal commercial had recently been filmed, and in doing so, they traveled across the latitudes of ancestral New Canaan. Here John Gruelle had first drawn his famous Raggedy Ann; landscape artist D. Putnam Bradley had painted his sweet pastorals; here Hamilton Hamilton had pen-and-inked, and Childe Hassam had gallicized a little verdant scene. Among writers Padraic Colum, Irish-born poet and folklorist, and Robert Flaherty, Arctic explorer, lived here, and William Rose Benét and Maxwell E. Perkins. Perkins, maybe, while editing *Look Homeward, Angel*. (Moody 271)

Looking back after twenty years, the narrator is slightly more optimistic about the history of his home town than he is about the 1970s in general, but his suburban history rapidly

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[141] Schulman describes the national energy policy drafted to address the energy crisis as "an orderly transition from a long period of 'cheap and abundant energy used wastefully and without regard to international and environmental imperatives to an era of more expensive energy with concomitant regard for efficiency, conservation, international and environmental concerns" (127).

[142] See Joel Garreau's *Edge Cities* for more on the importance of highway exits to new development siting, as well as his *Nine Nations of North America* for an analysis of cities and regions predicated on other transportation mode suitability.

recedes in the distance. New Canaan's history is a collage of almost unalienated hand-drawn images of arctic wastelands outpaced by a post-industrial world of "cloning or genetic engineering or biospheres or full-color photocopying or desktop copying" (Moody 4). While the first pages of the novel reformed the Hood family, however imperfectly, within the space of an energy-saving short walk from the Williams' to the Hoods' house, the McGinley-like short car trip to the station cannot reconstitute the family. Maxwell Perkins, editing Thomas Wolfe, provides the object lesson for the Hoods: you might *look* homeward, but in spite of nostalgia's appeal you can't go home again. If the Hoods want to re-form as a family and re-start their suburban success narrative, heading closer to the city and inner-ring suburbs in search of Paul moves them in exactly the wrong direction (according to suburbia's outward-sprawling logic). Benjamin and Elena drive hopefully "over decomposing Canaan Parish" toward the city, but the narrator knows that, as suburbanites must, "Before long the Hoods would move" somewhere fresher and less tainted – and farther out (Moody 271). The Hood family trip – which considers the New Canaan station to be the destination – is a gesture stuck in1950s Firstspace and Secondspace, but their continued pursuit of the next generation in the stations closer to the city underscores the Thirdspace potential of the in-between space of transit, even if Benjamin and Elena do not recognize it as such.

The Hood family's pathetic drive to a series of suburban stations acts out the conclusion *Ice Storm's* narrator – Paul – reaches about his "fucking family" at the end of the novel's penultimate chapter: "You could pay Arthur Janov to teach you to scream about history, or you could learn prayer or a mantra, or you could write your life down and hope to make peace with it, write it down, or paint it, or turn it into improvisational

theater, but that was the best you could probably do. You were stuck" (Moody 273). Paul, the novel's self-conscious narrator, self-reflexively figures representation as a meaningless or at least purposeless release in the tar pit of suburban Firstspace and Secondspace. Where exactly will the Hoods be stuck? "In the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs. In the wealthiest state in the Northeast. In the most affluent country on Earth" (Moody 3). First Babbittry's consumerist bent feeds the suburban landfill with standardized things, then the suburban built environment covers and hides it with rail lines, highways and noise walls. The Hoods will spend the rest of their lives between the city and some suburb, riding through the sprawl that paves over the "decomposing" older suburban towns on the way to new suburbs.[143]

For every sprawling step across the map, as suburbia consumes more and more of the nature it purports to provide its residents, a suburban apocalypse comes nearer.[144] Suburban shortcomings emerge from its Secondspace – when the solution always resides over the next hill, at the next exit, sprawl generates the accumulation of Firstspace that accelerates the energy-crisis apocalypse of gas lines along the highway. In spite of their tentative, reformist articulations of the necessity for change in the suburban way of life, *Back to the Future 1* and *2*, *The Ice Storm,* and *The Virgin Suicides* long for a future to

[143] Myron Orfield's *Metropolitics* describes his work as a Minnesota state legislature member to address the tendency for older suburbs to pay a disproportionate share of the costs in suburban expansion building new highways that lead to the new, more affluent suburbs that exacerbate the economic inequalities in a metropolitan region. Orfield goes into useful detail in chapters 5 and 6.

[144] In *Narratives and Spaces,* Nye traces the genealogy of apocalyptic narratives back to the distrust of "dark satanic mills," but, though he notes the nuclear danger narrative found in *The China Syndrome*, which I discuss in chapter three, Nye equates American apocalyptic narratives with human-made cataclysms keyed to war – Hiroshima, *On the Beach*, *Godzilla*, *Doctor Strangelove.* However, Nye is less interested in the everyday apocalypse I describe here.

look like 1950s suburban Firstspace and Secondspace, only ameliorated by minor changes in fuel sources, home design, and landscape design that can stave off this concrete-gray apocalypse. The Hoods' drive across suburbia's buried history, as Paul remembers it, resembles the world memorialized in the Talking Head's "Nothing But Flowers:" which imagines, with no small amount of irony, what the return to nature suburbia claims to offer up would actually entail. Lyricist David Byrne's song imagines a future in which a new Adam and Eve trade a naturalized suburban world that has existed "since the age of dinosaurs," full of malls, factories, real estate, parking lots, highways, and cars that run on gasoline for the rural agricultural life that suburbia emulates. The green apocalypse Byrne describes – oases, mountains, rivers, fields – functions as a Thirdspace engagement with the feared concrete gray apocalypse present in the *Back to the Future*, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides*. When suburban America's Firstspace can no longer deliver on its Secondspace promises, all hell breaks loose. But suburban First- and Secondspace occupy such a position of privilege in American culture that Byrne's song ends with the ironic equation of Eden and distress – "Don't leave me stranded here / I can't get used to this lifestyle." *Back to the Future, The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides* displace hell onto Libyan terrorists, extreme weather, and stifling parenting to make the world safe for future suburbia by making it literally concrete and thus recognizably suburban. A significant cause of gray and green apocalypses resides in the paradoxes of a suburban Secondspace that constantly generates unsustainable – even fatal – Firstspaces. As the *Back to the Future* films, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides* make clear, practices as simple as planting multiple species of trees in subdivisions and as complex as engineering new fuel sources at a global scale

emerge as the necessary Thirdspace component to a livable and sustainable suburban future.

CHAPTER VI

"CLEAR A PATH…I'M GOING HOME": USING THIRDSPACE TO FIX METROPOLITAN REGIONS

Falling Down (1992) begins with a normal traffic jam and, amid the clatter of the rush hour bottleneck, a man (Michael Douglas) with the personalized plates D FENS temporarily silences the noisy strains and stresses of commuting by abandoning his car and walking into the bushes on the shoulder (see Figure 6.1), rejecting the auto-based stresses of life in the Los Angeles region.[145] While at first he seems motivated primarily by (white) rage at traffic, DFENS claims his only goal is to see his estranged wife and daughter in Venice. To traverse the sprawling region, DFENS opts out of driving; instead, he walks through a cross-section of Los Angeles, where his troubling interactions with Hispanic and Asian-American Angelenos present an explicit white rage narrative that perpetuates the standard white-flight suburban narrative of the post-War era. The literal crumbling of the transportation infrastructure Firstspaces DFENS passes through devolves from the ongoing and misguided investment in the Secondspace of the "traditional" nuclear family headed by a white heterosexual male breadwinner.[146]

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[145] David Porush notes that, "Part of the fascination of the traffic jam is its ambiguity," then asks if traffic like DFENS encounters is "an artificial event, only conceivable as the product of a hyper-evolved hyper-complex urban system…[Or] Is it man-made? Or is it in some crucial sense a naturally occurring event?" (74). In other words, *Falling Down* represents the wages of sprawl as traffic, which takes on a chicken-egg cast.

[146] Sikivu Hutchinson, in an survey of the experience of Los Angeles in transit, identifies the experience of moving through LA as a key cultural symptom very much present in *Falling Down*: "As the most influential urban expression of the American conflation of private land ownership with individuality, LA reflects many key themes in the United States' invention of national identity. Theses themes include the redemption of the white

Throughout DFENS' journey, *Falling Down* engages with versions of normalcy, boundary-drawing, and protecting whiteness in a suburbia driving toward a gray apocalypse. In the fantasy DFENS's experiences offer, *Falling Down* represents 1992-vintage suburban sprawl in the late stages of a decay its residents finally cannot help but recognize.[147] However, it is the generically and narratively banal police narrative centered on Prendergast (Robert Duval) that implicitly and compellingly portrays interactions with the built environment – abstractly represented in maps that reveal important patterns and concretely lived on the streets that make up the back side of the city – as undergirding the most plausible potential Thirdspace-reformist vision for the region.

Figure 6.1

Warner Brothers provided *Falling Down* with two advertising taglines which obviously address DFENS but also pointedly address Prendergast's role in the

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immigrant, the fetishization of urban otherness (i.e., white suburbia under siege), and the reinvention of the frontier" (35).

[147] *Falling Down*, in this regard, gives form to the Anglo Los Angeles that Mike Davis engages in *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear* while shying away from the Latino Los Angeles Davis sees in *Magical Urbanism: Latinos reinvent the US city* and the "Battle of East LA" chapter in *Fire in the Hearth*.

maintenance of the suburban form. Both DFENS and Prendergast operate within "A tale of urban reality," to represent, "The adventure of an ordinary man at war with the everyday world" created by sprawl. Prendergast, like all police officers, is charged with protecting the sprawling Firstspace and serving the "mainstream" portions of its Secondspaces. While his fellow officers interview witnesses and his superior officer forcefully asserts gender roles to maintain order, Prendergast shows that effective (and non-abusive) police work depends on a vigilant awareness of the terrain from multiple angles and a willingness to engage various Secondspaces.[148] While I do not mean to claim that *Falling Down* offers the best possible version of confronting the issues inherent in sprawl – the film's racial and gender politics are particularly disturbing and unhelpful and recourse to police-state action against sprawl seems a high price to pay – once we move past its obvious, explicit engagement with "white rage," *Falling Down* moves toward solving the nearly-unmanageable problems of the sprawling metropolis -- such as inequality and crime-fighting – through a critical awareness of and action in the built environment. Thirdspace, in other words, can create a more livable Los Angeles.[149]

Falling Down reveals not only the very plain politics of white rage exploited in the Southern Strategy and by the Contract With America congressional class of 1994, but also how sprawl feeds that rage. No small number of hopeful groups have moved into California's increasingly auto-centered Firstspace since 1900. The militarization of the Los Angeles economy during World War II brought in thousands of defense industry

[148] Prendergast's interactions with witnesses are always respectful and revealing. Consider, for example, his discussion with the young Hispanic women involved in the drive-by or with DFENS's mother.

[149] I do not mean to argue that the juridical arm of the state should function as an armed urban planning group, but rather that *Falling Down* represents how a change in spatial practices, a change in relationships to space, can improve the metropolitan region.

workers – both highly-educated engineers and less-educated factory workers – like DFENS – Angelenos who were predominantly white/Anglo.[150] Suburban anxiety, in *Falling Down*, emerges quite plainly as a reaction to late-century economic instability (rapid technological change, off shoring, outsourcing) in terms of racial politics in majority-minority Los Angeles and empty nostalgia.[151] DFENS' parodic quest to reassert his white patriarchal authority follows former California governor Ronald Reagan's advice: DFENS hopes that by "going home" to an imagined moment in the past, to the family that was never as perfect as he remembers, such a morning in America might solve Los Angeles's problems rather than explode in the riots finally triggered by the Rodney King case verdict. However, while DFENS explicitly conflicts with racial and class others in everyday interactions like buying a Whammyburger, he also speaks out against the illogic of public infrastructure spending in concert with images of the crumbling corners of Los Angeles that have not benefited from highway-building and sprawl. After punching out a road-raging driver, DFENS directs his rant against the endless road construction common to every American metro region at a construction worker (see fig. 2). Looking at the carved-up street, DFENS says,

> Two days ago it was fine. You telling me the street fell apart in two days?...Pardon me, but that's bullshit. I wanna know what's wrong with the street! See, I don't think there's anything wrong with the street. I think you're just trying to justify your inflated budgets. I know how it works. You don't spend the money you have projected this year, they don't give the same amount next year. Now I want you to admit,

[150] See Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear*, especially "Beyond *Blade Runner*," and the prologue to *City of Quartz*.

[151] As Richard Nixon's pollster Kevin Phillips described the Silent Majority who would become Reagan Democrats, in *The Emerging Republican Majority*, "to many new suburbanites, their relocation represented a conscious effort to drop a crabgrass curtain between themselves and the increasingly Negro central cities" (179).

> there's nothing wrong with the street!...You're not gonna hold us hostage with your yellow lights and big trucks…I'll give you something to fix.

DFENS gives the construction crew "something to fix" by shooting a bazooka into the under-construction highway. Two elements of the mise en scene hint at the limits of this highway-centric thinking. First of all, while drivers and road construction crew members are rude, selfish, and take no responsibility for their actions; the blameless citizens in the scene are independent of cars and the highway: impatient drivers get punched in the face by pedestrian DFENS, but a group of bike-riding children help DFENS operate a bazooka. Second, director Joel Schumacher shoots the bazooka shot in a deliriously fantastic manner. In the only shot of its kind in the film, Schumacher uses an exaggerated high-speed tracking shot along the street surface as a projectile point-of-view, punctuating the scene with a grand explosion, as a parody of the cathartic violence DFENS has, up to this point in the film, directed against his racial others. However, the solution to the highway-building hostage situation DFENS perceptively describes demonstrates sprawl's discursive power. DFENS seems alone as he voices his objections in a close-up with only empty sky in the background, and, rather than confront the auto-centered development pattern which the majority of his diatribe's dialog and mise en scene implies, in the end DFENS defers to highways and makes their continued construction necessary rather than wastefully discretionary by blowing up the street.[152]

[152] Immediately after blowing up the highway, DFENS escapes through a gated community's golf course, where he first bemoans golf's profligacy and then awkwardly seeks class solidarity with a caretaker and his family.

Figure 6.2

The insistent formal echoes of the DFENS narrative within the Prendergast narrative suggest that the general population's emerging dissatisfaction with the sprawling status quo requires the state's intervention to advance.[153] While the DFENS narrative represents suburban frustration with the built environment in terms of interactions with racialized (and classed) others, the Prendergast narrative returns to the same spaces to confront such frustrations and rage by addressing Firstspace – built environment and also maps – to stop DFENS's problematic rampage. The traffic jam that opens the film introduces the film's twinned threads: an establishing shot drops down to place DFENS within a crumbling First- and Secondspace which spurs an eruption of violence from DFENS. After DFENS abandons his car, the scene shifts to Prendergast who also heads to work on the same highway. Prendergast is introduced with a crane-down establishing shot to reveal the shared highway space, and he shares streetscape's sounds of honking and shouting with DFENS as well. However, while the opening credit

[153] In this sense, the desirable sort of police work takes on a utopian-reformist cast. Prendergast does not merely stop crime as it happens, but addresses its root causes in the built environment.

sequence point-of-view shots for DFENS train in on street-level tokens such as aggressive bumper stickers, obnoxious businessmen, and loud children, Prendergast's point-of-view shot looks beyond the furrow of the road, if only slightly, focusing on a graffiti-tagged billboard that stands on the highway shoulder that DFENS walks through – right into the first stop on his crime spree, the Korean grocery. During DFENS' trek through the region, Prendergast at first remains in the police station, espousing a version of the suburban motto: his retirement means that he'll be moving away, and these problems now belong to someone else. Eventually, DFENS's violence against a particular portion of the LA region draws Prendergast out of his cocoon. DFENS backs off his white rage when he sees its associations with homophobia and anti-Semitism, writing class antagonism (read: white on white crime) onto the privatized infrastructure of golf clubs and gated communities that resemble the retirement resort Prendergast plans to call home.[154] A pedestrian crime spree confounds the police, but not DFENS-shadow Prendergast, who bases his successful pursuit not on crimes linked by motive or street addresses, but in his intimate knowledge of the region's Firstspace distinct from its auto-centered Secondspace. Prendergast deduces DFENS's role in the crime by thinking against the logic of car-based sprawl, placing car-abandoning DFENS at the scene first by recognizing the billboard and then by reading its city backside not as an advertisement, but as a landmark of pedestrian access.

By turning away from the car-oriented Secondspace of sprawl to consider DFENS's crime spree as a pedestrian signature, Prendergast reveals the positive Thirdspace potential in thinking as something other than a driver – in this case as a

[154] This narrative sleight-of-hand allows the film to have its cake and eat it too: Racial antagonisms become just another screen for the "real" problems of class antagonisms.

pedestrian – engaging concrete spaces in and/or abstract representations of the city. Like the maps Franco Moretti draws for Mary Mitford's work, film theorist Tom Conley overlaps the literal and the figurative when he argues that, cinematic cartography "requires close reading, not only of images of maps as they appear in the moving image, but also of the principles of montage that inform them and that make each film the webbing that contains issues of broader scope" (5). *Falling Down* bears traces of the Western, the war movie, the road movie, the thriller, and film noir – all genres "in which maps underscore how much everyone is lost and adrift in a world where neither ethical nor geographical bearings can be found in the chaos of war and confusion" (Conley 209).[155] Prendergast's use of the LA map to track DFENS from the abandoned car to Venice traces DFENS's discursive drift. At the same time, the LA region's literal bearings are not lost, but rather far too one-dimensional. DFENS can continue his crime spree because he does not stick to the road system like a driver would – as a pedestrian he constantly shifts his route and eludes police pursuit. Prendergast not only recognizes the backside of his daily commute by concretely engaging the built environment near the corner Korean grocery, but also by viewing the map of LA as more than a way for drivers to move from street to street. As he asks his partner for the locations of the "GI Joe" series of crimes, Prendergast draws a line across the map that ignores surface roads, tracing a path that only a pedestrian could write onto the region (see fig. 3). Sprawling Firstspace, in this case, represents not "how much everyone is lost and adrift," but rather how tied to a single relationship to and engagement with space – sitting in a car looking

[155] Western (the quick-draw showdown), the war movie (the fetishization of military technology), the road movie (in the failure of the open road, at the film's beginning), the thriller (tracking the elusive killer by investigating the spaces he/she once occupied), and even film noir (the decadent city).

straight ahead, just like DFENS as the film opens – residents of the Los Angeles region have become, and the wages of such a bargain on daily life and crime-fighting.

Figure 6.3

Falling Down stages its final confrontation as a contest over the control of two possible futures for Los Angeles: DFENS represents a future of violence based in nostalgia-drenched sprawl and Prendergast a reformist future of incremental change through attention to the built environment. DFENS succeeds in reaching Venice, but it is not, of course, the Venice he remembers either as Firstspace or Secondspace – the ice cream shop has closed and his family has been splintered by divorce. Helped by his perceptive reading of billboard backsides and street-ignoring maps, Prendergast finds DFENS at the end of a crumbling Venice Beach pier, where the Los Angeles cityscape looms in the background. Though the film begins with white rage, it first retreats from and then papers over a racialized vision of urban and suburban unease with DFENS's increasing recognition of the disreputable characters with whom he might be lumped by adhering to such a worldview. In this manner, the film exploits the frisson of racially-motivated crimes while appearing bravely to disavow them in the end. Sadly, but wisely,

this bargain occludes the film's take on the wages of sprawl; no one wants to be a closeted neo-Nazi or neo-Nazi sympathizer. DFENS, in the narrative's logic, is a grandly flawed, but not entirely odious figure, unlike the broadly-drawn, reprehensible surplus store owner (or even the fat cat restricted-access club golfer). This rehabilitation generates the utopian potential and fantasy bribe that Jameson describes in *Signatures of the Visible* (30-1), which I quoted in my introduction and have used as a heuristic throughout this dissertation. With the ocean behind him, pushed to the absolute First- and Secondspace limits of suburban expansion, DFENS asks Prendergast, "I'm the bad guy? How'd that happen?", defending himself by claiming that, "I did everything they told me to." "They," the existing Secondspace order, told DFENS that happiness and the suburbs are synonymous. However, *Falling Down* implicitly claims that suburban sprawl, with its history of racism and sexism, remains destructive and profligate. To bribe the suburban, white male audience (that is to say, the existing hegemonic order) DFENS at first indulges in cathartic violence against his racialized Others and then wises up to mete out pedantically obvious ironic justice on the *real* bad guys – neo-Nazi bigots and upper-crust snobs.[156] To solidify DFENS's salvation, *Falling Down* further reinforces the existing order by resolving the emptiness of white-flight sprawl's promise with state-sanctioned reformist violence. Prendergast is "still a cop" at the end of the film because metropolitan regions require vigilant spatial management by the state, more than the vigilante action of private sector unchecked sprawl. Prendergast locates and eliminates the bad suburbanite who has given regional growth a bad name, fusing two

[156] Consider the similar trip through urban hell *Judgment Night*, which first indulges in some racialized fears, but turns into a similar class-based "critique" of comfortable white-collar (but not always white) suburban life seeking safe dangers in the city.

civic jobs in one: police work and regional planning in one crime-fighting package curbs the excesses of sprawl.

I have argued in this dissertation for a spatial turn in literary and film analyses of the suburbs, and to do so means taking seriously the Thirdspace potential in texts that, in even their best moments, seem to be deeply invested in the hegemonic order. As ur-suburbanite Babbitt's spatial practices show, redirecting critical energies toward interactions with the built environment throws fruitful light on the spatial practices that make up – and can remake – suburban Firstspace, and such changes, though present in *Falling Down*, need not be implemented, through force, from the top down. Rather, I hope I have shown that a shift in tactical relationships to the suburban built environment can generate more livable and sustainable suburbs. Jack Lemmon-average suburbanites can engage in guerilla operations against uglifying additions to the car-centered built environment; Men and Women in Gray Flannel Suits can re-purpose the transportation infrastructure to serve ends beyond the Organization and capital; suburbs that welcome non-white, non-heterosexual residents can pave the way toward an expansion of suburbia's too-often exclusive Secondspace ideologies; and an awareness of previous crises made worse by suburban Firstspace can make plain the many changes needed to rescue the majority-suburban twenty-first century United States from the wages of sprawl.

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