

Tijd voor suburbia : de Amerikaanse buitenwijk in wetenschap en literatuur

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Summary
Time for suburbia
The American suburb in science and literature

For decades the representation of the American suburb and its residents has been primarily marked by intellectual disdain. This can be seen not only in magazines, television series and movies but also in social science and humanities studies and in works of literary fiction. In recent years this negative portrayal increasingly met with criticism. This dissertation focuses on a discussion of the terms in which scholars and literary authors reflect and comment on the persistent and cliché-like negative representation of suburban life.

Today, a majority of Americans is living in a suburban setting, while a steadily growing number of them also work there. Although we generally view cities as having many faces and identities, our common understanding of American suburbia seems hardly balanced or diverse. This one-sided conceptualization is not just a theoretical issue, but has direct ramifications for suburban realities. It affects, for example, decisions on whether funds should go to improvements of the inner city or to development of the city's outskirts; it also influences the layout and outlook of new suburbs, the design of suburban housing and people's decisions on whether to go live there or not. It is quite relevant, therefore, that this particular mode of modern life is known and represented in a multifaceted manner. Similar concerns apply to an increasingly suburbanized country like the Netherlands. In this country, too, spatial planning takes place in a culture that has predominantly expressed a derogatory view of suburbia.

A major concern of this dissertation is to show that conventional attacks on suburban stereotypes and clichés fall short. To this day such attacks tend to start from the so-called suburban myth, from the view that there are inaccurate representations of the suburban reality that need to be replaced by more realistic representations. As a way to counter the repertoire that is based on this particular myth,

I propose an alternative way of reasoning. Too often it is ignored that texts and studies do not merely *describe* suburban realities, but that they *have us perceive* such realities in a certain fashion: texts *do* something and directly affect our grasp of the outside world. In order to establish how this is the case, and what the specific effects are, this study does not focus on a comparison between reality and representation. It is not my aim to consider texts on suburbia and assess the accuracy of their representations. Instead, this dissertation capitalizes on a confrontation between texts that represent suburbs in a variety of ways. I will discuss scholarly studies and literary narratives side by side because they influence the world beyond their own discursive context; they have concrete effects outside their own tradition. In this study, then, texts from these various traditions function as each other's context.

Contrary to what the repertoire of myth suggests, negative representations of suburbia rarely involve simple images. The issue in this study is not so much the suburb as place, but suburbia – not so much the living environment *per se*, but the suburban lifestyle and mentality. Criticism leveled at suburbia is generally aimed at those who live there: members of the middle classes. Their representation involves a specific place and lifestyle, but it also has a temporal dimension: a particular engagement with the past, present and future. It is primarily their sense of time, including their embeddedness in time, on which suburbanites are judged. They are regarded as excessively nostalgic, as surrendering themselves to a hedonist present, or, conversely, as being blinded by ambition to get ahead. Moreover, their looking backward or forward is also tied to specific behavioral orientations, if not the competence to act altogether. Nostalgia and anticipation often imply fear and determination, dependency and autonomy, a lack of initiative and excessive eagerness to act.

Of course, this study, too, considers the suburb as a space that residents turn into a place. If we are to understand, however, what goes into dominant spatial constructions and what its alternatives look like in detail, we should consider the imagination of space as one in which time is a constitutive factor as well. The way in which relationships between the suburban middle classes' temporal ori-

entations, lifestyle and behavioral orientations are portrayed significantly contributes to robust representations of suburbia. These relationships are particularly relevant in forms of representation that move away from such robustness.

A comparison of these complex constructions reveals some continuity, not only in stereotypical representations, as is suggested by studies that employ the repertoire of myth, but also in more subtle representations. Although scholarly reflection on suburbia in a variety of traditions – including urban history, sociology, historical and cultural geography, cultural philosophy and architectural critique – has prompted diverse, discipline-based discussions, it is possible to identify a limited number of recurring motifs and narratives throughout these various traditions.

The suburb of the 1950s, for instance, plays a key role. It is often invoked as a *true site of middle America*. Three compromises converge in it, organized around a close connection between the ideal American, the so-called new middle class and the post-war suburb. The ideal American combines individuality with community sense: as an independent individual he is part of a harmonious group. The new middle class, mainly consisting of office clerks with a stable family life and an individual career, is seen to express a combination of calmness and competitive spirit. Represented as a whole, this class is after social-economic mobility based on traditional, close-knit family life. Divided into *lower* and *upper* middle class, the *solid* citizens in the first category mainly display satisfaction with what they have, while the career makers from the latter category strive for upward mobility and display hypersensitivity for status differences. The social-political compromise between individuality and community and the economic compromise between composure and competition come together in a third, *temporal* compromise. The *fifties*-suburb is seen to express both stability and progress. Depending on how the suburb is evoked, two forms of status anxiety can be distinguished. If the focus is on an individual suburb, in most cases there is a collective effort towards ensuring social status. But if the focus is on a mosaic of suburbs, career is central in most cases, whereby moving from one suburb to another is identical to an upward move on the social ladder.

Since the 1950s the suburb counts as the ultimate site for the middle classes to express the American ideal of being home *and* of moving on – of satisfied retrospection *and* eager anticipation. The grand narratives of the autonomous individual, the harmonious nuclear family, the stable community, upward mobility and material prosperity become entwined with the *true site of middle America* and turn it into a particularly robust notion. This robustness is further enhanced by five cultural ideas that have a much wider footing in American culture and society: paradise, the pastoral, the picturesque, the frontier and the city. These constitute a reservoir of notions – on time and place as well as identity – from which elements can be drawn for imagining community and individuality, peacefulness and mobility, security and renewal, nostalgia and ambition. Depending on the suburb's specific representation a fitting selection of these elements may be invoked. Paradise and the picturesque lend themselves for instance to the image of the perfect, (all too) carefully managed comfort in a beautiful, green setting. If not being home but moving on is seen as central, the narratives tied to the frontier tradition, in which entrepreneurial individuals take their destiny into their own hands (while ignoring that of others) are most appropriate. A combination of both types is frequently expressed by reverting to the (American) pastoral, which links up pristine rural life with a belief in progress.

Although in the past fifty years individual elements from this complex system may have been criticized, the basic formula has not been undermined. It can be found as a constant in the representation of the suburb as both ideal and nightmare. The valuations vary substantially, though. Suburbia counts as promise *and* disappointment, as heartland *and* wasteland.

The suburb is a battleground where intellectuals fight each other at three levels. Depending on what they expect from the individual and how they conceive of its behavior and competence to act, they sketch mutually competing versions of suburbia. The first issue concerns the loss of individuality. It is not just the suburb as a built environment that meets with criticism; its residents are also seen in a negative light. The monotonous suburb is populated by a fearful, dependent and excessively conformist middle class, which betrays

age-old American ideals like ingenuity, autonomy and energy. In studies and novels, critical outsiders outline different yet kindred dystopian versions of suburbia in which peer pressure silences all expression of individuality. This tradition still provokes imaginative yet pessimistic characterizations.

This image of herd-like behavior rests in a specific view of consumption, an activity that is traditionally assigned great relevance as part of suburban life and that elicits quite contradictory opinions. Those who consider consumption as a meaningful activity from the angle of both the community and the individual rather than as passive hedonism, tend to paint a quite different version of suburbia. Its residents, through their new car or at a neighborhood barbecue, express mutual similarities and differences, just like their favorite style of home decoration may express both nostalgia and ambition. In, for instance, Thomas Hine's *Populuxe* (1986) and Barbara Kelly's *Expanding the American Dream* (1993) the do-it-yourselfer positively contributes to the design of the suburb. In his own way he acts out his American dream, rather than that he is represented as a conformist bore who epitomizes the loss of traditional American ideals.

Besides individuality and herd instinct, or passivity and activity, destiny and willpower organize difference, especially in histories of suburbia. In one version, for example in Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias* (1987), a visionary middle class turns suburbia into a thriving autonomous social unit. In other versions, such as Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), the middle class's power to act is restrained while its self-reliance is questioned. The image of the autonomous middle class as the driving force of history is significantly weakened by, among other things, demographic developments, technological innovations, rivaling interests of all kinds of lobby groups and substantial government support. If, finally, an author proclaims the end of traditional suburbia, in one history – most prominently in *Bourgeois Utopias* – the middle class completely disappears from view as actor, while in another, for example Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear* (1998) or Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen's *Picture Windows* (2000), a fierce struggle among the progressively more dissimilar residents erupts about the definition of post-suburbia. All actors have their own ideas, strategies, memories and

expectations. Where one is attracted by promise, someone else leaves because of a perceived threat. Where one sees specific opportunities for improvement, another fears having to make a backward step. Similarly, while newcomers approach the future with a sense of expectation, those living in suburbia already cast a nostalgic glance backward or seek recourse in rigid zoning or closing their gates out of fear for the outside world.

The fact that suburban themes and motifs tend to recur, then, does not imply the absence of a rich and diverse offering of suburban images and narratives. Despite several patterns and continuities, various different and competing representations of suburbs and their middle class populations can be found in fiction as well as in social science and humanities studies. Literary narratives are often assumed to enrich the world of representation, in particular regarding time. Novels and stories are expected to add new images of suburbia, present alternatives for dominant images and undermine stereotypes. This dissertation does not so much focus on a comparison of literary and academic representations of suburbia in general, but on confrontations between individual stories, as well as between these stories and various scholarly arguments. This approach underscores that fact and fiction, transparency and ambiguity, and argument and story function as relative categories instead of as binary contrasts.

Some social science studies on suburbia explicitly claim to present ideal-types of suburbanites, rather than actual residents. Even though the characters that populate these studies are not true-to-life, some of these studies nevertheless come across as realistic. This is a direct effect of the deployment of narrative techniques and stylistic strategies that we rather associate with fiction than with science. In William Dobriner's *Class in Suburbia* (1963), for example, the models and types presented have an individual history and a voice and language of their own. Moreover, the strategy of focalization is used to provide a 'fictional sociological impression', which gives readers a sense that they can witness what actually takes place in Levittown. Conversely, the narrator in John Keats's *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) explains that the site of his story about John en Mary Drone, Rolling Knolls, does not exist, but that it is neverthe-

less based on facts. The story about this unhappy couple is embedded in a vehement argument against suburbia. The narrator relies on a host of experts to underscore the dreadfulness of suburban living, as embodied by the Drones.

David Karp's *Leave Me Alone* (1957) is a novel, but in this case, too, narrative and argument are hard to separate. The story about suburbanite Arthur Douglas is basically entwined with a sociological study, which is not carried out by a real expert, as in Keats's story, but by professor Cameron, who inhabits the novel's fictional world. His argument hardly differs, though, from that of the sociological commentaries by influential critics like C. Wright Mills, William H. Whyte and David Riesman. The novel's readers are enticed to identify with protagonist Arthur Douglas, but increasingly they find that it is not he who is central but his fellow suburbanites with whom he is at odds. As illustration of Cameron's sociological model, they are exposed as incarnations of *Little Man*, *Organization Man* and the *other-directed*.

Although most studies and novels on suburban life are populated by quite uncertain, hesitant suburbanites, variations on this pattern are found as well. Textual comparison reveals in fact that minor differences in the various forms of depiction may have substantial consequences for the ways in which relationships between the suburb as site and the temporal orientation and identity of its residents are evoked. Therefore, detailed mapping of how suburbs and their residents are represented should go hand in hand with careful analysis of how these representations are constructed and what they mean. In cultural analysis the *how* and *what* should always be considered in tandem.

John Updike's novels *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *Couples* (1968) display similarities with many major social science commentaries on suburban life. These novels' protagonists, Harry Angstrom and Piet Hanema, respectively, can be seen as failures in terms of their autonomy, initiative, vision and power to act. Moreover, if suburban life expresses the ideal image of both nostalgia and ambition, of a sense of retrospection and anticipation, Harry's lower-middle-class suburb Mt. Judge and Piet's upper-middle-class exurb Tarbox are all but characteristic. Despite these similarities, there are revealing dif-

ferences as well. In a so-called 'chronotopic' reading, aimed at how in and around specific spaces identity and temporal orientation are expressed, they come to the fore.

Rabbit, Run presents Harry's excessive nostalgia and lack of future vision as urgent problems. As is common in the life of fictional suburbanites, Harry's life is dominated by a feeling of oppression, which in his case is organized around an endless series of everyday problems. In a narrative that is structured as a downward spiral he gradually turns inward. He goes around in increasingly smaller circles and spaces. A prisoner of his diminishing horizon, Harry sees no opportunity to pause for a moment and reflect on the mess he made of his life. If studies like Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) articulate an explicit touchstone for criticism of suburbia, *Rabbit, Run* formulates such critique only implicitly and, moreover, in a non-judgmental way. Harry may be a coward and self-centered, it is nevertheless possible for readers to empathize with his doubts and his disorientation because of an understanding of his circumstances. In contrast to, for instance, the sarcasm in Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), the tone of Updike's novel is primarily marked by compassion.

Like *Rabbit, Run*, the later novel *Couples* strikes various chords. It is situated at the intersection of the realist, the symbolic and the burlesque, which results in an intriguing combination of venom, awe, humor and compassion. As opposed to the former novel, *Couples* judges the world it evokes explicitly. As the characters' interior monologues, dialogues and conduct suggest, they do not hide their aversion of suburban life, nor does the narrator refrain from voicing his opinions. If Piet Hanema still enjoys some sympathy, his circle of friends is sharply criticized. At parties and in their private dwellings the couples look for excitement and variation without endangering the status quo. Yet in isolation, their hedonist lives become increasingly oppressive. The novel represents the couples' cyclical everyday life as failed escapism and their involvement in local politics as a form of action that they quickly abandon after the arrival of a younger generation of suburbanites with their new prefab neighborhoods.

Couples links up an explicitly culture-critical diagnosis – as also found in studies like Richard Sennett's *The Uses of Disorder* (1970),

Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), and Dutch philosopher René Boomkens's *De angstmachine* (1996) and *Een drempelwerld* (1998) – with what it means for the couples involved to see their ideals evaporate and their desires frustrated. Thus the basic argument of *Couples* is not necessarily more complex than that of social science, as suggested, for example, by the split between complex literary art and schematic social science in Elizabeth Long's *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (1985). However, the novel does combine a variety of views into a single whole in which mutual differences and tensions between the characters are not reduced to a single perspective but remain visible. Moreover, the novel invites readers to identify with divergent characters and various, perhaps contradictory, views and arguments, while also holding up a mirror. By being convincing, absorbing and confronting, *Couples* challenges us to reconsider how we feel and think. Like many social science arguments, its basic structure rests in several familiar elements of the suburban imagination, such as the paradisiacal myth and the pastoral, while it is organized around clichés, such as suburban adultery; yet it nevertheless succeeds in involving us in subtle ways. It does not achieve this effect by aggressively countering clichés or attacking standard assumptions. Instead, it fully exploits the space of the literary novel: by presenting thoughts, feelings and behaviors as an integral part of a simultaneously understandable, appealing, despicable, commendable and preposterous lifestyle.

Where Updike's novels basically respect the boundaries of genre, Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991) allows space for strange new elements. This book's main plot, addressing the generation of people in their late twenties for whom the gates of suburbia proved to be locked in the early 1990s, is complemented by an explanatory and critical ensemble of statements, cartoons, neologisms and aphorisms in the marginal space of its pages, while the novel's appendix provides figures and statistics from official sources in support of its main concern. These marginal comments and the numbers evoke developments in several contexts. Thus readers can understand the problems of protagonists Andy, Dag and Claire in the context of overconsumption and environmental pollution, family issues and the fading middle class – concerns that were earlier represented in

stories and novels of authors like Don DeLillo, Raymond Carver, Bret Easton Ellis and John Updike. But if we are to understand the downward mobility of Coupland's three protagonists as well, we have to consider relevant humanities and social science studies, such as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling* (1989) and Katherine Newman's *Falling from Grace* (1988) and *Declining Fortunes* (1993). Together, these textual traditions constitute the world in which the three friends are lost and in which they try to reorient themselves in new ways.

Because the novel's main narrative, the marginal lexicon and the appendix mutually refer to each other and are to be understood in combination with each other, a closed-off worldview gradually emerges in which it becomes clear why these three young members of the middle class are hiding in Palm Springs, on the edge of California's Mojave desert. By the early 1990s, many of America's social promises have lost their validity or are no longer available to most, which forces the three friends to fashion a future perspective of their own. In this respect it becomes understandable why it is not easy, even for those in society's periphery, to escape from the middle class frame that disappointed them. Dominant cultural expectations are hard to evade in particular. Gradually, the three manage to conceptualize a future by looking backward rather than forward. Andy and his friends long for a future from the past, one with which their parents grew up and that proved unattainable for Generation X members.

The silence and withdrawal of the protagonists of *Generation X* does not mean they are written out of the story. On the contrary, Coupland's novel shows which considerations and activities precisely become possible in the margin. Peripheral Palm Springs is the story's central chronotope. It constitutes an appropriate place for temporal reorientation and allows Andy, Dag and Claire to rediscover a sense of control and authority. No matter how preliminary and hesitant, at the edge of the desert they succeed in making a step forward by talking to each other and doing things, especially telling each other stories. No matter how unpretentiously, their whispering and exploring becomes audible and visible in Coupland's novel. Thus *Generation X* offers an alternative for the disappearing act in Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias* and adds a specific voice and a mode of

action to the pushing and shoving and calling in, for instance, Iob Kling, Spencer Olin and Mark Poster's *Postsuburban California* (1991).

Finally, a most different (post)suburban California takes shape in Coupland's 'Brentwood Notebook' (1996). In megalopolis Los Angeles it identifies a fascinating suburban island that in various guises explores issues of place, time and identity. Prosperous Brentwood is represented as a self-contained, unsociable *non-place* where the only communal activity is protection against outside influences. Obsessively, the neighborhood guards its borders – against chaotically expanding and unpredictable L.A., against attention from the media and especially against the disadvantaged Other. At all cost, Brentwood's residents try to secure what they have. The neighborhood, suppressing both its past and its future, is only interested in cementing the status quo of the present, something that takes its toll and is increasingly difficult to realize amidst L.A.'s metropolitan dynamic.

'Brentwood Notebook' is hardly a traditional portrait. It brings to the fore what in the representation of suburbia generally remains hidden. It calls attention not only to *what* it represents, but also to *what is needed* to do so. It is not very useful to ask whether Coupland's notebook provides an accurate representation of Brentwood, but it is essential to ask how, exactly, it represents. The article gives one the impression of being a report of a visit to the neighborhood, but it invokes much more than just on-the-spot observations. With the help of classical narratives about suburbia, the author depicts Brentwood as both a utopian and dystopian suburb. At various moments and in various ways its very existence is put in doubt, and the question is raised whether it – in its delimited space in its isolated present – is either a dream come true or a nightmare.

Much in Coupland's portrayal of Brentwood is turned upside down. He draws on archival materials, he uses ads and he quotes from newspapers, magazines, autobiographies, a novel and a social science study. All but hiding the diversity of his sources in a fluent or seemingly transparent narrative, the notebook approach remains visible throughout, including the amount of work that went into portraying just a single suburb. The 'finished' notebook cuts across genres: not strictly belonging to journalism, cultural geography or

literature, it borrows strategies from each of these domains. Various genre conventions are pitted against each other in playful ways. Certainly, this challenges readers' expectations and forces readers to remain active and attentive. While merely appearing to *describe* a suburban reality, the notebook simultaneously *argues* for a specific *interpretation* of this reality as well as *evokes* a specific world. If it is viewed as a report of a visit of a suburban neighborhood, it becomes clear that a common strategy of this genre – giving residents a voice of their own – is entirely ignored. In addition, it *argues*, seeks to convince, but not through systematic argument as found in studies from cultural geography or sociology. As literary work, finally, the notebook evokes an ambiguous, unsettling world. Yet, although this particular tension is found in novels on suburbia like John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1967), Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), Coupland's text has no story in which we get to know specific characters. Detachment undermines identification, just like fascination disrupts analysis and the author's involvement the suggestion of objectivity. As multifaceted representation of a specific suburb, Coupland's piece is a valuable contribution to the overall representation of suburbia. Perhaps only a confusing portrait like that of Brentwood can serve us as a reminder of both the lively presence *and* the immanent demise of the suburban dream at the end of the twentieth century.

Although the one-sided, negative representation of suburbia is certainly persistent, it is not unassailable. By paying attention to the spatial representation of time it becomes clear that familiar and even dominant images are subject to reinterpretation, and although the same images continue to recur, there are also competing and sometimes surprising representations of suburbia. The problem is not the suburban myth itself, but the thinking in terms of myth. The latter suggests a negative portrayal of the suburb that is too simple. It hides the crucial link between suburb and middle class from view and, furthermore, does not even prove to be effective. After all, this myth is still regularly invoked, notwithstanding the fifty years of criticism with which it has met.

In suburban studies the suburban myth is a mandatory hurdle, it seems. Critical reflection on suburban life and issues starts in this

very myth, even with those who oppose it. This may certainly contribute to a shared sense of professionalism or to a legitimizing of one's academic discipline vis-à-vis other disciplines and the outside world. Yet the price to be paid is high. Three risks should be mentioned in particular. Those who target the suburban myth eliminate a straw man at best; they run the risk of remaining blind to the actual variation of images in social science and humanities studies, as well as in literary stories; and they tend to be oblivious to opportunities for reflecting on the kind of social and cultural critique that is embedded in attacks on suburbia.

This study contends that, rather than starting from the suburban myth, we should devote attention to a complex system of divergent notions – linked to each other, forged together and contrasted – that are associated with suburbia. Thus space is generated for a discussion that may cover much more than the single issue of whether suburban life is accurately depicted or not. If the focus is on the suburb, then the middle class is at issue as well; if the focus is on the middle class, then consumption and do-it-yourself activities, initiative and anticipation, conservatism and nostalgia, mobility and ambition are also at issue. It is clear, moreover, that the images of place and time in suburbia's imagined geography are at stake in debates that are not just about arguments but also about views, opinions, emotions, and evaluations. At what point does uniformity turn into monotony, community sense into conformism, nostalgia into paralysis, peacefulness into apathy, autonomy into egotism, ambition into status anxiety, and privacy into isolation? Regardless of the question's formulation, the 'facts' do not answer it. On the contrary, depending on the answer, an array of 'facts' gets presented to us.

In this dissertation the suburban middle class is center-stage. Based on this research, various roads can be taken to further elucidate the various forms of social and cultural critique that are enwrapped in representations of suburbia. For example, by focusing more specifically on the middle class, issues of gender or ethnicity can be developed in more detail. Attention for basic concepts and grand narratives may prompt one to explore issues like progress, the liberation of the middle class, the democratization of comfortable living, and

the myth of the westward movement as one from past to future. These concerns are not only relevant when it comes to differences between the American east and west coasts, but also in light of the frequent comparison between suburbia in the new world and the various other concepts and forms of dwelling – country estates, garden cities, centers of suburban development, *Vinex* locations and polycentric Delta metropolis – in the old world.