Seeking Culture in a Cultural Void?
The Relationship between Suburbia and Popular Culture

[Culture] . . . seeks . . . to make the best that has been taught and known in the world current everywhere, to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely – nourished, and not bound by them.

(Mathew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869)

There is far too much of the suburban classes
Spiritually not geographically speaking. They're asses.
Menacing the greatness of our beloved England, they lie
Propagating their kind in an eightroomed style.

(Stevie Smith, 1949)

There are some concepts that lend themselves to watertight definition. We know that a recession is when an economy has experienced two quarters of negative growth and there is a clear formula for calculating gross domestic product (GDP) but by contrast we are not so clear on what exactly it is that unambiguously a 'suburb' may or may not be. Its derivative 'suburbia' also eludes easy definition notwithstanding that both are long established terms. The Compact Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the origins and usage of the word 'suburb' go way back at least to Chaucer. Many of us have some sort of inklings about what this peculiarly Anglo-Saxon/Anglophone/Anglo-American notion is but there is no common agreement on what constitutes it. In the absence of any definitive definition of what we mean by suburbia, the concept has frequently formed in the popular imagination through representations of it in popular culture. Suburban imagery has changed over time: a rash of 1970s British tv sitcoms depicted suburban home furnishings in brown or even 50

shades of beige centring on couples like *George and Mildred*, *Terry and June* or Gerry and Margot (*The Good Life*). Age old US depictions feature white picket fences and manicured lawns of outward perfection, for example *Desperate Housewives* (2005–12). This book considers suburbia as a sociocultural category and examines its production and reproduction through representations in popular culture: onscreen, on the pages of popular fiction and musically. The angle taken of cultural depictions departs from the more familiar focus of academic suburban studies which have more commonly been grounded in urban planning approaches or concerned with building design and density of houses per hectare. The cultural significance of suburbia it will be argued is of critical importance. After all both narratives and practices contribute to our understanding of the meaning of place and of broader socio-spatial categories such as 'city', 'country' and a third lying somewhere in between the two 'suburbs'. The book builds on the valiant few academic examples that have taken this approach which inevitably have become dated particularly given the unfolding of new ways in which to read popular culture in the Web2 era (Silverstone 1997; Spigel 2001a; Webster 2001; Bueka 2004). In some senses this book then sets out to determine whether there is a separate cultural category of 'suburban' that characterizes the media texts to be described.

The social sciences tend to consider topics of enquiry in problem-solving terms. Accordingly in the broad area of the sociology of place, considerations of suburbia have tended to be crowded out by the attention commanded by the city and work centring on the urban 'problem'. Yet the suburbs were conceived of as solutions to city ills where urban overcrowding and squalor were substituted with aspirational space. In considering popular culture the book raises key questions around both the public visibility of the suburbs which are paradoxically associated with the private realm and the agendas of those doing the portraying. Methodologically a textual approach is employed with analysis of novels, television programmes, films and popular music. These different mediums are each approached by separate chapters in order to examine to what extent suburban portrayals follow or subvert conventions of genre and how far they further our understandings of suburban life. Narrative structure and content will be twin considerations, after all popular culture can legitimate social practices and help us make sense of understandings of phenomena in selecting and presenting material to us with its often subtle unstated theoretical/ political/ideological frameworks. Suburban-set cultural products and figures will be discussed including hopefully some lesser-known candidates alongside the emblematic. Some of the examples discussed pride themselves in 'social

realism' – perhaps the ultimate being the reality television show, while in others suburban characters and situations appear as comic foils or light relief. The book aims to be comprehensive in coverage but makes no pretentions to be exhaustive. Suburbia is often portrayed as backdrop rather than subject of these cultural products (e.g. the films *Donnie Darko* or *Hope and Glory*).

Culture and representation

'Culture' too is not easily defined but since the 1869 version quoted at the top of this chapter the social sciences have undergone what has been described as a 'cultural turn' which one suspects Mathew Arnold would have approved of. Many have proffered differing explanations including Scott and Marshall (2005:132–3) who in their *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* define culture as 'all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted . . . a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society'. They elaborate that popular culture is 'more widespread and accessible to everyone' (ibid. 2005:504). At the same time it seems that both popular culture and suburbia have constantly needed justification in academic circles as subjects worthy of being taken seriously. Stuart Hall (1981) has powerfully argued that popular culture matters and called it a 'battleground', a potential counter-hegemonic site of resistance against a culture of the powerful. The devaluing of the study of popular culture can be seen in debates on 'dumbing down' that have been propagated both in the United Kingdom and United States in the past couple of decades (e.g. Medved 1992; Washburn and Thornton 1996; Scruton 1998). The accusation largely made here is that the pre-twentieth century ideals of the cultural experience as enriching and civilizing as described by Matthew Arnold above or Raymond Williams (1976:77) has been crushed under the weight of sensationalism, titillation and quite simply junk. The pros and cons of the subject as an area of academic scrutiny polarized between defenders and those claiming falling standards seem to have been a perennial topic for example in the trade journal of the UK academic the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (*THES*). Colin McCabe has argued that there is no agreed precise definition of popular culture telling the *THES* that 'Contemporary culture is effectively impossible to analyse, not least because it cuts across the humanities and social sciences in ways that make it a very resistant object to disciplines that were constituted at the end of the 19th century' (Davies 1995). Indeed what we could group under its umbrella has grown exponentially. Popular culture as a subject of study is

nonetheless popular with students; Davies (1995) lists among its remit 'not only popular entertainment such as *EastEnders*, Hollywood movies and rock music, but also shopping, cooking or the clothes people choose to wear'. The products and processes of popular culture continually change over time; once we might have put the pre-mass produced folk song or musical hall performance into this category; now such phenomena are at best consigned to the history books. Even at the start of this century the web had not reached the all-pervasive influence that it now has in our lives and daily interactions. Cheque books for example have been rendered obsolete by electronic banking and payment by plastic. The old word 'debt' has been replaced by 'credit' which fuels so much of our access to culture as we fill our homes with the spoils of capitalism with consumer durables and lifestyle aids made in China.

What though of representation? Gramsci's concept of hegemony is key to the role of popular culture in constructing versions of suburbia embodying national values as this process is one where no one is forced into anything but consensus instead prevails in the preservation of the status quo. A further staple of many introductory media and communications textbooks is the 'hypodermic syringe' view of the media's function, as propagated by the Frankfurt School of cultural theorists and social scientists in interwar Germany who were greatly influenced by the rise of Hitler and his mastery of the art of propaganda. This broad position saw the mass media literally injecting beliefs, ideas and values into a passive public of cultural dupes. This theory of popular culture as narcotic/anasthesia has been much criticized since its appearance which for its underestimation of the public. Far from being inert, empty vessels with no choice but to be influenced by the messages of popular culture, today's media literate consumers are instead active audiences who are capable of interpreting popular cultural meanings for themselves whether they realize it or not, even if the act of consumption of, for example the act of watching television may be relatively passive in itself, for example having the television on as 'background' to other activities which might including surfing the web.

David Morley has claimed (1998:491) 'In societies such as ours, where increasing numbers of people are quite alienated from the processes of formal politics on which "serious television" focuses, it would be politically suicidal to fail to take seriously the field of popular culture in which people do find their attachments.' The ubiquity of popular cultural forms means that unthinkingly we are almost all constantly processing and interacting with multiple forms of media and popular cultural products which are embedded into our everyday social practices and increasingly complex lives. Counter-hegemonic processes

can include using new and social media to answer back. Representations on their own are never complete; they are part of a dialogue with their audience – particularly with internet forums, blogging and tweeting. They reflect ongoing social changes and can in turn inform suburban social perceptions and practices as well as holding a mirror up to them. Images of suburbia in popular culture will be subjectively interpreted differently by different audiences in various ways. Stereotyping is another trait that the observer of popular culture must be aware of (Perkins 1979). This practice often has much in common with 'othering' and in the portrayal of ethnic minorities can render populations as subordinate with simplification and cultural shorthand implying the superiority of 'us' (the majority or mainstream) against 'them' (the other). In communicating social stereotypes popular culture can reinforce dominant discourses but popular culture also has the power to upset received wisdom and alter perceptions as new stereotypes replace the old.

Media manipulation was a notable line taken by the Frankfurt School. Other factors that underpin our current understandings of how both popular culture operates and suburbia has developed were unforeseen by them. Globalization – the process whereby individuals, groups and nations become increasingly interdependent – is now taken as a given. Advocates point out how it diffuses cultural products allowing its consumers to act at a distance in enabling access to them but the resultant heterogeneity of culture could be criticized following Frankfurt logic as illusory: the so-called choice it could be argued is a sham with only different offerings available from within homogeneous mass culture. A pessimistic reading of globalization sees it as eroding the authenticity of 'local' cultures and instead substituting an Americanized 'global' mush which is unreflexive and not related to any real individualization. A sceptical view might see local identities and regionalization as being under threat of being steamrollered by globalization. Converse views are spelt out by David Held et al. (1999) who identify 'hyperglobalizers' as keenest on the phenomenon as opposed to 'sceptics', with 'transformationalists' occupying a third space. He argues that the power of national governments is diminishing as they are unable to control the effects of market processes or environmental threats from outside their borders leading to a loss of faith in national governments among individuals. The consequence is that both nation-states and relations between them are transforming as a result of improved communications, reflexivity and multiculturalism to name but three. These same observations could apply to suburbia at large which has outgrown stereotypical ideas of its remit as unchanging and steeped in tradition.

The suburban context

The rejoinder to the question 'why study culture?' given the intersection of topics under consideration in this book must be 'why study suburbia?' The latter has not historically been an abiding preoccupation of the social sciences. Compared to the copious body of work that constitutes 'urban sociology' looking at disorder and divisions, the suburbs are relatively under-researched for the reason that they are considered to be devoid of problems and instead fairly peaceable and self-sufficient. The intersection of 'suburbia' and 'popular culture' is ever-more pertinent given that the implication one takes away from many forays into suburban territory from the commentariat is that suburbia is something of a cultural void or desert. There is a case to be made for the very fact that suburbs are seen as unremarkable and conformist allowing artistic endeavour to flourish there (MacDonald 2010). The London listings guide *Time Out* magazine in a 2006 feature mused 'Soulless patches of urban ennui or hotbeds of creativity?' neatly summarizing the two sides of this argument.[1] In the same article the poet Tobias Hill declared 'On the whole the suburban dream is unfulfilled. The dystopian emptiness of suburban streets, young people hanging out at bus stops and in train stations, desperate just for a glimpse of strangers, just to collide with anything or anyone.' Yet nonetheless there are multiple suburbias which in the post-war era between them have proved to be fertile ground for fictitious portrayals and more recently reality television. Suburbia then despite being something that is often associated with defensible space and the realm of the private becomes conversely the stuff of spectacle in its onscreen representations, consumed in multiple ways: digitally as downloads or accessed on mobile phones or other handheld devices as well as more established modes such as in book-form in novels or seeping out of speakers and headphones in its sonic and aural representations. There is, as will be seen in the chapters of this book, a powerful suburban iconography served up through popular culture: picket fences, picture windows, sunshine gates, semi-detached dwellings topped off by green lawns and well-kept hedges. These symbolic landscapes say much about idealized, dominant values fed to us of suburban cultures.

Suburbia is something that we have an intrinsic feel for yet exactly what passes for it seems to have varied from place to place and time to time: specific locales that are considered as suburbs have changed over time with suburban expansion. Dines (2009:31) remarks 'It is unsurprising that people so often deny they live in a suburb even when the area in which they reside confirm to every planner's definition of one.' The word 'suburban' seems to be a pejorative one. It is in some ways suburbia is metaphorical rather than a literal or geographic term, a mindset as opposed to a term of strict definition. One of the narrow

features of suburbia that typically urbanites have fled from is whiteness/cultural backwardness. Defining what constitutes a suburb is almost made easier by reversing the question and looking at what it is not. The suburbs have a number of features that sharply contrast with those of the inner city. Suburbia has always evoked the idea of safety and security whereas the inner city has been equated with risk and danger. Suburbs are predominantly residential districts associated with population sprawl to accommodate the burgeoning workforce of the city. The expression 'bright lights, big city' conjures up a pulsating, throbbing buzzy space, ideally suited to the young, free and single whereas suburbia is associated with quiet sleepiness and middle aged familial suffocation. Inner cities are old and sometimes crumbling while suburbia is comparatively new having experienced its most rapid growth occurring in the interwar years in the United Kingdom, or post-war years in the United States. In short the suburb is of the city but positioned at its periphery rather than at its core.

Classic suburbia, as understood in this book, is curiously almost an exclusively Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, the basic tenets of its prescription also apply to Canada, New Zealand and Australia as well as the United Kingdom and United States. MacDonald (2010:30–1) explains, 'The idea of moving up the social hierarchy and out if the city was a distinct process in the English speaking world, making those suburbs a privileged socio-economic belt.' Urban socio-spatial relations are often the reverse of this situation in continental Europe: in France

Table 1.1 Some key events in suburban development

	United Kingdom	United States
Victorian advent of modern suburb	Carriage class suburbia built for well to do, alongside railway cottages, for example the three termini of London Underground's District Line: Wimbledon, Richmond and Ealing.	Notion of suburbia embodying the American dream takes root. 1853: Llewellyn Park prototypical gated residential community founded in New Jersey.
1900s–1920s	Popularization of mortgages; Stanley Baldwin (Conservative Prime Minister three times between 1923 and 1937) promoted suburban pastoral values tapping into this vital votebank.	Shift in suburban developments as the car-owning lifestyle becomes central to them and their character is less planned around public transport.
1930s	J. B. Priestly on three phases of England (1934); 4 million houses built in interwar years.	Great Depression 1934: Federal Housing Administration established.

(Continued)

Table 1.1 Continued

	United Kingdom	United States
1940s–landscape in transition	War-time bombing damages some of urban landscape, for example Coventry Cathedral. Anderson shelters installed in a nation's suburban back-gardens.	1944: GI Bill (Serviceman's Readjustment Act) aimed at increasing supply of Federal Housing Authority guaranteed property. 1947: First Levittown opens at Long Island, New York.
1950s–post-war optimism	Austerity gives way to boom years as fruits of consumer capitalism popularized. Britain's aristocrat Prime Minister Harold Macmillan declares during 1959 election campaign 'you've never had it so good'.	Critiques of suburbia in influential sociological studies including Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*, Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man* and Mumford (1961) decry suburban conformity/ homogeneity.
1960s	Swinging London. Hippie and counterculture movement, student sit-ins on higher education campuses and in suburban art-schools.	Home ownership rocketed from 40% of the population at the start of the Second World War to 60% by 1960. From 1945 to 1960 gross national product grew by 250%, particularly under President Eisenhower. Betty Friedan's second-wave feminism.
1970s	World economic crisis. Right to Buy policy introduced by Margaret Thatcher's governments (1979–90) triggering the sale into private hands of former suburban council houses.	1973 oil crisis, Watergate and aftermath of failed Vietnam war often seen as contributing to weakening in authority of American way of life.
1980s	Barrat homes, private new build estates as council house building slows. Retro developments such as Prince Charles' Poundbury village.	Reagan-omics, neo-conservative ideology promoting individual values triumphs.
1990s and on	Exurbia and rise of retail parks and out-of-town shopping. Archetypally suburban Prime Minister John Major followed by Middle England-loving Tony Blair Collapse of retail chain-stores in shift to online transactions and out of town shopping changing landscape of suburban high street..	Strip mall suburbia as less well-defined city centres, United States as world power in decline both in terms of political influence and as tiger economies of China begin to challenge it in manufacturing output.

peripheral districts at the edge of cities are more frequently associated with crime, unemployment and immigration than British or American suburban tranquillity to the point that many English language chroniclers of the country leave the word 'banlieue' (literally 'suburb') untranslated as seen in the gritty film *La Haine* (1995). Here attititudinal factors make it at odds with the dullsville/pleasantville British or American suburb. Across the Anglo American divide there are distinct shared recognizably suburban traits however there are importantly differences of scale and history. Table 1.1 attempts to capture these. While the words of Jackson (1985:188) writing in US context that 'No other invention has altered the urban form more than the internal combustion engine' applies on both sides of the Atlantic, it remains the case that car culture is more pronounced in North American and Australasian cases. UK cities and their corresponding suburbs were often planned around public transport and their infrastructure survives and is constantly being updated. Canadian band Arcade Fire's celebrated 2010 album *The Suburbs* reminisces on the title track about a key rite of passage associated with a suburban upbringing:

> In the suburbs/ I, I learned to drive/
> And you told me/ I'd never survive
> Grab your mother's keys, we're leaving.

For a teenager growing up in London with its comprehensive transport network a driving licence would not necessarily be a requirement of suburban adolescence.

To some extent suburbia captures stereotypical features of what we take as characteristically national traits in the United Kingdom and United States. For Dines (2009:13), 'houses speculatively built after the Second World War, unfenced and reminiscent in their styling of early ranch homesteads, evoke the wilderness of the American frontier . . . the desire for freedom and opportunity that residents share with the early pioneers of the west'. Complicating any satisfactory definitive comprehensive list of overarching British features is the fact that the United Kingdom includes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as the more obvious component of England. Most attempts at conceptions of 'British' values have almost always meant white 'English' ones. Parekh (2000:16) elaborates: 'these range from the humble cuppa to the grandeur of monarchy and parliament'. Prime Minister John Major in a paraphrase of George Orwell referred to 'invincible green suburbs' in his characteristics. Parekh (2000) reminds us that a distinct attempt was made to fuse this ill-defined notion of Britishness revolving around nostalgia and commemoration with elements of multiculturalism and modernity in the 'cool Britannnia' project of early Blairism.

British suburban house design has espoused the twin traits of (i) derivative (traditional brick-built construction and touches such as, neo-baronial turrets, stained glass details in windows and the whole style of Mock Tudor) and (ii) futurism (art deco modernist semis). Suburban houses have had to move with the times. Combined retrospection with cutting edge design meant that by the 1930s houses were being built to house labour saving devices of consumer capitalism and with garages to accommodate car-owning families. For Gardner (2003) their magnetic pull to the Americans is understandable:

> Lower crime rates, cleaner air, homogeneous settings, home ownership, and good schools have drawn millions of Americans to this middle landscape. In the arts, however, cities continue dominate their suburban neighbors. The arts were never a part of the lure of suburbia, so, as C.G. Vasiliadis points out, 'the relative absence of culture in suburbia is one of the major reasons for its stereotyped image of blandness'.

Although the suburb was conceived of as a refuge away from the negative aspects of the city, later cultural depictions of suburbia often portray it as a place to escape *from*. Ernest Hemingway is said to have commented that Oak Park, the middle-class Protestant Chicago suburb he was raised in, consisted of 'wide lawns and narrow minds' (Lynn 1995). Continually in the memoir suburbia is seen as a site that authors left behind. The now discontinued British ITV 'quality' arts documentary series the *South Bank Show* for example in its programmes on subjects as wide-ranging as film director David Lean, author Hanif Kureishi and the band Blur took their subjects (in the third case singer Damon Albarn) back to their suburban childhoods, literally in the latter two cases of Bromley and Colchester, Essex and in interview with Lean who grew up in Croydon. The implication was that these now-cultural-sophisticates could not wait to escape, this is heard in the narration of Melvyn Bragg with Lean and pictured with Kureishi and Albarn whose journeys back to their childhoods by train have a 'Return of the Native' quality about them. Channel 4 in 2010 screened a series *The House that Made Me* in which over four programmes celebrities were confronted with recreated interiors of their childhood homes in the exact locations: one per week. The Channel 4 website explains 'Famous figures take an emotional trip back to meticulous recreations of the homes they were brought up in, exploring how their past shaped who they are today.'[2] In the show physical recreations of interior contexts of the respective celebrity's childhood homes made it the highly graphic televisual equivalent of the documentary series *The House I Grew Up In* from Radio 4 (2007–11). In the case of comedian Michael Barrymore and the

singer Jamelia this meant a narrative of how they had 'made good' after growing up on council estates in the 1960s and 1990s respectively. With comedy actor Sanjeev Bhaskar and singer Boy George the programme in each case focused on how they had escaped the suffocating clutches of their suburban origins (Heston in the west London Borough of Hounslow and Eltham in South East London respectively). Both expressed surprise at social change in their hometowns since the 1970s the period in which the reconstruction was set – although as Peter Hall (2007) has pointed out the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1994 long after George O'Dowd left means that Eltham is now in the minds of the general public forever associated with this event. The inclusion of Kureishi (born of an Indian father and English mother) and Bhaskar (a second-generation Hindu Indian) as archetypes of suburbia are testimony to its social transformation, although in the interviews during these programmes when they were taken back to these roots, both pointed out how when they were growing up Bromley and Heston were predominantly white.

This disavowal of suburbia tendency is continued in the printed page as suburb has often framed autobiography. Dartford for example is ever present in the early chapters of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards's (2010) book *Life* as are Ealing and Richmond where the band played early gigs. The film director John Boorman (2003) named his effort *Adventures of a Suburban Boy* which begins with his experiences as a schoolboy in Sutton, South London, before the outbreak of the Second World War formed the basis of his film *Hope and Glory* (1987). Its parochial child-eyed innocence at unfolding events from an unthreatening semi is a stark contrast from some of his other directorial examples which include the dystopian nightmare of *Exorcist II* (1977) and the Burma-set *Beyond Rangoon* (1995). J. G. Ballard named his autobiography *Miracles of Life: An Autobiography Shanghai to Shepperton*. The writer Tim Lott's book *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1996) in its 2009 reissue as a Penguin classic gained the subtitle 'One family and the end of English Suburbia'. The publisher's website promises an elegy to 'the pebble-dashed home of his childhood and the rapidly changing landscape of post-war suburban England. It is a story of grief, loss and dislocation, yet also of the power of memory and the bonds of family love.'[3] The suburb that he describes is Southall, West London, home of light industry and scene of Lott's youth which experienced waves of migration from the Irish, the Carribeans and best known Sikh Punjabis. For his brother and him 'We bolted . . . Southall was a dump . . . predictable, safe, conservative, limited in scale and possibility' (Lott 1996:29). In later years, Lotts's mother took her own life naming the downhill trajectory of the area in her suicide note. The book has been the subject of academic controversy

provoking a response article from Brah (1999) who rejected the book as a coded racism; something Lott has always denied. Indeed Southall is far from predictable. Although Southall railway station's sign helpfully announces the destination in Punjabi as well as English, among the area's newest inhabitants are Somalis who have their own stretch of cafes on South Road and mosque just off it. The retro-styled jacket designs of Griff Rhys Jones *Semi Detached* (2006) and Andrew Collins' *Where Did it All Go Right?* (2004) also suggest youthful surrounds of suburban security although these two examples are more nostalgia-tinged than Lott's invective. In all of these examples there is a sense though that the authors eventually 'outgrew' the spaces inhabited by their childhood selves, as with the *South Bank Show* portrait of the artist shows mentioned above (apart from Boorman and Richards fleeing through). Higher education can be another motor of social change with relocation to study away from suburbia. The effect of the trebling of university fees, a policy due to be introduced by the UK government may cut off this exposure to city living that the tertiary sector used to bring suburban youth.

Suburbia and shifting national norms

The building of improved public transport routes and arterial road networks (ribbon development in the United Kingdom, highways in United States) connecting what was often former farmland to the city made expanding populations in the suburbs feasible. The distinction of suburb versus inner city positing salubriousness and space on one side with urban decay and built-up environment on the other is as I have argued elsewhere (Huq 2007, 2008a,b, 2013) (and as the examples to follow will illustrate) hopelessly outdated. Another way of thinking about the city is of the 'sprawling metropolis' but it is precisely this sprawl which the suburbs are defined by. While the city is a competitive thrusting place where the machismo bravado of the male breadwinner thrives the suburb is more a domain of domesticity where the wife is left behind with their offspring. This dynamic can be seen in numerous portrayals: the classic (and remade) *Stepford Wives*, *Desperate Housewives* through to *Mad Men*. Yet the coming of the dual-earner household and increasingly common same sex coupledom single-parent family or even single-person household have changed these old stereotypes. Gender politics are explored further in Chapter 6 but the issue needs flagging up here at the start as gender is a running theme throughout all of this book's content.

Of course culture has a long history in suburbia but in forms that urban elitists may not approve of: as a physical presence public examples exist in high street department stores, shopping centres, bingo halls and cinemas; even if the fortunes of some of these attractions has waned in recent years to be replaced by the multiplex or retail park positioned more out of town. In the United Kingdom, well-known high street chains like Woolworths have disappeared, olde English pubs have become Polski Sleps (Polish delicatessans) or even Tesco supermarkets. Given that suburbs have been so associated with a consumerism it is entirely fitting that other aspects of suburban popular culture have become more privatized than ever: the home cinema system is an update of the age-old cultural pursuit of the television set. The age-old saying dictates that an Englishman's home is his castle: both the home itself and car-culture, a by-product of being houseproud spawn their own rituals, for example weekend gardening, DIY or washing the car on a Sunday. Yet suburbia has transformed, as has society at large. It could arguably be described in keeping with national culture as being less privatized and more than ever a product of modernity and consumer capitalism. Blake Morrison (2012) has claimed: 'The British invariably perceive the countryside as being under threat, whether from bombs, developers, tourism, climate change or the passage of time. This makes our literature nostalgic – a land of lost content.' In the face of the release of the UK 2011 Census Results detailing how more mixed-race, foreign-born and less god-fearing and married the United Kingdom had become, right-wing commentators alleged that Britishness itself was threatened, yet this has always been an amalgam constantly undergoing transition even if it rests on (declining) tradition.

The suburbs are in many ways ordinary: according to estimates some 80 per cent of Britons live in them (Barker 2009). America meanwhile is often described as 'the world's most suburbanised country' (Jack 2008). It gave us mall culture for example that is still unfolding in UK developments like the chain of Westfield centres. Suburbia importantly embodies aspiration in both the United Kingdom and United States. The suburbs have tended not to be a subject of sociological concern in the same way as the urban question has preoccupied because it has tended to be seen as relatively unproblematic and even self-sufficient. Sociology has frequently tended to engage in a quest for social problems to be approached in problem-solving terms hence the fascination with the urban seen as synonymous with danger and deviance. Indeed the implication has repeatedly been said that the inner city was hollowed out with de-population to the suburbs. An associated term is that of 'white flight' (Frey 1977; Avila 2006) and the associated notion that those who could (usually white) go out in search

of a better quality of life away from the squalor of the inner city. The suburbs were invested in with much hope presenting an optimistic vision of lifestyle removed from the frenetic pace of metropolitan existence. The exodus from the city positioned the suburb as refuge as well as imbued with optimism. Raynor (1969:21) talks of 'the great migration . . . towards the suburbs and residential towns by the middle class, who have been searching not only for better physical surroundings but also a more exclusive and superior social environment by which they could distinguish themselves from people in the manual classes'. The suburb then despite being patronizingly sneered at by intelligentsia and treated with condescension is a place of aspiration and having 'made it'. Thompson (1982:16) describes the traditional model 'new suburbanites . . . desert[ing] the old town centres, escaping from increasing dirt, noise, stench, and disease, dissatisfied with the social confusion of mixed residential areas and with the inconvenience of traditional town houses for the style of life they wanted to pursue'. In this sense suburbs were initially a site of choice as opposed to the constraint of the city. Correspondingly depictions of suburbia have captured the hopes and made statements about issues of their times; these can be the times they were written in as well as the era they are set if they are looking back, for example homosexuality was beneath the radar of mainstream popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s but the film *Far from Heaven* (2002) and series *Mad Men* (2007–present) both designed for modern audiences incorporate this into their narrative. *Far from Heaven* (2002) and *Safe* (1995) both directed by Todd Haynes include Julianne Moore as the American suburban housewife as does the multi-temporal *The Hours* (2002). Some variation is in *A Single Man* (2002) where she is plays an English divorcee living in LA and in *The Kids Are Alright* (2010) depicting a lesbian couple (making it unclear exactly who is the 'wife') and their family situated firmly in suburbia where they instil middle-class values into their children including sending thank you notes for presents received. This final example shows the variety of family forms in post-millennial times as the only one of these films set in the present.

In the United Kingdom suburban variants include council house suburbia: Becontree in Dagenham, on the East London Essex border or Burnage in Manchester are examples. Conversely in the United States, a country where state provision is treated with suspicion (witnessed recently in the ferocious opposition mounted against Obama's healthcare plans which by British standards are restrained) the American dream translated easily into suburban self-reliance. US suburban layouts are generally more spacious than their British counterparts of semi-detached and terraced homes systematically laid out on a grid-plan

system with enclosed front and back gardens. There are touches of neo-baronial grandeur in the garrison effect of the heavy front door or turreted and stained glass stylings but the average square footage of the suburban semi is comparatively modest, certainly in comparison to the detached affair we see in the film version of Richard Yates' 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* pointed out by the estate agent, played by Kathy Bates as a 'sweet little house'. The yellow-coloured blue collar cartoon family of the Simpsons of Springfield too inhabit a home on its own plot despite Homer's everyman status. Both of these houses from two very different portrayals of suburbia show square footage that would be considered fairly vast compared to that occupied by the average British suburban home. As an *Economist* (18 December 2010) feature on the joys of baking claimed with commendable succinctness 'Britons yearn for tradition, but these days live busy, rather atomised lives. . . . [in] . . . their tiny, expensive homes'.

The central importance of public transport as key stimulus to the advent of suburbia can be seen in the classic fiction since seen as archetypal suburban novel *Diary of a Nobody*, which began as columns in the satirical magazine *Punch*. Here key character Charles Pooter travels from his home comforts in Holloway to 'the city' home of his workplace by bus and conveys commuter grumblings to the reader. The Cheap Trains Act of 1883 heralded a dramatic rise in the number of affordable suburban rail services linking outlying districts to London's city centre first by rail and then by underground. The same pattern can be seen in the US railroad. In early series of the television drama *Mad Men* for example (2007–present) the central character Don Draper makes the daily journey to Ossining Metro-North (an express station), the last stop on the line on his commute home on the Hudson Line from Madison Avenue in New York. There is a clear demarcation between city/work and home/family. Ossining was also home to John Cheever an extensive early chronicler of suburbia in novels such as his Wapshot series (Bueka 2004) and short stories such as 1964's *the Swimmer* which became a film starring Burt Lancaster. The latter is centred on the suburban pool which is a rarity in British houses but can be seen in various US representations from *The Graduate* to the very first episode of *Desperate Housewives*. Later UK suburbs/new towns and US examples were more reliant on car culture offering utopian possibilities positioned near a convenient junction of the freeway or orbital ring road. This meant for less social mixing in the jostle for rush hour space documented by the fictitious Mr Pooter and more privatized space between inhabitants. Indeed motorized transport is a prerequisite for visiting some of the more recent variants of suburban developments on the physical landscape, for example the state-of-the art air-conditioned

multi-screen cinema and leisure complex in place of the old suburban picture palace or the out of town superstore and retail park in place of the hollowed out high street and its sometimes worse-for-wear 'department store'. Some of these nouveau quasi-suburban creations combine elements of all of these, for example Manchester's Trafford Centre with attractions including the high-end department store Selfridges and multiplex located at the intersection of major motorway junctions making it accessible to most of the north of England, the midlands and also Wales. These developments could legitimately be described as 'exurban', that is in areas beyond the original suburbs. They constitute what Garreau (1991) calls 'edge city' as they are always located by arterial fast roads and home to plate glass office space, retail parks and leisure complexes.

Rising living standards are commonly associated with the advent of suburbia. For this reason it has also often seen as a shallow by-product of capitalism as can be seen for example in the scathing early criticisms of commentators such as Whyte or Mumford. Paul Barker (2009) has stressed the importance of easily available mortgages to the rise of UK home ownership. Via the character George Bowling in the novel *Coming Up for Air*, which is discussed in Chapter 2, George Orwell (1939:14) has written 'Nine-tenths of the people in Ellesmere Road are under the impression that they own their houses', a falsehood that they have accepted when they are in reality at the mercy of the money-lenders. In the United States the GI Bill paved the way for an expansion of suburban housing and people who had been raised in rural Hicksville or city tenements to the new suburban frontier. Federal funds helped particularly under President Eisenhower who instituted the network of freeways that linked these suburbs to cities. Quoting figures from the US Federal Reserve which show a rise of car registrations by 67 per cent from the period 1948 to 1959 and increase from 20 million suburban residents to 55 million in the 20 years from 1940 to 1960, Winters (2008) remarks: 'The postwar suburban household was home to Formica counters, Tupperware containers, and plastic Hula-Hoops. Once-exotic materials moved from the laboratory to the store shelves with amazing speed. Indeed, the 1950s saw an explosion of all manner of former luxuries that became mass consumer items.' Further figures he quotes from the Federal Reserve capture the wider industrial effect of this burgeoning market in showing US industrial production of consumer goods increasing steeply by 67 per cent from 1948 to 1959. Certainly consumerism was another culture that shaped the creation of suburbia, particularly in its post-war expansion era. The US writer Scott Donaldson (1969:73) wrote: 'Steadily the suburbanite fills every inch of available space with the "latest" in furnishings

and equipment, and the overall impression is one of cramped clutter.' Indeed this pressure to constantly 'keep up with the Jones" is continually seen in films picturing suburbia, sometimes with humour, poking fun at this most suburban of traits. In the time-travel film *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) when the main eponymous character rewinds back to 1960, her father buys an Edsel, the car that famously flopped on the American motor market and the rest of the family cannot work out why Peggy Sue falls about laughing remarking that her father 'was always doing crazy stuff'.

In latter decades inner-city gentrification has been a notable socio-economic and cultural fact that has doubtless led to shifting perceptions of what the form and function of the suburb is and contributed to a mismatch between what suburbia was meant to be and what it has become. This has been witnessed at its most intense in London in, for example Islington and Clapham but also in other cities such as Manchester's northern quarter with its warehouse conversions making real estate in the spaces of industrial decline. Once those who had the means to 'get out' of the inner city did, but post-gentrification the inner city has become both desirable and financially unobtainable to many of those who now live in the suburbs resigned to the fact that where they are is 'the next best thing'. The popularity of the gentrifying movement back towards the city from the 1980s onwards represents something of a suburban backlash often practiced by those who had grown up in suburbia and come to value the advantages of the inner city in the interwar and post-war years as a reaction to what they saw as bland placidity. The two processes are inter-linked. Popular wisdom dictates that suburbanization occurred as the city expanded outwards to satiate the demand of speculative builders, homeowners, local authorities (and indeed social housing tenants) seeking a better way of life in the interwar and post-war years. Gentrification happened when the potential of housing that had been left behind (which had often fallen into disrepair) was realized by a city-working population who valued the mixed environment of the inner ring of residential districts offering a shorter commute to city central work and leisure facilities. Under Thatcherism such people were termed yuppies (variously taken to connote 'young upwardly mobile professionals' and 'young urban professionals'). Gentrification is in some ways the flip-side of suburbanization with its racially coded undertones. In suburbanization city populations abandoned the inner city to undesirables (i.e. immigrants) instead seeking contained territories of respectability/safety: in sum bequeathing a state of affairs that Avila (2006) after George Clinton calls 'chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs'. Gentrification placed their descendants back among an environment of at-worst post-industrial danger

or at best unpredictability. Many of those now inhabiting the suburbs have no historic roots in inner cities that the stereotyped suburbanite had fled from for reasons of squalor. Some would dearly love to be in districts closer to the city's core but cannot due to being priced out. There is always a ripple effect around what is desirable; thus, Acton for some becomes an affordable alternative to Shepherds Bush in West London or Northenden the next best thing to Didsbury in South Manchester as property prices rise.

By the twentieth century suburbia was a part of the problem 'state of the nation' debates. In *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford (1961/91) described lifeless suburbs as shrines to uniformity, inflexibility and mass production. William F. Whyte (1956/2002) in *The Organization Man* fused elements of business studies and sociology in dissecting cultures of employment and middle management. People's solidarity with each other, it was claimed, had been crushed by their loyalty to corporations – in their adherence to corporations at work and consumerism at home, which was the efficient dormitory suburb. These allegations of suburbia as breeding conformity along David Riesman's (1950/2001) book *The Lonely Crowd* followed up by an essay entitled 'The Suburban Sadness' (1958) are now American classics still frequently cited today but this tendency has UK equivalents. In *English Journey*, an account of travels along the length and breadth of the country predating Orwell's (1937) better known and more political *Road to Wigan Pier*, J. B. Priestly (1934) concluded by drawing a distinction between (i) old England of minsters and manor houses where everyone knew their place, (ii) nineteenth-century industrial England and the most repellent of all and (iii) 'the third England', which is essentially the suburban. This is described as 'the new post-war England, belonging far more to the age itself than to this particular island. America . . . was its real birthplace. This is the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons' (Priestly 1934:401). Difference is a marker of contemporary suburbs. In an age where wireless broadband is a must in any suburban home, lottery scratchcards are more common in suburban detritus than cigarette cards and Woolworths has long disappeared from the suburban high street due to recession; the description sounds quaint but it says much about the whole 'condition of England' debate, suburban culture and Americanization which today must be broadened out to address globalization in a wider sense.

Structure and omissions: Popular culture missing in action

Suburbia can be conceptualized in a number of different ways but this book has chosen popular culture centring in on cinema, television, pop music and the novel as its focus. It is not intended to be a political critique in the same way as early writers such as Whyte (1956/2002) or Mumford (1961/91) – although I have attempted that elsewhere (Huq 2013). By choosing this cultural framing approach inevitably other considerations and methods are neglected. The chapters that follow do not systematically examine stage-plays, poetry or memoir/autobiography which all have their own sub-genres of sometimes overlapping suburban-themed examples. Over the years for example we have also gained an understanding of the potential pitfalls and advantages of suburban living from advertising – slots between the television programmes or radio programmes or films at the cinema we watch or the print ads that break up press articles. Particularly memorable running British suburban sagas have been the 30-second-long mini-dramas of the Oxo family advertising stock cubes or British Telecom's Beattie (BT), a Jewish grandmother who prided herself on being 'suburban' with an outer-London phone code unlike her 'inner city' friend as shown in when two dialling prefixes were introduced for the capital in 1990 to replace the old 01 code. Space and time limitations do not allow a systematic examination in any great detail in this book however.[4] Sport is similarly neglected although following, or playing for, clubs and teams are part of the cultures of suburbia.

 The suburban interior has been reproduced in numerous theatrical productions from classical drama to contemporary dramatic works. Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play of middle-class mores *A Doll's House*, originally set in small town Norway, is in present day stagings often situated in suburban context in, for example in recent years in Connecticut and suburban Scandinava as in a US and UK 2010 and 2012 production respectively.[5] At the time of writing a film version was in production in suburban Cincinnati. The play with its theme of a wife and her unhappiness despite outwardly having a prefect life was cited by Betty Friedan in her best-selling treatise *The Feminine Mystique*, a work of second-wave feminism (i.e. from the second half of the twentieth century) returned to in Chapter 6. Friedan's book was released in 1963, the year of Kennedy's assassination, arguably a key event in the US psyche that began to puncture the mythology of the American dream. Dashed suburban hopes have been a running theme that persist. When Lisa D'Amour's *Detroit* was first staged at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre one review remarked of its setting that it 'wouldn't have to be Detroit, it could be outside almost any urban city in the U.S . . . older, with smaller houses built about 40 or 50 years ago

during a time of American Optimism . . . By 2010, when the play takes place, the original houses are starting to fall apart along with the lives and dreams of its mostly middle-class residents' (Brewer 2010). During its National Theatre run in London the play about two sets of married couples was accompanied by publicity claiming: 'The dial is set to suburban dysfunction and spiritual blight in this wry, raucous, searching comedy.' *The Daily Telegraph* (Spencer 2012) review referenced UK suburban playwrights in commenting: 'The play often seems like an American take on Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* and the darker comedies of Alan Ayckbourn in its comic depiction of fraught lives spinning out of control.' The play, a dark comedy, showed the suburbs in recessionary America with anxiety behind the superficial pleasantries of inviting the neighbours to a barbecue. In the Chicago-set Clybourne Park by Bruce Norris (also 2010) a black family moves to a white suburb in 1959 which becomes multi-ethnic then gentrified by whites by 2009.

Alan Acykbourn himself has repeatedly revisited social mores in the English suburbs in stage offerings such as *Absurd Person Singular* (1972), *How the Other Half Loves* (1969) and *The Norman Conquests* (1973). A review of the festive play *Season's Greetings* (Letts 2009) comments that Alan Ayckbourn 'has an ear for failure, for suburbia's silent grieving . . . This show will give you many Christmas laughs but will also make you look afresh at the outer suburbs and ponder the darkness amid the twinkling lights'. Ayckbourn himself has said of suburbia 'It's not what it seems, on the surface one thing but beneath the surface another thing. In the suburbs there is a very strict code, rules . . . eventually they drive you completely barmy.'[6] A BBC press release on the radio broadcast of his *Norman Conquesst* trilogy has called Ayckbourn 'Chekhov of the Suburbs' (BBC 2009a), although this epithet has also been applied to novelist John Cheever (Collins 1982). Mike Leigh's work is discussed in Chapter 4 in his incarnation as a film director but he began as a dramatist. Perhaps the best-known example of British suburban drama through its one-off BBC television play is his *Abigail's Party* which originally began life as a stage production. This suburban satire has become so iconic that BBC4 has staged an *Abigail's Party* theme night of nostalgia inflected programmes in October 2007 on its thirtieth anniversary revolving around the play as centrepiece and newly made 'making-of' documentary *All about Abigail's Party*. The storyline is about a doomed suburban soiree with a fatal finish. Again discomfort and repression ooze through the script with the furnishings and costumes making this very much a period piece (Raphael 2007).

Betjeman's poetry and in particular his references to Metroland and the Berkshire town of Slough which he only saw as fit for human habitation if it were bombed are also well known. As a popular cultural figure his 1970s

BBC television series helped bring him to prominence as a household name. He will not receive sustained analysis in this volume but it is worth drawing attention to him at this point. Stevie Smith quoted at the top of this chapter was another portrayer of suburban satire in novels and drawings but her best-known work was poetry. Both academic and non-academic commentary on her life and work always remarks on how after being born in Hull she lived in the North London suburb Palmers Green (Bluemel 2003; Light 2004) until her death as a spinster, having been a one-time secretary at the BBC *en route*. These experiences shaped her lifeworld: the poem quoted at the start of this chapter satirizes the long-running anti-suburban prejudice among British intellectuals practiced among others by poets W. H. Auden, E. M. Waugh and novelist Graham Greene (Carey 1992; Gardiner 2010). In 2005 the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, unveiled an English Heritage blue plaque to Smith at 1 Avondale Road London N13, an unremarkable redbrick slice of Edwardian terrace by any other indicator but made remarkable by officialdom fêting its most famous occupant. Others who have documented the suburban grind when they could have shown us the joys of suburbia include cartoonists. Noteworthy historical examples include Osbert Lancaster (1908–86) and Sydney Strube (1892–1956) who chronicled the tastelessness of 'stockbrokers' Tudor' and the commuter hell of the 'Little man' respectively. Nonetheless only the latter gets a brief mention in passing in Chapter 2 of this book. My logic of inclusion is in part dictates by the limitations of space. It has also in great degree shaped by my own access to culture; which television series I have seen or have been exported to the United Kingdom where my own suburban reality is.

The penultimate two chapters of this book depart from the cataloguing of suburban popular culture medium-by-medium and instead take a cross-cutting approach in looking first at women in suburban portrayals and then at ethnic minority representation and more specifically 'Asian London' across all of the art forms discussed. Other salient candidates could have included social class, however this has not been dealt with in its own chapter as (i) to some extent US popular culture has been less muted on this (with white collar-blue collar being the key binary) reflecting the lessened significance of the concept in American society generally and for the reason that (ii) it is hoped that class is present throughout the whole book. Given that we are dealing with a subject of socio-spatial significance Bourdieu's concept of habitus which fuses cultural capital with locational factors is particularly relevant here. Another area that could have been candidate for its own chapter where examples can be seen in different spheres of popular culture is consumerism. 'Mall culture' seems to be

an identifiable feature of the contemporary suburb, having inspired the last novel of the prolific suburban-based British storyteller J. G. Ballard and visibly present in a slew of suburban-centred US teen movies. Long before this suburbs were marketed by advertisers with consumerist advertising techniques, for example in London's environs in tandem with the extension of the London Underground network. The desirability of a (mortgaged) suburban home in which one could store consumer comforts can be seen in the enduring existence of the annual Ideal Home Exhibition at London's Earls Court exhibition centre sponsored by the most suburban of daily newspapers the *Daily Mail* and documented academically by Sugg-Ryan (1997, 2000). Developments in the architecture of the suburban home reflect changing consumer-led vicissitudes that capture changing class relations: once the smarter homes in Victorian districts designed for the 'carriage classes', would include servants sculleries but by the advance of the twentieth century labour saving devices were being promoted as the service classes declined and instead garages and car-ports became a new norm of suburban dwellings.

By looking at a number of cultural forms over a wide sweep of time (the sample material) this approach has attempted to take an overview of the suburban popular cultural landscape in much the same way as many pictorial images of suburbia take an aerial view – shots of an earth spinning on its axis before we close in on the suburbs can be seen in the film *The Burbs* and the opening titles of the tv show *Weeds*, for example. As a UK-based writer it is unsurprising that the United Kingdom's capital London features so heavily in art forms and this megacity of super-diversity is the subject of Chapter 7. New York and its suburbs are omnipresent in US examples across different popular culture forms. Long Island features in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, children's adventure story series *The Hardy Boys*, *Jaws* and the 1997 film *Love and Death on Long Island* to name just a very few. Connecticut also was setting of *Far from Heaven* (2002), the film and book versions of *Revolutionary Road*, the *Ice Storm* and the fictional town of Stepford of the Ira Levin novel and two films.

I have not practiced a strict content analysis by quantifying instances of different phenomena but wanted to undertake an analysis of message and meaning to detect patterns. As someone who has taught research methods for well over a decade I am all too aware that methodologically subjective readings of cultural texts can as an approach be easily open to criticism for privileging a single cultural interpretation at the expense of wider audiences or a holistic intertextual view and potentially false-freezing in time what it is looking at. Some cultural works have a shorter shelf life than others with their 'critical

reception' often helping to seal their permanence or otherwise. Categorizing representations however does have strengths as a method of data analysis. In its defence an attempt will be made where possible to contextualize what follows in respective historical moment and popular and critical reception. Theoretically the concept of structures of feelings 'concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt' as propounded by Raymond Williams (1977:132) is a useful one in considering media reception. The case material selected between them provide cultural snapshots of suburbia past and present. Between them scenes unfold depicting the evolving nature of the suburbia and wider society in the United States and United Kingdom. It has been an intention to not necessarily concentrate on the obvious, for example John Cheever, Updike's 'Rabbit' novels or the *Sopranos* which have been much celebrated but go for newer examples, for example Gautam Malkani (2006) the author of *Londonstani* (not to be confused with Melanie Philips' 2006 diatribe against multiculturalism *Londonistan*). Works which will no doubt go on to be considered classic dealt with include Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Arcade Fire's album *The Suburbs*. It is impossible with a subject as vast as this to ever achieve completely comprehensive coverage. In 2011, in the United States ABC launched the comedy *Suburgatory* about a single father who moves with his wisecracking teenage daughter away from the temptations of the city to the boring 'burbs. The *New York Post* applauded the show: 'At long last, a TV sitcom that doesn't idealize suburban family life to the detriment of the tried-and-true TV notion that cities are horrible, scary, no-place-to-raise-kids hell holes' (Stasi 2011) as did *Time* (Poniewozik 2011). Yet the show had many echoes of earlier representations of suburbia as repressive and inauthentic as seen in the daughter intoning 'A box of rubbers landed me in a town full of plastic' after her father discovers condoms in her bedroom prompting the move. Indeed whole notion of 'suburban dysfunction' has now become a cinematic genre in its own right – it exists as a category in Amazon as well as Netflix – two recent ways of accessing media that illustrate how far we have come from film being about 'a night at the pictures' see Table 4.1 on p. 106. One could argue this strain of suburban condescension is becoming somewhat tired.

The voices of the represented have not been a part of the methodological approach. The film *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1986) which started life as a play was set on Bradford's peripheral Buttershaw estate where its writer Andrea Dunbar grew up drew local criticism. As the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* put it: 'a tatty sink estate where old mattresses and armchairs festered in overgrown gardens, family slanging matches spilled out onto the streets and teenage girls pushed prams around like trophies . . . many Buttershaw residents were offended at the

portrayal of their community and resented the fact that nothing positive had been highlighted' (Clayton 2008). When Sarah Ferguson fronted *The Duchess On The Estate*, in which the former royal was dispatched the Northern Moor estate of South Manchester's large council development Wythenshawe, before the show was even aired a resident was quoted as stating 'The preview is portraying Northern Moor as the worst area in Britain to live. We haven't got gangs of gun-wielding, knife-wielding yobs. It's a very, very, very safe and lovely area for families with children' (BBC 2009b). It is not just suburban council housing estates that have been accused of being subject of misrepresentation. When the 1997 film the *Ice Storm* was released the *New York Times* (Nieves 1997) quoted Janet Lindstrom, the president of the New Canaan Historical Society similarly remarked: 'People always seem to be involved in schools and family, the kinds of things that have made New Canaan such a wonderful place to live. It's not to say that what was described in "The Ice Storm" didn't happen here. Maybe it did. I just know a very different New Canaan.' The film was set in 1973 and recalls the unhappy adolescence of its writer Rick Moody there showing debased morals in well-to-do Connecticut suburbia including wife-swopping 'key parties' which the Historical Society President had never heard of. Although with reality programmes that the defence of dramatic or poetic licence might not seemingly apply, programmes like *Made in Chelsea* and *Made in Essex* depart from the ostensible 'camera never lies' original reality formula and instead offer the oxymoronic-sounding 'scripted reality'.

Conclusion: New popular cultural paradigms

It might seem a little odd to be seeking popular culture in a milieu that many have decried as a cultural void. Malik (2007:89) for example talks of '"uncool suburbia" as compared to the "cool, urban, hip" status of LA'. However suburbia is a space where modernity has been on display since its foundation symbolizing progress in conceptualization and everyday lived social practice. As the following chapters will detail, the suburbs have been a rich source of popular cultural material: be that as the butt of jokes in television sitcom or as a security blanket to rail against by exponents of punk rock. Several common themes can be discerned from the phenomena under discussion. In the 1960 film *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* discussed in Chapter 4 a family relocate from their crowded Manhattan apartment out to the wilds of Conneticut. The characters in the film describe this as 'the country' but the home they buy on the Hudson railroad

would now be considered as prime suburban real estate. *Diary of a Nobody* is often taken to be the prototypical suburban novel, still described as a 'superb satire on the snobberies of middle-class suburbia'[7] yet it was set in Holloway, now an inner London location. Indeed much of what we since consider to be suburbia (e.g. the entire Metroland development eulogized later by Betjeman) was at the time of its writing, open fields waiting for the bulldozers of the twentieth century to move in and redevelop aided and abetted with expanded road networks and improved public transport. The precise locations that we now classify as suburbs may have shifted and technology may have altered the scope of popular culture but the question of the representation of the suburbs is still a pertinent and under-researched one. Popular culture now has a history. From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, representations of suburbia now have a legacy behind them. The cumulative social effects of these have helped to define suburbia in the popular imagination. In an era where consumers of popular culture are more media literate and knowing than ever and in which popular cultural practices are continually shifting, questions may need refining as both popular culture and suburbia undergo a process of redefining. Popular culture has made suburbia which was founded on the principle of privacy and defensible space visible and available in the public sphere.

Importantly there are many suburbias. The leafy stereotype of 1930s semi-detached houses which often springs to mind in the United Kingdom only refers to one. Ditto the white picket fence bounded detached home of American drama. The principle of 'homes fit for heroes' referred to the boom in UK housebuilding following the 1914–18 war which took place both by speculative builders on private estates and in proto-municipal and council developments providing social housing in suburbs for those who had been raised in slums. Not all of these estates have aged well. The Channel 4 comedy series *Shameless* (2004–present) offers a British version of the working class suburban experience. The series has since been remade in the United States. Its setting of the fictional post-war Chatsworth Estate is located somewhere unspecified in suburban Manchester and has been filmed variously at West Gorton to the city's east and Wythenshawe at its southern border. At times we see lifestyle-crackdowns enforced as the Manchester city council officials flood the estate looking for benefit cheats. Creator Paul Abbott has cemented his suburban credentials by writing the foreword of the second edition of singer-songwriter Paul Weller's lyric collection *Suburban 100*, a book that would not have been possible had Weller not grown up in the London commuter-town of Working. Popular culture then serves as a means to connect the reader/listener/viewer to suburbia whether they

live there or not, making it part of their lived experience. Its forms multiply all the time: in the early 2000s *The Sims*, a computer game set in a simulated suburban environment near SimCity where players with avatars build communities became a runaway hit. A decade later the agrarian-themed *Farmville* played via Facebook reportedly numbered 300 million users demonstrating how far technology had come since long-running Radio 4 series *The Archers*. Some analyses attributed its popularity due to the fact that self-reliance was popular in a recession (Penny 2010); boredom at suburban life could easily be a related reason. In suburban novels or music and screen representations, everyday situations are elevated to become exceptional and social/moral issues are highlighted.

Bourdieu was well known for his theorization of distinction (1984) cultural capital and the 'taste cultures' that this spawns, an argument closely linked to questions of social class. However arguably as a by-product of mass-produced popular culture we are seeing more convergence of cultural practices and tastes despite the increased volume and type of source material available. In 1941 George Orwell (1968:77) wrote: 'In tastes, habits, manners and outlook the working class and the middle class are drawing together.' Indeed this has been a longstanding process facilitated by mass communication. Yet despite Frankfurt school fears about massified models there is also increasing divergence of the availability in what we can consume culturally and the ways that we consume it: the listening/viewing/reading public are more and more disparate and discerning than ever before. Again technology has dictated this cultural shift. Long gone is the era in which whole families would view prime time tv offerings collectively in rapt attention. Longer away still in the mists of time are instances such as the handed-down tales of entire streets crowding into the one household in relative proximity to them with a television in order to view for example the current Queen's coronation in 1953. Even further back in the depths of time are the family sing-songs round the piano. We are no longer in a mass broadcast era. Television catch-up services mean that the programme does not have to be watched at its intended scheduled slot (with meticulously pre-selected adverts). Twenty-four-hour news channels provide current affairs 'at the click of a mouse' making current news consumers the most informed and in turn changing the news cycle away from previous times when announcements were planned for big bulletin impact. In the journalist Hugo Young's posthumously published papers the late Labour minister Robin Cook was reported in 1996 remarking 'Politics has got far more difficult . . . because of the media. When I started, there were three terrestrial channels. Now there are four nationals, many locals, and several satellites. This requires many responses, often very fast. One aspect of all this is that one has to learn to say less

and less' (Young 2008). The situation is dramatically different today as camera crews are sometimes stationed outside the houses of those deemed newsworthy broadcasting the front door as a reaction to the breaking news of the moment is awaited. One recalls Mrs Duffy's pebbledashed council-built semi taking centre-stage during the 2010 British general election campaign with the world's 24 hour news media waiting for the twitch of a net curtain following 'bigot-gate' in which Prime Minister Gordon Brown was caught off-gaurd on radio mic. Official media (national broadcasting) and newspapers used as mouthpieces for their proprietors no longer have between them a monopoly on communicating news and shaping opinion. Even before the Leveson enquiry into press ethics brought former news giant Rupert Murdoch down to size by forcing his appearance, the blogosphere had rebalanced relations by opening up new channels. Twitter and YouTube viral videos also have the potential to disrupt established news cycles. Technology means that the e-book and kindle offer alternatives to the hardback and paperback. The chapters that follow will look at suburbia in many forms and its cultural framing in television, film, novels and pop with a detailed focus on the treatment of women. Inevitably these images are interlocking and overlapping and the results will appear dated almost as instantly as they are committed to the page but it is hoped that the snapshots from suburbia offered are of use to those negotiating this complex terrain.

Notes

1 'Suburban Special: What Is a Suburb?' *Time Out*, 1 December 2006, at: www.timeout.com/london/big-smoke/features/2331/Suburban_special-what_is_a_suburb.html.

2 www.channel4.com/programmes/the-house-that-made-me/episode-guide.

3 www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780141191485,00.html.

4 Although it is noticeable that in more recent campaigns for BT the post-traditional family has been reflected in depicting a single mother setting up home with a younger man with various offspring in tow. McDonalds' UK television advert of 2013 also showed a boy bonding with the new boyfriend of his mother following a reluctant start after he gets taken out for a burger. Between these two examples we can see a collapse of the ideal of the nuclear family.

5 See www.ctpost.com/entertainment/article/Long-Wharf-sets-Doll-s-House-in-suburbs-465133.php for 2010 article 'Long Wharf sets "Doll's House" in suburbs' and www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9390146/A-Dolls-House-Young-Vic-review.html for review of 2012 play at Young Vic, London.

6 Quoted in Ann Leslie/BBC (1991) documentary *Think of England: Dunroamin*, screened in BBC2 on 5 November 1991.

7 www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780140437324,00.html#.