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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10325>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Melenia Arouh, « Timotheus Vermeulen, Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2014-3, document 4, Online since 18 September 2014, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10325>

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- 1 Screen space is often considered an elusive concept, an unexamined cinematic phenomenology that serves as the backdrop of the action, only to be forgotten under the weight of narrative or ideological scrutiny. The literature surrounding the topic is quite diverse and it can become tricky for the reader to navigate through the different pathways of metaphysics, continental philosophy, feminist theory and cultural geography that inform much of the research. And yet, this is a topic that deserves much attention: the space in which the action will take place is an indispensable part of the medium and, in the hands of filmmakers, becomes an artistic tool with which they construct their story and communicate to the audience.
- 2 Timotheus Vermeulen's book *Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television* promises and delivers an in-depth examination of recent representations and mappings of suburbia in film and television. This is a meticulously researched and detailed book – a direct outcome of his Ph.D. thesis – that synthesises theoretical and textual research regarding space to discuss the suburb as screen space. Vermeulen informs his work with arguments made by a wide range of theorists, from Martin Heidegger and Frederic Jameson to Noël Carroll

and Kendall Walton and from Martin and Henri Lefebvre to Naomi Woolf. However, his own voice is never lost in the process as he carefully clarifies, counters and reverses several of the accepted positions in the relevant literature.

- 3 What is outstanding in Vermeulen's method of discussion and analysis is that he is not just observant of the themes and tropes of texts set in the suburbs, but also of the nature of this space. Vermeulen establishes early on in the book that a complete examination of the suburb requires also a visual analysis, of the cinematography, the editing and the *mise-en-scène* of the film or television program. His willingness to examine both the form and content of the texts of his inquiry becomes the foundation of this thorough and insightful account.
- 4 It should be made clear that the book is not a history of films and television shows set in the suburbs, nor is it a comprehensive account of more recent examples. Rather, Vermeulen chooses eight contemporary texts to conduct his analysis: *Pleasantville* (1998), *Happiness* (1998), *Desperate Housewives* (2004), *The Simpsons* (1989), *King of the Hill* (1997), *Brick* (2005), *Chumscrubber* (2005) and *Alpha Dog* (2006). Although the choices might seem random in the beginning, Vermeulen highlights at every chance the similarities between these texts and makes sure that the reader acquires a comprehensive view of the literature behind the more general arguments he raises. Usually, his observations start with the specifics of the text under examination but these are then substantiated and discussed with an eye to a more general understanding. Through these and with these the book develops a language: a language that can and should allow us to examine the represented and constructed space of the suburbs in film and television. This is a very welcome contribution, given the increase of films and television shows set in suburbia in the last 20 years, but also the limited literature on the subject.
- 5 Each chapter of the book examines a different text or set of texts. Chapter one introduces the film *Pleasantville*, where two contemporary teenagers are transported to a 1950s television sitcom and have to deal with the realities and constrictions of the time and place. Vermeulen discusses the film at length through references to the US sitcoms of the 50s, such as *Father Knows Best* (1954) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957). The film for Vermeulen presents and mocks the vision of the American dream as it was captured by the

sitcom suburbs of the period: safety, affluence and the means to succeed via hard work and education. Here Vermeulen makes a very interesting connection to Francis Fukuyama's work: Fukuyama in his seminal work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, argued that western societies after the cold war reach "the end of history." That is, not the end of actual historical events but rather a kind of political and social reality (liberal democracy) that ends the constant cycles of revolution, violence and change that have informed history up to this point. For Vermeulen the film parodies and renders problematic the idea that the suburb is the realisation of "the end of history": the geographical location where our deepest and most important needs are satisfied, the place where all questions have been answered. In his account the complexities and ontological instabilities of the suburb, as this is represented in the film, are made clear through his thematic and visual analysis of colours, framing and camera movements.

- 6 Chapter two examines the film *Happiness*, an ensemble drama dealing with heartbreak, divorce, isolation, sexual awakenings and paedophilia. Vermeulen is very interested in showing how the editing and mise-en-scène of the film create this suburban space of the narrative. The film for him produces its own distinct map of the suburbs of New Jersey "an incomplete plan of forever unfulfilled and suspended journeys to nowhere, at once totalising and fragmented" (56). Vermeulen is careful to establish how the film connects the suburbs with other locations, but also how these become disjointed in their visualisation: Florida is shown in a neon-colour palette, New Jersey in a pastel and pale one; New York receives a vertical composition, New Jersey a horizontal one. His analysis here is quite detailed. The actors' performances, the editing, the framing are all considered, and his conclusion seems to be that the space *per se* becomes in this case indifferent and impersonal, thus informing the lives of the characters. In his account the suburbs become something more than a background: they are complex in their iconography and style, shaping, and being shaped by, the social experience.
- 7 Chapters three and four turn their attention to television. It is important to note that for Vermeulen contemporary film and television approach the suburbs in similar ways and as such it is acceptable to study them together. Having said that, however, Vermeulen is careful to make several distinctions and engage with the specificity of animation. To

this end, much of his discussion in chapter three deals with the nature of animation space, and with what he calls the “plasticity,” “in-betweenness” and “flatness” of the very popular animation programs *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*. These terms become further important when it is noticed that many critics describe the suburbs as flat and one-dimensional (simplistic and shallow). Vermeulen’s point becomes that even this flatness and lack of dimensions (of the suburban or animated space) can be rendered complex and should be studied in its own right. Again, he seems eager to pursue a language that will help us explore this further.

- 8 Vermeulen quite rightly places these programs in the sitcom tradition and attempts to analyse their reproduction of suburban space through a discussion of the medium by frequently alluding to the post-modern discourse that usually frames discussions of television animation and especially *The Simpsons*. He argues that these animated sitcoms present the “suburb at once as democratic, in the sense that they render everything equally visible, and autocratic, in that each plane, each figure or shape is self-contained” (96). To establish this he analyses in detail the parts of the episode “Homer vs Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment,” where the Simpsons family steals cable from their neighbours and as a result spends many days and nights parked in front of the television set. For Vermeulen the living room and adjoined spaces in these sequences appear flat and empty, despite the apparent depth. In this way the space becomes democratic, each frame and figure equally important, and at the same time interdependent on each other for meaning.
- 9 The chapter four analysis of the television program *Desperate Housewives*, a dramedy about four female friends living in the suburbs, seems to me to be the one safe choice Vermeulen makes. Given the attention the program has received by commentators and theorists alike, what more is there to investigate? Indeed, the fictional Wisteria Lane is the Platonic form of the screen suburb: white picket fences, clean, apparently safe and walkable. Each house, as Vermeulen notices, has a distinct architecture and geography. The Scavos’ house is open, allowing for the couples’ “walk and talks.” The Solis’ house has bright and open spaces with doors of glass, a house of people who want to be seen. The Van de Kamp’s home is a much more compartmentalized and old-fashioned space, for Vermeulen

an intertextual reference to the Douglas Sirk melodramas, especially *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) that was filmed in the same studio lot.

- 10 Vermeulen provides a feminist framework for the discussion of this suburb, given the feminist attention the program has received. For him the show seems to suggest that men and women now live in a much more open and equal way, they have achieved, as it were, a kind of spatial equality. The suburb is not anymore a prison for women (one is reminded here of the iconic Betty Draper in the first seasons of *Mad Men*, 2007) but it has become a place of privilege – an actualised post-feminist utopia. However, and this is indeed a valid point, this equality is an illusion as the private/public divide disappears and the whole suburb becomes a stage: “Instead of openness and democracy, the modern interventions have brought about paranoia, since each and every space is always already intruded, and perpetual performativity, since one always has to be on her guard” (124). For Vermeulen the suburb in this case is not a post-feminist promise land, but a theatre of morality where characters are evaluated and judged for their performance.
- 11 The last chapter of the book examines the suburb as this represented in three teen-noir films: *AlphaDog*, *Chumscrubber* and *Brick*. What is refreshing in Vermeulen’s choice here is that the suburb is mostly associated with an adult decision: moving there to raise a family, providing a safe place for children to ride their bikes and eat ice cream. However, what is noticed is that the adults in these representations are often immature and childish, whereas the teenagers are sophisticated and adult. From *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) to *Arrested Development* (2003) and *Suburgatory* (2011) (a television program that merited a closer analysis here), the adult authorities are presented as irresponsible and ignorant. For example, in *Chumscrubber* the adults are totally unaware of the violent struggles present in their children’s lives. On the contrary, the teenagers are thoughtful, careful, responsible and aware of the harsh realities of this world – and of course, given the noir tradition they belong to, criminals.
- 12 The teenage experience of the suburbs seems to be drastically different from the adult one in these films. Whereas the adults are always within spaces, the teens seem to be in-between spaces. The adults seem to be trapped there, whereas the teens are constantly moving, journeying, connecting different places. Interestingly

enough, the teenagers in these films hang around in “non-places”: barren plot lands, high school corridors, phone booths, motorways and malls. In these non-places teenagers are allowed to congregate and establish their authority. According to Vermeulen, these non-places become for the young adults of the narratives not roads to destinations but the destinations themselves.

- 13 As is true with much of media theory, one can get lost in the theory and forget the texts. Vermeulen’s attention span is however unequivocal and balanced. Both theory and text are examined and the frequent references to other texts, new and old, provide an informed and thorough discussion. If one were to claim that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, what can we really do with the language that Vermeulen wants to delineate? It seems to me that several of his observations resonate in many instances of suburban (or even small town) representations. For instance in watching *Peyton Place* (1957) recently it was interesting to note that the way in which teenagers use the space in the film is similar to the way Vermeulen describes in *Brick*: they frequent non-places, and in one key scene the two teenage protagonists, Allison and Norman, pass by a sign that reads: “Road’s End.” Or elsewhere, when Norman asks Allison “What’s the matter?” she responds “Grown-ups who act like children.” Can this hold true for all cases of all fiction set in the US suburbs? Certainly not; nor does Vermeulen ever claim such universality. His observations and theoretical synthesis however do provide a general framework in which the screen suburb can be examined and discussed.

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