**SIMULACRA AND SELVES IN COLD WAR SUBURBIA**

**Dr Antonia Mackay - Oxford Brookes University**

Postwar suburbia is centered around enabling and proscribing a certain way of life - that of the utopia maintained through surveillance and visible conformity. Increasingly, the postwar suburb is envisioned in dispiriting, alienating ways, and remains at odds with all other living spaces. It is a place which is “nowhere” and as a result, emerges as its own socially constructed and contained space, where domesticity, the family and homogeneity are paramount.

Considering the concept of space and body interplay from theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Beatriz Colomina, the architecture of suburbia becomes highly influential in the manipulation of selves in thesespaces - “spatiality, the space surrounding and within the subject’s body is… crucial for defining the limits and shape of the body” (Grosz). Hence it is the space surrounding suburban bodies that comes to bear some relevance on their identity.

Read this way, texts such as Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972) clearly utilise the suburban space as an inscriber of identity to mark bodies, seeing the increasingly commodified landscape as capable of encouraging a symbiosis of machine and mortal, resulting in the murder of the Stepford women and the reign of their automatised alter-egos. The landscape of postwar suburbia is heavily marked by the technological ephemera therein, the most powerful of which being the television set.

The television is an object which conflates issues of containment by transmitting images of the outside onto a domesticated private interior and thereby promoted an intrusion from the outside world, bringing individuals together in a previously private space and, heralding the arrival of “a surrogate community” (Colomina, 188)**.** Turning the home into a space for looking suggests the objectification of the inhabitants - a space for observation, or exhibition, thereby overturning the containment of suburbia and its inhabitants. Television is therefore symbolic of a major part of the suburban experience, an object at the heart of domestic living, but also, an object that contained the possibility of disrupting hegemonic values.

In Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the plot focuses on Harry Angstrom’s search for an escape from his sense of masculine estrangement and this emasculation is directly linked to his suburban environment where the “fragmented endlessly mirrored nature of his… landscape and its male residents” (Beuka, 123) equates to his own insignificance. Updike clearly associates the erosion of masculine power with the consumer-driven and commodified language of suburban living, where technological objects mark the landscape:

he comes into Brewer from the south, seeing it in the smoky shadow before dawn as a gradual multiplication of houses among the trees beside the road and then as a treeless waste of industry, shoe factories and bottling plants and company parking lots and knitting mills converted to electronics parts and elephantine gas tanks lifting above trash-filled swampland yet lower than the blue edge of the mountain. (Updike, 35)

A great deal of Harry’s experience of suburban living revolves around commodities and consumerism; from his car journey where he listens to songs and commercials for radio controlled garage doors (Updike, 28) to his experience of the surrounding landscape seeing the city shine with neon lights, the outline of a peanut, a top hat and the sunflower beer building shining six stories high in a sea of light (Updike, 64).

Consumerism and commodification even extend into Harry’s identity, regularly slipping into thinking about his product MagiPeel and even extending a conversation about weight into that of a salesman - applying the domestic commodity to the shaping of bodies in order to “shave off fatty excess, grate carrots and sharpen your husband’s pencils” (Updike, 61).

So entrenched is Harry’s identity in his job, that it may no longer seem so surprising that his quest for autonomy in the novel ends so quickly, for it seems Harry does not, and cannot know himself. Instead, the television set steps in to take control of the character’s relationships and actions where **“**my valley. My home” (Updike, 189)becomes a place characterised by “the scatter rugs whose corners keep turning under, the closet whose door bumps the television set” (Updike, 189). It is even through the medium of the television that Harry and his wife are reunited as lovers:“it isn’t too bad a show... it even makes for a kind of peace; he and Janice hold hands” (Updike, 186).

Television recurs in the narrative in various spectral forms, often as an object that has to be navigated in the domestic space and even as the provider of memories and personal information. *The Mouseketeer’s* recurs several times in the text, both as the backdrop for Harry’s desertion and as a program he considers to be informative; “the big Mouseketeer has appeared, Jimmie, a grown man who wears circular black ears. Rabbit watches him attentively: he respects him. He expects to learn something from him helpful in his own line of work” (Updike, 10). The program even evokes an imagined memory in Harry, watching television with Ruth he is “curious to see the whole thing. It was like looking through a photograph album with about half familiar faces. The scene where the rocket goes through the roof and Fred MacMurray runs out with the coffee pot he knew as well as his own face” (Updike 99). Television programming becomes part of who Harry is, it reminds him of moments in his life and he recognises himself in the actors’ faces. The allusion to the photograph album suggests a personal memory and a family member and hence, for Harry, television has not only become part of his domestic landscape, but is also familiar, and homely, and entirely emblematic of suburban life. Increasingly, Harry’s identity is inseparable from the simulacra of the commodified landscape of the suburban environment, marking his speech and persona with advertisements and television personalities, filling his uncertainties surrounding his performative masculinity with reflections of a cultural plurality.

Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita* (1959) on the other hand depicts a critique of both suburbia and consumerist and technological culture. Much like Updike’s fiction, rather than only exploring masculine sexuality *Lolita* is heavily marked by disillusioned suburban bodies who lack autonomous selfhood and whose subjectivity is defined by the language and objects of commodification. Here, television functions as an informer of selves, filling bodies with entirely fabricated and media saturated identities, converting children to Hollywood starlets, and mothers to femme fatales.

Within Nabkov’s exploration of suburbia, *Lolita* offers a subtle narrative of space and body interplay. The two inhabitants of the house in Lawn Street, Charlotte and her daughter Dolores Haze, are frequently represented in terms which associate their identities with mass culture and consumerism. The house is littered with “bedraggled magazines” and Charlotte’s “polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her own soul” (Nabakov, 39). The small indicators of middle-class status, such as the magazines and commercial painting in the front hall, categorise the Haze women as cultural consumers and they are repeatedly presented in ways which suggest that they wear their culture as identity, picking ‘modes’ of expression (Nabakov, 86).

When Humbert marries Charlotte in order to exert his sexual desires towards Dolores, he actively displaces traditional gender roles normally associated with suburban spaces, and by extension the novel tackles the idea of authenticity - Humbert even has to read “Know Your Own Daughter” (Nabakov, 197).

*Lolita* clearly points to the American experience as one of advertisements, commodities and consumer products, where “sidetrips and tourist traps” (Nabakov, 174) abound and traditional culture - the Indian ceremonial dances, are “strictly commercial” (Nabakov, 177). Bodies here, internalise and reflect cultural signifiers, becoming in a way like television sets - projecting an image of perfection outward - a surface image of pure visibility and promoting objectivity over subjectivity.

Ultimately, it is Lolita herself who carries these references in her performance, drawing her selfhood directly from Hollywood and movie culture. Nabakov positions her as a “modern” girl who is “an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream slow close ups” (Nabakov, 53), who is repeatedly drawn to commercial objects and places, the “phoney colonial architecture, curiosity shops and imported shade trees” (Nabakov, 130) and she believed “with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land” (Nabakov, 166). Lolita is, throughout the novel, associated with consumer culture television and film, and to some extent, Nabakov envisions her as a non-self - a body without subjectivity, void and vacuous, filled only with media. For Lolita, a kiss is but a replication of a Hollywood scene, and hence, much like Harry Angstrom, Lolita does not know herself save for the marking of the media surrounding her - “to think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would … plump for the former” (Nabakov, 187).

In likening her subjectivity to that of mass culture, Lolita too becomes an object to be consumed; Humbert’s possession, his, “gaspingly adorable pubescent pet” (Nabakov, 194) that once was advertised and has now been consumed. The novel’s rampant commodity fetishism seems to mirror the implicit sexual fetishism, locking Humbert and Lolita into an affair of iconography and exteriority and the novel’s attention to photographs, advertisements, and magazines points to a landscape which is informed by image, where surface separates substance. Nabakov’s suburbia is not filled with autonomous subjects but rather, a sea of objects or commodities with differing and varying qualities to be consumed and eventually made redundant.

What emerges from this investigation of postwar suburbia is a blurring of reality and images, a sort of domestic hyperrealism where alternative identities for bodies are created by filling voided selves with conformist culture and ultimately negating the utopian autonomy and individualism the space claims to create.

Works Cited:

Grosz, Elizabeth, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Coloumbia University Press, 2008).

Colomina, Beatriz, *Sexuality and Space*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

Robert Beuka, *Suburbia Nation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American FIlm and Fiction.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

Updike, John, *Rabbit, Run*. (London: Penguin Books, 1960)

Vladimir Nabakov, *Lolita.* (London: Penguin Books, 1959)