

# “Do you smell fumes?”: Health, Hygiene, and Suburban Life

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**T**HE TYPOGRAPHICAL SPECIFICITY THAT DISTINGUISHES the title of Todd Haynes’s 1995 film *[Safe]* betrays the film’s interest in questions of security, shelter, and well-being but also of interiority and identity. *[Safe]* is set in late eighties suburban Los Angeles and traces the physical and psychological deterioration of its protagonist, Carol White (Julianne Moore), as she suffers from an illness her doctors cannot identify. Increasingly desperate to understand her symptoms, Carol is drawn to a poster at her health club that asks, “Do you smell fumes?” After attending a seminar hosted by a new age ecological group, she begins to believe that her symptoms are triggered by environmental sensitivities. Such a diagnosis points to a contradiction at the heart of Carol’s affluent suburban life. At the same time that suburbia, particularly the suburban home, is meant to foster a sense of security and a feeling of being nestled within its walls, safe from real as well as figurative contaminants, it also generates a sense of susceptibility, of being at risk from any number of unseen and unknown dangers that everyday life presents.

As much as the titular parentheses seem a typographic rendering of the walls of the suburban home or the gates of the suburban community, they also suggest that safety is a psychological matter, that it is less dependent

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on the actual existence of external threats than on the internal perception of one's own vulnerability. As such, suburbia is an expression of the desire to be safe, to find safety within by building barriers without. The film's clinical observation of Carol's decline suggests, however, that life in an environment characterized by the desire for safety, and which aspires to be both sterile and antiseptic, renders a person susceptible to a whole set of illnesses against which suburbia not only provides no protection but of which it is an identifiable cause. In this article, I explore the ways this film and other representations of the suburbs connect environment to illness to propose that while representations of suburbia frequently dwell on the exterior, relishing with metropolitan scorn such things as architectural homogeneity and signs of conspicuous consumption, the real anxiety is generated by what is (or is not) happening inside. I will begin with the origins of suburbia in nineteenth-century Britain and the near simultaneous appearance of anti-suburban tracts that condemn this new form of living. The greater part of my analysis will focus on cinematic representations of suburbia, which even more than their literary equivalents find figural expression for the fear that the future is suburban. I will identify a series of suburban anxiety films (of which *[Safe]* serves as the culmination or at least the most complex and nuanced expression of the fears that drive its antecedents) that focus on the process of dehumanization that strips the suburbanite of his or her own will. These films explain suburban existence in terms of a hollowing out of the soul, a negation of the capacity to reason, or the betrayal of the mind by the body. Given the social pull of suburbia, however, these representations are rarely altogether negative. Their force rests in their capacity to suggest that everyone, including even the most ardent urbanite, is susceptible. As such, these films frequently demand a certain level of urban identification with suburbanites, no matter how alien or strange their lives may seem, even if this identification is never complete.

There is a core contradiction in the development of suburbia and the history of its representations. What was first conceived in nineteenth-century Britain as a space of health and hygiene is now primarily represented as a space of illness and contagion. Suburbia was meant to be an escape from the contaminated and diseased core of the city, but its association with domesticity, consumption, and leisure means that it has often been perceived and pathologized by urban male sophisticates as altogether too feminine to be truly healthy. Medical discourses thus provide an historical continuity between representations of the earliest British suburbs and their latest American counterparts. These discourses depend upon the diagnosis

of suburban space as simultaneously sterile and contaminated, vacant and excessive, bland and noxious. The reproduction of these contradictions in a whole array of cultural artifacts, however, suggests that the suburbs are less a diseased appendage than a terrain onto which the urban subject displaces anxieties that the whole social body may be sick.

The question that seizes Carol's attention, "Do you smell fumes?" is significant as it connects her affliction to a history of suburban development driven by fears of infection and contamination as well as concerns for health and hygiene. To understand representations of contemporary suburbia, it is necessary to appeal to a set of discourses from an earlier historical moment. As much as postmodern Los Angeles and contemporary America are contexts integral to understanding *[Safe]*, the medical, architectural, and domestic discourses of Victorian Britain also provide an integral frame. The modern suburb is an invention of nineteenth-century Britain, and the catalyst for its creation was the horrible stench that plagued British cities. In an era when disease was thought to be transmitted as miasma, in noxious clouds of invisible gas that drifted menacingly throughout the city, the sense of smell was the primary safeguard against disease. Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842) detailed the appalling state of British cities which, because of an almost complete lack of sanitary infrastructure, were absolutely filthy. Chadwick, who wrote the report in his capacity as Secretary to the Poor Law Commission, was instrumental in establishing the correlation between sanitary conditions and high mortality rates, driving home in his report to Parliament the idea that squalor and filth lead to disease and desperation. This conclusion amounted to nothing less than a revolution in social thought. The misery of the poor was not attributed to the moral deficiencies of the class as a whole but ascribed to problems that fell within the government's purview and could even be seen as a wider social responsibility. The report itself consists of hundreds of micronarratives of despair gleaned from correspondents throughout Great Britain whose detailed accounts of squalid and overcrowded housing, insufficient drainage, and the lack of potable water Chadwick assembled in support of his recommendations for sanitary reform. The opening sections of Chadwick's report focus on the medical consequences of "atmospheric impurity," but later sections draw a direct correlation between material and environmental conditions and moral habits and behaviour (79). In documenting "impurity and its evil consequences," Chadwick shifts from a strictly physical diagnosis that focuses solely on the corporeal afflictions suffered by his patient (at once the labouring-classes, the urban agglom-

erations in which they live, and the nation as a whole) to a diagnosis that registers the deleterious moral effects of environmental circumstance and demands their transformation (79).

Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* ultimately led to the Public Health Act of 1848, which, despite legislating only the most basic of its recommendations, nevertheless meant that the government acknowledged a certain measure of responsibility for the maintenance of public health. Part and parcel of the reforms contained in the Public Health Act was a transformed understanding of what constituted adequately salubrious domestic conditions for Britain's urban population. Although there was little possibility that slums would be eliminated, structurally necessary as they were for the maintenance of British industrial capitalism, the Public Health Act in conjunction with reforms to the Building Act facilitated the growth of suburbs as a means to ease urban overcrowding. Ironically, in many cases this left the labouring classes in much the same situation as before, their circumstances only slightly improved by the installation of sewage systems, the building of new but hardly luxurious tenements, and the evacuation of the aspirant middle-classes from the city centre to a cleaner and healthier suburban landscape.

A curious byproduct of Chadwick's endeavours was the creation of a new species, the suburbanite, who, over the course of the nineteenth century, was subjected to a series of unflattering representations. Fleeing the noxious odours of the urban core, the suburbanite came to occupy a liminal position, both in terms of geography and social class. The in-betweenness of the suburbs was curiously distressing to those who, while separate from the urban labouring classes, nevertheless remained in the city and felt themselves to be defined by their chosen locale. Since the suburbs of London seemed to be generated out of nothing, built on hitherto empty land on the peripheries of the city, there was the suspicion that there was nothing to suburbia and, stripped of its semi-detached façades, suburbia would prove a void. Similarly, suburbanites themselves were denied interiority, the bric-a-brac of a commodity capitalism with which suburbia shares its rise perceived as a screen that conceals a total absence of thought and feeling.

The 1860s were marked by both the exponential growth of suburban England and widespread lament about the decline of British culture. The strongest voice in that chorus of indignation was Matthew Arnold who, in a series of articles later collected as *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), indicted the British middle classes for their lack of culture. Branding them Philistines, Arnold accused the middle classes of betraying culture

by pursuing material wealth and indulging in the vulgar spectacles of mass entertainment. So vociferous were the complaints about the early chapters of *Culture and Anarchy* that Arnold, in "My Countryman" (1866), was compelled to temper his remarks. Nevertheless, he still derides "dismal, illiberal Islington" and "dismal, illiberal Camberwell" (166). These London suburbs may offer a more comfortable life than the slums, yet for Arnold comfort breeds complacency and material progress hinders cultural and spiritual growth.

Much of the writing on suburbs from the second half of the nineteenth century continues in this familiar Arnoldian vein but becomes more agitated as the decades wear on. Many British suburbs, including the target of Arnold's derision, Camberwell, doubled in size each decade from 1861 to 1891.<sup>1</sup> Such a total transformation of the British landscape was the source of great consternation to many, who saw in suburbia the mere substitution of cultural impoverishment for economic impoverishment. The suburbs were recognized as a sign of a buoyant economy (and still today the development of new housing is taken as a key economic indicator), but they seemed scant reward for British economic success. Writing in 1908, a moment when the suburban growth of the late nineteenth century had only just started to abate, Liberal parliamentarian C. F. G. Masterman notes that "even the most hostile critics must acknowledge" that there exists in the suburbs "a clean and virile life" (*Condition* 76). The limited force of this acknowledgement, grudging as it is, is even further diminished when Masterman suggests that when it comes to the suburbanite, "perhaps the best that can be hoped for him is the advent of that friendly bullet which will terminate his inglorious life" (*Condition* 76). Such caustic remarks are characteristic of the era's anti-suburban rhetoric, which imagines suburbanization not as a marker of success but as a process of degradation. What seems to be a sign of health is actually a symptom of illness.

A crucial part of suburban expansion was the emergence and development of a domestic ideology that separated home from work for the Victorian middle-class man. The maintenance of the suburban home, of course, fell to women, and suburbia, from its very beginnings, has been a gendered space premised on a wildly uneven division of domestic labour. Despite its fantasies of a full slate of servants, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) provides an account of the labour involved in maintaining the Victorian home. The volume itself was aimed at the growing numbers

1 For a detailed study of the Victorian suburb that focuses on Camberwell, see H.J. Dyos *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*.

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of suburban women who had to supervise the day-to-day operations of a new home. In the *Sanitary Report*, one of Chadwick's correspondents noted that an increasing number of young women, primarily lower class but including those who would later find themselves in more respectable homes, were completely unschooled in the tasks required to maintain a household: "[T]hey marry totally ignorant of all those habits of domestic economy which tend to render a husband's home comfortable and happy; and this is very often the cause of the man being driven to the alehouse to seek that comfort after his day of toil which he looks for in vain by his own fireside" (205). It is precisely this social ill that Beeton's *Book of Household Management* aims to remedy. It is an instruction manual to guide women in the maintenance of a home, and, in doing so, it bolsters the domestic ideology at the foundation of Victorian culture. To emphasize the connections between suburban development and sanitary reform thus enables an understanding of how women's domestic labour was a crucial, yet almost wholly unacknowledged, part of a wider social restructuring. The suburban woman was drafted to oversee and protect a domestic space, a little piece of England, and to keep it free from contamination. The suburban home, above all else, had to be clean.

In this way, domestic labour was a constituent element of the wider project of sanitary reform, but sanitary reform itself comprised only part of a larger program of moral and social reform that demanded the circumscription of female sexuality and subjectivity. The suburban home became the vehicle and metaphor for those constraints. In this figural logic, the hygienic suburban home stands in for the female body itself in that cleanliness is taken as a sign of virtue. Given its established association with purity, cleanliness bears a great semiotic burden in the suburban imagination. On Mrs Beeton's list of feminine virtues "necessary to the proper management of a Household," cleanliness is second only to early rising: "CLEANLINESS is ... indispensable to health, and must be studied both in regard to the person and the house, and all that it contains" (8). The suburban woman's role in ensuring that the domestic sphere remains uncontaminated by the threats that lurk beyond it is essentially a metaphor for the maintenance of her own sexual integrity, the body held in metonymic relation to the suburban house of which it is an integral part.

This link between clean interiors and female virtue is established in John Claudius Loudon's *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* of 1838. Loudon was, at this time, England's pre-eminent horticulturalist, and the *Companion* contains all manner of salient advice on the construction and maintenance of a suburban house and garden. His name also appears

in the pages of Chadwick's *Report*, receiving much praise for his proposals for suburban development. Loudon stressed the health benefits that suburban life offered, focusing particularly on the pleasure of even the smallest of gardens. But Loudon also had many recommendations for the design of the suburban home. One piece of advice particularly stands out for the way in which it connects the minutiae of design with a judgment of morality: "Closets, when properly fitted up, and of a sufficient depth to be useful (that is, when the shelves are at least twelve inches wide) are a very great convenience; but when the shelves are only 8 inches or 9 inches wide, the closets generally become what are familiarly called sluts' holes, and the receptacle of all the rubbish of the house" (48). Loudon's anxiety about "sluts' holes" is clearly not only about domestic untidiness but about what that untidiness represents—a lapse in feminine virtue and the correlative contamination of the female body figuratively expressed as an overflowing cupboard.<sup>2</sup> The suburban house, even down to the width of shelves, was built to contain female sexuality and to reveal any lapse in feminine virtue.

As Loudon's inauspicious choice of phrase illustrates, it is not just that the ideological work of gender occurs in concert with the growth of suburbia in the nineteenth century but that it happens in and through it. Suburbia is produced as a gendered space, and the division of labour between "economic man" and "domestic woman" (to use Nancy Armstrong's terms from *Desire and Domestic Fiction*) reproduces in another register the divisions between public and private, urban and suburban. Housework keeps the suburban abode clean but, as Anne McClintock argues, this Victorian passion for cleanliness must be understood as part of the larger preservation of social order:

Housework is a semiotics of boundary maintenance. Cleaning is not inherently meaningful; it creates meaning through the demarcation of boundaries. Domestic labor creates social value, segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder, meaning from confusion. The middle-class was preoccupied with the clear demarcation of limit and anxiety about boundary confu-

<sup>2</sup> According to the *OED*, the use of "slut" in terms of both "slovenly" and "a woman of low or loose character" dates to the fifteenth century. To illustrate the use of "slut's hole," the *OED* cites an 1862 article from the *Saturday Review* referring to "a place or receptacle for rubbish" but groups the phrase with "slut's corner," which has a longer history dating back to the sixteenth century. The substitution of "hole" for "corner" amplifies the misogyny of the concept but also evokes a sense of deep interiority, a place where things are hidden and out of sight.

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integrity.

sion—in particular between private and public—gave rise to an intense fetish for cleaning and a fetishistic preoccupation with what the anthropologist, Victor Turner, calls liminal, or boundary, objects. Servants spent much of their time cleaning boundary objects—doorknobs, windowsills, steps, pathways, flagstones, curtains and banisters, not because these objects were especially dirty, but because scrubbing and polishing them ritually maintained the boundaries between private and public. (170)

The boundary between public and private, however rigorously maintained, is nevertheless subject to breakdown. This constant threat of boundary dissolution weighs heavily on the suburban woman who has been charged with maintaining a division that metaphorically represents her own sexual integrity. It is this history of suburbia, one that understands its development through the sanitary reform movement of Victorian England and sees the fear generated by the emergence of this new, seemingly empty species of suburbanite, that forms the background to twentieth-century representations of suburbia in general and of *[Safe]* in particular. What is inherited from the nineteenth century is the sense that suburbanization is not merely a planning phenomenon, nor is it even the simple development of a new way of life based on a different kind of social and economic organization. Suburbanization is both a frantic effort to keep contamination at bay and a kind of infection from within, a monstrous, alien, or viral form of life growing inside the social body threatening to seize control of its rational functions.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that anxieties about suburbia find expression in genres attuned to ideas of horror and menace. And here I will shift the focus of my analysis from Britain to America and from the turn of the century to the contemporary moment. This may seem an altogether too dramatic temporal and geographical leap, but I want to stress the continuities in the representations of suburbia in Great Britain and the United States. As in Britain, the expansion of suburbia in America occurred in tandem with fears of contamination and urban degradation and dilapidation. American suburban development even has its analogues to Mrs Beeton and John Claudius Loudon in Catherine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing. In *The American Woman's Home, or the Principles of Domestic Science* (1869), Catherine Beecher (writing with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe) notes that the book's detailed recommendations for the maintenance of a healthy home are "chiefly applicable to the wants and habits of those living either in the country or in suburban vicinities

as give space or ground for healthful outdoor occupation in the family service” (quoted in Jackson 63). Andrew Jackson Downing, a landscape designer and writer, also promoted the benefits of country living. Yet, he also recognized the necessity of having the city be accessible by trolley or tram. Downing adapted many of Loudon’s ideas for his American readers, and in *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) he drew heavily on Loudon’s model for suburban villas in order to encourage suburban living in America.<sup>3</sup> Despite this legacy of nineteenth-century American writing on the suburban ideal, my decision here to claim the British situation as productive of the discourses that allow an understanding of contemporary representations of suburbia derives from the fact that, as Robert L. Fishman argues, “American suburbia [began] as a virtual clone of earlier English models” (238). The primacy of the British model is perhaps a consequence of the more rapid growth in urban population in British towns and cities in the early- to mid-nineteenth century than in America. The resulting anxieties about overpopulation, the creation of slums, and public health meant the more rapid expansion of suburbia in Britain and also a greater intensity in the debates about the consequences and significance of suburbanization.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, shifts in global economic power mean that while Britain may be considered the quintessential suburban nation of the nineteenth century, the exponential growth of the affluence and power of the United States thrust it to the forefront of suburban expansion in the twentieth century. The very idea of suburbia in a sense became American, especially by the mid-twentieth century when images of middle-class America, families ensconced in suburban cul-de-sacs, were broadcast virtually world-wide via television. Anti-suburban rhetoric did not disappear altogether in the boom years of early twentieth-century America or during the Depression. It persisted in the terms already set out by Arnold and his less restrained followers of the *fin de siècle*. Likewise, the rapid suburban growth of the postwar period was largely accompanied by its celebration. Dissidents existed, and the Beats in particular sought to challenge the conformity

3 For more on both Catherine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing and their importance to the development of a suburban ideal in America, see Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985) and Margaret Marsh’s *Suburban Lives* (1990).

4 For comparisons of the development of suburbia in Britain and the United States, see Robert L. Fishman’s *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (1987) and Mark Clapson’s *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (2003).

they saw as asphyxiating American life and liberty, yet images of the good life in suburbia were hegemonic. The indissociable link between television and post-war American suburbs perhaps facilitated the criticisms that began to appear on the big screen. A film such as *The Graduate* (1967), in which a young man (Dustin Hoffman) is repeatedly told that plastics are the future, constitutes a criticism of the sterility of suburban lives, molded and formed into brittle and uniform shapes in the pursuit of efficiency and progress. Such a high cultural assessment of suburbia, however, is somewhat predictable as it is merely a revised version of the same agonizing about cultural decline that dates back to the origins of modern suburbia itself. More interesting perhaps are a series of films which, using the genre film as a vehicle, aim to bring critiques of suburbia to the suburban audience themselves.

The efflorescence of the genre picture and B movie production in the 1950s and sixties can be tied to widespread suburban development and the reorganization of the American economy that occurred with the emergence of the teenager as a marketing category. That many within this category so quickly grew disenchanted with the idealization of suburban life that had seized the imaginations of their parents made them the model audience for the spectacles of terror and destruction that B movies so frequently offered. B horror movies in particular afforded the opportunity to contemplate the annihilation of a way of life even if in their final moments (and in accordance with generic convention) they prove incapable of following through on that fantasy. *The Blob* (1958) is an ideal example in this instance, as the amorphous titular substance offers itself up to any number of allegorical readings—Communist infiltration, nuclear anxiety, and overflow of consumer desire to name just three—without signaling definitively a proper interpretation. It certainly could be interpreted as an attack on the growth of suburbia, and, if so, it would be a cinematic realization of Masterman's image of London's late Victorian suburbs "pushing outwards like some gigantic plasmodium: spreading slimy arms over the surrounding fields, heavily dragging after them the ruin of its desolation" (*In Peril* 163). Nevertheless, an allegory such as *The Blob* only anticipates films in which criticisms of suburbia are directly leveled. It is in a later generation of films, which draw on the energies of the B horrors of the fifties but are made either under the auspices of major studios or under differing economic conditions that separate them from their cinematic forerunners, that the problem of suburbia is openly engaged: *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978).

These films return us to the question of interiority since each of them narrativizes the deepest horrors of contemporary life in terms of cognitive hijacking, or being taken over from within so that one's body becomes the vehicle for something or someone else. Each film, whatever other generic commitments operating simultaneously, relies on a Gothic frame in order to express this horror. Kim Ian Michasiw argues that the emergence of this species of suburban Gothic, defined primarily by fears of cultural homogenization and degradation, occurs in conjunction with efforts to theorize the psychological effects of full immersion in commodity capitalism:

This sort of anxiety finds gothic frames in tales—told both at the drive-in and at the height of social theory—of cloning, podding, one dimensionality, mass uniformity that have distinctly traceable genealogical relations to more recent suburban gothics. (Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is index enough of this.) (244)

While Don Siegel's original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) expressed fears of Communist takeover, the remake seizes on the allegorical possibilities of alien invasion in order to formulate a critique of the emptiness of contemporary consumer culture. In this scenario, the suburbanite is posited as the ideal subject of the capitalist injunction to consume and thus is construed as a figure of horror for those who imagine themselves resistant to the sirens' call. In George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, zombification serves largely the same allegorical purpose. Pursued by an ever-growing legion of the undead, the still-living heroes of Romero's film decide to barricade themselves within a suburban shopping mall. Such a scenario enables Romero to assert an equivalence between mindless zombies and eager suburban shoppers and thereby facilitates the film's criticism of American consumerism. Despite the seeming crassness of this formulation, the choice is an inspired one in the way it expresses fears of conformity in terms of a loss of subjectivity. Zombies, quite simply, are after your brain, and it would be difficult to formulate a metaphor that more directly communicates the fear of succumbing wholesale to the logic of consumer capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

5 Zombies have surfaced in recent British cinema as well. In Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) a blood-borne virus transforms those who are infected into zombies. Far from the lumbering zombies of Romero's films, Boyle's zombies are driven by a murderous rage. The film follows a group of three uninfected characters who must traverse the hazardous space of London's suburban hub to make it to the relative safety of the countryside. Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) finds as much humour as menace in its zombies and, in contrast

The third of these examples brings us closer to *[Safe]* in the way that it engages with questions of gender and suburbia. The satirical force of *The Stepford Wives*, directed by Bryan Forbes, lies in its dystopic presentation of suburbia as the ideal locale for reactionary male fantasies. Whereas the zombies of *Dawn of the Dead* are a threat to everyone, *The Stepford Wives* focuses on the way in which suburban life threatens to strip women of their subjectivity. Although Donna Haraway would later seize upon the cyborg as a possible model for contemporary feminist agency, *The Stepford Wives* draws on the earlier, and again Gothic, tradition of the automaton in order to express the horror of becoming a suburban housewife. Despite the campiness perhaps inevitable in a scenario that involves sexy robots, the film is at moments genuinely horrific, especially in the way it presents the protagonist's reaction to the transformation of the women around her. While the scenes in which the robot-wives stroke the egos of their husbands are predictably disturbing, perhaps more interesting are those which see them enthusiastically maintaining their suburban homes. The desire to eradicate dirt is presented as being at the deepest level of programming, a more significant sign of submission than even the sexual servicing of masculine fantasies. However, the drive to maintain the spotless interior of the suburban home is where the allegory seems the most threadbare, since the robot is granted a humanizing neurosis. As such, it is at this moment that the film most directly addresses the fear hitherto cloaked by its elaborate allegorization, namely that the Stepford Wives are not a result of a technologically facilitated conspiracy but, rather, are simply an amplification of the everyday demands placed on suburban women. Consciousness is not replaced by cybernetic programming but commandeered from the inside by a reactionary anti-feminist ideology.<sup>6</sup>

One final example of how B movie tropes are used to criticize contemporary suburban life bears mentioning since it anticipates the way in which *[Safe]* formulates its fears of the toxicity of everyday chemical agents. Joel Schumacher's *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (1982) tells the story of a suburban housewife, Pat Kramer (Lily Tomlin), who, due

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to Boyle's efforts to connect zombification with anxieties about infection and fears of bioterrorism, Wright's film directly aligns zombies with consumption and suburbanization. In a memorable early scene, the protagonist walks to and from the corner shop, failing to notice that all around him have turned into zombies.

6 That both *The Stepford Wives* and *Dawn of the Dead* were remade in 2004 suggests that these concerns about the connections between consumerism, suburbia, and the irrational persist today, albeit in heavily ironized and somewhat blunted forms compared to the critical edges of the originals.

to prolonged exposure to cleaning products, begins to diminish in size. The original *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, directed by Jack Arnold and released in 1957, used its protagonist's dwindling stature to express anxieties of emasculation. It addressed fears of cultural homogenization common to the late fifties and is a variation on the dread of becoming, to borrow the title of Sloan Wilson's influential 1955 novel, just another suburban man in a grey flannel suit. With its female protagonist, Schumacher's film presents shrinking as a metaphor for the way in which suburban life steals from women their sense of self-worth. Pat is aligned entirely with the domestic, and her obsessive maintenance of her suburban home is fueled by the demands of consumer culture. She strives to attain the levels of pristine cleanliness promised by television advertisements, yet the products which this maintenance requires turn out to be the cause of her symptoms. *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* does venture criticisms of both consumer culture and women's subordinate status, but the film's satiric edge is blunted completely by its conclusion, which has Pat regain full stature after shrinking into a mix of household products. In this way, the film ultimately functions as little more than an apology for the very system it seems at moments to criticize.

What *[Safe]* retains from these cinematic antecedents is the manner in which horror film tropes are used to capture the fear of the protagonist. Unlike *Dawn of the Dead* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, both of which are driven by the fear of becoming suburban, in *[Safe]* suburbanization is already a fait accompli and the film's horror derives from Carol's increasing alienation from, and reaction to, her privileged existence. Haynes's camera frequently frames Carol in long shot, thereby borrowing a visual convention from the horror film to emphasize both her isolation and vulnerability. She is uncertain about what is happening to her and why, but, despite being told by her husband, her doctors, and even her friends that it is all in her head, she remains firm in her conviction that she is sick and that her symptoms are not simply psychosomatic but have exterior causes.<sup>7</sup> It is only after she attends the seminar held by the new age ecological group that she is able to assign meaning to her illness, understanding herself to be,

7 Haynes's *Superstar: The Story of Karen Carpenter* (1987) also explored the ways in which an illness that had not yet truly been accepted as legitimate by the medical community had catastrophic effects on a woman's life. This earlier film by Haynes is unconventional in its use of Barbie dolls to tell the story of its ailing protagonist. Nevertheless, it is an incisively satiric commentary not only on the demands of fame and of femininity, but also on how the excesses of seventies consumer capitalism and the pervasive corruption of American political culture functioned as a kind of environmental cause of Carpenter's illness.

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in the words of the group's video, "allergic to the twentieth century." While it is helpful to identify with greater temporal and geographical precision the trigger of Carol's allergies, it is dangerous to wrench the diagnosis entirely from its broader historical terms. Suburban Los Angeles may be the place where the confusions and contradictions of the contemporary moment find their fullest articulation, but Carol's very specific experience there holds the key to understanding symptoms of malaise occurring elsewhere. As such, *[Safe]* is a film that invites its viewers inside suburbia as a means of understanding the wider world. If suburbia is a distillation of the contemporary age, the place where the cultural logic of the present moment is expressed in its purest form, any simple repudiation of it evades the difficult task of understanding its properties. *[Safe]* offers an alternate model. It invites us inside suburbia and demands that we identify with its ailing protagonist so that we may understand how her symptoms may be ours as well.

The film begins with an extended traveling shot which takes the spectator deeper and deeper into suburbia, eventually arriving at an enormous mock-Tudor home complete with wrought-iron gate and flourishing front garden. The sequence is shot from the vantage point of the passenger seat, a subordinate, feminized position that invites identification with Carol, but the landscape is rendered alien by the eerie bluish glow of the streetlights and the total absence of street life. The Whites' corner of the San Fernando Valley is characteristic of what Mike Davis describes as the "security-driven logic of urban enclavization" (244). In *City of Quartz*, Davis stresses how the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a "post-liberal Los Angeles, where the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed-response'" (223).<sup>8</sup> The secure lifelessness of the suburban streets is matched by the cold blankness of the house itself, marked above all by its pristine hygienic surfaces and the meticulousness of its interior

8 In what is probably the film's most brutally satiric scene, it acknowledges white suburbia's fear of the racialized inner city that Davis sees as primary motivating factor in the construction of what he terms "Fortress L. A." At the family dinner table, Carol's stepson Rory reads a school essay in which suburban fantasies of gang warfare are given a full airing. It concludes on the ominous note that, "Today, black and Chicano gangs are coming into the valleys and white areas more and more." When Carol asks why it has to be so gory, Rory retorts, "That's the way it really is," his father nodding in agreement. Carol's unease gives voice to her disagreement with the racism of father and son, even if she is unable to express it aloud. For more on the way in which the film forges a series of connections between whiteness, suburbia, healthiness, and normative heterosexuality, see both Potter and Davis.

design. Haynes's wide-angle lens captures the horizontal spaciousness that characterizes suburban architecture even in those locales where the price of land should make such expansiveness impossible. The furniture is arranged in symmetries more disturbing than elegant, and the interior design eschews the florid kitschiness that made many eighties interiors seem the pastel-obsessed descendents of Victorian design, opting instead for a minimal aesthetic that employs a cool palette and flat glossy surfaces to evoke a wholly passionless precision.

The sterility of the suburban interior is matched by the lifelessness of the Whites' marriage. Shot from above, with a rigidly passive Carol staring vacantly at the camera while her husband grunts his way to orgasm, their sexual relationship seems wholly devoid of emotion, and Carol in particular is represented as experiencing nothing inside. Through this opening sequence, *[Safe]* establishes several levels of interiority in order to establish an analogical relation between them. The film takes the spectator inside suburbia, then into the suburban home and bedroom, before finally delving into the psyche of its protagonist. Each level is characterized by a blankness, the material environment of suburbia an expression of Carol's inner emptiness at the same time that the barrenness of the suburban landscape and the blandness of her own home seem a cause of Carol's emotional vacancy.

Carol's world is initially thrown into disarray when a black sofa set arrives instead of the teal one she had ordered. Her horrified reaction exposes her psychic fragility, and Haynes shoots the sequence in a manner that generates a level of tension worthy of Hitchcock. It is as if Carol has discovered a corpse in her living room rather than furnishings of the wrong colour. Yet this scene is telling in the way that it connects Carol's psychological stability with the carefully maintained order of her home. On her way back from lodging a complaint about the delivery of the wrong sofa set, Carol finds herself stuck behind a truck spewing exhaust fumes. The coughing fit this triggers is the first in a catalogue of symptoms Carol begins to exhibit. Her illness develops in the face of an ostensibly healthy lifestyle. As she confesses to her doctor, she has no vices and is "a total milkaholic." The inclusion of this seemingly innocuous detail exemplifies the way in which the film broaches the idea that what seems most pure, natural, and healthy may actually be the vehicle for toxins and a cause of illness. Pollutants trigger Carol's symptoms but so too do cleaning agents and other chemicals used to deodorize and sanitize the world. Although Carol is scarcely involved in the cleaning of her own home—she is very much the mistress of the household that Mrs Beeton imagines, manag-

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ing its maintenance rather actually doing it herself—she is exposed to the harsh agents her servants use to keep her house sterile. As well, the film catalogues the extent to which women in particular are subjected to chemical exposure in the form of perfumes, hair styling products, and makeup. When Carol gets a perm, the process is presented in great detail, emphasizing the extended exposure to the harsh chemicals that have become a naturalized part of the construction of femininity. As the hairdresser puts the finishing touches on Carol's new head of curls, Carol's nose begins to bleed. She, and the women in the salon, react in horror as the blood stains her pallid complexion. The image itself is grotesque in the way that the blood is presented as a consequence of the production of beauty. The film thus correlates the maintenance of the feminine body and the upkeep of the suburban home, presenting them as toxic experiences that combine to weaken Carol's immune system.

Carol becomes increasingly distressed by her growing weakness as well as by her doctor's persistence that there is nothing medically wrong with her. In this way, she is cast as the hysteric, and her symptoms explained away as purely psychosomatic. She is eventually sent to a psychiatrist who, in contrast to the relative kindness of her family doctor, glares silently at her from behind an enormous oak desk. Carol's body language, as well as the timorousness of her voice, betrays her complete discomfort. After a prolonged silence, she nervously asks the psychiatrist why he is not asking her more questions. His response, "We really need to be hearing from you. What is going on inside you?," once again accuses Carol of being the cause of her own symptoms. Moreover, it is a question Carol is completely incapable of answering. She does not know what is going on inside her physically, while at the same time her superficial suburban existence has left her unable to articulate any sense of an interior consciousness. Later, when the stress of her accumulating symptoms causes her to break down, Carol does not ask her husband, "Who am I?," but instead asks, "Where am I ... right now?" That she expresses her loss of identity in spatial and temporal terms indicates the extent to which her subjectivity is inextricable from her environment. And when that environment betrays her, causing her to become gravely ill, she loses all sense of orientation and no longer understands who she is.

Given this total loss of identity, it is perhaps not surprising that Carol so enthusiastically embraces the idea that she suffers from environmental illness, or EI. Indeed, the video on EI that Carol watches begins with a full-screen graphic asking, "Who are you?," the implication of course being that the program will answer the most basic question of identity. After

self-diagnosing herself as suffering from EI, Carol is to a certain extent revitalized and implements a complex vitamin, diet, and oxygen regimen to rebuild her immunity. This is not to say, however, that she does not have EI or that EI does not exist. Rather, it is that she derives a certain enjoyment from being able to assign the cause of her symptoms a name. Having lunch with her friend, Carol rambles enthusiastically about her illness, its causes, and what she must do in order to manage her symptoms. There is little question of eliminating the symptoms entirely, and one gets the sense that Carol would now be more than a little lost without them. In Lacanian terms, Carol enjoys her symptom, and she organizes her life around her affliction. As Slavoj Žižek explains, what the symptom provides is a gravitational centre around which everything else can fall into place. For this reason, “even after the completed interpretation, the subject is not prepared to renounce his symptom,” primarily because it serves as “a way for the subject to organize his enjoyment” (74). Again, this is not to say that Carol’s symptoms are not real or that they do not have an environmental cause. Rather, it is an effort to understand the ways in which the comprehension of an illness yields a type of pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Haynes’s film readily accepts the idea that EI is a legitimate syndrome and does not look condescendingly on Carol’s elaborate efforts to conform to a program of rehabilitation that would have been in 1995, let alone in 1987, looked at askance by the medical community.<sup>10</sup> Yet at the same time, it does remain critical of the desire to alleviate symptoms without addressing their cause. As part of the process of rebuilding her immunity, Carol constructs a “safe haven” inside her own home, a toxin-free zone that serves as a refuge

9 As Gaye Naismith suggests, this provides another way of understanding the protective brackets that are part of the film’s title: “The brackets that enclose the word ‘safe’ in the film’s title point to the way Carol seeks to secure a sense of identity by conforming to the roles expected of her within such closed systems as patriarchy, medicine, and alternative therapies—discourses that seemingly offer orderly, rational, and complete answers. Yet *[Safe]* leaves the viewer far from reassured that any reductive system, even an alternative one, can fully satisfy our individual needs and desires or represent the totality of our identity” (363).

10 *[Safe]* can to a certain extent be read as an allegory for the AIDS epidemic, yet a number of factors, including the fact that AIDS co-exists in the world with EI, suggest that it is better read as more general commentary on the complexity of the reaction to immuno-deficiency syndromes (including AIDS, but also Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) on both the personal and social levels. Haynes’s earlier film, *Poison* (1990), more directly engages with the stigmatization of AIDS in eighties America, albeit still in an allegorical way. The second section of this tripartite film, titled “Horror,” draws on the tropes of fifties B-movie science fiction in presenting its parable about panic and contagion.

from the chemically saturated outside world. As stark as a prison cell, and stripped of all but the barest necessities, Carol's safe haven is in effect a desuburbanization of suburbia, an escape from a sanitized environment to a detoxified one. Yet even this does not protect Carol from the hazards of everyday suburban life. When she next goes to the local dry cleaner, she collapses into spasms and is rushed to the hospital.

The film does not extend the sympathy it has for those who suffer from EI to the new age and holistic enterprises whose philosophies cater to those who are catastrophically ill. Carol's decision to go to Wrenwood, a recovery community located in the desert, is a sign of her sheer desperation. The reprieve from her symptoms she experiences as part of the euphoria of identifying their cause comes to an end, and she grows even more sensitive to her environment. What Wrenwood offers Carol is an ongoing affirmation of her identity as a sick person, insulating her from the outside world and promising to transform her illness into a positive and enlightening experience. *[Safe]* restrains from any direct censure of new age communities such as Wrenwood, indulging in certain stereotypes—the balding “new man” guru, the wide-eyed adulation of his acolytes, their use of a programmatic vocabulary—but is careful not to render it wholly as caricature. The force of *[Safe]* would be diminished if the spectator's sympathy for Carol was jeopardized by too caustic a depiction of new age philosophies. The film develops its criticisms of the Wrenwood methodology in a much more organic manner, sitting in with Carol on the exercises and activities that structure her day. In doing so, it enables an understanding of the appeal of Wrenwood's gentle affirmations for someone as vulnerable as Carol but also reveals the more pernicious and exploitative aspects of the group's philosophy. It offers salvation, but only at the cost of self-blame. Wrenwood patients are told that “the only person who can make you sick is you,” and as such they must bear the burden of their own illness. But this acceptance of personal culpability serves only to absolve society at large of any responsibility for the creation of toxic environments.

*[Safe]* looks on in horror as its protagonist is drawn further into the world of Wrenwood. At the film's end, Carol retreats to a wholly sterile environment, a porcelain “igloo” that has the appearance of a futuristic stain on the ancient desert landscape. She seems to commit herself fully to the Wrenwood philosophy, and the final image of Carol inside the igloo is a symbol of her desire to hide inside Wrenwood's explanations of illness. Yet some consolation lies in Carol's inability to utter with any conviction the mantra that she has been told is the key to her recovery: “I love you.”

In Carol's unconscious resistance to the Wrenwood philosophy, there is perhaps a measure of hope, a recognition that the alleged cure is simply a different kind of illness. The mild optimism of such a conclusion is a world apart from the redemption usually offered by medical melodramas. Carol's decline resists translation into the usual story of a noble struggle against disease or the tragic acceptance of fate. Yet what *[Safe]* facilitates is an understanding of illness as a sign of profound social disequilibrium. As such, it suggests that any effort to alleviate symptoms that does not address their underlying cause will result only in their recurrence and mutation. Furthermore, it exemplifies the way in which individual symptoms are frequently severed from their larger, social causes. Illness is internalized, and the sufferer is found guilty of his or her own suffering in order to absolve society of its liability.

This returns us to the question of suburbia itself, which in the creation of a hygienic space, set apart from and barricaded against the contaminations that plague the wider world, likewise seems an effort to escape the symptoms generated by the contradictions of a capitalist society. The suburbs, after all, were a result of the partial implementation of Chadwick's recommendations. And while Chadwick was not calling for the dismantling of Victorian capitalism, a fellow investigator of the conditions of the Victorian slums, Friedrich Engels, does suggest that more radical measures are in order: "[T]he cause of the miserable condition of the working class is to be sought, not in these minor grievances, but in the capitalist system itself" (36). In this sense, the development of the Victorian suburb was less a solution to the various problems plaguing Britain than an effort to evade them. And this is perhaps why the suburbs have been reimagined in contemporary culture as a space of illness. Sickness has caught up with the suburbs. The parade of aliens, zombies, and robots that have hitherto served as vehicles for the expression of anxieties of suburbanization have given way to chemical contamination as a means to articulate the fear that society itself is toxic. Suburbia, its immunity weakened by years of artificial isolation, is no longer safe from contamination. At stake in the medical discourses that pathologize suburbia is the health of the social body in its totality. What *[Safe]* challenges in the longer history of suburban representations is the notion that the symptom can be identified, pathologized, and cured in isolation. Provocatively, this film breaks with the diagnostic tradition of anti-suburban discourse to insist that spectators—urban, suburban, or even rural—identify with its protagonist and recognize her symptoms as their own. Ultimately, this film asks that the suburbs no longer serve as the terrain of metropolitan displacement for

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contamination.

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larger collective anxieties about the vacuity of modern life. The suburbs are not liminal spaces that must be either amputated or quarantined; they are spaces both integrated and integral to the functioning of the social body. As such, they are not sick in themselves but are instead a sign of a more pervasive disease, the cure for which must encompass the totality. The solution, therefore, is not to maintain an urban disdain for the suburbs. Nor is it to retreat further, to build other, new suburbias elsewhere. The challenge is to go inside, to recognize suburbia as a contradictory and contested terrain, and to understand the cause of the symptom to be the social system itself.

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