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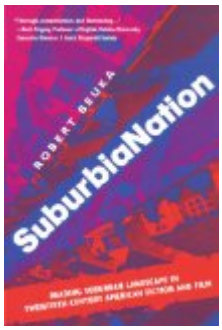

Robert Beuka. *Suburbianation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xi + 284 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4039-6340-6.

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No movement in American history has provoked more anxiety in its "happy" participants than the migration to the suburbs. The generation that bought its homes with federally-subsidized mortgages and perfected the backyard barbecue also worried over the skeptical portrayals of suburban conformity in novels by Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), and John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956). And, as Robert Beuka points out in this study of post-World War II novels and films, the readers who made *The New Yorker* their guidebook to suburban taste and style also learned from the short stories published in its pages by John Cheever, John Updike, and Ann Beattie that their neighborsâ?? well-trimmed hedges concealed financial fraud, gender insecurity, sexual infidelity, social exclusion, and spreading paranoia.

Unlike Catherine Jurcaâ??s *White Diaspora* (2001), which found suburban themes in unexpected places, *SuburbiaNation* considers classic texts.[1] Beukaâ??s method in each chapter is to pair a fictional portrayal of suburban life with a Hollywood film. He starts with two American landscapes--the Long Island Gold Coast in F. Scott Fitzgeraldâ??s novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and the small town in Frank Capraâ??s film, "Itâ??s a Wonderful Life" (1946). Then he moves forward to the years when the suburbs were perceived as both a glorious opportunity and a troubling problem.

John Cheeverâ??s suburban sequence, *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, is paired with Frank and Eleanor Perryâ??s film of one of Cheever's most anthologized short stories, "The Swimmer." Beuka convincingly shows that Eleanor Perryâ??s script and Frank Perryâ??s direction do much more than simply adapt Cheeverâ??s original story. They give an even harsher portrayal than Cheever to the economic anxieties that underlie Shady Hill, and, with Burt Lancaster enacting the role of Neddy Merrill (with Lancaster's magnificent but aging body), they pay close attention to what Beuka labels the "imperiled suburban male."

Gender anxieties, indeed, provide the focus of the next two chapters. We have long known that the post-World War II suburb seemed a place of confinement to women and Beuka explores that

theme in Ann Beattieâ??s novel, ***Falling in Place*** (1980), and Brian Forbesâ?? film, "The Stepford Wives" (1975). The suburbs provoked a crisis as well for the men who tried to be authoritative fathers in a world built for mothers and child raising. I had never thought of John Updikeâ??s ***Rabbit Redux*** (1971) and Mike Nicholsâ?? film "The Graduate" as related works but Beuka convincingly treats Benjamin Braddock and Harry Angstrom as opposite ends of the same scale. It is almost as if Nichols and Updike had agreed ahead of time to divvy up their subject matter--the filmmaker showing baffled youth, broad lawns, and swimming pools; the novelist exploring defeated middle-age in a raw suburb tied to a declining rust-belt city.

I nearly laughed out loud when I saw Gloria Naylorâ??s trenchantly satirical novel ***Linden Hills*** (1985) and Reginald Hudlinâ??s carefree film "House Party" (1990) sharing the same chapter but Beuka dispelled my doubts. He demonstrates that Hudlinâ??s attention to the correlations between landscape, race, and personal destiny is as careful as Naylorâ??s. Blacks were excluded not just from the physical suburb but from the vision of suburban paradise. Naylorâ??s novel implies that black suburbanites are imitating a dubious white version of utopia. On the other hand, Beuka shows that "House Party" portrays blacks claiming the "good things" that they have been historically denied. Taken together, the novel and film regard the suburbs with even more violently mixed emotions than those that Beuka traces in the work of Cheever, Updike, and Nichols.

The final chapter turns to representations of suburbia in the film and fiction of the last decade. It is shorter and less satisfactory than those that precede it, but it nonetheless poses stimulating questions. Beuka makes the important point that the image of suburbia has scarcely evolved. If anything, it has become nostalgic. as films like Robert Zemeckisâ??s "Back to the Future" (1985) and Todd Haynes's "Far from Heaven" (2002) return us insistently to the 1950s. A film like Sam Mendesâ??s "American Beauty" (1999), which is not nostalgic, nevertheless repeats the now traditional indictment of the suburb as a place that is repressive and alienating. This static suburban imagery seems odd given that the suburbs have continued to change. As Beuka notes, Levittown doesnâ??t look like Levittown any more. Shouldnâ??t representations of the suburb show more variation?

Nearly at the end of his book, Beuka cites four works that do indeed hint at a change: D. J. Waldieâ??s memoir, ***Holy Land***; Jeffrey Eugenidesâ??s novel, ***The Virgin Suicides***; Mark Salzmanâ??s memoir, ***Lost in Place: Growing Up Absurd in Suburbia*** (1995); and Pam Conradâ??s short story sequence for children, ***Our House: The Stories of Levittown*** (1995). This list will undoubtedly grow longer as time passes and critics will soon recognize that a new phase in suburban representation has begun. Increasingly, novels about the suburbs will be written by people who, unlike Cheever, Updike, and Beattie, were born and raised in them. They will present a world in which the suburbs occupy nearly the entire field of vision with only an occasional glimpse of the distant city. And they will be books in which events of suburban life are not so much seen as remembered. The suburbs will have generated their own history and their own mythology. We can see these trends emerging in Alice McDermottâ??s novel, ***That Night*** (1988), in David Beers's memoir, ***Blue Sky Dream***, in Tom Martinsonâ??s memoir, ***American Dreamscape***, and in Frederick Reikenâ??s novel, ***Lost Legends of New Jersey*** (2000).[2] When and if someone follows up on ***SuburbiaNation*** in a few decades, surely they will acknowledge that Robert Beuka gave us a classic account of the first phase of suburban representations and then proceed to discuss the second, quite different, phase that began just as his book was published.

Notes

[1]. Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth Century American Novel* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2]. Alice McDermott, *That Night* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988); David Beers, *Blue Sky Dream: A Memoir of America's Fall From Grace* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); Tom Martinson, *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2000); and Frederick Reiken, *The Lost Legends of New Jersey* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).