The American Psycho(sis) Goes Suburbia. Madness, Depravity, and Gender in Domestic Topographies

Dorota WIŚNIEWSKA

Department of American Literature and Culture
Institute of English
University of Łódź, Poland
wisnia1217@yahoo.com

Recibido: 15.09.2012
Aceptado: 30.09.2012

ABSTRACT
While the home had always been an important concept in American culture, the suburban home was unique. Unlike the urban neighborhood, the suburban home or the rural farm were founded on their separation from both the world of work and from the world of others. Removed from the hustle and bustle of the urban neighborhood, the suburban and rural homes became a private island that turned increasingly inward.
The following essay presents the examples of American productions that center upon the violation of home sanctuary, in which the suburban or rural house becomes radically unhomelike. It points to some instances in which such dwellings also form their abundant secluded spaces, nurture psychopathic carryover, projecting a "lived in" character in the most distressing sense.

Key words: American Gothic, suburbia, home, gender, psychosis.

La psico(sis) americana va a los suburbios. Locura, depravación y género en las topografías domésticas

RESUMEN
Aunque el hogar ha sido siempre un concepto importante en la cultura americana, el hogar suburbano fue único. A diferencia del vecindario urbano, el hogar suburbano o la granja rural se basaban en la separación, tanto del mundo del trabajo, como del mundo de los otros. Apartados del bullicio del vecindario urbano, los hogares suburbanos y rurales se convirtieron en un mundo aparte, privado, de mayor introspección.
El presente ensayo ofrece ejemplos de producciones americanas, centradas en la violación del hogar como santuario, donde la casa rural o suburbana se convierte en justo todo lo contrario a lo que representa un hogar. El ensayo presenta algunos ejemplos en los que estos hogares crean también sus abundantes espacios de reclusión, retroalimentación psicopática, proyectando un personaje que vive dentro, en su sentido más angustioso.

Palabras clave: Gótico americano, suburbio, hogar, género, psicosis.

ISSN: 2171-6080
http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_INFE.2012.v3.41136

The conventional Gothic text centers on a building. Whether and old castle, dilapidating mansion, or a remote family house, it is a gloomy and grotesquely ornamented repository of ghosts, dark inclinations of its inhabitants, and overall transgression. In his discussion of major shifts in the twentieth-century American Gothic fiction, Fred Botting notices a major departure from the tradition; the "domestication" of Gothic styles and devices within realistic settings and modes of writing. "The architectural and feudal background," he continues, "the wild landscapes, the aristocratic villains and sentimental heroines, were no longer objects of terror. Domestic, industrial and urban contexts and aberrant individuals provided the loci for mystery and terror. Haunting pasts were the ghosts of family transgression and guilty concealment; the dark alleyways of cities were the gloomy forests and subterranean labyrinths; criminals were the new villains, cunning and corrupt." (Botting, 1996: 123).

The increasing concern about the peculiar relationship of the individual to urban surroundings so frequently found in many discourses led to a rich representation of the city in American literature and film. What we see today as urban gothic has its roots in the close connection between architectural construction and the psychological experience of characters. Paradoxically, it is in this "urban product," where the paranoia and persecution of the characters is figured most vividly with reference to settings constructed by people yet unknowable by the individual.

While the city home had always been an important concept in Gothic imagery and in American culture, the suburban home was unique. Unlike the urban neighborhood, the suburban home or the rural farm were founded on their separation from both the world of work and from the world of others.

Although a suburban home is, undoubtedly, a modern structure from the labor world of an American town, the model seems to have medieval origins and not without real historical precedents. The predator Gilles de Rais in fifteenth-century France ruled over a detached from the neighborhood mansion of horrors wherein children kidnapped from nearby villages were subjected to abominations and dismembered in the chambers of his privileged property. Elizabeth Batory would feast on the flesh and bath in the blood of the aboriginal virgins in her remote fortress.

While an American suburban home is not a medieval fortress, it retains the Gothic remoteness, elaborateness, and seclusion that lend themselves to horrifying occurrences.

Similarly to their Gothic predecessors, American suburban dwellings are frequently depicted as places of ruins, paradoxically not always ancient but often decaying, presenting a state of death-in-life. "Houses, these properties of terror, are ones that, should we imagine horrible things unfolding, we should imagine them unfolding there – in "evilly shadowed seaports of death and blasphemy" (Lovecraft, 31).

In the following essay I am going to present the examples of American productions that center upon the symbolic infringement of home sanctuary, in which the suburban house becomes radically unhomelike and leads its inhabitants to insanity, depravity, and transgression. I am also going to point to some instances in which such dwellings also form their abundant secluded spaces since, as Gary Cross in *Visions of Suburbia* observes, the underlying motive of suburbanization was "the desire for domestic seclusion." (Cross, 1997: 109). Removed from the hustle and commotion of the urban neighborhood, the suburban home became a private island that turned increasingly inward.

Before I proceed my discussion any further and examine the particular examples illustrating the concept of "violated and violating suburbs" in American Gothic film, it is essential to understand what brought a significant part of American society to such logistic and cultural transferal.

The end of the 1950s was in the United States a time of both optimism and narcissism. While the Cold War still simmered under the surface, America was finally free from military conflicts, the economy was booming, and Americans were increasingly able to pursue their own individual pleasures. This cultural comfort and security seemed to be fueled, in part, by the cultural logic of containment: cultural and, indeed, global anxieties were repressed and suppressed within an optimistic veil of ignorance. On the verge of the decades, Americans were clearly willing to escape from the cultural problems ubiquitous in their society: racial injustice and turmoil, the continuing danger of the impinging Communism, and the encroaching teenage rock and roll culture that was challenging and often trespassing the notions of family and morality.

For many Americans – particularly those who were white and middle class – the cultural means of escaping their problems and anxieties involved retreating to the suburbs. While Americans have been drifting out to the regions surrounding their major urban areas since the late nineteenth century, it was in the 1950s that the move to the suburbs became a flood (Tobin, 106). Motivated by a complex mixture of upward economic mobility, fear of minorities and immigrants, and a pervasive cultural sense of the wickedness of the cities, American families were creating a new culture of automobiles, commuters, television, and "bedroom communities." The birth of suburbia had begun.

At its core, the cultural move from urban life to suburban life was also the result of a thriving U.S. economy. "The end of the Second World War saw America as the leading power of global politics and economics. (…) By the end of the 1950s, however, America's economic growth had become less about production and more about consumption" (Reisman, 1958: 375). Americans increasingly defined their success by what they bought rather than by the objects they made.

Suburban Americans spent their days in urban office buildings where they made enough money to afford their suburban homes and the automobiles that took them back and forth. David Reisman, writing in 1958, called this a "revolt against industry," a cultural shift away from factory and industrial life and towards the emerging "leisure class" – a shifting integral to the new suburban culture (ibid). With the diminishing importance of work, at least the traditional notions of industrial work, suburban culture defined itself through conspicuous consumption, the purchase of large, flashy new products as a means of defining cultural status. Roger Silverstone's diagnose is painfully blunt: "suburban culture is a consuming culture" (Silverstone, 1997: 8). Suburban Americans craved for the newest, largest, most advanced products: new cars, new gadgets, new fashions.

The shift from work to consumption as the defining element of cultural worth also led to a transition in the location of cultural meaning. As the consequence, the workplace faded from cultural importance, and a suburban culture focused its energy on the family home as the center of life. Having achieved domestic seclusion, the suburbanite was seen as both isolated and confined in his surreal dwelling. The weekends were spent working on the yard, the weekdays filled with work and childcare; the suburban home was, potentially, a trap and one particularly dangerous for women (Mower, 1958: 157). Reisman voiced the general concern, "When the husband goes off with the car (…), the wife is frequently either privatized at home, or must herself, to escape isolation, take a job which will help support her own car, as well as the baby-sitter" (Reisman, 1958: 387). As David Reisman further suggests, suburban life substantially affected gender and familial relations. On the one hand, the suburban home was a space of women's domestication where women were, by and large, left alone in their isolated home with a variety of domestic duties.

It seems evident from the above that the idealized suburban home embodied the paradox of the prosperous late fifties. The sense of security and domestic bliss, together with the technological innovations – freezers, washers, dryers, televisions, and automobiles – freed the homemaker from the daily chores of shopping, washing and seeking information or entertainment, but the freedom from daily necessities was limited by the overwhelming sense of isolation swaddled in the suburban vision. Families achieved their dream of conspicuous consumption – a spectacular showcase home in an affluent suburb – but the dark underside was a sense of confinement, isolation, confusion and often degeneration.

No coincidence, in the 1950s, Roger Corman decided to orchestrate his own revival of classical Gothic material in the scenery that to contemporary Americans looked strangely familiar. Appropriately enough, he chose "The Fall of the House of Usher" by American writer Edgar Allan Poe as his source material. To dispatch some hesitation on the part of the producers who doubted the scenario's potential to scare the audience, when asked: "Where is the monster?" he promptly relied: "The house is

the monster" (Wood and Lippe, 1997: 79). For Roderick Usher, of course, the house was the monster because it embodied the "foul thoughts and foul deeds" of his ancestors. For the 1950s American audience it was also this remote gothic house with its aristocratic, affluent and degenerated inhabitants that strangely reverberated with chills only American suburbia could offer. In Poe's story, Roderick summons a childhood friend to his isolated New England home to comfort him while he anxiously awaits his sister's return from the grave. Corman's film makes Roderick extremely possessive of his sister, and attributes his guilt over her death to a repressed lust for her. Significantly, in the film, it is Madeline's suitor, not Roderick's childhood friend, who comes to visit when Madeline becomes ill. Roderick watches the young lovers closely, forbidding Madeline to leave the house of Usher and spread their "diseased" blood any further. After her death, Roderick laments: "Once this land was fertile. The Earth yielded its riches at harvest time. There were trees and plant life, flowers, fields of grain. There was beauty here…Then a suffering swept across the land and blasted it…and the land withered as before a plague – a plague of evil" (Poe, 1985: 317). Madeline's suitor has seen this ruin – the burned-out, post-war landscape surrounding the house, and the faded, sterile décor of the house itself. The once fertile and bucolic, now desolate, austere and barren setting is emblematic of Roderick's madness, his ultimate loss of hope.

The 1970s suburban Amityville house in which its inhabitants would nurture their morbid obsessions and fragile minds might come as a deserving descendant of Corman's (and Poe's) heritage. *The Amityville Horror* – adapted from a bestselling novel by Jay Anson, who based his story on real-life events - turns the illusion of safety in suburbia into wreck. It paints a portrait of a family tormented by questions of economic viability. The horror begins when widower George Lutz impulsively marries a divorcee with three kids, then sinks all of his money into a Long Island dream house. His friends ridicule the idea and call George's sanity into question. The financial burdens of George's new life indeed begin to fray his nerves; he starts spending more and more quality time with his trusty ax and the friends' words begin to seem prophetic. The Lutz family finally flees in the middle of he night as their home and all their belongings are liquidated – the entire house bleeds out into a thick, gooey black bile.

One of the classic horror film sequences that lays bare the lack of safety and support culturally associated with American suburbia, is the one from John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) is running down the block, desperately banging on the doors of her neighbors. Her cries are ignored, and she eventually must face the killer Michael Myers on her own. Carpenter's film clearly resonated with the typical American youth. This resonance may have come from guilt, but it was certainly compounded by the familiarity of the film's setting. Haddonfield is meant to be a generic American suburban town. Horror had, since *Dracula*, been slowly creeping its way closer to the real-life experiences of its

audiences, but even films such as *The Night of the Living Dead* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* placed their horrific scenarios outside the suburban and urban streets familiar to their audiences. *Halloween* was the night that horror came home – to the suburban homes of its audience members. Carpenter's film introduced a kind of "suburban Gothic," in which the horror of the Gothic bogeyman comes to haunt the remarkably familiar streets of the American youth. As the sheriff explains to Dr. Loomis who follows the murderer, "Doctor, do you know what Haddonfield is? Families, children all lined up in rows up and down these streets. You're telling me they are lined up for a slaughterhouse?" *Halloween* most vividly synthesized the Gothic and the suburban.

Another example of the house, which stood long untenanted on the outskirts of a sleepy town, cultivating its nightmares, would be the Marsten house in Stephen King's *Salem's Lot,* as well as in the film based on the novel. A piece of real estate in Portland, Maine, figures in the coming of vampires to Salem's Lot. In a deal involving this valuable site, Lawrence Crockett, a mercenary local estate agent, facilitates the vampire Barlow's acquisition of the evil-ridden Marsten house and his entry into the Salem's Lot community. Here, the tropics of threatened suburban household but also public space are one more expression of the gothic mode's essential preoccupation with decline, wasting, and disintegration; (it is fearful when the guards or the authorities cannot protect and even enable the invasion of the communal place and its integrity is lost.)

The Steven Spielberg-produced *Poltergeist* (1982) is another haunted house story that offers dark shades of the American Dream. It begins during the witching hour, in the cozy suburban California home of Steven and Diane Freeling. Steven has fallen asleep in front of the living room television just as the local station goes off the air, ending the night's broadcast with the poignant rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner." The rest of his family is sleeping soundly, with the exception of Carol Ann – the youngest of the three Freeling children – who is awakened by ghostly whispers. She follows the sound to the living room, where she plants herself in front of the television set and instructs the voices to speak louder. Soon after, the haunting begins – electricity goes haywire, tables and chair begin moving by themselves, and Carol Ann's brother is nearly ingested by an old oak tree. Before the family can escape, Carol Ann is abducted by monsters in her closet and held hostage in a kind of other-wordly dimension surrounding the house. The Freeling family remains in the house, able to communicate with their missing daughter only through the television. Eventually, Steven learns that his own employers are responsible for the haunting – a greedy estate developer built the neighborhood on the top of an old cemetery, without removing the bodies. Thus the skeletons in their closets (not to mention their swimming pool) are literally, skeletons. The family is held hostage by the past until a psychic named Tangina arrives. With the family finally reunited, she prematurely

pronounces the house clean, but the ghosts retaliate, imploding the suburban funhouse before the eyes of the greedy developer.

The Freelings' perturbed reunion throughout the Poltergeist series not only brought to light the greed that consumed the suburban America, but unearthed another explicit aspect of American culture that in the film literally became an ally of evil forces and a channel through which they could enter American family – television.

In his analysis of the suburban community, Gary Cross mentions that "increasingly isolated in the suburban domestic space, Americans spent more and more time watching television, and they saw idealized images of themselves" ("Suburban Weekend" 111). There was also a deeply narcissistic aspect to the correlation between television and the rise of suburbia. Television functioned as a kind of mirror – albeit an unrealistically positive and optimistic mirror – into which suburban Americans could spend hours gazing. The narcissism of television was also, of course, voyeuristic. Television allowed families to spy through the window of other people's lives, seeing their dramas and tragedies, their foibles and follies. Supported by this narcissistic voyeurism, Americans were able to take comfort from their isolation and withdraw further into the optimistic self-gaze of their televised normalcy.

The contemporary American director and film producer, Tim Burton, not only was a "suburban kid" but, as he frequently stressed in numerous interviews, his childhood would pass on watching television.

> "I grew up in suburbia and I still don't understand certain aspects of it. There is a certain kind of vagueness, a blankness.(…) Growing up in suburbia was like growing up in a place were there is no sense of history, no sense of culture, no sense of passion for anything. There was no showing of emotions. (…) You never felt that there was any attachment to things. So you were either forced to conform and cut out a large part of your personality, or to develop a very strong interior life which made you feel separate" (Salisbury, 1997: 91).

The disturbing sense of confinement and "corruption in disguise" in the dreamy scenery of American suburbia has become an ongoing motif in the films of Tim Burton, whose passion for "all things Gothic" resulted in some extraordinary films which evade single categorization. Burton's films certainly reveal his qualities of an inventive cartoonist and animator, as well as his comic-strip sensibility and outstanding visual sense. At the same time they divulge the deep impact of film noir and Gothic tradition on his imagination, but above all they give away his fascination with the surreal and obscure world of American suburbia and its inhabitants.

Discussing the particular appeal that Roger Corman's early films had for him, Burton drew a connection between the American suburbia and a kind of sensitivity is produced in him:

> "Growing up in suburbia, in an atmosphere that was perceived as nice and normal (but which I had other feelings about), those movies were a way to certain feelings, and I related them to the place I was growing up in. I think that's why I responded to Egdar Allan Poe so much. (…) I likened it [living in suburbia] to that of Poe story where the person was walled in and buried alive. Those were my forms of connection to the world around me. It's a mysterious place, Burbanks, the seemingly sleepy suburbs of L.A" (Salisbury, 1997: 72).

The world of Burton's film *Edward Scissorhands* bears conspicuous resemblance to Burbanks. Edward, a young man with scissors instead of hands, lives alone in a dark castle since his inventor died of a heart attack leaving Edward unfinished. His scissors become inconvenient substitute for fingers: his face is a mass of scars, and he tends to shred everything he is trying to handle. The local Avon lady, Peg, discovers him on one of her rounds of the neighborhood and decides to adopt him into her pastel-colored suburban household. At first the neighborhood is intrigued by the unusual newcomer, especially that he reveals particular talents that the "friendly" suburbanites find useful: he can do wildly kitsch topiaries, outlandish hairstyle and elaborate ice sculptures with his scissorhands. He immediately becomes the source of fantasy, gossip, resentment and adoration for the neighbors Peg's daughter, Kim fears Edward at first, but gradually realizes his strangeness is only skin deep. The viewers, on the other hand, soon realize that the affability, openness and hospitality of the locals is equally superficial and illusory.

> "An interesting thing about these neighborhoods is that they are so close together you know everybody, but there is stuff underneath that you just do not know. Sexual stuff. There is a certain kind of kinkiness to suburbia. There was an undercurrent of it when I was growing up. I never saw it specifically, but you certainly go a feeling of it," Burton's reminiscences of his own childhood seem particularly at hand" (Salisbury, 1997: 69).

Behind the façade of cordiality and mutual understanding, the residents of the suburbia are consumed by greed, jealousy and driven by far-from-being-romantic lust. When Edward rejects the local nymphomaniac and is falsely accused of being involved in a robbery, the suburban folk suddenly turn against him and chase him back to his castle. Edward is the archetypal of the well-meaning outsider with nothing but innocence and good intentions, who is neither understood not accepted by the "normal" world he suddenly finds himself in.

The visual contrast between the Gothic architecture of the castle standing on a hillside and the sunny, pastel-colored suburbs enhances the split world motif of the

story. The view of the black castle shrouded in fog and clouds on a mountain right next to Peg's neighborhood makes the contrast between the two worlds existing alongside. Although the castle's Gothic atmosphere and the part of Vincent Price as Edward's inventor create a direct visual link to the horror films of the fifties, it is the saturated colorful and out rightly bucolic suburbia that provides a sense of evil lurking in seemingly peaceful surroundings.

All productions, from Carpenter to Burton, reveal a sense of things horrid and their aesthetic inclinations are heavily indebted in Roger Corman's 1950s and 1960s Gothic classics. They also share his conviction that American remote households hide things corrupted, but the film that, even today, resonates most dramatically with America's vision of suburbia is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

In the film's first half, the elements of conspicuous consumption and prosperity, the idealized family home, the narcissistic voyeurism of television, and the fantasy of safe mobility all intermingle. The leading lady, Marion, steals 40,000 dollars from her boss. She is drawn into her crime by the dream of prosperity proffered by the suburban vision. Hitchcock judges this dream harshly. When she flees from Phoenix, what she finds at the Bates Motel is a version of the suburban family home. Once, we imagine, the house on the hill was a commanding sight that caught the eye of passerby on the highway. Since then, Norman Bates tells us, the highway has been relocated, and the house has fallen into despair.

Secluded on a seldom-used highway, Norman lives in perfect isolation with only his mother for company. His time is spent in pursuit of leisure, with the absence of meaningful work, and in the absence of friends and father. His only meaningful relationship is with his mother: "A boy's best friend is his mother." Gary Cross summarizes this impression, "A well-known, mostly American literature portrayed suburbs as producing rootless, transitory, upwardly mobile 'status seekers' and hypersocial communities of conformists. There, children were smothered by Momism and fathers were absent. (…) Suburban women were characterized as lonely while men felt used as mere providers" ("Suburban Sadness" 389). During the 1950s and early 1960s, the frustrated and lonely mother became a dominant image of the suburbs. Thus, much of the 1950s and early 1960s was marked by increasing confusion over the relationship between the sexes and the propriety of gender roles.

The Bates family and their creepy Gothic home suggest reality lying behind the optimistic veneer of suburbia. The family, left in isolation, becomes twisted and distorted. As the psychiatrist explains during the film's final moments, Mrs. Bates "was a clinging, demanding woman, and for years the two of them [Norman and his mother] lived as if there was no one else in the world." Mrs. Bates becomes an extreme version of suburbia's fear of the "smothering mother." It is the smothering mother that becomes the root cause of Norman's psychosis and his crimes. In

becoming completely isolated from the world of others, Norman and his mother turn increasingly towards each other, and after Norman kills his mother, the psychiatrist explains, Norman "began to speak and think for her, give her half of his life so to speak. At times he could be both personalities, carry on a conversation."

The suburban dream of a secluded and private family home is revealed as a sterile and claustrophobic environment where the human spirit becomes twisted and distorted. The images from Norman's bedroom, with its child bed, stuffed bunny, and classical music, suggest the disturbing results of the suburban "smothering mother."

Though Norman habitually changes the motel linens once a week, he has left everything in the house exactly the way it was when he was a boy. When Norman is in the house, we assume, he is Mother, and in a sense the house has become a monster to Norman just as surely as Roderick Usher's house was a monster to him.

In the second half of *Psycho* Hitchcock reveals, almost methodologically, the emptiness of the suburban vision with which the first half had so deeply resonated. Wrapped up in their own assumptions of prosperity, Marion's lover Sam and her sister Lila, pursue Norman Bates based on their erroneous belief that he has killed Marion for the money. The reason, as we find out, was not mercenary.

The audience, like Marion, has fantasized about this prosperous family home or, conversely, dreamed of escaping this suburban life in fantasies of flight and, so, takes pleasure in gazing on as Marion enacts these fantasies. However, Hitchcock is quick to punish this desiring gaze. The shower scene is, in this way, as much an attack on the audience as it is an assault on Marion. So as her car is pulled out from the swamp, so is the audience dragged out of the film's narrative and left with the gleaming surfaces of American dream.

American suburbia as portrayed in Gothic films, illustrates the Freudian concept of suppression, where lust and paranoia simmer under a fake façade of often affluent and always blissful existence. Once the shiny paint is flaking, we are exposed to the corruption of American suburban culture. Such alienation of the urban subject, results in perversity and bad places map not only the despair but the corruption and depravity of their dwellers. They lead to but also reflect the inhabitants' madness, gender confusion, loss of identity, and fragmentation.

REFERENCES

BOTTING, Fred (1996): *Gothic*. London, Routledge.

CROSS, Gary. (1997): *The Suburban Weekend: Perspectives on a Vanishing Twentieth-Century Dream*. In, Silverstone, R. (ed.), Visions of Suburbia, 80 -115. London, Routledge.

LOVECRAFT, H.P. *The Shadow over Innsmouth.* In S.T. Joshi, S.T and David E. Schultz (eds), West Warwick, RI, Necromicon.

MOWER, Ernest (1958): *Family in Suburbia*. In, Dobiner, W. (ed.), The Suburban Community. New York, G.P. Putnam & Sons.

POE, Edgar Allan (1982): "The Fall of the House of Usher." In, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York, Penguin Books.

REISMAN, David (1958): *Suburban Sadness*. In, Dobiner, W. (ed.), The Suburban Community. New York, G.P. Putnam & Sons.

SALISBURY, Mark (1997): *Burton on Burton*. Boston, faber and faber.

SILVERSTONE, Roger. (1997): *Introduction*. In, Silverstone, R. (ed.), Visions of Suburbia, 1-22. London, Routledge.

TOBIN, Gary A. (1976): *Suburbanization and the Development of Motor Transportation: Transportation Technology and the Suburbanization Process*. In, Schwartz, B. (ed.), The Changing Face of the Suburbs. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

WOOD, Robin and LIPPE, Richard (eds.) (1979): *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*. Toronto, Festival of Festivals.