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“Representations of Suburbia in Popular Culture – A comparative analysis of suburbia in The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives”

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1. Introduction

Suburbia is a frequent and favored topic in popular culture, serving as the main narrative setting for a wide variety of films, television series, books, and songs. The image of suburbia is typically associated with a nostalgic, utopian ideal of family life, represented by picturesque houses with white picket fences and perfectly kept lawns (see Huq 2013: 2 and Coon 2014: 1). People living in suburban communities are mostly depicted as stereotypical yet-too-perfect and always happy characters. However, this excess of perfection is very often merely an attempt to conceal the misery that lies beneath the idealistic images we are confronted with. This thesis aims at examining the way suburbia is portrayed on screen, what kind of social ideals are conveyed to the audience, and to what extent these representations shape and influence people’s perception and understanding of suburbia. A particular focus will be on the contrast between the utopian and dystopian perspectives on suburbia leading to the main hypothesis that the presented utopian version of suburban life is very often, in fact, a dystopia.

The first part of the thesis will be concerned with a general introduction of how suburbia can be identified or characterized, what kind of connotations it generates among people and how the theme of suburbia is treated both in the academic as well as the cultural environment. A brief historical overview shall provide essential information on the development of suburban space as a typical Anglo-Saxon phenomenon with its roots in the United Kingdom. Thereby, it will be highlighted how the growth of the suburbs has increased the amount of representations in film and television, turning suburbia into a prominent cultural subject. In addition, suburbia as a cultural space and setting will be illustrated in order to provide a theoretical frame in which to embed the topic.
The main body of the paper will then be centered around the discussion of suburbia and its representations in films and television series. Apart from examining the way suburban life is presented to the audience, it will also be analyzed what kind of connotations are generated through these representations and in what way they influence the viewers’ perception of suburbia. After explaining the methodical approach, two selected examples will be studied by means of a close analysis, namely Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show* (1998) and Marc Cherry’s television series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012). Due to their large success and popularity, they can be regarded as important cultural texts treating suburbia as a cultural space. Moreover, both qualify for a detailed analysis since they are not only set in a suburban surrounding but rather present suburbia as their main narrative frame. Apart from elaborating on the visual aspects of the suburban settings, the main characters’ struggles within suburbia will be subject to discussion as well. In particular, the contrasting utopian and dystopian views on suburbia will constitute an essential part of the analysis, as *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* significantly present this dichotomy to the audience. After commenting on the film and the television series individually, central suburban themes that are observable in both examples will be examined and critically evaluated in a comparative manner, namely traditional values and nostalgia, family life and the role of women, and secrecy, privacy and the public.

The final chapter will summarize the main findings and draw conclusions from the analysis, aiming at a better understanding of suburbia as a socially constructed space. It shall be shown, how people’s perceptions of suburbia and its representations on screen are interdependent and, therefore, constantly influence and shape each other mutually.

Concerning the sources used for this analysis, the thesis primarily draws on the works of Rupa Huq (*Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture*, 2013),
David R. Coon (Look Closer. Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film & Television, 2014), Timotheus Vermeulen (Scenes from the Suburbs. Suburban Space in US Film and Television, 2014) and Melanie Smicek (American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares. Suburbia as a Narrative Space between Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary American Cinema, 2014), who have explored suburban life in the context of popular culture and provided interesting viewpoints on how visual representations have contributed to the perception of suburbia as a distinct social construct. Regarding the close analysis of The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives, the works by Simone Knox (Reading “The Truman Show” Inside Out, 2010) as well as Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence, 2006) constitute the main secondary sources, since they provide in-depth analyses of the film and the television series. In the following, these sources are briefly illustrated.

Rupa Huq’s Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture (2013) is a comprehensive account of suburban representations in a multitude of novels, music, television series, and films. Coming from a sociology background, Huq exhibits a broad understanding of changing trends in suburban life and the historical development of urban space and housing, which she combines with her knowledge of literature and cultural studies. The books’ chapters each examine a different type of popular medium, such as novels, pop and punk music, cinema, and television. In the introduction, the author explains how suburbia is connected to popular culture and in what way suburban representations shape people’s perception of this cultural concept and vice versa. She particularly emphasizes the “cultural significance of suburbia” (Huq 2013: 2) and repeatedly mentions the lack of academic coverage and debate about suburban space in a sociocultural context. Another major aspect of Huq’s work is the differentiation between the UK and the USA in terms of defining the suburbs as well as their representations in popular media. While the analysis of novels and music is naturally restricted to
the textual level, Huq’s discussion of films and television series features an in-depth study of visual representations of suburbia ranging from the early 1950s to most recent publications of the last decade. Similar to other works, the book continuously refers to the oppositional portrayal of suburbia as either “utopian promised land or dystopian hell” (Huq 2013: 104), or sometimes both at the same time. While the author did not include any pictures to illustrate certain aspects of her analysis, she makes use of tables, which are essential to gain an overview considering the book’s multitude of examples, as well as extracts from screenplays in order to highlight selected scenes.

David R. Coon follows a similar approach as Rupa Huq and examines the relationship between suburban representations on screen and people’s images and perceptions thereof in his work Look Closer – Suburban Narratives & American Values in Film & Television (2014). The book’s introduction presents a brief historic overview of suburban development in the United States without going too far into detail and outlines selected films and television shows which form the basis for the author’s analysis. The main part consists of five chapters, in which Coon discusses different themes in relation to the concept of suburbia and supports his statements by examining various scenes and cinematic shots. Thematically, the book ranges from nostalgia and traditional values to social and racial exclusion, crime, masculinity, and the American Dream. Coon manages to analyze his chosen films and television shows in a thorough but nevertheless very intriguing way that is accessible both for people with advanced knowledge in the field as well as those who are simply interested in the subject matter. One aspect that distinguishes Look Closer from other publications is the fact that the author also includes documentaries and reality television series for his analysis instead of exclusively focusing on fiction.

Timotheus Vermeulen presents a broad analysis of suburbia on screen in his work Scenes from the Suburbs. Suburban Space in US Film and Television
After giving an introduction on the author’s background and intention for writing about this subject, the book is divided into five parts, each representing one type of visual text that differs from the others. In his analysis, Vermeulen focuses exclusively on contemporary narratives, criticizing the lack of recent studies dealing with the suburbs in a sociocultural context, similar to Rupa Huq’s remark. He states that most discussions about suburbia are “almost exclusively historical, tracing the development of the suburban chronotype across the nineteenth and twentieth century” (Vermeulen 2014: 5) and that he instead aims at providing a new and detailed perspective on how the suburbs are used and portrayed in film and television. For each chapter, the author chooses a thematic focus in which he embeds the suburban space occurring in his selected films and television shows, for example “The Suburb as World” for the analysis of Pleasantville or “The Suburb as Social Space” for the analysis of Desperate Housewives. That approach allows Vermeulen to elaborate on suburbia from different perspectives and on various levels. In regard to the selection of the discussed texts, the author explains to have chosen films and shows which, according to his view, are representative for the most prevalent trends within their genre (see Vermeulen 2014: 12).

In her work American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares – Suburbia as a Narrative Space between Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary American Cinema (2014), Melanie Smicek explores the significance of suburbia as a cultural space and provides a detailed discussion of contemporary American movies that feature a suburban setting. As the title of her book suggests, Smicek focuses on the duality of suburban narratives and their position between utopian and dystopian perspectives. After giving a historical overview of the development of suburban space in the USA, the author explains general concepts and themes that are of importance for the subsequent cinematic analysis. The main part of the book centers around the discussion of the three movies Pleasantville (Gary Ross,
1998), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). Each of these movies is analyzed with regard to a specific theme, such as nostalgia, simulation, or the American Dream, which are all linked to people’s perceptions and understandings of suburbia. In that way, Smicek outlines the topic’s complexity but at the same time manages to provide a compact elaboration of suburban space as it is portrayed in American cinema. Particular attention is drawn to the contrasting utopian and dystopian perspectives, which is a prominent feature of suburban narratives. In her analysis, Smicek not only discusses the films’ visual presentation and staging of the suburbs but also evaluates the plausibility of those representations to influence the viewers’ perception of suburbia and draws conclusions from narrative techniques and cinematic choices. Since the book includes a number of selected screenshots and dialogues from the screenplays, it provides an inspiring insight and is just as suited for readers who are not acquainted with the topic or the movies so far. The cited works and references are primarily recent findings from the 21st century, which confirms the research question’s topicality.

*Reading “The Truman Show” Inside Out* (2010) by Simone Knox is a thorough analysis of *The Truman Show*, which comments both on the narrative themes as well as the cinematic implementation of the 1998 movie by Peter Weir. Knox’ elaboration of camera techniques is supported by various pictures taken from the film, which highly contribute to the text’s intelligibility. The author manages to discuss visual aspects in a concise way and interprets the story with regard to its suburban setting.

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’ *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence* (2006) is a compilation of essays which provide discussions about the television series from various perspectives. The book is divided into four parts, namely “culture”, “sexual politics”, “genre, gender and cultural myths”, and “narrative, confession and intimacy”, comprising thematically related essays
and giving the reader an overview of the central topics. Many of the book’s contributions focus on the depiction of women and their role within the narrative’s fictional suburbia.

2. What is suburbia?

When thinking about the term suburbia, most people have a certain image in mind, as to what this particular cultural concept or type of space is constituted of. As Rupa Huq points out in her book *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture* (2013), “there is [...] a powerful suburban iconography served up through popular culture: picket fences, picture windows, sunshine gates, semi-detached dwellings topped off by green lawns and well-kempt hedges” (Huq 2013: 6). Greg Dickinson also refers to these elements as the “visual vocabulary of the suburb” (Dickinson 2006: 219). It can, therefore, be stated that people’s image of suburbia has originated from and been formed through representations of selfsame in popular culture. Especially television has had a major influence on the visual perception of suburbia and its various social aspects. Suburbia is prominent not only on television but also in literature and music, where the depiction of suburban life serves as a central narrative element. Since a broad examination of all the mentioned types of cultural texts would go beyond the scope of this thesis, the focus will solely be on films and television series, with a close analysis of selected material.
2.1. Definitions and concepts

Before analyzing representations of suburbia in popular culture, it is essential to discuss central terms and definitions in order to gain a basic understanding of the concepts in question. First and foremost, the meanings of the terms suburb and suburbia need to be explained. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word ‘suburb’ originates from the Old French term ‘suburbe’ or the Latin term ‘suburbium’, meaning ‘near to’ (sub-) ‘city’ (urbs). It is further defined as “an outlying district of a city, especially a residential one” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2018: suburb). Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a suburb as “an outlying part of a city or town” or “the residential area on the outskirts of a city or large town” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2018: suburb). Apart from these two definitions, that clearly refer to the spatial aspects, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary also specifies the suburb as “a smaller community adjacent to or within commuting distance of a city” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2018: suburb), providing a broader sense by including the people living in a suburban area. An even wider interpretation can be found in the Cambridge Dictionary, where suburbia is defined as “the way of life of people who live in the outer parts of a town” (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2018: suburbia). Interestingly, the Cambridge Dictionary also includes the addition “mainly disapproving”, indicating that the term suburbia is often used in a pejorative, disfavoring way.

As Rupa Huq argues in her work Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture (2013), it is easier to define what a suburb is not than what it actually is. She states that a suburb is always described as the counterpart of the city, which usually displays typical characteristics such as densely built houses, a lot of traffic, anonymity, dirt and smog, crime, noise, a mixture of cultures, etc. In contrast, the suburbs do not comprise any of these aspects, representing the
quiet, peaceful, clean, homogeneous, safe, and neighborly outskirts of the “dangerous” city. As such, they supposedly provide a healthy and friendly surrounding for couples and families, where all longed for desires are fulfilled (see Huq 2013: 7). Similar definitions can be found in David R. Coon’s *Look Closer* (2014), where he describes suburban spaces as “both the product of and an escape from urban expansion. [They] exhibit traces of both urban and rural areas but are technically a part of neither” (Coon 2014: 9) as well as in Roger Silverstone’s *Visions of Suburbia* (1997), in which he comments on the contradictory assumptions of suburbia as “instantly recognizable though never entirely familiar. Ubiquitous but invisible. Secure but fragile. Desired but reviled” (Silverstone 1997: 4). He further claims that the driving force for the development of suburbia was people’s desire for an ideal between city and country, which, however, does not only come with the advantages of both worlds but also includes some inevitable disadvantages (see Silverstone 1997: 3ff.). Interestingly, Wout Vergauwen also points out the difference between suburban space in English-speaking regions such as the US, the UK, Canada or Australia and in continental Europe, Asia and Latin America. While the suburbs in the first group of countries are typically inhabited by a middle-class population, suburban areas in the latter group are more likely associated with a poorer and less educated demographic profile, which can, to some extent, be explained by differences in urban planning and housing quality (see Vergauwen 2013: 2).

In popular culture as well as in the general public, the two terms ‘suburbs’ and ‘suburbia’ are often used interchangeably, although they have different distinctive meanings to them. While ‘suburb’ clearly refers to the objective location of a physical space as opposed to rural or urban areas, the term ‘suburbia’ includes the people living in the suburbs as well as their way of life within their, in many aspects homogenous, community. Suburbia, therefore, also incorporates a
specific state of mind, social ideals and views connected to the cultural image of a typically American landscape (see Vergauwen 2013: 4).

To summarize, one can agree on the following general definitions of suburb(ia):

- suburb in a spatial sense, meaning the outskirts of a city or town with mostly residential buildings;
- suburb as a community of people living typically in the outlying parts of a city or town;
- suburbia as a way of life of the people mentioned above.

However, there are more aspects and notions connected to the term suburbia, apart from the general, factual definitions. Many people have a personal, subjective view of or opinion on suburbia, be it positive or negative. The image of suburbia has certainly changed over the course of time (see Huq 2013: 1) and the various representations of suburbia in popular culture themselves have contributed a considerable share of their public image and reputation.

### 2.2 The origins of suburbia

Before focusing on and analyzing fictional depictions of suburbia, the historical development of suburban space shall be the fundamental starting point for the subsequent discussion. Being a mostly Anglo-American phenomenon, the emphasis lies on the history of suburban settlements in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, although similar developments naturally took place in other parts of the world as well (see Huq 2013: 7 and Smicek 2012: 4). Since an elaborate portrayal would exceed the purpose of this thesis, the following passages have to be comprehended as merely an overview of the aspects most relevant for the main topic.
The first suburban developments can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, when the improvement of transportation through railways and roads led to an increase of commuting and founding settlements further away from the main cities. In the United Kingdom, the industrialization resulted in a rapid growth of cities such as London or Manchester, which in further succession caused wealthy people to move to the suburban districts in order to get away from the mostly crowded and dirty industrial cities. The extension of public transport systems made it possible for the population to commute to the urban centers while residing in the outskirts (see Huq 2013: 6ff.).

In a similar manner, transportation development was a significant cause for the suburbanization in the United States. Until the late nineteenth century, the US landscape was still defined by increasing urbanization processes across the country, which has then gradually started to change. Urban landscapes underwent substantial transformation which led more and more to a separation of workspace and residential areas. By the twenty-first century, the United States can be regarded as a suburban nation since the majority of its population are living in suburban areas in contrast to urban or rural areas (see Beuka 2004: 2).

The revolution of the car industry certainly had its share in the design and development of urban as well as suburban space. Having a car and being able to commute between work, home and leisure offered new possibilities for people, especially families. Real estate agents advertised single houses in spacious suburban areas as highly favored yet affordable dwellings within a community of like-minded people. The idea of living away from the crowded cities but still having the amenities of an urban center within reach was appealing for many working and middle-class people. Increasing wages and lower construction costs accelerated this development even more (see Coon 2014: 6).
Another aspect that played an essential role in the suburbanization of the United States were government programs. In the 1930s, the Great Depression drew many Americans into unemployment, poverty and homelessness. As a response, the Roosevelt administration established a number of federal programs under the name of the New Deal with the purpose of economic recovery and unemployment relief. Apart from several other strategies, the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had the highest impact on the housing sector and thus on suburban development on the whole. Those two programs were established in order to protect homeowners from foreclosure on the one hand and to provide insurances for mortgage loans for building or purchasing homes on the other. As a consequence, more people were able to afford single-family homes and relocated to the suburbs (see Coon 2014: 7).

However, the largest increase in suburban development took place after World War II, when the government enacted the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (the G.I. Bill) with the aim of supporting veterans financially to purchase homes in suburban areas. The housing industry further boosted the popularity of homeownership in the suburbs by advertising it as the American Dream come true, with regard to status, wealth, freedom and independence (see Huq 2013: 8, Smicek 2012: 6f.). During the second half of the twentieth century, the main driving force for suburban growth were innovations in housing construction, which made it possible to provide a large number of houses relatively quickly.

One of the most influential companies regarding the suburban trend was the building firm Levitt & Sons, which was founded by Abraham Levitt and his sons, William and Alfred, in 1929. With their experience in mass-producing of military housing by using identical, prefabricated construction components, they were able to transfer these processes to civil housing construction, creating a time-efficient and inexpensive method for large-scale home building (see Coon 2014:...
The Levitts bought cheap farmland in mostly undeveloped areas of Long Island, where they implemented the first Levittown, a fully planned community, from 1945 to 1951. Levittown was designed specifically to provide affordable small homes for thousands of families in a short period of time during the post-war era. The company managed to reduce the construction process to a small number of steps and to buy many of the components directly from manufacturers, which allowed for a significant cut of costs. In that way, Levitt and Sons was able to build many thousands of homes at nearly the same time and to sell them at a low price. The houses looked mostly identical and featured appliances, such as modern kitchens and television sets, and the community as a whole offered lots of green space, public parks and schools. In 1950, a house in Levittown cost less than $8,000 on average (which converts to about $65,000 in 2009) and combined with the housing loans offered by the G.I. Bill and the FHA, a potential buyer had to make a down payment of only about $400 (see Glaeser 2012: 175ff.). The master-planned community became so popular and successful, that Levitt & Sons soon expanded their project and developed three more Levittowns, one in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), another one in Willingboro (New Jersey), and a fourth one in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, other developers adopted Levitt’s mass production processes and designs, which led to a considerable increase in the construction of suburban areas throughout the United States. For good reason, William Levitt is widely regarded the founder of modern suburbia with Levittown serving as the prototype for American suburbs (see Coon 2014: 7).

What is worth mentioning is the fact, that while the development of suburban settlements is not exclusive to the United States, the particular structure of North-American suburban space differs remarkably from suburban areas in most other countries around the world. Typically, suburbs in the United States are characterized by detached houses inhabited by middle-class or wealthy population, who chose living in a quiet surrounding whilst enjoying the benefits of
a nearby urban center. In other cities outside the United States, however, the peripheral areas became home to mostly working-class or poor population, while the often high-priced city centers served as preferred places of residence for the wealthy. Another major difference can be found in terms of construction and density. Suburbs in the United States are usually low-density areas with limited height of construction. In contrast, European, Asian, or South-American suburbs are often defined by densely built-up areas and high-rise apartment buildings, providing affordable room for lower-income population (see Coon 2014: 5).

Concerning transportation and commuting, it has to be noted that the development of cities in the United Kingdom as well as in other European countries often went hand-in-hand with public transport, whereas in the United States the dependence on a car is far more prominent. This, of course, has impacts on the further development of a city and also determines which part of society can or cannot afford to live in the suburbs (see Huq 2013: 9).

According to the US Census Bureau, the suburbs of North-American cities have rapidly grown from 1910 to 2000. Especially since the 1940’s, suburban areas exhibited a larger population growth than cities, which, of course, can be linked to Levitt’s innovations and accelerations in suburban housing construction. While in 1910, only 7% of the US population lived in suburbs, this number has risen to 50% by the year 2000. It can be concluded that the growth of cities was constituted to a large part by the growing suburban areas. This development proceeded even further during the first ten years after the millennium, and according to demographer William Frey, the suburbs “grew three times as fast as cities from 2000 to 2010”. Various census data shows that there was a general trend towards living in the outskirts of cities or towns in contrast to the urban centers. However, this high degree of suburbanization was a particular characteristic of the late 20th century and the first decade of the new millennium,
whereas since the recession, the suburban growth has slowed down again in contrast to urban growth (see Coon 2014: 8 and Hobbs & Stoops 2002: 33).

From a social and demographic perspective, the American suburbs have always been a subject to criticism, as they were not accessible for all population groups equally. The suburban residents were predominantly white families, whereas black Americans were discriminated against in various manners. Either developers simply refused to sell their houses to non-white costumers, or funding organizations made it more difficult for blacks to get loans. Simultaneously, urban development processes often produced racial conflicts and ghettoization, which in further succession led to the growing phenomenon of “white flight”, referring to middle-class white population fleeing the urban centers in order to find a better quality of life in the suburbs (see Huq 2013: 13 and Coon 2014: 8). Today, suburbia is still characterized by racial segregation and homogeneity, and, as Fishman (1989) pointed out, the suburbs convey the image of community when in fact they reproduce all forms of exclusion (see Fishman 1989: 4). On this account, the suburbs have been criticized by various sociologists and authors, who pointed out numerous negative aspects which are supposedly manifested in suburban areas. To mention only a few examples, suburbia was presented as a “breeding ground for conformity” (see Coon 2014: 9), an “oppressive, psychological prison for women, who were expected to take joy in their roles as mothers and housewives” (Coon 2014: 9) and a “homogenizing and oppressive phenomenon” (Coon 2014: 9). Despite these critical views, it does not seem as if the trend for families to purchase homes in suburban areas would decline in the near future, since suburbia still functions as the ultimate refuge for a large part of the population.
2.3. Suburbia as cultural space

The suburbs have been studied intensely on the basis of geographical aspects and discussed as physical spaces in contrast to their urban and rural counterparts. Suburban life, however, implies more than the mere appearance and arrangement of homes and car lanes. In order to comprehend the cultural meaning of suburbia, it is necessary to analyze it as an idea and a state of mind, rather than simply a quiet place of residence. Referring to suburbia as a cultural space means that it is shaped by and dependent on people’s actions and relations within that space. In her book *American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares*, Melanie Smicek emphasizes the relationship between spaces and the subjects moving in them, referring to suburbia as “the interaction between its physical form and the ideas and visions that people map to it” (Smicek 2014: 8). This thesis aims at identifying the values and ideologies that make up suburbia and examines it as a cultural construct. Based on these results, representations of suburban space are then discussed, since they themselves have contributed to the perception of suburbia in turn.

Suburban communities are mostly seen as interchangeable, both from a visual as well as from a social point of view. While cities often have their distinct appearance, that makes them instantly recognizable, such as a particular skyline, famous buildings, a certain type of architecture, etc., most suburban areas lack those sorts of distinguishable features (see Coon 2014: 223). They are made up of seemingly endless rows of detached houses, which, surrounded by green lawns and picket fences, mostly look alike. Without knowing anything more about the specific suburb, it cannot be allocated to a particular region (at least within the United States) and thus could be everywhere and nowhere. This is, however, an often wanted and recreated feature in film and television, which shall be discussed later on. Similarly, the social composition of most suburbs is
considered to be highly homogenous and uniform in race and social status as well as in terms of traditional values, heteronormativity and political views. In short, one could argue that suburbia is a desired ideal place of residence for white middle-class families, who wish for a peaceful life in green surroundings, away from crime, pollution and racial tensions in the big cities. Since the concept of suburbia is closely connected to the history of the United States and the social ideals from the postwar era, it can be regarded as a distinctly American cultural phenomenon (see Smicek 2014: 8).

Many of these aspects lead over to the following chapter, in which the contrasting views on suburbia as utopian and dystopian places will be discussed.

2.4. Utopian and dystopian perspectives on suburbia

Over the last decades, suburbia has been a growing topic of interest for sociologists and social geographers (see Huq 2013: 6). As living in the suburbs has been the reality for most Americans since the 1990s (see Coon 2014: 4), it is not unusual that this type of space has attracted more and more attention both in social sciences as well as in popular culture. Nevertheless, Rupa Huq points out that the suburbs are “relatively under-researched” (Huq 2013: 6) compared to the vast amount of works that are concerned with urban sociology. She argues, that urban space is considered to be more interesting for researchers since it comprises more problematic aspects that are worth discussing, than suburban space with its supposedly peaceful and unremarkable environment (see Huq 2013: 6). Similarly, Vermeulen criticizes the lack of scholarly debate about the suburbs and their representations in film and on television. He especially emphasizes the fact that out of the small number of studies that have actually examined suburban narratives, there has not been any thorough analysis of
contemporary suburban films or television series (Vermeulen 2014: 1ff.). However, there is a variety of works that specifically deal with the nature and composition of the suburbs and critically examine them from different points of view.

Before discussing the perspectives in detail, it is essential to briefly illustrate the concepts of utopia and dystopia first. The term ‘utopia’ gained popularity through Sir Thomas More’s 1516 fictional work of the same name, which focused on an imaginary society on an Atlantic island. The word itself derives from the Greek ‘ou-topos’, translating to ‘no-place’. Typically, a utopia is defined as a non-existing place or society which is usually regarded to be an, in many ways, improved and superior version of the common society. In this regard, a more appropriate derivation would be from the Greek ‘eu-topos’, meaning ‘good place’, since it refers to an ideal and desired location. (see Smicek 2014: 11). However, since eutopia and utopia are homophones in English, this might be the reason for the second version to have been established as the predominantly used term. As a counterpart, dystopia refers to a society or place that is undesired or even terrifying. Violence, crime, misery, and a general notion of despair are characteristics of a dystopian world. Often, its society is governed by an oppressive regime and is confronted with social decline or environmental disasters (see Claeys 2017: 1f. and Claeys 2011: 135).

Utopian and dystopian societies have served as the main narrative frame in a multitude of fictional works. In literature, utopian and dystopian fiction is a distinct and popular genre, that typically deals with social and political issues. There is a tendency towards more dystopian perspectives on suburbia to be found in literature and film, while television shows feature utopian views more often. However, some authors chose to combine utopia and dystopia in their works, suggesting that the seemingly perfect utopia can just as fast turn into a terrible opposite, depending on the decisions made by the protagonists.
The image of suburbia has originally been a positive one. When suburban neighborhoods were developed in the 1950s, many people viewed them as the perfect retreat and the ultimate way of community living. After all, the new houses were modern, well-equipped and affordable, making them part of the American Dream of a calm and happy family life in the outskirts of the city. This perception of the idyllic suburbia was further intensified by depictions of selfsame in general popular culture (see Vermeulen 2014: 9).

In utopian depictions, the audience is generally presented with an idyllic place far away from the cities’ crime and pollution, that serves as the perfect home for families in order to raise happy children. Suburbia is portrayed as a supporting community of like-minded people, where you can always find a friendly neighbor to ask for help. In contrast to the anonymity of the city, everyone knows each other in the suburbs, which is usually connected with trust and social cohesion within the community. Family life is seen as the highest value which has to be taken care of, primarily by the woman, who seems to have found fulfillment in being a mother and housewife. Many of these values and ideals are closely linked to the American Dream, which similarly has its roots in the 1950s. Problems like poverty, crime, addiction, or abuse are rarely mentioned since they are strictly associated with city life and would be in conflict with the harmony of the suburbs. On the contrast, dystopian views on suburbia reveal the problematic facets that come with living in a small community where perfection is expected from the residents in all ranks. From this perspective, the suburbs are primarily associated with isolation, oppression and conformity. Women have to fully commit to the lifestyle as a housewife and mother, being responsible for raising the children in the best way possible, while at the same time keeping house and being physically presentable for neighbors and friends. In turn, this often leads to isolation, since these women’s everyday lives almost exclusively take place within the privacy of their homes and social interactions are limited to the family.
and other mothers in the neighborhood. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be hard-working role models who provide for their family and, as the dominant gender, make sure that everything within the community stays orderly. Otherness in any way is rejected, which applies to sexual orientation and gender just as well as to political views and ideologies. On the whole, the dystopian perspective draws a very dark picture of the suburbs, which are inhabited by mostly conservative, narrow-minded people who have to keep up the façade of an idyllic world that does not exist (see Coon 2014: 12ff. and Smicek 2014: 12ff.).

While the utopian views in general portray suburbia as the ideal, harmonious place for families to raise their children in contrast to the dangerous and crowded cities, dystopian perspectives illuminate the downsides that come with living in such a homogenous place, namely conformity, isolation, and even oppression (see Coon 2014: 11). As Beuka points out, there have been debates on whether the suburbs should be seen as “utopian models of community or dystopian landscapes of dispiriting homogeneity.” (Beuka 2004: 7). Furthermore, a number of authors talk about the “suburban myth” (see Donaldson 2002, Coon 2014 and Vergauwen 2013), referring to a collective set of social values, ideals, and expectations, that make up the image of a perfect suburban life in the minds of many Americans (see Coon 2014: 3). The majority of suburban representations, whether in visual or written media, is built on these values and reflects the idyllic family life, typically behind a white picket fence. This, however, hints at the fact that behind the picket fence, we can find imperfection and trouble just like everywhere else and the suburban reality differs in various aspects from its imagined model (Vergauwen 2013: 9). Robert Fishman emphasizes the strong relation between suburbia and its associated values “so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture that it might also be called the bourgeois utopia” (Fishman 1989: 4).

Popular culture, in all its variations, has of course a strong impact on how
suburban life is perceived by the public. Not only can authors or directors actively distort images of suburbia according to their own position, those images can and will be interpreted differently by their audience. Representations of suburbia therefore always function in interaction with the people who perceive them (see Huq 2013: 5).

The contrasting utopian and dystopian perspectives have definitely created the foundation for the equally oppositional representations observable in films and television series, that use suburbia as their main narrative setting, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

3. Suburbia on screen

This chapter focuses on the visual representations of suburbia in television and film and analyzes in what way these representations further shape the audience's perception and understanding of suburbia. The reasons of directors and authors for choosing specifically the suburbs as a setting for their narrative will be discussed as well as how suburbia on screen is perceived by the audience. One main subject of debate will concentrate on the question whether fictional representations of suburbia are critical of what they display or if they just reproduce the common images without questioning their underlying meaning. Do these representations glorify the utopian picture or are they putting the dystopian perspective into question? By critically analyzing a film and a television series in terms of their display of suburban life, different perspectives on suburbia shall be examined. Another aspect will focus on how the audience can interpret the illustrated suburban scenes and in what ways this affects their previous understanding of the concept of suburbia. Before discussing various
representations of suburbia on television, the methodical approach for the following close analysis is briefly explained.

3.1. Methodical approach

For the analyzing section of this thesis, I will first give an overview of representations of suburban life on television over the course of time and discuss their position between utopian and dystopian perspectives. By considering the social and historical context, the development of suburbia as it was portrayed in different sorts of visual media will be covered as well as the values and opinions that were communicated through them. Furthermore, it will be discussed for which reasons authors and directors may choose the suburbs as a setting and in what ways they use cinematic methods to portray suburbia. After that, two examples for film and television series that use suburbia as their narrative setting will be examined in detail, namely Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998) and Marc Cherry’s *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012). There is certainly a large number of other examples that could just as well be taken into examination, however, to include more works would go beyond the scope of this thesis. The reasons for selecting these two examples in particular are the following: first of all, both narratives are not merely set in a suburban area, but suburbia itself plays the major role, which is why they can be regarded as representative of suburban visual media; secondly, while *The Truman Show* centers around a male protagonist, *Desperate Housewives* tells the stories of four different women, which offers a variety of aspects for discussion; thirdly, both examples exhibit utopian as well as dystopian features; and finally, film and television use different approaches and methods in terms of narrative composition and engaging the audience, which will be taken into account. The analysis will initially focus on the visual illustrations of suburban space and discuss how those images are used to
create a certain atmosphere and feeling. Furthermore, the conveyed images of these representations will be elaborated and interpreted thoroughly. Subsequently, the main protagonists and their individual roles and struggles within their suburban environment will be discussed. By conducting a close analysis of a media text, both its observable aspects and its implied meanings are illustrated and critically commented on. In order to clarify certain arguments, a selection of significant scenes will be provided and explained. One main point of discussion will be whether the said examples convey a utopian or a dystopian view on suburbia and what they intend to communicate to the audience. In further succession, the film and the television series will be evaluated in terms of whether their representations of suburbia are critical of society and in what way they raise awareness of the problematic aspects. At last, three main themes that are closely connected with suburbia were selected to be examined in detail, namely traditional values and nostalgia, family life and the role of women, and secrecy, privacy and the public.

3.2. Representations of suburbia on TV

In his book Look Closer, David R. Coon points out that the suburbs we see on television are always “spaces created by cultural producers in order to tell particular stories and convey particular ideas” (Coon 2014: 10). Thus, representations of suburbia are never simply a re-creation of reality but are filled with ideologies and viewpoints that serve a specific purpose. It is therefore essential to differentiate between the actual suburban space and its cultural representation. Coon further elaborates on that argument, by stating that the collective idea of suburbia has been shaped by the works of filmmakers, authors, songwriters and advertisers, and that their representations have, naturally, contributed to how the suburbs are perceived by the public in many ways (see
Producers of films and television series use suburban space to explore, idolize, but also to criticize the values and ideals inherent in the concept of suburbia. Since those values and ideals are strongly connected to people’s understanding of suburbia, it provides the perfect location for filmmakers in order to examine them, and it is up to the filmmakers which of these themes are brought to the foreground and which are put to the background (see Coon 2014: 23). While some narratives reinforce the utopian perspective, which applies to the majority of postwar sitcoms, movies and television ads, others call these values and ideals into question, which can be seen more in contemporary productions of the late 20th century and after the millennium (see Coon 2014: 3f.).

Early representations of suburbia were primarily to be found in advertisements and family sitcoms during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Coon, they developed “an onscreen image of suburbia as a utopian space filled with desirable homes, happy families, and trouble-free lives” (Coon 2014: 2). Since the housing boom in the postwar era led companies to put several new household items, furnishing, etc. on the market, advertisers soon began to use suburban homes as the perfect setting to sell them. In their portrayals, they emphasized the idealistic view of suburban life, by showing the audience a happy family, usually consisting of a neatly dressed housewife who seems to have found fulfillment in being a good wife and mother, her working husband, and one or two children. In a similar manner, sitcoms (for example Leave It to Beaver, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, Father Knows Best) used the suburban setting to illustrate the utopian views of harmonious family-life. As the number of people living in suburban homes was rapidly growing during that time, these representations tied in with the real-life situations of many Americans (Coon 2014: 12). They identified with the shown lifestyle or used it as an example as to how they would like to live themselves. As Rupa Huq put it, popular culture tries to connect the audience to suburbia “whether they live there or not, making it part
of their lived experience” (Huq 2013: 25f.). Coon, however, argues that these narratives, although they generally communicate a utopian perspective of suburbia, at the same time reflect problematic ideologies that were common for the postwar period. Various authors (for example William Douglas, Nina Liebman, or Gerard Jones) claim that through those family sitcoms, the privilege of the middle class with its traditional mindset was further reinforced while minorities (of race, social status, or sexual orientation) were excluded, thus conveying the message that suburbia is a place and way of living designed only for a certain part of the population. In reality, minorities were faced with a number of difficulties when trying to purchase a suburban home and this fact was also reflected in suburbia on television, in which non-white families were generally underrepresented. On the whole, conflicts and topics that might have troubled the harmonious suburban life, such as racial tensions, sexual orientation, or female empowerment, were rather omitted in order to sustain the façade of perfection (see Coon 2014: 12f.).

More recent depictions of suburban life in film and television heavily rely on their preceding examples, reproducing the traditional values and views in various ways. Some typical contemporary examples of films and television series that use suburbia as their narrative frame are Pleasantville (1998), American Beauty (1999), The Virgin Suicides (1999), The Stepford Wives (2004), Disturbia (2007) and Revolutionary Road (2008). While some of them seem to approve the utopian perspective, others clearly use the idealistic image of suburbia to create satirical or tragicomic stories. However, one aspect of suburban narratives that seems to be more prevalent in contemporary rather than past depictions is the act of breaking through the façade of perfection, be it on a visual surface level or relating to an emotional façade (see Coon 2014: 18f.).

In his analysis, Coon further points out, that all cultural texts have to be seen and interpreted in relation to other texts dealing with the same topic. Any type of media
that portrays suburbia, be it a movie, a novel, or a television advertisement, has been influenced by suburban representations before and, in further succession, will continue to influence future representations. By repeating typical images, character traits, storylines, etc. that have been associated with the concept of suburbia, people's understanding thereof is being shaped and reinforced. That means that shows like *Desperate Housewives*, *Suburgatory* (2011-2014), or *Weeds* (2005-2019) certainly have not invented the idea of suburbia on screen but instead have drawn existing ideas from their forerunners and expanded them in order to fit the modern television landscape (see Coon 2014: 20f.).

### 3.3. Close analysis of the film *The Truman Show*

This chapter will now examine a cinematic representation of suburbia, namely the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, and discuss what kind of role suburbia plays in this example. After a short introduction including general information about the film's plot and its production, it will be analyzed how *The Truman Show* depicts suburban life and whether it offers a utopian or a dystopian perspective to the audience. A particular focus will be on the film's setting and how it was used in the movie to represent a perfect suburban town. Here, the visual aspects again play an important role. Furthermore, the main characters and their actions within the suburban context will be illustrated and critically commented on.

*The Truman Show* was directed by Peter Weir and written by Andrew Niccol, who was also one of the film's main producers. As a satirical science-fiction movie, it centers around the main protagonist, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), whose life is being televised all over the world, around the clock, in a simulated show without him being aware of it. The show's creator, Christof (Ed Harris), adopted Truman as a baby and decided to stage his life within a giant film studio in Hollywood,
designed as a perfect and idyllic suburban island called Seahaven. Thousands of hidden cameras follow Truman’s every move and broadcast his daily routine as a live reality show for a worldwide audience. Apart from Truman himself, all the other characters are hired actors, who contribute to the simulated reality according to Christof’s instructions. During the course of the film, Truman becomes skeptical of his surroundings due to a number of unusual occurrences and little by little starts questioning his own life.

Director Peter Weir wanted to find an actual existing location for the story’s setting, instead of only using studio sets, and came across the town of Seaside, Florida by coincidence, where the majority of filming took place. Seaside is a master-planned community, which perfectly represents the utopian suburb intended for The Truman Show. The film’s great success has led to immediate popularity of Seaside, turning the town into one of the most famous examples of planned suburban communities (see Coon 2014: 35). Interestingly, in the first version of the original script, The Truman Show was set in a dystopian Manhattan, which would have changed the narrative’s atmosphere tremendously (see 'The Truman Show': Weir and Niccol’s Uplifting Yet Prophetically Disturbing Dystopian Satire).

Throughout the story, the utopian ideal of the postwar suburbia is being satirized in various ways. Seahaven is presented to the spectators of the television show not just as an idyllic neighborhood but also as an advertising space, where almost everything they see can be purchased too. This aspect becomes particularly ridiculous in scenes, where Truman’s wife more than obviously promotes products or appliances of their home in an exaggerated way. Although this behavior causes Truman to get suspicious, his wife as well as his friends and all other people he interacts with are strictly engaged in maintaining the instructed sequence of Truman’s supposedly normal day-to-day routine (see Smicek 2014: 31f.).
While Seahaven could be seen as the perfect utopia for Truman, since he can live a happy and carefree life with his family, friends and a secure job, in a world without crime or real dangers, it is still an artificial, imitated world based on surveillance, monotony and the inability to make one’s own decisions. Therefore, even though Truman’s suburban life may seem as the dream come true for many of his spectators, he is not aware of his fake surroundings and has no control over anything that happens within his confined space. The film clearly plays with this dichotomy of utopian and dystopian aspects and the more the story progresses the more it reveals its underlying dystopian atmosphere to the audience. In her close analysis of *The Truman Show*, Melanie Smicek discusses the relevance of distinguishing between the spectators of the televised ‘The Truman Show’ and the audience of the actual film. The first group clearly clings to the idea of Seahaven as the utopian paradise, because this visually appealing but staged place “satisfies their nostalgic image of what life in suburbia should look like” (Smicek 2014: 34). The TV show’s creators continuously make a great effort to present Seahaven in the best way possible in order to create an idyllic and pleasant space, that most people are longing for. The film’s audience might get the same impression and emotions when watching Truman at the beginning, where he seems very content and happy with his life, always smiling and joking around. Equally, on first sight, Seahaven seems to be a wonderful, sunny town accommodating a friendly and supporting community. However, upon a closer look, the audience realizes the tragedy of Truman living a scripted life in a supposedly perfect place which is, in fact, just a façade to hide the oppressive reality. Moreover, the spectators of the television show are repeatedly told to be witnessing real people with real emotions and that nothing they see is fake, but merely controlled. They are not aware of the full degree of control that Truman is really exposed to and can hardly suspect how much of his life is preset and directed by Christof and his team. In contrast, *The Truman Show’s* audience gains some insight into what is happening behind the scenes and how Seahaven
is constructed to represent suburban perfection. Thus, the audience is more able to identify Seahaven as a fake paradise and conclude that Truman’s life is a dystopian reality (see Smicek 2014: 32ff.).

Director Weir’s camera techniques further support this aspect, as they even more generate the feeling of Truman being a prisoner in an artificial environment, while for the spectators of the television show this does not appear as clearly when they see him within the utopian bubble. In her critical film analysis, Simone Knox (2010) illustrates how Weir establishes different camera shots and angles in order to switch between perspectives and provide the audience with a very authentic feeling of how the spectators perceive Truman and his daily life. Furthermore, he uses alternating cameras for scenes that are only visible to the audience of the film, for instance “behind-the-scenes”-shots with Christof or sequences filmed from a wider distance, and for the ones that are broadcast to the viewers of the television show. Many of these scenes include a number of stylistic devices, like shaky cameras that are attached to actors, visible adjusting of focus, or quick switching between different perspectives when following Truman’s movements. All these methods are applied in order to create a realistic impression of what an actual live broadcast television show would look like. They also hint at the fact that while there have to be as many cameras as possible for the production team to be able to record Truman’s every step, at the same time they have to be hidden and disguised to prevent Truman from detecting them (see Knox 2010: 3ff.). Very often, we can see shots with vignette effects, which means that the edges of the picture are darkened in order to simulate a wide lens camera and to concentrate the focus towards the center of the picture. The scene of Truman stepping outside of his house in the morning, greeting his neighbors, is an accurate example for vignetting and dramatic zooming (see figure 1 and figure 2). Apart from drawing attention to Truman, by fading out the less important surroundings, this shot also conveys the sense of watching the scene through a movie camera. In a way, this
scene also functions as a repetitive element, framing Truman’s daily routine and giving the audience something they can expect and look forward to every day.

Another relevant effect of Weir’s techniques is that they clearly illustrate how Truman is followed and monitored day and night, which accounts for a large amount of the spectators’ entertainment, however, for the audience it points out that “the suburban space of Seahaven appears threatening and imprisoning [...] despite its utopian surface.” (Smicek 2014: 36).

In order to emphasize the commercialism of ‘The Truman Show’, Weir frequently uses shots in which a certain product or advertisement is foregrounded in an often comical way, since there is, of course, no commercial break during the show. For instance, in one scene when Truman is on his way to work, he meets an acquaintance, who literally pushes him against a wall with a large advertising poster on it, to make sure the viewers would definitely see it (see figure 3). Moreover, Truman’s wife, Meryl, repeatedly promotes household items, such as the “Chef’s Pal”, or suggests a new model of a lawnmower to Truman (see figure 4). Every time she performs such an advertising scene, the camera distinctively zooms in on her, to highlight the product.

In a video about the visual effects of The Truman Show, Craig Barron, the film’s visual effects supervisor, explains how the production team altered wide distance shots of Seaside/Seahaven to make it appear as if the town was on a small island, separated from the main land by a river that leads into the ocean. This was done in order to fit the storyline, which, for example, required Seahaven to be isolated, so that Truman could not simply leave. While figure 5 is an actual shot of the existing town of Seaside, figure 6, in contrast, is the altered version, showing Seahaven as an artificially constructed island-town. Barron also mentions that the horizon as well as the clouds were curved to further intensify the impression
of Seahaven being a smaller, “dome-like” area (see Faux Finishing: The Visual Effects of ‘The Truman Show’, 03:20).

3.3.1. Seahaven – the ultimate suburbia

Functioning as the narrative setting for The Truman Show is the fictional, suburban island town, Seahaven. The audience is introduced to this picturesque place at the beginning of the film by means of establishing shots, illustrating the beauty and easiness that constitutes Seahaven. Director Weir intentionally uses these wide shots from above, in order to display the whole area as an idyllic suburb, creating a pleasant atmosphere and a feeling of nostalgia. In the film, the producer of ‘The Truman Show’, Christof, created Seahaven within a huge, dome-like film studio, with the intention of presenting his viewers the perfect suburbia. Interestingly, the actual filming location used to present Seahaven is the town Seaside, Florida, which is to no lesser extent a planned suburban community with a highly pleasant visual appearance. Seaside is a privately-owned area and was designed from scratch on previously unused greenfield land in 1978. In contrast to natural settlements which grow and develop over time, such master-planned communities are predetermined according to a specific scheme (see Coon 2014: 35). In that, the real town of Seaside and the fictional Seahaven are very similar to each other since they both were planned and created by someone with a particular vision in mind. Concerning the visual appearance, Seaside (and thus Seahaven) could hardly be a more characteristic example of suburbia. When discussing the film’s setting, Knox describes the “pristine, pastel-colored, and excessively wholesome Seahaven” as “a gigantic simulacrum based on mythical American small town life” (Knox 2010: 2). The residential houses are mostly single homes with homogenous front yards and white picket fences, just as the typical suburban ideal is supposed to look like. Figure 7 is a shot taken from above the town and perfectly illustrates Seahaven’s
aesthetic, showing a representative street of houses, while figure 8 portrays the
town center, which consists of a wide street with the most important public
buildings, encompassing a large hexagonal park area.

Figure 8 also displays an unnatural denseness of pedestrians for a small town
such as Seahaven, which indicates that the whole scene is, of course, staged for
‘The Truman Show’ and is supposed to convey the feeling of a lively town center.
Although the most relevant places around town are within walking distance,
Truman as well as many other people in the film are regularly seen taking their
cars in order to go to work or do the shopping, which points to the omnipresent
dependence on cars that is strongly connected to American suburbs.

At one point, Knox even compares Seahaven to Disneyland, declaring that both
are “imaginary, and relentlessly cheerful spaces” (Knox 2010: 14), planned and
monitored, in order to create a desired realm that separates itself from the outside
world. However, she also states that these two separate spaces, the inside and
the outside, each depend on the other one respectively to gain its individual
meaning. This means that visual representations always interact with and shape
the way an audience perceives suburbia and vice versa (see Knox 2010: 15).
The audience projects its knowledge and biased views on to suburban
representations and they in turn influence the audience’s perception of suburbia.

Concerning the director’s selection of the film’s setting, Smicek states that by
implementing the actual physical space of Seaside, Florida to function as the
artificial Seahaven, Weir made a “meta-textual, critical comment on the
intertwining of nostalgic visions of suburbia and contemporary planned and gated
communities” (Smicek 2014: 38). This means that, apparently, modern urban
planning in the USA heavily relies on people’s perception of suburbia, creating
places by using nostalgia as a way to connect with people on an emotional level.
Director Weir wanted to ensure that from a visual point of view Seahaven, on the one hand, had to look realistic and desirable in order to raise the feeling of the town being an existing paradise, while, on the other hand, it had to look like an “art-directed” place, created specifically for the purpose of ‘The Truman Show’ (see Faux Finishing: The Visual Effects of ‘The Truman Show’, 01:10).

3.3.2. The characters of The Truman Show

This chapter focuses on the film’s main characters, Truman Burbank, Christof, and Meryl Burbank/Hannah Gill, illustrating their individual characteristics and motives which essentially constitute the story.

As already briefly outlined in the film’s introduction, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is the main protagonist of a daily reality show named after him, without knowing that his life is constantly being broadcast around the world. He was adopted as a baby by the show’s creator, Christof, and since then has been the unsuspecting star for a huge audience. In his childhood, he was traumatized by the staged death of his television father, who apparently died during a storm on a boating trip he went on together with Truman. However, this was only a trick by the production team, to provoke a fear of water in Truman, in order to keep him from wanting to leave the island of Seahaven. The team also tried to make Truman fall in love with a girl called Meryl while he was in college, but he instead was interested in Silvia, another actress, who then tried to reveal the truth about his broadcast life to Truman. Upon her attempts, she is being removed from the show, and although Truman ends up marrying Meryl, just like he was supposed to, he has never stopped thinking about Silvia. During his adulthood, he starts noticing irregularities and unusual incidents, like a headlight falling from the “sky”, a single artificial raincloud moving with him or people seemingly walking in predetermined loops, causing him to become doubtful of his environment and
slightly paranoid. He starts looking for answers, but his family and friends are not a great help for him, because they are instructed to deflect Truman’s attention away from his doubts. Time and again, Truman has the desire to see more of the world and he wants to travel to the Fijis in particular, because that is apparently the place that Silvia went to after their last encounter. However, the producers immediately react to these situations, giving Truman the impression that traveling is the most dangerous thing in the world and that there is no other place better than Seahaven. Still, Truman becomes more and more tired of the monotonous everyday routines and the fake happiness of his surroundings. Although it seems as if he lives in a perfectly designed suburban paradise, he does not truly adapt to this lifestyle and tries to flee from this artificiality that more and more turns into a dystopian nightmare for him. Eventually, Truman chooses the challenging and possibly dangerous, but certainly more rewarding path by leaving Seahaven behind and finding out what the real world is like. The ending can therefore be seen as Truman escaping from the dystopian world that was presented to him as the ultimate utopia.

Christof (Ed Harris) is the creator and mastermind of The Truman Show. He is convinced that he has designed a perfect suburban world for Truman to lead a happy and safe life, sparing him all the dangers, fears and problems that the real world is filled with. Although he actually holds Truman captive in the artificial Seahaven, he does not feel guilt or remorse, since he “believes completely in his own version of utopia” (Mercadante 2016: 3 qtd. in Smicek 2014: 35). This becomes particularly obvious in a conversation between Christof and Silvia, who openly questions the show, and to whom he responds “I have given Truman a chance to lead a normal life. The world, the place you live in, is the sick place. Seahaven’s the way the world should be” (The Truman Show: 01:04:28). He believes he has saved Truman from all the world’s evil by placing him into this supposed utopia, without realizing that through the massive surveillance, control
and artificiality, Truman’s world is, in fact, a dystopia (see Smieck 2014: 32f.). For Christof, it is highly important to assure the show’s spectators that every emotion they see on screen is real and that Truman is an authentic character. In the course of the story, he consistently has to find ways to prevent Truman from trying to leave Seahaven, in order to discover the world beyond his suburban hometown. At the end of the film, when Truman finally reaches the edge of the artificial town, Christof for the first time addresses him directly and tries to convince him to stay. He appeals to Truman by giving him the choice between a safe and privileged life in his fabricated utopian suburbia or an uncertain future in the real world where he would have to deal with problems and challenges he is as yet unfamiliar with. It is an emotional scene and Christof almost shows fatherly feelings towards Truman, when he recapitulates certain events of Truman’s life, telling him “you can’t leave, Truman, you belong here with me” (The Truman Show: 01:17:20). However, this almost intimate moment quickly changes when Christof then urges Truman to say something, since he is live on television and people are waiting for his response. In that scene it becomes obvious, how Christof is obsessed with sustaining his suburban utopia and keeping the show alive, hoping that Truman will stay in his perfect world. When Truman finally makes his choice to leave Seahaven, Christof seems puzzled, slowly realizing that The Truman Show and thus his work of a lifetime has come to an end.

Meryl Burbank (Laura Linney) is Truman’s wife, who played an important role in the progress of the story. Just like the rest of the show’s cast, she is actually a paid actress, whose real name is Hannah Gill, and has a strong impact on Truman and his behavior. Her role functions as a sort of control mechanism in order to counteract any of Truman’s potential doubts and attempts to find out more about himself and the fictional world he lives in. Any time Truman shows signs of skepticism, Meryl immediately cuts him off, by changing the subject or playing down Truman’s concerns. This sometimes leads to comic situations,
since her interjections have nothing to do with Truman's concerns and just seem ridiculous in various moments, for example when Truman confronts Meryl after his breakdown and asks her why she wants to have a baby with him when she clearly cannot stand him. Instead of discussing the issue, Meryl just turns around, grabs a can of cocoa and starts reciting an advertisement (see figure 9).

3.3.3. Conclusion

To summarize this chapter, it can be concluded that suburbia in *The Truman Show* is thoroughly an artificial phenomenon, which becomes apparent not only through the essence of Seahaven as a constructed space but also by presenting the audience a version of a suburban utopia that is not real. Smicek recapitulates her analysis by referring to suburbia in *The Truman Show* as “the nostalgic replication of a historical suburban space that never existed in reality” (Smicek 2014: 36). She particularly emphasizes people’s nostalgia and longing for an idealized version of the 1950s American suburb. In a similar manner, Beuka regards the film’s depiction of suburbia as “an artificial reconstruction of small-town America” (Beuka 2004: 227).

At the end of the story, when Truman finally escapes his suburban prison, the television show’s spectators react differently than one would expect. Many of them are seen applauding and cheering for Truman, apparently being happy that he made it. This suggests that also the spectators have come to the conclusion that what they were watching all along is actually not a utopian world but a dystopian one. Based on this reaction, the film’s audience might think that they are presented with a happy ending, since Truman managed to start a new life and the spectators are aware of the actual misery they were witnessing. However, when the TV screens only display a static noise, since the “Truman Show” is over, one of the spectators asks the other “What else is on?” (*The Truman Show:*
01:32:00), suggesting that they have not really reflected on the events at all, but simply want to continue being entertained. According to Smicek, The Truman Show therefore does not have a positive ending, because it does not affect the spectators’ perception of their own world, which comprises dystopian elements such as control and superficiality as well. Also, it is not clear whether Truman really finds happiness in his new life, since he might have escaped the controlled Seahaven but nevertheless has to adapt to a certain degree of control, artificiality and fakeness in the real society as well (see Smicek 2014: 41).

On the whole, The Truman Show addresses a number of other interesting topics that would be suitable for an extensive analysis, such as voyeurism, surveillance, or consumerism, however, its most prominent theme remains to be suburbia.

3.4. Close analysis of the television series Desperate Housewives

In this chapter, the television series Desperate Housewives is analyzed with regard to its depiction of suburbia and how the show illustrates and treats different themes that are connected to suburban life. After providing an overview of relevant facts about the series’ production and background, the show’s plot and setting will be discussed. A particular focus will be on the visual aspects and in what way typical images of suburbia are being reinforced and reproduced. Afterwards, the main characters and their respective struggles with suburban life will be examined. Since the whole show comprises a total of 180 episodes in 8 seasons, the analysis will refer to single episodes exemplarily, mainly from the first season. In the subsequent citations of this chapter, phrases that were taken from the television series are indicated by the episode’s name as well as the number of the season, followed by the number of the episode.
The American television series *Desperate Housewives* was created by television writer Marc Cherry and produced by the ABC Studios. It aired on October 3rd, 2004 with 22.3 million people watching the first episode of this comedy-drama and continued to entertain its audience until May 13th, 2012. Both critics and viewers generally gave positive reviews and by 2007, *Desperate Housewives* was one of the most popular television shows, with a worldwide audience of about 120 million viewers in its target group of 18-49-year-olds and has won several awards. The cast consists of exclusively female leading actresses, namely Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross and Eva Longoria, which is rather unusual for the entertainment industry. (see McCabe & Kim 2006: 2ff.).

The series’ plot centers around the four main characters, Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher), Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross) and Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria), who live in the fictional suburban town of Fairview on the equally fictional Wisteria Lane. The story starts with the suicide of Mary Alice Young (Brenda Strong), a housewife and neighbor of the main protagonists, and unfolds through her narrating the secrets and lies of her friends. Framing each episode as an omniscient voice-over narrator, she has access to the characters’ inner feelings, thoughts and intentions, which highly contributes to the show’s atmosphere and course of events. Mary Alice’s choice of ending her life was a shock for the community since she apparently “had it all”, a great home, a nice family and nothing to worry about. However, life on Wisteria Lane is not as perfect as its polished appearance might indicate. Beneath the façade of perfection, we find loneliness, fear and desperation. Based on Mary Alice’s narrations, the series focuses on what is going on in the lives of Susan, Lynette, Bree and Gabrielle, and how they each deal with their individual desires and dissatisfactions. In the course of the episodes, many secrets and lies are being revealed and it becomes apparent that everyone is hiding something at one point and that no one can be fully trusted. Seemingly perfect lives all have their
drawbacks, and everyone has his or her own cross to bear. Mary Alice addresses this aspect in the sixth episode of season one, when she says that “beneath the peaceful façade everyone has secrets and we need to think carefully before digging them up” (“Running to stand still”, 1:6). This raises the question whether we really want to know everything about our friends and neighbors or if it is sometimes better to just keep up the false front without worrying too much about reality and the problems that people are struggling with (see Coward 2006: 36f.).

Producer Marc Cherry was influenced heavily by his own suburban upbringing and his mother’s life when he had the idea to write *Desperate Housewives*. As he stated in an interview, when he was young, he saw his mother as the perfect homemaker, who was happy to be at home with her three children, fulfilling her dream of the life she had always wished for. But one day, the two of them had a conversation over a news report of a family tragedy, when Cherry’s mother admitted to him, that she herself had moments of desperation during the time when her children were young and that she often struggled with the demands of motherhood. Astonished by these confessions, Cherry realized that “if (his) mother had moments like this, every woman who is in the suburban jungle has. And that’s where (he) got the idea to write about four housewives” (qtd in Weinraub 2004). Emanating from that, Cherry produced a television show which in all forms reflects this double-sidedness of the perfect façade that conceals all the frustrations, secrets and despair which people try to hide from each other.

Using voice-over narration is a strategy in film and television that serves a specific purpose and has a certain effect on how a story is perceived. In her analysis of the female voice in *Desperate Housewives*, Stefanie Hoth (2010) argues that “as soon as there is a voice-over in an audiovisual text the situation gets more complex as the act of narration becomes personalised” (Hoth 2010: 82). This is particularly true for *Desperate Housewives*, since Mary Alice Young does not only share her own personal views but also lets the audience gain insight into the other
women’s feelings. Hoth further claims that “voice-over narration changes the quality of the visual, adding a subjective note by implying that what the audience is watching has been chosen by the narrator” (Hoth 2010: 82). Again, this applies to the narration in *Desperate Housewives*, as Mary Alice intentionally talks about individual events that are either somehow connected to each other or lead to significant turns in the story. Using this technique, the omniscient narrator can jump back and forth between timelines, and thus create suspense and a more interesting progression of events, by specifically selecting what is important and leaving out what is unnecessary. Her role is also of particular importance, because she is able to provide background information, that is vital for a deeper understanding of a character or scene but would otherwise be difficult to convey to the audience. Furthermore, each episode ends with an epilogue, in which Mary Alice often refers back to significant storylines, draws conclusions from the characters’ actions, or hints at a possible aftermath. In that way, the audience becomes intrigued to find out what is going to happen next and is more likely to continue watching the following episodes. To some extent, Mary Alice can be regarded as a main character of the television series too, even though she is primarily present through her voice and physically seen only in flashbacks. Nevertheless, she has been part of the suburban community and functions as a connecting force that puts together all the single storylines for the audience. (see Hoth 2010: 93ff.).

The opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* is both memorable and unique, as it differs from other television shows by refraining from simply introducing characters and settings and instead using scenes that are not directly linked to the story itself. It basically comprises an overview of women’s representations, specifically portraying domestic situations, in art over the course of history, animated in such a way, to convey a certain meaning. In her article *Murder and mayhem on Wisteria Lane: A study of genre and cultural context in Desperate*
Housewives, Judith Lancioni (2006) discusses the show’s title sequence and provides background information on the used pieces of art. The sequence starts with a painting of Adam and Eve standing below the tree of knowledge, followed by Eve taking an apple from the snake, which then results in Adam being crushed by an enormous apple, exhibiting the show’s title (see figure 10). This can be interpreted as a depiction of women as the reason for man’s downfall. The next scene features Egyptian tomb paintings illustrating Nefertiti, who was one of the best-known Egyptian queens and one of the principal wives of Ramesses the Great. Her status was defined primarily by her role as wife to the king, which reflects the common situation of women being dependent on their husbands and urged to merely be good-looking and decent. The sequence continues with a variation of “The Arnolfini Portrait”, an oil painting by Jan van Eyck, portraying the Italian merchant Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife. The portrait is edited into a scene, in which the husband is throwing a half-eaten banana on the floor behind him and his wife instantly cleans up, while rubbing her pregnant belly. This humorous scene refers to the clear distribution of traditional male and female roles, insinuating that women’s only task is to bear children and clean up their wealthy husbands’ mess. The next illustrations are taken from Grant Woods’ painting “American Gothic”, showing a farmer and his spinster daughter, which are, however, portrayed as husband and wife for the purpose of the opening sequence. A winking pin-up girl appears, and the scene is animated in such a way, that the girl is attracting the farmer’s attention, who then starts smiling while his wife in the background watches the situation with a disparaging look. The whole scene becomes even more ridiculous when the woman’s face is then edited into a can of “aged sardines”, reducing the woman to her appearance and age, and suggesting that women are expected to be young and attractive (see figure 11). Next, the sequence shows a woman in a kitchen holding several glass jars, a scene that was taken from Dick Williams’ propaganda poster “Am I Proud!” during World War II. Again, this illustration refers to the traditional role of women
as housewives and their domestic tasks. The final artwork is a pop-art painting by Robert Dale, in which a woman and a man appear to be arguing. In the animation, the woman starts to cry and then punches the man, leaving him black-eyed. Out of all the other scenes, this is the only one where the woman has power and stands up against the man, whereas the previous sequences mostly demonstrated women in inferior situations. This can be interpreted as women’s empowerment over the course of the decades and leads over to the women of Desperate Housewives who are shown in the very last scene of the introduction, standing below the tree of wisdom from the first scene, each of them holding an apple in their hands (see Lancioni 2006: 129ff. and Visual Analysis: Desperate Housewives Opening). Interestingly, the whole opening sequence focuses completely on the development of domesticity and the female role in society, while including no direct reference to the main theme of suburbia. Nevertheless, suburbia plays such a significant role in the show that its omission in the opening sequence is not crucial, albeit uncommon.

What distinguishes Desperate Housewives from other suburban representations on screen is the fact that it illustrates a very modern version of suburbia with all its downsides. While previous shows or films mostly presented the suburban women as, in a way, being forced into this lifestyle as a housewife through tradition or absence of alternatives, it is very different on Wisteria Lane. All four of the female main characters have deliberately made the decision to move to the suburbs and to lead this kind of life. Yet, each one of them has taken a different and very individual path, which also has led to very individual challenges and fates. Although the women in Desperate Housewives are far more emancipated and can make more decisions on their own than women in postwar representations, one main aspect stays the same. Both groups have tried to live up to expectations that can hardly be fulfilled, which results in the women’s frustration and desperation (see Coward 2006: 38). With Mary Alice Young
functioning both as a tragic figure of suburbia herself as well as an omniscient narrator pointing out all the other protagonists’ secrets and despair to the audience, *Desperate Housewives* is very explicit in representing its clearly dystopian perspective on suburban life. However, this explicitness is also subject to criticism. As Huq points out, a certain degree of vagueness is missing, since “messages are increasingly spelt out for audiences rather than to let them read between the lines” (Huq 2013: 131).

3.4.1. Suburban life on Wisteria Lane

In order to produce a show about suburbia, an appropriate setting for *Desperate Housewives* had to be found. Wisteria Lane, which is actually called Colonial Street, is a fictional street located at the Universal Studios in Hollywood and has been used as a filming set for a number of different television shows and movies. It is a winding street that comprises several single-family-homes ending in a cul-de-sac, representing the typical appearance of many suburban areas. Its idyllic aesthetic is intensified by picturesque homes, well-kept lawns, parks and quiet roads, conveying the image of a perfect suburb. For the story of *Desperate Housewives*, Wisteria Lane is set in Fairview, which is, just like Wisteria Lane itself, a fictional place. It is common for filming sets to have just the façades of houses for exterior shots, while scenes that take place inside of a house are filmed on different locations and stages. For *Desperate Housewives*, however, the producers created real interiors for the houses on Wisteria Lane, so that scenes could be filmed inside a room and at the same time views through the window could be provided in order to witness events happening on the street. This proceeding is very unique and contributes to the show’s suburban feeling, where people tend to observe their neighbors from behind their own literal and figurative façades. With regards to architecture, size, color and interior style, the
single houses were all assigned to the different characters to match their personalities and emphasize their traits. In that way, the audience could find a connection to the protagonists more easily. The production design was further supported by the use of colored light, matching the characters’ color range, which was an innovation for the show. The wisteria flower, which is accountable for the streets name, can be seen blooming on many houses and front gardens, making the whole area look very pleasant and welcoming. Typically, most of the houses have white painted picket fences surrounding the yard, a most characteristic feature of suburban areas (see The American Society of Cinematographers and The Studio Tour).

Concerning the presentation of Wisteria Lane on screen, production designer Thomas A. Walsh pointed out how the production team intentionally altered the visual appearance of the exteriors and interiors, stating that “everything was a little heightened, everything was a little too perfect” (Desperate Housewives S1 – Behind the scenes and secrets). David R. Coon also comments on the fact that the “highly stylized” show is “a little too flawless to be believed” (Coon 2014: 116), referring to clearly staged moments in the television series, such as the introductory shot of Wisteria Lane (see figure 12), in which several people and vehicles cross each other’s way in a very unnatural, choreographed manner, to convey the image of a lively neighborhood (see Coon 2014: 116f.).

In her analysis, Deborah Jermyn (2006) comments on the show’s camera work and points out how the “unusually fluid camera” and its “high-angled shots above Wisteria Lane down to individual houses, or pans and tracks across the street” (Jermyn 2006: 175) are very characteristic and remarkable features of the television series. One the one hand, this technique is used to complement the story’s narration through Mary Alice Young, whose ghost seems to be watching and commenting on her former neighbors from above, while on the other hand, it
also emphasizes the sense of suburbia by setting the focus on Wisteria Lane and its beautiful appearance.

Vermeulen (2014) points out the extraordinariness of Wisteria Lane as it functions not only as a cinematic set but more as a central part of the narrative itself: “[...] the neighborhood of Wisteria Lane really has a personality. It’s like another character on the show” (American Cinematographer, qtd. in Vermeulen 2014: 110). In contrast to other sitcoms, Desperate Housewives makes extensive use of its location by presenting the audience long shots and quiet scenes focusing solely on Wisteria Lane itself. By means of this increased visual presence, the producers are able to create some sort of familiarity between the viewer and the location, generating a feeling of closeness within the audience (see Vermeulen 2014: 109ff.).

Vermeulen further describes how Desperate Housewives “uses mise-en-scène, camera movement, architecture, design and [...] fashion, to create an idea of openness and democracy” (Vermeulen 2014: 116). This sense of openness, which is conveyed by Wisteria Lane for its inhabitants, can be discovered in many scenes and is realized through “shots of children playing on the asphalt [...] fathers and mothers with buggies occupying the pavements, social events in the park, and people talking to one another from their lawns” (Vermeulen 2014: 115). Mise-en-scène, which can be translated to “placing on stage”, refers to the arrangement in a cinematic production and includes all elements of the visual design that contribute to the storytelling. In his book Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation, John Gibbs defines this technique as “the contents of the frame and the way they are organised” (Gibbs 2002: 5). The single contents comprise, apart from the actors, all visual properties such as costumes, décor, buildings, colors and lighting. By arranging the frame, for example by putting certain aspects in the foreground while others remain in the background, directors
can affect and control what the audience can see and how particular elements of a scene are perceived. This means, that all decisions regarding the framing are made deliberately to serve a specific purpose, since they are a crucial factor in creating a relationship between the audience and what they see on screen (see Gibbs 2002: 5). What can be noticed in the houses of Wisteria Lane is the fact that many of them have large picture windows and doors with glass elements, which adds both to the openness and brightness as well as to the observing, gazing nature of the show. Various scenes are shot from behind a character, as if one is looking over the person’s shoulder, spectating the events or witnessing something from a distance (see Vermeulen 2014: 114).

The show’s cinematographer, Lowell Peterson, also managed to hint at the personal tragedies and imperfections that lie beneath the polished exterior of Wisteria Lane. In the series’ pilot opening, the audience is introduced to a seemingly idyllic suburb with the camera moving above Wisteria Lane, presenting a glimpse of the residents’ flawless lives before Mary Alice Young begins to tell the story about the day of her suicide. This scene immediately catches the viewer’s attention, because it dramatically shows the dichotomy between the perfect appearance and the tragic realities that are often hidden and kept secret. Thus, the audience gets an idea of what to expect when watching Desperate Housewives, namely a tragicomic show that deals with the protagonists’ not always flawless lives and challenges instead of a shallow feel-good television series. In that way, Wisteria Lane not only represents a suburban area with its problems underneath the pretty surface, but it can also stand for the superficial, phony people who try to keep up a façade in order to distract others from their own miserable lives (see The American Society of Cinematographers).
3.4.2. The characters of Wisteria Lane

The four main protagonists in Desperate Housewives are very diverse characters with their individual challenges, but they all share a common set of difficulties that come with living in suburbia. In the following, the show’s central women shall be briefly illustrated with regard to their personality traits and life situations as well as their roles within the community of Wisteria Lane.

Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher) is a divorced mother of a teenage daughter and a hopeless romantic. She repeatedly struggles with the responsibilities of being a single mother while at the same time trying to find happiness and love for herself. Susan is very emotional and vulnerable, and at times she even seems more dependent on her daughter, Julie, than the other way around, which naturally causes tension and demands a lot of maturity from Julie, who supports her mother as good as she can. During the first season, Susan starts dating one of her neighbors, Mike Delfino, and soon finds out some displeasing details about his past, namely that he was convicted of drug trafficking and manslaughter of another Wisteria Lane resident. In the course of the story, the two have an on-and-off relationship overshadowed by misunderstandings and secrecy on both sides (see Desperate Housewives Wiki: Characters).

Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman) is a stay-at-home mother of four rebellious children, who gave up her career as a CEO in advertising, while her husband, Tom Scavo, dedicated his life to work and business trips. Especially her hyperactive twin boys continuously take her to the brink of desperation, although she would never admit her struggle in public. When meeting an old colleague at the supermarket, Lynette would refer to her life as a full-time mother as “the best job (she has) ever had” (1:1). She starts taking ADHD medication prescribed for her twins, to make her situation more bearable, until she realizes she has developed an addiction. Her marriage is deteriorating, partly due to her husband
being away so much and making decisions without her agreement. After a series of arguments and negotiations, Lynette and Tom reach a compromise which involves them changing their roles, with Lynette going back to work and Tom being a stay-at-home father. She later is diagnosed with cancer and has to undergo chemotherapy, which she at first tries to hide from her friends in order to avoid their pity (see Desperate Housewives Wiki: Characters).

Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross) is an excessive perfectionist who wants to present herself as the ideal housewife and mother. Having a spotless house and a neat appearance at any time is highly important to her. However, while she is an exceptional homemaker and cook, her husband, Rex Van de Kamp, and her two children, Andrew and Danielle, suffer under Bree’s obsessive behavior and her lacking emotional commitment to her family. As a result, the relationship with her children becomes more and more problematic. During the course of the story, Bree has to face several crises, such as alcoholism, her son causing an accident while drunk-driving, and her husband dying from a heart attack (see Desperate Housewives Wiki: Characters).

Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria) is a former model who married a rich businessman, Carlos Solis, not out of love, but to enjoy the amenities of wealth and luxury. The couple lives in a large, extravagant house and Gabrielle’s main interests are shopping for fashion and looking good. Since her husband is more interested in making money than in the well-being of his wife, Gabrielle starts having an affair with her teenage gardener. Nevertheless, Carlos has a strong wish for a baby and replaces Gabrielle’s birth control pills. When Carlos gets arrested for financial crimes and has to spend eight months in jail, Gabrielle finds out that she is pregnant, but does not know whether Carlos is the father. As a consequence, she ends her affair and is willing to work on her marriage. However, after she has a miscarriage and Carlos cheated on her, their relationship is full of conflicts. Gabrielle has to deal with divorce, financial struggles, and later in the show she
has two children with Carlos, who are spoilt and difficult to handle. Although Gabrielle is pictured as the most superficial and selfish of the housewives, she also has vulnerable moments (see Desperate Housewives Wiki: Characters).

As mentioned before, Mary Alice Young (Brenda Strong) should be treated as a main character too, because even though her physical appearances are rare, she plays an essential role both as a community member of Wisteria Lane and as the narrating voice of the whole story. Mary Alice is probably the most mysterious character, as the audience learns about her suicide from the very beginning, but everything that has led to her act of desperation is concealed and only slowly being uncovered over the course of the series. When she was still alive, Mary Alice was perceived as the perfectly happy, committed wife and mother, who lived with her husband Paul and their son Zach on Wisteria Lane. However, when Mary Alice’s neighbors are asked to help Paul with her personal belongings after her suicide, they find a letter which appears to be a blackmail, stating that whoever had written the note would know what Mary Alice had done. Little by little, the women find out more about their neighbor’s past: Mary Alice and her husband Paul were unable to conceive a second child and agreed to illegally take an addicted woman’s baby in exchange for money. In an attempt not to arouse suspicion, they changed their names (from originally Angela and Todd Forrest), left their hometown and moved to Wisteria Lane to start a new life. A few years later, the baby’s real mother found them nonetheless and insisted on taking her child back. In a fight, Mary Alice killed the woman and, together with her husband, buried the body under their pool. At first, they got away with the murder for several years, until a neighbor recognized Mary Alice as Angela, roughly reconstructed the abduction of the baby and consequently blackmailed her, which then resulted in Mary Alice committing suicide (see Desperate Housewives Wiki: Characters).

What can be construed from this characterization and the women’s portrayal in Desperate Housewives is that each of them has her own cross to bear and that
life in suburbia is not always perfect, no matter how shiny the façade. One crucial reason for illustrating such diverse characters in Desperate Housewives was, of course, to appeal to a wide range of female viewers, who should identify and sympathize with at least one of the show’s main women. Regardless, producer Marc Cherry managed to write a script that included situations and issues that apparently resonated with a large audience, considering the show’s success.

3.4.3. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the creators of Desperate Housewives have not only used suburbia as a setting for their storyline but, moreover, they have foregrounded it in order to make it the show’s main narrative theme. Thus, Wisteria Lane, the fictional suburban street, serves more purpose than just being a location, as its depiction and integration into important events adds to the series’ overall atmosphere significantly. A central aspect of the television show is the concept of the façade, which the characters try to preserve at all costs.

As David R. Coon summarizes, “Wisteria Lane is a parodic reimagining of previous representations of suburbia” (Coon 2014: 125). He states that producer Marc Cherry intentionally exaggerated the image of the perfect suburb that has been present on television since the 1950s to show how ridiculous this nonexistent version of suburban life is (see Coon 2014: 125).

On the whole, Desperate Housewives portrays women, who on the one hand challenge the traditional image of the happy housewife but on the other hand still struggle to fight against social pressures and their own expectations of a suburban life.
3.5. Central suburban themes in *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives*

As already mentioned before, there is a number of common themes connected to suburbia or rather the “myth of suburban perfection” (Coon 2014: 23) which are, of course, also observable in its visual representations. This chapter focuses on three main topical clusters, each combining a set of ideas that are typically subject to discussion within the context of suburban life, namely traditional values and nostalgia, family life and the role of women, as well as secrecy, privacy and the public. In the following, it will be analyzed which of these themes are prominent in *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* and in what way they are portrayed or given attention. A particular focus will be on the question whether traditional and idealized versions of suburbia are reproduced in the two selected sorts of media and whether the film and the television show provide their audience a critical insight on the chosen themes.

3.5.1. Traditional values and nostalgia

As already outlined in previous chapters, the image of suburbia is to a large extent built on nostalgic views of the past and the set of values associated with it. This chapter aims at identifying what kind of role traditional values and nostalgia play in *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* and in what ways these themes are treated with regards to the representation of suburbia.

The term “tradition” usually refers to “something from the past that has been handed down through generations” (Coon 2014: 53) in order to keep it alive. Depending on a society’s culture, certain values are regarded as desirable by the general public, which is why they are reiterated in an attempt to foster specific behavior and norms. Thus, the phrase “traditional values” always reflects the
preferred opinion of a society or group of people based on collective memories and images of the past (see Coon 2014: 53). Nostalgia can be defined as having sentimental feelings about certain aspects of the past that are often euphemized and associated with a better, happier time. The postwar period with its increasing marketing of suburban living sparks those nostalgic feelings in many Americans who idealize that time in terms of values and desires. Television shows and advertisements certainly had a part in that development, since the suburbs were not only pitched to people as the bourgeois dream come true, but they were just as well used as an advertising space to promote household appliances, furniture, and altogether a lifestyle that appealed to a wide population. Furthermore, the availability of television sets led people to spend more leisure time at home, watching programs together, which certainly had an effect on people’s perception of the suburban family life and the values and norms associated with it (see Coon 2014: 39f.). As Rupa Huq points out that “television can reflect, reinforce and challenge dominant norms or even create new ones” (Huq 2013: 139), it becomes evident how influential television programs are by deliberately creating feelings of nostalgia through their depiction of suburbia. This aspect is also acknowledged by David R. Coon, who explains how, for example, television reruns are used to activate the so-called “collective nostalgia”, which refers to a sentiment of longing for the past that is shared by a large number of people. Coon further elaborates that this kind of nostalgia plays an important role in the media and that it is used to create and sell a certain image, especially of suburbia (see Coon 2014: 39f.).

However, contemporary suburban narratives seem to feature nostalgic aspects more and more as a means of criticizing this practice and often do so in a satirical way, as it can be seen both in The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives (see Coon 2014: 32f.).

In The Truman Show, the spectators of Truman’s life are exposed to a fictional world that is completely based on nostalgia for an orderly, domestic life within a
like-minded community of people, who seem to enjoy their never changing day-to-day existence. Generally speaking, “The Truman Show” is characterized by almost comically repetitive sequences of the characters’ daily routines, such as greeting the neighbors, going to work, having dinner, or spending time at home. This demonstration of trivial, everyday life situations generates a feeling of stability, familiarity and connectedness to the place and its inhabitants within the spectators, because they perceive Truman’s life as a constant and a desirable concept of living. As viewers of the movie, however, we realize that the picturesque Seahaven, with all its constructed “nostalgic-ness”, does not work for Truman, who is constantly longing for more. Concerning the use of nostalgia in order to sell the idea of a perfect life, Coon concludes that in The Truman Show “nostalgic versions of the past […] are presented as initially appealing, but ultimately unsustainable, as the limitations introduced by nostalgia clash with human desires for freedom, knowledge, and growth” (Coon 2014: 32). Truman is born into an artificial world, whose creators relied on the “recycling of nostalgic suburban imagery” (Coon 2014: 33) in order to distract the story’s main character as well as the spectators from reality. In one scene we can see Truman, Meryl and Truman’s mother flipping through a photo album, reminiscing past days, and essentially reproducing nostalgic moments to further reinforce the picture of the happy suburban family (see figure 13).

Coon further explains how The Truman Show explicitly uses nostalgia to filter Truman’s understanding of the past, which in turn hinders his self-awareness in the present, and points out the adverse effects of the nostalgic view: “When we filter out the bad, the negative, and the unpleasant (as we do when we are thinking nostalgically), we are left with an incomplete picture of our existence” (Coon 2014: 56).

What Christof and his team did not expect, was that the whole concept of a
traditional suburban life had no appeal for Truman, who finds himself struggling within this community which more and more feels like a prison to him rather than utopia. He wants to break out and travel the world to finally see and experience something new apart from his dull, monotonous small-town and he is not afraid to take the risk of all the possible dangers that he has been warned from since childhood. Truman actively chooses the exact opposite of what is promoted, not only to him but to people in general, as the suburban dream, leaving his “creator” and the show’s spectators speechless. In this portrayal, The Truman Show manages to highlight the discrepancy between an idealized concept based on nostalgia and all the downsides that come with living in a community that prices conformity and traditional values over everything else. Thus, The Truman Show does not try to reproduce the nostalgic view but instead exposes the manipulation and leaves it for the audience to criticize (see Coon 2014: 34).

Desperate Housewives clearly differs from The Truman Show in its use of nostalgia as a visual and narrative tool. One interesting aspect that Alex Bevan (2018) mentions in her analysis is that the use of first-person omniscient narrator Mary Alice Young contributes to the “sense of pastness that is a defining feature of Desperate Housewives” (Bevan 2018). Mary Alice leads the audience through the show’s storyline, repeatedly referring to past events in the housewives’ lives that all seem to be interconnected. In that way, her narration and the voiceovers, which are a central part of every episode, constantly generate a feeling of memory and the past.

However, the television series clearly presents the audience an image of suburbia that is not as sugar-coated as some nostalgic depictions might suggest. In fact, Desperate Housewives plays with that blurred perception of a supposedly better time and points at those other examples in a satirical way, by focusing on the life of four women, who definitely do not comply with the nostalgic image of the happy housewife. In her analysis, Sheryll Wilson (2006) elaborates on the
show's use of nostalgia, particularly with regard to the female characters' “quest for romantic love” (Wilson 2006: 145) and how it reinforces traditional ideals of marriage, womanhood and domesticity. Wilson claims that, while Desperate Housewives tries to sell us a progressive approach on women’s lives and their struggles within a suburban community, the narrative frequently falls back into old patterns in which traditional romantic concepts such as the knight in shining armor who saves the desperate woman or the happily-ever-after couple are reproduced, specifically in the storylines of Susan and Gabrielle, who are both longing for these ideals of romantic love that are part of the nostalgic image representing the American post-war family (see Wilson 2006: 144ff.).

Taking a closer look at the physical space in which Desperate Housewives is set, Wilson further discusses Wisteria Lane by referring to Raymond Williams’ “concept of the room as a televisual space that both structures and infuses with meaning” (Wilson 2006: 146). Williams claimed that the room “is an actively shaping environment” and “a set that defines us” (Williams 1989: 12, qtd. in Wilson 2006: 146), which means that there is an interdependence between the subject and the space in which it acts. In Desperate Housewives, ‘the room’ does not refer to one of the women’s actual interior spaces but rather, as Wilson explains, to the space that “is created through the lines of picket fences as they criss-cross Wisteria Lane, marking out each character’s private, domestic space encapsulating the women’s individual dramas” (Wilson 2006: 146). Thus, Wisteria Lane functions as a defined space that shapes and influences its inhabitants. She further claims that “the structure of feeling produced by those ‘rooms’ returns us to a world containing us – as well as the characters – within the 1950s American suburban ideal” (Wilson 2006: 153). According to Wilson, Desperate Housewives creates nostalgia both through its illustration of the female characters, in terms of their own desire for nostalgic ideals, as well as through evoking the feeling of pastness by means of stylistic decisions (see

In general, traditional values and nostalgia are certainly closely connected with idealized visions of family life and domesticity, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.5.2. Family life and the role of women

Living in suburbia is particularly associated with married couples who have children and a detached house, reflecting the American Dream and following the example of the 1950s and 1960s ideal image of the nuclear family. Usually, this type of family consists of a full-time working husband and stay-at-home housewife who cares for the children and is responsible for all domestic duties. The distribution of roles is clear and rarely questioned. However, it can be argued that the picture of the aspired postwar family is blurred by nostalgia, since statistics on demography have shown a very different reality of the modern family over the past 50 years, considering for example increasing divorces, declining birth rates, and new forms of blended families (see Douglas 2003: 1). Nevertheless, the family has always been regarded as the primary domain for women, which has not changed drastically since the 1950s, as William Douglas points out: “Women, in particular, have been implicitly and, often, explicitly instructed to define themselves in terms of home and family, and the preferred trajectory, even for the modern American woman, customarily involves marriage and motherhood” (Douglas 2003: 3). Since television series and films have always drawn from real life examples, the postwar family structure is, of course, also reproduced on screen. Douglas outlines his findings on the portrayal of families on television as follows: “Television families are presumed to offer implicit lessons about family life and family relations […] that often affect viewers’
expectations about the family as well as their own family interactions […]” (Douglas 2003: 1). So, according to Douglas, the families we see on television not only reflect the ideal model that viewers orientate themselves towards, but they apparently also serve an educational purpose. In this chapter, The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives will be analyzed with regards to their depiction of family life and the role of women in the context of suburbia.

Desperate Housewives has clearly set women’s roles in the center of attention, with the show focusing on the lives of four female main protagonists and being told by a female narrator. Although traditional roles and ideals of the nuclear family that have been prevalent from the 1950s and 1960s onwards are mentioned in the show, it becomes highly obvious that the four women in Desperate Housewives are not only very diverse, but they also exhibit lifestyles that differ tremendously from the way women were expected to be according to the traditional image. Anna Marie Bautista critically analyzed Desperate Housewives with regards to domesticity and comments on how the television series differs from earlier depictions of the “happy housewife” as follows: “Images of the nuclear family in 1950s America are often associated with the always smiling and cheerful figure of the housewife/mother who is completely satisfied with her role of the happy homemaker – an image of domestic bliss that is distinctly absent from the representations of domesticity on Desperate Housewives” (Bautista 2006: 157). She points out how the portrayal of the housewife was typically reduced to a stereotype from 1950s television programs such as Leave It to Beaver (1957-1963), which is opposed and to some extent even parodied by Desperate Housewives.

The only character in Desperate Housewives who corresponds to the stereotypical model of the ideal housewife, at least on the surface, is Bree Van de Kamp. To an outsider, Bree might come across as the perfection of a 1950s
suburban mother, who excels in baking and keeping a tidy home for her children and husband. Certainly, her character in the show is exaggerated in order to point out the ridiculously unrealistic image of women which we are often confronted with. However, in the course of the story Bree is portrayed more and more as a cold, neurotic control freak, which overshadows her flawless façade and damages her relationship with both her husband and her children. Bautista even refers to Bree as “the most complex and possibly the most desperate” (Bautista 2006: 161) character of the series, listing her obsessive pursuit of perfection and her controlled emotions as the main reason for her divorce. This statement is confirmed by Bree’s husband, Rex, who in the series’ very first episode directly addresses their problematic marriage: “I want a divorce. I just can’t live in this detergent commercial anymore.” (“Pilot”, 1:1), to which Bree just reacts in an elusive way. In a later scene, Rex gets back to the topic and clarifies: “I’m sick of the bizarre way your hair doesn’t move. I’m sick of you making our bed in the morning before I’ve even used the bathroom. You’re this plastic suburban housewife with her pearls and her spatula who says things like ‘we owe the Hendersons a dinner.’ Where’s the woman I fell in love with? Who used to burn the toast and drink milk out of the carton? And laugh? I need her. Not this cold perfect thing you’ve become.” (“Pilot”, 1:1). But even confronted with these hurtful truths, Bree does not discard her façade and just changes the topic, only crying when she is by herself. Bautista concludes that Bree’s external perfection is “a façade for the sadness and desperation within her” (Bautista 2006: 164). Thus, Desperate Housewives clearly displays a dystopian reality for women within the suburban context.

Rosalind Coward (2006) points out that the characters in Desperate Housewives have made “post-feminist lifestyle choices” (Coward 2006: 38) which were not imposed onto them by external influences such as tradition, societal pressure or financial reasons. Neither Gabrielle, who does not want to become a mother and
hates housework, nor Lynette, who followed her career path before settling as a full-time mother, or Susan, the single mother, fit into the female role that was regarded as normal or desirable by society. They feature very diverse family structures which are often in contrast to the idealized model of the suburban married couple with two to three children and a traditional distribution of roles and duties. However, even though the women in Desperate Housewives have more freedom and possibilities to choose a life of their own liking than women of previous generations, it seems as if they struggle with their lives and roles nevertheless. As it can obviously be derived from the show’s title, the protagonists are desperate and unsatisfied on multiple levels, concerning their love life, their roles as mothers, their careers, and generally their position within the community on Wisteria Lane (see Coward 2006: 38f.). The only stable constant during the whole show seems to be the women’s friendship, which in spite of minor crises appears to be strong and irresistible. Resulting from this observation it can be presumed that in the television series female friendships represent a more stable factor for the women than other relationships. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that even though the housewives offer support and show sympathy for each other, they still refrain from talking about their biggest problems with their close friends, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter (see Shuler, McBride and Kirby 2006: 183).

Despite the show portraying rather untraditional family structures, the typical distribution of gender roles and problems resulting from them are frequently covered, often with an ironic undertone. In episode three of the first season, Lynette’s husband, Tom, comes home from a business trip and during a discussion about how to spend the following evening, while Lynette is still doing laundry, he brazenly asks her: “I mean, do you remember what it’s like to work a 60-hour week?” (“Pretty Little Picture”, 1:3), to which Lynette just remains dumbfounded. Her husband, who rarely helps with household chores, cannot
even imagine what it means for his wife to be a full-time mother of four young children and taking care of the house all day. This scene is a typical example of how the show portrays marital challenges and women’s struggles that stem from the traditional understanding of male and female roles, which are still present in people’s minds. A similar aspect regarding women’s roles that is covered in Desperate Housewives is the perceived social pressure imposed by other women. In episode eight of the first season, Lynette opens up to her friends about using her child’s ADD medication in order to cope with her exhaustion as a mother of four, and states that she feels like a failure. When Bree and Susan then suggest to Lynette that she should get herself help, Lynette answers: “That’s what is so humiliating. Other moms don’t need help. Other moms make it look so easy. All I do is complain.” (“Guilty”, 1:8). She plays down her own desperation and feels pressured by other women around her, who apparently keep up the image of the perfect housewife and mother, who never fails and has everything under control. Bree and Susan then talk about their own struggles as mothers, to which Bree adds: “Nobody likes to admit that they can’t handle the pressure.” (“Guilty”, 1:8). This shows that there is still a picture of unrealistic standards and expectations prevalent in people’s minds when it comes to domesticity and motherhood.

On the whole, Desperate Housewives manages to challenge the traditional image of family life and women’s roles predominantly visible in suburban utopias, where “single mothers and divorcees were largely absent” (Huq 2013: 134), by presenting the audience a group of female characters who clearly set themselves apart from that image. By using Wisteria Lane as the picture-perfect setting and repeatedly referring to the utopian perspective of suburbia, while at the same time displaying the tragedies and breakdowns of the main characters, the viewer is confronted with the discrepancy between a seemingly perfect façade and the often painful realities that everyone has to face. Thus, Desperate Housewives
can be regarded as an example for a dystopian representation of suburbia, as the show primarily illustrates the characters’ struggles that are inevitably connected to their suburban life.

As it has been elaborated before that all representations of suburbia subsequently influence and shape people’s perception of this socio-cultural concept, the question arises in what way *Desperate Housewives* might affect the audience’s view on suburbia and whether the show is able to initiate discussions about traditional roles of women and the ones illustrated in the narrative. Producer Marc Cherry stated that he intended to create a television series that on the one hand refers to the feminist movement and displays empowered women but on the other hand also demonstrates that this empowerment does not only come with benefits: “What I’m doing is having women make the choice to live in the suburbs, but that things aren’t going well at all” (Weinraub 2004: B12, cited in McCabe and Akass 2006: 9). Vermeulen, however, criticizes the assumption that women may have chosen their “suburban prison” and want to stay in that position due to lack of courage. Instead, he claims that *Desperate Housewives* presents “an illusion of equality, but it also, simultaneously, deconstructs that illusion” (Vermeulen 2014: 117).

It can be claimed that even though *Desperate Housewives* had to face criticism regarding its depiction of women (for example Sayeau 2006, Coward 2006), it was certainly one of the first television shows to actively address the desperations of family life and, as Bautista states, the “contradictions behind the constructions of woman’s place in the home, particularly as they relate to women in the post-feminist era” (Bautista 2006: 161).

*Although The Truman Show, in contrast to Desperate Housewives, features a male leading actor, family life and the role of women are nonetheless central topics of the film, albeit in a very different manner. Truman’s relationship with*
Meryl was “arranged” by the show’s producer in order to guarantee a “functioning” marriage that should eventually lead to children. Meryl, or rather Hannah Gill, was specifically cast for the role and besides her duty of playing Truman’s wife she also functions as an advertising face to market numerous products to the viewers. Truman and Meryl were supposed to represent a typical suburban family, in order to appeal to the audience and to convey the image of a perfectly happy life. Their daily routine is characterized by repetitive, superficial interactions with the neighbors, for example when leaving for work in the morning, inviting friends over for dinner, and spending the evening together at home, which is essentially being used as a setting for advertising items and the suburban dream in general. Meryl’s role is clearly influenced by representations of women from the postwar period. Not only her physical appearance but also her behavior reflects the image of the traditional housewife, whose main concern is to please her husband and to live up to society’s expectations. In Meryl’s case, she additionally has to make sure that Truman does not get suspicious of his surroundings and has to come up with sometimes ridiculous distractions and excuses as to why Truman could not or should not pursue certain things, such as traveling. Even though she is completely committed to her role, Meryl fails at one aspect, namely at bearing Truman’s child. In an interview on The Truman Show, actress Laura Linney talks about her role of Hannah Gill/Meryl Burbank and explains, how Hannah Gill is actually a tough career woman who has gained success and fame through her acting in ‘The Truman Show’. Linney further points out that Hannah does not like Truman at all but tries very hard to conceal that in front of the camera, since he is the reason for her celebrity status in the first place (see The Truman Show: Laura Linney Exclusive Interview). In conclusion, when analyzing her character, it becomes clear that Hannah/Meryl, in all aspects, has to follow the stereotypical role model of a suburban housewife, in order to fulfill not only Christof’s vision of the perfect family but also the viewers’ expectations of the like. This raises the question, whether Hannah perceives ‘The Truman Show’ as a utopian suburbia
or rather as a dystopian prison, since Hannah cannot live a free, independent life, but has to play a role instead.

3.5.3. Secrecy, privacy and the public

The last theme to be discussed is centered around aspects of secrecy and privacy as opposed to openness and the public of a suburban community. As a counterpart to cities, which are often perceived as dangerous and crime-ridden places, the suburbs were usually praised as a safe and idyllic environment to raise a family. Moreover, the amenities of a private home surrounded by yards and sidewalks as well as a supportive community of friends and neighbors were promoted by urban planners and the media likewise. There are debates on the assumption of existing tensions between the urban and the suburban population who appear to despise the other way of life respectively. In his account of Bourgeois Utopias, Robert Fishman (1987) views the suburb as “a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into contempt and hatred for the ‘others’ who inhabit the city” (Fishman 1987: 154). So, Fishman claims that many suburban residents have fled the loathed city based on their bourgeois presumptions and exaggerated fears they connected with urban life. David R. Coon, on the other hand, points out that with the transition from the impersonal and anonymous city life to the suburban community life comes, of course, a certain degree of reduced privacy and increased exposure to the public. This is due to aspects of architecture and urban planning as well as the nature of community life, which implies interaction with neighbors and commitment to public activities (see Coon 2014: 74).

Privacy is, of course, a main topic of The Truman Show, since Truman’s life from the very first day has been everything but private. By means of an artificial world with hundreds of surveillance cameras, the show’s creator Christof attempted to
make sure that he generated a “safe” environment for Truman, who is not aware of being monitored at all times. This simulated safety, however, stands in contrast with Truman’s desire to explore the world and leads to many frustrating situations for Truman, because every unplanned situation immediately gets counteracted by the people around him.

In the opening scene, we can see Hannah Gill/Meryl Burbank talking to the audience of ‘The Truman Show’ and stating that for her “there is no difference between the private life and the public life” (*The Truman Show*: 00:01:03), since she has to truly commit to her role as Truman’s wife each and every day. Just like Truman, Hannah/Meryl is constantly being watched, and her life, even though it is an act, is open for the public to see and judge. She continues by saying “‘The Truman Show’ is a lifestyle, it’s a noble life, it is … a truly blessed life” (*The Truman Show*: 00:01:10). As viewers of the film, we might at first believe that Hannah/Meryl genuinely means that, although it becomes obvious in the course of the story that this is just part of her role, which of course has to be convincing, in order to convey the message that ‘The Truman Show’ is authentic and delightful.

Another aspect that is connected to the theme of privacy is that Truman is secretly in love with Sylvia despite being married to Meryl. He even keeps a little box in his basement with cutout pieces of female features from magazines, which he puts together to form Sylvia’s face, and dreams about seeing her again one day. For Truman, the basement is a sort of secret retreat, where he can dwell on his fantasies about the Fiji Islands, Sylvia, and everything else he thinks he has to hide from his wife. Over the course of the story, Truman gets more and more suspicious about what is going on, so he secretly develops a plan to escape Seahaven. The supposed suburban paradise and its fake inhabitants turn out to be a dystopian prison for Truman. It has to be mentioned that not all spectators of ‘The Truman Show’ are also supporting the program, but instead, a group of
opposing activists has formed, whose aim is to free Truman. This group, joined by Sylvia, openly criticizes the whole concept of ‘The Truman Show’ and fights for Truman’s right of privacy. Eventually, Truman’s secret intention to flee Seahaven leads to the collapse of the simulation and the show altogether, even though Christof tries to convince Truman of the safe and idyllic place he has created for him.

When analyzing the public in The Truman Show, it can refer to either Truman’s neighborhood, his workplace, and all the other locations in Seahaven outside of his home, or to the audience who is watching ‘The Truman Show’ all day long. The public in Seahaven, which is of course artificial, adheres to a perfectly written script in order to precisely reenact a suburban community. The way in which the people go about their “daily businesses” is deliberately arranged as repetitive and monotonous, to create the illusion of stability, routine and safety, not only for Truman but also for the spectators, who enjoy the recurring elements as an essential part of their daily entertainment. Truman, to some extent, has adjusted himself to the community and goes along with some of those repetitive actions, creating such memorable phrases like “Good morning, and in case I don’t see you: Good afternoon, good evening, and good night!”, which he regularly uses to greet his neighbors. This phrase becomes even more special at the very end of the film, when Truman is about to leave Seahaven and he deliberately addresses the audience of ‘The Truman Show’ for the first time by saying the exact greeting that he has used for many years. This scene is in fact the only moment, in which Truman is fully aware of himself being broadcast and it is, thus, his only interaction with the public in the real world. He even takes a bow before stepping out of the artificial Seahaven to symbolize the ending of ‘The Truman Show’ and leaves with a big smile on his face (see figure 14).

In a different way than portrayed in The Truman Show, privacy and secrecy play a major role in Desperate Housewives, too. As previously discussed, the
characters of the television series are all hiding something underneath the beautiful façade of their lives on Wisteria Lane. Their secrets range from trivial white lies, spread in order to feel and appear superior among the community, to deceiving close friends or family members, and eventually to even serious crimes such as murder. In any case, it is important for them to keep up appearances and to distract others from everything that might not fit into the picture of a happy suburban life. To some extent, the protagonists not only care about maintaining their own façade, but they are also reluctant to look behind their neighbors’ curtains for fear of what they might see. Bree accurately points out this condition when she asks her friends in the second episode: “How much do we really want to know about our neighbors?” (“Ah, But Underneath”, 1:2). Surprisingly, this does not only apply to the women’s neighbors but can also be found within their friendships. The housewives rarely open up about their most private issues, such as Bree’s marital problems, Susan’s struggles as a single mother, Gabrielle’s affair, Lynette’s desperation as a mother of four or her cancer diagnosis later on. Even though they consider each other to be close friends, they hide their weaknesses and desperations behind a façade, because they do not want to admit to the downsides that the suburban dream entails (see Shuler, McBride and Kirby 2006: 181ff.). Bree, for example, does not want her friends to know that she and her husband are in marital counselling and so she tells everyone that they are taking tennis lessons. Keeping up the façade of perfection is more important to Bree than being honest about her family issues (see Sharp 2006: 126). Nevertheless, in the rare moments when the women actually open up to each other, they admit to thinking that “it’s easier to keep it all in” (“Guilty”, 1:8) and come to the conclusion that, instead, they should talk about their problems more often.

A substantial part in the uncovering of secrets is realized through the omniscient voice-over narrator, Mary Alice, who shares the other characters’ inner feelings
and intentions in a suspenseful and sometimes ironic manner. As Stefanie Hoth points out: “the women in Wisteria Lane do not tell each other everything; instead, they hide private matters from each other, conceal their ulterior motives and sometimes lie, which is, of course, debunked by their deceased friend: ‘Yes, each new day in Suburbia brings with it a new set of lies’ (‘Impossible’, 1.15)” (Hoth 2010: 95). Interestingly, Mary Alice’s own story and the circumstances of her suicide are a mystery to the other characters and the audience as well, which is gradually being revealed over the course of the television series. From time to time, the voice-over narration provides small hints or ambiguous pieces of information, in order to create even more curiosity and suspense among the viewers (see Hoth 2010: 96).

For many of the housewives’ secrets, the cause can be found in the community’s or society’s expectations regarding the perfect suburban life, which the characters cannot live up to. Although the women seem to be emancipated and independent in a way, they still struggle with breaking free from the image of the happy housewife who is completely absorbed in her role. What connects the women of Desperate Housewives, despite the fact of them having secrets from each other, is their mutual experience of the struggles in suburbia, even when they are only hinted at. This becomes most obvious in the pilot episode, when the four women are sitting together at Mary Alice’s funeral, discussing what could have led her to commit suicide. Gabrielle wonders, ‘She was healthy, had a great home, a nice family. Her life was…’ – ‘Our life.’, finishes Lynette, and they look at each other knowingly (‘Pilot’, 1:1). Still, the problems are not made explicit by the women themselves but primarily by Mary Alice.

Another central point that affects how privacy and the public are perceived in Desperate Housewives is the appearance of Wisteria Lane. As already addressed in the analysis on the layout and design of Wisteria Lane, the houses feature architectural elements such as picture windows and glass doors, which
create a certain sense of openness. While from an aesthetic point of view, this might turn a house into a very appealing light-flooded space, it also results in the so-called “goldfish bowl” effect, referring to the condition of homes being visible for neighbors from the outside (see Spigel 1992: 128 and Coon 2014: 75). This aspect certainly plays an important role in Desperate Housewives, as the audience repeatedly witnesses particular events through a window or glass door or sees someone else observing a scene in the same way (see figures 15-17). In that sense, the television series actively plays with the contrast between privacy and the public and shows how private space in suburbia is often invaded by others.

One interesting aspect that can be observed in both The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives is how the audience is directly confronted with lies, deception and betrayal of the main characters. While in The Truman Show, it is unfolded from the beginning that Truman’s whole life is basically a lie, in Desperate Housewives the protagonists’ secrets are revealed little by little through the voice-over narration. Hence, in both narratives the audience is witnessing secrecy and deceit. Private emotions and secret intentions are made available to the public either by displaying them directly, as it happens in ‘The Truman Show’, where the show’s spectators are part of every “private” moment in Truman’s life, or, in the case of Desperate Housewives, by hinting at them or sometimes just telling them straight to the audience or to other characters of the story.
4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that there has been an interesting development in the depiction of suburban life in visual media. While in early representations, suburbia was seen as a safe haven that provided stability and a predictable way of living, this image has changed towards suburban realities that are challenged by a wide range of interpersonal issues and societal expectations (see Huq 2013: 157). The predominantly utopian views on suburbia have given way to depictions with a critical and often dystopian perspective.

This thesis aimed at discussing the concept of suburbia and its representations on screen by analyzing two contemporary examples that used suburbia not just as a setting but also as a main narrative aspect in which to embed their stories. The relevance of suburbia for the analyzed film and television show, amongst other examples, is pointed out by David R. Coon in the following way: “[They] are so heavily influenced by their suburban settings that they are inseparable from them. Moving these narratives out of the suburbs would radically alter them, in some cases beyond recognition” (Coon 2014: 222). Therefore, both concepts of The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives would not function if they were detached from their suburban setting, as it does not simply provide a spatial reference for the audience but even more a socio-cultural context in which the narratives make sense.

The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives are both examples of suburban narratives that illustrate how the idealized suburbs are not devoid of conflicts and tragedies. By using the concept of the façade (and breaking through it), directors and producers create an arc of suspense and an underlying theme that connects each narrative strand (see Coon 2014: 29).
Concerning nostalgia and traditional values it can be concluded that *The Truman Show* uses these themes at first to create an illusion, which is then falling apart in the course of the story, and in a self-reflective way comments on the constructedness of a suburban vision that cannot live up to reality (see Coon 2014: 49f.). Furthermore, *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* challenge the viewers to question not only the film’s and the television series’ own depiction of suburbia but all other representations thereof as well.

For the audience, it can be assumed that every interpretation of a suburban narrative is influenced by the viewer’s previous knowledge and opinion of suburbia. Therefore, it is possible to see the critical side as well as the glorifying aspects simultaneously, since both are identifiable. Although *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* clearly portray a dystopian suburbia for their main characters, the utopian aspects, as typical of previous representations, are still recognizable, especially from an aesthetic point of view, creating an appealing superficial appearance that represents the façade, which is one of the most prominent features of suburban narratives. As Coon summarizes, “suburbia is not just a static background. Whether utopian, dystopian, or somewhere in between, the suburban landscape is a dynamic force that in many ways defines the narratives contained within it” (Coon 2014: 17).
5. References

Films and television series


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Abstract

Suburbia has been used not only as a geographical setting but also as a narrative frame for a wide variety of films and television series. These representations of suburbia have created a certain image in people’s minds, which typically comprises beautiful detached houses with white picket fences, well-kept lawns and happy families. However, this perfect appearance very often turns out to be merely a façade, distracting from what lies beneath the idealistic image the viewer is confronted with.

This thesis explores representations of suburbia on screen and examines what kind of connotations they convey to the audience. It shall be shown, whether these representations replicate nostalgic visions of an idealized past and how they influence the viewers’ perception of suburbia. After a brief overview of the historical development of the suburbs, the contrasting utopian and dystopian perspectives on suburbia are discussed. The main part of the thesis centers around a close analysis of Peter Weir’s film The Truman Show (1998) and Marc Cherry’s television series Desperate Housewives (2004-2012). Both examples present suburbia as their main narrative frame and therefore qualify for a thorough examination of how suburban life is portrayed on screen. Apart from discussing the film’s and the television series’ visual aspects, their characters’ struggles within the suburban environment are commented on. Furthermore, The Truman Show and Desperate Housewives are analyzed with regards to three main topics that are closely connected to suburbia, namely traditional values and nostalgia, family life and the role of women, as well as secrecy, privacy and the public.

The analysis reveals that contemporary representations of suburbia, on the one hand, draw from previous representations but, on the other hand, also criticize
them. Thus, the audience is confronted with a dystopian rather than a utopian version of suburbia. By using the concept of the façade, which is a typical feature of suburban narratives in general, both *The Truman Show* and *Desperate Housewives* illustrate how suburbia is not always as perfect as early representations have tried to indicate.
Suburbia wurde in einer Vielzahl von Filmen und Fernsehserien nicht nur als geographische Kulisse, sondern insbesondere als erzählerischer Rahmen verwendet. Diese Darstellungen von Suburbia haben eine bestimmte Vorstellung erzeugt, welche typischerweise aus schönen Einfamilienhäusern mit weißen Gartenzäunen, gepflegten Rasen und glücklichen Familien besteht. Allerdings stellt sich dieses perfekte Erscheinungsbild sehr oft als bloße Fassade heraus, welche davon ablenken soll, was sich unterhalb des idealistischen Bildes befindet, mit dem der/die Zuseher/in konfrontiert ist.

Familienleben und die Rolle der Frauen, sowie Verschwiegenheit, Privatsphäre und Öffentlichkeit.