Reading Suburban Narratives

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Abstract

This thesis discusses London suburban-set fiction as enacting a key semiotic problem of modernity: how the individual must interpret, make sense of, and inhabit a particular locality. By semiotic here I mean the individual's drive to capture external reality, to read and constitute a sense of what is meaningful and objectively real in the suburban habitat. The suburb is presented in much suburban fiction as a key exemplar of modern built space insofar as it continually thwarts the individual's attempts to see and read it, to make it home. Suburban fiction presents a site that continually thwarts its perception, understanding and constitution and one that is thus experienced, in different ways, as strange, odd or unsettling.

The thesis discusses London's suburban fiction from the 1860s to the present day and each chapter focusses on different aspects of this struggle to see the truth of, and find meaning in, the suburbs. Suburban fiction presents a chronicle of compromised seeing. It repeatedly emphasises doubt and confusion, spectacle and performance, varieties of deception and falseness, modes of fantasy, vision and dream, the ghostly, insubstantial and unreal. It foregrounds the anxious urge for rational investigation and the complex relation of surface signs to the reality of depths.

Related to this, suburban fiction also presents an environment that is materially compromised. There is a doubt anxiety expressed in suburban fiction over the substantive nature of external reality and we note constant references to a materiality gone awry, to the things of the domestic real that threaten to overwhelm and suffocate the individual, or else to withdraw, or to actively attack and terrorise the suburban inhabitant. The suburban body itself, in so much suburban-set fiction, becomes the site of this struggle, portrayed as thing-like, as ineffectual and powerless, as sickly or diseased, as comic and absurd.

In most suburban fiction the suburb is never homely and inhabitants struggle to make such spaces legible and meaningful. The present work traces how such fiction has evolved over the last century and a half.

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Introduction

This thesis argues that suburban fiction reflects an acute semiotic challenge. How can we find meaning in, how can we decipher the signs of, suburban spaces as these appear in the fiction written about them? The development of the suburbs represents, itself, a discomfiting blurring of older distinctions, both imagined and felt, between the country and the city. The suburban novels I discuss do not represent what Raymond Williams called, in *The Country and the City* 'knowable communities' (Williams, 1973). Reading London suburban-set fiction of the last 150 years, I argue that such work foregrounds a particular crisis of modernity. Modern mass suburbia is frequently presented as illegible and suburban narratives dramatise the semiotic difficulties faced by individuals struggling to know and interpret the modern sites of mass, private domesticity. More than this suburban fiction is concerned with the question of how individuals can go on to meaningfully inhabit, to create a sense of home, in these supposedly homely sites of private and opaque mass suburbia.

Descending Shooter's Hill, in suburban south London, Sinclair, poet, novelist, diviner of urban esoterica, 'London's Magus' no less (Jackson, 2003) is collared by a disorientated Frenchman with an intriguing question. "Is this London?"' he demands, very politely'. Sinclair doesn't think so: '"Not in my book"', the writer answers. Sinclair then points northwest and offers simple directions; '"Keep going. Find a bridge and cross it"' (Sinclair, 1999b: 40).

Sinclair's encounter raises some intriguing questions about London suburbs, the sites that are the main subject of this thesis. It asks what counts as 'London'. The bewildered tourist cannot read *this* suburb as actually being part of what is signified as London. It also raises questions of the relation between these different sectors of London and London as it is traditionally represented in writing. Sinclair is the renowned investigator and recorder of unseen London, but this, an undistinguished South London suburb, does not fit into the category of a London that could be written; *'not in my book'*. The London suburb (and, I would add, regional suburbs and peripheral communities) is fascinating in that it is that ambivalent site which is

both London but not part of London. London's suburbs, the world's first modern, industrial suburbs, have not translated at all well into fiction. This particular site of mass domestic habitation, now home for 8 out of 10 people in England, is largely invisible in canonical literature (HELM, 2011).

One way of exploring the difficulties of writing about the suburb is to explore questions of representation, of the attempted verisimilitude, (or not) of writing about specific suburban individuals and places. Here we are concerned with the representational gap opened up between the experience of a specific kind of social space and that site's depiction in imaginative writing. On this view, one problem with recording the suburbs may be that the suburb, largely lower-middle class, domestic, private, hidden, dull and distant, full of displaced individuals from elsewhere who have no connection to place, may just not be perceptible to literary viewing. The suburb cannot be brought into focus because it cannot be properly seen in the first place. This approach is supported by literary geographer Franco Moretti's provocative discussion of 'the place- bound nature of the novel'. Moretti argues that 'without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible' (Moretti, 1998: 100). The London suburb seems to be that kind of indefinable space that is not amenable to literature; it isn't amenable, for example, to Sinclair's kind of literary re-enchantment; it's just not in his book. We could argue that the suburbs (and by this, and throughout this thesis, I mean various forms of occluded, peripheral domestic space; council estates, provincial towns, New Towns, gated communities) are often considered the 'wrong' kind of space for telling certain types of stories, for literary work in general. Indeed, we could go further and argue that the suburb, not only escapes literary figuring, but even seems to actually discomfit writing. Fiction seems unable to make a purchase on suburban experience.

Rather than seeing suburban fiction as primarily a difficulty with literary representation, it is more useful, I will argue in this thesis, to pursue the idea that the suburb presents us with a keen *semiotic* challenge, more broadly in terms both of cultural and cognitive mapping. The suburb asks profound questions about the individual's ability to see, know and inhabit modern environments. In a sense, the suburb confronts us with the problems of modern epistemology: what counts as real. I will argue that a very useful way to articulate and analyse this emphasis in suburban-set fiction on the difficulty of establishing suburban external reality and its attendant problematic materiality, is to use a broadly semiotic approach. For thinkers such as Thomas Sebeok, Jesper Hoffmeyer and others, and building on original work in semiotics by C. S. Peirce (not, I must emphasise, the semiology of

Saussure, which is concerned with human verbal signs alone), semiotics is the study of sign production and interpretation in all creatures living in specific environments. Semiotics is, of course, the study of the sign, and crucially for our argument here, argues that all 'objects', inasmuch as they are semiotic objects, and whether mind-independent or mind-dependent are *real* objects of knowledge. There is no unmediated access to the objects of external 'reality', and no unmediated access to the subjective experience which arises from being alive. What there is, however, is intersubjective and supra- subjective agreement (whose varying degrees of 'reality' and 'illusion' will differ over history and time'). The Peircean conceptualisation of the sign addresses precisely the issues discussed above, of the seemingly insoluble gulf between self and world, subjective and objective reality. The sign, for Peirce, mediates between self and world, between subject and object. Indeed 'the main mission of semiotics', as philosopher Thomas Sebeok argued, is to 'mediate between reality and illusion' (Sebeok, in Deely, 2009: 137).

This thesis is not seeking to offer a profound Peircean semiotic reading, but, rather, hopefully aims to open a conversation about a wider understanding of semiotics (again, broader than the previously dominant, largely Saussurean semiology, used in so much literary criticism). This is an approach which subsequent scholars may find interesting to develop further.

What I usefully take from Piercean semiotics is the key insight that there IS a reality which we (and all living things) can, and must, grasp – however partially – if we are to survive (and evolve). This is the semiotically mediated reality of our species: the individual 'lifeworld' we create in our everyday semiotic interaction with the world. Changes in the natural and, for humans, symbolically rich, *cultural* life-world must be integrated and made to mean. This is precisely the semiotic problem of modernity which humans have been encountering over the last two centuries, particularly, in the mass societies of the metropolitan suburbs.

The suburb presents a problematic object of knowledge. It establishes itself as modern form of mass metropolitan living, in London, from the 1860s, one that is private, domestic and familial, at a distance from the city, with inhabitants newly arrived from elsewhere. Suburban individuals have no connection to place, frequently move, and inhabit a site that balances conformism and standardisation with an offer of some scope for touches of individualism. Indeed the promise of suburban living, particularly the growth of the mass lower middle-class suburb, is that this site *is* amenable to acts of personal meaning-making: the individual, with

the family, can create an ideal balance of remote privacy with room for individualism, set within an affordable and comfortably predictable and standardised environment.

Yet in suburban fiction this balance is never presented as being realised. This radically new mass social space totally alters the relation of individual to other individuals, to lived locality and to community. Because the suburb is private, peripheral, ever-changing, comprised of standardised built units and semi-featureless topographic layouts, inhabited by uprooted strangers, the individual is always faced with the difficult task of reading and negotiating, making a home, in a frequently illegible environment. The mass suburb is also seen, throughout its development, as expanding horribly, as *sprawl*: shapeless and unlimited. For much of its evolution the suburb has also lacked design and been unplanned, built piecemeal by small local builders with no overall co-ordination. This unstructured and fragmented suburban morphology also generates a semiotic unease. Suburban fiction repeatedly asks what can be really known of this ahistorical, uprooted and unplanned form of mass living. Suburban *writing* itself is part of this same anxious dilemma of suburban experience, asking what can we know for sure of our communities and environments – and thus of ourselves.

This repeated anxiety about what can be known for sure in the suburbs is a crucial element, then, in much suburban fiction over the last century and a half. These include epistemic dilemmas concerning what we can know of neighbours, visitors and strangers, about others' class, social status and origins, and later around race and ethnicity. This anxiety includes concerns about others' moral character or personal biography and with establishing the precise boundaries and economic viability of the suburb. Suburban experience then, is then, presented in much fiction as reanimating old philosophical debates around the problem of the individual's personal contact with, and knowledge of, external reality. How can the individual know anything for sure about this new suburban reality? This is an essentially new challenge to older the traditional philosophic discourse of self and world, subjectivism vs. objectivism, or of idealism vs. materialism. Suburban fiction constantly asks what could be the truth, the substantive reality of the suburb?

This apprehension of much suburban-set fiction about what can be securely known of the suburban habitus is often characterised as a profound doubt over the substantive material reality of the suburb. Much suburban writing foregrounds a suburban materiality which seems deeply troubling. So, for example, the suburb can be figured as materially inchoate, with a slippery, muddy opacity that resists interpretation or investigation (as, for example, in

Arthur Conan Doyle's early Sherlock Holmes stories(Conan Doyle, 1998)); the suburb can also be materially dense, packed with household objects and knickknacks, yet which are also wayward and troublesome, a site of independent 'thingliness', full of objects which develop independent salience and seem to deny individual human agency (in, for example, the clerkly 'Nobody' fiction of the late nineteenth century, most notably in the Grossmith brother's 1892 *Diary of a Nobody* (Grossmiths, 2003). At the same time the suburb can be presented as insubstantial and ghostly, barely real at all, a place of financial speculation, performance or spectacle (for example, in some mid-nineteenth century ghost stories (Le Fanu 1993a, Bleiler, 1977) and in Orwell's 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air* (Orwell, 2001)). Finally the suburb is figured as uncanny space, full of things that are banally familiar and yet unsettlingly odd, as in 1950s science fiction and in novels written by Commonwealth migrants. In addition to this troublesome materiality (and, as I shall argue in Chapter two concerning the Pooterish 'Nobody'), the body of the suburban individual itself becomes problematic matter, and is represented as a wayward alien 'thing', which is incapable of shaping and negotiating the difficult suburban environment. This further extends the troubling Cartesian divide between subjective self and objective world which, itself, seems to haunt suburban-set fiction.

Reading suburban fiction through a broadly semiotic framework draws together precisely these elements of perceiving subject and perceived object, the self and the world. Semiotics provides a helpful theoretical model because it can offer a useful account of how 'real' physical material environments are moulded by the creative cognitive capacities of the perceiving subject. As opposed to forms of positivistic scientific realism, which presuppose that the observer simply perceives or senses the fixed properties of the external world as observer-independent, just 'there', with a continuous being independent of our experience of them, semiotics argues that the external world is always to some extent observer-dependent.

The suburb is a semiotic problem then, precisely because it challenges the construction of traditional human life-worlds, the creation of a home. The signs by which individuals read traditional communities become increasingly occluded in the spaces of the modern mass suburbs. Again and again suburban fiction is a response to what happens when we try to build a home within the destabilising and often uncertain structures of the modern metropolis; with the breakdown of traditional communal forms of comprehension, individuals are shown to be increasingly detached and uncomprehending. As I have mentioned, lack of meaningful interaction with suburban habitat is characterised in fiction as a problem with material reality itself. This is, of course, an urgent question for suburban writing because the suburb is

precisely predicated on the notion of offering the individual an opportunity to create a real 'new' home. 'I like to be at home. "Home, Sweet Home" that's my motto', as Charles Pooter insists in *Diary of a Nobody* (Grossmiths, 1998: 3). But what we go on to read about is not his canny homeliness but his comic alienation and incomprehension, his unbelonging. The suburb is not a home for Pooter.

These material difficulties that Pooter and other individuals frequently face in suburban writing also expresses, I will argue, a profound ambivalence towards notions of free-will. Pooter has no sense of belonging and is never at home; he, and numerous other suburban characters, are buffeted by the incomprehensible and unfathomable malice of the external world. They lack the autonomy fully to shape and inhabit the suburban environment.

Using a broadly Peircean perspective we can fruitfully unite suburban experience, contact with 'real' existing suburbs, with these concerns of suburban representation. Both foreground the urgent need to 'read' and fully inhabit environment. Both are inevitable modes of the same human need to create a semiotically comprehensible life-world, to construct a *meaningful* home. Suburban fiction in this sense is part of the human creative drive to make the world legible and liveable.

In much suburban fiction suburbs are not *homely* because they are not legible. Forms of seeing and knowing are central to suburban writing. Indeed, suburbia itself is founded precisely on controlling what can be seen. It is established as a peripheral, separate, private zone, aimed at marking and maintaining distinct social, economic and gender zones. Privacy, the withdrawal from others' gaze is promoted. Where visibility is so tightly controlled and real understanding thwarted there are many kinds of anxieties around seeing, knowing and communicating. Suburban fiction is populated by characters who fail to properly see and know their habitat, who are entirely reliant on glimpses, hearsay, gossip and incomplete interpretation. Indeed much suburban fiction is fixated on these problems of seeing and knowing and sending the correct signals. It is concerned with performance, theatricality and spectacle, with display and attendant obsession with appearance, on uncanny visions and the spectral, on snobbery and social etiquette, on falseness and fakery, and on the apocalyptic and hyperreal.

Indeed, one common approach to explaining the absence of the suburb from serious writing suggests that is so because there is actually *nothing to see*. The suburb is dull, predictable and

conformist; that is why it is popular and people live there. It may just not be worth writing about. T. W. H. Crosland is typical here when he archly observes, in *The Suburbans* that the 'whole of the humdrum, platitudinous things of life, all matters and apparatus which, by reason of their frequency, have become somewhat of a bore to the superior person, are wholly and unmitigatedly suburban' (Crosland, 1905: 8).[1] Sure enough, much late nineteenth-century suburban-set fiction concentrates precisely on this almost imperceptible trivia, focussing as it does on the lives of semi-visible suburban 'Nobodies'. Formulated most clearly in *Diary of a Nobody*, the suburban Nobody is a lowly clerk employed in the burgeoning field of City finance and commerce, a lower-middle class Everyman: home-oriented, downtrodden, dull, trivial and, above all, insignificant. Nobodies are invisible because they are embedded in the dreary everyday. Along with other characters in writing by H. G. Wells (*Tono Bungay*, (Wells, 1994a), *The History of Mr Polly* (Wells, 2005a), *Ann Veronica (*Wells, 2005d)), Shan Bullock (*Robert Thorne: The Story of a London Clerk*, (Bullock, 1907)),William Pett-Ridge (*Mord Em'ly* (Pett Ridge, 1992)) and Jerome K. Jerome (*Three Men in a Boat* (Jerome, 2004)) and later influencing Arnold Bennett (Bennett, 1994) E. M. Forster (Forster, 2000) and George Orwell (Orwell, 2001) , we observe Mr Pooter engaged in numerous minor domestic tasks: tidying, rearranging and ineffectually mending things, arguing with his wife, disputing with tradesmen. These Nobodies are actually submerged, smothered in material excess and horribly embroiled in physical detail; they are identical to the stuff of the every day. They cannot see anything clearly of what is all around them. This tradition of the embattled nonentity informs characterisations of the suburban right through to the present day.

This anxiety expressed in suburban fiction, over how the individual can see, read and fully inhabit the new sites of modernity is usefully informed by the work of geographer James C. Scott. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott, 1998) views modernity precisely as a project to make the inhabited world *legible*. Legibility (and control), he argues, could be achieved over any given physical space by use of careful surveys, data collection, standardised measurements, consistent methods and the use of cadastral maps. The aim of the cadsastral survey is to homogenise all space, to make all points equivalent. This is achieved, Scott argues, and gives examples such as forest management, land tenure and town planning, by making it readable from an imaginary external viewpoint.

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[1] For similar, more recent, arguments about suburban unexceptionalism see Paul Barker 'Non-Plan Revisited: or the Real Way Cities Grow' in Oliver, P, Davis, I , Bentley, I (1981) (eds) *Dunroamin': The Suburban Semi and its Enemies.*

Clearly the suburb, with its emphasis on forms of economic, social and gender segregation, standardisation and specialisation, can be viewed as part of modernity's program of constructing rationalised built space. Indeed it is an ingenious form of modern space because, as I have mentioned, it provides elements of 'freedom' (privacy, withdrawal, scope for minor modifications and individual idiosyncrasy) yet all contained within a familiar and standardised framework. Crucially for this thesis, however, this legibility from the outside has no bearing on lived experience on the ground; 'there is no guarantee' Scott reminds us, that such rationalising homogeneity, simplification and use of the straight line actually 'works for its citizens' (Scott, 1998: 56). The uniform 'plan of the ensemble', he argues, has 'no necessary relationship to the order of life at is experienced by its residents' (Scott, 1998: 58) As we shall see, the predominant theme of much suburban fiction is that these places are unintelligible to their inhabitants.

Without any doubt there is a paucity of serious, complex fiction that deals fully with suburban experience. Instead, partially occluded versions of the suburb as troubling are presented. Thus the suburb, which cannot be fully seen, is presented in various ways as dull, weird, boring, absurd, the site of repetitious every-day tasks and problems. Suburban individuals tend to be barely distinguishable and are presented as insignificant, petty, competitive and joylessly materialistic. The women are melancholy and bored, the men infantilised, incompetent and powerless. This presents a tradition going back to the 1840s, which shows the suburbs as remote and unknowable. Nobody is really sure what happens there. The present study aims both to explain these difficulties of the writing of suburban experience and also to provide a productive reading of that literature that does focus on the suburb.

This sense of the difficultly of suburban knowledge, of suburban legibility, predominate in many studies of the suburb. John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (Carey, 1996), probably the best-known account of anti-suburban prejudices, describes how early twentieth century literary intelligentsia regarded the unknowable and remotes suburbs as the natural home of loathsome and threateningly unknowable masses (Carey suggests that these same intellectuals then invented tricky modernist poetics to bamboozle and further exclude these loathsome masses). The title of Roger Silverstone's important collection of essays 1998's *Visions of Suburbia* (Silverstone, 1998) also captures this note of suburban illegibility. *Visions* suggest, firstly, that suburban reality is an obscure object which can only be revealed by informed, occult 'special' vision, by revelation. Secondly, *Visions* also hints a re-

presentation for us of something that cannot readily be seen, something that is illegible to ordinary seeing. Roger Webster, in another useful essay collection discussing suburban fiction, *Expanding Suburbia* (Webster, 2000), concurs with this estranging suburban doubleness. 'It occupies a space' Webster argues, 'defined as much by what it is not, as by what it is, constructed by difference and imitation'. It is 'a liminal and borderline space', he continues, informed by 'myth and stereotype' (Webster, 2000: 2).

A more useful discussion of the suburbs as experienced habitat and as series of mediated 'visions', also informs the best and most detailed recent assessment of Victorian and early modernist suburbia, Lynne Hapgood's *Margins of Desire* (Hapgood, 2005). Hapgood discusses the startling outward surge of London's suburbs, that 'potent fusion of material reality, individual dreams and social futures' and how these new sites and experiences in turn generated a need for new literary forms to account for them (Hapgood, 2005: 25). Hapgood discusses the new themes and forms of suburban fiction precisely as a drive to *know* and include the suburb in what is already known. The suburb is given form, bounded, by new forms of suburban writing in order for it to be seen properly: 'the literary suburb was constructed in response to what was perceived as a fundamental and irresistible social change' (Hapgood, 2005: 21). Here, the threatening suburb (threatening because it doesn't keep to boundaries, because it won't stay in place) is *quarantined* by modes of fictionalisation.

This thesis aims to expand this insight by suggesting that suburban fiction addresses a keenly felt semiotic anxiety concerning illegibility. My concentration here on reading suburban fiction as itself a cultural artefact and thus as part of that broader semiotic drive to produce models of a given environment, to make the suburb legible, means that we can avoid the deadlocks and sterile thinking that tends to divide suburban-set fiction into positive or negative camps (for or against, convincing portrayals or caricature). Accordingly, my range of texts is broad; I cover both popular genre works (ghost stories, detective and science fiction) and canonical literature (Dickens, Woolf, Forster).

In this thesis I argue that cultural artefacts and culture, *both* cities and texts, can best be considered as part of the same living semiotic processes. Both the suburb and suburban writing are products of the deep urge for meaning, for modelling a particular modern environment, or lifeworld. Suburban fiction, is, then, in this sense, the reflective recursive attempt to give meaning to and to shape the suburb. This is how, in John Hartley's words, the

'semiotic sphere of culture both generates and cohabits within the physical, architectural space of suburbia' (Silverstone, 1997:183).

My selection of suburban-set texts progresses chronologically and has been governed by the wish to discuss those works which best exemplify the thesis' wider argument that the suburb presents an acute semiotic challenge to how we can find meaning in the domestic zones of the modern mass suburb. It is in the nature of a widely perceived problem (here, that of the suburbs and semiotic illegibility) that each generation of writer should develop its varying implications. I will briefly discuss these implications, with my chronological framework, and outline below how each generation of writers address the problem and develops different ways of formulating responses to an evolving suburban reality.

In Chapter 1 below, 'Suburban Slums and Ghosts' I discuss semiotic anxieties around seeing and knowing during the dramatic reshaping of new metropolitan boundaries and zones (including the suburbs) during the mid- nineteenth century (1830-1870). At this time, social and economic distinctions were being mapped onto metropolitan spaces. The boundaries between the social spaces of private/ public, home/work, family/city were increasingly contested. Section One, 'The Shape of the Suburb', briefly outlines the emergence of mass London suburbs in the mid-nineteenth century and discusses anxieties around the maintenance of metropolitan social boundaries. The anxiety of reading the visible signifiers of an expanding and compartmentalising metropolis, the keen desire to know, produces fiction (popular proto-reportage like Pierce Egan's 1820s 'Tom & Jerry' romps, the 'Silver-fork' novels of the 1830s and 40s, best-selling 'sensation' fiction of the 1850s and 60s). It also results in the social reportage of the mid-century, in investigations by Edwin Chadwick (Chadwick,1843), Henry Mayhew (Mayhew, 1985), and, later, by Charles Booth (Booth, 2002). This writing is all concerned with the legibility of metropolitan boundaries. Here the spaces of the newly fashionable West End, and the newly blossoming peripheral suburb, need to be investigated and illumined, and above all distinguished. Most significantly, they need to be differentiated from the threat of the slum. The slum here functions as the opposite of the suburb; it threatens to dissolve and mix the constitutive boundaries of suburban distinction, privacy and respectability.

In Section Two, 'Metropolitan Sketches', I move on to a more detailed discussion of how, in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) subtitled 'Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People',

Charles Dickens underscores the anxious need to illuminate, categorise and *place* these new metropolitan sites and identities (Dickens, 1995). Dickens attempts to read the signs of suburbanity. In Section Three, 'Suburban Ghost Stories', I discuss how anxieties around such suburban legibility (decoding neighbours, noting indicators of economic stability, reading marks of social status) testify to a fear of porous metropolitan boundaries. Here there are numerous spectres □ whether ghosts, risky financial speculations or the dreaded return of the disavowed slum □ and all threaten bounded suburban security. Here the suburb threatens to dematerialise altogether.

In Chapter 2, 'The High Victorian and Edwardian Suburb 1880-1914', I discuss how this concern with legibility in the expanding and subdividing city focuses on a semiotic problem of locating the signs of the individual lost in the suburban mass. The fearful image of the depersonalising urban mass swamping the isolated individual is increasingly found, not among the poor of the undifferentiated dense city centre, but out on the new mass lower-middle and working class suburbs at the metropolitan periphery. More exactly, this illegibility is dramatised by writers of the period as a problem with the materiality of the real. Again and again suburbs and suburbanites are presented as somehow unreal, insubstantial or ghostly. This is a problem with what can be known and whether it is in fact reality or illusion.

In Section One, 'A Bad Business', I will look at detective fiction, a genre that is particularly concerned with uncovering and reading the traces of the individual. Although starting, with Edgar Allen Poe in the 1840s, as an urban genre, the first Sherlock Holmes tale, from 1887, *A Study in Scarlet,* is actually set in suburban South London and famously displays considerable anxiety over the ability to decode signs, read the clues and establish the outline of the individual in an opaque, literally *muddied,* environment (Conan Doyle, 2001). The material environment here is very reluctant to offer clues to individual identity. Indeed Holmes' famed rational 'method', for making the mysterious legible, turns out in fact not to be deductive scientific reason after all; it is what semiotician Thomas Sebeok (after Peirce) calls 'abductive' reasoning (Sebeok, 1994). This involves logical reasoning, but also much creative guesswork and fictional imagining.

In Section Two, 'Stories of Nobodies', I focus on suburban writing which also aims to see the individual in the expanding army of City clerks. Here, no distinguishing marks of the individual can readily be seen and the clerk is, therefore, a 'Nobody'. H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, George Gissing, the Grossmiths, E. M. Forster focus on the City clerk as

representative figure of (unknowable) London suburban masses. Crucially, a primary characteristic of these clerks is an inability to make their own environments legible. They cannot read either their environment or other people, and are equally blind to their own inner selves. Crucially, their semiotic deficit is figured in theses fiction as affecting the material world itself. The latter appears here as uncontrollable and spiteful; nothing works and the individual lacks the manual dexterity to manipulate his own domestic world. The material world here robs the individual of free-will. These Nobodies are comic puppets jerked by abstract and incomprehensible forces of nature.

Section Three of this chapter, 'Suburban Arcadias', looks at suburban fiction which addresses the suburb through aspects of utopian thinking. The suburb itself, as Robert Fishman reminds us, was considered a 'bourgeois utopia', mixing in a happy balance the ideal elements of town and country (Fishman, 1987). The utopian is also that place which is perfectly legible. My fictional suburbs depicted here, by William Morris (*News from Nowhere* (Morris, 2003)) and Jerome K. Jerome (*Three Men in a Boat* (Jerome, 2004)) are not presented this way. The utopian here is both imaginary (distanced in time and place) but also material (dealing with the nature of work and leisure, and how the individual can effect change in the environment). The late nineteenth century suburb presented here is a site of alienation and conflict.

Chapter 3, 'Suburban Fiction and Modernity: The Suburb 1918-1939', discusses writers' reaction to the expansion of inter-war suburbs, to middle-class 'dunroamin' ribbon development, and to the spread of the lower-middle class and working class suburban estates of the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of Greater London, the new suburbs of the car, modern modes of communication, leisure and consumption, are presented by writers here as an increasingly semiotically illegible environment. The predominant theme here is a perception of strangeness in the mysterious unreadability of the suburb, and how this landscape can be constituted as a version of modern England. In Section One, 'Seeing the Suburb', I argue that the legibility of the suburb and suburbanites is presented as a problem for writing itself. Virginia Woolf's seminal 1925 essay, 'Modern Fiction' (Woolf, 1966), identifies the mundane suburban scene ('Mrs Brown' is a suburbanite) as precisely the mysterious raw-material that must be the focus of literary creativity. In this view Modernism (and modernity) is self-consciously considered a problem with materiality and realism. Woolf attacks Edwardian realism as a form of materiality (reading surfaces as signs pointing to a deeper reality) that no longer functions as a way of apprehending the world. Woolf argues for a new poetics to perceive such mysterious illegibility as suburban Mrs. Brown.

In Section Two, 'Stevie Smith's Suburbia', I discuss what such a poetics looks like, by reading the work of Stevie Smith. Smith's complex (and rare) engagement with the suburb produces here a paradoxical 'radical eccentricity'. Smith is both 'modernist' and middlebrow; she is both engaged with suburban themes but also curiously detached from them; like the suburb itself she occupies no easily assimilable position. The strangeness and eccentricity of Smith's suburbs, that place which will not quite come into focus, is also the focus of Section Three, 'In Search of a Lost England'. Here I discuss George Orwell's suburban 'little man', George Bowling in his 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air* (Orwell, 2001). Bowling is *the* Thirties suburbanite: haunted by unreality, disconnected from place and history, plagued by the ersatz streamlined modernity. Bowling is always out of place, even in his own body.

Chapter 4, 'Suburban Strangeness; Post-War Suburbia 1945-1980', continues my discussion of writers' engagement with the suburb as a problem of semiotic interpretation. The suburb in fiction discussed here is presented as a type of uncanny space: it is both banally familiar and yet also unfamiliarly odd. It is presented as uncannily both every-day and alien. What is common to post Second World-War fictional rendering of suburban fiction is the appearance of drastic new forms of threatening dematerialisation. The suburb is the place of nuclear annihilation, the haunts of the ghosts of a vanishing empire and the primary site of an intensely mediated pop culture, one in which 'mediatisation' itself appears as a problem. Here we note that the more a given suburban landscape appears to be known, measured, rendered dully quotidian, the stranger, in fact, it then becomes. A common feature of suburban material 'normality' is that its very normality, if stressed enough, becomes bizarre. For instance, in Section One, 'Suburban Apocalypse', I read science fiction, from the fifties to the seventies, where stolid suburban normality suddenly becomes deeply odd and disturbing. Here, the everyday routine and dull 'nothing happening' of the London suburbs, as presented in fiction by J. G. Ballard (1974's *The Unlimited Dream Company* (Ballard, 1990)), John Wyndham (1951's *The Day of the Triffids* (Wyndham, 1973)), is pressured and fractured until it reveals a deeply disturbing core. The 'alien' is the most familiar and routine of habitats. Conversely, the apocalyptic itself, a familiar trope in fifties Cold War-tinged writing, is paradoxically rendered as drearily familiar, as *suburbanised.* 'Apocalyptic normality' is here regarded as the uncanny.

In Section Two, 'Search for Centre', the strange unreality of the post-war London suburbs (considered, as with Iain Sinclair above, as being both part of London and not London) is

stressed in writing by post-war migrants new to London. The London experienced here, especially in work by V. S. Naipaul (*Mr Stone and the Knight's Companion* (Naipaul, 1963), *The Mimic Men* (Naipaul, 1969) and T*he Enigma of Arrival* (Naipaul, 1987)), is both that which is already seen, mediated and made familiar by prestigious literary sources, by *writing*, but which is also experienced as troublingly unfamiliar. The suburbs themselves, it turns out, are *not* written, they are not the expected London of prior literary creation, and are experienced as completely unknown.

In Section Three, 'Suburban Pop', I address, through a reading of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Kureishi, 1990), the specific *creation* of suburban and urban identities in the 1970s. Here the substance of the suburban and urban are revealed to be increasingly nebulous and unstable. Indeed in the novel they even swap particular features: the urban becoming trite pop commodity, the suburb rendered as radically unpredictable and site of creative individualism. They are revealed as creations of increasing pop commodification.

Finally, in Chapter 5, 'Contemporary Suburbia', I discuss how suburban fiction reflects the fact that today suburbia reworks the traditional relation of urban centre to periphery. Here supposedly uniquely 'suburban' features are now increasingly found dispersed throughout the metropolis, indeed throughout all forms of landscape. Concerns over the legibility of contemporary 'suburbanised' social space take on two main forms. Again, as mentioned in Chapter Two (on ghost stories) and Chapter Three (the insubstantial 'Nobody'), these forms link the problem of suburban legibility to problems of material being. The first concern over the contemporary suburb, and the focus of Section One, 'The Immaterial Suburb', sees this site as a species of weightless 'non-space' and as a version of the globalised, mediated and technologised contemporary landscape consisting of car parks, air ports, supermarkets, business parks and suburbs. These sites are standardised, temporary and totally unrelated to specific locale. They lack the traditional weighty anchors of personal history, individual meaning or historical dimension. I discuss this version of the contemporary suburb by contrasting the later work of J.G. Ballard (*The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1994), *Millennium People* (Ballard, 2003), *Kingdom Come* (Ballard, 2006) and *Miracles of Life* (Ballard, 2008)) with that of Iain Sinclair (*White Chappell, Scarlett Tracings* (Sinclair, 1998), *Liquid City* (Sinclair, 1999b), *Downriver* (Sinclair, 2002a), *Lights Out for the Territory* (Sinclair, 1997) and *London Orbital* (Sinclair, 2002). For Ballard this form of unattached homelessness is the inevitable condition of contemporary life and generates fascinating extremes of pathological behaviour. Iain Sinclair's writing on the urban periphery, on the

other hand, desperately attempts to read and re-enchant these most unpromising spaces (Erith and Waltham Cross, for example) in order to make them denser, by dredging up ever more ingenious historical and literary ballast. Sinclair attempts to conjure up a sense of particularity, a dimension of location, to illegible globalised non spaces.

In direct comparison, in Section Two, 'The Material Suburb', I discuss how these versions of a 'weightless' contemporary suburb contrasts strongly with an alternate strand of contemporary fiction where suburban reality is characterised as *excessively* material. This overpowering everyday materiality is presented in two ways. I discuss it firstly as a centrifugal force which ejects individuals, mostly men, from any meaningful relationship to place. Here, incompetent male characters who are incapable of interpreting and shaping the suburb are expelled from it. Here I discuss work by Nigel Williams, *The Wimbledon Poisoner* (Williams, 1989), Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (Swift, 1996), *The Sweetshop Owner* (Swift, 1997), and John Lanchester, *Mr Phillips*, (Lanchester, 2001). I then discuss how the suburb is presented at the other extreme, as a centripetal force which oppresses and crushes individuals, here mostly mothers, beneath an unbearable weight of materiality. Here I discuss fiction by Helen Simpson, *Dear George* (Simpson, 1996), *Hey Yeah Right, Get A Life* (Simpson, 2001) and Rachel Cusk, *Arlington Park* (Cusk, 2007). This suburb here is dense, sticky even, trapping its female inhabitants.

Chapter One

Suburbs, Slums and Ghosts: 1830 – 1870

Introduction

London's suburbs first began to appear in the latter decades of the eighteenth century with the establishment of single-family large detached houses, set in landscaped parks, at Clapham and Regent's Park. 'By the second half of the eighteenth century' Robert Fishman argues, 'all the elements were in place for the creation of modern suburbia' (Fishman, 1987: 26). These were grandly aristocratic suburbs pioneered by affluent Evangelists, including the Wilberforce and Macaulay families. This was the first attempt to carve out a dedicated domestic zone close to, and dependent on, the urban centre. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century the outline of a standardised middle class suburb first started to appear, in small developments, in locations around four miles from London's centre, at Walworth, South Lambeth and Battersea in the south, out to Homerton, Clapton and Highbury in the north, and, to the west, Holland Park, West Kensington and Chelsea. This chapter concerns fictional representations of this piecemeal suburban development, part of the larger large-scale restructuring of the capital. My contention here is that these new suburbs are a problem for fiction precisely because they are peripheral, domestic and private. The suburbs present a semiotic problem; they cannot easily be read, cannot be fully known as objects of investigation or as meaningful homely spaces. Fiction's drive to illumine and present for us the lives of suburbanites is already compromised.

During the middle of the nineteenth century, London started to become a mechanism for sorting and storing its inhabitants. Whereas the much smaller eighteenth century city had consisted in large part of a haphazard miscellany of building types and usage, with social and economic practices, and individuals, mixing relatively easily in urban space, this was giving way to new spatial sub-divisioning. A combination of the increasing expansion and specialisation of nineteenth-century industry and commerce, the development of new transport systems (omnibus, tram, underground), public and private environmental

'improvements' and road building schemes ensured the shift to single-purpose, single-class, homes and neighbourhoods. This is part of the urge to establish *physical* rather than *symbolic* forms of distinction and distanciation in the diversifying city. Donald Olsen outlines a lengthy trajectory toward just such a geographic urban social differentiation in London starting as far back as seventeenth-century developments at Covent Garden, St James and Bloomsbury, and reaching an advanced stage in the Victorian period, which saw 'the systemic sorting-out of London into single-purpose, homogenous, specialised neighbourhoods' (Olsen, 1979: 18). The modern city instigates systems of specialised function, and becomes a means of constructing and maintaining specialised social spaces and boundaries. Miles Ogborn terms this drive to order the 'social production of distance', a vital component of modernising power which imposes classification and order, an 'urgency and ferocity of boundary-drawing and boundary- defining' (Ogborn, 1998:18). The creation of the suburb is part of this ordering.

Public and private spaces, the places of work and home, precise commercial and economic functions were now becoming mapped onto particular, separate, dedicated sites. A key example of the carving up of metropolitan space is the classifying of gender roles theorised as the 'separation of spheres', by Davidoff and Hall in their influential *Family Fortunes* (Davidoff and Hall, 1979). This profound development sees the splitting of the industrialising cities into, on the one hand, newly dedicated and patrolled public spaces, those activities taking place outside the home (politics, work, commerce and business), and also, on the other, into private spaces (domestic, familial). This 'material separation of work and home' argues Janet Wolff 'was the result of both the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the suburbs' (Wolff, 1998: 118). Suburban development was, then, a major component of this reorganisation and compartmentalising of spatial function. Men are allied to public roles and the spaces of work, and women are devolved to a domestic ideology, becoming exclusively identified with the home as wives and mothers.

These boundaries marked between social and gender groups, the zones of public and private, inside and outside, illumination and darkness, are, in the period under review anxiously negotiated. This chapter is concerned with the semiotic anxieties generated by modes of seeing and then making legible the shape and boundaries of these new, and often newly impenetrable, metropolitan zones. Mid-Victorian London', Lynda Nead argues, 'was shaped by two urban principles: mapping and movement' (Nead, 2000: 9). That is, by seeing and capturing the rapid changes in the reshaping of metropolitan spaces.

This reshaping of the capital impacts on a number of visual and investigative practices. One of the major changes in the segregating metropolis was, of course, the prosperous urban middle classes' drive to live somewhere else. Yet, this middle class removal to the peripheral suburb, while removing them from unwonted proximity and sight of the mingling indiscriminate urban masses, at the same time, reduces their ability to safely envision the urban masses. Once the suburb removes itself from the city, the city must then be re-imagined. Dickens characterises this urgent drive to see into the city as an uncovering, as the desperate urge, in *Dombey and Son* (1848), to 'take the housetops off…and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes' (Dickens 1991: 738). This unroofing metaphor, as we shall see in Chapter 2 below, re-emerges in the metropolitan researches of that supreme investigator, Sherlock Holmes. The nineteenth century in fact produces a wealth of writing and commentary, sketches, guides, investigations and reports, that strive to penetrate the hidden spaces of the city. This is not, as we shall see, merely a drive to view the city slum; there is a concomitant anxiety over seeing within the new suburb itself. The suburb offers withdrawn privacy, but also threatens to be worryingly unknowable. Fiction in the period under view, then, foregrounds these anxieties around the struggle to gain a view, to penetrate and read the occluded surfaces of city sectors, from the slum to suburb, while yet maintaining a counterbalancing distance.

This anxiety of reading the suburbs thus presents a semiotic crisis, with reading the signs of the human-made environment. In his useful essay 'The Semiotic Self' Thomas Sebeok argues that it is precisely such a form of semiotic failure, of being unable to decode a dense network of environmental signs, which produces states of extreme individual anxiety. 'Some aspects of anxiety', Sebeok continues '…can best be posed in the context of a problem involving information flow' (Sebeok 1989: 264). Interestingly for our purposes, Sebeok argues that this anxiety over environmental illegibility is linked to proximity, that is, to the relative boundaries of self and other. Anxiety is itself a signal, information flow to the self ('a supplementary form of semiosis'), and a kind of second-order immune response, that an external intruder may be threatening the very constitutive boundaries of that self (Sebeok 1989: 264). Any organism's coherence is dependent on the ability to 'segregate themselves from the rest of the soup of surrounding organic material, in order to keep their Self distinct from the Other' (Sebeok, 1989: 266). This anxiety is of course central to my main theme: how the suburban individual can know and engage with external reality, with the modern space of the mass suburb.

Suburban space, then, premised on the maintenance of distinction and distance, the mapping of cultural and social distinction onto physical distance, is constantly undermined by such boundary anxieties. Suburban prosperity, everyday life itself, is based on observing boundaries; cultural, social, economic and even temporal (as the suburb here has no past, no intimate ancient connection to land or place at all). One key boundary that is constantly compromised is the demarcation between slum and the suburb, also the hazy line between past and the future. This boundary is regularly revealed to be permeable, as a horrible past of indiscriminate commingling then threatens to return to the desired suburban present of clear separation. Boundary crossing or fuzziness is characterised here as a contamination. While 'the undrained clay beneath the slums oozed with cess-pits and sweated with fever', David Reeder notes 'the gravely heights of the suburbs were dotted with springs and blossomed with health' (in Dyos and Wolff, 1973:126).The important dividing line in the period is between suburb and slum; the disavowed slum (from whence many suburbanites would have migrated) threatens to remind the suburb of its dodgy foundation in shaky economic speculation. The 'oozing' slum with its indiscriminate crush also horribly threatens to undo the principle of distinction itself.

After briefly sketching an outline of London's initial suburban development, and the major characteristics of the mid-century middle-class suburb, in Section One, 'The Shape of the Suburbs, this chapter will move on to discuss a number of texts concerned with illuminating and interpreting the new and unknown sites of the evolving Victorian capital. Here, in Section Two 'Urban and Suburban Sketches', I will examine how those newly constituted sites which are deemed to require illumination are both urban *and* suburban zones. Suburbs and slums are intimately connected here. The new industrial slums (those threatening places of poverty, crime, disease and homelessness, bursting with recent arrivals from the modernising countryside and provinces) and the emergent middle class suburb. The nineteenth-century metropolis, fragmented, speeded up, populous, demanded in response a new type of panoramic sensibility: not just the static viewpoint from a privileged position that was in vogue earlier in the century. Julian Wolfreys argues that writers from 'Shakespeare and Jonson to Johnson, Fielding and Richardson' had presented a London which could be 'depicted, given a common image to be shared by writer, reader and audience alike' (Wolfreys, 1998: 61). This city is certainly chaotic, carnivalesque, even monstrous, yet there is a sense that at least this can all be made sense of, be *revealed*. In mid-nineteenth-century London this is increasingly no longer true. The city is becoming massified and fragmented. I would argue that the journo-literary sketch, the amiable feuilleton, the descriptions of

perambulatory artist-observers like Dickens and G. A. Sala, can be considered as new forms of a kind of post-panoramic writing. These sketches have to meet the challenge of a vast city that can no longer be simply held in view.

The connection between modes of metropolitan investigation, and anxieties over maintaining the integrity of the newer suburbs can be glimpsed, as I argue in Section Three, 'Suburban Ghost Stories', in the mini-genre of suburb-set tales of haunting. These stories provide a useful link between the need to *see*, to read the environment and the demands of maintaining distanced and bounded domestic suburbs. The semiotic urgency of establishing constitutive boundaries is dramatised here in fiction as a problem with the material itself. The suburb dematerialises apparently solid material reality The *spectre*, a visitation from the past, is indeed linked with financial *speculation* (a house in the new suburbs could be a risky investment) that is, seeing into the future. Both terms have a common root **specere**, meaning 'to look', or 'watch'. Ghosts and bad money dissolve the solid-seeming boundary of the wall. There is a crisis of seeing and knowing in the suburbs. Nobody knows anything. In these stories either too little is seen, or too much.

Section One – The Shape of the Suburb

Before discussing the fiction of the mid-nineteenth-century suburb, it is worth pausing briefly to discuss the evolution of London's suburbs up to 1870. Etymologically 'beyond the city', by the sixteenth century the early suburb 'contained precisely that which had been banished from the town' (Ackroyd, 2000: 727). The originary, bounded, walled medieval city identifies, separates and expels unwanted and inassimilable elements of itself. Southwark, is the 'South Work', the germ of subsequent South London suburbia, originating as distanced (south, over the river) subordinate site for deviancy and unorthodoxy, for criminality, unassimilated immigrants, commercialised or deviant sexuality, even for irregular economic activity, such as non-guild craftsmen and unassimilated foreign workers. It is also a space for surveillance and control, for containment and punishment; Southwark contained a multitude of prisons, barracks, hospitals and asylums. This particular area then gains a reputation for the excessively sensual and violent (prostitution, fighting, riot), for sites of distraction and diversion (taverns, theatres, brothels) and as marginal site for unwanted, dirty industries and processes (tanning, brewing, dyes, timber). The suburb, notes Peter Ackroyd, 'was in every sense a dumping ground' (Ackroyd, 2000: 692). The pre-modern suburb is a debased place,

an overflow for those heterogeneous elements expelled from the aggregate uniformity of urban space.

Even in its earliest forms, the suburb is thus presented as negative and unstable 'other', anxiously removed beyond accepted orders of civility and, crucially, thereby distanced from any possible informed urban *vision*. H. J. Dyos, innovative social historian of suburban Camberwell, is quite clear on this point; 'suburbs began in England with the extra-mural settlement of persons who stood in every sense on the fringes of society' (Dyos, 1961: 34).

In addition to these proto-suburban sites, deviant and unregistered outlands adjacent to the urban core, a simultaneous, yet very different tradition also existed, from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, of wealthy city-based merchants *electing* to build villas outside the city. Again, although clearly not what we would recognize as a mass suburb, as the numbers were neither large nor concentrated, these early villas are instrumental in gradually shifting from the widespread notion of the primacy of central urban habitation. Standard extra-urban development was physically contiguous to the urban core, either adjacent to city walls, as noted above in the 'dumping ground' type areas, or as haphazard ribbon developments scattered along major transport links.[2] As David C. Thorns notes; 'many of the substantial traders and professional men in the sixteenth century combined a career in a city company with their mansions and suburban gardens' (Thorns, 1973: 36). This other, aristocratic, form of detached suburban development, physically removed from the city while retaining economic and social links, is an important factor in the subsequent development of purpose-built extra- urban habitation. Indeed, the subsequent rapid building of mass suburbs, from the mid-century on, can be viewed in one sense as mimicry of aristocratic homely ideals.

Over time then, and starting in the late eighteenth century, the function of the suburbs switches polarity. It changes from being a negative, debased space containing deviant elements unhappily *expelled* from a broadly assimilative core, to starting to provide potential welcome space for expansive elements actively *escaping* a threatening core urban milieu. It is the late eighteenth century which marks a key moment of reversal of the notion of suburban space as malignant superfluity. Wealthy merchants and the aspirant 'middling classes' chose to remove themselves from the urban core in increasing numbers. F. M. L. Thompson notes 'already from the middle of the eighteenth century the great suburban sea change had started

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[2] John Summerson in fact describes a fourfold originary suburban typology: i) overgrowth of existing villages; ii) building of remote villas; iii) roadside developments along key routes; iv) development of self-standing estates (Summerson, *Georgian London* (1991))

in London', which made 'places distanced from the city centre desirable residential areas, rather than mere dumping grounds' (Thompson, 1982: 2). In addition, Ackroyd marks the 1750s and 1760s as witnessing the 'emergence of the villa as the standard suburban dwelling' which 'anticipated the atmosphere and texture of later suburban life' (Ackroyd, 2000: 729).

There is also some agreement among historians on the *place* of early suburban development; *south London*, that early dumping ground for unwanted urban elements. Thompson writes that 'the idea of the residential suburb as an attractive emblem of material success was in circulation before 1815 and its realization on the ground was already sprouting particularly in South London (Thompson, 1982: 22). David Thorns also considers that the 'eighteenth century marked the beginning of the suburban development of south London' (Thorns, 1973: 37). Fishman provides a list of late eighteenth-century bourgeois suburban developments; even though 'London was surrounded by a string of suburbs, all located in the open country about three to five miles from the core', most of them were in fact in the south, at 'Dulwich, Walworth, Camberwell, and Clapham' (Fishman, 1987: 62).

By the 1840s this early piecemeal suburban development had consolidated into something more visible. The metropolis was growing rapidly. The population of England and Wales doubled in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century. In forty years, from 1801 to 1841, the population of London also doubled, from 959, 000 to 1,873,000. Importantly, much of this unprecedented population growth was, for the first time, located in the periphery rather than the centre. This growth went hand in hand with the first serious suburban building boom. Susie Barson argues that 'the suburban building boom began in earnest in the 1840s' (Saint, 1999: 61). Donald Olsen describes a two-part process: The 1830s to the 1860s were a time, he suggests, when lines of new buildings were being built, pushing out from the centre of London; the 1860s to the 1880s were the decades when this linear extension halted, and a process of massive 'in-filling' began (Olsen, 1979).

Mid-nineteenth-century London suburbia, then, marks the beginning of suburban building mania, the point at which the mass suburb starts to emerge from the exclusive wealthy one. Now, with the development of railways and tram services, the suburb became more attractive to the middle classes. Where an early nineteenth century suburb, in Clapham, or Regent's Park West, would have enormous Italianate or Gothic villas set in landscaped parks, by mid-century suburbs would be far more modest. These latter were characterised by substantial detached and semi-detached villas, built from existing design manuals (often in gothic-revival style) by main stream speculative builders, in locations along main thoroughfares, such as

Walworth Road and Brixton Road in the South, Hornsey Road and Seven Sister's Road in the north and Shepherd's Bush Road in the west. This kind of suburban development marks the start of a new type of metropolitan social formation. The small in number, tightly bounded social enclaves of the urban rich, (albeit also containing vast populations of live-in servants and domestics), based on face-to-face contact, visual recognition, family connections and exclusive social networks, become increasingly surrounded by suburban developments. This inward surge of new mass lower middle class residents, uprooted, unknown to each other, of doubtful class or social origins, often temporary, but also domestic and private and so invisible, living in mass-produced houses and sites, provokes a profound anxiety about what can be known for sure about the suburbs.

Section Two – Metropolitan Sketches

This section is concerned with particular semiotic anxieties around seeing and knowing the fragmenting sectors of the metropolis in mid-century nineteenth century writing. I will briefly discuss these difficulties around seeing in the expanding city, and the attempts to illumine different opaque spaces of the new metropolis, specifically the slums and suburban margins, by novelists, sketch writers and investigative journalists. I will then move to focus on Dickens' approach to unknown London, including suburban London, in *Sketches by Boz* (1836).

Anxiety over what can be seen and known in the changing landscape of the mid-century metropolis is neatly revealed in an episode recounted in Ruskin's autobiographical *Praeterita* (1885). Ruskin spent most of his early life in rapidly changing Herne Hill, South London, and he vividly recalls an edenic childhood on this pre-suburban London periphery. In 1822 this 'little domain', he recalls, 'answered every purpose of paradise to me' (32). It is paradise partly because it can be directly encompassed and because it is clearly removed from the city. Importantly, Ruskin repeatedly returns to detailed descriptions of the uninterrupted *panorama* seen from the hills. This 'view from the ridge on both sides', was, he remembers, 'before railways came, entirely lovely; westward at least, almost sublime' (Ruskin, 1886: 32). Crucially, the city is legible. It can be seen in its entirety, bounded, and at a conveniently removed distance. This vision, of the country and the city, proves dangerously irresistible to the young Ruskin. At one point his rapt 'contemplation of the sweeping crescent' gets out of hand. 'One day', he recalls, 'I frightened my mother out of her wits by saying "the eyes were

coming out of my head!" She thought it was an attack of *coup-de-soleil* [sun-blindness] (Ruskin, 1886: 32).

Ruskin's obsessive viewing is eventually ruined by the growing suburb, more exactly by the re-siting in 1852, of the Crystal Palace, the vast glass and iron building from the 1851 Great Exhibition. For Ruskin the Palace *is* meanly suburban; 'We suppose ourselves to have invented a new style of architecture, when we have magnified a conservatory!'. The worst element of being swamped by suburban growth is, however, the destruction of his beloved *view*. 'Then came the Crystal Palace' he recalls, 'forever spoiling the view through all its compass' (Ruskin, 1886: 34).[3] The suburb means the city can no longer be seen.

Ruskin's rapturous descriptions of the city laid out for observation is a common theme in much mid-century London writing. Harriet Martineau, records in 1838, that her first urge, on encountering a new city, was to find the highest point, from which she could see a 'living map' below (quoted in Briggs, 1990: 58). Similarly, Alan Ruthven, central figure of Charlotte Riddell's 1861 novel *City and Suburbs,* has his first glimpse of London from that panoramic viewpoint common to London's Northern approaches, Archway. 'Churches and houses' he observes, 'lines and lines of streets, a sea of roofs, stretching away as far as the eye could reach' (Riddell, 1861: 8). Fixed ascension by balloon was a popular feature of Victorian pleasure gardens, such as the Cremorne on Chelsea embankment, where punters would ascend to enjoy a calmer, quieter, more ordered view of the ramshackle city than could be experienced at ground level. The balloon ascension was a counterpart to other forms of panoramic display provided at pleasure gardens. In his sketch of Vauxhall Gardens, Dickens links the 'cosmoramas' with organised balloon trips, as both providing leisurely spectacle to 'captivate our hearts' 'dazzle our senses' and 'bewilder our brains' (Dickens, 1990: 155). An ascent over London Bridge made in 1863 by James Glaisher emphasises both the ability to see detail and to encompass the entire panorama, even the suburbs. 'At the time when we were 7,000 feet high' he records, ' and the scene around was one that cannot probably be equalled in the world. We were still so low as not to have lost sight of the details of the spectacle which presented itself to our eyes; and with one glance the homes of 3 million people could be seen, and so distinct was the view, that every large building was easily distinguishable. 'All round' he continues, 'the suburbs were also very distinct'... with their 'lines of detached villas, imbedded as it were in a mass of shrubs' (Glaisher, 2002: n.p.).

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[3] The Crystal Palace was of course of crucial architectural significance; the first iron and glass structure in the world, strong, durable, light, adaptable and moveable. It was also immensely popular and, despite its official role showcasing British scientific and imperial achievement, was actually dedicated to amusements, spectacles, games and sports.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century, as cities expand and change by 'bursting open their walls and spilling into the countryside' as Christine Boyer argues, 'the unifying view holding in place the city centre was an image torn beyond repair' (Boyer, 1996: 251). This concern with seeing and knowing the city as a totality occurs, Julian Wolfreys argues, at around the time that a single vision of the metropolis is no longer possible. Where an eighteenth-century observer can create a image of London in its *entirety*, the city functioning as 'a backdrop or stage setting' for character's activities this readily comprehended backdrop starts to erode in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Wolfreys 1998: 63). Wolfreys firmly place this 'epistemic shift', this new doubt over what can be known of the expanding metropolis, in 'the hands of the Romantics', in the 1820s, (particularly with Anna Barbauld, with Shelley and Byron), and in 'the novelists who follow' (Wolfreys, 1998: 67).

Writers, from the 1830s, can now only offer isolated snapshots of London; they cannot easily illumine the fragmented social spaces of the city. They cannot, argues Wolfreys, 'pretend to create an image of the cityscape in its entirety' (Wolfreys, 1998: 65). For instance, the subgenre of 'Silver-fork' novels, briefly fashionable in the 1820s, responded to London's expansion and fragmentation by simply not seeing certain sites in the capital, focussing instead on a narrowly defined area of the West End. These fictions, centred on the aristocratic antics of fashionable Mayfair society for a middle class readership, coped with the increased complexity and fragmentation of urban life by neatly splitting London into two distinct spheres: the fashionable West-End, and... all the rest. This purblind West End exclusivity is neatly echoed in a rumoured episode in the life of Regency dandy, Beau Brummel. He was mortified, upon painfully awaking from a debauch, not because he happened to be in the gutter, but, far worse, he lay in a gutter somewhere *east* of Regent Street. East of this new useful thoroughfare, separating fashionable West End from murky Soho, Brummel would not, in effect, exist as socially 'recognisable'. Similarly, in the 'Silver-Fork' fictions, there is no desire, or need, to encompass entire London; most of it is simply beyond the horizon of visibility. In Edward Bulwer Lytton's 1928 novel *Pelham* the solution to dealing with the rancorous density of the massively expanding city is to severely restrict his character's movements to one defined West End zone. In this novel, argues Franco Moretti, 'outside Mayfair, London is a meaningless jumble of streets', (Moretti, 1998: 86). In *Pelham* it isn't just that the rest of London is ignored; it is incapable of being construed as an object of visibility.

Another writerly response to the fragmented London of the early decades of the nineteenth century, and a desire to make it legible, is the literary sketch, or *feuilleton*. If silver-fork London is static and partial, the fiction not concerned overmuch with the unknowable, then sketch writing is mobile, fleeting, offering to guide the reader to obscured spaces. Pierce Egan's 1821 highly popular mock society-guide, *Life in London*, featuring rapid sketches of the London japes of Corinthian Tom and his pal Jerry Hawthorn, is a good example of a writerly response to metropolitan fragmentation and distortion. Egan's work is confidently subtitled 'a camera obscura view of the metropolis with the light and shade attached to "seeing life" ' (Egan, 1821: 14). The author has chosen this investigative method, he tells us, because it possesses 'the invaluable advantages of SEEING and not being seen' (Egan, 1821: 15); knowledge is thus attendant upon seeing whilst remaining invisible. This has the advantage of permitting Egan unnoticed access to a range of London venues. The emphasis on unreflective and apparently unselective visioning is aimed to produce for the reader a sense of indiscriminate access and illumination to the wildly variant zones of London life, with no division between 'high' and 'low' social spaces.

George Augustus Sala in his 1878 journalistic urban sketches, *Twice Around The Clock* (Sala, 1878) also busily presents London for his assumed *suburban* readership, while at the same time excluding that readership from the city he presents. Early in his guide Sala directly addresses, and discounts, the typical suburban reader, by assuming their unfamiliarity with his busy urban time-keeping. 'It may be', he comments, 'that you live at Clapham, that one of the rules of your domestic economy is "gruel at ten, bed at eleven", and that you consider keeping late hours to be an essentially immoral and wicked habit' (Egan, 1821: 8). If so, this is the book for you.

This urge to report on the unseen and unknown spots of the capital for those with no access to them, also operates for concerns at the other end of the social spectrum: the slum. Informed investigative writing of the mid-century, slum investigations by Edwin Chadwick (*Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, 1843) (Chadwick, 1843), Henry Mayhew (*London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851) (Mayhew, 1985) and others,[4] has at its heart urgent concerns around what can be known of the obscured spaces of the compartmentalising city. Here, then, the spaces of newly fashionable West End, the slums and the newly blossoming suburb share a curious kinship: they all need to be illustrated for

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[4] See also *Sanitary Ramblings, Being Sketches and Illustrations of Bethnal Green* by Hector Gavin (Gavin, 1848), 1872's *London; a Pilgrimage* by Jerrold (Jerrold, 2004), *In the Slums* by the Rev. D. Rice-Jones (Rice-Jones, 1884.

those who do not know them and cannot see them. This drive to map and then make legible these diverse spaces of the metropolis reached a peak in the late 1880s with Charles Booth's 'Poverty Maps' of London (published from 1886-1903) (Booth, 2002). Over a lengthy period Booth and his researchers called on every dwelling they could find in and around London, interviewing everyone they met. They then ascribed each one into seven distinct categories, such as "Well-to-do" or "Vicious, semi-criminal", and this information was then colour-coded onto a map[5] (Booth, 2002). The resulting map permits an at-a-glance look at specific social and economic factors of entire suburbs and districts. Slums and suburbs here are made legible; with one look residents could tell where each district began and ended.

What is important is that the slum and the suburb need to be brought into view. In fact those seeming opposites, the slums and suburbs present a curious disavowed co-dependency. As London fragmented socially and geographically, at the start of the Victorian period, 'the characteristic shapes' these forces produced on the ground, argue Dyos and Reeder, indeed 'were slums and suburbs' (Dyos and Reeder, 1973: 360). They are at once opposites (one centrifugally dense, socially heterogeneous, defined by proximity; the other centripetally dispersed, homogenous and defined by distinction), but both are indispensable to the growth of the expanding metropolis. Booth's maps in fact show a complex in-mixing; 'well-to-do' are never far from 'semi-criminal'. They form an inescapable metropolitan continuum; suburb and slum are both features of the fragmented city.

Edwin Chadwick's *Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain,* published in 1842, reports on twin urban terrors; population density and disease. The 'various forms of epidemic, endemic, and other disease' the commission notes, is caused by, among other factors, 'close and overcrowded dwellings' (Chadwick, 1843: 1). The slum is filthy and diseased, and this is worrying because this erodes boundaries, both within its own space (overcrowding, social promiscuity), with the senses of the observer (unlocatable smells, indefinable substances), and because is threatens to leech outwards, even to the new suburbs. Many investigators dramatically report overpowering stenches, greasy surfaces, bodily excretions, rotting matter, mess, bare skin; those elements that cannot be securely located, that abjectly exceed their limits. Once 'constituted topographically', David Trotter writes of Chadwick's investigations, they could only be 'solved topographically', in other words, by an insightful 'knowledge which opens up the dense spaces, and by a power which dislodged their accumulated refuse' (Trotter, 1993: 72).

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[5] See http://booth.lse.ac.uk/ for reproductions of Booth's maps

The fear expressed in all these investigations and surveys is a semiotic one. Distinctions between bounded zones must be maintained. One might aspire to move from slum to suburb, from indiscriminate in-mixing to a more ordered separation; but one also might fear that this suburb will revert back to slum. The slum is the default, the zero point, the place where all attempts at social and physical distinction collapse inwards. The slum is fearful because it dissolves categories; it is the place where boundaries between self and other, inside and outside dissolve. It is the dark shadow of Victorian suburbanism. This horror of suburbs returning back to slum-like conditions informs much mid-century London writing and is the focus of the next section on suburban ghost stories.

Metropolitan investigation of the 1830s and 40s is concerned then, with making the newly created sites of the subdivided metropolis legible. The drive to see and know aims for a difficult balance. It is both a desire to read the city, to illumine it unknown sectors, while at the same time also seeks to also institute a boundary, a distance. The distinct spaces of the metropolis must be known, and therefore clearly considered part of a whole, but must also partitioned, kept distinct. The slums must not ooze into the airy suburbs. This difficult dialectic of metropolitan investigation, to bring closer and to keep at a distance, is the controlling dynamic of Charles Dickens' early metropolitan sketches. Crucial to Dickens' drive to make the metropolis legible is the matter of distance. Dickens's 1836 *Sketches by Boz* (Dickens, 1995), some of the earliest suburban-set writing, addresses the dilemma of establishing a working distance between his readers' worlds and the 'reality' of the new metropolitan spaces. Like Sala, Dickens goes out there because we, the readers, cannot. Many of the sketches' scenes and characters would be immediately familiar to Dickens' readership, and indeed, many contemporary reviewers of the work praised its 'reality' above all other factors. The spectacle of the metropolis appears in *Boz* as familiar, known and comfortable, but at the same time alien, frightening and removed. Dickens writes a series of urban sketches and tales that would be familiar to his readers (with its gallery of commonly encountered lower-middle class clerks, shop-keepers, manual workers, extended families, places of leisure, common street scenes), but also probably unknown (extreme destitution, crime, poverty, violence).

Deborah Nord correctly sees this twin movement, presenting the unfamiliar and unknown in a reassuring way, as the difficult balance mentioned above, close enough to see but safely remote, a 'dialectic between alienation and contagion' (Nord, 1995: 50). This results, Nord

suggests, in a form of quarantining, where Dickens' hints at, say, the common brutal reality of prostitution, and its severe punishment, but seeks to deny, or is unable to provide, any direct connectivity with this experience and the everyday reality experienced by his readers. The slum is important here; the reader wants to see but not get too close. In other words, we could argue that there is a certain suspension of distance, where other city spaces are noted, described, but suspended as it were, held in view. One extreme example of this double fascination is the scene in *Sketches by Boz*, in 'The Prisoner's Van', where two teenage prostitutes are removed from a police station to a wagon in view of an excited street crowd. In Dickens's report we notice a mixture of both outraged compassion ('a melancholy prospect') but also excited voyeurism ('our curiosity was satisfied'). The crowd disperses and Boz moves on, leaving an 'impression on our mind we would gladly have avoided' (Dickens, 1995: 316).[6]

Dickens/Boz is our surrogate observer. We are close enough (through the work of our tireless urban investigator) to see and know what is happening in those obscured regions of the metropolis we do not really want to go to but must know about, and yet just distanced enough, as removed viewers, to try and make some sense of it all. This balance, as we shall see, is anxiously negotiated in Dickens' city sketches. Dickens' narrator also seeks the necessary anonymity to go out and investigate on our behalf; again the suburb is where the city is seen from, not itself a part of investigative writing's focus. Thus, a series of boundaries are maintained, a separation is marked between author and investigator (Dickens and Boz), reader and subject (the city), and between suburb and city. The investigative roaming persona, like the reader, must not be pinned down and investigated. 'The reader must not expect to know where I live' Dickens's exemplary framing narrator in a later work, *Master Humphrey's Clock* tells us; 'my abode may be a question of little or no import to anybody' (Dickens, 1870: 8). This invisible spot, from where investigated viewing is conducted, is in fact the suburb; 'I live in a venerable suburb of London', we are told (Dickens, 1870: 8). This is an ideal location for the removed narrator because it is precisely the kind of neutral place that is *not* written about. This is where writing about the city is consumed, not set.

In Dickens' London-set *Sketches by Boz* these variable boundaries between authorship, witnessing, unknown city spaces and readership, are skilfully calibrated by fictional means. One way in which the balance is maintained is by sheer energy. *Sketches* assumes an

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[6] Subsequent sketches and tales from *Sketches by Boz* will be abbreviated as 'Shops and their Tenants' *ST*, 'Shabby Genteel People' *SGP*, 'Thoughts About People' *TAP*, 'The Black Veil' *BV*, Our Next Door Neighbour, *OND*, 'Mr Watkins Tottle' *WT*, 'London Recreations' *LR*, 'Mrs Joseph Porter' *MJP*, 'Horatio Sparkins *HS*. All are found in Dickens, 1995.

inquisitive, city-roaming, viewpoint, one that feverishly explores all the physical distances of the city. Dickens/Boz here is at pains to be at home nowhere and yet everywhere. Boz, informed and resourceful, gets round the capital like no other previous city writer, even getting out to the new suburbs. Boz (like Dickens himself) prefers to endlessly walk the entire metropolis. This compares markedly with, say, Sala's febrile rushing only around the West End, or Jerrold Blanchard's planned and organised excursions to major Londons sights and occasions in the 1860s, and later published as *London: A Pilgrimage* (Jerrold, 2004). 'What inexhaustible food for speculation, do the streets of London afford!' boasts Boz, the narrator, in the sketch 'Shops and their Tenants'. 'We have not the slightest commiseration', he continues, 'for the man who can…walk from Covent-garden to St Paul's churchyard without deriving some amusement…from his perambulation' (*ST,* 80). Dickens' urban investigation attempts to penetrate all the hidden spaces of the city, not by restful panoramic seeing, but by rapid movement, by getting around. This urgent mobility is neatly evoked in Dickens later metropolitan sketches from 1860, later collected as *The Uncommercial Traveller*: 'Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent-garden, London—now about the city streets: now, about the country by-roads-seeing many little things, and some great things' Dickens, 1991b: 1). Boz's rambling investigations are leisurely, unhurried, and serendipitous, as if the spaces and sites of the cities would be accessible to any well-informed Londoner with time to spare. In this way Dickens has 'collapsed the class distinction between reader and subject', suggests Nord. Furthermore, he 'emphasised not the distance but the correspondence between the observer and the urban scene' (Nord, 1995: 50).

Dickens sketches these London suburbs just as they are in the process of shifting from peripheral urban wastelands towards becoming desirable extra-urban communities. Thus, while we see poverty, criminality and death in the suburban Walworth of the recent past of the 1810s (*The Black Veil*), we also see affluent City bankers overseeing extravagant domestic amateur-theatricals replete with nosy neighbours at Clapham (*Mr Joseph Porter*), and outrageous antics of snobbery in then-wealthy parts of Camberwell (*Horatio Sparkins*). Also, most importantly, further down the social scale we witness numerous examples of the expanding clerical class commuting to the City, from suburban clerks' districts Camden, Holloway, Camberwell and Deptford. This is the start of a truly profound demographic shift of the lower middle classes outwards to form a mass suburbia.

Dickens's key investigative procedure in these attempts to make the suburb legible is to read the truth of the environment by reading and interpreting external signs. Visible signs here

provide clues as to what lies beneath. Dickens's standard practice is to formulate a general taxonomy of metropolitan types (shabby genteel people, middle-aged male buffoons), then focus in on the telling details (worn gloves, an ingeniously re-patched coat) that fit the individual neatly into a specific class. This investigative method (as we shall see again in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, in the next chapter) demands acute observation and analytical skills. For example, in 'Shabby-Genteel People', Dickens moves from offering a description of an entire social sector of metropolitan life to a particular example of this permanently displaced and shadowy suburban genus. 'Shabby Genteel People' are a common metropolitan feature. They 'seem to be indigenous to the soil, and to belong to London as its own smoke' (*SGP*, 303). The type can be identified, read, from their gait, their hair, gender, their clothing, particularly their unsuccessful attempt 'to conceal tattered garments underneath' (*SGP*, 304). Then, Dickens notes one specific 'example'. This shabby-genteel specimen needs careful scrutiny, determined as he is to hide the signs of his true poverty (indeed this unsteady performance of an imaginary respectability is the defining feature of the type). The main protagonist of 'Shabby Genteel People', mentioned above, requires specialist interpretation from Boz. Only our energetic clued-up narrator observes that this figure has been 'revived', that is, has used a 'deceitful liquid' dye to give his clothes the appearance of being new. Only the narrator notes the transience of this temporary disguise, and observes that 'the transient dignity of the unhappy man decreased in exact proportion as the 'reviver' wore off' (*SGP*, 306). He is discovered reading in the British Library, attempting to 'conceal the lack of buttons on his coat' and hiding his hat, 'flattering himself it escaped observation' (*SGP* 305).[7] In the sketch 'Our Next-door Neighbour', then, as evidence that the city can be effectively read from its external details, we are reliably informed that the 'character and pursuits of the people who inhabit' the city, may be 'construed from the appearance of the house doors' (Dickens, *OND* 58). Indeed, this does not require any specialised knowledge, but is a popular truth. Boz notes, for example that 'everyone knows the brass knocker is common to suburban villas'.

Dickens' mode of metropolitan observation, reading surface signs that point to what lies beneath, is, as Michael Wood points out exactly the same kind of surface/depths correspondence that stand at
the core of literary realism. In 'the great works of realism', Wood argues, 'the surfaces always speak'. These surfaces, he continues, 'communicate with the depths the way a trap-

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[7] This link, between observation, detection, and what we could describe as social epistemology, recurs later in this work, in the mysteries of suburban ghost stories and the structure of mid-century 'sensation' novels.

door communicates with a cellar or a space beneath a stage' (Wood, 2008: n.p.). Thus, in Balzac, for instance, a selection of material details, a rented room, a boarding house, a landlady, can be noted, interpreted, and furnish the reader with a sense of the true 'inner' nature of these places and people. Literary realism, then offers a 'profusion of signs' and, more than that, it offers a 'theory of the readability of those signs' (Wood, 2008: n.p.). These signs point to somewhere else. Woods's Balzacian example is telling: realism is urban. In a city where spaces are closing to the casual observer, an informed reading of the available signs is crucial. These readings of the signs are, of course, acts of semiosis, of meaning-making and orientating a particular environment.

This mode of literary illumination, the useful correspondence between surface and depths, between an individual's appearance and their inner being, does however, run into difficulties when used in the suburbs. As Roger Webster argues, discussing suburban narratives, in the suburb 'there is no depth from which an archaeology might exhume artefacts' (Webster, 2000: 2). This clearly is a semiotic problem as signs here do not point to any specific referent. Here, surface and the depths do not touch; 'surface' signs do not point to a 'deeper' substrate of reality. We can identify such examples of suburban illegibility in *Sketches by Boz*. There is a flattening of the suburban scene, so that the two-dimensional suburban reality actually contains no 'hidden' depths that can be reliably pointed to by external signs. The suburb here is *just* banal surface. At the same time, another twist on such suburban illegibility, also in Boz, is that the suburb and its inhabitants can be difficult to read because they are frequently duplicitous. Again, the suburb is just surface, but this time it is a mask, a play, a theatrical performance.

A good example of the former type of suburban semiotic illegibility, the individual who is only surface, occurs in Dickens's sketch of a clerk in 'Thoughts About People'. This individual, is from 'the back settlements of Islington' and is not reckoned an individual at all, but is considered totally lacking in interiority (*TAP*, 252). There is no 'inside' here at all. The clerk's most startling attribute is a disconcerting *transparency*. For this suburban clerk, a thorough reading is not possible, nor even required. He has no depths, and lacks surface characteristics that can generate signs. He is, in fact, too visible. He presents an immediate totality to the observer. Everything is knowable about this man on immediate sight; 'there was something in the man's manner and appearance', Dickens observes, 'which told us, we fancied, his whole life, or rather his whole day' (*TAP*, 252). In fact there is no difference between one day and his whole life because 'a man of this sort has no variety' (*TAP*, 253).

This suburbanite here is, at the same time, then, both curiously both knowable and unknowable. There are no secrets; but then nothing to hide. Furthermore, Dickens sketches this suburban commuter's daily grind as visible and knowable, unchanging and predictable, but also consisting entirely of inhabitation of obscured, increasingly removed spaces. He works in a 'dingy little back office', until eating at an obscure back-street 'dining-place somewhere near Bucklesbury' work, then he 'walks home, at his usual pace, to his little back room at Islington' (*TAP*, 253). He cannot be easily be brought into view, but, then, doesn't need to be.

'The Black Veil' is another suburban-set tale (rather than straightforward sketch) that deals with failed attempts to see and read suburban signs, to uncover hidden depths. This tale addresses notions of suburban opacity and unreadability; it offers to show us 'glimpses of the reality beyond the black veils' (*BV*, 432). But here, beneath the veil, there is no 'reality'. The story's setting is doubly displaced, removed in both time and space, published in the Sketches in 1836, yet set in 1800, in a pre-suburban, 'back part of Walworth, at its greatest distance from town' (*BV*, 431). Dickens describes an inchoate, ghostly place that in fact both does, and doesn't, exist. At the time the action happens, this part of Walworth is yet to be built; 'very many of the houses which have since sprung up on all sides, were not built until some time after'. Additionally, the locale described is pushed even further back in time, as it is more like a medieval suburb than a mid-nineteenth-century one; the 'isolated position of the suburbs …rendered many of them…a resort for the worst and most depraved characters' (*BV*, 433). This is the suburb as remote and unknowable, so 'imperfectly lighted' that the 'chances of detecting desperate characters, or of tracing them to their haunts, were thus rendered very few' (*BV*, 433). The story alternates between the mystifyingly unreadable and the commonplace banal. The 'mysterious figure' of the veiled woman 'muffled in a black shawl' appears unexpectedly to the narrator, and is disconcerting, odd. An early impression suggested is that the veiled figure might be a 'man disguised in woman's attire' (*BV*, 435). Later, the veiled woman's house is described as murky, 'indistinct' and impenetrable. Gradually, in the corner of her room 'closely enveloped in a linen wrapper', a corpse is noted. Yet, throughout, the story these mysterious, chilling 'gothic' elements are continuously undermined by the common banality of the location. Once her veil is removed the woman, a grieving mother, is revealed, anticlimactically, as 'a woman of about fifty, who had once been handsome' (*BV*, 436). Eventually, the story revealed is not mysterious at all, but a familiar one of poverty, crime and maternal love. The inexperienced doctor at the centre of

the story decides, bluntly, that the 'history was an every-day one' (*BV*, 437). Again, there is nothing beneath the surface.

Another type of illegible terrain encountered in the *Sketches* is the insubstantial ethereal suburb. It is presented as either materially insubstantial (*ghostly* as we shall see in the next section), or a realm of fantasy, role-play and pure display. The objects of suburban investigation are strangely unfocussed. The suburbs are half-built and unclear. One particular 'shabby-genteel man' individual inhabits 'a damp back parlour in a new row of houses at Camden Town, half street, half brickfield, somewhere near the canal'(*SGP*, 307). The habitat is imprecisely located and uncertainly constituted. One of the reasons the suburban landscape is presented an unfocussed and illegible surface in *Sketches by Boz*, with no direct correspondence between sign and its referent, is because it is also considered a fantasy space. Aspiring would-be suburbanite Mr. Watkins Tottle, in the eponymous tale, is incapable of seeing anything that hasn't already been utterly transformed by his own personal fantasies. Trapped in his room in unfashionable *central* London (a nice reversal this) he is 'wrapt in profound reveries', dreaming of suburban living. He passionately wants to join the urban middle class move out of the city migration out to the new suburbs. He even pretends he is there already, as his 'fancy transformed his small parlour…into a neat house in the suburbs' (*WT*, 495). When he travels to properly suburban Norwood, a dream destination, Tottle completely fails to understand what he sees. He grotesquely misreads the environment, particularly romantic signs and possibilities with a certain Miss Lillerton, or even, it is suggested fantasises such signs and projects them onto the desired individual. The suburb, seen through Tottle's desiring eyes, the object of his social yearning, appears oddly dreamlike. It is insubstantial, fantastic, toy-like, the wrong scale, comprised entirely of deceptive surfaces. The suburban landscape is in fact a temporary stage-set. The cart Tottle travels in, 'drew up before a cardboard looking house with disguised chimneys.' In front there was a 'lawn like a large sheet of blotting paper' (*WT*, 500).

In 'Mr Watkins Tottle' there is a repeated emphasis on necessary masking which both permits and yet makes any accurate social observation difficult. External details cannot be relied upon; the mask here is all you can see. Knowledge of an individual's true intentions is either prone to deception or to forms of projection, as in the case of Tottle's own middle-aged lovelorn buffoonery. The difficulty of seeing and knowing anything for certain in the suburb, even basic personal identity, in this case further warped by social aspiration, envy and snobbery, is made clear after 'Tottle's' demise. After his excruciating romantic misunderstanding with suburban Miss Lillerton, Tottle jumps into the Regent's Canal. Later,

'the body of a gentleman unknown was found'. A calling card case, which 'it was confidently believed, would have led to identification', proved to be useless, as there was 'nothing but blank cards in it' (*WT*, 535). Tottle is a blank. The 'self' is revealed, rather, as a process of continuous, extemporized social masking or theatricality in the service of social aspiration and respectability. Identity, and its anchoring in this new and fluid social space, is something that needs to be continually performed for others.

The difficulties around seeing and knowing, masking and lack of established identity in the suburbs are also central to the tale 'Horatio Sparkins'. There is, in fact, no 'Mr. Horatio Sparkins'. This is an assumed name, half heroic, half absurd. Sparkins is an idealised fantasy figure, both for himself and for others, and particularly for the Malderton family of then-fashionable suburban Camberwell. In an interesting play on the notion of suburban visibility, Mr Malderton, as the tale's narrator ironically notes, has escaped dreaded suburban anonymity (that is, the ignominy of being totally invisible) by having made a fortune. Money has 'raised him from a situation of obscurity' (*HS*, 411). Remunerative City financial *speculations* here offers the possibility of just the right amount of controlled personal visibility; just enough for a degree of distinction, but at the same time, not excessively intruded upon. Yet this newly established social distinction -- being seen but not being known -- is inherently precarious. Social being is presented here as both inauthentically derivative, cobbled together from scraps of other extant social identities, and also continuously, frantically, performative. The Maldertons, in order to fit in nicely into an upmarket suburban environment where nobody really knows anything about anyone else, are frantic mimics. As noted above, pioneering, prosperous, middle-class suburbanites were placed in a new, unfamiliar situation, and anxiously sought guidance on social, aesthetic and moral etiquette. They often tended to copy the established taste of their presumed precursors, the semi-rural aristocracy. This is the wish, as Dickens' notes in the sketch, 'London Recreations' of 'persons in the humbler classes of life to ape the manners and customs of those whom fortune has placed above them' (*LR*, 115). With their new money, the Maldertons 'affected fashion, taste, and many other fooleries in imitation of their betters' (LR, 411).

This stage of uncertain observation and knowledge of social distinction and hectic mimicry is the ideal setting for the appearance of figures like Mr Horatio Sparkins, who ingeniously exploit these suburban insecurities. His own unspecified social status, fluid identity ('he must be *somebody*') and dexterous impersonations (clothes, gesture) guarantee him access to these Camberwellian's social strata. He can, in other words, put on a show, can cue and control the types of reading he wants from others. Sparkins is a very accomplished social impostor and

can control the way he is seen and interpreted by others. He functions successfully as a series of well-wrought fantasy projections figures, personally tailored, for virtually all the individuals of the Malderton family: as, variously, 'Clergyman...barrister... ...distinguished foreigner...writer of fashionable novels' (*HS*, 417). He is considered as a grotesque version of that ideal Malderton social superior, the well-established aristocrat. Someone remarks that 'he bears a strong resemblance to the Honourable Augustus Fitz-Edward Fitz-John Fitz-Osborne' (*HS*, 418).[8] Of course this fantastic mutability eventually comes to grief, reverses itself, as, at the tale's end, the 'mysterious, philosophical, romantic, metaphysical Sparkins...was suddenly converted into Mr. Samuel Smith, the assistant at a cheap shop' (*HS*, 425).[9]

Nowhere is the theatricality and performativity of suburban life, thus complicating the urge to see, clearer than in the tale of the Gattleton family's amateur theatricals, at Rose Villa, Clapham. In the sketch, ' Mrs Joseph Porter', Mr Gattleton, that standard figure of much subsequent suburban representations, a 'stockbroker in especially comfortable circumstances', is obviously terrified of the possibility of not being seen to clearly belong to a specific social group (*MJP*, 480). He has not been able to mark out the optimum distance, that zone between being seen and being exposed, developed by the rich Mr Malderton mentioned above. As anxious social mimics, these suburbanites rely on performance (in this case a literal, if chaotic, performance of *Othello*), on clearly marking out what needs to be seen in order to generate the required signs of a desired social position. Indeed, the stress placed on what others can see of you, rather than any intrinsic quality you might possess or wish to project, and interpret, is clear from the fact that the tale is actually named after one of the Gattleton's prying neighbours. The Gattleton's only become 'The Gattletons' through Mrs Porter's reception of their performance.

Mrs. Porter is an early example of that frequently used cliché of suburban life, the prying curtain-twitcher. She is the neighbour who urgently needs to see the details and find the truth. In this case she is out to deflate a particular projection of reality, to prick social pretension by revealing its 'truth' as manufactured artifice. This popular figure of the nosy neighbour is of

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[8] Ironically, this prestigious lineage serves to further undermine Sparkin's authenticity. Originally, the suffix 'Fitz' indicated that the person named was illegitimate, was in fact of Royal bastard lineage.

[9] This lack of suburban individual substance reaches a comic, even uncanny, extreme in Dickens' 1861 novel *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1992). Here, the famous suburban clerk Wemmick's intended wife, at home in his Walworth 'castle', is portrayed as wind-up automaton, made from wood. Wemmick himself is a robotic commuter lacking free will. This important idea of the suburbanite as automaton, without free- will, and at the mercy of a wayward material world, also forms the portrait of Mr Pooter, in the Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody* (Grossmiths 2003) addressed in Chapter 2 below.

course testimony to the deep-seated suburban anxiety concerning the difficulty of establishing exactly *what is going on* in the suburbs. If suburban life is all theatre, it is the job of the nosy neighbour to peep behind the scenes, to try and *see* how the performance is being sustained and what exactly, if anything, is being hidden. One unofficial communication channel available for gathering information in the uniquely occluded suburb, used by the 'mischievous Mrs Porter', is *gossip*. Gossip fills communication channels that are denied authorised information. It sidesteps official means of distributing and receiving information; it slips around formal control barriers and establishes its own community of users. In this sense, gossip and rumour are the contagious fever of the suburbs. They have no clearly defined origin, easily jump boundaries and are difficult to eliminate. Mrs Porter, sharp-eyed neighbour and dealer in gossip is *dangerous;* and thus 'was courted, and flattered, and caressed and invited' by the 'good folks of Clapham (*MJP*, 485). Also, of course, and this point will be fully developed in the next section, gossip is speculation, currency about events that cannot easily be verified.

At first Mrs. Porter, eagerly watching at her window is confused at what she spies at the Gattleton's across the road. The comings and goings are difficult for her to read. Eventually, however, her desire to penetrate the mysteries of the private suburban house is satisfied because the Gattleton family resort to one of the means available of signalling status; the visible pursuit of High Culture. The Gattletons become 'infected with a mania' for absurdly grandiose 'Private Theatricals' (*MJP*, 482). Hence the delicious irony that the cultural form chosen to anchor arriviste suburbanites to firm social position is the pursuit of elaborate theatricals. This strategy is risky. There is a risk that effective social display could tip over to social exposure. Mrs. Gattleton, we are told, lived in fear of such unauthorised exposure, that she lived 'in bodily fear of anything in the shape of ridicule' (*MJP*, 485). Ridicule here is precisely the sudden exposure of that clanking machinery required to maintain (suburban) social status. In 'Mrs. Josephine Porter' the pursuit of social status in the guise of Shakespearean amateur dramatics, serves, to the neighbour's delight, in opening up the interior of the home to an outside gaze. Mrs. Porter and other locals get a priceless glimpse of the inside of their neighbour's home, as the Gattleton's house is transformed, is turned inside out, ' "regularly turned out o' windows"', in a frenzied attempt to put on a show (*MJP*, 488). More importantly the production 'as Mrs Joseph Porter triumphantly told everybody', was '"a complete failure"' (*MJP* 493). Mrs Porter's 'prying gaze' thus reveals the spectacle in the process of being produced.

The difficulties of seeing and gaining knowledge of the suburban interior, that site tucked away into the fragmented and hidden spaces of the suburbs, is thus turned by Dickens here into a concern with spectacle itself. Rather than trying to illumine a specific suburban habitat, reading the telling sign that links to submerged truths, Dickens's metropolitan sketches themselves stage seeing and knowing. The suburb is represented here, by our energetic and roaming spectator and by the knowing authorial voice of the tales, as endlessly invented and performative. The suburb, precisely because it cannot be fully seen and known, becomes, in its writing, a form of spectacle. Dramatic spectacle, with outlandish and larger-than-life (and two-dimensional) characters, with melodramatic flourishes, plots surprises, disguise, bombast and bathos, stands in precisely for that which cannot be seen and known.

Furthermore, in addition to marking a semiotic problem, that the suburb cannot be brought into view and read, some of the suburban–set tales in the *Sketches*, also, strive for a (very Dickensian) pathos. There are many sad souls and sorry stories here; not least poor deluded Watkins Tottle, dead and dumped, nameless, in a dirty canal. The *feelings* generated here, the dramatic effects of these sketches and tales of thwarted desire and failed social striving on the reader, we can argue, are an attempt to provide that knowledge which cannot be directly known by seeing (or showing) alone. The reader here, in other words, is made to *feel* what suburban life may be really like in the absence of verifiable, seen, knowledge. Where vision is compromised other senses may be used to gain some kind of knowledge. In this way the 'gap' of visual perception, the space between the individual seeing and the object to be seen, is closed. We shall also see this sensory/bodily knowledge in the next section, on ghost stories, and will also be discussed in chapter two, part two, where I will discuss how the abject body of the suburban 'Nobody' clearly marks multiple forms of alienation from material habitat. This kind of anxiety around seeing and knowing in the early suburbs, and attendant interest in spectacle and sensation as substitutes for vision, also appears, around the mid- nineteenth century, in a mini-genre of suburban haunted-house stories. Different modes of 'seeing' are run together here; the dramatic 'spectacle' of the gothic haunted house, the spectre or ghostly apparition, and also financial speculation, that is, seeing into the future.

Section Three – Suburban Ghost Stories

A fear communicated by mid-century suburban-set fiction is of an inability to see what may be happening. One area of such semiotic anxiety, already noted above, is that of an unwanted

connection being re-established between the emerging suburb and the old slum. The suburb, unless kept under clear observation and clear view of boundaries, could devolve horribly back to the slum, unravelling back from being a prestigious site of distinction and separation, to diseased, sticky, undifferentiated morass. This is the 'semiotic anxiety' of constitutive boundaries being eroded. If the signs cannot be read then identity itself, the self as a distinct entity from others and from environment, is under threat. The suburb may be swamped again by the slum if it fails as an economic enterprise; if it turns out to be a risky *financial* investment. In the mid-nineteenth century exactly these suburban anxieties, around status and identity are addressed in a minor genre of suburban-set ghost stories. I want to discuss here ghost stories by Dickens, Charlotte Riddell, Margaret Oliphant and Sheridan Le Fanu that are all set in either suburban locations, or at least in areas of peripheral urban development. The 'suburban ghost story of this period' argues Lara Whelan, 'addresses anxieties about the instability of suburban space during the time of [its] most uncontrolled and rampant growth' (Whelan, 2002: 1).

As Sharon Marcus observes such stories of suburban haunting arise precisely at 'the time when London suburbs begin to replicate the conditions they had been designed to replace' (Marcus, 1999: 115); that is, the return of slum conditions, such as over-crowding, in-mixing of individuals and families, dirt and disease. Hauntings in these ghost stories repeatedly feature a distinctly suburban type of revenancy; the nightmarish fear that the suburb may in fact be turning into a slum, that the suburbanite may not have in fact escaped the worst aspects of urban life. Watchfulness (including financial probity), are needed to prevent this happening. We have already noted how suburb and slum are intimately linked. As Dyos and Reeder remind us, the 'suburbs begat or became slums, rarely if ever, the reverse' (Dyos and Reeder, 1973: 360). They are both inevitable, interconnected factors of the economic, social and political system of nineteenth century capitalism. The 'fact of the suburb', argue the authors, 'influenced the environment of the slum; the threat of the slum entered the consciousness of the suburb' (Dyos and Reeder, 1973: 360).

One undesirable aspect of urban life haunting the suburbs in these ghost stories is the terrifying precariousness of basic economic survival in the mid-nineteenth century metropolis. The earlier suburbs, with the exception of a few grand examples[10], were not planned and carefully financed large developments. Instead, the pattern was small-scale and

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[10] Nash's Park Village West, on the edge of Regent's Park, or Norman Shaw's Bedford Park's 'Aesthetic Movement' fantasia in west London, for instance.

localised. Lack of co-ordination with local parish road-building schemes, the piecemeal nature of fresh-water provision, the lack of adequate drainage, waste-removal and sanitary arrangements, the erratic arrangements for lighting, resulted in a less than ideal pastoral suburban scene. Laura Whelan paints a vivid portrait of slum elements seeping back into some of the new mid-century suburbs; jerry-built,[11] unfinished, abandoned, unlettable. Rather than the idealised suburban elements of space, light, comfort and security, the suburban visitor was just as likely to encounter chronic overcrowding, badly built houses, dirt and disease. 'Instead of a green suburban idyll' Whelan writes, what the early middle-class suburbanites found 'was a repetition of the evils of urban living' (Whelan, 2003) Charlotte Riddell describes one such 1870s suburb, in *The Uninhabited House* from 1875: 'Smelly, bad drainage, impure water, unhealthy of situation, dank' (Bleiler, 1977: 302). Sometimes, the suburb would just end in fields – future road, plots and houses hopefully marked out by lines of string; ghostly premonitions of future growth. This was not the secure, domestic haven of the suburban ideal.

The alarming contiguity of London slum and suburb in London, and the way that material space can be dematerialised and haunted by other spaces, is neatly captured in Dickens' 1838 novel *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, 1999). Here, the doubled zones of dark, labyrinthine underworld and sunny, polite middle-class suburb (high and low again) are separated by a mere turn in the road at the Angel, Islington. Roads from here lead either to the indiscriminate density, darkness and filth of Fagin's Saffron Hill, or to the bright, peaceful sanctuary of Mr. Brownlow's suburban Pentonville. A little later Oliver has an apparition. Even though he 'knew perfectly well that he was in his little room...and was asleep' (Dickens,1999: 271), he sees or, in his otherworldly state, imagines those slum figures, a ghostly Fagin and Monks, horribly near, 'at the window; close before him; so close that he could have almost touched him' (Dickens, 1999: 272). The panic in *Oliver Twist* is that the slum returns as both as unreal spectacle, as a ghost, but also as something horribly real, as tangible physical invasion. Oliver fears the slum *physically* touching him: the disavowed and abject urban body actually invading, polluting, secure bodily space. This split between the real and the unreal can, of course, only be intimated in a borderline semi-conscious state.

Suburban ghost stories combine anxieties around legibility, around the drive to *spectate*. In these new and economically shaky suburbs there is a tremendous need to see and *know*.

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[11] First recorded, incidentally, in the 1860s, and according to one source: 'The cheap, flimsy constructs of Jerry Brothers - a Liverpool building firm'. See http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/211600.html

Residents must be able to read subtle indicators of social rank and distinction, and be acutely sensitive to indicators of economic prosperity or decline in their neighbourhood. Many of these tales of haunting evoke a crisis over the process of informed investigation, of seeing what exactly is happening within the enfolded spaces of the suburban domestic household and neighbourhood. Linked to *spectate* is the *spectre.* The ghost, is of course, the disembodied spirit, that entity which traditionally dematerialises the apparently real, particularly the solidity of the suburban house. The sort of haunting addressed in the fiction under review refer, however, as much to a haunted economics as to haunted houses. That is, I want to link the ghost, the *spectre*, with risky financial *speculation.* Just as the ghost dissolves walls, so speculative economics can dissolve entire neighbourhoods and cities. This is creative/destructive dynamic capitalism, famously described by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), as that where 'All that is solid melts into air' (Berman, 2010: 21). *Spectate, spectre* and *speculations* share a common root in *specere*, meaning 'to look', or 'watch'. The suburban house, in these stories, is haunted, not by a 'real' ghost, that is, by a phantasmal apparition from a different dimension, but by the possibility of failed financial speculation, from an attempt to look into the future. The effect of not seeing, of failed speculation, is the inability of suburban homes and neighbourhoods to maintain the ideal of a rigorous separation of classes, genders, and public and privates spheres. They will dissolve, revert to the indiscriminate in-mixing of the slums. In fact the phantom suburb was a common site in 1850s London, as partially built, or abandoned building sites, newly laid out streets and half-built or unlettable houses became victims of various economic crises. Here we also note that curious problem of suburban materiality substance, where seemingly inert suburban objects tend either to take on a wayward inner self-will, or to melt away all together.[12]

In the mid-century haunting moves to the suburbs. The Gothic emphasis on remote, external sublime terrors (the castle, the ancestral home) declines. As Steven Connor argues, 'the supernatural came up close during the course of the nineteenth century, and became intimate and domestic' (Connor, 2006: 2). In Dickens' 1858 ghost story, 'A House to Let' (Dickens, 2004) a prospective tenant is warned-off renting a particular house, because the house opposite 'won't let' and could be a sign heralding the economic failure and social downgrading of the entire street. Moving to a suburban location presented a considerable risk for middle-class and lower-middle class inhabitants. Suburbanites were jittery, and had to be ready to move if the neighbourhood seemed threatened. Property owners were constantly

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[12] For further discussion on this see Chapter 2, on Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and the Grossmith's *Diary of Nobody* (1888), Chapter 3 on Virginia Woolf's critique of Edwardian realist materialism and Orwell's 1930s suburb as presented in *Coming up for Air* (Orwell, 2001) and Chapter 4 for an account of the uncanny suburb.

vigilant, nervously on the look out for indicators of social decline. Householders, reading the signs, would have to decide whether to move out if their suburban corner seemed to be sinking, stick with what they already had, or gamble on the profitability of moving to a new neighbourhood. This potential mobility, of course, added to the jittery economic scenario. One fearful indicator of a localised economic crisis was the sight of an uninhabited house.

'I have heard of a haunted house' remarks the spooked neighbour, 'but never of a haunting *by* a house' (Dickens, 2004: 12). The house in the story turns out not to be supernaturally possessed at all, and the reason for its failure to be rented is mundanely financial. This house is kept deliberately vacant, not because tenants are terrified by spooks, but because its owners, for complex, criminal, reasons, ask a forbiddingly high rent. The threat to the neighbourhood's economic stability is quarantined as soon as the house's scheming owners are identified (by watchful locals) and ejected. The 'haunting' here is a hidden ruse to disrupt economic, and therefore, social status and security, for financial gain. The terror comes from the prospect of having invested in a failed economic project rather than being rattled by supernatural apparitions

There is in fact a mini-tradition of Victorian ghost stories concerned with the negative financial impact of haunting on property values. Rhoda Broughton's 1868 'The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth' (Bleiler, 1979) and, later in the century, B. M. Croker's 'Number Ninety' (Croker, 1890) both relate speculation to spectral apparition. Charlotte Riddell's 1875 long story 'The Uninhabited House', presents, in a suburban location, a house that is both haunted and that (financially speaking) haunts (Bleiler, 1977: 3). '"If ever a residence"', notes the estate-agent narrator, '"suitable in every respect for a family of position" haunted a lawyer's offices, the 'Uninhabited House'… haunted those of Messrs. Craven and Son"' (Bleiler, 1977: 3). Riddell's story explicitly links ghostly haunting with financial speculation. In fact, the extensive vocabulary of responses to supernatural haunting, apparitions, possession, immateriality, uncertainty, deception, irrationality, euphoria and fear, are here all applied to the booming world of property speculation. First of all, the house distorts sound economic practice. It does this by mostly failing to be let, and when it is, by not being able to keep a settled tenant: 'It did not matter in the least whether it happened to be let or unlet', notes the lawyer narrator (Bleiler, 1977: 5). In this way future economic certainty, seeing into the future, is jeopardised.

Furthermore, the main protagonists in this tale of haunting are both employed in the creating and servicing of ghostly money. Both are property speculators, pursuing and nurturing intangible and often imaginary profits. The titular uninhabited house is 'River Hall', a suburban house in West London, 'near the river' and 'far from town', turns out to be a deliberate ploy by a Mr. Harringford, a 'builder and property speculator', to make the house deliberately uninhabitable and thus allow him to buy it cheap, then redevelop, and resell at profit. Harringford's role model, employer and financial backer in all of this is a Mr. Elmsdale. Elmsdale's skill, we are told, was to 'create something from nothing' (Bleiler, 1977: 86). He 'was a speculative man in many ways' notes Harringford, 'yes, very speculative, and full of plans and projects ' (Bleiler, 1977: 87). Elmsdale is the manipulator of the blind-spots and unknowns inherent to suburban economic growth. He is the invisible presence, the ghost behind suburban financial growth and development, echoing the famed 'invisible hand' of market economics, that invisible factor which ensures some degree of stability. Elmsdale is the spook who makes a profit from economic uncertainty, from impenetrable suburban speculation. Whole streets were mortgaged to him', we are told; 'terraces, nominally the property of some well-to-do builder, were virtually his, since he only waited the well-to-do builder's inevitable bankruptcy to enter into possession' (Bleiler, 1977: 85).

Harringford is himself seduced by the attraction of ghostly capital and soon becomes embroiled in layers of unreality. He gives up a safe and steady job and, following Elmsdale's example (and borrowing money), also becomes a speculator and investor, working with imaginary funds. Unfortunately in his attempt to spirit capital quickly out of nothing, he also becomes addicted to accelerated form of speculative economics: pure gambling. This leads to increasing levels of insubstantiality. He creates and projects an imaginary picture as a successful businessman, when he is in fact a debtor and bankrupt: 'the world thought me a prosperous man; probably no human being, save Mr. Elmsdale, understood my real position' (Bleiler, 1977: 86). He becomes his own double, his own ghost.

Now Elmsdale wants his loaned money back and threatens to expose Harrington's 'true' financial nature. Elmsdale's menaces are also presented in ghostly terms. He haunts Harrington and demands restitution; 'he could not rest and would not let me rest till I had paid him principal and interest' (Bleiler, 1977: 99). When this ghostly money, of course, fails to materialise, Harrington murders Elmsdale. Harrington, in turn, becomes the ghost of 'River Hall', haunting the property to make it unsaleable. As in Dickens's uninhabited house tale,

once the tawdry, everyday motive of plain criminal gain is revealed, the neighbourhood can revert back to becoming profitable. The house is put back onto the market. Then, we are told, it was 'pulled down, and not a square, but a fine terrace occupied its site' (Bleiler, 1977: 102). Here, then, the entire suburban neighbourhood is made spectral, prone to dissolution and reshaping. Bricks and mortar are insubstantial, ghostly. The new development becomes successful and makes money for investors; 'Munro lives in one of those desirable tenements, and is growing rich and famous day by day' (Bleiler, 1977: 102).

The economic precariousness of suburban life, based on the impossibility of accurately seeing financial futures, is linked also in some mid-century stories, not just with a return to slums, but with the fear of not having a home at all. The spectre of homelessness haunts the homely suburbs. '"Houseless – homeless – hopeless!"', as Charlotte Riddell memorably opens her suburban-set ghost story 'The Old House in Vauxhall Walk'(originally 1882, Bleiler, 1977: 85). This story concerns the homeless suburban wanderings of Graham Coulton, 'weary desolate, hungry, forsaken…over the pavements of Lambeth Parish' (Bleiler, 1977: 85). Again, suburb and slum, respective markers of social and economic distinction and failure, are revealed to be frighteningly proximate. This suburban location, near the Lambeth road, is recently built, but is already slum-like; 'The fumes of the gas works seemed to fall with the rain. The roadway was muddy; the pavement greasy; the lamps burned dimly; and that dreary district of London looked its very gloomiest and worst' (Bleiler, 1977: 86). This once-fine neighbourhood is slipping from suburb to slum; 'the houses, so large and good – once inhabited by well-to-do citizens, now let out for the most part in floors to weekly tenants' (Bleiler, 1977: 86).

Seeing and knowing are compromised in 'The Old House in Vauxhall Walk'. We encounter many forms of compromised seeing: by dream, fancy, simple error. A 'homeless' person, out on a cold, dark, rainy night in the suburbs, wanders the streets *looking in* at the comfortable interiors, so invitingly illuminated. Graham Coulton, apparently a vagrant, is here presented as a sort of ghost, aimlessly wandering the suburb on a cold, dark, rainy night. This invisible spectre, unnoticed by others, is a keen observer of other's suburban domestic bliss. He is eventually invited into a house, not a cramped, new, subdivided hovel like the others, but an old, spacious, grandly furnished one. Then, in another inversion, the homeless man turns out to be neither poor, nor destitute. He is clearly not one of the 'desolate, the hungry, the forsaken, the waifs and strays of struggling humanity that are always coming and going, cold, starving and miserable…on the streets of Lambeth Parish' (Bleiler, 1977: 78). For a start,

Coulton is clearly untouched by external conditions: 'His face was not pinched with famine or lined with wicked wrinkles, or brutalised by drink and debauchery' (Bleiler, 1977: 78). In fact, Coulton is not homeless. He is only *playing* at homelessness. He is no outsider, in any sense, but rather the son of an Admiral, with whom he has fallen out. The man who lets Coulton into the house, clearly Coulton's social inferior, is a deferential former servant, in service with Coulton's father.

Coulton, by circuitous means, ends up in a suburban mansion, which, of course, is supposedly haunted by the ghost of a murdered woman, and, yes, the house cannot be successfully let. The murdered woman had reputedly stashed away certain, dodgy 'securities and deeds and bonds' (she *could* speculate into the future) which Coulton, by acute observation, and by staying up all night and outsmarting two bumbling thieves, eventually locates. Again, as a result of uncovering dodgy speculation, quietly respectable (again, from our root *specere*, that which is seen to be of good standing), property speculation is restored. Suburban respectability, a worthiness that can be transmitted and seen, is here tinged by association with money of uncertain provenance, from hidden sources. The unsettling aspect of this story is the shocking intrusion, into the seemingly secure suburban interior, of external economic factors. As easily as Coulton sees into the brightly lit interiors of suburban homes, so are the outside and the inside roughly intertwined. This flimsy border between inside and outside is emphasised when Coulton violently pulls the quiet house apart, ripping open furnishing and fittings, desperately looking for the hidden loot. It is this mingling of inside with outside is that which provide the ghost story with its frisson of the uncanny. This is also repeated in narrative terms with the contrast between the safe, softly lit, cosy interior where the story is narrated and heard, and the dark, wild conditions extant outside.

Spirit apparitions erode, among other oppositions, the clear distinction between interior and exterior. They emphasise this liminality by tending to appear around (what of course have no use for them) physical gateways and doorways. Ghosts tend to appear in those places that provide a physical conduit: doorways, gates, and at windows, fireplaces, landings. This underlines their disregard for such material portals, and their function as psychic or symbolic agents passing between different realms Two later suburban-set ghost stories of the 1880s, by Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Riddell share a title: 'The Open Door' (Oliphant, 2008).

The ghosts ability to dissolve fixed material boundaries, of course makes them ideal observers. The ghost, unlike the suburban resident, gets around and has a good look. Laura

Whelan argues for 'the use of the ghost as a disciplinary force that can go where the middle-class eye could not' (Whelan, 2002, np).The suburban ghost, in its free, amorphous wanderings and sudden manifestations, is here the direct opposite of the suburban resident. The ghost can see. It is (nearly) the only agency that can clearly perceive what is actually happening in the suburb (a quality later acquired, as we shall see in the next chapter, by numerous suburban detectives).

If the all-seeing ghost buster resolves haunting, I want now, by way of contrast, to look at some suburban hauntings that offer no such resolution. Ghost stories by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, written in the mid-nineteenth century, also include themes of haunted visibility, but in a very different register. In these tales, set in peripheral, semi-suburban environments around Dublin and London, seeing and knowing are replaced by terrifying episodes of oppressive surveillance and defenceless exposure. Here, distinct boundaries between inside and outside are made transparent by malevolent spirits. The self is made spectral, exposing the individual to spiritual and psychological fragmentation. 'Normality' (economic, domestic or psychic) is not restored

In Le Fanu's fiction these critical moments of unrelenting exposure are most severe the more eagerly the haunted party tries to escape the busyness of the city and move out to sheltered suburbs. These concealed, private suburbs provide no barrier against intrusive hauntings. The Rev. Jennings, in the story 'Green Tea' (1869), is a secret and reclusive scholar of esoterica who is exposed to terrifying scrutiny. Jennings, in fact, first meets his relentless spying 'companion', during a commute back to his 'triste and silent' suburban residence (Le Fanu, 1993b: 19). On the way to the 'quiet house in Richmond', the Reverend notices an obscured shape in the corner darkness of the cramped deserted omnibus: 'there was very little light in the 'bus. It was nearly dark' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 20, 23). Jennings cannot see very well here and is not sure whether or not what he sees may be an illusion. Eventually, in the darkness, Jennings notes 'an outline of something black', which turns out to be a 'small black monkey…its teeth grinning at me' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 23). Trying to escape the creature's penetrating gaze, Jennings retraces his journey, back 'along the quiet and deserted streets' that grew every moment 'darker every moment' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 23). Lack of light, however, makes no difference to the malignant creature, as even 'in total dark it is visible as in daylight…it is all visible distinctly as in a halo' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 27). Darkness cannot stop the creature being seen and cannot stop its penetrating vision.

This creature is a terrifyingly agent of indiscriminate surveillance, seeming to see right into Jennings's inner being. This ability to see everything is accompanied by an unsettling immateriality. Just as the creature dissolves Jennings physical being by seeming to see straight into him, it also is itself physically nebulous. The monkey appears to Jennings gradually, condensing out of nothing, slowly materialising into physical being. Yet, even when visible, Jennings is still able to pass his umbrella 'through it, back and forward, without the slightest resistance' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 24). The monkey also dissolves space by being everywhere; 'its eyes were never off me, I have never lost sight of it' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 23). The monkey's uncertain immateriality also means it frequently appears in domestic and enclosed settings, in those suburban spaces designed to keep the city out. It was even 'with me in the church - in the reading desk - in the pulpit' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 29). For Jennings, there is no escape. 'In all situations, at all hours', he explains, 'it is awake and looking at me. That never changes' (Le Fanu, 1993b: 26).

The inability to escape the creature, to develop a boundary of the self that cannot be crossed, takes on a frightening psychological and spiritual dimension. The dissolution of material boundaries here merges with a fearful indiscriminate mingling of mental and spiritual dimensions. Dr Hesselius, the supposed collector of the narratives we are reading in Le Fanu's collection, *A Glass Darkly*, is himself a sort of metaphysical investigator, one who consults Swedenborg's *Arcana Caelestia* (Heavenly Secrets), and reads '"When man's interior sight is opened"', he reads, '"then there appear the things of another life, which cannot possibly be made visible to the bodily sight' "(Le Fanu, 1993b: 14). Swedenborg, of course, is the Christian mystic, visionary and scientist whose work addressed the question of metaphysical division, how matter relates to spirit, how the body relates to soul. Jennings's Swedenborgian moment is a terrifying one. He becomes part of a nightmare where all constitutive boundaries are erased by the monkey's evil gaze – bodily, psychic, and spiritual. Jennings' eventual despairing suicide, cutting his own throat, is shocking because he seems, for a victim of such a malicious haunting, completely innocent. Jennings appears a humble, hard-working suburban clergyman, his only 'vice': drinking green tea. That this vicious possession and despairing suicide occurs in a quiet and unremarkable suburb makes it truly unsettling.

A similar shattering of personal and spiritual boundaries (and ultimately suicide) affects Captain Barton, in Le Fanu's 1851 story 'The Watcher' (Le Fanu, 1993a). Again Barton is terrorised by an omnipresent, all-seeing agent. Here, Barton is, initially, a man of action and

'unbeliever', a bluff denier of all 'evidences of revelation', and thus suitable treatment for a haunting (Le Fanu, 1993a: 40). Returning home to his secluded suburban house from then-fashionable North Dublin (after a late-night 'discussion had degenerated into one upon the supernatural and the marvellous'), Barton's first experience of his watching apparition is on the partially-built suburban periphery. Here the space of the new suburb becomes an image of the spectral self made insubstantial by the gaze of the 'Watcher'. Barton walks through the suburb, 'through a line of streets which had as yet merely been laid out' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 44). This skeletal space is a shadowy version of the city Barton has just crossed, and a ghostly premonition of the future suburb yet to be built.[13] This suburb is a ghostly map of the potential future, the future of spectral speculation, as Barton observes the 'lonely road with its unfinished dwarf walls tracing the foundations of the projected row of houses on either side' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 45). The suburb here is both potential and yet already dead.

It is here, in the ghostly dead suburb/suburbs-to-be, that Barton is watched. On this occasion the surveyed subject himself can see nothing of his observer, and is haunted first by sounds, as he hears ghostly footsteps behind him: 'There was repetition of these haunting sounds' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 46). The footsteps are haunting because they cannot be precisely located; 'the street was deserted; no form was visible... he glanced over his shoulder, almost at every half-dozen steps; but no one was visible' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 47). This sound is unlocatable, emerges from no precise source, and surrounds the hearer. The sense of being watched by a non-specific source terrifies the unflappable Captain. At home in his suburban villa he is not safe, is not secured from malevolent forces. He receives a written warning from someone signing as 'The Watcher' and threatens the victim with terrifying indiscriminate exposure. '"You may as well think, Captain Barton,"', the note reads, ' " to escape from your own shadow as from me; do what you may, I will see you as often as I please, and you shall see me, for I do not want to hide myself, as you fancy"' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 49). The suburban home does not offer distance and distinction here; in fact it offers the withdrawn privacy essential for a true haunting.

The more Barton buries himself in his remote suburban home, evading scorching visibility, the more he is exposed. This exposure upsets notions of suburban seeing and being seen. Barton, especially in his suburban villa, cannot hide from the Watcher, can carve out no

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[13] Compare this with the London suburb in Collins' *Basil* (1852); it barely exists, with 'unfinished streets, unfinished crescents, unfinished squares, unfinished shops, unfinished gardens' (Collins, 2000: 32). For Basil, proud of his ancient Norman lineage, it was the 'newness and desolateness of appearance that revolted me' (Collins, 2000: 32). The place 'was silent; desolately silent as only a suburban square can be' (Collins, 2000: 34)

personal space or boundaries. The fear here is one of a defenceless openness; 'His mind became...more vividly impressible, by a system of attack which operated through the nervous system....and in this state he was destined to sustain, with increasing frequency, the stealthy visitations of that apparition' (Le Fanu, 1993a 52). Barton's psyche suffers from exposure to the world, from 'excitement of the nerves', from 'depression, misery and excitement', from 'influence'. In addition, as the Captain undergoes a drastic change 'in his health and looks', he finds it impossible to carry out suburban social interaction. As Barton feels himself becoming increasingly transparent, unable to regulate and shape his own exposure, social performativity, the projection of a mask, becomes impossible. Barton becomes a recluse, determined not to be seen by anyone. His social standing is stripped away as he becomes increasingly unhinged. A chastened Barton, the level-headed materialist and empiricist, now becomes a believer in revelation, an inkling that 'there does exist beyond this [world] a spiritual world - a system whose workings are generally in mercy hidden from us - a system which may be, and which is sometimes, partially and terribly revealed' (Le Fanu, 1993a: 65). Buried in his suburban home, Barton summons one final meeting with the Watcher, is heard to scream, and is found dead.

The feelings generated by Le Fanu's short stories compensate, as I have said, for lack of subjects of vision. The fictional mode whereby *feeling* is the only knowledge we may get of occluded or fragmented social spaces, is a central element, of course of much so-called 'sensation' novels of the 1860s and beyond. Fiction by Le Fanu, Wilkie Collins, Mary Braddon and others, hints that an obscured world of secrecy or criminality takes place behind the scenes of the unknown everyday, and is often set in the London suburbs. Collins's 1852 proto-sensational novel *Basil*, another melodramatic tale of duplicitous love in the London suburbs, takes place in the 'unfinished streets, unfinished crescents, unfinished squares, unfinished shops, and unfinished gardens' near Camden Town (Collins, 2000: 25). The novel, subtitled 'A Tale of Modern Life' gains it power from the fact the neither the main character, nor the reader, has much idea what is happening in these opaque suburbs. *Basil* is full of secret marriages, hidden passions, obscure relationships and sudden revelations where seeing and knowing are compromised, as communication of what the suburban habitat is like fails, other forms of knowledge are needed. Seeing does not produce knowledge in the suburbs, as they are remote, domestic and interiorised. Thus other channels of meaning-making are opened up, what we termed above embodied knowledge. Sensation fiction, in which these ghost stories just discussed, and Le Fanu in particular, can be included, is obsessed, as noted above, with an invisible underneath, with an obscured dimension of secrecy or criminality.

Something must be taking place behind the scenes of everyday, domestic experience – though an observer can never be certain of this. The Rev Jennings's terrorising by a spectral monkey is shocking because of his one-dimensional ordinariness. What could he have to hide? Indeed, Philip Davis argues that sensation fiction provides a 'strange undermining double to the world of realism' (Davis, 2004: 325). Whereas literary realism, links surface clues to submerged truths, being where, as Michael Wood suggests, 'the surfaces always speak', here, in the sensation universe, the 'underneath' comes adrift terrorising the surface. As the individual is no longer the neutral observer, detached from the objects of investigation but rather bodily involved with them, we note, in Le Fanu, that this uncertain proximity produces foreboding, uncertainty, passion, and terror. In the end it produces madness and death.

Sensation fiction suggests a semiotic anxiety. What cannot be clearly seen and known must thereby be re-presented as that which might be felt by the sensual body. This structure of concealment, spectacle and the melodrama has a somatic component; 'sensation' refers here both to outlandish and melodramatic fictional subject-matter and also to the reader's own bodily reading experience. The sensation novel generates in the reader, as D. A. Miller argues, 'the "sensationalised" body', that is the reader's bodily state, 'where the blood curdles, the heart beats violently, the flesh creeps, the cheeks lose their colour' (Miller, 1998: 149). The difficulty in seeing and knowing the truth about social reality manifests itself in material terms. We cannot be sure about what is shown, about what is true and what is substantial. Dickens offers spectacle, make-believe and emotional response. Ghost stories underline anxieties about the *substance* of suburban economic viability. Both use bodily sensation as a sort of bedrock of knowledge. In the occluded zones of the suburbs sensation is as close as we may get.

Ghost stories and sensation writing, then, are attempts to make the suburb legible, to produce meaning when the environment cannot readily be seen. Both emphasise a problem with vision as a problem with the materiality of the suburb. As the suburb cannot readily be known as a specific object of knowledge, its very material nature is problematised. This emphasis on the doubts over the substantive material reality of the suburb is addressed in the next chapter. In the late nineteenth century, as we shall see, suburban writing becomes anxious identifying the individual in the teeming metropolitan mass. Here, the urgent need to identify the marks of the individual in the teeming metropolis (as criminal or victim) is the motor of popular detective fiction. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales start in the London suburbs. That representative of mass suburban culture, the anonymous clerical Nobody is also the subject of

much suburban-set fiction. In both instances, as we shall see, the semiotic anxiety of making legible is dramatised as a profound unease over the substantive material reality of the suburban habitat.

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Chapter Two

The High Victorian & Edwardian Suburb 1880 – 1914

Introduction

This thesis argues that suburban writing addresses a semiotic problem concerning the legibility of the new mass metropolitan suburbs. In Chapter 1 I described such uncertainty over what could be seen, known and communicated in the early suburb. This is not simply a question of *vision* as such, but also the individual's inability to meaningfully read and connect with the lived environment, with other individuals. We saw characters unable to read and negotiate their suburban habitat. This involved the individual's semiotic immersion in their own lifeworld; nothing here seemed to be readable and thus habitable. We noted an anxiety, expressed in work by mid-nineteenth century Silver Fork novelists as to exactly where the suburb or city was, where the boundary lay. Metropolitan sketch writers also aimed to keep up with, observe and report the scenes and individuals of an expanding and fragmenting city, one that could no longer easily be seen at a glance. Surface descriptions, especially in Dickens, are not a reliable guide to what truths may lie beneath.

The connection between seeing and knowing, on the one hand, and the integrity of the built space of the suburban home, on the other, was further discussed in terms of suburban-set ghost stories. Here the ghost, or *spectre*, that which dematerialises the home, is linked with risky financial *speculation*. Suburban-set fiction emphasises that the environment has to be read, decoded, in order to be fully inhabited. We also noted how these difficulties of making the suburb legible, of embedding oneself in the mid-century suburb, led to a necessary emphasis on other, alternate, forms of perception and knowledge. Where making the suburb truly habitable through visual knowledge is compromised – in the suburb no one really knows anything – then other ways of reading the city and orientating the self to environment are required. Firstly, we saw how spectacle, the staging of a something to see, re-presents precisely that which can no longer be seen. Secondly, we saw, in suburban-set ghost stories, how anxieties generated by an inability to accurately see the obscured feature of the suburban habitat, produced an emphasis on non-visual modes of knowing and feeling, on sensory knowledge.

For the mid-nineteenth century the London *slums* were main focus of investigative knowledge. The opaque spaces of London's central slums were thoroughly scrutinized. 'No other section of British society had been so minutely studied, analysed, reported on and written up', Peter Keating argues, 'than the urban proletariat' (Keating 1971: 319). What is new here is that the problem of the elusive individual shifts location toward the end of the nineteenth century and we can see that the suburbs takes over from slum as the prime site of that dense, mass metropolitan anonymity which demands to be seen and mapped. In her essay '"The New Suburbanites"' Lynne Hapgood argues that the late 1880s witnesses a profound shift at the margins of London (as new working and lower middle class suburbs, and identities, were being built on a massive scale) (in Webster 2000). This precipitated a 'shift of public interest away from its absorption in the dramas of the inner city' toward the suburbs as a new kind of terrain (Webster, 2000: 31) It is only', Kate Flint argues, 'from the early 1890s onwards that a distinctive fiction of suburbia appears' (Flint, 1982: 70). What is new in this period, and addressed below, is that the suburb now presents semiotic anxieties around what can be known about metropolitan space. In this period, Phillips and Witchard point out, while London's suburbs did not present the anxiety of crimes defined by the circumstances and squalor of the inner slum, their relentless spread evoked less tangible fears' (Phillips and Witchard, 2010:, 41). These fears concern what can be accurately known about this rapidly expanding mass formation.

The drive to see the unknown suburbs, occluded as they are by various constitutive factors – private, domestic, camouflaged by conformism and standardisation, ever-shifting – actually founders on the suburb's most salient (and lauded) characteristic; its seeming material solidity. Its apparent material solidity is one of its prime assets but at the same time a serious problem. This dislocation between knowledge and material reality is brilliantly captured at the opening of Arnold Bennett's partly suburban-set 1889 novel *A Man from the North* (Bennett, 1994). Here, a Mr Aked is involved in producing a detailed inventory of the hidden suburban psyche, a book titled 'The Psychology of the Suburbs', no less. The suburbs, Aked contends, 'are full of interest for those who can see it' (Bennett, 1994: 102). He invites the novel's hero to scrutinise a typical suburban street and openly wonders at the potential quantity of human life there; 'how many houses are there in Carteret Street? Say eighty' (Bennett, 1994: 102). Knowledge is difficult at first because the physical architecture thwarts vision, the 'roofs form two horrible converging straight lines' (Bennett, 1994: 102). This blocking material surface needs to be removed, as we have seen in Dickens's desire, in *Dombey and Son*, to 'take the housetops off and peer inside' (see above, Chapter 1, p.2, this

thesis). Once roofs are removed, argues Aked, then 'beneath, there is character and matter of interest – truth waiting to be expounded' (Bennett, 1994: 102). If the truth cannot readily be ascertained by seeing then it can be produced through a staging. Mr Aked's street works out, he reckons, at 'eighty theatres of love, hate, greed, tyranny, endeavour' (Bennett, 1994: 103). Aked cannot see, so must imagine; 'Eighty separate dramas unfolding' (Bennett, 1994: 103). What is needed then, in light of these difficulties around investigative knowledge is precisely suburban fiction, a *re-staging* of that which cannot be seen. Such fiction is, ultimately, a 'sustained plea for a literature of the suburbs' argues Kate Flint, 'a recognition of the suburbs as an environment with a sufficiently separate – and varied – identity to provide subject matter for novels' (Flint, 1982: 9).

In the present chapter I further explore how these semiotic difficulties with suburban legibility are manifest in the suburb at the material level. Looking at fiction set in the rapidly expanding lower-middle class suburbs of the last two decades of the nineteenth century I discuss how this writing expresses an anxiety over what can be considered real or substantial in the suburb. Again and again; the objects of knowledge seem to lack substantial being. The suburb is frequently rendered in fiction as a site where nothing is quite real.

Section One, 'A Bad Business', explores the anxiety of suburban legibility, and how this compromises suburban material reality in the urgent need to see and identify the suburban individual, seemingly vanishing into the metropolitan millions. The legibility of any social entity depends, as Scott argues, also on 'that other revolutionary simplification of the modern era; the concept of a uniform, homogenous citizenship' (Scott, 1998: 32). This concern, establishing the individual in the community, is addressed in late Victorian detective fiction). Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories provide a way of demonstrating the kinds of reasoning required for accurate 'seeing' and locating the individual in the modern metropolis. From the very beginning, James R Giles informs us, 'the problem of knowability has hung over novelistic depictions of the city': The expanding city, and now increasingly the newer suburb, presents a challenge for knowledge of the individual (Seed, 2010: 25). The figure of Sherlock Holmes, rational and scientific, seems to solve the problem of urban ineffability, offering to locate and read the clues and decode the city for us. In fact, though, Holmes's famed modern scientific investigative 'method' is not what it seems. It is not technically 'deductive' at all, but, rather, has better been described, by semiotician Thomas Sebeok, as 'abductive'. What Sebeok calls the 'detectival method of abduction', is in fact a mix of 'logical deduction, intuition and inspired guesswork' (Sebeok, 1994: 86). Holmes's method,

employing imagination and play, as well as coolly 'scientific' deduction, can usefully be seen, in fact, as dramatising an anxiety over Victorian material conceptions of reality. Objects of knowledge here, the material world of the suburb itself, are slippery and contingent. Holmes uses other methods, not just scientific materialism, to decode the truth.

In Section Two, 'Stories of Nobodies', continuing to explore this anxiety of suburban legibility leading to compromised suburban material realities, I look at the minor sub-genre of 'clerkly fiction'. This is writing centering on the lives of invisible suburban 'Nobodies', taking its cue from the Grossmith brothers 1888 *Diary of a Nobody* (Grossmith, 2003). The suburban Nobody, a junior employee in the quickly growing area of City finance , or in commerce, and is a kind of lower-middle class Everyman. He is perceived as insignificant, home-loving, put-upon, incompetent and, above all, invisible. Such characters appear, as we shall see, in fiction by H. G. Wells, Shan Bullock, William Pett Ridge and Jerome K. Jerome, which raise the vexed issue of distinguishing the unique individual in a standardised, mass, suburban environment.

Again, this anxiety over what is visible and knowable is linked to the perception of the textures of material reality. The Nobody, as the Grossmith's title suggests, lacks substantial being. This 'no- *body'* lacks corporeality, and thus clear markers of identity. Using elements of 'Thing theory' popularised by Jane Bennett, Bill Brown and others, (Brown, 2000, Jane Bennett, 2004) I will argue that rather than being simply no-thing, and lacking real substance, suburban clerks here can usefully be discussed as in fact plagued by 'thingness', that is by a materiality gone wrong. The hapless suburban Nobodies testify, in Brown's terms, to the presence of *things* rather than just of *objects*. In this sense things are the everyday material objects of everyday life that have lost their transparency, their background neutrality. They have, rather, developed an independent salience, an inherent mischievous animation. We confront the 'thingness of objects', Brown argues, 'when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy' (Brown , 2000: 4). The Nobody, as we shall see is troubled, in much suburban fiction, by just such a richly detailed world of animated and wayward material things. We also need to be aware that Pooter's trouble with everyday household objects arguably reflects a broader concern with modes of modern scientific materialism. Victorian deterministic materialism, the principle that external reality is entirely knowable and predictable, permits little scope for individual action. Pooter's ineffectual railing against the material things of his modern suburban home, his

inability to actually do anything, presages a profound cultural ambivalence, towards the implications of scientific determinism.

In Section Three, 'Suburban Arcadias', I change the focus slightly and discuss the problem of vision and knowledge in the rapidly expanding suburbs in the guise of what Lynne Hapgood calls the 'suburban imaginary as utopia' (Hapgood, 2005: 8). Here, anxieties around seeing and knowing in the metropolis and with how the individual reads and finds a home in the environment are refocused as forms of utopia, itself a visioning of a possible place. Utopia, of course, is that ideal place where the individual flourishes and finds a meaningful place in the social order. Utopia is home. This home is established by physical manipulation of the material landscape, which in William Morris's philosophy is skilled craftsmanship – as opposed to technological fix. In two versions of possible suburbanised utopias, by William Morris and Jerome K. Jerome, I discuss how two projected visions of suburban themes – as future socialist utopia or as temporary holiday – are based on very different understandings of work and the shaping of the material environment.

Section One – 'A Bad Business'

A slightly earlier version of Arnold Bennett's dream of transparency, mentioned above, occurs in a curious episode in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes 1892 story, 'A Case of Identity' (Conan Doyle, 1998).[14] Here Holmes dreams of total surveillance, the elimination of material impediments to full vision, a vision already noted above in G. A. Sala, Dickens and Arnold Bennett. This is the fantasy, based on an episode in Alain Rene Le Sage's seventeenth century drama, *Le Diable Boiteux* (1707), of seeing exactly what is going on in the city by floating above it. This involves, in Sala's words, deciding to 'take one house and unroof it' (Sala, 1878: 52). In the Sherlock Homes version, the detective ponders that '"life is truly stranger than anything the mind could invent"', and suggests that this truism could be easily demonstrated '"if we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on"' (Conan Doyle, 1998: 147).

The anxiety revealed in suburban fiction toward the end of the nineteenth century is a concern to illuminate the individual in the metropolitan mass. Indeed, 'every society', points

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1. Subsequent Conan Doyle novellas and stories featuring Sherlock Holmes will be abbreviated: *A Study in Scarlet*, (Conan Doyle, 2001), *(SS)*; 'A Case of Identity' (CI),*The Sign of Four (SF)* 'The Blue Carbuncle'(BC), 'The Adventure of the Cardboard Box' *(ACB)*, 'A Scandal in Bohemia' *(SB)*, all in *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Conan Doyle 1998).

out Carlo Ginzburg, 'needs to distinguish its members' (Ginzburg, 1988: 104). This dream of total transparency, the notion that everything can be seen and known, particularly the truth about the individual, is at the core of detective fiction. Here, the all-knowing, acutely attentive, logically rigorous, detective takes on for us the most daunting scientific challenge: that of scrutinising the modern metropolitan masses and identifying the single individual, in this instance, the criminal. Here I will discuss Holmes's detectival procedures and will then argue that such so-called 'deductive' methods are in fact a response to a deep uncertainty concerning the certainty of knowledge, especially knowledge about the individual, in modern settings like the suburb. I will argue that it is the suburb, not the urban centre, which is set up as the fiendish challenge to Holmes's investigative potency; this place is certainly a problem for knowledge. In fact the suburb here takes on some of the features previously possessed by urban slums; anonymous, dangerous, with a shifting populace, a site in urgent need of knowledge and investigation. In fact the suburb turns out to be the wrong kind of space for this kind of writing, for detective fiction.

At the start of the very first Sherlock Holmes criminal investigation, in the 1887 novella *A Study in Scarlet* the detective receives a note; 'There has been a bad business during the night at 3 Lauriston Gardens, off the Brixton Road' (*SS*, 26). Another murder takes place in suburban Camberwell shortly afterwards. Thus, the first murder case (and also the second[15]) which the detective is called out to solve actually takes place in the south London suburbs, not, in the labyrinthine, foggy urban centre of the popular imagination. Conan Doyle, in his 1892 non-Sherlock Holmes novel *Beyond the City; The Idyll of the Suburb* directly explores the possibility of remote suburban domestic happiness, a site where individuality (within a domestic setting) might flourish safely removed from the city (Conan Doyle, 1912). Conan Doyle's first outing for his detective seriously undermines the possibility of a suburban retreat, presenting the opaque suburbs as ideal ground for safely anonymous criminal activity. The suburb, as we shall see, presents a personal challenge to Holmes' famed 'method'.

The Sherlock Holmes stories are attempts to personalise the unimaginable London aggregate, to catch the individual. Holmes's dream of roof-lifting transparency is a desire to view London's masses precisely as unique, legible *individuals*. Many of the stories (including the aptly named 'A Case of Identity' from the first proper collection of short stories *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892)) begin with the startling emergence of a single

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[15] Norwood appears in the 1890 novella *The Sign of the Four* (Conan Doyle, 1998). Doyle himself lived, happily enough in South Norwood, from 1891 to 1894.

protagonist from the urban crowd, literally stepping forward (and upstairs) from a background of grey anonymity, onto the gas-lit stage of the 221b Baker Street flat. The crowds come to Holmes, materialising from the murk. 'Holmes', suggests Iain Sinclair, is 'like an author, a school-of-Mayhew social analyst, receiving reports of the city...Each character flounces on set, trying for a part in one of Conan Doyle's fictions' (SS: xv). Again the suburb here takes over from those slums investigated by Henry Mayhew as locus of fearful mass anonymity.

Detective fiction thus sets out to solve a semiotic problem, to read the signs that will lead to the individual. The detective story expresses social concerns to see and identity distinct specimens of the metropolitan totality by way of noting markers of individual difference. For Holmes himself, any difficulties of seeing and gaining knowledge of the individual in the city are banished by rigorous application of his well-known 'method'. The method consists, Holmes himself tells us, in *The Sign of the Four*, of the 'three qualities necessary for the ideal detective...the power of observation, that of deduction...and knowledge' (Conan Doyle, 1998: 65). In other words, detection consists in the accurate observation of material objects and their subsequent assignation as clues, followed by an unbreakable causal chain of logical deduction that leads back, ultimately, to the individual. Holmes's method is underpinned by an encyclopaedic memory and instant recall of all kinds of material effects and phenomena (and past criminal cases). Holmes, in fact, has written numerous monographs on a range of obscure material data, such as identifying varieties of cigars from the ash they produce. The method explains Holmes's famous opening words to Watson on their first meeting 'A *Study in Scarlet*: '"How are you?...You have been in Afghanistan I believe"' (*SS*, 13). All that is required to recreate the unknown individual's biography, to deny randomness and anonymity (Watson has himself at this time, we learn, been loafing aimlessly around the capital) is the accurate observation of insignificant - seeming details and then link these together in to a regressive causal chain. The detective argues elsewhere that 'from a drop of water a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other' (*SS*, 20).

More specifically, then, the core of Holmes's 'method' is not merely accurate and detailed seeing, but the effective transformation of such *objects* into *signs*. Insignificant- seeming smudges left on a wall, for instance, have to be identified as fingerprints before they can then be construed as signs of individual human identity. It is this transformation of material marks into signs that really sets Holmes apart. The sign leads to the individual: 'By a man's finger-

nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot...by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs-by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed' (*BC*, 23).This is Holmes presented as great logician; "'Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner'" he explains to Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet* (*SS*, 42). The detective, like the investigating scientist, observes phenomena, discovers the causality between events and ascribes this back to an underlying law.

Certainly, then, the great nineteenth century detective, as Franco Moretti argues, 'incarnated a scientific ideal' (Moretti, 2005: 246). Importantly, we can argue, however, that Holmes's ' method' is in fact, rather than an outstanding example of scientific certainty, a response to a particular *crisis* of knowledge at the end of the century. This crisis is played out, I would argue, in the social formation of the new suburbs. The final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed rapid developments in scientific method and knowledge and in technological application. But at the same time that this scientific rationalizing worldview produced great optimism and huge possibilities it also began to generate a crisis, as the spread of scientific thinking and method paradoxically undermined older certainties and created new problems. Thus in medicine, for example, powerful new technologies (stethoscope, speculum, X-rays) offered to illumine the hidden body, but at the same time threaten to invade and fragment it. Darwinian science identifies a mechanism, natural selection, for understanding the place of the individual in nature, but also hints at possible regression and the survival of latent 'primitive' instincts (Mighall, 2002). Real advances in communications technology and transport fragment the conceptions of human space and time (Kern, 2001). Psychological research challenged the unity of the individual, the consistency of human consciousness and developed an interest in extreme pathological states. There was also, of course, a growing interest in at the fringes of science, in the occult and psychic research (Luckhurst and McDonagh 2002b). For all its self-confidence Victorian positivist science generates doubt; late nineteenth century culture manifests this in its concern with decadent and gothic modes, with the double, the uncanny, unconscious and extreme psychological states.

The wavering in the certainty of Victorian science's progressivism is especially evident in the developing social sciences. As Moretti points out, at the end of the nineteenth century 'high bourgeois culture wavers in its conviction that it is possible to set the functioning of society into the framework of scientific, objective, laws' (Moretti, 2005: 247). More exactly, science cannot produce a synthesis of causal factors to explain all observable events. This is particularly true of the metropolis, where the expanding and subdividing city, teeming with

anonymous and unknowable individuals, seems beyond all measure and control. This is where Holmes comes in, reconnecting science and the individual, and being triumphantly certain about the objects of his observation. The suburb, it appears, is more of a problem because of its defensive, private domesticity, its opaque withdrawal to the margins.

Before studying exactly how Holmes fares in the London suburbs, that startlingly modern type of mass habitation, we need to be clear what the great detective actually does. In fact there are at least two ways in which Holmes famed investigative method departs from traditional modes of 'panoptic' and objective scientific investigation. Both are concerned with acts of creative semiosis, with reading the signs. In the first place, his mode of reasoning can better be described as 'abduction' rather than purely 'deduction', and, secondly Holmes's method is ground-breaking in that it is more concerned with minor, insignificant-seeming details, rather than with larger, general truths. Science, of course, is also concerned with details. What it generates are not 'truths' but rather hypotheses which stand until shown to be wrong by further scientific investigation; by further details. Where Holmes is different is that he notices details that seem to have no evidential validity, no relation to that being investigated. Holmes terms these crucial minor details 'trifles' Let's take each element of Holmes method in turn.

To start with then, Holmes's so-called 'deductive' logic, as Thomas Sebeok points out, can more accurately be described as 'abductive'. Sebeok credits the identification of abductive method to C. S. Peirce, who argued for it as 'a distinct kind of argument, different from both deduction and from induction' (Sebeok, 1981: 18). An 'essential element' of such abduction Sebeok adds is 'something for which the colloquial name is guessing' (Sebeok, 1981: 19). As hypothesis creation abduction, then, is the process of deriving the likely truth by way of making an informed guess, or a speculative hunch, rather than of detailed logical causality. Abduction is the crucial first step in getting at the truth, only afterwards can come the chain of causality, which is deduction proper. Abductive inference is a part of logical reasoning, but, importantly, it is also creative. 'The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash' Peirce argues (Peirce, 1974: 113). 'It is an act of insight; although of extremely fallible insight' he continues, '...it is the idea of putting together what we had never dreamed of putting together which flashes the new idea before our contemplation. This judgement is part of a process that is not controllable and therefore not fully conscious (Peirce, 1974: 113). This sounds very much like Holmes' method and explains the detective's procedure: as distant calculating observer and rationalist, but also as impetuous, intuitive and wildly imaginative.

Abduction relies, in other words, on some very unscientific elements; intuition, gut-feeling, guess-work, imagination, creativity. As Sebeok comments; 'what makes Holmes so successful at detection is not that he never guesses but that he guesses so well' (Sebeok 1981, 18). It demands a subconscious receptivity, an instinctive feeling for unperceived connections between differing aspects of the world. A second way in which Holmes's urge to fathom the city departs from mainstream positivist science, is usefully outlined by Carlo Ginzburg, in an influential essay 'Clues: Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes' (Ginzburg, 1988). Ginzburg argues that a keen interest in observing and noting the minute and seeming irrelevant details of individual difference was a response to the urgent need to establish individual identity created by rapid industrial development, increased social mobility and the growth of huge urban centres. In such social structures of 'increasing complexity', Ginzburg continues, 'any claim to systemic knowledge appears as a flight of fantasy' (Ginzburg, 1988: 109). What was needed was a 'new epistemological model' (Ginzburg, 1988: 87). A new system, developed at the end of the nineteenth century, focussed not at all on the big picture of total control (Holmes's flying dream), but rather on tiny details of difference, easily overlooked details that provide clues to a broader picture. Systems were thus developed that could tabulate such marks of individuality: efficient filing, a putative national photographic record, anthropometric measuring systems (graphology, phrenology, fingerprinting (introduced in 1880). The common thread here, as Ginzburg argues, is the model of 'medical semiotics or symptamatology' that discipline which allows diagnosis, *though the disease cannot be directly observed,* on the basis of superficial symptoms or signs' (Ginzburg 1988, 87)[16].

'"You know my method"', Holmes confidently tells Watson, in 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery', '"it is founded upon the observation of trifles"' (*BVM*, 165). The celebrated Holmesian scientific method departs here again from traditional scientific investigation, then, in its counterintuitive obsession with insignificant-seeming details. 'For Holmes', as Watson records 'there is nothing so important as trifles' (Conan Doyle 1998, 140). This is where Holmes repeatedly triumphs over the 'official' science of the police, who look for evidence to support a few salient facts and ignore the rest. The 'obvious facts', Holmes argues, are 'the most deceptive' (*BVM*, 166). In *A Study in Scarlet* Holmes can see clues that no one can see as clues: 'No doubt it appeared to you to be a mere trampled line of slush', he comments looking at a formless, dirty patch of half-melted snow, 'but to my trained eyes every mark

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[16] Ginzburg notes the commonality here with Freud's psychoanalytic symptomatology which seeks deeper truths by examining common trivial parapraxes (slips of the tongue, accidents, misreading and so on) (Ginzburg, 1988).

upon its surface has a meaning' (*SS*, 61). The police are unaware that the slush, random and unmarkable, even constitutes the sort of surface where *marks* could appear. In fact a most Morelli-like investigation takes place in the vast anonymity of *suburban* south London. In *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box*, in the uncelebrated metropolitan hinterland of Croydon, an innocent old lady receives an anonymous box containing 'two human ears, apparently quite freshly severed' (*ACB*, 309). From these unpromising, disconnected, trivial fragments, lacking, one would assume, any marker of human individuality, Holmes can establish (just as Morelli promised he could) a singularity. From Holmes's detailed observation of the ears he tracks down the old lady's sister, the intended recipient of the gruesome package, and cracks the case.

This epistemological shift, away from certainty toward a new paradigm that Ginzburg calls the 'conjectural hypothesis', reflects anxiety, then, in tracing and knowing the individual in the metropolis. Holmes inaugural Sherlock Holmes story, (first published 1887) takes its place in a tradition of late nineteenth century gothic writing that is centred on an anxiety of what can be known of the individual in the metropolis. R. L. Stevenson's 1886 *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 2003), Arthur Machen's 1885 *The Great God Pan* (Machen, 2009), the public obsession over the 1888 Ripper murders, and Oscar Wilde's 1890 *Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 2004) are all centred precisely on the this theme of doubling, dissembling and potential criminality. They are all concerned with epistemic doubts; the modern here contains a barely legible trace of much older murderous and atavistic impulses. The central message in late-Victorian gothic is, as Robert Mighall points out, is 'never trust appearances' (Mighall, 2002: 159). [17]

Importantly, Conan Doyle relocates this gothic tradition from the centre out to the suburban periphery[18]. The London suburb, *on the face of it* seems to be a difficult place for the detective to read the barely perceptible signs of individuality. Again, we see a problem with investigation in the very nature of the suburb's materiality. The signs in Holmes's inaugural Brixton case, for instance, case appear to be particularly elusive, to appear not just unreadable, but even non-existent. The material world here seems to conspire to actively erase all signs of individuality. The day of the investigation is a 'foggy, cloudy morning' while 'a dun-coloured veil hung over the house tops, looking like the reflection of the mud-

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[17] Conan Doyle and Wilde actually met in summer 1889, with the editor of Lippincott's magazine, and received commissions to write *The Sign of Four* (the second Holmes story) and *Dorian Gray* respectively.

[18] We will see, in Chapter 4, how the 'neo gothic' rendering of 1990s London, searching for disavowed ghosts and echoes, can gain no purchase in the suburbs.

coloured streets beneath' (*SS*, 19). This is the opposite of Holmes's dream of surveillance; here all is opaque, obscured, *blind*. The light is 'hazy' and 'uncertain'. The house had three 'tiers of vacant melancholy windows, which were blank'; the inside of the house cannot readily be seen and the house itself is unseeing. The 'solitary window', where the murder happens, 'was so dirty that the light was hazy and uncertain' (*SS*, 19). Outside, idle loafers 'strain their eyes in the vain hope of catching some glimpse of the proceedings within' (28). Everything here is *unfinished*. It is colourless and formless, a severe challenge, as we shall see to Holmes's forensic skills. The whole place is watery, inchoate 'very sloppy from the rain' a site that does not retain any impressions. The house and its environs are diseased and sickly looking. It has a 'small garden, sprinkled over with a scattered eruption of sickly plants' traversed by a 'yellowish' pathway (SS, 20).

In the suburbs Holmes struggles, slows down, and gets distracted. The Brixton Road crime scene is dark, slippery, wet and muddy. Material clues in this environment would be temporary or partial at best. If 'a herd of buffaloes had passed along there could not be a greater mess', Watson comments (*SS*, 29). Messiness, as David Trotter has pointed out, is deeply ambivalent and anxiety provoking, defying categories, denying difference, implying contingency and chance. Mess 'interferes in some way', as Trotter argues, 'with the ascription to the experience of meaning and value' (Trotter , 2000:, 10). It is a problem, in other words, with matter. Mess makes no sense; it is matter out of place. Nothing in this suburban murder scene is in the right place. A corpse is found in a gloomy villa on the urban perimeter and, as W H Auden's has it, it is shocking because it is 'matter disastrously out of place' as 'when a dog makes a mess on a drawing room carpet' (quoted in Symonds, 1992: 12).

Indeed Holmes's first murder victim is out of place in more than one sense. The corpse is not identifiable, that is, it lacks a name, a meaningful place in social structures. More than this the corpse is out of place in a temporal sense: an evolutionary throwback that has materialised unwarranted in the present. The anonymous victim is a well-dressed, up-to-date, late nineteenth century gent. Watson's detailed inventory describes a 'heavy broadcloth frock coat', 'immaculate collars and cuffs' and a 'top hat'. A shock comes, however, when we discover that clothes actually dress some kind of horrific pre-modern creature. 'The low forehead', records Watson, 'blunt nose and prognathous jaw, gave the dead man a singularly simious and ape-like appearance, which was increased by his writhing, unnatural posture' (Conan Doyle 2001, 30). The unidentified corpse is matter from another evolutionary epoch.

The South London suburb presented here marks a materiality gone wrong. Its material texture seems to prevent it being made legible. It is both modern feature of the latest industrial, economic and technological technologies, but also presents a curious return to a premodern beginning, that is a threatening return to the opaque, undifferentiated slum, (as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis). Watson himself looks out of the window of the Brixton flat, 'which looked out upon one of the great arteries of suburban London' (*SS*, 30). For Edwardian suburban commentator, C. F. Masterman, the suburb is the 'modern type of all civilisation' (Masterman, 1909: 65). For many at the start of the twentieth century' notes Judy Giles, 'suburbia was the predominant form of civilisation' (17).

Yet, the suburb is also, as we see in *A Study in Scarlet,* an atavistic space, on the unseen edge of the modern city. It is characterised, for example, as drastically different from the modern metropolitan centre, as a place where things slow down. While advanced technological communications and transport technology clearly predominate at Holmes's Baker Street HQ, the suburb seems disconnected and backward. Outside the Brixton house after a long, slow journey, seemingly a journey without progress, Holmes, contrary to Watson's expectation, doesn't rush up to the crime scene. Rather, affected by the entropic ambience, 'with an air of nonchalance… bordering upon affectation, he lounged up and down the pavement, and gazed vacantly at the ground, the sky, the opposite houses' (*SS*, 20). The suburbs are nightmarish in their sluggish resistance to movement, in the repeated senses, of a movement without moving. On the journey to the murder site, for example, the duo's cab 'treads its way through a long succession of dingy street and dreary byways' (*SS*, 25). But their journey's end, 'in the dingiest and dreariest of streets', conveys no sense of a proper destination; 'the driver pointed to a narrow slit in the line of dead-coloured brick' (*SS*, 20).

Holmes's inaugural suburban crime scene also seems excessively, even brutally, material. There are actually very few murders at all in the Holmes series. 'Among the twelve stories of the first series', notes Pierre Nordon, 'nine contain no bloodthirsty crime at all' (Nordon, 1966: 239). Furthermore, this Brixton murder is presented in startlingly, even excessively, gruesome detail. Watson provides such an unusually replete material inventory of the victim's personal characteristics that it is unclear for a while that the figure on the floor is actually dead. Even Watson, experienced doctor and ex-soldier, is shocked by the corpse's appearance of 'malignant and terrible contortion' and his 'writhing and unnatural posture' (*SS*, 30). The only significant clues seem to be (there are no impress wounds) the body's

emotional traces of its own terrible murder. 'On his rigid face' Watson records, 'there stood an expression of horror and hatred' (*SS*, 30). The murder presented here is, in fact, detailed, lurid and unpleasant, a fictional approach Conan Doyle would abandon in writing the later Sherlock Holmes stories.

Although the suburb seems to present serious obstacles to the Holmesian detectival method, he does, eventually, triumph. The case is solved, the 'scarlet thread' of murder unravelled. The semiotic difficulty of reading the suburb actually lies elsewhere.

The entire metropolis for Holmes, although fragmented and obscured, becomes legible, ultimately, because it forms an interlinked network. Holmes is at the centre of an extensive communications network, availing himself of the latest information and transport technologies; telegraphy, telephony, rapid mails, cheap newspapers, even an informal surveillance network ('The Baker Street Irregulars'). He also regularly uses the extensive and expanding public transport system, and ubiquitous cabs. Even on a night-time suburban journey in the second, also suburban-set tale, *The Sign of Four* Holmes is not lost. In fact he accurately (and ostentatiously) recites the all the obscure points on their journey south: "'Rochester Row, now Vincent Square. Now we come out on Vauxhall Bridge Road. We are making for the Surrey side…Walworth Road, Priory Road" (SoF, 17). For Holmes, all parts of the city are connected to each other; like a huge organism, with the detective sitting at the exact centre. 'He loved to lie in the very centre of five millions of people' observes Watson in 'The Adventure of the Cardboard Box', 'with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion' (*ACB*, 307). The picture of Sherlock Holmes crouching in the very centre of the city is an example' argues Nordon, of the' modern character given to urban civilisation' (Nordon, 1966: 249). It is, he continues, 'an enormous spider's web, with every thread leading to the hero at the centre' (Nordon, 1966: 249). For Holmes, then, as Nordon continues, London 'is no longer, as in Dickens's novels and sketches, a collection of parishes and suburbs' (Nordon, 1966: 75).

It is precisely here, with the detective operating at the centre of an extensive communications network, where the Holmesian dream of total metropolitan transparency is most realised. Rather than the impossible dream of scientific panoptic control and certainty, it is *culture* itself that becomes the means by which the individual is defined and regulated. 'The culture knows, order and defines', Franco Moretti, in his essay 'Clues' argues, 'all the significant data of individual existence as part of social existence' (Moretti, 2005: 143). Culture itself, in other words, becomes a form of policing: 'Holmes's culture – just like mass culture, which

detective fiction helped found – will reach you anywhere' Moretti adds (Moretti, 2005:146). In this view detective fiction itself is the means by which the individual is located and identified. Detection fiction is, then, a frame-up: it creates a problem, a crime and the anonymous criminal individual who must be recognised and isolated, and then presents us with the solution to this social problem, the logical scientist/detective who can always establish who the individual is.

In Holmes's inaugural case, then, his excursus to the dull suburbs is never a challenge, a real threat to investigative scientific certainty. Holmes will always have all the answers. Rather, the suburb takes its place in the staging and resolution of particular problems, of fears and uncertainties centred on the frightening anonymity of the capital. The suburb too, we learn, can be seen and controlled, as story.

Holmes himself in fact is always sensitive to the dramatic and entertainment possibilities of his own activities. In *A Study in Scarlet* he begins the series-long ambivalent attitude toward the reception of his own investigations. He repeatedly insists that his work is merely dry, scientific ratiocination, but yet cannot resist enjoying their inherent human drama, take enjoyment at his own abilities and be secretly thrilled at his 'audience's' response. He is in fact torn between two personas the serious, rigorous scientist, and the showman or magician. [19] One of course is anonymous: the other well-known. He berates Watson's reporting of the cases as stagey melodrama, '"You have attempted to tinge it (the scientific business of detection) with romanticism"' (*SS*, 32). Yet in his inaugural case he is also aware of the impact his actions make on his audience, he is always keenly aware of how his prowess will be received. '"I'm not going to tell you much more of the case doctor"', he tells Watson, '"a conjuror gets no credit once he has explained his trick"' (*SS*, 38). He also gives the first (reported) case its melodramatic title: 'Why shouldn't we use a little art jargon' he asks Watson. 'There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life' (*SS*, 42)

It is at this point, finally, at the *writing* of the case, where the suburb produces its most destabilising effect on Conan Doyle's own method. While the case is successful, the suburb proving no real impediment to the detective's method, in fact just being fodder to better show his greatness, Conan Doyle's first attempt at detective fiction was not at all successful. As

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[19] Holmes is more in fact; he is also the languid aesthete, the drug-taking melancholic, the cruel narcissist, the athlete , the showman.

fiction *A Study in Scarlet* is very much a failure. *Scarlet* is one of only four full-length novels in the original canon, and suffers from a digressive plot, a lack of dramatic tension and suspense. The story is over just as it starts and lurches in the second section to a tortuous excursion to the American West, before returning to London to tell us what we already know. The novella was not a commercial success (nor indeed was its suburban-set follow up, *The Sign of Four*) and as a product of the expanding field of popular culture is not a successful detective fiction.

It is precisely at the level of culture, the *writing*, then, where the suburban setting discomfits the great detective on his first case. Crucially, in these inaugural Sherlock Holmes stories, the suburb is the wrong kind of space, not for detection as such, but for Holmesian detective fiction itself. The suburb here becomes just another annexe to the centre, merely a setting, as is the American West depicted, for an adventure. Neither site becomes integral to the narrative itself, as it does in the other 'gothic' tales discussed above, where place becomes part of identity itself, and as it does in subsequent Holmes stories. The external world absents itself. The suburb here is inert background, disconnected from the required networks (cultural, communication, transport) and detracts from the tale's narrative rhythm and dramatic tension. The suburb here is problematic for writing, for literature. Subsequent Holmes stories tend to be set either in central London locations or, at the other extreme, remote rural or regional spaces, both of which are plugged into cultural or communication networks. The suburb here lacks the complex relation to place that can furnish a frisson in the crime committed there. The 'bad business' in Brixton turns out not to be just a nasty murder, but an unsellable story.

The semiotic problems thrown up in suburban-set fiction, generated by the demand for knowledge of the individual in the suburban social mass, is further evident in many popular novels of the late nineteenth century dealing with the lives of obscure suburban clerks. Here characters are all striving for personal communicable significance and the desire to scrape out a more than a bearable existence. Charles Pooter's lament in *The Diary of a Nobody* is 'why shouldn't I publish my diary… just because I do not happen to be a 'Somebody?' (Grossmiths, 1998: 2). This is the fiction of the suburban 'little man', the numerous and interchangeable Victorian and Edwardian 'Nobodies' who stand in for the unknowable suburban multitude, to which I shall now turn.

Sherlock Holmes uses his genius to resolve a riddle; to locate and read the obscured clues of metropolitan suburban individuality. This occluded individuality is not directly observable (Holmes can only dream that it is so) and the function of the detective story is to create this knowledge for us by showcasing the detective's observational and abductive prowess - the 'method'. The case of the unknown individual is resolved, ultimately, as part of that communications network; detective fiction itself becomes the means by which individuality can be scrutinised and controlled in the metropolitan aggregate. The knowledge demonstrated is literary. 'Detective fiction', as Moretti reminds us, 'furnishes only the sensation of scientific knowledge' (Moretti, 2005: 149).

This difficulty with making the individual legible in the new metropolitan suburbs, and the problem this creates with the material fabric of the suburbs, also produces the figure of the suburban nonentity. In this section I will discuss the appearance of fiction foregrounding the adventures of London's suburban 'Nobodies', that expanding army of clerical and minor administrative workers, as presented in popular late Victorian fiction, particularly in George and Weedon Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody* (1892), but also found in popular fiction by H.G. Wells, William Pett Ridge and Barry Pain. The 'Nobody', then, is usually a clerk, part of the huge 'variety of service and white-collar occupations emerging and expanding in the later nineteenth century' (Anderson, 1976: 3). These clerks and their families inhabited the inner London suburbs, particularly in the 'clerks suburbs' of Peckham, Camberwell, Islington and Camden. This figure sees nothing. This presents a semiotic anxiety over what can or cannot be seen (or recorded) in the suburb. In some ways Pooter is like Watson; he see nothing, or rather, as Holmes (again) berates Watson, 'you see but you do not observe' (*SB*, 123).

We must also note here that this semiotic anxiety is factually presented, as in the Holmes stories, in terms of a curious suburban materiality. The invisible and unknowable individual, as socially insignificant, becomes, as the Grossmiths term him, 'the Nobody'. That is, lacking salient material substance; he is the 'no-body'. At the same time as being immaterial, however, the Nobody is also presented as being entirely embroiled in an excessive material realm, a universe of the wrong kind of stuff. He is in fact all too real.

In this section, I will, first, discuss why the Nobody is presented as troubled, in much suburban fiction, by a richly detailed world of wayward material stuff. The Nobody, the late

Victorian suburban Everyman, is swamped by the material domestic glut of early popular consumption. Furthermore, these harmless-seeming everyday objects develop independence and an inner drive and go on to discomfit and even attack the hapless individual. Secondly, I explore how this aggressively animated army of alien things eventually goes on to include the individual's own body. The body itself becomes here alien object; it appears, in fiction, as unappealing, ugly, ageing, as physically abject. Furthermore, this body of the nobody, as mute alien thing, lacks the required skills, the co-ordination, to manipulate and order the domestic environment. While not directly attacking the self, the body cannot usefully direct the individual through the hostile suburban environment. The suburban domestic male is clumsy, accident-prone, and incapable of husbanding resources. Thirdly, I want to suggest that this emphasis on a belligerent materiality and on the somatic is itself indicative of a crisis in modes of perception and knowledge. 'Sense', here, meaning both ways of perceiving and of comprehending the world, is in crisis. Without being able to fully apprehend the world through the bodily senses, the suburban individual cannot engage with that world and belongs nowhere.

Pooter's immense difficulty with the material world can usefully be positioned, I would argue within the broader context of a profound cultural anxiety around developments in Victorian scientific materialism. The increasing influence of Victorian Positivism, the set of ideas that everything that is knowable proceeds from a basis in material reality, and that thoughts, ideas, individual character and human values are nothing more than secondary effects of this, and its claim to supersede religious or spiritual explanations of the world, creates great unease.[20] Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel *The Secret Agent*, for instance, gives us a nightmarish picture of London, the modern metropolis, as a centre of rootless rationalism, where amoral characters are crushed by a world dominated by utility and clockwork mechanism. As Conrad's bitterly ironic portrayal of the novel's terrorists shows (puppet-like individuals who want to refute vapid materialism by blowing things up) such all- encompassing utilitarian Victorian materialism offers little room for the exercise of free will (Conrad, 2000). In a mechanistic universe individual determination ceases to exist.

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[20] John Tyndall, colleague of Darwin and Thomas Huxley, Superintendent of the Royal Institution, famously used his address to the British Association, in 1874, to establish the superior credentials of scientific materialism over religion as the pre-eminent mode of explaining the universe. More specifically he sough to rise to the challenge of explaining how 'mechanical acts…and individually dead atoms' can give rise to 'sensation, thought and emotion' (Tyndall, 10). Tyndall claims 'that any form of life can be developed out of matter ' (17)

This anxiety around free will in a deterministic and materialistic world in the last decades of the nineteenth century is also evident in *The Diary of a Nobody*. Pooter's inability to control the abundant and wayward material stuff of his habitat suggests profound doubts around his own free-will. Things here rob Pooter of agency, and this suggests a profound ambivalence concerning the individual agency in a material and mechanistic universe; rendered of course, as comic. Pooter's absurd unselfconscious bumblings suggests something of the clunky automaton, the clockwork creature at the mercy of contingent external forces.

The peculiar figuring of self and material things in suburban fiction such as *The Diary of Nobody,* can be fruitfully discussed using 'Thing Theory' (Brown, 2001). Bill Brown traces the specific history of 'things' through the work of Walter Benjamin, the Surrealists and Bruno Latour. This distances itself somewhat from studies of Victorian materialities by examining those everyday items that do not enjoy a settled ontological status. These Things of the everyday Victorian world are not easily classifiable or fixed. 'Thing Theory' takes as its starting point Heidegger's distinction between objects and things – where an object becomes a thing precisely when it stands out, or is made to stand out, against the background of the world in which it exists (Heidegger, 1993). Brown argues, as mentioned above, that the inert objects of the world, lose their transparent innocence and assert a troublesome presence as a thing, precisely when things go *wrong*; 'you can cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you can trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut' (Brown, 2001: 7). This is the exact moment when neutral background objects lose their innocence and become troublesome things. In this sense objects-as- things seem to have an inherent inner power, a force that Jane Bennett, drawing on recent thinking by Gilles Deleuze and Latour, and emphasising Bergsonian Vitalism, calls 'Thing-power' (Bennett, 2004 and 2010). This is the notion, she argues, that 'so-called inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence and resistance to us' (Bennett, 349). More specifically, for our purposes here, we can emphasise the element of *resistance*, the notion that things enjoy independence, actively block human agency.

Things, then, compromise the subject's ability to make the world knowable, legible and thus fully inhabitable. The subject cannot readily know the objective world because the precise demarcation of subject and object, self and world, is erased. The subject/object dialectic is broken, they swap sides, so that things can be full of people (that is independent and animate) and people have things in them (in suburban fiction the body itself is rendered as thing-like).

The world only becomes visible, apprehended, at the moment when objects become things; when things, for the nobody, go horribly wrong.

Brown's references to the bathetic accidents that signal the disappearance of the object and the arrival of the thing hint strongly at the inherent *comedy* of things. *Diary of a Nobody* and other suburban fictions of the period use 'thing' humour to underline the individual's absurd condition of permanent eviction from any secure place in the world. One of the reasons Pooter is a comic creation (we shall explore other reasons later) is an absurd lack of fit, between self and world, self and other. Pooter neither inhabits his lower-middle class locales (home, neighbourhood, and workplace) nor his body.[21]

To start with, for the Nobody, there are *lots* of things. Certainly, in *Diary of a Nobody*, the Pooter's beloved Holloway home (the house exterior itself fussily detailed and over-decorated) is densely packed with the newly available items of popular consumption. It appears to be crammed with multiple soft furnishings, items of furniture, pianos, pictures, framed prints, mirrors, clothes, kitchen-ware and handy gadgets. Much time and effort is spent on ordering and delivering food and alcohol (large amounts of cheap champagne). There is, particularly, an abundance of superfluous decoration: knick-knacks and mementoes, stuffed birds, wall mounted plaster-cast stag's heads, richly decorated shelves and piled-up mantelpieces. The dominant motif is *excess*, the unnecessary addition and covering of things with yet more layers of things. Carrie Pooter, Charles's wife, has a penchant for rugs, antimacassars, tablecloths and mantelpiece covers. The best-known instance of surplus addition is Mr Pooter's attempt to cover various indiscriminate household items with Pinkford's enamel paint. Pooter experiments by repainting, with red enamel, plant pots, a fence, and, happy with the results, next moving indoors and painting books, a coalscuttle, a washstand, and, eventually, the bath.

The suburban novel of the period frequently recounts this material stuff, particularly from around the 1890s with the increasing availability and ubiquity of domestic consumer items. This connection between suburbanite and a growing consumerism is in fact made explicit in George Gissing's 1889 suburban-set novel *In the Year of the Jubilee* (Gissing, 1994). This

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[21] This malicious waywardness of everyday domestic objects and activities is wittily described by humorist Paul Jennings theory of 'Resistentialism'. Jennings humorously contends that the condition of bodily 'being-in-the-world' is more contentious than even Sartrean existentialism ever imagined, and this is because of *things*. Being, for Jennings, has to contend, not with contingency, with the universal indifference of world, but with that world's active malignancy, with things. For Resistentialism it's a gruesome battle out there, as Jennings' catchy slogan emphasises: 'Les choses sont contre nous'- (Things are against us) (Jennings, 1963)

novel foregrounds, much to Gissing's evident distaste, the main features and players of nascent consumer society; popular journalism, crass advertising, HP facilities, market research, department stores, risky entrepreneurialism, and, above all, consumer goods as index of taste and status. Gissing here critiques the degraded culture operating in the suburbs, mostly created for (and sometimes by) women, that seeks to concretise and exchange abstracts such as taste or refinement. Nancy, thrives on the consumer attractions of the present; 'What was it to her the future of the world? She wanted to live in the present, to enjoy her youth' (Gissing 1994, 83). Young Nancy and her friends (proto-teenagers) link freedom with the new material world; of retail opportunities, magazines and papers, clothes going out, restaurants and holidays.

Unlike such domestic commodities, which could be read as clues to class status and identity – and thus anchor in some way the individual within a social context, the 'things' discussed in this section do not lead to any such understanding. Rather, they work to evict the individual from place. Crucially, these things, as Thing Theory suggests, are beyond the individual's personal control. This waywardness of the material is very clear in much late Victorian suburban-set fiction. H. G. Wells's influential suburban nobody (in fact, more of a provincial 'little man') Mr Polly, in *The History of Mr Polly,* spends all his days 'chasing obdurate things around corners' (Wells 2005a: 26). The suburban skivers and connoisseurs of idleness in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* precisely those individuals who detest formal work of any kind, have to labour very hard to combat what one character calls 'the natural obstinacy of all things in the world' (Jerome, 2004: 25). One famous extended set piece in the novel concerns a heroic struggle with an unopenable tin of pineapple chunks. In *The Diary,* a typical Pooter diary entry states, bluntly; 'April 11th: Today was a day of petty annoyances' (Grossmiths, 1998: 3).

We soon learn of the long-suffering Pooter's battles against things: 'there is no key to our bedroom door...the bells must be seen to. The parlour bell is broken...which is ridiculous' (Grossmiths, 4). Things break, do not co-operate, get lost, malfunction, and even attack. At Pooter's home, The Laurels, nothing does what it is supposed to, or refuses to co-operate altogether. Pooter's lovingly tended flowers and vegetables all refuse to flourish. Important social occasions are always accompanied by physical mishaps. Trying to impress at the theatre, Pooter's clip-on tie falls into the audience below. On another formal occasion a wayward anti-macassar is snagged to Pooter's coattails for the evening. He gets drunk and things deteriorate further.

But there is more: Things are not only annoyingly wayward. They are also actively malignant. Things *attack*. The individual here is hapless victim of the inherent malice of the material universe. The Pooters, to take just one instance, have a malfunctioning foot scraper that has a seemingly vindictive intent. The Curate, we are told, 'caught his foot on the scraper and tore the bottom of his trousers' (Grossmiths, 1998: 6). Numerous neighbours suffer too. The butcher suffers the same fate, and threatens legal action. The malice of the inanimate world, and Pooter's abject defencelessness, is underlined by the frequency of bizarre incidents. This is the precise moment, as Bill Brown argues, when the objects of the world become things. It is then that we actually *see* objects for the first time- when they swim into consciousness and enter the category of things. We stop looking through the window and see the window itself.

In fact Pooter's inability to either control the things of the world, or to defend himself against them, leads us to the most far-reaching aspect of the suburban Nobody's struggle with things. The suburbanite's clumsy incompetence is a result of the body itself being merely another thing. The malicious intent of suburban things is intensified, in a neat circularity, by the incompetence of the suburban body in managing that world. This is because the body also becomes a thing. Bill Brown also argues that faced with Things, the body itself becomes a thing: 'the body is a thing among things' (Brown, 2001: 6). In this relentless battle, the body mutinies and ends up siding with things.

We can see that Brown's ideas here share certain features of a semiotic account of the suburbanite's problems with a wayward material universe. Brown argues that objects become things at the precise moment they go 'wrong': that is the moment they are brought to consciousness. In effect, although he doesn't say this, Brown seems to be moving toward a theory of signs. A broadly semiotic account would argue, to reverse the polarity of Brown's concept of object and things, that things become (semiotic) objects only when we become conscious of them as *signs*. We cannot know of the existence of things until they become objects for us. Here, as John Deely argues, 'things are what they are independently of being known' (Deely, 2010: 77). The mind-independent realm of things only become objects for us through semiosis: 'every object …owes its being to the triadic relation' of the sign (Deely, 2010: 77). This is precisely what Brown seem to be referring to when he talks of seeing the window as opposed to just looking through it.

In the world of the late nineteenth century suburbanite the domestic environment remains stubbornly outside the individual's ability to meaningfully read and order it. The individual becomes thing like at the level of the body. Indeed the body itself appears as thing-like in two, related, ways. In the first instance the body, as clunky alien thing, is grossly *incompetent*. It is incapable of shaping the world for the self, incapable of mediating or ordering environment, particularly a bewildering world of such numerous and wayward things. Hence we have the figure of the Nobody as incompetent bodger, as unhandy man. Secondly, the body *qua* thing, is abject; that is, cast off, separate from the self. The abject body here is experienced as sick, ugly, ageing, inappropriately feminised or absurdly infantilised.

Firstly, then, Pooter is unskilled and incompetent. He is embroiled in many facets of the practical running of the home he does not like to leave; bits of decorating, minor repairs, dealing with unreliable tradesmen and stroppy domestics. Even though Pooter's very name echoes elements of creative domestic *bricolage* - pottering, potting, mooching, doodling - Pooter has no skills or competence. Pooter breezily supposes that this maintenance will be straightforward; 'all of which I can do with my pipe in my mouth' (Grossmiths, 2003: 4). In fact all of these tasks are vexing and done extremely badly. The material world is just not amenable to Pooter's pottering. Pictures will not hang, items get lost, break or malfunction, and cannot be repaired. Nothing in Pooter's tended garden will grow. The food delivered to the house is terrible, and not what they asked for. Pooter is always getting lost, or is late, or is diverted

The body is revealed as thing, as alien and malicious matter, most urgently at the scene of the accident. The accident is that horrible moment where the incompetent body and malignant material world unite and conspire against the dignity of the individual self. This is where the natural world seems to be most urgently attempting to expel the individual from any sense of belonging. Pooter, of course, has many accidents. He trips, slips, loses things, drops things, knocks things over, gets knocked over, gets punched in the back of the head (though, this may *not* be accidental), gets assaulted by a toddler (neither is this a complete accident).

Again, this stumbling clumsiness is a very common feature of suburban-set fiction in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Jerome K. Jerome's three men in a boat, of course, are hopeless sailors, and are continually breaking, misusing or losing something getting lost, losing or misusing one of the numerous items of equipment they have brought with them.

Pooter' literary progeny can be also be seen in Barry Pain's popular *Eliza* stories, first published in 1900. Like Charles Pooter, the (unnamed) husband narrator of the *Eliza* sketches is a pompous, self-unaware, ham-fisted fool. Each story follows a similar formula. A simple enough seeming common object ('The Hat', 'The Mushroom', 'The 9.43', 'Concerning a Toothbrush') causes Eliza's husband no end of convoluted complex grief (until his wife, Eliza, uncomplainingly sorts it all out) (Pain, 2002). Popular suburban set fiction, in the early years of the twentieth century, by minor figures such as William Pett Ridge (*Mord Em'ly*, 1992)) and Shan Bullock (*Robert Thorne:A Story of a London Clerk* (Bullock, 1907) presents suburban existence as purely comic, a shrunken world whose boundaries barely stretch beyond minor domestic misunderstandings, ineptitude and incompetence. This fiction generates an endless supply of tiresome escapades, pratfalls, mistakes, misadventures and accidents. The figure of this type of inept bumbling Nobody finds its most influential literary figure in E.M. Forster's graceless Leonard Bast in *Howards End* from 1910 (Forster, 2000). Bast is aligned with the corporeal (sluggish, dull, hollow) and yet at the same time distanced from the physical, presented in the novel as losing touch with sources of natural vitality and authenticity. His death itself – literally crushed by the weight of falling books – is absurdly clumsy, partly accidental, partly willed.

The second manifestation of the suburban Nobody rendered as thing is the abject body. The suburban body, in other words, is not 'handsome' in the etymological sense of 'easy to handle', or tractable. The handsome is that which is in comfortable relation with the world, and the word retains this sense of ease or fittingness. The abject, literally the 'state of being cast off', as theorised by Julia Kristeva is that which confounds categories (Kristeva, 1982: 92). The 'loathsome ', for Kristeva, 'is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system' (Kristeva, 1982: 92). The ugly here presents a semiotic anxiety, it is that thing that we cannot make sense of, cannot be read. This is, of course, the uncanny repulsive object that is both familiar to us and at the same time disconcertingly other. The abject is that which occupies the disconcerting no-man's land between subject and object, that is, in terms we have been discussing here, the space of the thing. 'The ugly', as defined by Mark Cousins, 'is defined not so much as being an attribute of the object, but as falling outside signification' (Cousins, 2007: n.p).

There is no place for the ugly. Suburbanites are abject in this sense of being unappealing. They are, variously, presented as ugly, overweight, short, ageing, badly dressed, pained. Pooter, himself, as we can see from Weedon Grossmith's illustrations, is stiff, awkward,

slope-shouldered, pigeon-chested, and gangly. Pooter's neighbours and colleagues are not presented in a much better light. A supposedly comely toddler who assaults Pooter is thus described: 'I do not think I have seen a much *uglier* child myself. That is *my* opinion' (Grossmiths 1998, 72). Pooter sets in train a minor tradition of physically unappealing suburbanites, leading through characters in Wells, Bennett and E. M. Forster, reaching its apotheosis with Orwell's George Bowling, in *Coming Up for Air* (Orwell, 2000). Bowling is overweight, unfit, shapeless, sweaty, clammy, balding and toothless.

The abject body as alien thing is also evident in suburban fiction in its presentation of the suburbanite as a picture of unhealth. Pooter's diary records a lengthy complaint of colds, pains, nausea, dyspepsia, numbness, headaches and, of course, frequent hangovers. Pooter, as hypochondriac, constantly monitors his body for signs of rebellion. Sickly suburban Nobodies are fairly common. E. M. Forster's weedy empty husk, Leonard Bast, is also prone to colds, coughs and chills. He is of course, an empty husk eventually *crumpled* to death. H.G. Wells's Mr Polly is also prone to numerous ailments, 'suffering', among many things, 'acutely from indigestion' (Wells, 2005a: 8). This, we learn, is something which happens 'now nearly every afternoon in his life' (Wells, 2005a: 8). Indigestion, we can argue, is a typical suburban complaint (it is also the main affliction of Mr Aked, the compiler of 'The Psychology of the Suburbs' in Bennett's *A Man from the North*). It is, after all, symptomatic of a literal inassimability; an inability to fully absorb external elements and make them one with the body. The world cannot be stomached.

Lastly, the body of the suburban Nobody as abject alien thing, that which further expels him from experience of, and belonging to, his environment, is apparent in suburban fiction where males are presented as being in the wrong body entirely. These Nobodies, because of their docility, tamed domesticity and close allegiance to the everyday, are seen as failing to meet traditional masculine ideals. Nobodies are often presented as being inappropriately feminised. Their domestic incompetence suggests a deficit of traditional authentic masculine ('heroic') experience; the stoical management of the experienced body-in-the-world including building, hunting, making habitations, providing for the family via the competent male body. Shan Bullock's eponymous suburban clerk in *Robert Thorne; A Story of A Clerk* (1907) is taunted by his father. 'Haven't I told you better. Haven't I taught you what a man owes to himself is to strive after manhood. A clerk, with a clerk's narrow little soul – is that your idea of a man?' (Bullock, 1907: 7). These Nobodies are also often infantilised, filling dull days with an unending series of childish games, minor scrapes and petty squabbles.

The body as represented in suburban fiction as thing-like (unhandy and abject) marks ways that the individual cannot make the suburb personally legible and meaningful. This illegibility at the somatic level (the body as sensory being in the world) is sometimes depicted in suburban-set fiction exactly at that boundary where self, body and world meet; at the skin. Just as, despite huge efforts, we realise the suburbanite is not at home in the house, similarly neither are they at home in their own skin. The skin is that complex organ that functions multiply as covering, limit, membrane, screen, and conduit for our sensory inhabitation of the world. The skin here does not act as boundary of the self, the membrane which negotiates self and other, inner and outer. Importantly, Charles Pooter literally doesn't feel at home in his own skin. On one occasion he awakes with a strange sensation: 'owing, I presume, to the unsettled weather, I awoke with a feeling that my skin was drawn tight over my face as tight as a drum' (Grossmiths, 1998: 32). This curious displacement is also experienced by Wells's Mr Polly, equally not at home in his own skin. There is an uncomfortable gap, his skin doesn't seem to 'fit'. 'The east wind', we are told, 'made Mr Polly's teeth seem loose in his head, and his skin feel like a misfit' (Wells 2005a: 9). The skin is limit boundary, where the individual ends, but also where sense of the world begins. The skin, as Steven Connor points out, is a 'place of minglings, a mingling of places' (Connor, 2005: 26).

A useful way to explore this bodily unhousing and its unfeeling disconnection from the world, is with the notion of 'semiotic anxiety' outlined by Thomas Sebeok. Here, Sebeok argues that bodily boundaries are crucial to the formation of selfhood, to a self distinct from habitat. Such boundaries, demarcating self and other, are maintained by acts of communication, that is, by semiosis. The self is, for Sebeok, a 'semiotic self ', and is maintained in its unity by its ability to send and receive information. Adapting here a biosemiotic understanding of the immune system as that structure whereby a given cell's integral boundaries are maintained by reading worrying signs of invasive non-self (a virus, say), Sebeok argues that the whole individual is analogously constituted and thrives, in fact, by reading and responding to external threats. Just as an invasion of a cell, when 'read' correctly, activates an immunological response, so, for the individual, any perceived environmental threat, for example the proximity of a stranger, produces a semiotic anxiety. This fearful anxiety, then, the relation of self to environment, damaging to the self, is experienced around that boundary between what Sebeok describes as the 'invisible, malleable proxemic shell that the layman calls reality', and the skin itself (Sebeok, 2001: 78).

The individual's sense of environment, is, Sebeok argues, always 'composite, partial and forever incomplete' (Sebeok, 2001: 75). The suburban Nobody, we can now see, however, suffers a total inability to read the signs of habitat and thus to situate themselves in a specific niche, (to be 'environmentally subtle' in Sebeok's terms (Sebeok, 2001: 75). Suburban fiction, as I re-emphasize, is in fact, predicated on an urgent anxiety around what can be made legible. No one in the suburb sees or knows anything for sure. To speak of an individual self as a Nobody, then, is to underline a crisis over seeing and knowing, and therefore belonging to, the world of the mass suburb. The humour of the *Diary* is that he sees and knows (even though his diary is intended precisely to catch the minutiae of everyday life) much less than everyone else. The comedic centre of the novel is precisely Pooter's detachment and complete lack of understanding of this new and evolving suburban landscape

All attempts at making sense of the world (sign making, communication) are, as Marcel Danesi points out, 'initially grounded in the experiential realm of the senses' (Danesi, 1998: 17). Here, bodily experience converts the 'external world of the senses into an internal one of representation (Danesi, 1998: 17). The suburban 'no-body' is cut off, from sensuous engagement with the world. The suburban habitat is unavailable as home and in fact the world, as malicious 'thing', ejects the suburbanite. Crucially, the world, as full of things, has now withdrawn, is unavailable for meaning. If the human body and environment are intricately intertwined and mutually engaged, then for our hapless suburbans, self and world are hopelessly separate. These suburbans have been separated from the reality of the senses. Crucially, the world, as full of things, has now withdrawn, is unavailable for meaning. The suburban environment in not fully inhabited. The suburbanites do not belong.

The comedy of the suburban Nobody, the impotent raging against wayward material things, is, finally, a compensation for managing and inhabiting a world gone awry. That mass of consumer items (consumerism, which precisely in this period is beginning to strip objects of stable identities and reconstituting them as desirable commodities), the absurd accidents and slap–stick moments, above all the comically failed attempts to shape environment, can be seen as a way of shoring up a sense of a (masculine) self which no longer works. Thingness of the world, the dead weight of the Nobody's body, stands in for the embodied experience of environment (and potent self) that has been lost.

Thus far in this chapter I have assessed the problem of seeing and making the suburbs personally legible, and how these 'semiotic' difficulties (communicating and reading the signs) are presented as a materiality gone wrong. Indeed, Lynne Hapgood, in *Margins of Desire,* argues that suburban inscrutability means that a version of the suburb has to be produced in order to be made visible (Hapgood, 2005). The 'literary suburb', she argues, 'was constructed in response to what was perceived as a fundamental and irresistible social change' (Hapgood, 2005: 21). Hapgood discusses the fictional suburb as a recreation of that which cannot readily be seen. She goes on to argue that *Diary of a Nobody* is in fact a kind of 'suburban *anti-vision* articulated in a middle-class voice for a middle class readership' (my italics) (in Webster, 2000: 39). This is vision not as seeing, but as wish-fulfilment. Pooter here is a fictional construct, designed for a purpose, to show a middle-class readership precisely the sort of (daft, decent, non-threatening) suburban they would like to see. The novel for Hapgood is not gentle mockery; but profoundly ideological, reassuring its readership that these new mass suburbanites are nothing really to worry about.

'Vision' has three related meanings. In addition to straightforward physical sight, it also contains the sense of a personal interpretation or re-presentation of that which cannot readily be seen, but which could be known (as in, say, a 'vision of Britain'). Vision also contains the sense of *spiritual* insight, a prophetic looking beyond the limits of the immediate place and time. Suburban visions address this latter meaning in their charged pictures of a radically different world. Interestingly, around the turn of the twentieth century the new mass suburb is frequently addressed in fiction in the guise of one particular vision of a future state: the utopian. Robert Fishman titles his influential history of suburbia, *Bourgeois Utopias,* and explains that the suburb 'expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture that it may be termed the bourgeois utopia' (Fishman, 1987: 22). By utopian Fishman means that ideal balance of town and country, community and privacy, civic and domestic, that the suburb, in different stages of its development, was meant to achieve. There was indeed a strong current of utopian thinking in late nineteenth century suburban thinking and planning. Christine Bolus-Reichert, discussing nineteenth century architectural 'Suburban Picturesque', notes that suburban estates were 'frequently characterised as middle-class utopias' by planners and commentators (Bolus- Reichert, 2002: 164). These aspirations, in turn, were promoted 'by the suburbs links with the Aesthetic movement' (Bolus- Reichert, 2002: 164). Thus, as Susie Barson argues, the spread of the suburbs through London in the nineteenth

century, although appalling to William Morris watching it happen, represented, it might now be argued, 'the meeting of town and country as envisaged in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere*' (Saint, 1999: 100).

The suburb became linked with the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements, seen in Norman Shaw's English Vernacular suburban houses (evident in the quintessential aesthetic London suburb, Bedford Park). Furthermore, architectural historian Dennis Hardy notes that although the 'nineteenth century was strewn with a legacy of failed utopian plans', the Garden City movement, instigated by Ebenezer Howard's *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), better known in its reissued form as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, based on Arts and Crafts ideals, focuses on limited and practicable realisable goals (Howard, 1965). A quick glance at Howard's designs for the Garden City reveals that Howard was aiming for suburban clarity and legibility. Howard's planned suburb would provide the legibility that the unplanned, incoherent, piecemeal laissez-faire contemporary suburb lacked. The plans, depicting gracefully linked concentric circles promoted planned, self-contained, communities surrounded by greenbelts, and containing distinct zones of residential, industrial and agricultural areas. Howard's plan was put into practice, with major modifications, by architects and planners Unwin and Parker at Letchworth in 1905. Howard's utopianism was thus both visionary and practicable, influenced both by William Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere* and by Edward Bellamy's hard-nosed, technocratic state-planned vision of the future, published in 1888, *Looking Backward* (Bellamy, 2009). This was a vision of the future that Morris despised.

In the present section I discuss this notion of suburban 'visioning', the suburb and the utopian, in late nineteenth century fiction, in William Morris's 1890 *News from Nowhere* (Morris, 2003) and in Jerome K. Jerome's 1889 *Three Men in a Boat* (Jerome, 2004). Again, I shall discuss this concentration on the semiotic problems of suburban legibility in terms of difficulties that suburban fiction dramatises as manifested in the material environment. The problem of knowledge in the suburb, as I have argued, results in a crisis over what can be considered real or substantial. The reality of external environment is in doubt. In the present section, the material ambiguity at the core of utopian visioning informs the fiction discussed. Utopia is, at the same time, both a vision of place that does not exist, has no material solidity, literally a 'no-place', while also being, as an ideal community, an intensely experienced and joyous reality.

'The suburban imaginary as utopia', argues Lynne Hapgood, 'finds its most complete expression in two of the earliest visions of earliest suburban fiction of the period' that is, in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (Hapgood, 2005: 8). These texts are discussed below and, differing from Hapgood's focus, I shall discuss here these fictions' utopianism in terms of their understanding of the nature of work. Work, of course, is the means by which the material world is manipulated by the individual. In Morris's vision of a utopian future (the opposite of the Victorian mass suburbs, which he despised) the self, the skilled body, is in easy harmony with the environment, shaping and making the world, rendering it knowable and habitable through skilled craftsmanship. Contrasting with this, Jerome's comic utopia, describes a temporary Thames-side holiday from onerous suburban 'realities', namely from work, from salaried labour. The vacationing suburban sailors, however, never really manage to evade alienating labour. They are, like Pooter and the Nobodies, harassed by the onerous work involved in controlling the wayward materiality, the things, of everyday suburban life.

Morris's 'vision' of the suburb as a possible utopia is a complex one that frequently foregrounds the material aspects of that site's terrain. It incorporates then prevalent ideals of the perfect city, not one that includes 'the monstrosity of haphazard growth' that was the contemporary suburb, but rather one that 'introduces to each other the best features' of town and suburb (Leopold, 2003: xx). Importantly this view includes an anti-suburbanism that viewed existing suburbs as destructive of an idyllic presuburban countryside ☐ and which in turn deserves to be destroyed. There was, indeed, a minor genre of 'London destroyed' fantasy narratives dwelling gleefully on the details of metropolitan, especially suburban, devastation. These destroy the capital, and return it to a simpler, bucolic past. Richard Jeffries 1885 *After London (Wild England)* is a fantasy of Greater London's total annihilation and reversion to a semi-barbaric, pre-technological past, and to the world of childhood (Jefferies, 1980). England, pulverised by an unspecified disaster brought on by the 'passage of a dark body through space', has been transformed into a primeval vast lake and forest. Greater London, taking to extreme Ruskin's theme of the liquefied filth of suburban London obliterating all meaningful boundaries, has become a gigantic toxic swamp, which exhales so 'fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it' (Jefferies, 1980: 37). The boy hero Felix Aquila braves a visit to the swamp and makes a horrific discovery: 'the earth on which he walked, the black earth, leaving phosphorescent footmarks behind him, was composed of the mouldered bodies of millions of men who had passed away' (Jefferies, 1980: 206). Morris enjoyed London's devastation in *After London.* 'Absurd hopes curled round my heart as I

read it' he admits in a letter, 'I rather wish I were thirty years younger: I want to see the game played out' (Morris, 2003: viii). Later, H. G. Wells' 'scientific romances' also enjoyed materially obliterating London. In *The War of the Worlds*, Wells satisfyingly describes the ruins of suburban East Sheen: 'Now I stood on mounds of smashed brickwork, clay and grave. Over which spread a multitude of red cactus plants…traces of men there were none' (Wells, 2005b: 143). The gradual merging of suburbia and nature is also mentioned by the narrator of Wells' 1910 future-fantasy *When The Sleeper Awakes*, whose somnolent narrator, like Morris's Guest, awakes to a transformed world. 'Nothing remained of it' he observes of greater London, 'but a waste of ruins here, variegated and dense with thickets of the heterogeneous growths that had once adorned the gardens of the belt, interspersed among levelled brown patches of sown ground, and verdant stretches of winter greens' (Wells, 1994b: 138).

In *News from Nowhere*, rather than a satisfying material annihilation of the existing suburb, we see a radical reconfiguring of material itself. Morris's *Nowhere*, relies, not on destruction, but on a gradual melting away of the worst features of the extant material suburb; industry, pollution, noise, ugliness, extensive unplanned housing, the masses. 'The suburbs' of the nineteenth century, Hammond informs us, 'have melted away into the general country' (Morris, 2003: 60). Here, unlike in Wells's enjoyable destructive rampages, there is no wholesale suburban destruction. Rather, the conglomerated metropolis, 'the brick and mortar desert of London', has just 'disappeared' (Morris, 2003: 60). In fact Morris's novel posits a transition (the novel also relates a journey) from a world of alienating material obduracy (that is, from things) towards one where the shaping and rendering of the material affords individual sensual delight. This is what pioneering planner Ebenezer Howard takes from Morris, an image of the London populace happily moving out to self-contained planned small towns.

The material world of the existing suburb is initially presented as materially oppressive and dense. As the novel opens Morris's narrator, William Guest inhabits a 'shabby London suburb', by the river, a' little way above an ugly suspension bridge' (Morris, 2003: 3). He returns home one evening, by tube, 'that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity' (Morris, 2003: 3). 'Like others' he is 'stewed discontentedly' (Morris, 2003: 3). After this uncomfortable and nauseating journey home, followed by restless and fitful night's sleep, Guest awakes to a materially transformed world. This world, seen through Guest's sensitised just-awakened state, has become frictionless. Scrappy suburban light industry has vanished:

'the soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone' (Morris, 2003: 7). It is also quieter; 'no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's' (Morris, 2003: 8). Also vanished are ugly suburban villas. In their place now are 'pretty houses, low and not large, standing back a little way from the river' (Morris, 2003: 9). Unlike the previous suburban semis, these villas are not intrusive and provide a perfect fit between individual and place: 'all comfortable, and as if they were, so to say, alive, and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them' (Morris, 2003: 9). Life on the free-flowing and clear Thames, permeated by Guest's dreamy and 'hazy' 'half-awake' state, is characterised by ease (the novel's subtitle is 'an epoch of rest'). Physical activities – rowing, swimming, and the work of boatmen – are smooth, co-ordinated and effortless. Even the boat Guest travels in hardly requires effort to be moved, as it drifts upstream Morris's guide 'rowing in an easy, tireless way' (Morris, 2003: 124).

This material ease of Morris's future suburban utopia is based on a particular conception of skilled work, of craftsmanship. Here, we see the opposite embodied experience of the unhandy Nobodies mentioned above. In Morris's utopia, there is delight in work, in the skilled and meaningful manipulation of the world. Workers here, unlike the puny Pooter, are healthy and strong, skilled and handy, without being grossly material: 'Light dark-haired and berry-brown of skin' he observes of the boatman, 'well-knit and strong, and obviously used to exercising his muscles, but with nothing rough or coarse about him' (Morris, 2003: 10). As Norman Talbot has it *'Nowhere's* first delight is physical and sensory' (Talbot, 1990: n.p) and this physical delight is present in work. The material world is controlled and shaped effortlessly, in total contrast to the malicious material environment, especially the ready-made, machine produced consumer items, of the suburban clerk.

The novel's attitude towards delightful work can be seen as a direct response to another best-selling utopian vision of the previous year, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). Bellamy's novel also concerns the awakening of a profound sleeper, but in this case one who awakes, to a micro- managed, centralised, technocratic state, based on planning, infinite scientific progress and the rule of enlightened benevolence. Morris was aghast at Bellamy's state-socialist can-do future. 'Think of it!' Morris appeals, 'was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap', with 'a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make them all contented together' (Leopold, 2003: 8). The key area of Morris's disagreement with Bellamy

is the nature of work (and its relation to leisure). In Bellamy's utopia work is a necessary evil whose most deadening aspects will be alleviated by technology. Morris, on the other hand, places work at the centre of human worth. Indeed, as Fredric Jameson argues 'the most radical demand' we could 'make on our own system', in order to achieve utopia would be 'the demand for full employment, universal full employment' (Jameson, 2004: 4). Morris presents an utterly transformed future community where the idea of work as understood by Marxists, as alienated labour, has vanished. 'All the work we do is an exercise of the mind and body more or less pleasant to be done' Guest, the narrator, is informed by a contented Nowherian (Morris, 2003: 84). Unlike, as we shall see in a moment, Jerome's weekending suburbans, for whom official work is an irksome curse and labour unavoidable, in *News from Nowhere* it is physical delight. It is the use of bodily training and skill to affect material change for the benefit of the community.

Morris's suburban vision is an aesthetic one. The sensuous rapport between self and environment, subject and object, stems from the fact that work and art have become the same thing, that is, a constant source of pleasure. Here, in the 'new handicraft period' *everything* is aestheticized (Morris, 2003: 153). Guest's utopia is pleasurable because he observes that, with the collapse of capitalist competition and waste, the use of mechanisation is not to reduce labour, but, rather, to facilitate it as creative. There are neither 'pure' art objects, floating above material concerns, nor the mass- produced items that fill the Pooter's home. Art here is a synthesis of work and pleasure. 'Art', Morris argues in 'Art under Plutocracy', is 'man's expression of his joy in labour' (Morris, 1993: 27). Here the individual is fully rendered, not depleted by work. In this material refiguring through blissful work, the world comes to make complete sense and Guest comes to feel entirely at home (unlike his unhappy and unhealthy residence in suburban Hammersmith).

Work and pleasure are indistinguishable in Morris, in this form of a suburban utopia, where work serves to creatively, even joyously to reshape the world, making it meaningful and thus embedding the individual in a sensuous and meaningful relation to it. Turning now to Jerome K. Jerome's contemporaneous contrasting Thames-side utopia, *Three Men in a Boat,* we notice immediately that work and the material world are here configured very differently. Where Morris's utopia is a community of artisans enthusiastically creating and working, Jerome's is one of artful skivers, intent on avoiding 'proper' work. At the same time, as we shall see, Jerome's suburban clerks are not at all alienated by the wayward materiality they

encounter, as Pooter and other clerical Nobodies were. Rather, Jerome's suburban characters enjoy their forms of materially- inflected detachment from place.

Jerome's three men, all suburban City clerks, plan a week's holiday on the upper Thames in a camping skiff. The clerks aim to *avoid* 'official' paid work at all times, eagerly looking forward to their leisure time. In fact, as we shall see, the neat distinction between work and leisure does not hold up, and that life for Jerome's suburban clerks is now in fact *all* work. It is split into official, paid, work and supposed leisure time, but this latter becomes another form of semi-official work; in fact it turns out to be even more laborious than paid work. If for Morris, then, the river presents a post-industrial utopia of fulfilling work, work which serves to connect the individual to the world, for Jerome's footloose suburban clerks the river doesn't offer a temporary excursus from alienated labour. It is a continuation of alienated work.

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century the Thames, was becoming a designated suburbanised leisure zone. 'The river', writes Henry James in an 1877 essay entitled, 'The Suburbs of London' (which is not really about London suburbs at all), is 'the great feature of suburban London: In talking about London suburbs we should come to that first of all'. 'Londoners use the Thames' James continues, '... use it, I mean, for pleasure' (James, 1989: 232). In this view the river ceases to be a blighted feature of the industrialised metropolis (as it is in say, Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865)) and becomes instead a playground. For the three men the river, functions as an escapist, commercialised, leisure zone. Employees, now with some free time, are free to pursue the new activities of (male) popular culture: cycling (as in the novel's sequel *Three Men on the Bummel*), music hall (hence many of the skits and jokes in the novel), organised sport, gambling, music, and, of course, boating holidays. Boating for leisure gains in popularity just as the commercial and industrial use of the river declines. Boating is the ideal holiday activity for the suburban clerks because it combines the current vogue for 'nature', simplicity and exercise, an opportunity to buy and use numerous equipment and gadgets from mass consumer culture and a chance to ape the upper class penchant for nautical nonchalance.[22]

Jerome's suburban sailors in fact attempt a version of Morris's joyful work, the eradication of any difference between work and non-work, work and pleasure. They do this, however, not

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[22] Again, we notice the continuing theme, as with Pooter, of suburbanites copying upper class mannerisms. But also see p. 76, below, for a further comment on this.

through joyful work, but by avoiding work at all times. Thus, while technically even *at work* the sailors are expert skivers, adept at providing the *illusion* of work. These suburbans affect a leisured indifference to work, 'I can't sit still and watch another man slaving and working' J. the narrator tells us, 'I want to get up and supervise, walk round with my hands in my pockets and tell him what to do' (Jerome, 2004: 29). The 'old antiquary' in *News from Nowhere* remembers a rumour told about the nineteenth century: 'I have often heard my old kinsman say the one aim of all the people before our time was to avoid work' (Morris, 2003: 154). This is unthinkable for Nowherians; it would be like avoiding life itself. The elaborate avoidance of formal work, and a concomitant connoisseurship of idleness, is one of the key life-aims for our clerks, and also one of the main sources of the novel's humour in which over-sleeping, skiving, lazing, cutting corners, are all paramount. 'It is not that I object to the work, mind you' the narrator tells us, 'I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours' (Jerome, 2004: 15). 'George', we learn, 'goes to sleep at a bank from ten to four each day, except Saturdays, when they wake him up and put him outside at two' (Jerome, 2004:12).

Skiving, however, does not in fact reduce the amount of labour required from the clerks: it does not mean that they do nothing. As Jerome states in his own *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* (1906), the idler 'is not a man who slouches about with his hands in his pockets. On the contrary, his most startling characteristic is that he is always intensely busy' (Jerome, 2009: 5). Actually doing nothing is thus considered wasteful because it prevents you from wasting time *properly*. As salaried clerks, working long hours six days a week, these young suburbanites work very hard indeed to feign a leisured idleness, an aping of the moneyed languor of the clerk's socially superior class.

Furthermore 'leisure' itself, as it turns out, is not at all free of the curse of work. Instead of a Morrisian aestheticisation of work, the opposite happens, and everything becomes tainted with labour. Work, avoided 'at work', reappears here, in leisure-time, in the familiar guise of the struggle with the recalcitrant 'things' of everyday suburban material existence. If work is treated as a casual and unimportant leisure pursuit, then leisure itself, particularly organised leisure, in turn, involves grinding work. Indeed, as Theodor Adorno argues, leisure itself is a 'pseudo-activity', and a 'mere appendage of work' (Adorno, 1981: 188). The boat trip ends up more much more laborious than 'official' work ever could be. Even as the excursion is being formulated, a 'trip up the river of life', the ideal of simplicity and ease fails. Despite the seductive meanderings of the novel's relaxed narration, repeatedly dawdling down little-

known rivulets of yarns and reminiscences, the trip is not a relaxing jaunt at all. The trip is not an escape from the suburb it is an intensification of it. The travellers are weighed down, just like the Pooters, by dense wayward materiality. 'How many people', points out J., the narrator, 'on that voyage, load up the boat till it's in danger of swamping' with a 'store of worthless things' (Jerome, 2004: 19). Even as J. is pronouncing against excess weight □ 'It's lumber man □ all lumber' □ he and his colleagues are packing the boat with a vast amount of extraneous material consumer goods; including rugs, lamps and basins (Jerome, 2004: 19). There seemed a good deal of luggage' rues J., 'and Harris and I began to feel rather ashamed of it' (Jerome, 2004: 37). The abundance of material seems to mock any harmony, any order, with bags, rugs, umbrellas and melons thrown together haphazardly. This indiscriminate chaos, redolent of course of the haphazard suburb, is echoed in the disgusting 'stew' cooked aboard, which extravagantly breaks any accepted culinary taxonomy (vegetables, inanimate objects, rats).

Again, as with the suburban Nobody, discussed earlier, this abundant material takes on a life of its own and refuses to co-operate. It is all *useless* stuff, nothing works: oil lamps leak, the barometer doesn't forecast the weather, the handy toothbrush hides itself somewhere. Like our suburban Nobodies discussed above, the three pals are ejected from their suburbanised riverine utopia (moneyed leisure, social ease) by a wayward materiality, by malicious things. Again, as with the Nobodies discussed above, this struggle with things is intensified by the 'thingness' of the body itself. These clerks lack the husbandry, the physical adeptness to fully engage with the environment. They spend much time as the novel opens comparing imaginary illnesses and somatic complaints (brought on by overwork).Things go wrong; the material world cannot be rendered by the body as knowable and habitable. The three clerks' search for belonging seems thwarted by the physical structures of the world itself. 'Official' leisure time is thus extremely hard work; the three friends have much difficulty with everyday material objects, with what J. terms the 'natural cussedness of things in general' (Jerome, 2004: 87). Work increases: 'It seems to me' grumbles J., 'that I am doing more work than I should do' (Jerome, 2004: 131).

Where Pooterish Nobodies are cruelly ejected from easy accommodation with suburban habitat by a malevolent materiality, and Morris's vision entails experiencing a melting away of materiality, a joyous harmony of self and world achieved by skilled work, Jerome's suburban vision is, again, different. The river here is the scene for various very material *clashes* not for fantasy resolution of the conflicts of self and world, labour and creative work.

Jerome's sailors, industrialised mass suburbia's breezy and sporty youth, actively collide with, and at one point, literally crash into, other river users. Material waywardness, is, to a certain extent, enjoyed. Indeed, Jerome's sailors relish rubbing up against and annoying other classes on the crowded river, and strenuously aim to make themselves as highly *visible* as possible. Unlike Pooter they are unapologetic about their own unmistakable presence: they will not 'know their place'. They deface and remove property signs, they mock and jeer at toffs, they avoid stuffy Henley all together because of its elite Regatta. At one point they even briefly blockade the river itself, temporarily claiming it as their own territory.

The suburban clerks bring their stuff with them – and enjoy it. The trip is partly an excuse to assemble and use mounds of equipment. The three suburban sailor's very material presence here (and in this sense it is an early precursor of 20th century popular mass consumption and consumerism) marks out assertive forms of personal space and identity. This is achieved by the three men's clothes, songs (sung drunkenly and loudly), boating equipment and by a general style of behaving cobbled together from popular culture sources: irreverent, loud, 'masculine', boisterous, sporty and communal. Their unashamed presence is perfectly broadcast by their jaunty, joyously vulgar, purple, orange and green striped boating blazers. The suburban holiday-makers are (despite their jokily indulgent hypochondria) fit, able-bodied and boisterous, enjoying the rigours and tests of being outdoors. In this they are most unlike the sickly suburban *indoor* Nobodies discussed above. They also do not copy the aristocratic cliché of 'English reserve', from superior social classes, and indeed, present a new force in British culture. The clerks disconcerting presence on the river is marked also by a new style of humour (facetious, understated, studiedly laconic) and also by their language. They speak, loudly, using slang, colloquialisms, funny neologisms, pastiches of upper class speech, mild expletives, boating argot and nick-names.

Unlike Pooter and other suburban Nobodies urgently trying to understand the suburb, and desperate to belong to a newly formed suburban community, we can argue then, that the three men thrive on such disharmony and unbelonging. They do not strive to make this particular riverine version of the suburb personally legible. In fact their breezy indifference to habitat here (they imitate their social superiors but are not really concerned about acceptance) is, paradoxical proof of a new type of community. The three men constitute newer forms of belonging (informed by growing common consumer culture) that seem to reflect a new kind of 'accepted unbelonging' which is temporary, extemporised and borrowed. The three men confidently bring their own culture with them; young, literate (beneficiaries of the 1870

Education Act), metropolitan, mobile, salaried, vigorous, and increasingly, consumers of popular culture. They are robust, optimistic and confident. The clerks are very much the product of a rising industrial metropolitan mass culture; the holiday and its equipment are proof of this.

As an alarming harbinger of a new kind of brash and confident suburbanity Jerome's novel, most unlike *Diary of a Nobody*, caused something of a critical panic. According to John Carey, contemporary reviewers 'denounced the "vulgarity" of *Three Men in a Boat*' because it was written in colloquial clerk's English' (Carey, 1992: 59). Jerome himself was taken aback at the critical reception: 'One might have imagined ... that the British Empire was in danger. I may claim to have been, for the first twenty years of my career, the best abused author in England' (Jerome, 1926: 145). The novel itself, its language slangy and irreverent, its humour physical, facetious and well-intentioned, and its meandering structure aping that of the Thames itself, is perceived to be as out of place in the literary world as the clerks are themselves on the river. Just as suburbans encroach on the river, so this novel itself impinges on literary territory. A contemporary review in the *Morning Post* condemned the novel's language as an example of 'the sad results to be expected from the over-education of the lower orders' (Nicolas, 2007: n.p). For traditional criticism, this was simply popularising vulgarity, and Jerome was mocked, in *Punch* and elsewhere as ''Arry K 'Arry', providing easy laughs for all the suburban cockney 'Arrys and Arriets'.

This, then, is the paradox of utopian suburban visions, of making the suburb legible. Morris demands, in order for the individual to meaningfully inhabit place, the overthrow of alienating labour. His work operates as utopian and rests securely within the genre confines of literary fantasy. Its very distancing language and imagery suggests the depths yet ungraspable fleetingness of the dream. Jerome's suburbanism, on the other hand, operates squarely within the realm of new, consumer-orientated, capitalist relations. The three men are harbingers of mass culture and leisure. The comedy of *The Diary of a Nobody* is that Pooter is always serious, solemn, bent on self-improvement and acquiring 'high-culture: but failing. The three men represent a commodified hedonism, happily seeking community and comradeship in a Thames-side arcadia temporarily detached from the 'real' world.

This vision proves far more threatening to literary culture. Jerome presents a sort of modern suburb, one beginning to be informed by mass consumption, popular culture and the growing confidence of the lower middle-classes. This is the suburban modernity of the next

generation, of Charles Pooter's brash and adventurous son, Lupin. Some of the cultural alarm raised by Jerome's work, this sense of the suburb as containing within it a strange, new, mobile and encroaching population of threatening lower middle-class individuals, with the very landscapes of England and Englishness undergoing profound changes, will be the focus of the next chapter on the inter-war period. The suburb in interwar modernity presents a very different vision of England.

Chapter Three

Suburban Fiction and Modernity: The Suburb 1918 – 1939

Introduction

I noted in Chapter 2 that a dominant feature of much suburban writing is an urgent semiotic anxiety around reading the signs of that environment. I argued that this applied, in the late nineteenth century, particularly to rendering individuality threatened by the perceived anonymity of the new mass suburb. I also outlined that this difficulty in seeing and reading suburban habitat means that individuals are never securely embedded in place, that they exhibit extreme modes of unbelonging and cannot create convincing life-worlds. The suburban individual is discomfited by meagreness of environmental context; there is no social nexus, no sense of cultural tradition, and no form of neighbourliness. I argued that inability to read the signs of the London suburbs is presented in much suburban-set fiction as a problem with the material substance of that world.

Thus, we saw that Sherlock Holmes's *urban* detective genius, reconstructing the marks of the individual by scrutinising metropolitan density, is curiously muted in his first investigation, out in the South London suburban badlands. The suburb resists being seen and known, obscures clues of identity and belonging. More than this, the suburbs destabilises the cultural production of detective fiction. Clerical Nobodies, we also saw, receive no legitimation from their new environment. They cannot see or read their world, and are frustrated in their attempts to connect with it. They are incapable of fashioning their world to make it habitable, their own rejection symbolised here by the bloody-minded material things of the everyday, with this cruel reification extended even to their own bodies. Suburban utopias, we finally noted, those visions of an ideal synthesis between discrete areas of personal and social being (country/city, home/work/leisure) offer joyous, yet fleeting, glimpses of meaningful intelligibility and belonging. In Jerome (and in critical reactions to his work) this vision heralded the beginning of attitudes towards the suburb of twentieth century modernity

In this chapter, I argue that much 1930s representation of suburbia struggles to find meaning and authenticity in the new, evolving spaces of the mass suburbs. Echoing hostile critical

responses to Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, this anxiety over the cultural and political significance of the suburbs is reflected in concern over whether or not such sites could be considered a fit subject for literary work. A range of interwar writers, Orwell, Waugh, Eliot, Greene, Forster and Betjeman, among them, considered the new suburbs as philistine, conformist and standardised and only with difficulty could be considered as suitable writerly material. Novelists of the period, as Simon Dentith argues, offer a keen sense of just 'how unpropitious this England is for novelistic treatment' (Dentith, 1997: 109).

In this chapter I discuss suburban fiction in a period of mass suburban growth, particularly in the 1930s, when the suburb presents a new form of civilisation, a new version of Englishness that is presented as a forbiddingly *alien* landscape. This is the suburb as exemplar of modernity, modernity in different guises and forms. This is the period when, as Roger Bowdler argues 'London and its outskirts became "Greater London"', that is when 'great swathes of Middlesex were built over and large parts of Essex, Kent and Surrey disappeared beneath the expanding capital' (Saint 1999, 103). London becoming Greater London suggests an expansion of territory but a diminution of meaning, a dilution of London's originary core identity. By 1940 Greater London had 8.7 million inhabitants, up from 5.6 million at that start of the century; and this increase was largely outside the older urban core (Porter, 1996: 306). In London the post- Great War building boom was a combination of the LCCs commitment to providing extensive working class housing on the urban periphery (Lloyd George's 'homes for heroes' facilitated by the 1918 Addison Act) and by the massive expansion of private house building in the outer suburbs. This mixture of council and private suburban building boom can be viewed as the result of a general political and cultural push to establish a home-owning democracy. It was both centrally planned and a product of building speculation, a result both of civic idealism and entrepreneurialism.

The shape and form of the interwar suburb was facilitated by a number of integrating economic and cultural factors, notably a shift in the economy toward service-sector industries and production of consumer goods, particularly household goods, private cars and leisure activities. Cheaper and more flexible mortgage arrangements, the increasing social acceptability of debt and relative prosperity for the lower middle classes made buying a house easier. Unified and electrified transport links (trams, tubes, rail), road building and the internal combustion engine made commuting and shopping easier. This socio-economic shift was complemented by marketing and advertising campaigns (notably London Transport) which promoted the attractions of independence and home-ownership, healthy semi-rural

living, time and space for leisure, and a rejection of urban squalor. This produced, in the twenties and thirties, endless rows of semis, loosely informed by Arts and Crafts details, with bay windows, faux – leaded panes, pitched roofs, 'tudorbethan' decorative features, adjoining garages, and neat small front gardens. This landscape has now become, as Barrett and Phillips observe, 'the epitome of what is usually meant by suburbia' (Barrett and Phillips, 1987:120). The interwar suburb is our contemporary idea of suburbia; it even has a name. This, the 'largest proportion' of the total suburban landscape we observe today, is that place Paul Oliver observes, 'unsung and upraised, but by no means unloved, which we have collectively designated as Dunroamin' (Oliver, 1981: 11).

Literary reactions to the fact of this new suburb often emphasises the peculiar *strangeness* of this new suburban England. English fiction of the inter-war period, as this chapter argues, struggles to find ways to account for and describe these new modern mass suburbs. In his travelogue *English Journey* (1936), for example, J. B. Priestley observes the dramatic impact of a new suburban landscape, one he calls the 'third England' (Priestley, 1977). This is the startlingly new suburbanised England of millions of tudorbethan semis, of new forms of business and commercial building and of the visible presence of mass communications and expanding popular consumer culture. This is a picture of 'arterial and by-pass roads, filling stations and factories, giant cinemas and dancehalls …Woolworths, motor coaches, wireless and hobbies' (Priestly, 1977: 375). Crucially, this new landscape is perceived as fundamentally *strange*, not fitting in to the accepted scheme of how things should look. The unique unfamiliarity of London's new peripheral zone, particularly along west London's Great West Road, lies behind the nervy catalogues of the new Thirties 'Pylon poets'. Features of this list, from which one could, according to Paul Fussell, 'make a fairly representative poem of the 20s and 30s, after the manner of Auden, C. Day Lewis or MacNeice', include 'gas-works, new towns, power stations, housing estates, hoardings, Woolworth's' (Fussell, 1980: 18). Aldous Huxley's own West London suburban panorama is defamiliarised by being seen from a jet (and 500 years in the future) in *Brave New World* from 1931: 'flying over the six kilometre zone of parkland that separated Central London from its first ring of satellite suburbs' (Huxley, 1969: 58). This zone, out by the Great West Road, is, like Priestley's, dedicated to lower-caste leisure ('Bumble-puppy towers', 'Riemann-surface tennis', gymnasium displays) and the leisure industry (Feely studios, Television Corporation factories) on a numbingly massive scale. The suburbanites here are like 'aphids and ants' (Huxley, 1969: 59). Evelyn Waugh in *Vile Bodies* (1930) also has a couple of Bright Young Things in a plane peering down on the suburbs. Here the view of an alien deformed

landscape, one that is assuredly not England, is underscored with a mangling of Shakespeare's familiar vision from *Richard II*: ' "This sceptre'd isle, this earth of majesty, this, something or other, Eden'" (Waugh, 2000: 35). Nauseous, Nina looks down and sees 'inclined at an odd angle, a horizon of straggling red suburb: arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others empty and decaying; some disused canals; some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless masts and overhead power cables'(Waugh, 2000: 35). This place is both shockingly alien, yet, as for Priestley, resists clear focus: 'the scene lurched and tilted again' (Waugh, 2000:35). Ultimately this otherness that evokes vertigo, that cannot be contained or placed, induces nausea: '"I think I'm going to be sick," said Nina' (Waugh, 2000: 35).

What is interesting here is the suburbs' complex relation to influential forms of cultural (especially architectural) modernism. Modernism can be considered the drive to declare new beginnings. James C. Scott has usefully described such new interwar 'authoritarian high modernism' as the 'administrative ordering of nature and society', based on the immense power of the state to use scientific and technological knowledge, rational design of social realties and increasing control over nature (Scott, 1998: 88). The aim of such a project, by planners, engineers, technocrats, senior administrators, is, Scott argues, the drive to simplify the social, to make it universal, to control it and, most of all, to make it *legible*. Twentieth century high modernism's rationalising drive to total transparency is most clearly manifest in the fields of architecture and urban planning. Le Corbusier's extreme high-modernist urban plans, one example of which is for the bulldozing and rebuilding of a huge section of central Paris, are startlingly simplified and geometric, grid-like and angular, offering the spectator simple and uncluttered visions of urban blocks and highways. The ideal modernist dwelling ('home' not being quite the right word) would be unadorned and functional, with extensive use of glass, steel and concrete. It would be immediately visible and comprehensible.

Suburbia's relation to 1930s 'international modernism' is complex. As Roger Silverstone reminds us 'suburbia itself has remained curiously invisible in the accounts of modernity' (Silverstone, 2005: 5). In fact, both modernists *and* anti- modernist traditionalists despised the suburb. Modernists despised suburbia because it was considered wasteful, unplanned and messy, using up precious resources of land and materials. It was, according to Le Corbusier himself, the 'symbol of waste and, at the same time... a kind of scum churning against the walls of the city' (Le Corbusier, 1931: 5). Unplanned sprawling 'Dunroamin' suburbia, in its ribbon development and housing estate forms, is the antithesis of architectural modernism's

ideals. It was in order, Antony Vidler argues, 'to free culture from what Henry James called the overburdening "sense of the past" that modernist architects… attempted to erase its traces from their architecture' (Vidler, 1992: 63). Modernism here sought physically root out the cluttered nooks and crannies where memory could find a purchase; streets, neighbourhoods and amenities would be functionally zoned, roofs flattened, cellars filled in, the house opened up to the free flow of air and light. The built environment must be legible.

On the other hand, anti-modern traditionalist planners and architects made exactly the same kind of criticism of suburbia as extreme modernists did. The suburb was wasteful and shapeless, and it was not legible. In effect suburbia ruined the clean sightlines of the countryside. We recall Margaret Schlegel anxiously watching from the titular house in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* she 'pointed over the meadow, over eight or nine meadows, but at the end of them was a red rust'; this is formless, semi-visible suburbia, closing in (Forster, 2000: 122). Clough Williams- Ellis, in his 1929 anti-suburban polemic *England and the Octopus*, criticises a similar post-Great War suffocating expansion of formless suburbia. The 'spate of mean building all over the country' he argues, is 'shrivelling up old England' (Williams Ellis, 1928: 25). The rapid expansion of suburbia the 'growth of mean and perky houses for mean and perky people' clearly needed controls. Williams-Ellis was a key figure in the development of the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (1926), and was also influential in contemporary protests agitating for building controls, eventually resulting in the Town and Country Planning Act (1932), and the Green Belt Act (1935, but only implemented after the war). The suburb, in effect, ruins the view, or rather, makes viewing impossible.

The present chapter examines the anxious urge, in Forsterian terms, to bring the suburbs 'into view', to make the modern suburb legible. Section One, 'Seeing the Suburb' starts with a discussion of the suburb, not ignored or denigrated, but deemed as *the* place that must be known, as the core habitat of the modern mass individual. Virginia Woolf's 1923 essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (Woolf, 1966) presents a challenge to extant forms of literary realism. Dominant modes of literary representation epitomised by the titular (Arnold) Bennett, Woolf argues here, are simply not up to the task of presenting these newer suburban social realities, with their new types of individual. Again, the problem of illuminating the individual, in this case the suburban individual, involves a materialism gone wrong. Realism itself, Woolf argues, presupposes a certain material interpretation of the world, one that is no longer possible. Woolf's exemplary mysterious individual in the corner of the train carriage,

Mrs Brown, the anonymous modern nobody who must be written, is, *suburban*. The writing of this Mrs Brown, Woolf repeatedly tells us, places a great strain on the agreed conventions of language itself; on the shared codes of realist verisimilitude and ultimately on the very relation between writers and readers.

Section Two, 'Stevie Smith's Suburbia', argues that the kind of writing that could make newer suburbanised social and human realities legible is revealed in the work of Stevie Smith. Smith is one of the few avowedly modernist writers (in the sense of foregrounding language and employing technical experiment) who actively engages with suburban experience, seeing there a context of community and the familial, of belonging, an even enchantment and joyousness. Yet Smith's focus on suburban character and milieu is fraught with difficulty. As Woolf argues, writing the suburb strains the lineaments of the literary project itself. The only way Smith can be considered a 'suburban' writer (as with another suburban chronicler, John Betjeman) is by becoming a particular kind of writer, one who defies set categories. Smith is thus constructed as middlebrow, as a one-off, as an *eccentric*, an outsider who defies easy literary categorisation. To see the suburbs Smith has to forge a new kind of writing, one that engages the suburb obliquely rather than directly.

Section Three, 'In Search of a Lost England', focuses more on this oddness and strangeness of the suburban habitat. George Bowling, in Orwell's 1939 suburban-set novel *Coming Up for Air,* is a typical (male) resident of a sprawling lower-middleclass suburb; trapped, unhappy, not belonging (Orwell, 2001). This account of Bowling's desperate suburban plight is particularly interesting because it also displays a concern for the whereabouts of the 'real' England. Bowling's suburb, and his life, is presented as unreal, and as hollow and false. It is imprisoning and claustrophobic, destructive of meaningful spatial or temporal co-ordinates. His suburban life is a nightmare of insecurity, debased mass culture, money worries and apocalyptic doom. Orwell details Bowling's desperate search for the real England, informed by a debased nostalgia, that he recalls from childhood.

One way in which the strangeness and impenetrability of this new suburban landscape manifests itself in writing, particularly in relation to the impact of modernism, is in broader themes of understanding what England is, or what it may become. There is a struggle in the period to see and understand suburbia within a framework of 'Englishness'. Alexandra Harris has recently written of 'the imaginative claiming of England' undertaken in the Thirties by artists John Piper and Paul Nash, and writers such as Betjeman, Woolf and Eliot, who

attempted to reintroduce English particularity and sensitivity to locality into their work (Harris, 2011: 10). Harris argues here for a different kind of modernism, one that connects to a past, to tradition and local vernacular, rather than the modernism perhaps more familiar to us that calls for the sweeping away of the accumulated residue of the past. Harris argues here for a reappraisal of a submerged strand of English modernism, one that desperately sought an authentic modern England, a search given urgency by the threat of impending war and possible national obliteration.

One minor instance of the difficulties of integrating the suburbs into the broader notion of what 'London' is, for example, can be seen in the large number of guide books published which were dedicated to the intrepid exploration of obscure Greater London locations. Home, especially the suburbs, is now sufficiently strange and it requires elucidation and recommendation by experts. These guidebooks (echoed by similar titles offering to elucidate obscure corners of England catering for car-owners)[23] listed, for the curious and adventurous, not the usual sites of central London, but spaces on the capital's shifting periphery. Rambling and driving are key idea in these new guides. They aim to offer both nature's freedom from the human, but also a context of cultural tradition. In this they serve to negotiate and mark out the boundaries, the limits, of London itself. They testify to a need to both define the parameters of the new London and to preserve an outline of the old. The ramble book, then, is *for* the new suburbanites. It 'performs the interesting cultural work', Kristin Bluemel argues, 'of transforming suburbanites into Londoners' (Bluemel, 2003: 6). Thirties guidebooks make the strangeness of the new suburbs a departure point for investigation and familiarising.

This perception of the contemporary suburb as illegible and false, is, finally, interestingly challenged in a very influential work from 1946, J. M. Richards' *The Castles on the Ground* (with woodcut illustrations by John Piper) (Richards, 1946). This work, written peripatetically during World War Two, ponders the significance of home in the context of a global struggle over the meaning of home and nationality, with compulsory migrations, mass evictions and movements, and offers a rare, sympathetic and serious account of suburban demands. The suburban villa, the fantasy of security that the home-as-castle offers, may, Richards suggests, be the 'despair of people of taste' but what must be taken into account is 'the appeal it has for 90% of the population' (Richards, 1946: 30). 'The times we live in', Richards notes, 'do not provide much sense of security', and the 'individual is increasingly

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[23] See for example *Blue Guide: Muirhead's Guide to London and its Environs* (Muirhead, 1918), *In Search of England* (Morton, 1927), *The Face of England*. (MacDonnell, 1933).

the victim of circumstances beyond his control' (Richards, 1946: 30). The suburb's ambivalent social and political positioning, falling between modernity and traditionalism, means that, lacking authentic cultural legitimacy, the suburb is necessarily self-fashioning. 'The world the suburb creates' Richards argues 'is an ad hoc world, conjured out of nothing' (18). Suburb-dwelling becomes a creative act. The suburb in this view offers some scope for self- definition and security. The suburbanite blocks out this outside world in the search for a sense of belonging and a basic level of control over the immediate environment. The qualities that Richards lauds in traditional suburban desires are precisely those of self-created legibility and control. This is a new departure in the story of the suburb, where the suburban environment seems to offer scope for personal invention and creativity.

Section One – Seeing the Suburb

Virginia Woolf may seem, at first, an odd subject for a discussion of interwar suburban writing. Indeed, her work often concerns central London locations and patrician or upper middle class experience rather than with the lives of mostly lower middle class suburban Greater London. But Woolf is important here because her work evinces an overwhelming concern with the nature of literary representation, with capturing the elusive complexity of the full range of modern lives, particularly with metropolitan experience. In her essay 1925 essay 'Modern Fiction', Woolf writes of the hugely expanded field of contemporary experience that must now all be considered the subject matter of literature, the aim of every writer (Woolf, 1993). The '"proper stuff of fiction" does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought' (Woolf, 1993: 12).

Woolf is an interesting figure to discuss suburban-set fiction because her notion of this liberal 'proper stuff of fiction' includes, as a sort of test case, the perceived dull ordinariness of suburban lives. For Woolf it is often the lives of London suburbanites that stand for this elusive ordinary human experience, forever tantalisingly beyond the reach of recording and representation (at least as it stands for contemporaries). Thus we hear, in her essay 'The London Scene' (1931), of those individuals who are 'too many, too minute, too like each other to have a name, a character, a separate life of their own' (Woolf, 1993: 122). These are the anonymous 'millions of Smiths and Browns who scuttle and hurry, swing off omnibuses, dive into tubes' (Woolf, 1993: 122). These are, of course, the same sort of obscured suburban Nobodies encountered in the previous chapter; one of these Browns will go on to become the

titular Mrs Brown of a later essay. In another essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1930), the dissociation and random encounters experienced by the joyfully aimless metropolitan shopper ('am I here, am I there') is sharpened and checked by an odd, fleeting encounter with a somnambulant 'stream of walkers', who turn out to be rush- hour suburban clerks (Woolf, 1993: 77). These hurrying, home-bound suburbanites who 'sweep by too fast' to permit any leisured *flaneuserie*, are definitely not part of the metropolitan drifting, 'street haunting', but rather, now suddenly free 'from their desks', are wrapped in 'narcotic dreams', unreachable, garishly fantasising themselves 'great cricketers, famous actresses, soldiers' (Woolf, 1993: 78). Rapidly, they escape their observer's identification (and sympathy) 'sweeping over the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge whence they will be slung in long ratting trains, to some prim little villa in Barnes or Surbiton' (Woolf, 1993: 79).

Woolf's modernism is expressed here in an anxiety over the need to capture both what Charles Baudelaire famously, in 'The Painter of Modern Life'', 1845, called the 'fleeting, the contingent' (consider the eponymous Mrs Dalloway's joyous grasping of 'this morning, here, now') but also in accessing and presenting the mass, the bulk of ordinary unrecorded metropolitan humanity (Baudelaire, 1995). This anxiety over a mundane reality escaping the maw of literary representation, invisible to written history and culture, is central to Woolf's landmark, 1924, essay of modernist poetics 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (Woolf, 1966). This essay is squarely concerned with the central importance of ordinary everyday experience as the lifeblood of literary work. This everyday experience is to be found in a particular place; suburban London.

This quest to illumine and represent suburban lives, as a metonym for all the obscured lives of the twentieth century metropolitan masses, fuels Woolf's famous disagreement with Arnold Bennett in the 1920s, in the essays 'Modern Novels', (1919, revised as 'Modern Fiction' in 1925), then in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924, extended later that year to 'Character in Fiction'). In these polemics Woolf takes suburban experience as a litmus test for the efficacy of differing fictional modes and, in brief, for the superiority of her 'modernism' over their Edwardian/ Georgian material realism.

This debate starts with Arnold Bennett's negative criticism of Woolf's 1922 novel *Jacob's Room*, in his provocatively titled 1923 essay 'Is the Novel Decaying?', published in *Cassell's Weekly* (Bennett, 1923). The fundamental point of disagreement here is over the notion of *character*. Woolf's 'characters do not vitally survive in the mind', Bennett argues, 'because

the author is 'obsessed by details of originality and cleverness' (Bennett, 1923: n.p.). Bennett is arguing that Woolf's characters do not approximate to a convincing *individuality*, whereas it is precisely his fictional task to delineate the individual in the most unpromising terrains, such as the provinces and the metropolitan suburbs. Bennett, we recall from chapter 2, has Mr Aked, in *A Man from the North*, lovingly composing his compendious suburban survey. Aked observes that any suburban street is 'eighty theatres of love, hate, greed, tyranny, endeavour; eighty separate dramas always unfolding, intertwining, ending, beginning' (Bennett, 1994: 102). As Lynne Hapgood argues; 'like Wells, Bennett had no difficult in seeing the individual within the crowd' (Hapgood, 2005: 220).

Woolf certainly shares Bennett's belief in the crucial project of establishing individual character, whatever the circumstances. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' she states; 'I believe that all novels …deal with character… It is to express character …that the form of the novel has been evolved' (Woolf, 1966: 324). Woolf's crucial point of departure from Bennett-style realist fiction is, of course, that she has a very different understanding of what 'character' actually is; we shall return to this later. For the moment I want to concentrate on this notion of the 'ordinary', the environment of the everyday that Woolf disputes with the Edwardian 'realists'. Woolf's anti-Bennett essays on fictional method are heartfelt because both she and Bennett are contesting the same everyday territory. Woolf's polemic is based precisely on a terror of missing the quotidian: 'Is it worthwhile? What's the point of it all?' she is desperately forced to ask, because even Bennett, furnished with 'his magnificent apparatus for catching life' has unfortunately come down 'just an inch or two on the wrong side' (Woolf, 1966: 327). For Woolf, Bennett, in his ponderous attention to material detail, misses the target and lets the elusive real slip away.

To illustrate its central thesis about the short-comings of Edwardian literary realism, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' provides a brief vignette of the writer's daunting task. This contains a short narrative telling us of 'an unfinished third-class railway journey from the suburban periphery to the centre of London' (Bowlby, 1997: 4). The focus here is on *suburban* Mrs Brown. The fictional set up, designed as a showcase for the novelist's penetrative investigative powers, is slightly reminiscent of a Sherlock Holmes story,[24] with the observant writer/detective unobtrusively collecting a mass of data on an unknown individual and trying to interpret them as clues to identity. Suburban Mrs Brown is a passenger on a commuter

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[24]In the same essay Woolf actually dismisses Conan Doyle's limp characterisation, viewing Dr Watson as 'stuffed with straw' (Woolf 1966, 310).

train, along with a slightly sinister Mr Smith, the latter alighting at Clapham Junction.
Suburban Mrs Brown is a 'representative of unknown humanity', who Woolf presents as supreme challenge for observational skill and literary rendering. Mrs Brown is unremarkable, middling, 'one of those clean, threadbare old ladies' that nobody really notices (Woolf, 1966: 322). This woman needs careful scrutiny, Woolf, the eavesdropping observer, suspects that the couple in the carriage have a 'secret, perhaps sinister business' to discuss' (Woolf, 1966: 322). Their conversation is elliptical and strained. Woolf and Mrs Brown finally get out at Waterloo, Mrs Brown slipping, again like a Conan Doyle bit-player, off the page and back into the anonymous, 'vast blazing station', out into the city.

This undistinguished suburban Mrs Brown is, as Rachel Bowlby points out, for Woolf an 'exemplary character' (Bowlby, 1997: 8). She is elusive, secretive, shadowy, a 'phantom' and 'will– o' the –wisp' figure who taunts the novelist, 'catch me if you can' (Woolf, 1966: 319). At the same time she is absolutely central, Woolf asserts, to all fictive endeavour; 'I believe that all novels begin with a lady in the corner' (Woolf, 1966: 324). Mrs Brown is, on the one hand, secretive, mysterious and vague, a figure from the great suburban shadows, noted quite by chance going about her routine business. Yet she is also extremely vivid, provoking in the observing and recording Woolf a flowing 'myriad of responses' (Woolf, 1966: 324). The 'impression she made was overwhelming' Woolf writes, 'pouring out like a draft' (Woolf, 1966: 323). Mrs Brown offers multiple possible biographies and numerous types of fictional rendering; 'she can be treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer' (Woolf, 1966: 325). Crucially, she is suburban. Here the suburban Nobody is Everywoman, exactly the universal type of fictional character, the basis for the potential rich particularity of the individual.

What is undisputed is that Mrs Brown is considered a figure who urgently *needs* to be claimed. She may be unremarkable and shadowy, but she is also universal human nature. This character is exemplary because she stands for all those characters whose experience is not recorded, what Woolf calls in her essay 'How it Strikes a Contemporary' those 'people who have no chance of immortality' (Woolf, 1993: 27). Unfortunately, Mrs Brown is short-changed by the Edwardian literary realists, by precisely those for whom suburban Mrs Brown should be ideal subject matter. Woolf feels passionately obligated to finding a way to account for Mrs Brown, to save her from this literary neglect, or maltreatment. She must be rescued from the Edwardians immediately. Already she is somewhat 'pale and dishevelled' awaiting the rescuing 'axes' to clear a way through. 'Something must be done', Woolf argues, '...Mrs

Brown must rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world, before the train stopped and she disappeared forever' (Woolf, 1966: 333). A large portion of the essay is taken up with Woolf's sense of a frustrated mission. *She* is the only one who can capture the reality of this suburban character; all the others, Wells, Bennett and other Edwardian realists, have failed.

Wells and Bennett are deemed by Woolf not up to the job of presenting the everyday, the ordinary life of the suburbs, for interesting reasons. They have failed because their 'tools' of literary representation, particularly Bennett's, are inadequate to the job. They fail in fact because they are *too materialist*. The weakness in the writing is precisely their detailed materialism, their attempt to capture the essence of everyday life via its external material manifestations. Here then, at the heart of Woolf's aim to capture the ordinary, in the guise of the suburban, we find an emphasis on *seeing*. The ordinary, for Bennett, is material, and, more than this, personal identity and social placing is located in relation to observable material fact; to the details of domestic interiors, to work, to the places of everyday existence. Popular Edwardian realism, according to Woolf, aims to establish and reproduce knowledge of the individual from observable information concerning 'fathers, incomes, hot water bottles' and the 'name of their villas' (Woolf, 1966: 332). Bennett's characters, Woolf argues in 'Modern Fiction', 'spend their time in some softly padded 1st class railway carriage packed with bells and buttons innumerable' (Woolf, 1993: 35). Woolf, then, purposely also sets her fictional quarry on a train precisely for this reason; to demonstrate that the individual need not be sunk beneath external material detail, but may simply be changed according to perspective, place and time. I shall return to this idea below.

This reading off of 'inner' individualism by way of readable external signs is, of course, the hallmark of literary realism[25]. We recall Bennett's suburban connoisseur Mr Aked, in *A Man from the North*, boasting that the reading of suburban material surfaces would lead to the revelation of 'more character' than 'a hundred Balzac's could analyse in a hundred years' (Bennett, 1994: 102). This link between reading surface indicators for submerged meaning and the procedures of Balzacian realism is also made, as I pointed out in Chapter1 (page17 above) by Michael Wood. Wood argues that nineteenth century literary realism is precisely predicated on a 'theory of readable surfaces' (Wood, 2005: 4). Discussing Balzac's attempt to describe a Parisian boarding house by noting the external visible details of its Landlady, Wood argues that literary realism's power resides precisely in 'a selection of details to show

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[25] This was particularly noticeable in Dickens, in his *Sketches by Boz* (1995).

what lies beyond the details' (Wood, 2005: 4). Observation here is linked to hidden truths in the 'same way that a trapdoor connects to a basement'. Realism in this sense, then, is devoted to a profusion of material signs certainly, but also, before that, is dedicated to the notion that a signifying system exist, and only then to 'a theory of the readability of those signs' (Wood, 2005: 4). Here, however, the readability of the signifying system has broken down.

Thus, this literary realist penchant for seeing correspondence between surfaces and depths, between things and 'inner' qualities however, is, for Woolf, exactly where the Edwardians are going wrong. Bennett's failure, in Woolf's view, is linked, precisely, to his dedicated materialism, to the obsession with domestic detail, with minute descriptions, as Woolf comments, of 'sorts of houses'. Bennett, in Woolf's view, for example, would record the external world in detail, would 'observe every detail with immense care' and would relate facts about rents and freeholds' (Woolf, 1966: 329). Yet this detail would only leave 'one with a strange feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction' (Woolf, 1966: 230). This strategy seems to get stuck at the surface level and, rather than fostering understanding of the individual, seems rather to provoke only a generic response; the reader feels compelled 'to join a society, or more desperately, to write a cheque' (Woolf, 1966: 326). Woolf identifies a gulf between the world and its representation that cannot be linked by such realist methods of accumulated observed surface detail and descriptive accuracy, by laying 'an enormous stress upon the fabric of things' (Woolf, 1996: 332). The once reliable signs of the individual no longer lead seem to lead to deeper truths.

This is because the classic realist method of reading physical surface detail for clues to inner depths is, Woolf argues, simply no longer possible, particularly in her suburban example. There are many reasons for this rupture in the common acceptance of literary realist codes of meaning, the convention that the rounded individual can be gleaned from the detection of external signs. This rupture is, of course, the experienced moment of cultural modernism, where many nineteenth century literary and artistic certainties are questioned. Woolf concentrates in the essay on two ways in which traditional realist narrative is, in the post-Great War era, has increasingly broken down and is aesthetically untenable.

The first is the breakdown of the agreed code of realist poetics between writers and readers, generated by the advent of mass popular culture. Woolf identifies 'a shift in the scale - the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages - has shaken the fabric from top to bottom' (Woolf, 1966, 27). Woolf argues, in her last essay from 1940, 'Anon', that originally

there had been no splitting incomprehension in the exchange of cultural meanings. There had been, once, only a single voice, the peripatetic teller of stories and singer of songs in the oral tradition (Woolf, 1997). This 'Anon' was not distinct from their audience, or even from the 'tradition' of texts. There was no separation of producer, text or audience. It is under the conditions of modernity, of course, that writer and audience has fragmented. With the professionalization of writing and the advent of mass communication, writers and readers are now irrevocably split. 'At the present moment' Woolf argues, 'we are suffering…from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept' (Woolf, 1966: 334). Clearly, this breakdown of a common code is a semiotic problem.

As Andreas Huyssen and other have long argued, aesthetic modernism and popular culture are the inseparable twin poles of modernity (Huyssen, 1987). The development of a mass readership, and of cheaply produced and disseminated popular genre fiction, is murkily reflected in literary modernism's own emphasis on newly encoded formal complexity and the readerly exclusivity of a new knowing community which this fosters. Formal modernist experimentation, the restless rejigging of the shared code that can 'capture reality', *and* the explosion in popular mass produced genre fiction are, thus, both 'modern'. This is precisely the formation infamously dissected by Q. D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Leavis, 1932). Leavis argues that writing had split either into a complex, 'highbrow' literary Modernism, thereby recreating the cosy shared (high) culture relations of pre-modern writers and readers, or, writing becomes popular, gains a mass readership and the relations of authors and readers are estranged and mediated by complex technological and commercial mechanisms.

The second way in which the agreed conventions of realist fiction have been shattered, the 'foundations and rules of literary society destroyed…grammar violated: syntax disintegrated' is, for Woolf, linked to the changing notions of the nature of individuality itself. The title of Woolf's original talk that provided the basis of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' is 'Character in Fiction': 'character' is the essay's central business. Woolf means 'character' in both the sense of fictional construct and as core human identity. The importance of Mrs Brown as character is that she is emblematic, a core self that is lastingly eternal, and, as we have seen, also profoundly ordinary. The unremarkable and unseen individual, the suburban everybody and nobody, is now what counts as 'character, 'for Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature' (Woolf, 1966: 330). Mrs Brown is certainly of the moment, a manifestation of suburban mass modernity, and yet she also contains a core essence that, Woolf argues,

persists through history. At the same time, this unchanging nature of the ordinary self has to be set against the best-known phrase from 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', the deliberately provocative claim, vital to modernist poetics, that 'on or around December 1910, human nature changed' (Woolf, 1996: 329). Woolf is arguing here, then, for a different conceptualisation of 'character', that is no longer consistent or coherent. If Mrs Brown is eternal, unchanging human nature, and can be manifestly seen as such, how, then, can this ever change? And if human nature does change Woolf must demonstrate how it can ever be seen and recognised.

Woolf's dating of this epochal event must have had numerous causes; the death of the King and fall of Asquith's Liberal government, suffragette campaigning and other social unrest, possibly rapid improvements in cinema technology and popularity. The key event for Woolf's dating, however, was Roger Fry's organisation of the *Manet and Post-Impressionism* exhibition (Fry himself naming the movement 'post-impressionist'). The outrage caused by the work exhibited here, in pictures by Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, a taste of Modernist non-figurative painting, was based on its radical reappraisal of modes of seeing and representation. Post- impressionist art aimed to explore subjective feeling rather than the observable objective naturalism of impressionism. It thus foregrounded questions of personal emotion, expressivity and the structures of aesthetic form. Above all, post-impressionism highlighted the subjective and personal nature of the act of seeing. No two individuals, it seemed to suggest, ever see the same object. Material objects in the world appear differently to different observers. These art works were thus difficult to interpret and decode, were difficult to accept, and seemed to cast doubt on the observer's ability to see and understand a common world at all.

For Woolf, then, the question of change in human nature is thus linked with newer modes of seeing the world and representing it. So, for Woolf while character doesn't change ('Mrs Brown is eternal', remember) the individual is in fact both constant *and* changing. For Woolf, 'character', while being historically and culturally continuous, is also unstable and relative; it can 'wear different aspects' and it 'is perilous to describe it in words' (Woolf, 1966: 321). The core self can be seen differently in different circumstances. This view of the self, conditional on how it is viewed, underlines the importance of Woolf's essay's overriding metaphor of the railway journey. Here, the *same* passenger shuttles between *different* stations. Woolf reveals that her 'Mrs Brown' rattles along, not only between stations, but also

between 'ages of English literature', that is, she is both unchanging constant of humanity and also a specific individual is precise and different circumstances (Woolf, 1966: 322).

The realist material position is exhausted, then, because seeing and knowing are no longer the same. The important point for Woolf here is that the self will appear differently to different observers; this is the crux of post-impressionism and indeed of literary modernism, and indeed of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity itself. D.F. Comstock in 1910, and Einstein in 1917, both used the moving train in thought experiments concerning relativity theory (Waugh, P., 2003). Woolf's choice of a train journey to explore the idea of relative understandings of the same 'universal' individual may well have been influenced by these thought experiments. The truth of the self, Woolf adds, 'is that it 'will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born' (Woolf, 1966: 320).

Woolf insists, in the essays 'Mr Bennett and Mr Brown' and 'Modern Fiction', on the continuing relevance of literature, its unchanging power to see this slippery human reality, as an individual both eternal and mutable, reflecting changing local circumstances. The suburbs, particularly, is the modern landscape which provides the relevant context. Woolf thus sets the contemporary writer a task; how to see and know contemporary reality without focussing narrowly, as Bennett and Edwardian materialists have done, on the fixed material 'fabric of things'. Woolf posits the existence of an inner being that is not simply reducible to external or material details of that self alone, but which is dependent upon relative perspectives.

This task of seeing and re-presenting the new 'ordinariness', epitomised by the modern suburban individual, is something which, in fact, also very much troubled Woolf's maligned Edwardian realists. For Bennett, and even more so for G. K. Chesterton, while still working within the conventions of realism, the ordinary is, in fact, always extraordinary. Chesterton sees the ordinary, the suburban, as very strange. The opening of Chesterton's 'metaphysical thriller' *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) presents 'the suburb of Saffron Park' (based on Bedford Park) as 'fantastic' and even 'wild' (Chesterton, 1990: 9). Chesterton sees the magical in the banal. Although merely the 'outburst of a speculative builder', the 'place was not only pleasant, but perfect, if once it could be regarded not as deception but rather as a dream' (Chesterton, 1990: 9). The core of Chestertonian paradox is thus to locate the real in the unreal. Other Edwardian realists had different ways of locating the particular and the unique in the realm of suburban ordinariness. H. G. Wells, for instance, tracks the eccentric

standouts; characters like the eponymous Mr Polly and George Pondevero (from *Tono Bungay*, 1909) who are from the mass but stand out as larger-than-life. For Bennett, what marks his characters as extraordinary, as Lynne Hapgood argues, is their own 'sense of the uniqueness of their lives: they do not think they are ordinary' (Hapgood, 2005: 220). Bennett is interested in the suburbs because the 'finest eye and pen were required to discern and evoke its distinctions' (Hapgood, 2005: 221). Bennett 'intervenes in the suburban formula to demonstrate, within it, the distinctiveness and interest of each individual' (Hapgood, 2005: 222).

In 'Mr Bennett', Woolf is arguing, finally, for a different type of *seeing*. 'The Edwardians have failed here. 'They have not', she points out, 'so much as looked at Mrs Brown' (Woolf, 1966:10). They have not seen the suburbs. Woolf's point is that the Edwardians stick to external details and fail to illuminate the subject's inner life. Woolf agrees that the material world *is* there – and we get detailed descriptions of Mrs Brown's physical presence. But truth about this objective realm also depends, for Woolf, to a certain extent on the mind of the observer. Woolf's concern, as Terry Eagleton has it, in *The English Novel*, is with 'the way the mind half creates the world (Eagleton, 2005: 315). The mind, then, must open itself to its own seeing of the world. Despite the claims of scientific objectivity, the poles of subject and object, observer and material fact, should not remain separate.

Indeed, and to the contrary, the observer must now be mobile, dynamic, and flexible. What is required to capture a truth of the exemplary modern individual, the suburbanite, is that the writer must see in different ways to capture lighter, newer realities, 'the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is on something hitherto ignored' (Woolf, 1966: 10). This is a call asking for a new kind of 'psychological' perspectival realism. This involves, not the material 'realist' reading of inner states from external signs, but rather the use of imagination, the capturing of impressions, and the reconstructing fleeting psychological states – including those of the reader in his or her reading processes. The world cannot be apprehended at first glance; it must be approached from different angles, moving in and out and around the subject. This is precisely Woolf's formulation, in "Modern Fiction", of the writer's task. The writer must, 'record the atoms as they fall on the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness' (Woolf, 1993: 161). Again, this is why encountering suburban Mrs Brown on the train is an ideal scenario. Mrs Brown is unknown, in flux, randomly encountered. The formidable task that Woolf sets herself in 'Mr Bennett and Mr

Brown', therefore, is to be equal to this shift in capturing a different and changing reality, especially the new type of individual as fragmented and changeable.

Woolf concludes the 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' essay by triangulating the three agents of author, reader and character in the same suburban railway carriage, and by making a direct address to the essay's audience/readership (evoking the essay's first appearance as a talk, a vocal performance). 'May I end', she exclaims, 'by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books (Woolf, 1966: 336). Woolf is aiming here then for a democratic inclusiveness, for both the formal complexity of High Modernism *and* the broad appeal of popular fiction. Woolf's modernism makes demands upon the reader: it desires both to be elitist (i.e. culturally demanding) and to have the popular inclusive appeal of a Bennett. We are all, she reminds us, 'companions in the railway carriage, fellow travellers with Mrs Brown (Woolf, 1966:336).

Section Two – Stevie Smith's Suburbia

Virginia Woolf uses the figure of suburban Mrs Brown to raise urgent questions about legibility. These include questions about what constitutes new modes of 'character' and individuality, and also questions about how the suburban individual as the raw material of the modern period presents a challenge for literary representation. This focus on *suburban* experience as exemplar of modern low-key humanness emphasises both the need for a new writing that considers all lives as worthy subjects of art, and at the same time also serves to underline how suburban lives were still considered the ultimate in obscure semi-legibility. Woolf chooses Mrs Brown precisely because of the challenges involved in seeing and representing her clearly.

These difficulties of making the suburb – as habitat of the ordinary – legible to readers were widely acknowledged in writing of the twenties and thirties. As I've noted earlier, 'Literature had difficulties'; Simon Dentith argues, 'when it comes to writing about the suburbs' (Dentith, 1997: 108). Indeed, Dentith argues that 'poetic writing in the thirties was in crisis' and at the heart of this crisis was in finding ways to make the suburbs legible; literature could not find 'an appropriate manner for writing about the landscape of the suburbs' (Dentith, 1997: 109). Stevie Smith, the main focus of the present section, is an interesting figure to discuss in this context. Unusually for a 'serious' writer of the interwar period, indeed one

considered a 'modernist', the London suburbs are frequently her subject. Another rarity here is that some of Smith's writing is actually positive about the suburbs. She frequently associates the suburbs with ways of belonging, and with family, community, homeliness and happiness. In her 1949 essay 'A London Suburb', she describes suburban Palmer's Green, where she lived for most of her life, as 'wide open to the sky', and as a 'cheap place for families to live in and have children and gardens'. There, 'behind the net curtains', lie, not nasty secrets or pathology, but 'family life - father's chair, uproar, dogs, babies and radio' (Smith, 1981: 104). Smith's suburbia, chiming with Morris's utopianism discussed in Chapter 2, and with the nostalgic suburbs examined below in Section Three, is identified with the paradise of an enchanted childhood. It is 'a very beautiful place to live in, especially for children' (Smith, 1981: 84). In her 1947 essay 'Syler's Green' (also real-life Palmer's Green), the past is remembered as 'always a sunny day' and which also 'seemed like a golden age' (Smith, 1981: 85).

Smith's work raises interesting questions about the relation of the suburb to literature. The overall note in Smith's work is ambivalence. In this she shares something of Woolf's notion that the external world, and people, cannot be seen directly and objectively – but can only be glimpsed obliquely or partially, spied momentarily from different perspectives. Smith, although an observer of suburban life, does not address the suburb or suburban experience directly. She does not seek to represent the suburb as objective, knowable object. In her work the suburb is always seen askance, awry. In this askew relationship of observer and observed, Smith, like suburbia, is 'eccentric', in both meanings of the word. She is detached from the middle, not belonging to the centre (be it a place or a literary tradition), while at the same time unconventional, strange, and at heart (if there is a heart) unknowable. 'Stevie Smith often uses the word "peculiar"', observes Hermione Lee 'and it is the best word to describe her effects' (Lee, 1983: 12). This twin preoccupation of Smith's work, estrangement and strangeness are the themes of the present section.

Above all, as suburban eccentric and observer, Smith questions the centrality of the perceiving and recording 'I'. Smith's eccentric distancing can be seen most clearly in the complex relation between her life and her work. Thus, her biography, as dull suburbanite, is commonly considered to offer direct clues to her work; her work, then, can be read back to illuminate the life. This translation from one to the other seems a direct result of Smith's suburbanity; place and individual are directly convertible. Yet as we shall see, this is never exactly the case. Smith, in fact, is always distanced somehow, removed from sight. Smith the

individual, the writing presence, against what is commonly held to be the case in much criticism, is not fully present in the work, but always implied, removed somewhere behind a series of masks and voices. As I shall detail below, Smith's eccentric displacement is achieved through her playful style (packed with puns, self-conscious archness and whimsy) her wide range of linguistic registers, her use of odd and shifting perspectives, and her use of multiple personas.

Smith's eccentricity, then, starts with her suburban biography, or rather, with her status as *suburban* poet and novelist, which is inevitably directly rooted in her suburban biography. Smith moved to outer London suburbia, Palmer's Green, when she was 3, and stayed there all her life – never even moving out of her childhood home which she shared with her aunt for over 60 years. Smith's life, as true suburbanite, alternated between city and suburb. She worked in prestigious urban cosmopolitan literary milieus (she worked as a secretary for a London publisher and met many key literary figures) while nightly returning to remote Palmer's Green. Her suburban biography is mentioned in most Smith criticism and is considered central to an understanding of her work. Simply the fact that she lived in a north London suburb for 60 years is itself deemed worthy of attention. James MacGibbon's introduction to Smith's 1975 *Collected Poems*, for example, focuses on some odd details of the poet's domestic life that emphasise unchanging banality. She lived, we are told, with an elderly aunt 'alone during all her maturity' in the famous north London suburban house. This was a 'place of fascinatingly ugly décor not a stick of which ...had ever been changed since Stevie's arrival' (Smith, 1975: 8). This was 'inconveniently placed in North London', MacGibbon adds, 'far from the fashionable localities where her friends lived' (Smith, 1975: 8). Frances Spalding's 1989 biography of Smith opens with a disclaimer: 'Stevie Smith is an unusually difficult subject for biography' (Spalding, 2002: 1). This is because, the biographer tells us, Smith, the working suburban woman, didn't actually *do* that much that was memorable. The dull life here takes precedence over the work actually produced. The fact that a literary/biographical assessment should in the first place trouble itself with minor details of a writer's (unpleasant) décor, and read important biographical details from such observations, surely expresses a need to place that writer in a specific narrowly defined context; female, domestic, suburban.

In fact, this common perception of Smith as echt suburbanite, crankily living in a remote suburb with aunt and numerous cats, for whom nothing ever happens, does not in fact illumine the work in any simple way. Smith cannot be pinned down that easily. In fact

Smith's identification as a suburban writer is presented in ways that are a bizarre *overdetermination* of accepted suburban clichés. Smith's poetry often refers to what are perceived as typical suburban concerns: for example, courtships, marriage, motherhood, babies, raising children, competitive consumerism and social snobberies. Yet, in fact, Smith appears to have had no direct experience of any of these experiences and often comments on her disconnectedness from such 'typical' suburban concerns. The Smith of critical biographies is actually a crude caricature of the inscrutable 'typical' suburbanite; commuting, timid, domestic, routinised, socially agoraphobic.

In a real sense, Smith's more meaningful identity as a suburbanite can be said to lie not in the unchanging inhabitation of a dull Palmer's Green semi, with all the cultural accoutrements this implies – the domestic, spinsterish femininity, the split allegiance between city and suburb, the commuting – but rather lies in Smith's very ambivalence. Rather than being an immediately knowable product of environment, 'Smith' is in fact a shifting being of continuous self-fabrication. Her years of unchanging routine, the tight compartmentalisation of public and domestic spheres, the fear and rejection of outsiders, the phobia over the messiness of 'real life', are suburban in being not an excrescence of immutable environmental factors, but rather the performance of a life permanently displaced and renewed. She wasn't even known as 'Stevie Smith' in Palmer's Green, but rather as 'Maggie' (from Florence Margaret Smith, her real name). Smith's true suburbanism lies, then, in the fact that suburbanism has no observable essence. Being suburban here is something not directly observable but consists of differing perspectives, enacting roles and trying on voices.

This displacement and strangeness of Smith's suburbanised identity as a writer is usefully reflected in Kristin Bluemel's description of her as 'radically eccentric' (Bluemel, 2003). It includes both routine domestic ordinariness *and* a playful and extemporised inhabitation of other personas and voices; neither is the truer self. Smith is always at home and yet nowhere at home. She is Smith the spinsterish and cranky suburbanite *and* Smith the metropolitan modernist. The eccentric defies convention and exists outside of conventional ways of being. Smith, Kristin Bluemel contends, is permanently displaced, and joins that small group of interwar writers who cannot easily be placed in literary terms (Orwell being the best-known). These are out of the loop, not fitting typical literary periods or categories. They are, rather, grounded in 'the experience of the English working class and working middle class cultures' (Bluemel, 2003: 2). For Bluemel this sector of experience has no natural form of literary expression. These do not fit the 'framework deployed by scholars of Bloomsbury

experimentalism, the Auden generation, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf or Beckett' (Bluemel, 2003: 2). Smith has no fixed position as a *writer*. Philip Larkin (himself occupying similarly ambivalent literary territory between popularity and critical disapproval), does not know what to make of Smith. He comments that she seems to 'lie somewhere' in literature's files 'between children's and humorous' (Larkin, 1983: 56). Larkin is unsure about Smith's fey crankiness, the decorative doodling and suspicious love of cats which, he suggests, 'casts a shadow over even the most illustrious name' (Larkin, 1983:56).

Alison Light, in her study of interwar literary culture, *Forever England* (Light, 1991), actually places Smith in that paradoxical group of individual writers who do not belong to any group. Smith, Light points out, 'is not an obvious candidate for the role of bard' (Light, 1994: 240). Her poetry, Light continues, 'seems both too prolific and too slight; too piecemeal and too samey, eminently quotable and eminently forgettable' (Light, 1994: 240). These 'conservative modernists', awkward characters, belonging to no identifiable tradition, address those staples of modernist writing, exile, fragmentation and alienation, but they do so in a feminised, domestic and conservative context. Ivy Compton- Burnett writes of the exile from childhood, from a personal golden age, set within tense, claustrophobic and unforgiving family units. Agatha Christie also 'upsets the notion of home sweet home', seeing its cosy interiors and characters as setting for murderous impulses and acts. Stevie Smith, of course, experiences a series of internal exiles, not at home in any of her personas. All these displaced modernists (others that Light mentions are Henry Williamson, Evelyn Waugh and Jan Struther, creator of Mrs Miniver) set their work in either domestic or suburban contexts.

Suburbanism as disconnection from place, is then, linked to disconnection from cultural definition and centrality. Stevie Smith (along with fellow enthusiastic suburban, John Betjeman) has an ambivalent relation to literary modernism. Neither writer is considered by the academy to be quite serious, neither has generated much detailed critical appraisal. Yet, of course, both have always been popular. Both, points out Andrew Motion, 'have a small academic following, but a large popular following' (Motion, 2005: n.p.). This complex fault line, between the popular and the highbrow work, is, of course, a most distinctive trait of literary Modernism. It is freighted by the notion that popular fiction is underwritten by a direct correspondence between writers and readers, writers seeming to be accessible to their readers, whereas the archetypal modernist is remote, removed from the reader behind formal tics.

Smith's suburbanism is very difficult to position in the cultural landscape, as she embodies a series of contradictions (eccentricities). These include modernist experimentalist and homely traditionalist, difficult yet readable, linguistically complex and plain-speaking, avant-gardism accompanying fey doodling, professional and amateur. Sheryl Stevenson maintains that Stevie Smith evinces a 'striking originality', one that marks 'a complete separation from poetic fashion' (Stevenson, 1992: 24). This ambivalence, *central* and *eccentric*, is best illustrated in Smith's complex use of voice, or, more precisely, in its alternation between seeming to offer a direct accessibility to individual or subject-matter (the familiar suburban Stevie behind the scenes) and the adoption of a series of masks. On the one hand, there seems a direct link to authorial voice- being playful, informal, friendly, completed with wonky little drawings, everyday subject matter, a confessional tone, a set number of themes (death, time, religion), stylistic devices (terrible half-rhymes, whimsy, quirkiness, over-cuteness). This Smith of biographical presence, the Smith behind the scenes, offers a sort of transparency, a window onto the writer. On the other hand, Smith's writing is not, as it may seem at first glance, a straightforward window to her soul or a direct short circuit from writer to reader. The crucial 'suburbanity' of Smith lies not in any showing and sharing with readers, revealing what the suburb is really like, but rather in her 'eccentricity', her sense of unbelonging and detachment, which reminds us that the suburb is really a place of unknowing.

Thus Smith's representation of suburbia, marks a semiotic ambivalence. It is one of indirectness rather than straightforward identification; the suburb cannot easily be seen and written. This much is made clear in Smith's use of multiple poetic voices and impersonations, not just the dominant playful or informal one. She uses an extensive range of tones, impersonations, voices, personas, registers and perspectives. In many of Smith's poems, as Bluemel argues, 'her speaker, even her rhymes and rhythms, are out of place, located somewhere in-between known spaces and categories' (Bluemel, 2003:8). Sheryl Stevenson argues that Smith's '570 pages of collected poetry encompass not only remarkably varied impersonations' but also 'exhibit diverse poetic modes and forms' (Stevenson, 1992: 27).

This tension between Smith being both present and obscured in her writing is clear in her 1937 poem 'The Suburban Classes'

> There is far too much of the suburban classes
> Spiritually not geographically speaking. They're asses.

Menacing the greatness of our beloved England, they lie

Propagating their kind in an eightroomed stye.

Now I have a plan which I will enfold

(There's this to be said for them, they do as they're told)

Then tell them their country's in mortal peril

They believed it before and again will not cavil

Put it in caption form firm and slick

If they see it in print it is bound to stick:

'Your King and your Country need you Dead'

You see the idea? Well, let it spread.

Have a suitable drug under string and label

Free for every Registered Reader's table.

For the rest of the gang who are not patriotic

I've another appeal they'll discover hypnotic:

Tell them it's smart to be dead and won't hurt

And they'll gobble up drug as they gobble up dirt. (Smith, 1975: 58)

Here the invigorating and sunny opening, a suburb, the narrator tells us simply 'wide open to the sky', gives way to something different. The poem packs a mixture of voice and tones, and (despite what the title and experience of similar works leads the reader to expect) no simple 'attitude' toward its ostensible subject can be deduced. Smith employs a 'traditional' voice for the poem's title and opening. The title itself, with its complacent generalisation and promise of a no-nonsense clarification, clearly echoes numerous anti-suburban tirades. This continues in the blustering opening lines; 'There is far too much of the suburban classes/ Spiritually not geographically speaking. They're asses'(Smith, 1975: 58). Despite the fact that the rhyme here is likely to make many English readers read 'asses' as 'arses', these first lines seems unequivocal as standard patrician/high-brow contempt for the encroaching suburb that is obliterating the English pastoral: 'Menacing the greatness of our Beloved England, they lie/Propagating their kind in an eight-roomed stye' (Smith, 1975: 58). Appealing to patriotism, the suburban home is deemed fearful, foreign, filthy and absurdly grand. Here the poem switches voices, modulating to an exaggerated, conspiratorial tone of fairy tale and romantic high adventure: 'Now I have a plan which I will enfold'. This plan turns out to be a Swiftian 'Modest Proposal' – style scheme for all suburbanites to commit mass suicide. The tone switches again, to outline this plan and becomes frighteningly terse, knowing, and slickly confident ('you see the idea? Well, let it spread'). Mass suicide can be simply

achieved by preying on a few core suburban traits: blind patriotism ('tell them their country's in mortal peril'), monarchism and gullibility ('"Your King and Country need you dead"'), susceptibility to techniques of advertising and persuasion, eagerness to consume 'suitable drugs', even a penchant for mail-order special deals (Smith, 1975: 58). All this should make the suburbanites easy targets for elimination. At the end, the poem's presumed irony, the gap between poem's narrator and author that permits the reader to be wary of its vicious earnestness, falters. The voice adopts an unreadable flat denotation: 'Tell them it's smart to be dead and won't hurt/And they'll gobble up drugs as they gobble up dirt' (all Smith, 1975: 58). This productive indecision here (who is speaking and in what tone) is key to Smith's work. The humour here lies in the irony□ which is always double-voiced □ of the sincerity of the anti-suburban bombast and the casual nastiness of the 'modest proposal'.

Another poem from 1937, 'Suburb', also contains an ambiguous narrator addressing an explicitly suburban theme.

How nice it is to slink the streets at night
And taste the slight
Flavour of acrity that comes
From pavements throwing off the dross
Of human tread.
Each paving stone sardonic
Grins to its fellow masonic:
'Thank God they're gone,' each to the other cries
'Now there is nothing between us and the skies'.
Joy at this state transports the hanging heavens
And down to earth they rain celestial dew
The pavement darkly gleams beneath the lamp
Forgetful now of daylight's weary tramp.
Round about the streets I slink
Suburbs are not so bad I think
When their inhabitants cannot be seen
Even Palmer's Green. (Smith, 1975:81, l.1-17).

The narrator here is a mysterious, shifting, cat-like presence (Smith, a notoriously indulgent cat-lover) slinking around a night- time suburb with super-sensitivity, savouring the streets in

the absence of people. The narrator can even 'taste the slight/flavour of acrity that comes/from pavements throwing off the dross / of human tread' (Smith, 1975: 81). This poem echoes a similar scene in Edward Thomas's 1906 state of the nation travelogue *The Heart of England* (Thomas, 1982). Here the 'silence of the suburbs' is double. This is first because it is night-time and all suburban residents are asleep, but also because this is unknown territory, because suburbanites have yet to be heard (Thomas, 1982: 3). For the narrator of Smith's poem this absence makes the darkened suburb a joyful place, with a paradoxical sense of fullness as Nature's diurnal cycle is restored. The earth and the heavens are rejoined; there is no tiresome irruption of 'human tread' or intrusive jerry- builders 'building against time'. The paving stones themselves call out, '"Thank God they're gone" each to the other cries/Now there is nothing between us and the skies"' (Smith, 1975:81). Suburban presence here is equated to the something in-between, to pointless filler, obstacle or filth, to 'dross', 'slime', to assorted builder's detritus. Suburbs are dull and depopulated during the day; but night-time when residents are both there and not there, is best of all. The suburb is at its best when denuded of that which it is for: people. 'The suburbs are not so bad I think/When their inhabitants cannot be seen / Even Palmer's Green'. The true nature of the suburbs consists in that which can only be dimly seen, at night, in between and beyond everything else, sensed only by the highly alert slinking narrator. This narrator, we feel, knows more about the unseen suburb.

These secret marginal places are a familiar place in Smith's understanding of the suburbs. These are, as well as the night, the miraculous in-between places of childhood wonder and terror, as depicted in the Blakean titled 'Little Boy Lost' and 'Alone in the Woods'. These are the unsettling spaces, of scrappy woods, vacant houses and waste ground and echoes of the magical gothic forests and woods found in fairy tales. These marginal sites, with their sense of threat, contrast strongly with the child-like suburban arcadia of other fictional memories of childhood suburbs. Again in the depiction of these ambiguous zones the ambiguity of voice is emphasised; is the narrator here our guide, or is she concealing something? In 'Suburb' we are not quite shown the hidden, the magical underneath; 'I have never seen / Anything quite so green' (Smith, 1975: 81). 'I will not show you yet /Lest you should forget', the narrator tells us, but also promises that 'I'll show you that you may die remembering (Smith, 1975: 81). The ambivalence lies in the undecidability of our trust in the narrator.

These difficulties of providing an objective view of the suburb, of making it legibly presented to us by someone 'on the inside', is revealed in Smith's semi-autobiographical 1936 work

Novel on Yellow Paper (Smith, 1980). Here, the authorial presence, in the semi-autobiographical form of Pompey, the narrator, is presented as suburban, and as friendly, conspiratorial, almost as if the work is accidental. This is someone on our side, artlessly direct, seeming to present us with random thoughts and disconnected events. Even the novel itself is conceived as an unofficial production, presented as being written while the narrator (as was Smith herself) works at a publishers. According to James MacGibbon, writing in the introduction to Smith's *Collected Poems* her job was fairly leisurely, a position where 'she had plenty of time in her "private office" to entertain her friends to tea and hot-buttered toast' (Smith, 1975: 7). In the novel, boss and secretary inhabit different rooms 'indulging in the utmost limits of boredom… he in his room and I in mine' (Smith, 1975: 16). This version of work, real paid work, as something to be avoided, while unofficial leisure turns out to be the real task, is something we have noticed in suburban-set writing before. Jerome K. Jerome's suburban sailors are adept skivers at their official paid work, but find leisure extremely laborious. For Smith it is different; real work is performed illicitly while ostensibly 'at work'.

The novel's status as stolen work, rather than the work of literature, is made clear from the beginning. 'It is very yellow paper', Pompey tells us, and it is this very yellow paper because often sometimes I am typing it in my room at my office' (Smith 1980, 15). The novel is presented, then, as not being a novel at all, but rather an unofficial *unauthorised* attempt at writing, snatched from official time, from serious work, from literature. This follows the practice of the *Perruque,* or 'wig', as outlined by Michel de Certeau in his 1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life:* the worker's own work disguised as work for his [sic] employer' (de Certeau, 1984: 24). Smith's mocking of the fully authorised work is evident form the beginning of the novel, as traditional fictive modes are played with. Smith clearly subverts the role and status of literary writing here: writing the suburbs clearly calls for a new voice and a new literary approach.

The novel is acutely self-referential about its status as writing ('this book will be ready for printing in limp yarn and sitting on your rich aunt's breakfast plate…by Christmas'(Smith, 1980: 7)), wildly and unpredictably digressive, frequently directly addressing the reader ('Read on, Reader, read on and work it our for yourself' (Smith, 1980: 9). The narrative is aleatory in structure, randomly opinionated, and crammed with what seems to be incomprehensibly personal jokes, nicknames, asides and anecdotes. The reader is warned: 'this is a foot- off-the-ground-novel that came by the left hand (Smith, 1980: 38). The 'writerly' aspects of the work are disguised in the attempt to provide a semblance of direct,

unmediated contact with the reader. Pompey's 'voice' indeed seems to be spoken. The nimble- footed narrator will not be pinned down on anything; 'I am a forward-looking girl and don't stay where I am' (Smith, 1980: 19). She in fact denies any referential intent: 'Now Reader, don't go making trouble fixing up names to all this. I say here there's not a person or a thing in this book the ever stepped outside of this book' (Smith, 1980: 19).

Smith's new style of writing is oblique and tangential, unable to offer the suburb as it is in itself. The narrator clearly positions herself as suburban: 'did I say that my fiancé Freddy and I both live at Bottle Green' (i.e. Palmer's Green), but at the same time cannot explain why this is significant or what it exactly means (Smith, 1980: 145). This particular suburb can only be defined by considering what it isn't. It's 'None of your Hampsteads or Highgates or Golders Greens, just straight north in a line with Enfield' (Smith, 1980: 146). For Pompey the suburb is a place of possibility, of deferred status, rather than anything definite. 'Everybody is always trying to be the next step up' she notes, and, because 'given a slight increase in income and ordinary luck' this is quite possible, the suburbs are 'all very hearty and make for the survival of the *status quo*' (Smith, 1980: 146). Pompey resolutely does not recognise herself as the implied subject of broad generalisations about what the suburb should be. She gets these insights into 'the suburban condition' from her fiancé Freddy, himself an expert and 'very keen observer of Bottle Green'. Pompey does not see herself as a 'typical product of the suburb: 'I do not know it myself' (Smith, 1980: 146). She has no interest in traditionally defined suburban culture: 'I have never played tennis': neither has she 'joined an amateur dramatic club (Smith, 1980: 146).

Smith's narrator cannot offer fixed conclusions about suburban life. She admits to being a suburbanite and the suburb being a 'fascinating subject' (Smith, 1980: 149), but also says that she knows nothing about it. With her aged aunt, and occasionally, a sister, she forms part of a 'duo-trio of non- communication' (Smith, 1980: 208). Pompey is saddened to 'see so many people about the streets of Bottle Green' and 'not know who at all who they are, or what they are doing or where they are going, or what they are thinking, or why' (Smith, 1980: 208). Pompey feels, despite her long suburban acquaintance since childhood, that she is still temporary, merely passing through. Pompey feels like a visitor to her own suburbs: 'I feel that I wish only to be a visitor' (Smith, 1980: 234). Her fiancé, Freddy 'has been my guide, my Virgil, in these regions': 'He has taken me in, I have visited in Bottle Green' (Smith, 1980: 235). This is precisely where Alison Light locates Smith's modernity; 'in her refusal to

offer a convenient attitude or summation' (Light, 1994: 240). Smith cannot be a guide for us, the suburb remains unknowable.

Pompey's status as detached visitor strongly affects her feeling for the suburb that she has lived in all her life. This suburb, her lifelong home, strangely, is resistant to feelings of nostalgia. 'I have wondered' she notes 'about having a nostalgia for this suburb, but no means of getting into the inside of it' (Smith, 1980: 233). Nostalgia, as I discuss more fully in the next section, is a desire for home and belonging, and is an important feature of thirties writing on the suburb. Nostalgia is a good example of complex feelings which have affective charge, but which require a good deal of exploration to understand. For Pompey the suburb is not the locus of personal nostalgia, it cannot be explored and made meaningful enough.

Section Three – In Search of Lost England

Stevie Smith's work suggests that the suburbs cannot easily be brought into view. The suburb generates, rather, ambivalence. The suburb, the focus of much of Smith's attention, is nebulous, unreal and strange ('eccentric'). Suburban living, Smith's work strongly suggests, is indefinable, subject to a constant extemporised performativity. This unhomeliness that Smith finds in the suburb marks it, for her, as immune even to forms of nostalgia, though she lived in the same suburban house for all of her adult life. The suburb is not amenable, in other words, to that part of nostalgia which is a fantasy resolution to a sense of dispossession.

Smith's refusal of nostalgia is important here because nostalgia for a particular version of England, and the suburb's ambivalent position in this revisioning, is much in evidence in cultural work of the thirties , in popular fiction, film, music, and also, as I mentioned earlier, as Alexandra Harris, has shown us, in serious art. It was part of what Alison Light sees as the work of re-imagining England and the English in the teeth of impending catastrophe signalled by the rise of European fascism. The search for nostalgic versions of Englishness also generated a vision of the golden age of the pre Great War period, a vision of pastoral simplicity and innocence. It is in these inter-war years, Light argues, that the 'English are re-imagined as a primarily domesticated, essentially private people, modest and unassuming rather than expansionist or aggressive' (Light, 1991: 242). This reworking of 'Englishness', in total contrast to elite Victorian and Edwardian ideals of masculine honour, national expansion and imperial grandeur, is feminised, small in scale and focussed on the home. In this sense it is informed by Neville Chamberlain's deliberate emphasis on domestic policy:

legislation for paid holidays, the encouragement of home ownership and leisure opportunities, and the growth of mass consumption. This reworking of Englishness, informed by suburban ideals, reaches its apogee in the depictions of the British Home front in World War Two: modest, plucky, unaggressive and home-loving.[26]

Elite imperial aspirations were not share by the British masses and this reworked Englishness of ordinary people finds its natural habitat in the modern mass suburb; that zone of quickly and privately built, semi-detached tudorbethan 'dunroamin' homes, located either on peripheral greenfield sites or along London's new arterial roads (the A4, A40, A13, A 23). This suburb, which in many ways can be considered a metonym for this new England has a complex relation to modernity (as we have already seen) and to nostalgia during the interwar years. We can see this relation in at least two ways. Firstly, in a negative sense, the suburb is modern destroyer of the past. It is viewed as a nasty symptom of modernity's obliteration of an older, ordered version of England. We have already cited (p.83, this thesis) Clough Williams-Ellis, bemoaning the suburb's shrivelling up of 'the old England' (Williams-Ellis, 1928: 25). The suburb here is the problem, the vanguard of standardising and mechanised modernity, erasing meaningful signs of older inhabitation. The suburb *is* modernity. Secondly, in contrast, we can see that the suburb is also in some ways a modern *compensation* for the erasure of this lost England. It becomes, in its design, layout, decorative features and marketing, a hoped-for cultural nostalgic replacement for a lack of historical meaning. Suburban design here seeks to appeal to a broader nostalgic desire for a fictitious national past. Modernity thus takes away versions of homeliness (community, attachment to place, a settled continuity) only to attempt an architectural/technological fix for this loss. In the case of thirties' suburbia, this means the mass building of technologically up-to-date semi-detached houses, but with additional stylings connoting an imagined national past, mostly of Jacobean or Elizabethan England. The thirties suburb, with 'Tudorbethan' decorative touches, comes with a form of nostalgia already added. These decorative touches acknowledge the reality of nostalgic feeling (and make it part of their sales appeal).

The present section discusses how George Orwell, in *Coming Up For Air* negotiates these competing imagined Englands, of modern suburban hell and of nostalgically evoked pastoral pre-modern England (Orwell, 2001). Nostalgia is a desire for the familiar, for a reinstatement of meaning and fullness in the present. It is a response to a present which is not legible and is

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[26] The centrepiece of a 2008 exhibition of the British home front during World War Two, at London's Imperil War Museum, is a full-sized replica of a wartime suburban semi.

therefore not a home. The 'nostalgic subject' argues Stuart Tannock, 'turns to the past to find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community that are felt to be lacking in the present' (Tannock, 454). The novel's main character, George Bowling, searches for meaning and belonging, for legibility, not available in the featureless and false incomprehensible modern suburb he inhabits. Nostalgia here is a way of seeing clearly, of viewing, or retrospectively creating an authentic childhood past, set in a premodern village, which is the counterpoint to the overriding falseness, the corruption of anything for certain, in the suburbanised present.

Again, Bowling's yearning for truth, for authenticity and a home, can be interpreted as part of the project of straining to see a rapidly transforming modernising England. One of Orwell's key concerns as a writer and social commentator was to pin down this 'real' Englishness: 'It is of the deepest importance' he writes in 'England your England' section of the pamphlet 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (1941), 'to try and determine what England *is*' (Orwell, 1991: 12). Orwell here both lists what *he sees* as the permanent features of English identity ('Yes, there *is* something distinctive and recognizable in English culture') and espies trends for a new England just emerging; 'England, together with the rest of the world, is changing' (Orwell, 1991: 13).

Orwell's George Bowling feels the pull of a lost arcadia, a lost *time* where everything can be seen and known and makes sense: his pre-Great War childhood marks lost personal time, but also coincide with the 'end of an epoch' (Orwell, 2001: 111). In terms of nostalgic loss for the lost *time* of the nation, the Great War is the pivotal moment here, clearly marking an enormous gulf between 'before' and 'after'. The twenties was the period when the myth of the lost golden 'Edwardian summer' took hold, when everyone seemed to agree that 'the pre-War summer was the most idyllic for many years. It was warm and sunny, eminently pastoral' (Fussell, 1980: 23). Great War poetry and memoirs, first appearing in the twenties and thirties emphasise a lost English pastoralism and childhood innocence as the profound opposites of the war's mechanised murder. Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden all emphasised the pastoral in their elegies for a vanished England (and vanished youth). Interwar writing such as Edmund Blunden's 1932 *The Face of England* (Blunden, 2006), A. G. MacDonnell's 1933 *England Their England* (MacDonell, 1983) (alongside memoirs by 'war poets') sought to uncover and preserve a beleaguered, ruralised, traditional England, safe for cricket, hunting and quaint villages. Bowling's yearning is intensified here as this pre-war golden age matches exactly the lost years of his childhood. Orwell's novel

addresses precisely these overlappings, between a largely suburbanised present and an English national past, imposed onto the personal terrain of a miserable adult present, and warmly remembered childhood.

The lost time of the pre-Great War is also converted, in much cultural work, into a lost *place* that may, just, be on view into the present. We noted above how popular contemporary guidebooks attempted to make the new (Greater London, for instance) legible, by linking it to a past, by offering remnants of a pre-modern England that still make sense, that is still visible, somewhere. In terms of finding lost space, one commentator has suggested that Orwell's novel is 'in part a parody and critique of H.V. Morton's bestselling 1927 guide book *In Search of England*' (Morton, 2000), (Small, 2005, n.p.). George Bowling, dissatisfied and unhappy, trapped in a phoney and regimented modern suburb, sets off by car for the Oxfordshire location of his rural boyhood, on his own search for a lost England. Bowling is searching for a 'real' England, for a 'settled period', for 'a feeling of security...more exactly a feeling of continuity', which is also a search for his personal childhood (Orwell, 2001:110). *Coming up for Air* is interesting because it moves across numerous temporal and spatial locations in Bowling's search for a meaningful and legible present. No sites here are immediately legible: locations are always doubled, always false. Thus the suburb where Bowling lives in the novel's suburb present is false: it is full, as we shall see, of phoney modern objects, people and places, especially an ersatz frankfurter encountered in an American-style milk bar[27]. Bowling's remembered childhood home, when visited, actually no longer exists. The novel also depicts the suburb as distorting time. Just as Bowling is not at home in his modern (or even, as we shall see, in his skin) Bowling simultaneously inhabits two temporal zones: the present and the past. He continually falls between them.

The modern suburb, in Orwell's novel, is frighteningly illegible because it shrinks and condenses space. Its residents are isolated and trapped, pressed in and deprived of space. As the novel opens we see Bowling inhabiting a typical thirties Dunroamin house and suburb, one with which he assumes the reader is on familiar terms: 'you know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses' (Orwell, 2001: 9). Bowling's suburban Ellesmere Road is presented as a prison and torment. It consists of a 'line of semi-detached torture chambers where the poor little five-to-

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[27] In his comic *Cartoon History of Architecture* Osbert Lancaster mocks the 'various contributions which past styles have made to this infernal amalgam' (Lancaster, 1975: 152). He painfully observes 'some quaint gables culled form Art Nouveau surmounting a façade painfully Modernistic in inspiration; the twisted beams and leaded panes of Stockbroker's Tudor contrasted with terra-cotta plaques, Pont Street Dutch in character' (Lancaster,1975: 125).

ten-pounders a week quake and shiver, everyone of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches' (Orwell, 2001: 10). Individuals here are crushed by proximity and sameness.

The suburb as instrument of modernity, modern because it effaces individual difference by imposing the stamp of enforced sameness, is an idea that haunts Orwell's work. This is modern suburban standardisation as fearfully imagined in Orwell's 1934 novel *Burmese Days*: 'I think that in two hundred years all this will be gone', the narrator informs us, 'And instead there will be pink villas fifty yards apart: all over the hills as far as you can see. All playing the same tune on the gramophone' (Orwell, 1990: 42). Orwell's terrifying picture of the suburb as part of a larger state prison also hints at the kind of totalitarian landscape described nine years later in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Here Winston Smith, in inner suburban Islington, is trapped in a succession of standardised, featureless rooms and buildings (Orwell, 2008). This is the suburb as incarceral totalitarian modern space, where the unseeing individual cannot know anything, but is always spied upon, that Bowling wants to escape.

This modern suburb where Bowling, as the novel's title suggests cannot breathe, crushes the inhabitant. This material oppression also means that suburbanites do not fit exactly, are not in the right place. No-one is comfortably 'at home' here; there is always discomfort or disharmony. Bowling's suburb contains many indicators of this unhomeliness; the houses are cramped, badly built, malfunctioning, and don't actually belong to owners, but are mortgaged to an unseeable future (this idea of a lack of future time will be developed below). This uncomfortable estrangement from material space is centred on Bowling himself, and more precisely, on his body. This physical discord recapitulates the unhomeliness experienced in material and bodily terms by Charles Pooter, Mr Polly and other suburban 'Nobodies', discussed in Chapter 2, section two, above. Orwell's novel opens with a detailed account of Bowling's morning routine, as he is hounded and harassed in every room of his house, even in the privacy of the bathroom. This lack of being-at-home, hounded where he should most belong, segues into a form of physical disgust. The body here becomes alien 'Thing', a little piece of alien external nature. On this particular morning, Bowling takes a grim inventory of his aging body. Grotesquely, his temporary wooden false teeth do not fit, a disgusting clash here of body and alien prosthesis. Bowling is not at home in his own skin. His skin doesn't fit; it is 'pudgy', alien, repulsive. Bowling unsuccessfully washes himself; 'It's a rotten thing to have a soapy neck', Bowling gripes, 'it gives you a disgusting sticky feeling' (Orwell, 2001: 6). This bodily stickiness is disgusting because it compromises distinctions and

boundaries; between liquid and solid and between inner and outer. Bowling's own physical being in the world, delimited by his skin, is here compromised.

This unhomely spatial discord between inside and outside continues with Bowling's' assessment of his own physical being. 'It's quite true I'm tubby', he admits sitting in the bath, 'not what they call "disgustingly fat"...merely a little broad in the beam...the active, hearty kind of fat man, that athletic bouncy type that's nicknamed Fatty or Tubby, with a tendency to be barrel- shaped' (Orwell, 2001: 18). Yet his acceptance of an easy social persona, an identifiable being, is fraught, as he constantly returns to the uncomfortable limitations of being considered a visibly definable 'type': 'Every fat man's labelled as a matter of course. I'm the type that people automatically slap on the back and punch in the ribs, and nearly all of them think I like it' (Orwell, 2001: 17). There is a distinct problem of legibility here, one that echoes the broader perception of the suburb, as Bowling's perception of himself, from the inside so to speak, does not match others' external view of him as obese: 'I'm fat, but I'm thin inside' (Orwell, 2001: 20). Bowling has this inner core of being not seen from the outside. Again, this links with the problem already discussed above (p.93 above) of suburban realism. Here, for Bowling, the surface and depths do not connect. The depths, here the emotions, are absent. What is important about this uncomfortable gap between appearance and reality in this 'streamlined' modern suburban version of England is the fact the nothing here is really legible.

Bowling's suburb is constantly characterised in terms of duplicity. For Bowling, the modern suburbanised England is an ersatz one, part of his nostalgic desire to return to the past is to relive the experience of simple truths, where surface and deep realities visibly coincide. In the suburb, 'nothing is real...except gas bills, school fees, boiled cabbage and the office' (Orwell, 2001: 246). Bowling experiences a horrible insight into contemporary falseness at a flashy Milk Bar, that familiar locus of the technological contemporary world: (shiny, functional, American), where 'everything is slick and shiny and streamlined' (Orwell, 2001: 22). Bowling orders a Frankfurter. Again, duplicity here is centred on an awareness of inside (depths) not agreeing with the outside (surface), in this case the literal breaking of the Frankfurter's membrane separating, but also linking, the two. Bowling bites the Frankfurter's rubbery skin and 'suddenly - pop! The thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear' (Orwell, 2001: 23). 'I just couldn't believe it' Bowling continues. 'Then I rolled my tongue around it and had another try. It was fish!' (Orwell, 2001: 23). The sensation here is that Bowling 'had bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was made of' (Orwell, 2001: 23).

Surfaces here offer no clue to a reading of the essence of the modern world. In this instance the 'depths (the 'meat' inside) turn out to be semiotically unrelated to what the Frankfurter's surface appears to promise. It should be meat, but it is fish. It is not just a surface. It is a semiotic falsehood.

Bowling's suburban world, then, is a fake, a semiotic illusion. Surface signs are deceptive, 'everything is made out something else' (Orwell, 2001: 22). Bowling is clearly experiencing semiotic anxiety here, wresting with signs, incapable of interpreting and fitting himself to environment. Bowling cannot even differentiate between inner and outer, self and other, his inner 'thin' self, contrasting to his external reception as clichéd 'fat man'. To counter this anxiety Bowling goes in search of the true, of the real, England, where appearance may correspond to reality. This is a real place both out there in the present (in this case, Oxfordshire) and also located firmly in the past. Orwell addresses here a key element of nostalgic longing; the desire to supplement a terrifying experience of *loss* in the present. Nostalgia addresses a loss in the present that can only be answered by an appeal to the perceived fullness of the past. Yet, at the same time it must be admitted that Bowling's yearning is not straightforwardly nostalgic. He is actually very clear-eyed about the temptations of the past. Of the notion that there was a 'permanent summer' before the war, Bowling is 'quite aware that that's a delusion' (Orwell, 2001: 37). In fact, 'life was harsher. People worked harder, lived less comfortably and died more painfully' (Orwell, 2001: 109). He suspects the past may not correspond to his dream of the past. 'Bowling finds', Lynne Hunter argues, 'that his own nostalgia is completely misplaced' (Hunter, 212).

Nostalgia here, a desire for meaning and belonging, is impossible. Just as the suburb is illegible because it crushes spatial dimensions and flattens the individual, so also does it dismantle meaningful temporal relations. [28] Bowling's failed nostalgia here is part of a wider instability with time; he never fully inhabits temporal zones. For Bowling, temporal certainty has an unsettling tendency to dissolve; 'to outward appearances I was … fat and fortyish, with false teeth and bowler, but inside me I was Georgie Bowling, age seven…of 57 High St, Lower Binfield' (Orwell, 2001: 28). Bowling falls through gaps in the present; 'some chance sight or sound or smell sets you going' (Orwell, 2001: 27). Here the past is not reproduced in the present, rather you are transplanted there: 'you're actually in the past' (Orwell, 2001: 27). Bowling is not anchored to the present and shifts involuntarily between different epochs. For

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[28] Etymologically, 'nostalgia' is a compound, consisting of *nóstos* meaning "returning home" and *álgos*, meaning "pain, ache".

Bowling, chance encounters with the name 'King Zog', combined with 'some sound in the traffic or the smell of horse dung or something' effects the unwilled return to the past (Orwell, 2001: 191). Everywhere in the novel the present is insubstantial, and ghostly. Bowling himself has double vision, seeing the present infiltrated by the past; 'The past was sticking out into the present' (Orwell, 2001: 196). Bowling's perception of the present Lower Binfield, his former childhood home, is haunted by powerful memories of the past. 'It was as if I was looking a two worlds at once, a kind of thin bubble of the thing that used to be, with the thing that used to actually exist shining through it' (Orwell, 2001: 191).

For Bowling, then, Lower Binfield both exists and does not exist. Bowling meticulously plans a *real* trip, in his car, to search for the England of his past, but never gets there. The place of his memory has disappeared. It has, in fact, been displaced by modern suburban developments. Place here becomes a confusing palimpsest, revealing traces of the town's past and of his particular memory of that past, overlaid by present conditions. The suburb has made the past illegible. All this temporarily exists in a semi-obscured multi-layered present; 'you remember it in great detail and you remember it all wrong' (Orwell 2001, 187). Lower Binfield's suburbanisation is the concrete manifestation of these unstable spatial and temporal relations. Just as Bowling's inhabitation of his alienating suburb triggers a search for a more stable, pre-suburban, version of England, so his boyhood home, a former village, is now itself a suburb of a small town. Bowling finds himself overwhelmed by the 'enormous river of brand-new houses', the 'big council housing estate', the 'houses, houses, everywhere, little raw red houses' (Orwell, 2001: 191). Horribly, it resembles those prison-like places that have no chance of temporal ghosting, no memorial echoes- the new suburbs. His old village is now just like the suburbs of thirties Greater London that have recently 'suddenly swelled up like balloons... Hayes, Slough, Dagenham and so forth' (Orwell, 2001: 192).

Just as modernity in its suburban guise, means that the past lacks meaning for Bowling, so also does the future. Bowling's nightmare is also the absence of a future, or, more precisely a future which is merely an endless repetition of the present from which no-one can escape. *Coming up for Air* is full of the dread of coming catastrophe, of time coming to a stop: 'It's all going to happen ...the bad times are coming' (Orwell, 2001: 230). The present time of thirties modernity, has run out of future. This future just means that the worst that can happen *will* happen: 'it's all going to happen: All the things at the back of mind, the things you're terrified of' (Orwell, 2001: 238). This relentless extension of the present into perpetuity is the core of Bowling's modern trauma, and the reason he fails in his search for an older England.

There is no longer either a detectable purposive temporal flow, what we might call progress, and yet neither is there an endless futurity. Again these losses, the end of progress and the end of time, it could be argued, are partly a result of the final trauma of the Great War. This war was 'perhaps the last to be conceived', argues Paul Fussell 'as taking place within a seamless purposeful "history" involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future' (Fussell, 1980: 21). Bowling seems to think this too: After the 'unspeakable idiotic mess' of the Great War, Bowling suggests, you couldn't 'go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable' (Orwell, 2001: 127).

The future as merely endless continuation of the blighted present hits Bowling as he returns back to his London suburb at journey's end. He is trapped here in his suburb; cut off from the meaningful contextualisation of a shared national past, and alienated even from the history of his own life. This is the suburb's illegibility for Bowling. He is without temporal or spatial co-ordinates here and stuck fast in an unending present without progress. On his way back Bowling has a kind of anti-vision, observing the dull, material, reality of 'miles and miles of ugly housing' in suburban Greater London, with 'people living dull, decent lives inside them' (Orwell, 2001: 239). This seems so stolidly immovable that it cannot possibly be destroyed: 'The bombs aren't made', he argues 'that could smash it out of existence' (Orwell, 2001: 239). The drab everyday reality of suburban everydayness, that 'Monday morning feeling when everything seems bleak and sensible' closes in 'like a red brick prison' and seems to close of all possibility of a future (Orwell, 2001:239). 'What's the future got to do with chaps like you and me?' he asks, 'Holding down our jobs – that's our future' (Orwell, 2001: 240).

The representation of a social space that cannot be fully known, integrated into a meaningful personal biography or even into broader narratives of national identity, will be developed in the next chapter. In particular the perceived duality of the suburb, that which is both familiar and yet also unknown, as we have seen in George Bowling's anxious experience of the suburb, attests to what I shall call, in the next chapter, the suburban uncanny. The uncanny suburb presents a semiotic crisis; it is space that is both known and unknown, familiar yet strange. This kind of suburban representation occurs in suburban writing of the post Second World-War period.

Chapter Four

Suburban Strangeness: Post-War Suburbia 1945-1980

Introduction

I have argued so far that the suburb presents a crisis for modes of legibility. In Chapter 3 I argued how, as a prime site of social modernity, the suburb is presented in much fiction as an uncertain object of knowledge. I noted Virginia Woolf's critique of the 'Edwardian' project of aiming to see newer suburban realities. Woolf questions the material basis (the emphasis on the 'very fabric of things), the indelible links between surfaces and depths on which realism depends, and how new techniques would be needed to capture suburban realities. Stevie Smith presented the suburb as a shifting, uncertain terrain that cannot be reduced to easy stereotypes (Smith, 1980). Later, in the thirties, we noted how Orwell characterised the suburb as home of modern falseness, the material surface not reflecting the reality of submerged realities (Orwell, 2001). The suburb here is physically insubstantial, constantly threatened with spatial and temporal dissolution. This gap between outside and inside, and a paradoxical lack of material substance, is centred on the body of Orwell's suburban anti-hero. We noticed that there is a *catastrophic lack of fit between suburbanites and environment* and this mismatch happens quite frequently at the level of the somatic. I have also argued how such environmental illegibility is often manifest in suburban fiction as a problem with materiality, and, in particular, with the materiality of the body. Here difficulties with signifying systems, signs and referents, are predicated on a problematic materiality.

The remote, private and domestic suburb cannot be prised open and scrutinised ('unroofed' as both Dickens and Conan Doyle have it). I have already argued, (in chapter 3 above) how, using the insights of James Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, the suburb becomes a significant site of a semiotic problem of modernity, a problem around *legibility* (Scott, 1998). Scott describes one branch of mid-century 'authoritarian high modernism' as that drive, epitomised above all by the grand schemes of Le Corbusier, to 'redesign cities in order to make them more legible' (Scott, 1998: 54). In short this involves overcoming any initial spatial unintelligibility, for example the confusing street patterns of unplanned villages or towns, or 'awkward' natural

landscape features in order to 'make urban geography transparently visible from without' (Scott, 1998: 54). Legibility (and control) could be achieved, by planning, segregation, use of a grid, standardisation of land-use, by making lived space readable from an external viewpoint. Clearly the suburb, with its emphasis on forms of economic, social and gender segregation and specialisation, can be viewed as part of modernity's program of building such rationalised built space. This is especially true of the period under review, from 1945 to 1980, where planned suburbs, 'Corporation' suburbs and housing estates and New Towns, were increasingly coming to be seen as antidotes to the formless expansion of pre-war 'speculative' suburbs. Patrick Abercrombie's *1944 Greater London Plan (borrowing from Ebenezer Howard (Howard, 1965) and Patrick Geddes's radial 'Garden City' (Geddes, 1915)* is based on the rigorous spatial demarcation of separate metropolitan functions, transport links and the movements of population.

Crucially, however, as we have seen, this legibility from the outside has no bearing on lived experience on the ground; 'there is no guarantee' Scott reminds us, that such rationalising homogeneity, simplification and use of the straight line actually 'works for its citizens' (Scott, 1998: 56). The modern state thus encourages new forms of knowledge (about individuals, property and land) but what is important and legible to the state is increasingly illegible from the ground. This produced, as we saw in suburban writing in the previous chapter, a fictional response that emphasises strangeness. What *is* needed on the ground, as Fredric Jameson makes clear in his account of postmodern spaces is some kind of cognitive mapping. This is the attempt to make sense of a bewildering environment 'the alienated city is above all a space win which people are unable to map (in their own minds)…their positions in the urban totality' (Jameson, 1991: 51). The cognitive map is thus called upon to 'enable a situational representation' for the individual of that larger totality of 'society's structures as a whole' (Jameson, 1991:51) which cannot readily be seen. Where this personal mapping fails to make the modern suburb legible, as as we have noted above where the individual suburbanite fails to read or comprehend their environment, we can term a cognitive deficit.

The present chapter moves to reading suburban fiction from the 1950s to the 1970s and argues that the inability to see and make the post- war suburb legible results in fictional representations of the suburb where that place appears as troublingly unknowable and as very *strange*. What is new in the period's suburban fictional portraits of the suburb is an anxious awareness of its intangible nature. I will further analyse these particular fictional responses by examining the perception of the suburb as strange in three directions: first the suburb as a

particular version of uncanny metropolitan space, then London as spectral site of a dissolving empire, and finally as a fantasy space, a suburban imaginary heavily mediated created by an increasingly sophisticated popular culture. The three areas of fictional work that I shall discuss below, in genres of science fiction, postcolonial London writing, and work by and about teenage (London) suburban subcultures, all share a sense that the physical fabric of the suburb is unstable and prone to dissolution. What I call suburban oddness, the uncanny double perception of familiarity with unfamiliarity, is figured in fiction, then, as a problem with material fact. This chapter plots a crisis in post- Second World War British culture around what can be considered objectively real or materially substantial. This anxiety over the material can be mapped onto my tripartite structure. Thus in the fifties we see the threat of nuclear obliteration, which is followed, around the same time by the dissolution of London as substantial authoritative political and cultural centre of a global empire. Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s, we encounter the appropriation and reassembly, in various pop subcultures, of signs of 'Englishness' which are ripped from their specific historical contexts.

In Section One then, 'Suburban Apocalypse', I discuss a version of suburban uncanniness that involves material dissolution. The safe, banal suburb, the great achievement of ordered and modern ways of living, is, paradoxically, also the focus of visions of the violent obliteration of the material world. A gap is opened up between, on the one hand, the apparent material solidity of suburbia and its visibly reassuring familiarity, and, on the other, its imminent destruction. This tension produces an uncanny sense of unsettling unfamiliarity lodged within the familiar. This kind of uncanny reversal can be found in abundance in suburban-set science fiction. The uncanny element here is the dramatic (re)appearance of what was secretly there all along. This kind of fiction does this in two ways. Science fiction stresses both the *weirdness* of the suburban normal, where the everyday banal contains a current of abnormality and also, to reverse the terms, the peculiar sense of normality that can inhabit the bizarre. We have already seen this latter in H. G. Wells, in his 1888 *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 2005b) where inter-planetary warfare rages in East Sheen. An extreme version of the first uncanny mode, the dislocating strangeness of the suburban banal, can be found in British disaster fiction, more precisely the 'cosy catastrophe' of the fifties, often set in London and its suburbs. In work by John Christopher and especially John Wyndham (*The Day of the Triffids*) apocalyptic events manifest themselves as slight variations of dull material suburban reality (Wyndham, 1973). The other type of suburban uncanny informs the work of J. G. Ballard. Here, particularly *The Unlimited Dream Company* (Ballard, 1990), the predictable and settled material substance of the everyday suburb is utterly transformed into

new, non-material forms of psychic and sexual energy. In one the apocalypse is suburbanised; in the other the suburb is transfigured. In both the suburb is dematerialised.

Section Two, 'Search for a Centre', relates the struggle to interpret the strange landscapes of Greater London in work from the late fifties by new Commonwealth arrivals to London. Here, in work by Caribbean writers Sam Selvon *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon, 1985), George Lamming *The Emigrants* (Lamming, 1954) and V. S. Naipaul *Mr Stone and the Knight's Companion* (Naipaul, 1963), *The Mimic Men* (Naipaul, 1969) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (Naipaul, 1987) there is an uncomfortable disjunction between the expected imperial centre and the reality of the peripheral London actually encountered. The journey from (former) colonial periphery to cosmopolitan centre, from cultural marginalisation to the centre of the literary imagination (for these writers London is *always* a literary formation derived from Evelyn, Johnson, Dickens and Eliot) always ends, inevitably, in disappointment. This disjuncture is neatly captured in the diary of a 1955 visit to London by Indian writer Nirad Chaudhuri. For three months, he notes, 'a persistent trance-like effect never left me, and nothing seemed quite real' (Chaudhuri, 1989: 13). Again, the suburb presents itself as insubstantial, as not quite real. This sense of doubling and strangeness is increased by immigrants' experience of the not-quite London, in the neglected suburbs, popular destinations for Commonwealth arrivals, in places like Brixton Croydon, Shirley and Hounslow. A common figure of such writing, particularly in Naipaul, the main focus of the chapter is the spectrality of London. It is weightless and transparent.

This curious material insubstantiality of the suburbs is also a common feature of Hanif Kureishi's 1970s -set novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Kureishi, 1990).This is the focus of the Third Section, 'Suburban Pop'. Here, Kureishi records a second-generation Asian experience of rejecting the sober, dull suburbs, (an attractive proposition for hard working, family-orientated, law-abiding Asian immigrants) and fantasising instead a city of pleasure. Here, the illegibility of urban and suburban spaces creates a need to try and imaginatively construct a meaningful life-world. Yet, again, these particular *versions* of suburb and city (the boring and familial vs. hedonistic and deviant) prove to be lacking in substance. They are highly unstable and also prone to contradiction and reversal. Because suburb and city stand revealed in the novel as creations of pop-cultural commodification, neither has any substantial identity. In fact created suburb and city swap roles: supposedly dreary Bromley is actually full of eccentricity, deviance, and artifice: the city is grimly hierarchical, restrictive and money-

obsessed. The suburb, and the suburban individual, as insubstantial and unstable pop artifice will be the focus of this section.

Section One – Suburban Apocalypse

The paradoxical familiarity *and* strangeness of the suburban scene can be clearly observed in some photographs taken in the late 1950s and early 1960s and collected by Martin Parr in his 1999 collection *Boring Postcards* (Parr, 1999). This retro-chic package presents postcards, originally produced (and mailed) in the late 50s/early 60s, commemorating vistas that are, to the contemporary eye, either absurdly banal or bizarrely optimistic. The cards depict scenes, and deliver a charge from the fact that they present the antithesis of what would normally be considered a worthwhile postcard view. Celebrated here are banal suburban street scenes (*Croydon Underpass*; *Shopping Precinct, Stevenage*), road features (*Traffic, A40; Motorway, Knebworth*) and the new, shiny, landmarks of everyday modern build (*Bus Station, Exeter; Sandy Bay Caravan Park*) (Parr, 1999).

Viewed today the postcards are, of course, far from boring; they even generate an avid curiosity suggesting a time when modern cityscapes and suburbs were new, empty, and rich with promise. The familiar everyday presented in the cards, with the additional layer of time past is stressed and thereby made unfamiliar. The normal here is pregnant with the promise of the abnormal. The normal, somewhat like the reality of contemporary CCTV images, is *too* normal. This sense of suburban normality's troubling core of abnormality also appears clearly in Ian Nairn's 1955 illustrated polemic, *Outrage,* a neat summary of post-war anti suburban attitudes. Here, architectural critic Nairn terms British suburbia, 'Subtopia'. Subtopia, Nairn informs us, is a 'mean and middle state', an 'even spread of abandoned aerodromes and faked rusticity, wire fences, traffic roundabouts, gratuitous notice-boards and Things in fields' (Nairn, 1955: 451). Nairn produces images of suburban streetlamps, road signs, municipal flowerbeds and by-pass verges, which perfectly display, like Parr's, postcards, the simultaneous banality and weirdness of the suburb.

One way to theorise the effect of these strange suburban scenes is to describe them as uncanny. The uncanny, of course, is the *unheimlich*, the unhomely. Uncanniness evicts us from the certainty of belonging, of being at home. Cultural geographer Anthony Vidler, employing Freud's influential formulation, describes the uncanny as the 'fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners... to suddenly become defamiliarised, derrealised, as if in dreams (Vidler, 1992: 7). Vidler, working against the grain of much

literary work[29] which sees the uncanny as a largely urban phenomenon, identifies this uncanny feeling as better suited to *suburban* locations. The suburban 'uncanny erupts', Vidler argues, 'in empty parking lots, around abandoned or run-down shopping malls, in... the wasted margins and surface appearances of post-industrial culture' (Vidler,1992: 3). Michael Bracewell agrees, noting that the 'darkest alley in the seediest district of the biggest city will lack the sheer oddness of suburban neatness' (Bracewell, 2002: 109). The suburb uncanny here speaks of an unsettling illegibility. The familiar, tidy suburban landscape does not speak. It seems to be saying *something* (like the automaton Olympia in Hoffmann's uncanny tale, 'The Sandman', explored by Freud in 'The Uncanny') but does not speak *meaningfully* (Freud, 1955). This is where the suburban banal becomes odd, apparently freighted with meaning, yet silent. This is the oddly pregnant silence we experience in Parr's postcards and Nairn's photographs.

In a useful essay, 'Apocalypse in Suburbia' Mikita Brottman, traces the development of this particular fictional trope of the uncanny (Brottman, 2003). She identifies the sense that beneath the familiar and cosy exterior there lurk unspeakable extremes. If the suburban surface is presented in fiction (as a trope of the project of literary realism itself) as unreadable, then suburban apocalypticism goes further and hints that this bland surface actually covers an awful abyss. Brottman identifies a shift in the popular perception of suburbia, from pre- and post-war affluent and aspirant utopianism to a later obsession, in the 1960s and 1970s, with excavating the murky depths of suburban depravity. This shift involves a move, in its popular construction, from a place of cosy, secure, domesticity in the fifties, to the garish and over-determined site of eighties' serial killers, family murders and school massacres.

Brottman is concerned with the explosive shifting of a seemingly bland and peaceable orderly surface into its extreme opposite, into apocalypse. Modernity is, of course, ripe for uncanny frisson; the planned and ordered surface slips to reveal traces of a remainder of the pre-modern past. The products of modernity are most freighted with the uncanny, machines (especially automata and robots), buildings, built environments, communication devices. The ultimate expression of the secret abnormality of the placid surface of suburban normality is the figure of apocalypse itself. Apocalypse is the ultimate revelation, the seeing beyond. Etymologically, it is the 'lifting of the veil', the revelation of God in the world. If seeing and

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[29] See in particular Richard Lehan's *The City in Literature*. The nineteenth century metropolis of literature, Lehan writes, is a 'City beset by apprehensive nervousness, haunted by a sense of the eerie and ghostlike -the uncanny' (Lehan, 89).

knowing are difficult in the suburb, the surface not leading to any meaningful connections, then we can go further and argue that the apocalyptic suburb blows this apart. More than just a sign, or clue to what lies underneath, in the apocalypse the underneath seethes, the 'inside' explodes. The shocking emptiness of Parr's bleached, overexposed, depopulated suburban images, their evacuated banality of the everyday, also hints at some kind of imminent apocalypse; they transmit to the contemporary viewer disturbing echoes of the dead, depopulated, frozen landscapes of post-nuclear obliteration.

The fictional trope of the alien strangeness of the suburbs, that paradoxical combination of the oddness of the familiar (and the eventual domestication of the bizarre) with the ultimate threat of apocalypse, is a common feature of post–war British science fiction. I want here to discuss work first by John Wyndham, and then by J. G. Ballard, which address the uncanny strangeness of the suburb in apocalyptic terms. They treat the uncanny very differently. Where Wyndham tends to stress the relative normality of the strange (the core 'cosiness' of the catastrophe), Ballard reverses these terms and pressures the suburban ordinary, until it releases its inner weirdness, the strangeness at the heart of the everyday. Both versions of the uncanny here, of course, emphasise the core business of the uncanny, the sense of not being at home.

John Wyndham's best-selling 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids* starts with a minor disorientation that presages a major shift in reality. Indeed, the drastic 'showing forth' of the apocalypse is often triggered, in much suburban-set science fiction, by minutely small changes (Wyndham, 1973). As critic Pierre Carrere notes of a similar device common in Philip K. Dick's science fiction, 'someone is struck by some small, utterly insignificant detail, perhaps some little thing out place, and realizes that something is not right' (Carrere, 2004: 37). The almost imperceptible small detail may presage a huge change in reality, an uncanny sensation of 'something not being quite right'. In this novel, the 'something' is a glimpse of the suburb itself, as London's urban centre becomes uncannily *suburbanised*. The city here becomes a problem for seeing and sense-making. Awaking groggy and bandaged from an eye operation, the novel's hero, Bill Masen, also can't hear anything: 'when a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere' (Wyndham 1973: 7). Uncanny silence, here, is the noticeable thing that sticks out, it is the first indicator the narrator has that this day could turn out to be 'the end of the world' (Wyndham 1973: 7). An uncanny quietness pervades the descriptions of London: 'There was nothing to be heard…such a quietness held everything as cannot have

been known in those parts for a thousand years' (Wyndham, 1973: 23). The new, post-apocalyptic world is 'disturbing' because it is slightly *and* yet at the same time hugely different, 'mysteriously different' (Wyndham, 1973:9). Masen finds this new world disorientating because it looks so much like the old one and yet it demands new responses, new forms of interpretation: 'There was a feeling that as long as I remained *my* normal self, things...might return to *their* normal' (Wyndham, 1973:53). Masen does not want to make the transition from the old to new order, cannot, for instance, move from law-abiding shopper to uncivilised looter: 'the moment I stove in one of those sheets of plate glass I should leave the old order behind me for ever' (Wyndham, 1973: 53). His greatest challenge at first is believing that the present is real at all. The new is bizarre because it is very much like the old world, only within a catastrophically shifted basic reality.

Wyndham's novel fits into the particular scheme of the so-called 'cosy catastrophes', so termed, dismissively, by Brian Aldiss in his history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree* (Aldiss, 1973). Aldiss includes in his cosy catastrophists, along with Wyndham, John Christopher (especially *The Year of the Comet*, 1955, *The Death of Grass* 1956, *The World in Winter*, 1962) and American George Stewart's Earth *Abides* (1949). Christopher Priest, in turn, adds Aldiss himself to the 'cosy' list, particularly *Greybeard* 1964 (in Parrinder, 1979). 'Cosiness' works by offering a contemplation of great danger but viewed from a safely remote position. In British fifties science fiction, the disaster brings massive disruption on a global scale but also retains reassuring elements of everyday life. The disasters depicted here are cosy because they transform apocalypticism into the familiar and the domestic; even at the end of the world familiar everyday routine continues. Uncanniness is domesticated here. Wyndham, suggests Christopher Priest, uses many of H.G. Wells' 'best literary devices – especially the almost surreal juxtaposition of the familiar and reassuring against the exotic and menacing' (Priest, 1979: 194). The disaster is normalised, and made safe by bringing out its core of familiar, even enjoyable, elements. Survivors tend to have a fairly good time (at least at first), taking what they want, in an exciting depopulated, new world full of possibilities. In John Wyndham's 1953 novel *The Kraken Wakes,* for instance, the world is catastrophically drowned by melting polar ice caps. One character responds by noting the 'wretched summer we've been having; things cancelled...Wimbledon may have to be washed out altogether' (Wyndham, 1970: 194). This novel's central surviving couple, fortunate to survive the terrifying rising floods, are nicely holed up in Selfridges, having the top floors to themselves. The 'essence of the cosy catastrophe', as Aldiss points out, is that 'the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking)

while everyone else is dying off' (Aldiss, 1973: 294). Quite differently from Ballard, as discussed below, there is here no total global breakdown nor disintegration of the human self

We can argue that the looming apocalypse in *The Day of the Triffids*, the unsettling normalisation of everyday life, *is* a kind of suburbanisation. The subtle changes the Triffid invasion bring to the bustling city are in themselves forms of suburbanisation, that normality but with a latent menace. 'I can't believe it' exclaims one character, surveying curiously unchanged Russell Square, 'it can't all be going…going…going. This is some kind of dream. Tomorrow…the red buses will be roaring over there, crowds will be scurrying along the pavements. A world doesn't just end like this' (Wyndham, 1973: 111). The uncanniness of the disaster scene, familiar and strange, is suburban insofar as it is *illegible*. Here, the everyday view from the ground does not correspond to what is known of the larger picture; it may be the end of the world but this cannot be personally registered. Just like the suburbs we have been exploring, in disaster London nothing much happens and nobody knows anything: yet there is an unsettling sense that this is not the whole truth.

In this London, then, like the suburb, doubleness produces an unbearable normality occasionally punctuated by flashes of the bizarre. 'Normal' street scenes are punctuated by brief outbreaks of violence as blinded Londoners scavenge for food. It is 'a grim business without chivalry' Masen notes, 'as they were already fast losing ordinary restraints' (Wyndham, 1973: 28). It is the slip between such banal normality, nothing happening, and then sudden irruptions of the strange, that most discomfits Masen. The apocalypse is presented here not as grand ending but as weirdly excessive fumbling and *quietness*. The Triffids, rather than being read as symbols of the revenge of meddled Nature on proud techno-science, can be read as a form of suburban vengeance. The city becomes quieter, neater and depopulated. It is traffic-free, spacious, and fresher, full of wildlife and, of course, greener. The suburb here is performing its main duty, bringing the countryside back to the city. The Triffids, we can argue, present the return of the suburb as alien, exotic and threatening, but also of course they bring a destabilising unreadability.

The Triffids themselves are , of course, a suburban phenomena. They originate (though their real origin may have been in Soviet science) thrive and reproduce in thousands of suburban back gardens. Masen himself (who is intimately connected with the Triffids' fate), hails from a 'southern suburb of London' where his family had a small house, and where 'there was not a lot to distinguish us from the ten or twelve million other people' who lived around London

(Wyndham, 1973: 24). Recalling his own childhood he hits the authentic suburban note of apparent tranquillity broken by sudden irruption of violence. Playing quite happily in the safety of his suburban back garden, he remembers that 'something from nowhere hit me one terrific slam, and knocked me out' (Wyndham, 1973: 40). Triffids thrive and reproduce precisely where they were 'growing up quietly and unobtrusively' (Wyndham, 1973: 24). This stereotypical suburban feature, the dominated and domesticated wilderness of the garden, mutates and turns on its owners

The Triffids represent a kind of unknowable and uncertain suburban otherness. It is striking, Masen muses, 'how odd and somehow foreign the first ones appeared to us' (Wyndham, 1973: 37). They are hybrid creature on a number of levels. They, of course, horribly erode the clear boundaries of species classification, being plants that are mobile and carnivorous, showing evidence of intelligence and communication. This uncannyness is increased as the Triffids threaten a zombification of the city. London's shuffling blinded survivors appear as both living and dead, lacking all spark of sociality and individuality, and stumbling as 'if they were parts of a single mechanism' (Wyndham, 1973: 135). Masen notes that these individuals without individuality appear in London as soon as the night of the comets has finished, 'a tight-packed mob of men and women, in their nightclothes, milling slowly and helplessly around' (Wyndham, 1973: 21). The zombie-figures here, blinded, starving, half-dead 'constantly colliding on the pavements and in the narrow streets', can be read as a suburban figures (Wyndham, 1973: 25). [30] The zombie of course, is the individual without individuality or soul, the animated corpse that hovers between life and death, the individual immersed in swarm life. The zombie marks a physical pseudo-embodiment of the fearful anonymous mass of London suburbs.

Significantly, the Triffids, as suburban agents who make the city unreadable, have as their main weapon the ability to attack sight. As the novel opens, having regained his sight and emerged from a central London hospital, Masen, desperate to make sense of this new world, has to chose which direction to take, where to find meaning. To 'the left, through miles of suburban streets, lay the open country; to the right, the West End of London' (Wyndham, 1974: 52). Masen turns right, towards the city centre, as part of an instinct to 'seek familiar places' and because of a feeling that here there 'may be more authority' (Wyndham, 1973: 52). In his search for a legible London Masen is 'still magnetically drawn toward the old

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[30] This is the premise of the 2004 suburban-set Zombie comedy film *Shawn of the Dead*. Here, a north London suburb is overrun by staggering flesh-eating zombies. Also, like the suburbanisation of the city, this is a twisted normality: in the suburb no *one notices* that zombies are on every street.. It is much like an average suburban day.

centre of things' (Wyndham, 1973: 55) as he heads towards Piccadilly, even though that centre no longer exists. At first Central London seems to offer more salvation, as Masen finds food and shelter, but then order breaks down as the suburban masses, the zombies, appear in numbers. The scavenging suburbanites, the zombie masses, have moved in and are the unwanted elements that impinge on the exclusivity of the cosy catastrophe. In a similar situation of metropolitan disaster, in *The Kraken Wakes*, Wyndham observes that 'gradually, lawlessness seeped inwards from the suburbs and the sense of breakdown became inescapable' (Wyndham, 1970: 217). Suburban intrusion here suggests that lawlessness is a failure, beneath the surface, of reliable modes of signification.

If Wyndham and the cosy tradition place an unstable normality at the heart of the disaster, then much of J. G. Ballard's fiction aims for the opposite effect: the uncanny weirdness at the heart of the suburban ordinary. Ballard's novels are initially set in the most ordinary and banal of modern spaces. His preferred peripheral and unpeopled landscapes are similar to the ones in Parr's and Nairn's photographs: cars, motorways and bypasses, service stations, airports, anonymous building developments - and suburbia. Roger Luckhurst begins his study of Ballard, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, with an account of the area around Heathrow airport as seen from a plane. This is Shepperton, Ballard's notorious long-time suburb (bizarre counterpart to his childhood in suburban Shanghai and later in a Japanese prison camp), and those 'patterns of suburban streets' with 'swathes of tarmac and the inelegant architecture of motorway intersections' inform Ballard's work (Luckhurst, 1997: xi).

Suburban modernity in Wyndham seemingly offers an uncanny normality that is a form of horrible illegibility (nobody knows anything, and survivors eventually head out for the pre-modern countryside to start completely different lives). Wyndham's suburb brings a normality that proves to be a form of unreadability, literally with a sting in its tail. As rational, planned and technologically advanced, the suburban habitat does not make conventional sense for the experiencing individual. Ballard, on the other hand, presents the suburb as a site for new forms of visioning. The dull and illegible suburb becomes a visual delight. Faced with the illegibility of the modern here, Ballard pressures the suburban habitat and provokes a *surreal* response, evoking sudden glimpses of 'pre-modern' lives, communal and sensuous. The very featureless banality of the modern suburb produces an abundance of its disavowed, uncanny supplements.

Here I want to discuss in some detail Ballard's 1979 novel, *The Unlimited Dream Company*, which expressly addresses the suburb as epitome of dull normalised modernity, which, on the surface, makes no sense to its inhabitants at all (Ballard, 1979). Yet this surface normality retains latent hints that not everything is so straightforward. 'Ballard', argues Luckhurst, 'revels in the banality of the Western suburbs' (Luckhurst,1997: xi). In this novel the drab suburb of Shepperton (Ballard's home for over fifty years) makes it the ideal place for a series of bizarre transformations. The apparently placid and everyday suburban landscape produces a surreal efflorescence of exotic or malevolent violence and sexual extremes. Everything that the modern suburb is designed to eliminate, violence, unpredictability, the community beyond the family, sexual extremes, here uncannily resurfaces. The uncanny here, let us recall, is the unsettling strangeness that always resides at the heart of the seemingly normal, the 'fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners... to suddenly become defamiliarised, derrealised, as if in dreams' (Vidler,1992: 7). The uncanny element here is that overlooked element that later reveals itself to have been there all along.

This pressuring of the banal is, we can note, a common strategy in Ballard's work. Discussing an earlier novel, *Crash* (Ballard, 1973), with its dull suburban setting contrasted with extremes of self-mutilation, warped sexuality and death, Iain Sinclair argues that 'Ballard has taken the germ of suburban consciousness and allowed it to mutate into something subversive and strange' (Sinclair 1999a, 85). The car crash is precisely the violent, explosive act that jolts the suburban banal toward transcendent psychosexual epiphany 'the car crash can be conceived of as ...a powerful link in the nexus of sex, love, eroticism and death' (Sinclair, 1999a: 80). This is also, surely, the 'crash' of modernity.

In *The Unlimited Dream Company* the crash of a light aircraft is the catalyst for the bizarre transformations of the everyday that overwhelms suburban Shepperton. Here the uncanny sense that there must be something else beneath the orderly calm of the suburb, the uneasy sense that *something is not quite right*, is taken to extremes, as Shepperton erupts into a paradise of untrammelled desire and delight. The plane's pilot – pointedly named Blake – initially crashes into a place of 'suburban pleasantries' where the 'streets are silent in the afternoon light', where 'toys lie by the garden gate' (Ballard, 1990: 8). This is where 'people live sterile lives' and which 'seemed to be the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere' (Ballard, 1990: 35). The place consists of nothing more than a 'supermarket and shopping mall, a multi-storey car-park and filling station' (Ballard, 1990: 35). The suburb has the oneiric weirdness of already having been seen while never encountered before: 'looking

around me, I realised that I had seen these houses before. The lower floors were unfamiliar, but each of the roofs and chimneys...I recognised clearly' (Ballard, 1990: 69).

This uncanny dream-state, the sense of familiarity generated by repetition, is deeply suburban. In Shepperton, this uneasy déjà vu, the difficulty seeing the suburb properly is emphasised by the presence of extensive film studios and their manufacture of technological fantasy. The influence here of industrialised fantasy means that nothing seems substantially real. The locals are 'for ever dressing up as beefeaters or the Hanoverian infantry' (Ballard, 1990: 47). For Blake, at first, 'the placid town into which I had fallen had a distinctly sinister atmosphere', as if 'all these unhurried suburbanites were in fact actors recruited from the film studio to play their roles' (Ballard, 1990: 26). They joyfully acknowledge that Blake had succeeded in liberating their sense of inherent fantasy 'it's marvellous – you've turned Shepperton into a film set' (Ballard, 1990:132). Unavailable information about others' true self is transcended here by pure performativity as residents enact spectacle. For some residents reality and fantasy have already parted company as banal everyday is invaded by the exotic: 'safari parks, dolphinaria, stunt flying, it's all the same to them' (Ballard, 1990: 47). Blake's plunge into the river, his seeming resurrection from death, and the novel's numerous invocation of spectacle, intensify this trend toward the fantastic. 'My spectacular arrival', he muses, 'had tapped some barely formed but powerful dream' (Ballard, 1990:46).

Whereas in Wyndham suburbanisation is the failure to see and make sense of environment, here in Ballard, forms of *visioning* replace seeing. Ballard, a life-long admirer of surrealists Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, presents here forms of surrealist reasoning. Where instrumental reason alone fails to provide a convincing picture of reality for the individual, surrealism opts for opening up the full range of human imagination, the unconscious, dream states, fantasy and desire. Where the suburb, as product of modernising forces, proves illegible for the individual subject, then other meaning-making responses are needed.

Ballard's dully unreadable Shepperton is transformed by dream into a vision of exotic abundance. The banal suburb vanishes as the physical landscape is tropicalized; suddenly there is too much to see. The 'once immaculate lawns and flower-beds were overrun with tropical plants. Palmettos, banana trees and glossy rubber plants jostled for space' (Ballard, 1990: 108). Everything is illuminated by bright tropical sunlight, as exotic animals, cicadas, flamingos, macaws, all flourish. Staid and responsible suburban social patterns are transformed; 'nobody works' now and 'people leave open their front doors and stroll along

the centre of the roads' (Ballard, 1990: 108). Even standard physical laws are abolished, as people start to fly and even the dead live on.

Yet, the biggest behavioural transformation is sexual as all the senses, not just sight, are transformed and intensified. 'All my senses seemed to be magnified' Blake records, and he is 'gripped by a powerful but indiscriminate sexual urge' (Ballard, 1990: 48). Blake's proliferating priapic desire transforms the locals and infiltrates the banal spaces of the suburb. Out shopping, Sherppertonians 'gaze at their reflections in appliance-store windows, exposing their handsome bodies to washing machines and TV sets' (Ballard, 1990: 35). Blake's messianic mission to sexualise and fertilise the suburbs begins here: 'I was moving among these young women with my loins at more than half cock, ready to mount them among the pyramids of detergent packs and free cosmetic offers' (Ballard, 1990: 36). The more banal and unpromising the location the more acute the libido: at the shops, alarmingly, Blake's 'semen splashed the windows of the supermarket, streamed across the sales slogans and price reductions' (Ballard, 1990: 115).

Suburban Shepperton is registered as uncanny here also because it exists adrift between differing zones. It cannot be seen as a self-evident, given site. It has both the heightened reality and insubstantiality of dream or vision. Blake himself exists 'half-submerged, as if between two worlds' (Ballard, 1990: 214). As redemptive figure, he is simultaneously dead *and* alive. His charred corpse, noted at the novel's end, is still trapped in the wreckage of the plane; it has been there the whole time he has been at the centre of the novel's events. Blake, meanwhile, is simultaneously more than alive, an extreme force of pagan fertility, busily revitalising the suburb. The suburbanites seem to need it, as their routinised dullness is perceived as a form of deadness: 'it's not you who are alive' they tell Blake their saviour, 'but we here who are dead' (Ballard, 1990:79). Other forms of uncanny doubling proliferate everywhere in this suburb, underlining its curious existence between life and death, organic and machinic. We have already noted the fantasy element of the suburb, inseparable from its film studios. At other moments, the locals are curiously robotic: they are 'mannequins in a dream' (Ballard, 1990: 49). Elsewhere Blake observes that the locals 'had frozen in their positions...as if I had switched off their clock time' (Ballard, 1990: 52). This is the unsettling boundary of suburban zombification, stumbling between life and death, individual autonomy and herd instinct, noted above in John Wyndham's fiction.

Where Wyndham's fiction is ambivalent about the suburb, suggesting an invasive modernity that haunts the city itself, Ballard treats suburbanity as the essential modern condition. The uncanny, for Ballard, is a crucial element of this modernity. That which is eliminated by technological modernity – difference, the local and specific, the body, sexuality, the quirky recesses of the psyche – necessarily returns at some level. In the secure safety of the modern, technologically advanced suburb, Ballard is suggesting, already lie the repressed elements of its potential dissolution; fantasy, libidinousness and violence.

Blake only escapes the suburb by means of a thorough dissolution and transformation of his own material self. The suburban apocalypse here is a transfiguration as Blake and his suburban followers evade earthly gravity and become bird or angel-like. They become aerial beings of pure light, eventually escaping to a new dimension. 'Holding one another's outstretched hands', Blake finally records, 'we moved together through the sky, an immense aerial congregation' (Ballard, 1990: 208). Ballard's response to suburban illegibility is to provide new forms of surreal logic. Where the individual cannot see and negotiate their way through the suburb, the suburb is derealised and new modes of perception and being are called for.

Section Two – Search for the Centre

The uncanny normality of the post-war capital, especially its suburbs, is also a common reaction recorded by many writers on first experiencing London after migrating to the capital from former colonies in the 1950s. The capital's experienced otherness, its perceived simultaneous familiarity and oddness, is not new. 'Many writers throughout the centuries', argues Sukhdev Sandhu in his landmark study of immigrant London writing, London Calling, 'have bemoaned London's apparent absence of ballast, certainty and authority' (Sandhu, 2004: 276). This curious insubstantiality is again linked to difficulties of legibility. London's topography and architecture, the fact that it is unplanned, shapelessly extended and decentred means that it is difficult to make sense of on the ground. In addition the strange sense of unreality that occurs when legibility is compromised, London's curious unreality in the eyes of many newcomers, however and particularly those of a literary (or filmic) bent, is surely based on the fact of its prior cultural constructedness, its state of *already* having been seen, read, (or sung about) before. This doubled, ghostly city, as John McLeod argues in *Postcolonial London,: Rewriting the Metropolis* is 'fashioned at the conjunction of the

material and the imaginary'. It is uncanny, something unfamiliar yet already seen (McLeod, 2004: 8).

Writers who migrated to the metropolis from former British colonies testified to the curious insubstantiality of their new home. London, the former cultural and political centre of empire is actually objectively experienced as flimsy and uncanny. Mike Phillips, migrating to London from Guyana in the fifties, recalls that he first 'experienced a combination of familiarity and strangeness' (Phillips, 2001: 3). The city, Phillips continues, was 'familiar because I had encountered it so frequently in books, films and traveller's tales', yet it was also 'strange because the London I knew was a city which existed only in my imagination' (Phillips, 2001: 3). We have already noticed this estrangement in Nirad Chaudhuri's, reverse Forsterian travelogue *A Passage to England* (1955), where he is stunned to discover that he has 'no previous idea that things which were so familiar to me from descriptions and pictures...would become so strange and different in their three dimensions, atmosphere and personality' (Chaudhuri, 1989: 25). In *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) V. S. Naipaul notes that while he had 'come to London as to a place I knew very well', that is, from literature and films, he actually 'found a city that was strange and unknown' (Naipaul, 1987: 133). The capital's curious familiar unfamiliarity is, of course, most keenly experienced by migrants with a serious literary mission, for writers-to-be, like Naipaul, George Lamming, Doris Lessing and Janet Frame. Here, London is inseparable from its extensive literary prefiguring.

If the experience of (central) London evokes a strangeness based on its lack of coincidence with its literary figuration, then those metropolitan areas that lack 'literary coverage' altogether, the 'wrong' bits of London, are doubly estranging. These wrong areas, the places that have not featured in much London writing, are, of course, the suburbs. Suburban experience, particularly is not validated or contextualised by its appearance in cultural work. Personal experience of working class suburbia is not *worked through* by reference to fictional, historical or other prestigious cultural frameworks. Ordinary life in the suburb, particularly the post-war municipal suburb, simply does not appear much in post war fiction. Again, this returns us to Franco Moretti's point, mentioned in the Introduction, (see above p.iv) that 'without a certain kind of space a certain kind of story is simply impossible' (Moretti, 1998: 100). Indeed this invisibility of the ordinary suburb in the corpus of literary work, in a more traditionally middle-class setting, is neatly captured in Julian Barnes novel *Metroland* (Barnes, 1980). The novel relates the growing pains of two precocious, literary-minded, suburban schoolboys, Chris and Toni, in the 1960s northwest London suburbia

famously celebrated by Betjeman (Betjeman, 1958). The novel focuses largely on the disjunction between the dull and predictable (and occasionally alarming) reality of everyday suburban experience, school, commuting, family routines, boredom, and the kinds of experience the boys believe is available in an adult, cool, *urban*, place they call 'Out There Living'. This latter place is the kind of lauded reality celebrated by the boys' favoured writing, by exotic metropolitan decadents like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, poet-seers who have the capacity to transform the everyday to romantic ephinanies. The place of Metroland itself has no possible connection at all with their aesthetic interests, that is, with writing. Literature here does not connect to place. Being a *flâneur* in the suburbs, for instance, 'wasn't as easy as it sounds'; for a start 'you needed a *quai* or at the very least a *boulevard*'(Barnes,1980: 17).

And these places, dull distant suburbs like Hounslow, Croydon and numerous peripheral housing estates on one side, and the crumbling, unfashionable inner-cities of Notting Hill, Shepherd's Bush and Brixton on the other, are precisely the places where commonwealth immigrants first settled in large numbers. Nirad Chaudhuri's own excursion to the suburbs compounds his initial sense of detached unreality experienced first in London proper. This other London does not even appear in the historical archive and is therefore not a location whose direct apperception can be compared (unfavourably) to previous knowledge. 'I learned that beyond the London of history' writes Chaudhuri, 'there was another London, of whose immensity and mass, gravitation and power, I was totally unaware' (Chaudhuri, 1989: 58). The South London suburbs that Chaudhuri sees are in the wrong place. They occupy the site where the celebrated English countryside should be. 'When the car passed Elephant and Castle' Chaudhuri tells us, 'I sat up expecting to see the built up area thinning out and the famous English countryside make its appearance' (Chaudhuri, 1989:59). This does not happen and curiously the unreal London scene becomes more real as it becomes less like itself. 'But as we sped on, the unending blocks of houses became more and more solid, and I was not sure that I had left London behind even when we had passed through Bromley' (Chaudhuri, 1989: 60).

In this section I will discuss post-colonial writing from the fifties and sixties that centres on this perception of a strange and illegible suburban London. This decentred Greater London is viewed doubly, as both part of cultural and imperial node, but also as peripheral, as a colony of the centre. Writers of the period who write of the doubled unreality of the suburbs include Sam Selvon, Edward Kamau Braithewaite and George Lamming. I will focus here on V. S. Naipaul's London-based fiction which addresses the unreal and alienating experience of

migrants living in London's less mapped suburbs. His work addresses the sense of rootlessness, of loss, inauthenticity and the desperate theatricality which he claims are the lot of deracinated ex-colonial subjects and suburbanites alike. Again, Naipaul writes of the material insubstantiality of the London suburbs as they shift and dissolve.

In the post war period we can see a complex parallelism between metropolitan and colonial spaces. These two sites have always been linked, as we saw above (Chapter 2) in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, where colonial crimes return and are played out in the south London suburbs. As John Archer points out, albeit in some proto-form, 'Colonies and suburbs' points out John Archer, 'have existed almost since the beginning of organised settlement' (quoted in Silverstone, 1997: 27). Indeed the sites share a sense, Archer continues, of 'being a locale outside the settlement proper' (Silverstone, 1997:27). Both, Archer argues, share features of being places of exile and alienation, both perform different aspects of social differentiation, both seek to forge a collective (homogenous) identity, and finally both spaces are inscribed with relations of elite (centre) to non-elite (periphery).

V. S. Naipaul suggests the two sites, suburb and colony, share a dismal symmetry: political insignificance, lack of formal history and cultural tradition and an attendant sense of individual's inauthenticity. He argues that it is the *insubstantial* nature of place that is characteristic of colonial experience in his native Trinidad, the unsettling flimsiness that he tries to escape by coming to the centre, to London. This is made clear in his semi-autobiographical work *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), where (post-) colonial culture is repeatedly characterised as lightweight, contingent and unrooted. Here, this peripheral 'small colonial world', a 'small world within a world' is experience as floating free from the main current of global power (Naipaul, 1987: 137). 'History', a connectedness with a meaningful past, is also tenuous, considered 'abstract' (Naipaul, 1987: 137). 'I had no idea of history', the narrator rues, 'it was hard to attach something as grand as history to our island' (Naipaul, 1987: 137). Subsequently the narrator admits that he hardly 'knew his community; of other communities I knew even less' (Naipaul, 1987: 131). For Naipaul, both Trinidad and, later, London's periphery, lack substantive reality - both are essentially imaginary locations that produce ghostly citizens.

Naipaul's work is an outstanding example of the imaginary London that is the city of literature and other cultural representation overshadowing the encountered place itself, making the actually experienced place seem strange and unreal. For Naipaul literary London,

particularly in Dickens, is the 'real' London. It is more substantial, has more ballast and authority, is better known than the 'real' place itself could ever be. 'The London I knew or imaginatively possessed' Naipaul notes in *The Enigma of Arrival*, was the 'London I had got from Dickens' (Naipaul, 1987: 118). It 'was Dickens – and his illustrators', Naipaul points out, 'who gave me the illusion of knowing the city' (Naipaul, 1987: 119). On arrival Naipaul finds the reality 'strange and confusing' (Naipaul, 1987: 119). It is, of course, inevitable that a difference between (literary or any other) representation of place and reality should be striking. This seems true for any actual experience of a place only ever seen or read in previous representations. Nevertheless, these unwritten suburbs that these immigrants encounter go on to remain stubbornly cognitively unmappable.

Naipaul first arrives at Earl's Court. This, he soon realises, is not considered 'London'. Like the ancient, pre-war vending machines that Naipaul sees in the tube stations, still promising chocolate even though they have been empty for 10 years, this particular London has 'broken down or been superseded but remained unthrown away' (Naipaul, 1987: 121). This part of London, virtually considered a suburb by Naipaul, is rendered unreal, not because its empirical fact does not square with its literary representation, but because it doesn't have *any* prior representation. In a crucial section of the novel, Naipaul argues that this part of London is 'as strange and un-read-about as the Englishness of [Norman Douglass'] *South Wind*' (Naipaul, 1987: 123). Later Naipaul in fact discovers that Earls Court does in fact have some literary pedigree, having been the location of Patrick Hamilton's lugubrious *Hangover Square* (1941), a novel itself much concerned much with London's shady outcasts. 'If I had read a book like that' Naipaul suggests in a telling moment, 'it would have peopled the area and made it romantic and given me…some sharper sense of myself '(Naipaul, 1987: 122). Earl's Court feels uncomfortably alien, then, because it is a part of London that has not been mediated by prior literary representation. It has not been made legible and therefore does not count as a 'real' place for real people.

Naipaul's work, in fact, is infused with a melancholy sense of the inevitability of this inborn unreality of place, particularly in London. The figuring of 'real' places in literature may be vitally necessary for Naipaul's response to that place, but there is a reluctant admission that such 'literary' space may be all there ever is. The creation of 'Imagined Londons', in Pamela K. Gilbert's useful phrase, will always exceed the 'real' perceived place (Gilbert, 2000). Naipaul moves toward an articulation of the failure of language itself to create what semiotician Thomas Sebeok terms 'world modelling' (Sebeok, 1994).For Sebeok all species

are endowed with the inherited evolutionary capacity to construct a semiotic model of their meaningful (signifying) environment. For humans this model is made in nonverbal and verbal signifiers. Naipaul's work seems to be suggesting that this human capacity to produce such possible life-worlds is, in peripheral sites like suburbs and colonies, seriously limited. The failure to produce an effective world model inevitably produces for Naipaul a sense of loss and estrangement; an 'idea of ruin and dereliction, out-of-placeness' (Naipaul, 1987: 19).

It is the suburbs, in Naipaul's work, which provide an exact spatial counterpoint to the perceived personal insubstantiality and inauthenticity of his former Caribbean colonial home (Naipaul was born in Trinidad, of Indian descent). The suburbs and the colonies are the rootless haunts of the exhausted, spectral 'mimic men'. In the novel *The Mimic Men* (1969), Naipaul has Ralph Singh, recently returned from unsuccessful business and political ventures on the fictional Caribbean Island of Isabella, relocated to an anonymous South London suburban boarding house, there to write his memoirs. The location here is ideal. It has been chosen precisely because it is unremarkable, and because it allows Singh (who is in some trouble) both the anonymity and the opportunity to assume a number of roles. In this case, Singh mimics the role of the returning, retired and world-weary colonial officer, finding an anonymous, remote, untroubled location, frequently a suburban bungalow or villa, after the exertion and uncertainty of colonial high adventure. Like the homecoming British colonial, Singh self-consciously mimics the lower middle-class masses, excelling in 'living modestly and without recognition in small semi-detached suburban houses', gladly 'going out on a Saturday morning to do the shopping at Sainsbury's' (Naipaul, 1969: 8). In this suburb Singh is happy to be mistaken for a lowly 'ordinary' Caribbean migrant: 'in these lower middle class surroundings…we pass for immigrants' (Naipaul, 1969: 9). This rootless, anonymous, invisibility is crucial for Singh: a more conventional 'suburban semi-detached house' would be unbearable. 'I could not', he admits, 'pretend even to myself to be part of a community' (Naipaul, 1969: 10). Singh has 'fitted into the hotel', has 'learned to fill the day' with a number of melancholy routines: pub lunches and solitary evening meals in the hotel. He is accepted, or tolerated, 'suspicion has disappeared' (Naipaul, 1969: 246). This is 'London as the final emptiness' (Naipaul, 1969: 8). Singh prefers the extreme nowhere of 'my far-out suburban hotel' and values 'the absence of responsibility: I like the feeling of impermanence' (Naipaul, 1969: 11).

This South London suburban experience takes to extremes Singh's standard London experience. 'In a city already simplified to individual cells', he notes, 'this order is a further

simplification. It is nothing and it links to nothing' (Naipaul, 1969: 36). Singh feels he is in exile everywhere, a belief bolstered by his experience of London; 'this city in which I could never feel myself as anything but spectral, disintegrating, pointless, fluid' (Naipaul, 1969: 52). On his first visit to London as a student, Singh has lived in a decrepit boarding-house in 'the Kensington High Street area' (Naipaul, 1969: 5), a shocking and 'sombre beginning' to his London life. London appears here as threadbare, bomb-cratered, grubby, as a ghostly half-life. It is like this precisely because it has been seen before in Dickens and Eliot. He sees his first snow; grey, muffling, homogenising, disappointing; not like the real thing. He observes that this is akin to 'being left cold' by the 'object of a pilgrimage', because it is, paradoxically, 'so well known' (Naipaul, 1969: 30). The unreality of the experienced city, as noted above, hits him early, 'the god of the city was elusive', he observed, sightseeing along the Embankment,' the magic of names soon faded' (Naipaul, 1969: 19). Soon the landmarks lose aura, even names, and merely revert to being 'the river, here the bridge, there that famous building' (Naipaul, 1969: 19). This discomfiting uncoupling of place and name increases as Singh subsequently moves further and further 'out of the heart of the city'. He observes the suburbs in dismay: 'Those houses! That impression of temporary, fragile redness, of habitations set superficially on trampled fields' (Naipaul, 1969: 32).

The insubstantial suburb is ideal for the 'mimic' man, a place that can be useful camouflage. For other suburbanites suburban unreality is not so comforting. Naipaul's 1963 novel *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, suggests that the insubstantial material nature of suburbia (again unnamed, but recognisably South London) is an urgent matter for Mr Stone. Stone has difficulties anchoring himself to his isolated suburban life. 'Familiar things', we are told, begin to have for Stone the 'heightened reality, which is like unreality, that a fever gives to everyday happenings' (Naipaul 1963, 31). For Stone the suburb has this unique strangeness; it is both too real *and* distressingly insubstantial. We have noticed before that the key characteristic of fictional suburbanites, like Mr Pooter, H.G. Wells' Mr Polly, Orwell's George Bowling, is that they do not fit into their environment. This mismatch between self and environment is often manifested at a material level, more precisely the obscured boundary between self and body, body and world. We have noted sickly or unfit suburban bodies, the discord of physical awkwardness and lack of handiness. Crucially, these material crises suggest that the suburban individual does not have a fully embodied phenomenological knowledge of the world

Stone fits this suburban profile exactly; there is a problem with the material here. He is overweight, aging, and clumsy, even has false teeth. Mr Stone also has his classic suburban little-man not-fitting-in moments. He is startled to find someone else's false teeth in his bathroom and, after his new bride's house makeover, a 'sitting room he could scarcely call his own' (Naipaul, 1963:42). Later he muses that 'the order of the universe, to which he sought to ally himself, was not his order' (Naipaul, 1963:158). At one stage he stands in front of the window of a joke-shop, staring at the 'imitation glasses of Guinness, the plastic faeces, the masks, the joke teeth' (Naipaul 1963:21). The joke realia reflects Stone's ambivalent physical being; he is somehow both dead and alive, spirit and material.

This tradition in suburban fiction, emphasising the illegibility of the suburb as the failure of embodied knowledge, a sense of something having gone wrong with a perverse wayward material world, immune to human wants or skills, also at times emphasises a certain *dematerialisation*. Just as the suburban habitus (including the body itself as object) can be perversely too material (dense and recalcitrant), it is also nebulous, on the cusp of dissolution altogether. These are the two sides of Stone's feverish heightened perception of the suburb. This horribly too-material reality is also an unreality. Here, the environment, and with it Stone himself, are in danger of dissolving away entirely. 'There remained to him nothing' we are told 'to which he could anchor himself' (Naipaul, 1963: 149).

Despite his name, Stone is not solidly there. A profound sense of this dramatic sense of suburban material unreality occurs when Stone suffers alarming visions of the dissolution of his apparently material environment. While commuting into town he had often, we learn, 'mentally stripped himself of train, seats and passengers and seen himself moving four or five feet above ground in a sitting posture at forty miles an hour'(Naipaul, 1963: 52). On another occasion 'he was assailed by a vision of the city stripped of stone and concrete and timber and metal, stripped of all buildings, with people suspended next to and above and below one another' (Naipaul, 1963: 53). This is a terrifying X-Ray of the nature of suburban reality: that it is a thin cover for frail human reality. Stone has a realization, 'too upsetting to be more than momentarily examined' that everything 'solid and immutable and enduring about the world...flattered only to deceive' (Naipaul, 1963: 53). During a transport strike Stone walks miles home to his suburb from central London, and again he is struck by the flimsiness of urban reality. As he 'walked through the long, dull streets' he 'stripped the city of all that was enduring' (Naipaul, 1963: 158).

Stone has developed ways to counter this destabilising sense of suburban dematerialisation and imminent dissolution. First, he anchors himself to the everyday by carefully nurturing habits and adhering to closely observed set routines. 'He cultivated his habits' we are told, he 'shaved the right hand side of his face first; he put on his right shoe first' (Naipaul, 1963: 9). He has obsessive routines and rituals for meals, for reading the daily paper, for his daily commute. His life is given some anchoring by the reassuring reappearance of annual events, private parties, holidays, festivals. He goes to the same party 'as he did every year at this time' (Naipaul, 1963: 10). This obsession with establishing patterns in the world, and with forming habits, combines in Stone's daily observation of a tree in his garden. It is this tree, with its gradual but definite changes, altering over time along with its observer that is the means by which he 'noted the passing of time, the waxing and waning of the seasons' (Naipaul, 1963: 11) It is the 'contemplation of this living object' that 'reassured him of the solidity of things' (Naipaul, 1963: 20). Stone's unreal suburb, and his sense of personal hollowness and drift is also countered by his dramatic sudden marriage, and by devising at work (he is a company librarian) a far-fetched and (quasi-ludicrous) welfare scheme for retired employees. This scheme, self-consciously named after the fantasy of Arthurian legend ('The Order of the Knights Companion'), aims to create a community, a social support network, for far-flung former employees. He also tries to order his nebulous reality by giving it mathematical certainty and predictability; he 'liked to think in numbers' we are told, and 'I have been with Excal for thirty years' (Naipaul, 1963: 120).

Rather than seeing, there is a form of transparency. Transparency is seeing too much, a sort of seeing *through* rather than seeing something. This kind of seeing dissolves that which is supposed to be seen. In fact it is this terrifying transparency of suburban life that leads to the creation of its opposite, to a defensive opacity. Transparency, or the fear of exposure, leads to extremes of suburban domestic *secrecy*. Before having his vision of transparent London, Stone is amazed by the fact that, though his life had changed dramatically (newly married, with new purpose in life, even becoming sociable) his neighbours cannot *see* this. It is not a visible, communicable reality. Nobody in the suburb knows any of this.

Again, the suburb here is unreadable. Stone does not know his neighbours and they are instead reduced to a simple set of legible quirks and shorthand markers. Stone's inscrutable neighbours are simply named after simple visible characteristics: 'The Male', 'The Beast'. Indeed if nobody can see anything, or know what is going on for sure, then, consequently *anything* might just be happening; 'what strange things must happen behind the blank front

doors of so many houses' Stone muses (Naipaul, 1963: 53). This then is the strangeness of suburban unknowing; when we cannot see or know anything, we must create our own meaning. The creation of legibility, to try and supplement such a lack, is the focus of the next section.

Section Three - Suburban Pop

The perceived ambivalent strangeness of London's post-war suburbs is linked to their semiotic uncertainty. The suburb, as a modern built landscape, in either its planned, state-managed form, (the council estate) or as laissez-faire speculative enterprise (the private estates) lacks the necessary markers for any form of semiotically rich engaged habitation. One result of such impenetrability is that the individual, the perceiving body does not engage or interact with environment, in any sensuous way: the habitat remains uncannily other. As the basic reality of the suburbs cannot be engaged with by the perceiving individual, the suburb is represented in much fiction as materially problematic. Suburbs are presented as either oppressively physical or, alternately, as distressingly flimsy. They also represented, as we saw with Naipaul's Mr Stone, from being opaque to being horribly transparent.

The question of suburban legibility is crucial in the post war decades as mass population movements seek to make a new life in freshly built suburbs. The perceived illegibility of the newer suburban landscapes, its homogeneity, lack of distinguishing features, its very newness, were, in fact, part of contemporary critiques. In *Invincible Green Suburbs* (1997), Mark Clapson points out that the noted 'absence of social life and community feeling in unplanned English suburbs' was a standard element of anti-suburban commentary' (Clapson,1997: 143). Michael Young and Peter Willmott's influential survey *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), for instance, compared lively, communal, street-focussed East End family life unfavourably to the dull, atomised, newer suburban communities in suburbs in Essex at Dagenham and Brentwood for example, in which bombed out East End communities were rehoused after the war.

Mark Clapson argues that individuals in these suburbs actually went some way to try and build new forms of meaningful communities, developing *controlled* suburban sociability. Displaced arrivals worked to create a 'social life structured by a variety of formal and informal associations' (Clapson,1997: 156). The initially illegible suburb, which may appear to the observer as standardised and featureless, may be re-worked in certain ways to become

personally meaningful and habitable. The suburb offers a new context for age-old desires for community and sociability, for personal connection to environment, the 'collective need and aspirations of humanity writ large' (Clapson, 1997: 162). Young and Willmott 's 1960 follow-up survey, *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, a study of suburban Woodford, also examined how the influx of new arrivals attempted to recreate support networks and familial groups in the functional and blank spaces of the new suburb (Young and Willmott, 1960). Other suburban historians agree here with Clapson. Paul Oliver, recalling a forties suburban childhood, argues that suburbanites had property, security and community organisations, and were not (unlike their post-war urban counterparts) 'lonely people in a lonely crowd' (Clapson, 1997: 122). Suburban commentator Paul Barker, in important work to which I shall return in the next chapter, describes the unplanned suburb, precisely, because it is based on the 'Non-Plan', that is as product of uncoordinated, speculative and piecemeal construction, as a site where individuals must create social patterns and networks for themselves (Barker, 1999). Barker sees the suburbs as sites of amazing adaptability, where individuals seek to personalise home and habitat. If this type of suburb that Barker has is mind is *not* a product of enforced modernity, a grid of control 'imposed from above'[31], then individuals are compelled to make their own maps, to make social space meaningful for themselves. This strand of utopianism, as discussed above in chapter two, goes back to the 1880s, where Arts and Crafts-influenced design aimed to provide a complex balancing act, merging, polarities of industrial and pastoral, individual and communal, past and present.

These positive views of suburban life, particularly the warmly-remembered experiences of 1930s suburban life are important. They seem to contradict the suburban expereience presented in fiction, like Orwell's George Bowling (Orwell, 2001) who experiences a hellish entrapment and experience of profound inauthenticity which he tries to counter by revisiting his own, semi-rural, childhood. Literary representations, as opposed to non-literary reminiscence, are clearly attempting to get at another kind of truth, one concerning semiotic uncertainty in modernity. The suburbs here, as the exemplary sites of modernity, are a means to discuss deeper truths about the detachment and incomprehensibility of modern lives.

Continuing with this them of individuals trying to reshape the suburbs and make them personally meaningful, in the present section I will to argue that the suburbs, and the city, beginning in the 1950s, were subject to particular forms of reimagining and re-forming. I will address these complex issues of the recreation of city and suburb through a reading of Hanif

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[31] Barker here is excluding the planned suburb of the Ebenezer Howard type.

Kureishi's 1990 novel, *Buddha of Suburbia* (Kureishi 1990). Although its publication date breaks this chapter's chronology, it nevertheless offers a useful illustration of 1970s suburban pop-cultural motifs. In particular I want to explore how pop culture worked to produce particular versions of suburban life. Specific strands of youth pop subcultures, in this instance, punk rock, attempted to re-imagine and remap suburb and city, and make them personally legible for a new generation of suburban youth. Punk, in particular, was based on an ethos of reusing and recombining found cultural elements to cobble together a community of the like-minded in the face of an individually alienating and illegible habitat, often a suburb.

Notting Hill, for instance, is a very good example of the numerous re-imaginings that London districts would go through in the post-war period, informed by popular culture. Originally a respectable lower middle-class inner suburb (lauded by Chesterton in his 1904 novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (Chesterton, 1991) the district undergoes dramatic reimaginings. Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon, 1985) deals with the attempts of recent migrants to construct a convincing personal relation to the city, to connect their personal experiences, of racism, poverty and claustrophobia with larger narratives of London as political, cultural and imperial centre. Here Notting Hill, the inner suburb, becomes Inner City, the decaying villas and crumbling mansions subdivided and broken up, the home territory of slum landlord Peter Rackman's ruthless exploitation. This is the Notting Hill shown in Monica Dickens's panoramic 1961 novel *The Heart of London*, as the middle-classes flee the influx of crammed-in commonwealth immigrants (Dickens, 1961). Notting Hill was also the setting for Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* (MacInnes, 1995). At the end of the fifties this inner suburb/inner city boundary becomes an ideal pop-cultural fantasy space: cheap, temporary, populated by 'boys fresh from the nick, national refugee minorities, out-of-business-whores' not to mention teenagers, squatters, beatniks, rent boys, junkies and most importantly for Mac Innes' purposes, the 'absolute beginners' of the nascent pop culture industry (MacInnes, 1995: 47). Since then the area has cycled through punk, gentrification, global recognition as cool/posh setting of Richard Curtis/Hugh Grant films, and finally, home of David Cameron's Conservative- elite 'Notting Hill Set'.

MacInnes' Notting Hill, , argues John McLeod, can 'best be considered an hallucinatory location' where, in the mix created by mass metropolitan and global migration and relocation a new kind of freedom can be attained (McLeod, 2004: 21). The city here is imagined as a pop dream. Charlie Gillett argues that 'rock and roll was perhaps the first form of popular

culture to celebrate without reservation characteristics of city life' (Gillett, 1983:12). Pop music and culture invests the city with certain characteristics that are all checked in MacInnes's novel: freedoms from family, authority and from a specific class or ethnic identity, from preformed destinies. Pop offers the city as a glamorous place where the individual can be transformed and can create new like-minded communities, not based on race, class or traditional locality.

Indeed, we can go further and argue, as Simon Frith does, that this particular version of the city is in fact a *suburban* fantasy. The 'myth', he writes, 'the rhetoric of class and street and grit is itself the product of suburban dreams, suburban needs' (Frith, 1997: 269). This vision of newer urban elements, authenticity, toughness, hybridity and transgression, replaces former constructions of glamorous sophistication. The 'lure of the city' offers the chance of an authentic 'reality', the urgent feel of real 'street' authenticity, that the unreal suburb itself cannot match (Frith, 1997: 271). The city is imagined in the suburb and in a sense itself becomes somewhat suburbanised. This city is suburban in being convenient, a place to visit, not live; it is a temporary weekend and evening space in which to enact fantasies. It is a place to consume urban fantasies.

The pop recreation of city as site for excess, for night-time, consumption and fantastic recreations of the self, is accompanied by counter-characterisations of the suburb. The suburb here is *excessively* dull, everyday, routine and constrained, viewed by individuals feeling far more detached and trapped than their parents. This popular version of the suburban imaginary can be found in many sixties and seventies TV sit-coms; it is comically grotesque. Terry and June (Terry and June, BBC, 1978-1986), Tom and Barbara (*The Good Life*, BBC, 1975-1978), George and Mildred (George and Mildred, ITV, 1976-1979) all inhabit a timeless unreal prison of minutely observed claustrophobic pettiness and fantastic snobbery. This move toward regarding the suburb as both material quotidian trap and delirious nightmare reaches a peak in Mike Leigh's 1977 television play, *Abigail's Party*. The play cranks up the excruciatingly garish material and cultural bad taste and seething social relationships, so that the suburb becomes here a hallucination. In addition to the naff suburb it is also presented as necessary adjunct to city glamour. Here, in what Frith terms 'Bohemia in the Bedroom', and manifest in a long rota of pop cultural icons, and echt suburbanites, as the Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Marc Bolan, Boy George, Pet Shop Boys, Morrissey and Suede, the confining, conformist suburb is conjured up in rock and pop. It is for and by a new generation, one that

has little stake in suburban cultural, social or economic practices. The suburb breeds the possibility of urban performance, of escape and self-definition.

Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* has at its centre pop-cultural re-imaginings of the urban and suburban. Subcultural theorists see a reworking of pop culture as a means by young people to forge new identities and to establish meaningful new communities. Subculture, as theorised by British Cultural Studies in the seventies (especially Phil Cohen's landmark 1972 article 'Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community' (Cohen, 1972) and Dick Hebdige's 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1988)) emphasises the ways in which popular culture can bring people together and foster a sense of belonging. Cohen for example, argues that popular subcultures were a creative response to the devastation wrought by post-war London suburban developments, as slum clearance, resettlement and the creation of extensive suburban Estates worked to 'destroy the function of the street, the local pub, the cornershop' (Cohen, 1972: 81) Pop culture, borrowing and re-combining signifying elements from parent cultures and consumer cultures ('Teds, Mods, parkas, skinheads, Crombies) all represent in this view 'an attempt to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in the parent culture' (Cohen, 1972: 83). In other words the work of pop style is to make the devastated cities and uprooted communities meaningful again. Dick Hebdige broadly agrees, arguing that punk for instance, 'celebrates, in mock-heroic terms, the death of the community and the collapse of traditional forms of meaning' (Hebdige, 1978: 78). Thus certain reworkings of pop culture, particularly the 'do-it-yourself' ethos of early punk, are an attempt to make unintelligible habitats meaningful and legible.

Kureishi's novel explores the very process of reimagining suburban/ urban polarities as informed by pop and subcultural trends. The novel is neatly split into two halves; 'In the Suburbs' and 'In the City'. This *bildungsroman* charts the journey of Karim Amir from suburb to city, chasing a dream of escape from suburban detachment to urban belonging and liberation. He has much to escape from. Karim 'loathed the suburbs' and resolved to 'continue my journey into London' and so 'get away from people and streets like this' (Kureishi, 1990: 62). He finds it dull and empty; 'during the nights...all around me was silent, most of the neighbourhood went to bed at ten-thirty' (Kureishi, 1990: 63). It is also extremely predictable; 'Life for commuters was regulated to the minute' (Kureishi, 1990: 65). Karim's parents follow a quiet routine, watching TV, no socialising, one visit to the pictures a year. It is pacific and accepting; 'in the suburbs people rarely dreamed of striking out for

happiness'. Instead it was all 'familiarity and endurance; security and safety were the reward of dullness' (Kureishi, 1990: 8).

This emphasis on dull indoorsness is complemented by strictly policed visible behaviour, by constant neighbourly surveillance. Anything hinting of difference is jumped upon, nobody must stand out: 'In the suburbs there had been few things that seemed more petty than the fear everyone had of their neighbour's opinion' (Kureishi, 1990: 188). There is a fear of being seen to be different: 'my Mother could never hang out the washing in the garden without combing her hair' (Kureishi, 1990: 188). This fearful conformity also has a more explicitly violent and thuggish aspect; Karim's school is brutalising, it specialises in lowering expectations and excels at bullying. Nearby Penge is 'full of neo-fascist groups' actively demonstrating on the streets, and mixed-race Karim is constantly taunted and racially abused, 'everyday I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury (Kureishi, 1990: 63).

Karim joins a long list of the suburban alienated those who are not at home in the supposedly homely suburb. In Karim's case this disengagement from place is underlined by his second-generation immigrant status. His father was born in Bombay, his white mother in England. Karim sees himself as *qualified* English, as 'an Englishman born and bred, almost' (Kureishi, 1990: 3). The connection is made again here between the suburb and the colony. This 'odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not' is a fact of both postcolonial migration and suburban living (Kureishi, 1990: 3). Whereas in V. S. Naipaul this collision of colonial marginalism and suburban peripheralism produces a melancholy mimicry, in Kureishi's novel it produces a disaffection, a charged desire for change and escape. Cultural and social hybridism produces restlessness. Karim is 'restless and easily bored'; he is always 'looking for trouble, for any kind of movement, action and sexual interest' (Kureishi, 1990: 3). The suburb is not home. It is a transient, holding area for restless father and son (but significantly, not the mother) close to the nearby city.

Bromley thus offers Karim nothing with which he can identify and belong, and yet also grimly polices the demand for fitting in. As an Asian/British bisexual with a penchant for Glam Rock Karim has plenty to fear. In fact the suburb's enforced demand for quietist conformism, for social and cultural homogeneity actually produces a series of sealed-off, mutually incomprehensible, micro-worlds. The demand for suburban conformism produces, along with the impact of consumer choice, as I shall explain below, a spectacular series of

'alternative' lifestyles and cultures. Suburban privacy turns in on itself and creates subdivisions of interested groups, adhering around the development of taste and pursuit of cultures. The 'English passion' here is 'not for self-improvement or culture or wit... but for DIY', for improving the house (Kureishi, 1990: 74). That is, 'the painstaking accumulation of comfort' (Kureishi, 1990: 75). It is this concentration on the house that provides status: 'display was the game' (Kureishi, 1990: 75). Everyone is indoors watching TV. Everyone goes straight home after work, 'There were no excuses to be made in the evenings: no one went out and there was nowhere to go' (Kureishi, 1990: 46). Shopping is the other main popular-cultural activity. 'They were fanatical shoppers in our suburbs. Shopping to them is what the rumba and singing is to Brazilians' (Kureishi, 1990: 65).

Access to different worlds *can* be gained, Karim reckons, via the passport of High Culture. Karim perceives his alienation as a lack of the right kind culture, not the suburban one with its preference for kitsch, middlebrow pursuits and philistine materialistic display. 'I read a lot of proper books' he tells us, *'Lost Illusions, The Red and the Black'* (Kureishi, 1990: 145). His later escape from the suburb into the desired zone of metropolitan arts and media is facilitated by 'the easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel: the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way around a whole culture' (Kureishi, 1990: 177). When he eventually escapes to West Kensington an enlightened Karim becomes 'aware that I knew nothing; I was empty, an intellectual void'(Kureishi, 1990: 176). For Eleanor's crowd 'hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth'; high culture here was 'the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer' (Kureishi, 1990: 178). Later, comparing his suburban past to sophisticated Eleanor's, Karim argues that 'it was as if I felt my past wasn't important enough, wasn't as substantial as hers' (Kureishi, 1990: 178).

In fact, Karim attempts to construct a sense of belonging, a personally meaningful relation to his environment and shared culture, by creating his own. As we shall see, everyone else in Bromley is engaged in creating a personal identity. Naturally enough Karim's personal canon rates highly those works which themselves are on the contested border of high and popular culture. He favours literature with a beatnik or counter-culture edge: Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, *Rolling Stone* magazine. He is engrossed in 'serious' pop music, that which most approximates to highbrow taste, particularly favouring 'the tuneless: King Crimson, Soft Machine, Frank Zappa' (Kureishi, 1990: 18). Karim hides in his bedroom, creating an alternative and oppositional culture of hip journalism, pop music, and cultish literature, and, his unique twist on teenage suburban dilettantism (combining this with traditional suburban

pastimes), drinks exotic teas. Or he sits in the park with other 'boys who'd escaped from home' (Kureishi, 1990: 19). His brother also scuttles to his room at every opportunity, with 'copies of fashion magazines (*Vogue, Harper's and Queen*). Karim temporarily creates his own space while desperately wanting to swap it for another (the city).

Pop music, itself a rapidly constructed system of cultural meaning and belonging, is another mode of moving beyond the immediate. Karim's sink school has David Bowie as its most illustrious old-boy, and 'boys were often to be found on their knees before this icon, praying to be made into pop stars' and thus 'released from a lifetime as a motor-mechanic; or a clerk in an insurance firm; or a junior architect' (Kureishi, 1990: 68). Bowie offers the template, according to Sukhdev Sandhu, for many of Kureishi's characters' trajectory. Bowie's 'escape from suburbia, and from class, from sex, from personality' he argues 'into London's realm of free play, make-believe and self-gratification is a trajectory that resembles the odysseys taken by Kureishi's characters' (Sandhu, 2004: 238). Karim and his wannabe-pop star friend/lover, Charlie, share a blinding moment of insight at an early punk gig: '"That's it. That's it. That's fucking it...The sixties have been given notice tonight"' (Kureishi, 1990: 131). This is their mode of escape. The energy manifested here propels Charlie (thence 'Charlie Hero') from the suburb into pop superstardom.

Yet a straightforward reading of Karim's daring escape, from stifling suburb to liberating city, a *bildungsroman* of youthful progress, as the novel's two-part structure suggests, is not so simple. The problem with this pop creative rendering of suburb and its urban antipode is precisely this, it is always emphasised as being a representation. Both city and suburb lack significant substance and become fatefully undermined, as we see in the novel, by their status as commodity. In this sense, again, both lack substantive being and are presented as curiously insubstantial. Karim's journey is one towards becoming rich, in part by exploiting such commodities.

The problem that the novel identifies is that pop culture itself is part of the broader 'cultural logic of late capitalism', so termed by Fredric Jameson, as postmodernism. Here we can isolate one key feature, as Jameson argues, of the 'new economic world system' emerging in the seventies, the moment of the *Buddha of Suburbia*, which is 'the whole new culture of the image, or the simulacrum' (Jameson, 1991: 6). Here, as Jameson argues, building on the insights of Guy Debord (the 'society of the spectacle') and Jean Baudrillard, we have 'image addiction', the 'transformation of the past into visual mirages, stereotypes or texts', which

reduces the social itself to pure image (Jameson, 1991: 6). Pop, of course, is a crucial element of the postmodern culture industry, generating, recombining and recycling endless images from fashion, music, places, personal styles, inventing a 'lifestyle', and of course, promising modes of belonging to a new community of the like-minded.

The hollowed-out meagreness, selfishness and greed of pop consumption, based on commodity exchange, are at the heart of Kureishi's novel. This fatally undermines Kureishi's creation of the textures of suburban life. Thus while Karim dismissively sees the (adult) suburb as epitomising the 'English passion 'for shopping and DIY', as the banal 'accumulation of comfort' Karim himself is industriously involved in the *accumulation* of culture, more precisely, for 'alternative' cultures, the trying on of disguises and roles, such as existentialist Outsider, *poet maudit*, Beatnik, punk (Kureishi, 1990: 74). Karim's final concern is with money itself. The novel's central figure of anti-materialist Buddhist enlightenment is also revealed as a product, a service, something to be bought and an identity to be played with.

The problem here, then, is that as the notion of place itself is subject to the dematerialisation of pop-cultural image and commodity culture so any settled definitions of that place are impossible. In the novel neither suburb nor city will sit still as clearly defined locales. Thus suburban Bromley is actually not simply the unchartered, uncultured and remote location that the novel castigates; there are countless other locations that would probably better qualify. In fact, Bromley is not just nowhere, but more properly, a favoured nowhere. Bromley is in fact well-known for being nowhere , for being highly representative of the unknown and unique in its state of being like everywhere else. This is where H.G. Wells was born (in 1866) and is the setting for his suburban-set fictions *History of Mr Polly*, *The New Machiavelli*, and *Tono-Bungay*. Roger Silverstone's influential 1997 collection of essay *Visions of Suburbia* places Bromley squarely as the suburb of suburbs (Silverstone, 1997). Southeast London suburbs, Andy Medhurst argues, are not 'just any suburbs, but paradigmatic suburbs' (Silverstone, 1997: 243). Medhurst notes 'sound historical fact', for this area's suburban typicality; its status as the world's original industrial suburb, with the development of the world's first commuter railway, and thus its establishment as a space of transition, instituting an integral polarity of work and domestic space, of spatial displacement from its own originary suburban centre (Silverstone, 1997: 243). As noted earlier Bromley is also, as Simon Frith mentions in the same collection, where David Bowie was brought up, 'the quintessential suburban star'; also home of 'the quintessential suburban fans, the Bromley contingent' and, we might add,

Kureishi's quintessential suburban novel (Silverstone, 1997: 271). Bromley, and South London suburbs in general then are indeed exceptional (the face of suburbia in countless films, sitcoms, TV dramas and novels) and absolutely average (in their standardised physical features, cultural homogeneity, resolute domesticity). Bromley operates as productive sign of suburbia.

Another problem with a reading of the novel as simple escape from a specific suburban confinement to urban freedom and creativity is the picture of the dull and joyless suburb presented in the novel. In fact, Kureishi's suburb does not stay tedious and insular for long. While Karim is not at home in his suburb, neither is anyone else. In the suburb, the affects of affluence, popular consumption, accessible mass culture, all promote the rapid creation of, sometimes extreme, new identities. Karim has his arty 'bedroom bohemianism[32]' and develops his own modes of belonging; and this happens throughout the suburb. The suburb, informed by affluence, choice, and counter-cultural drive toward self-expression and self-determination seems awash with new possibilities for individual self-creation. In fact, Karim fits in quite nicely; he is of the suburban party without knowing it.

The biggest 'transformation' in the novel is actually, not the son's but the father's. Plodding civil servant Haroon becomes a spiritual advisor; the titular 'Buddha'. Haroon (and Eva his new girlfriend) invent and package their own subculture. They put on a series of exotic evenings that seem to go against the suburban cultural grain of shopping, TV watching, DIY and material consumption. Using soft lighting, candles, incense and mood music, and with an improvised hybrid of Buddhist koans, Yoga, Self-Help platitudes and dramatic silences, Eva announces that 'My good and deep friend Haroon here will show us the Way. The Path' (Kureishi, 1990: 42). This new persona comes as a shock to Karim, remembering his father's difficulty finding Beckenham, never mind enlightenment. In fact the spiritual anti-materialism of Buddhism here becomes just another product, or service, that people buy.

Suburban individuals' readiness and desire for personal transformation, and openness to fashion and new consumer opportunities, guarantees the 'Buddha's' great success. His insights promise 'they may even change you a little, or make you want to change, in order to reach your full potential as human beings' (Kureishi, 1990: 13). The offer of self-realisation, however, is rendered as just another version of a selfhood that can be tried on and discarded

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[32] The Bohemian itself, as Elizabeth Wilson., reminds us is a bourgeois performance space that plays out the contradictions of art, commerce and the individual (Wilson, 2003).

at will. Buddhism is another commodity that targets the key site of postmodern concerns, the meaning of the contemporary self. The question of personal authenticity is repeatedly raised in the novel is always being raised; 'Beneath all the Chinese bluster', Karim observes, 'was Dad's loneliness and desire for internal advancement' (Kureishi, 1990: 28). The Buddha promises suburbanites a real self, but *his* 'real' self is desire for social advancement.

The suburb presented here thus contradicts Karim's complaints about it being predictable and boring; precisely because the seventies suburb demands continual self-creation it is actually wildly unpredictable and profusely eccentric. In the seventies, in the midst of a dramatic economic and social changes and a cultural shift toward consumption and identity politics, the suburb presented is profoundly unstable, and in perpetual crisis. 'Traditional', dull settled suburban conformity ends just as the novel opens: 'Then one day everything changed' (Kureishi, 1990: 3). Nuclear families implode and form exotic new configurations, new relationships spring up everywhere. People have very loose sexual and familial attachments; Jamila and Changez, for instance, stuck in an arranged marriage, have a further negotiated arrangement whereby they both see other (sexual) partners. Karim finds sex and love quite easily. Bromley is packed with oddballs and eccentrics: there are anorexic fathers, bisexual popstars, and of course, mystic civil servants. It is also chock full of 'alternative' lifestyles (mysticism, Punk Rock, pop-stardom), sexual adventure and, most of all, high comedy.

If the *suburb* isn't exactly what Karim protests it is, destabilised by globalising forces of consumer capitalism, then a different reading of his version of the city is also possible. The city that Karim dreams of is, of course, a pop fantasy. Karim 'fantasises about London' before experiencing it, and his vision is one of 'people in Hyde park playing bongos with their hands; there was the keyboard on the Doors 'Light My Fire; there were kids dressed in velvet cloaks...shops selling all the records you could desire. There were parties... , casual sex, drugs' (Kureishi, 1990: 121). This lure of London seems to promise many freedoms, a chance to play with identities, to pursue interesting and creative work (Karim works in the theatre and possibly TV), to explore sexualities, to develop networks of like-minded individuals. Karim is determined to be true to this 'self' even if it doesn't seem to exist. In the opening paragraph of the novel, we recall, Karim confidently announces that he is 'going somewhere', and now we see what this entails.

Karim looks closely at himself: 'I'm probably not compassionate or anything' he admits, 'I bet I'm a real bastard inside and don't care for anyone' (Kureishi, 1990: 104). Karim sets his

mind: 'my goals were clear and I knew what I wanted. I was ready for anything (Kureishi, 1990: 121). He admits that although he 'hated inequality, it didn't mean I wanted to be treated like everyone else' (Kureishi, 1990: 148). Both his father, and friend Charlie, who jumps on the punk bandwagon and becomes a faux rock star, successfully invent and lucratively market themselves as particular types of saleable 'individual'. What Karim 'liked in Dad and Charlie was their insistence on standing apart. I liked the power they had and the attention they received' (Kureishi, 1990: 149). This emphasis on creative self-fashioning, social advancement and packaging identity (eventually to the ultimate commodity of self, celebrity) leads Karim inexorably toward theatre, show business and TV. Towards the end of the novel, moving into an Eighties neo-liberal agenda of selfish acquisition, under the government of Margaret Thatcher, Karim discovers the pleasures of 'money-power'. Charlie becomes a complacent, New York-based global megastar repackaging punk 'grit' for money to a US audience. He informs Karim of his own enlightenment: '"It was then I knew I loved money. Money and everything it could buy" ' (Kureishi, 1990: 248).

That it is punk itself that drives such acquisition is especially troubling. Dick Hebdige argues that punk's utopian impulse was to create meaning. Punk 'celebrates, in mock-heroic terms, the death of the community and the collapse of traditional forms of meaning' (Hebdige, 1988: 78). The old is reused and reassembled to provide new meanings. Hebdige describes punk's ethos as the stripping out of older traditions and cultural signifiers and their reassembly to produce new meanings. The punk ideal was a form of cultural 'DIY', producing and reassembling, rather than just purchasing, personally relevant new aesthetic forms. Punk as a subculture is a way for suburban teenagers to make some sense of their particular environment. 'Punk', argues Vicky LeBeau, 'was generated and sustained by the emptiness, the blankness, of the suburbs' (LeBeau, 1997: 75).

But, as *The Buddha of Suburbia* tells us, in the logic of cultural commodification, punk style, even its amateur bricolage, becomes another saleable commodity. We see in the novel a shocking encounter for Karim and Charlie with a new punk band (clearly based on the Sex Pistols) leaving them both attracted and appalled. The raw anger of nascent punk seems the epitome of a gritty, dysfunctional seventies urbanism, very different from the kind of urban boho fantasy Karim indulges in. These punks are from the inner-city/inner-suburban council estates. These are the unreal estates that a disorientated Lindsey Hansley wanders through, in her account of growing up in a peripheral suburban housing estate, *Estates: An Intimate History* (Hansley, 2007). This is an 'environment which makes as little sense as your life',

Hansley argues. In a telling comment she writes that 'I find myself wishing I'd come from a real place' (Hansley, 2007: 45). Karim feels utterly alienated from these boys. For him these are 'vicious little council estate kids' (Kureishi, 1990: 131). They are alien to 'suburban boys like us', Karim argues, 'we're not like them. We don't hate the way they do. We're not from the estates' (Kureishi, 1990: 131/2). Karim and Charlie are free to create a particular, heavily mediated, version of the suburb and the city, a version they will later package and sell.

My reading of the novel argues that the forms of legibility that pop offers, a way of seeing and creating versions of metropolitan space, is a fantasy one promoted by the globalising forces of late capitalism. Karim and Charlie, we guess as the novel closes, are in a privileged position and will learn to use punk's energy, this despairing railing against suburban displacement and unbelonging, against the very illegibility of modern built spaces, and simply turn it to financial profit. This particular construction of the suburban imaginary is lucrative. Karim agrees with Charlie's priorities: '"Time and money are the best, Charlie"' (Kureishi, 1990:248). The novel ends in an absurdly expensive restaurant, with Karim, poised for a big career in TV, paying for everyone's meal. 'They were grateful', he remarks uncharitably, 'they had to be; they could no longer see me as a failure' (Kureishi, 1990: 283).

Chapter Five

Contemporary Suburbia 1980 – 2011

Introduction

In this thesis I have been arguing that the suburb presents a key semiotic problem of modernity and that this is presented in various forms in suburban fiction. Such fiction asks questions of how we live. More precisely what we can see, know and communicate of our lived environments, especially the new urban and suburban sectors of the rapidly expanding modern metropolis. Suburban fiction repeatedly explores what the truth might be, the substantive objective reality, of the suburb. One key manifestation of the problem with uncovering the reality of the suburb, one we have seen reoccurring over and over in suburban fiction, is a problematic suburban materiality. Doubts over suburban legibility are communicated here as a problem with the very nature of reality itself. Suburban investigation, as we have seen, encounters a range of problematic material conditions: The suburb can be figured as materially dense, with an excess of domestic surfaces or objects that resist interpretation or investigation (in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories). The suburb can also be materially wayward, a site of independent 'thingliness', full of objects which develop independent salience and deny individual human agency (notably in the clerkly 'Nobody' fiction of the late nineteenth century); at the same time the suburb can be presented as insubstantial and ghostly, barely material at all, a place of performance or spectacle (in mid-nineteenth century ghost stories, and in Orwell and Stevie Smith). In addition, the body of the suburban individual also, as I have argued, especially in chapter two (the Pooterish 'Nobody') itself becomes problematic matter, becoming itself wayward 'thing', incapable of shaping and negotiating the suburban terrain, and further extending a divide between subjective self and objective world.

In Chapter 4 I described how the suburb, in much post-World War Two fiction, is presented as an alien and unreadable environment. During the post-war years, in science fiction, in work by writers from former British colonies and in writing addressing pop culture, the suburb frequently appears as a site where the displaced individual fails to establish any sense of belonging or community. Again this semiotic problem, how to read the signs of habitat, becomes a concern with the nature of objective reality: what can count as true and substantial

in these exemplary sites of modernity, the mass suburbs. I have demonstrated how the mass post-war suburb, informed by three key political and economic moments – the development of fearful technologies (nuclear weapons, molecular genetics, electronic communication), the establishment of 'post-colonial' societies, and the rise of commodified youth cultures – is reflected in suburban fiction as anxiety around substantive everyday reality. The suburb is rendered here as predominantly *strange*, producing that anxious material doubling of the seen and unseen, the familiar and the unknown, that I have called the suburban uncanny.

This concern with seeing and establishing the precise objective facts of the suburb also, I have argued, raises concerns with the question of distance, of establishing clear boundaries. In work from Dickens and the Grossmith brothers, to Wells and Orwell, the suburb, as literary subject matter, is never quite in focus, never remains at the correct distance. As a modern and unknown form of lived experience, social organisation and cultural artefact, the suburb must be representable, brought in close and examined (as indeed the slums were in the mid-1800s). Yet, in much work, the suburb and suburban culture is kept away for fear of its potential to contaminate the centre. It is bracketed off, something that must happen obscurely 'out there', to other people. It is thus either kept at a comic distance, and rendered absurd, or is experienced as occupying that uncanny space which incorporates the utterly strange and the unsettlingly familiar at the same time. The suburb is troubling, then, because it moves; it is *both* distant (irrelevant, dull, incomprehensible) and at the same time, can also be horribly close and contaminating (philistine, crass, materialist). The suburb, we can say, is never quite in the right place for easy reading.

These tensions around what can be seen and known, and rendered at a meaningful distance are urgent in contemporary suburban writing. What appears new in contemporary suburban-set fiction is an awareness that suburbia now appears to be nearly everywhere. According to a recent report, 'The State of the Suburbs' by 'The Local Futures Group for the Successful City-Suburbs Project', more than 80 per cent of us live in areas that can be classified as suburban' (Fisher, 2007: 2). As Nick Hubble, of the 'Centre for Suburban Studies', argues, since the early 1990s, in England, 'a broadly suburban way of life and set of values have come to cultural and social dominance' (Hubble, 2006: 3). The suburbs can no longer be considered, alternately, as out there somewhere, a remote site that requires ethnological decoding and interpretation, or as a frightening place that might get too close. Rather as Baumgartner argues in his *The Moral Order of a Suburb*: 'The suburbs are no longer marginal places but rather, increasingly central locations in the modern world' (Baumgartner,

1991: 5). Contemporary fictional treatments see today's suburbs as a ubiquitous form of lived space, one that severs all links to local specificity, to familial ties and communities and to narratives of shared histories. The semiotic anxiety generated by the suburb, as I have traced in this thesis, is now everywhere.

The ubiquity of the suburban landscape is part of a broader contemporary reworking of traditional economic and cultural relations that have worked to transform metropolitan spaces over the last thirty years. 'Suburban' can now come to define a much wider range of built environments. Neither 'suburb' nor 'city' now quite resembles their previously accepted traditional definitions. Geographer Stephen Marshall, for instance, argues that the 'polar oppositions of the centripetal compact city and the centrifugal periphery now no longer apply' (Marshall, 2006: 267). The traditional hierarchical relation of economically and culturally dominant, politically powerful, industrialised city and the dependent, peripheral domestic suburb has changed. That is, rather than concentric rings of development radiating from a historic core, with neat divisions between industry, commerce and residential zones (the shape of London's suburban development from around 1860 to the 1970s, the familiar form of concentric growth rings), the pattern of development is now more like a web, or perhaps a rhizome.[33] Starting in the 1980s suburban growth began to present a multiplicity of rhizomes, independent that form around motorways, shopping malls, corporate headquarters and science parks. German urban theorist Thomas Sieverts calls this contemporary suburb the 'Zwischenstadt' – the between city', and he defines it as neither urban nor rural, and uncatagorizable according to conventional definitions that focus on density and centrality (Sieverts, 2003). For Joel Garreau, coining a popular neologism, these new suburbs are 'edge cities' (Garreau, 1991). A suburb today' adds Marshall, 'is perhaps more just a local centre in a hierarchy of centres, but not a satellite of any one centre' (Marshall, 2006: 8).

Suburban commentators see this contemporary ubiquitous suburbia (or 'exurbia')[34], a site that doesn't conform to notions of centre/periphery, as a product of broader late twentieth century social, economic and cultural developments. Neo-liberal economics, global capital flows, world-wide markets in goods and services, flexible working conditions, instantaneous communications networks, the whole range of contemporary capitalisms, described by

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[33] The rhizome, in Deleuzian thought, being that spreading , non- hierarchical, heterogeneous, organic structure, where each point is necessarily connected to each other point, yet where no one location may be defined as the centre, the beginning or the end (Deleuze, 2004).

[34] 'Exurbia': coined by coined by Auguste Spectorsky in his 1955 book *The Exurbanites*.(Spectorsky, 1955). The exurbs, booming in the 1990s and 2000s, are more typical of land-rich North American or Australian growth, are extra-suburban, semi-autonomous developments, independent of nearby urban centres.

Fredric Jameson, writing in 1989, as being either Post-industrial, Multinational, Third Machine Age or Late, all work toward uncoupling suburban space from specific locations, that is from proximal relations to commercial, industrial or financial centres, transport hubs, sources of skilled labour and so on (Jameson, 1991).

Contemporary suburbia is the outcome, then, of industrial, economic, commercial, cultural and technological arrangements that have reduced the importance of physical location. It is a species of postmodern space (for some of the authors discussed below, the epitome of postmodern space). In direct opposition to the modernist notion of space, as something that needed to be used for particular purposes, postmodern space is independent and autonomous. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) David Harvey describes the postmodern metropolis 'as a palimpsest of past forms superimposed on one another, a collage of current uses' (Harvey, 1989: 66). British geographer Iain Chambers, in *Border Dialogues* (1990), argues that late twentieth century cities are 'coming less and less to represent the culmination of local and territorial cultures' (Chambers, 1990: 55). While the older city presented a distinct political, geographical and social unit with city, suburb and countryside linked via shared regional, cultural and commercial interests (albeit, as we have seen, with profound semiotic difficulties for those 'reading' the suburb), modern suburbs and towns 'are increasingly the dispersed loci of a shared and shaped world' (Chambers, 1990: 53). While increasingly part of globalised topoi the suburb is yet more semiotically illegible. Indeed, postmodern geographer Ed Soja, in his intriguingly entitled *Postmetropolis* (2003) has argued that the contemporary city has become 'unmoored from its spatial specificity, from the city as a fixed point of collective memory, reference and identity' (Soja, 2003: 150).

Postmodern space, and the postmodern suburb, then, lacks any rootedness to a specific location, any specific topographic form, and more importantly, also lacks material substance. Postmodern space, as informed by intellectual currents such as Guy Debord's society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967). Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983), modern developments in communications and computing, is rendered as virtual, as a free-floating creation of signification .[35] This trend reaches its apotheosis in what anthropologist Marc Augé, in 1995, termed the 'non- place' (Augé, 1995). This contrasts to 'anthropological place', which is a product of local material environmental factors combined with enduring symbolic constructions of that place, with 'the idea that...the inhabitants have of their

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[35] Postmodernity itself, problematizes the real. The core idea of postmodernism is that there is no core, that we exist in a world of free-floating signifiers with no access to the real, and that therefore everything is already mediated.

relations with the territory, with the family and with others' (Augé, 1995: 56). Non-places, of which I would argue the suburb is one of the first and most important examples, are uncoupled from a meaningful relation to physical space or its accrued grid of social meanings (Augé, 56). The subjective experience of such Non- places as airports, motorways, hotels, shopping malls is of the 'fleeting, temporary, ephemeral' (Augé, 56). More recently, in 2011, Farley and Roberts, based on the work of English geographers Richard Mabey and Marion Shoard, undertook an exhaustive survey (by walking) of those places that exist, unseen and unvisited, on 'the fringes of English towns and cities, where urban and rural negotiate their boundaries…where overspill housing estates break into scrubland and wasteland' (Farley and Roberts, 2011: 5).

Seen in terms of postmodern space Roger Silverstone, in an influential essay 'Television and Everyday Life' (Silverstone, 2004), directly equates contemporary suburbanism with the 'way of life' of an everyday postmodernity. The contemporary suburb is the main focus of this chapter. I have here identified two key types of suburban-set writing that interrogate the suburb in contrasting ways. On the one hand fiction that addresses what we can loosely call the postmodern suburb, the weightless contemporary suburb, perceived as rootlessness and detached from locality and history. On the other hand, and in direct contrast, another trend in contemporary fiction renders suburbia as excessively material, as densely resistant to human agency, or as smothering and constraining the individual. Both versions of suburbia today, address the semiotic problem of how we can know and inhabit this deeply problematised suburban habitat. They do so, I will argue, by working their way through semiotic problems concerning how individuals can seek to establish some sense of what might count as the experience of objective reality. It is a rethinking of an old philosophical problem (of objectivism vs. subjectivism, or materialism vs. idealism, which has animated the work, in recent years, of philosophers such as John Deely (Deely, 2009), from the perspective of Piercean semiotics, and, as I discuss in detail below, Jane Bennett and others, from new, 'vital materialist', perspectives (Bennett, 2010) and (Coole and Frost, 2010).

Section One below, 'The Immaterial Suburb' will discuss recent suburban – and 'exurban'– fiction by J. G. Ballard and Iain Sinclair. Ballard (*The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1994), *Millennium People* (Ballard, 2003), *Kingdom Come* (Ballard, 2006) and Miracles of Life (Ballard, 2008)) and Sinclair (*White Chappell, Scarlett Tracings* (Sinclair, 1998), *Liquid City* (Sinclair, 1999b), *Downriver* (Sinclair, 2002a), *Lights Out for the Territory* (Sinclair, 1997) and *London Orbital* (Sinclair, 2002) are the outstanding examples of a contemporary

obsession with peripheral London as technologised and 'hyperreal' exurbia. This London lacks all the usual co-ordinates of what, until the industrial revolution, had been the traditional markers of lived space: the matrix of shared history, ancestral memory, a continuous community and profound knowledge of local geography. The suburb here is characterised instead by surface, inscrutability, mobility, temporariness, frenetic consumerism, estranging technologies, bizarre behaviours, surveillance, and violence. These writings emphasises the 'sign-rich' contours of exurban habitats, but are unable to link these to any stable objective referent. Both authors see such space as profoundly disorientating, chiming with Fredric Jameson's insight that' this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world' (Jameson, 1991: 44). Neither writer can posit any sense of a personal engagement with sensuously experienced locality.

Yet, these two writers treat such disconnection from place very differently. Ballard deems the rootless, self-sufficient suburban enclave, for better or worse, the inevitable mode of contemporary life. For Ballard suburbanised London (travel infrastructure, shopping, estates, gated communities) is the reality; the older 'traditional' urban/suburban dyad (West End, Mayfair, Hampstead, Clapham) is now itself the inauthentic theme park, the hyperreal fantasy of the rich. In Ballard, especially in work from the last two decades, the only urgently experienced 'reality' on offer is mediated via fascistic channelled modes of choreographed therapeutic violence. Sinclair, on the other hand, as visionary late-romantic urbanist and psychogeographer urgently seeks to reconnect the dematerialised contemporary city to broader patterns and resonances of submerged cultural and historical co-ordinates. For Sinclair the amnesiac contemporary suburb is troubling and dangerous as it obliterates the unique textures of specific locales. Sinclair's attempts to recover an erased past in the city, however, and as we shall see, flounder in the suburbs.

The real, the material, returns in the final part of this chapter, in Section Two, 'The Material Suburb'. Where the material world seems to disappear or recede in Ballard and Sinclair, it is troublingly very much present in other contemporary suburban-set fiction. Fiction discussed here is split into two parts. First, I will examine the 'male' experience of the everyday suburb. We have already noted above (in Chapter 2, Section Two) the inept and unhandy suburban male, the individual who fails miserably to read and negotiate, with the skilled body, the complex demands, the husbandry, of his environmental niche. This figure reappears in

contemporary suburban fiction, in work by Nigel Williams, *The Wimbledon Poisoner* (Williams, 1989), Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (Swift, 1996) *The Sweetshop Owner* (Swift, 1997), and John Lanchester, *Mr Phillips*, (Lanchester, 2001). Where the nineteenth-century Nobody was something of a pioneer, a resourceful frontiersman, humorously trying to find a way to survive the unknown territory of the new mass, lower-middle class suburb, these more recent suburban males are grimly cast out from any accommodation with place.

Secondly, in Section Two, by way of contrast, where the male is *ejected* from habitat by wayward material things, we will see how female characters tend to be weighed down and crushed by suburban materiality. Here, writers present a claustrophobically dense material world that closes in on characters. In direct contrast to those dematerialised exurbs excavated by Ballard and Sinclair, we see instead a portrayal of the textures of a problematic sluggish and densely material domestic everyday life. Again, this disharmony between self and environment is centred on the body, which becomes a sluggish and inert corporeality. The body here, figured as reproductive, as mother, is not terrifyingly *alienated* from suburban habitat, as the male characters are, but is, rather, fearfully *incorporated*.

Indeed suburban fiction seems to be registering here some kind of disturbance with the notion of external reality itself. It points, I would even argue, to the increasingly wide popular awareness of a difficulty with the ideas of a settled 'Newtonian' universe of observable and predictable external reality that can be securely known by the neutral observer. This problematising of the nature of objective reality is already something I have mentioned above in Chapter 2, where Mr Pooter's trouble with everyday household objects reflects a broader concern, I argued, with modern scientific materialism. This concern was with free will itself, as Victorian deterministic materialism sees little scope for individual actions. Pooter's ineffectual railing against the material things of his modern suburban home, his inability actually to *do* anything, presages a profound cultural ambivalence toward scientific determinism. The problematic materiality of the contemporary suburb, and the anxiety over individual free will can usefully be approached by using some aspects of current 'thing theory'. 'Recent years', as Steven Connor argues in 'Thinking Things', 'have seen in philosophy and cultural studies something like a thingly turn...a stirring of things' (Connor, 2008: 2). We have met thing theory before, in Chapter 2, where I discussed the suburban nobody's dire struggles with domestic suburban stuff as that moment when an 'object' becomes a 'thing' that is, when it stands out, or is made to stand out, against the background of the world in which it exists. Bill Brown argues, we recall from Chapter 2, discussing the

wayward materiality of suburban Nobodies, that the inert objects of the world lose their transparent innocence and assert a troublesome presence as a thing, precisely *when something goes wrong* (Brown, 2001). We can also note that this is also the moment when the thing stands out, or are made to stand out, as a signifying objects against the background of the world. The suburb, here, is exactly the place where things go wrong and where things stand out as mattering in some way. I want to further explore this idea of the independent vitality of material things profoundly affecting human agency itself in light of Jane Bennett's analysis, in *Vibrant Matter*, of 'the capacity of things…not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own' (Bennett, 2010: viii).

Section One – The Immaterial Suburb

In a 2007 interview with J. G. Ballard, Jeanette Baxter suggests that the writer's work, especially *Kingdom Come* (Ballard, 2007) addresses the horror of the 'non-place', in which 'time, history, politics and morality are absent' (Baxter, 2008: 53). Iain Sinclair agrees with this assessment and observes that Ballard is not at all 'interested in the dust and the detail', that is, in the particularity of a specific place. Rather, he, Sinclair concludes, is the 'great writer of nowheres' (Sinclair, 2006b: n.p). These nowheres are the favoured and obsessively repeated Ballardian landscapes: motorways, motels, retail and business parks, airport hinterlands, gated or closed exurban communities. For Ballard the suburb's interchangeability, its disconnection from fixed co-ordinates of history and belonging and cultural precedent, is precisely the point of his focus. These spaces and features make no concession, of course, to locality or a particular place; they are all the same everywhere and nowhere. Ballard celebrates these sites as fitting perfectly with contemporary mores and cultural forms: 24 hr TV, the ubiquitous car, informed consumption, surveillance, isolation and, above all, boredom. They are fitting sites, Ballard suggests, for new types of post-industrial, mediatised and technologically advanced societies and a new kinds of individual.

This notion of the contemporary non-place, lacking the traditional features of lived spaces such as familial continuity, personal relevance, communal context or historical dimension is a central concern of both Sinclair and Ballard. Both writers explore hyperreal exurban sites (the M25, Heathrow and Gatwick hinterlands, business parks, private estates) and how these places can be related to a sense of personally meaningful lived space. Both writers agree that

these particular spaces are increasingly ubiquitous, and are eclipsing the older urban/suburban formation. Yet the crucial difference is that Sinclair struggles, as I shall later discuss later, to reclaim a unique particularity for the seeming standardised, interchangeable and ephemeral sites of contemporary exurban metropolitan homes. He attempts this by striving to establish connectivity to buried or partly erased cultural contexts and historical continuities (this strategy comes under different names, psychogeography, the neo-gothic, urban shamanism, morphic resonance. Ballard, as I have mentioned above, does not attempt to reconnect the suburb to any particular local historical, social or personal landscape. The suburb's interchangeability and disconnection from fixed co-ordinates of history, belonging and cultural precedent is its very being. For Ballard, the suburbs, and their modern forms, are the way we live now, and should be the focus of literature: 'There is a huge bias in the English novel towards the city' he explains in a 1999 interview with Sinclair. 'I find the suburbs more interesting' he continues, 'you find uncluttered lives…people have more freedom to explore their imaginations (in Sinclair, 1999a: 84).

The consistent features of a particularly Ballardian social space have informed all the writer's life and work. From a childhood spent in suburban pre-war Shanghai, then imprisonment by the invading Japanese at Lunghua Camp, followed by repatriation to Britain and 50 years in suburban Shepperton semi, these sites have a strange similarity. 'Shepperton', a character says in Ballard's 1979 novel, *The Unlimited Dream Company*, already discussed above in Chapter 4, 'known to me only for its film studios, seemed to be the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere' (Ballard, 1990: 55).[36] Ballard's favoured locations have all been enclaves of a kind. These spaces of his personal biography are peripheral and incarceral, with a curious mixture of freedom and control, surveillance and opacity. They are experienced as boring, frequently illegible and latently violent and have profoundly destabilising effects on inhabitants' psyches. The symmetry between such ostensibly different sites as 1930s Shanghai and post-war suburban London, where the very lack of fixed historical and cultural coordinates paradoxically promote a certain similarity, is made clear in Ballard's strongly autobiographical 1991 novel *The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1994b). Here Ballard relates how he witnessed the filming of his 1984 novel *Empire of the Sun*, based on his boyhood experiences in Shanghai and Lunghua Camp, but also containing 'fictional' elements that could not have actually happened, being made in and around Suburban London and at the Shepperton film studios. Ballard even gets a part as an extra in this interpretation/ recreation

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[36] Ballard's writing discussed below will be abbreviated as *Empire of the Sun* (Ballard, 1984) *ES*, *The Kindness of Women* (Ballard, 1994b), *KW*; 'First Impressions of London' (Ballard 1996b) *FI*, *Millennium People* (Ballard, 2003), *MP*; *Kingdom Come* (Ballard, 2006c), *KC*; *Miracles of Life* (Ballard, 2008), *ML*.

of his own life. This odd doubling is also mentioned in his memoir, *Miracles of Life* (Ballard, 2008), where he discusses the filmic recreation of his own life; 'The scene was so like the real Shanghai of my childhood that for a moment I fainted' (*ML*, 257). Both sites are revealed as mythical creations, as mediations and staging of reality, and are thus strangely equivalent and lacking in uniqueness or specificity. This strange doubling and folding back of space and time, in art and memory, perfectly illustrates Ballard's understanding of everyday suburban existence as lacking temporal/spatial differences through which meaningfulness is made.

These uncanny repetitions and echoes of Ballard's life and work are curiously insubstantial in the sense that both are heavily mediated, the product of prior presentations. 'All these technicians', the author realises on the film set, 'were working to construct a more convincing reality than the original I had known as a child' Ballard (*ML*, 333). Ballard seems to be arguing for a lack of an 'original' experience here; suburbanised experience has no spatial or temporal specificities. It is not that primary experience is weakened by its endless technological reproduction, but rather that there is no prior primary affect at all. There is no originary 'convincing reality' to be found here; everything is flat, dull and banal – or else absurdly overdone. 'The medium of film' he argues 'had turned us all into minor actors in an endlessly running day-time serial' (*ML*, 250). In an essay 'First Impressions of London', collected in *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (Ballard, 1996b), Ballard recounts how London was first represented for him as a small boy by adult Shanghai expatriates; 'the bright lights of Piccadilly, Noel Coward and Gertie Lawrence... a Peter Pan and Christopher Robin image of London' (*FI*, 128). Sebastian Groes argues that here 'London is foregrounded as an overtly fictional city...a discursive construct' (Baxter, 2008: 81). Interestingly, this perception of place as given meaning by its own prior cultural signification also operates in the 'real', yet mapless, chaos of the Lunghua internment camp. Here, as Ballard recounts in *Empire of the Sun* (1984), confusing pathways and tracks are made legible by being renamed as London landmarks: 'Piccadilly', 'Knightsbridge' or 'Petticoat Lane' (*ES*, 81. This, Groes argues, 'recreates a synchronically aligned city of the mind'(Baxter, 2008: 81). Here we see that access to the real, to substantial material place, is always informed by modes of signification. There is always this uncomfortable mismatch, in Ballard, between the semiotic rendering of a place and the felt, sensuous experience of that place.

This gap between signification and experience is neatly explored in Ballard's first experience of London. The material reality of the war-damaged capital, when actually encountered in 1946, presented a profound shock for Ballard. 'When I actually arrived', he continues in

'First Impressions', 'I found heaps of rubble, an exhausted ferret-like people defeated by war' (*FI*, 129). 'I could hardly believe this was the city I had read about' he continues in *Miracles of Life*, 'small, putty-faced people moved around, shabbily dressed with a haunted air' (*ML* 121). The grim material reality of London presented here expresses, in one sense, expresses an all-too-real facticity. This is the urgently experienced reality of the shocking, the unexpected. But also we can sense here that Ballard's reaction to this unpleasantly material 'really- existing' London is also in its own way, thoroughly mediated. Ballard's perception of place is also viewed through the device of metaphor and even literary cliché; people are ferret-like, unfeasibly small and pale. London was really, he declares, like 'Bucharest with a hangover' (*FI*, 129). Place is always informed by its signification.

Indeed this profound and inevitable gap between the discursive systems that create an image of place and the experienced material reality of that place fuel much of the creative energy of Ballard's work. The shock of the real is devastating but also liberating. Critic Andrzej Gasiorek argues that this 'slippage between two imaginative worlds, of Lunghua and England, opens up the space in which Ballard's fiction operates and gives rise to a series of indeterminate, liminal zones' (Gasiorek, 2005: 3). These indeterminate, liminal zones will eventually, as we shall see in a moment, include the Ballardian suburb. We can go further than Gasiorek and see that Ballard registers a semiotic problem here, which is that we can never adequately encounter the real itself. The material reality of the environment is always impossibly mediated, distanced through sign-systems. The Ballardian suburb itself crystallises these notions of detachment; it is presented, as we shall see, as affectless and dulled.

There are two possible ways of interpreting this semiotic problem in Ballard's writing. One is to suggest that Ballard is symptomatizing (in the very work itself) a wider semiotic problem of the way that the suburb problematises differentiation □ that is, the question of legibility and meaningfulness in the suburb. Another way of viewing this is to suggest that Ballard does indeed register a 'semiotic problem, but the problem is that he's *not* registering the differences that carve up reality. Ballard's work is infused with the central notion that the boundaries of the 'real' and the fictive are constantly eroded. Indeed, for Ballard, the nature of fiction and reality has reversed in the heavily technologically mediated post-war era. These motifs are collected in genre-shattering anti-novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Ballard, 2006a) where historical events (Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons technology) are mixed haphazardly with personal fictions and inner psychological states.

Ballard's work suggests, then, that *all* temporal and spatial boundaries are dramatically fragmented and reversed in the latter half of the 20th Century. The shifting and mutating disjunctions between self and the individual's lived relation to environment is a key and evolving feature of Ballard's opus. His 1960s 'disaster' sequence (which I discussed in chapter 4 in connection with 1950s cosy catastrophe fiction), explores not the facts of various global disasters but the 'inner space' of his anti-heroes. This was followed by novels of urban dystopia (*Crash* and *Concrete Island,* (Ballard, 1973), and *High Rise* (Ballard, 1975) that chartered urban and suburban built high-tec environments and again, focussed on the interface between technological and architectural isolation and individual psychopathology. In other words, Ballard quite enjoys this boundary-blurring semiotic confusion, foregrounding psychological states and extreme experiences.

In a later sequence of novels Ballard shifted geographic focus, and perhaps geographic focus, from the decaying urban periphery, to the specific addressing the relation of the relation of individual psyche to place in the sites of contemporary exurbia. Thus, *Cocaine Nights* (1996c) and *Super-Cannes* (2006b) are set in, respectively, a Marbella exclusive holiday village and a Cotes-d'Azur high-tech science park, *Millennium People* (Ballard, 2003a) has a similar controlled environment, but set in a central London luxury gated community, 'Chelsea Marina'. 'This is what North America and Europe might be like in about 200 years time' Ballard suggests, 'it will be a landscape of not so much of suburbia, but exurbia, a kind of country-club belt' (*MP*, 7). In these novels, which share many stylistic and plot similarities, the placeless, featureless and heavily mediated nature of the exurban landscapes depicted are foregrounded by Ballard's use of detective fiction motifs – the semiotic genre par excellence, as discussed in chapter two with reference to Peirce and Sherlock Holmes. The extreme boredom generated by these affluent, controlled cocoons warps individuals; baroque crime is engineered here, in a desperate attempt to spark some engagement with external reality. The narrators in all these novels, as concerned relative, function as amateur detectives, determined to uncover and explain this senseless violence. He always fails to read the clues or to uncover personal motivation or guilt. There is nothing left here to uncover.

In his last novel, *Kingdom Come* (Ballard, 2006c), presents Ballard's view of the contemporary British exurb. It is set around a 'motorway town' and shopping mall along the M25 corridor between Gatwick and Heathrow airports. It opens with its main protagonist, Richard Pearson, anxiously trying to locate 'Brooklands', a new post-suburb/exurb, somewhere 'beyond the outer London suburbs', an 'impossible location' past Heathrow (*KC*,

4). Pearson, urban sophisticate, is, in the frequently used Ballardian fictional device, the 'metaphysical' detective, out to solve the mystery of who shot his father at the Metro-Centre, a vast shopping mall and sports centre, but who of course also highlights the impossibility of reading or interpreting anything in this kind of environment.

Brooklands cannot be found. From the start, Pearson has no co-ordinates. 'I was moving through a terrain of inter-urban sprawl, a geography of sensory deprivation,' Pearson observes, 'a zone of dual carriageways and petrol stations, business parks and signposts to Heathrow' (*KC*, 6). This exurban landscape is meaningless for Pearson as it lacks scale, continuity and orientation; 'I tried to work out where I was' (*KC* 7). Here, 'nothing made sense except in terms of transient airport culture' (*KC* 6). Pearson is trying to pinpoint a location that doesn't exist. What *does* make sense in this estranging environment are anxiety and fear themselves. The semiotic anxiety engendered by being adrift in an illegible and meaningless landscape is echoed by that place's paranoid surveillance and security. 'The entire landscape' Pearson observes 'was coded for danger' (*KC* 7). He notes the CCTV technology, numerous alarm systems, filter-signs and high-security measures protecting the sanctuary of science parks and private communities. Yet Ballard's text is no thriller □ there is nothing to see, nothing to uncover. As in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super Cannes*, Ballard uses specific thriller/ detective fiction genre elements to suggest that nothing at all can actually be seen and known for sure. Ballard's texts do not offer the satisfying pleasures of these popular genres; there are no clues to be followed, no guilty individuals, no conspiracy or satisfying resolution. *Kingdom Come* uses some detective/thriller elements, but only to show how irrelevant they are. As Paul Cobley argues 'there is a problem of knowledge in the thriller but it is not the one it is customarily thought to be' (Cobley, 2004: 320). The problem of knowledge here is not who shot Pearson senior and why, but that in this space signs do not lead anywhere. As in the Sherlock Holmes stories discussed earlier, in chapter two, the detective elements are not concerned with intrinsic factors (whodunit), but with broader elements of cultural hermeneutics (what can we know of these kinds of place).

Like many Ballardian landscapes the Brooklands exurb is devoid of signs of community. Here, lost in the 'heartland of the motorway people', Pearson 'observes that there are 'few signs of permanent human settlement' (*KC*, 6). The place lacks all indicators of community; of other people, human contact and meeting places. Any building here is only 'linked to any sense of community by the used car lots that surround it', and, elsewhere Pearson muses that a petrol station 'enshrined a deeper sense of community than any church or chapel' (*KC*, 7).

Later in the novel we hear David Cruise, a local media celebrity, ranting on his radio show about the concept of community: '"community". That's a word I hate...the kind of word used by snobby, upper-middle class folk, who want to put ordinary people in their place' (*KC*, 176). Paradoxically, the use of 'community' here is rejected as being too old-fashioned 'suburban': 'community means living in a little box, driving a little car, going on little holidays' (*KC* 176). Cruise also mentions the use of 'community' as euphemism for 'ethnic minority', for what Cruise's racist white listeners assume are people different from them, *not* part of their community at all.

Cruise goes on to outline a new type of exurban community: 'the only real community is one we've built here at the Metro–Centre' (*KC*, 176). The Metro-Centre is the real focus of Brooklands, an enormous exurban shopping centre (based on real-life Bluewater in Kent), an 'immense aluminium dome... a cathedral of consumerism' (*KC*, 17). In fact, this motorway settlement, reckons Pearson, who works in marketing, can only really be explained by contemporary patterns of consumption. The commodity being that object, of course, which that has no intrinsic material qualities or meaning, but which is infinitely interchangeable for something else. This exurb is purely a creation of consumption: 'The suburbs, we would believe to our last gasp, were defined by the products we sold them', Pearson explains (*KC*, 4). Here, in the 'perimeter city' it is consumerism that 'dominates the lives of its people', that provides the only textures of community (*KC*, 15). Out here, we are told, everyone 'looked as though they were shopping, whatever they were doing' (*KC* 15).

But this logic of a community brought together by mass consumption is itself pushed to further extreme ends in the novel. Ballard attempts to forge an explicit link in his recent work between these kinds of enclosed exurban consumer-led, or exclusive class-based communities, and elements of fascism. Fascism, here including directed violence, racism, parades, group–identification (in the guise of sports fandom), seeks to reconnect the exurbanites to everyday material reality by igniting extreme emotion. 'This is a soft fascism' we are told in *Kingdom Come*, 'like the consumer landscape. No goose-stepping, no jackboots, but the same emotions and the same aggression' (*KC*, 145). The controlled, mediated emptiness of the new exurbs is thus reconnected to place by deliberately exploiting extremes of atavistic behaviour. The benign, banal, controlled spaces of the super mall in *Kingdom Come*, watched over by giant teddy bears symbolising infantilism and excess, is in fact a site for organised violence, group madness co-ordinated by a charismatic leader. 'The aim is to develop belonging, group identity', Pearson explains (*KC*, 85).

Ballard's attempts to reconnect exurban non-places with a sense of the real contrasts interestingly with features of Iain Sinclair's work.[37] In a 2006 interview Sinclair admits: 'My own writing is at absolutely the opposite extreme from Ballard's (interview with Tim Chapman, Sinclair, 2006n.p). Philosopher John Gray, in a review of *Millennium People* suggests that 'the juxtaposition of J. G. Ballard and Iain Sinclair is far from obvious', adding that 'their views on the political and cultural scene from which they are equally estranged are quite different, even opposed' (Gray, 2003: n.p). Yet while implicit attitudes and reactions do differ, both writers share a deep concern with the texture of life in contemporary suburbanised landscapes. Sinclair views extreme Ballardian sites, not as crazed, science-fictional extremism, but as a form of documentary realism; 'his reality of the 60s has now come into place in the English landscape...we are a motorway culture and he was a prophet of that' (Sinclair, 2006). Crucially, where Ballard's work obsessively works themes of inevitable disengagement from lived place, from shared tradition and rooted community, which for him is the very condition of modernity, Sinclair's concern is with some form of salvaging of these elements.

However, Sinclair's aesthetic of retrieval and memory, the drive to uncover and preserve features of precise locality, only works in sites which contain the layers of accumulated historical and cultural sediment to uncover: namely, the city. This project is clearly stated in Sinclair's edited collection of themed writing, *London: City of Disappearances* (Sinclair, 2006a). Sinclair's stated aim here is to make the city legible by rescuing disparate fragments of a forgotten or erased London, to collate an 'anthology of absence', of fading cultural and personal memory. In a useful article, 'The Contemporary London Gothic' (Luckhurst, 2002a), Roger Luckhurst positions Sinclair's unburying of the city's submerged past as part of a broader movement, a 'newly Gothicized apprehension of London'(Luckhurst, 2002a: 525). This chimes with a broader 1990s concern with the spectral as an inerasable remainder of the past, as that which can never be erased, a concern sparked by Derrida's highly influential *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida, 2006). This is the work which launches 'hauntology', presenting, with its pun, the spectre as that paradoxical state which is neither being nor non-being. Gothic hauntology suggests that the present exists only with respect to an ineradicable past. It is, as Mark Fisher, puts it 'space that is stained by time' (Fisher, 2010: n.p). The

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[37] For clarity Sinclair's work will be abbreviated as *White Chappell, Scarlett Tracings* (Sinclair, 1998) *WCST, Liquid City* (Sinclair, 1999b) LC, *Downriver* (Sinclair, 2002a) *D, Light Out for the Territory* (Sinclair, 1997) *LOT, London Orbital* (Sinclair, 2002b) *LO*.

contemporary gothic seeks to uncover traces of the past, a past seemingly lost forever, buried by the energetic forces of modernity.

This aesthetic of the spectral trace finds expression in a broad range of writing over the last twenty to thirty years, including both the literary (W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2001), Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*(Ackroyd, 1990) and in the more genre-based fiction of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (Gaiman, 1995) , Christopher Fowler's, 'Bryant and May' series featuring the 'Peculiar Crime Unit' (Fowler, 2003), and China Mieville's *King Rat* (Mieville,1999) and, more recently *The City and the City*, (Mieville, 2010). We can also include here film-makers, such as Chris Petit, but especially Patrick Keiller, whose trilogy of 'Robinson' films (*London* 1994, *Robinson in Space* 1997 and *Robinson in Ruins* 2010), attempt to make legible contemporary London non-spaces by reconnecting them to submerged historical currents. Rather than a total annihilation by the forces of modernity, on this reckoning the city preserves (if you know where and how to look) traces of a past that seem, at first glance, to have been swept away by rebuilding and redevelopment. These palimpsestic approaches to London present the capital actually consisting of multiple layers of historical and cultural signifiers, always containing still legible, if faint, echoes of the past. The palimpsest can be read by those with recourse to deep and usually esoteric knowledge, and who are prone to eager searching and chance encounters, aided by quasi-mystical intuition.[38] This, in the form of a cultural, perhaps haunting, repetition, is the urban investigative fantasy of Conan Doyle mentioned above, the flaneur/detective making the teeming city newly legible, in a new *fin-de siècle*, with quasi-magical powers.

This reference to the mystical is crucial to a semiotic understanding of such neo-gothic sensibilities. In a late, 2002, essay 'Occult London', Luckhurst calls Iain Sinclair 'the laureate of London's strange causalities, unearthing hidden lines of force and conducting investigations...through the language of occult conjuration and séance' (in Kerr and Gibson, 2003: 335). The occult is defined here as 'hermeneutic, whereby a hidden, esoteric meaning is extracted from an apparently banal, exoteric surface '(Kerr and Gibson, 2003: 335). The occult is thus a semiotic operation, a way of reading the signs, particularly the semi-legible signs of post-industrial and postmodern cities. The occult promises to show us, then, what straightforward realism cannot.

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[38] There is also a vogue in contemporary publishing for studies and guides dedicated to uncovering a range of forgotten or secret Londons: lost railways, canals, rivers, slums, cemeteries, counter-cultural London, criminal and deviant demimondes.

But it is precisely this element of Sinclairian occult investigation, reading the signs of an apparently meaningless surface that can gain no purchase in the suburb. The gothic in fact is an urban form (or, more exactly, urbanised in the late Nineteenth Century), as already noted in Chapter 2, in such supernatural-in-the-city tales as Stevenson's 1886 story *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 2003) and Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* (Stoker, 1993). The gothic is symptomatic of London's modernity as threatened by uncanny elements, and by the return of those repressed elements that were actually there all the time, the masses, the ubiquitous slums, and forms of supposed evolutionary regression that lead to criminality, deviance and insanity[39]. This form of haunting and occult reading is not present in the suburbs. Indeed, I noted in Chapter 2 how mid-nineteenth set suburban ghost stories, by Dickens and others, also testified to a return of disavowed elements, such as the slum, and it erosion of social and economic boundaries. Yet we also saw how such suburban 'occultism' was in fact all faked. There were no occult elements in the suburbs here, no 'real ghosts' but only fakes, amateurish attempts to make real money on a largely imaginary property market. The 'haunting here became purely financial; the pursuit of phantom money.

Where the urban is prime territory for these kinds of neo-gothic seeing, reconnecting the city to a historical and cultural grid, the suburb, then, very much is not. What is interesting is that this 'spectral turn', the attempt to make the city more rooted to a specific location by conjuring ghosts and occult reading of the signs, runs into difficulties when it is applied to the London suburbs. The idea of a *palimpsestic* suburb, layer upon layer of accreted historical details, local tradition, cultural memory, the ghost of traumatic events, the elucidation of a previous literary tradition, now all partly erased and barely legible, but still adding up to an esoteric meaningful connectivity, doesn't work.

In Sinclair's writing the suburb, unlike the city, is irretrievable; it is not amenable to gothic excavation. For Sinclair the suburb is both defensively bounded, and also too fluid, its formlessness not a suitable surface from which to read past traces.[40] In *White Chappell, Scarlett Tracings* (Sinclair, 1998), Sinclair's first novel, the key characters are Jack the Ripper obsessives, dealers in esoteric books and psychogeographic explorers, all involved in

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[39] In fact, to be precise, we find that the most densely haunted sites of London in the work of the neo-gothics are not actually located in precise central urban locations, but tend to be slightly off-centre. Sinclair ignores the well-documented City of London and instead obsesses around its peripheral borders, those former slums existing in the City's shadows: Shoreditch and Whitechapel (especially Brick Lane), Limehouse and Clerkenwell. Indeed London's Psychogeographic' spaces are as now as recognisable, as fashionable, and as expensive, as many traditional central London locales..

[40] This is, of course, the Kantian sublime, that object which exceeds the limits of representation, that which is monstrous and formless. Lyotard, also defines the sublime as an awareness of the monstrous, what he calls the 'unform' (the formless) (Lyotard, 1991)

a manic search for a particular copy of Conan Doyle's first Holmes outing, *A Study in Scarlet* (Conan Doyle, 2001). They are also attempting to find textual evidence for a theory of the Ripper's true identity. As discussed in chapter three above, both this novella, and the problem of solving the 1888 Ripper murders, represent paradigm cases of semiotic problems. Reading this world of the late Victorian metropolis and especially its slums and suburbs, had become, as I argued, highly problematic.

In fact as both Sebeok and Cobley argue Holmes turns out, not to be a master rationalist and scientific investigator, but a figure who uses seemingly new abilities to make the metropolis legible, deploying what semiotician Thomas Sebeok calls the 'detectival method of abduction', a mix of 'logical deduction, intuition and inspired guesswork'(Sebeok, 1981). We saw a dramatization here of anxieties around the capacities of deductive reasoning to make sense of the 'mess' of modernity. I argued how Holmes's method, employing imagination and play, as well as 'scientific' deduction, can usefully be seen as dramatising an anxiety over the material nature of objects of knowledge (the suburbs in *A Study in Scarlet* we should recall, are muddy, unfinished and unexplored). This sense of semiotic chaos also invades *White Chappell*. The crazed book dealers travel from EC 1 down to South London precisely for room, for breathing space, for relief from the oppressive rich urban textual density and demands for legibility imposed by the modern city. They go 'to get some air' (*WCST*, 62). Intriguingly, although the Old Kent Road's potential as worthy neo-gothic territory *is* partially admitted, it being in fact 'really' that 'much older track, The Pilgrim Way', the area itself presents as opaque and confined. Bermondsey here is enclosed and defensive, solidly residential and unproductive of the cultural/temporal echoes and sonorities Sinclair craves. 'This was an area that knew itself', he suggest, the locals 'existing in suspended time' (*WCST*, 63). South London here is inert, frigid, in contrast to the prolific 'heat' (Sinclair's term for vital, generative, visionary power) generated by urban spaces. This suburban 'zone' he complains 'was defended by its rigorous domesticity. The family remained a unit of force within its walls' (*WCST*, 62). Sinclair is defeated by the walls and moves on.

Sinclair's later novel *Downriver* (Sinclair 2002a) is a densely allusive and multi-layered narrative using the lower Thames to reconnect episodes from British imperial history with Eighties Thatcherite capitalism, especially symbolised by Canary Wharf (itself arcane symbol of the 'occult logic of "market forces"') (*D*, 265). Here, Sinclair's visit to the suburb, as against the crazed multitude of signs being received from the city, and reflected in the novel's complex and allusive language, is again highly constrictive. Sinclair perceives the suburb as a

form of entombment. 'The realization came over me', he is shocked to note, 'I was dead' (*D*, 51). The language itself reflects this; syntax simplifies, narrative rhythm slows. But, curiously for Sinclair, this is not a death that haunts, not a deathliness that permits the resonance of any ghostly messages. For Sinclair, suburban south London is 'beached in the suburbs of purgatory' (*D*, 51). This is a stilled, unspeaking death.

Some recent London suburban-set fiction, incidentally takes up this conceit of London's suburbia as necropolis, as a place where nothing can escape. In direct contrast to urban revenancy, where the dead can speak urgently to the present, here we have here a very suburban deathliness, deathliness in the midst of life. There is no 'hauntology' here. In recent novels by Will Self and Hilary Mantel London suburbs are packed with the undead, but these are not ghosts, revenants of thrilling psychic events, reminders of a given place's specificity, but rather just the dull and dissatisfied inhabitants of the dreary suburbs of the 'other side' (of the river). Self is part of Sinclair's informal group of London walkers and seers and has published two collection of essays *Psychogeography* (Self, 2007) and *Psychogeography Too* (Self, 2009). In Self's novel *How The Dead Live* (Self, 2001), the freshly deceased turn up in suburbs, called 'cystricts', which act as 'quarantine, or clearing houses for the newly dead' (Self, 2001: 206). These areas, such as 'Dulston' in the north and 'Dulburb' in the south (clear echoes of 'real-life' suburban counterparts), are located precisely in the same physical location as 'real' suburban places: 'If you lived in Hendon you'd know what a living death was' (Self, 2001:186). Here, two zones, two suburbs are actually mapped onto one physical space, like the two cities of 'Besźel' and 'Ul Qomahere' which, without noticing each other, occupy the same space in China Mieville's 2007 novel *The City & the City* (Mieville, 2010). There is no ontological hierarchy here, no subterranean world of the dead; the suburb is deathly; death is suburban. The two cannot see each other. Hilary Mantel's 2005 novel *Beyond Black* presents the psychic concerns of London's exurbia, those 'marginal lands', a 'landscape running with outcasts and escapees, with Afghans, Turks and Kurds...rejects of anomalies' (Mantel, 2008: 1). Here, in a place where 'family memory was short, in towns where nobody comes from...with their floating populations and car parks where the centre should be' Alison provides, at certain 'Psychic Extravaganzas', a desperate frisson of another dimension, of contact with 'the world of the dead' (Mantel, 2008: 17). Alison is a psychic, a bridge between two zones, working 'the conurbations that clustered around the junctions of the M25, and the corridors of the M3 and M5'. Yet, again, as in Self's novel, these twin zones have a curious material adjacency. Alison's mediumship between them is not really

needed as both sides merge into each other at the edges. This is a zone of the half- dead, the forgotten the old and the sick, the haunted and unhappy.

The suburb in Sinclair is presented as one incapable of retaining palimpsestic impressions from the past. In *Downriver* (Sinclair, 2002a) the south London suburban landscape, is presented as changeable and fluid. On a deviation to South London, through the Rotherhithe tunnel, Sinclair describes an Alice down-the-rabbit hole inversion. The tunnel, we are told, 'opens a vein between two distinct systems, two depictions of time' (*D*, 51). On the south suburban side it is marshland, it drains meaning away from the esoteric riches of the city. The environment here is too amorphous to operate as palimpsest; it retains no impression or trace of any past. The investigating subject here in this fluid space cannot construct a meaningful grid, or a map. Sinclair, the Holmesian investigator feels troubled here because 'the townscape would not settle into any recognisable pattern' (*D*, 51). Even the temporal revenancy is wrong. 'Disturbingly, everything was *almost* familiar- but from the wrong period' (*D*, 51). This zone is anachronistic rather than diachronic, temporal traces cannot be intimated, signs interpreted, or territory made legible. 'The Surrey Canal has dried...the unmarked passage out...it is a track of rubbish, waste, old streets tipped-in to dull its meaning" (*D*, 62). The suburb effects a deliquescent deforming, a blurring of constitutive borders, and a subsequent dislocation and displacement of legibility and representation; Sinclair discovers he is using 'a map whose symbols had been perversely shifted to some arcane and impenetrable system' (*D*, 51). This zone is lost in 'the mists of Ultima Thule', that mythical place traditionally located beyond the borders of any world we might know (*D*, 51).

Sinclair's other suburban trip in *Downriver* is to suburban St Mary Cray, in Kent. He goes there to photograph the house of the poet Nicholas Moore, who lived, exiled, 'out there in the wilderness' (*D*, 311). Sinclair cannot read the landscape here: 'there is nothing in sight except identical houses' (*D*, 311). Describing one of Moore's own poems as a dream sequence about wandering endlessly through anonymous streets, Sinclair notes, 'pavements the same, trees the same...that's suburbia' (*D*, 311). Although this might seem an historical echo, an example of productive hauntology it is no such thing. For Sinclair, trips to the suburbs articulate precisely the uncanny repetition that is just a meandering dream-like stasis, where there is movement but no 'arrival'. This is precisely what Anthony Vidler, who gave us a description

of the suburban uncanny discussed in chapter four, calls movement without progress[41] For Sinclair, 'there is no sense of movement' (*D*, 311).

More than this Sinclair also has his own dream of the suburbs. Sinclair has seen this suburb in dreams, but, crucially the reality is wrong, slightly out of sync: '"my" house was a mirror image...pictured from the other side of the street' (*D*, 320). Sinclair's suburban dream here contains a reversal of another Holmesian echo; the fantasy of surveillance from the air. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Sherlock Holmes, in the 1892 story 'A Case of Identity' (Conan Doyle, 1988) fantasises the possibility that 'we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in'. Sinclair's suburban dream is actually a 'pituitary nightmare, floating along these unpeopled cul-de-sacs' where, crucially, nothing can be seen. 'Nothing', Sinclair concludes, 'had been resolved (or made clear) by my visit' (*D*, 321). He is made to fall back on cliché. Sinclair is not at home in south London; his attentive, dense, allusive writing itself becomes banalised, immobilised at the anxious boundary of the visible/invisible; 'I always wonder, drifting through south London, what mysterious lives occur behind the net curtains' (*D*, 42).

The only way 'truths about a city divided against itself' can be uncovered, Sinclair argues, 'is through a series of arcane pilgrimages, days spent crawling around the rim of things' (Sinclair 1997: 1). This is the premise of 1997's collection of London walks *Lights Out for the Territory*, subtitled 'nine excursions in the secret heart of London'. Yet again, here we find Sinclair's project of *urban* ambulation and excavation is much less productive when transferred to the South London suburbs. Here the thrilling frisson of the chance encounter, the relaxed certainty of some significant encounter fails. In *Lights Out*, a walk to Greenwich fails to produce a true a psychogeographic buzz. Sinclair only encounters 'washed out streets, without shops or garages or action of any kind' (*LOT*, 43). In the 'lost foothills to which only commuters return', Sinclair discovers that walking here produces neither an illumination, nor a legible mapping; 'I cannot connect any of this with the elegant fiction of my map' (*LOT*, 44). A later walk, recorded in the same work, to nearby Maryon Park, in Charlton, is also frustrating. The park is the setting of Antonio's celebrated 1969 film *Blow-Up*, which develops themes of visibility and absence. For Sinclair 'the park didn't connect with an area of London I knew' (*LOT*, 347). This sense of the London suburb being off the cultural map,

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[41] The terror is the tantalising, nightmare of endless laborious negotiation of disorientating vertical labyrinth, the illusory horizon continually receding, the subject actually remaining stationary, Vidler calls 'abyssal repetition of the imaginary void'. He connects this particular terror to Thomas De Quincey's fearful response to Piranesi's drawings of ruins (Vidler 1992: 37).

invisible to cultural cartography as lacking meaningful signifiers of place, is repeated in a visit to another south London suburban location, Herne Hill, as described in *Liquid City* (Sinclair and Atkins, 1999b). This travelogue of London walks focuses on London's eastern and south-eastern sectors, the 'liquid' here being the Thames but also the fluid and ungraspable suburbs. Here the 'undifferentiated suburbs' lack any of the traditional 'landmarks' that would 'confirm or justify [a] sense of the metropolis' (*LC*, 40).

After *Lights Out* Sinclair recalls, in an interview with Tim Chapman, that central London neo-gothic mapping was in danger of 'exhausting itself' and that consequently there was a need to expand, to 'go out to the urban periphery' (Sinclair, 2006b: 4). 'I kind of felt that I'd reached a dead end' he admits here, 'the city was becoming so heritaged and corrupted I thought the interesting move was out to the margin, to the motorway, to the M25' (Sinclair, 2006b: 4). Sinclair needs to go elsewhere to find unchartered zones. There has been, in fact, an intriguing orbicular expansion in the focus of Sinclair's work, from urban centre toward suburban margins and out towards the exurbs. In a sense this has been forced on Sinclair as precise urban/suburban spatial polarities are eroded. While the city is hollowed out, turned inside out, the former suburbs expand and mutate, developing characteristically 'urban' features, so that now neither recognisable urban core or peripheral suburb nor can be truly identified or located. This is the ubiquity of suburban forms noted above. Thus, as he argues in *Lights Out*, archetypal 'urban' areas like Limehouse and Bethnal Green, Bermondsey and Elephant 'once seen as the epitome of urban experience...are now Neo-Suburbia' filled with displaced commuters, apartments and tiny semis with neat gardens, defensive domesticity (*LOT*, 221). The urban core itself becomes more suburbanised in the sense that is closely monitored, and often zoned into tightly bounded homogenous enclaves. What's more, Sinclair adds 'nobody can afford to live at the heart of the city' and so it is now sealed off, the 'hollow centre divided up' (*LOT*, 59). Meanwhile, away from the metropolis, greenfield sites are now residential or commercial 'off-highway zones' with their own 'impenetrable microgeographies' (*LOT*, 11). These contemporary spaces, disconnected from local specificity and devoid of community relations, are, of course, Ballardian.

In *London Orbital* (Sinclair, 2002b) an exploration of Greater London's exurban periphery, Sinclair is very much aware that this is a move onto Ballard's turf. It's 'invading his territory' he explains in the interview with Chapman: 'I certainly felt homage had to be paid...and it was necessary to stop off in Shepperton' (Sinclair, 2006b: 4). This is unpromising territory for the Sinclairian project; place here does not generate occult signals, modernity has not

buried seams of cultural gold. The outer suburb or exburb is in fact, he tells us in *London Orbital*, 'the point where London...gives up its ghosts' (*LO*, 3). For Sinclair, of course, this lack of ghosts is fatal, making any 'hauntological' investigation impossible. Out here on the motorway rim', Sinclair writes, 'there were no memories'. 'Back stories' are 'erased'; history is 'revised on a daily basis' (*LO*, 26).

Sinclair's twin strategies for attempting a neo-gothic treatment of the unpropitious M25 and its suburban hinterland, to give it some redemptive context of local attachment and historical/cultural depth, are firstly to walk it, and then to unearth literary/cultural precedents. First, then Sinclair undertakes, for the suburb, the 'arcane pilgrimages' mentioned in *Lights Out*; he walks (or walks near) the M25 motorway. Putting into practice the De Certeau's distinction, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (De Certeau, 1984) between 'strategy' (the 'official' unified version of the city) and 'tactics' (the experienced city as actually explored by the individual, on foot), Sinclair seeks to extract meaning on the motorway by getting close and slowing down. Or, as Sinclair puts it in *Liquid City* ' a marriage of convenience between chiropody and alchemy...magic and feet, that's what it's all about' (*LC*, 84). The emphasis in *London Orbital* shifts from 'the overworked urban "*flaneur*" to 'the *fugueur*' (*LO*, 18). This is a Situationist psychogeographic term combining the sense of absconding with temporary psychological disturbance, especially amnesia. This is a form of ambulatory 'hysterical fugue' that turns out to be exactly 'the right description for our once-a-month episodes of transient mental illness' (*LO*, 18). Now, the walk, the *Fugue*, becomes both 'drift and fracture', or 'mad walking' (*LO*, 120), the only way to figure the fragmentary collapse of constitutive zones and boundaries in London's newer outlying regions.

The perversity of walking the M25 is precisely that all the activities such a walk should involve – aimlessness, leisure, unplanned stopping, daydreaming, unscheduled contact, a focus on the unusual – are not possible on a motorway. Speed, circulation, movement, temporariness, a total lack of distraction, is all. These motorway features are extrapolated to include the region itself. Subsequently, the area reveals its 'awful secret: there is no there' (*LO*, 61). Even the buried historical trace, the ghostly revenant, is absent in this transformation; 'memory is trashed' (*LO*, 62). M25 post-suburbia exists in an amnesiac present tense; quite the opposite of the notion of all time existing in one moment, the specific urban temporality of 'London Gothic' with the return of buried cultural memories; 'out here on the motorway rim there were no memories' (*LO*, 149).

The second way in which Sinclair aims to salvage meaning or legibility from the M25 hinterland is by excavating a lost literary tradition. Just as the walk is intended to reveal a recognisable narrative of place, so, unearthing a sites previous literary figurings can also work to make place meaningful. In previous works Sinclair has only ventured out to the suburb to locate literary figures who can offer to give the place some meaning: 'I've long held the fancy', he writes in *Lights Out*, 'that the skin of London should be divided up by poets and seers, as much as by gangsters' (*LO*, 142). Thus we have Nicolas Moore in St Mary Cray, Eric Mottram in Herne Hill, Samuel Palmer in Shoreham, Kent. In *Downriver*, Sinclair tries to piece together a suburban canon, a 'south London literary pot-pourri; Conrad's Greenwich, Paul Theroux's Family Arsenal at Deptford, Muriel Spark's Peckham Rye, Pinter's Sidcup' (*D*, 319). Interestingly, Sinclair's choice of collective noun here suggests a miscellaneous collection of diverse objects. The suburb does not have distinctive features and can only adhere to a tradition represented by fairly random works.

Similarly, in *London Orbital*, Sinclair admits to an attempted 'triangulation' of M25 exurbia by evoking the spirits of 'Bram Stoker to the east, H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*...out on the other side in Woking...and Ballard himself at Shepperton' (*LO*, 5). Sinclair later adds nineteenth century poet John Clare at the northern point. The conjuring of these literary figures (all canonically peripheral, all concerned with extreme themes or genres) aims, then, to reclaim a unique particularity for the seeming standardised, interchangeable and ephemeral sites of the contemporary suburb.

Increasingly, however, Sinclair's desperate search for meaning in the M25 hinterland becomes desperate and deranged. The fugue is 'madness as voyage' and Sinclair's journeys becomes more and more disordered and obsessive (*LO*, 64). The text's syntax itself reflects this fragmentation becoming denser and fractured with impenetrable references to any external referent. Sinclair's visionary expeditions stagnate and the experience of the present moment both greatly intensifies (for lack of a legible past) and increases a loss of meaning. Sinclair focuses in great detail on the now, especially on the motorway detritus immediately in front of him: bits of plastic, metal and rubber, traffic patterns, impenetrable buildings, randomly encountered individuals. At the end, the M25's own banal circularity, its constant movement and deferral, its lack of a sense of place, eventually dominates Sinclair's writing. The work itself stops seeking to find meaning in place and, instead, deliriously, is deflected onto the next scene.

The walker repeatedly stumbles across sites that effortlessly repulse inquiry or comprehension by foregrounding the fact of having a lack of anything that can be seen, or anything to hide. On visiting the 'Siebel building', one of many mysterious, unreadable buildings out on the Motorway periphery, Sinclair notes: 'They smile. They know nothing. You are welcome to see whatever you want to see, but there is no content...an absence of attitude. Zero attrition' (*LO*, 217). The new suburban landscape thus guarantees invisibility and anonymity, and rejects legibility, by eliminating being 'read', by denying signification, by rejecting the possibility of having anything to hide. These places reject the notion that it may have depths, secrets, hidden corners, psychopathologies that need illuminating. They project neutrality, naturalness. The pyschogeographer is redundant. Sinclair goes home.

Section Two – The Material Suburb

Ballard and Sinclair both approach the new exurbia, from different perspectives, as a standardised non-place that has no real semiotic or organic relation to specific location. Importantly, in these fictions and investigations just discussed, the contemporary suburb or exurb lacks substantive material reality; there is little sense of the stuff of everyday life. These sites are experienced as insubstantial and depthless, lacking the bite of the real.

This particular view of contemporary suburbia contrasts strongly with another current of recent suburban writing where the environment, on the contrary, is presented as overly material and thickly textured, and where the individual is entangled in a dense web of everyday routine. Here the suburb, contra Sinclair and Ballard, is presented as excessively 'real'. It is, in fact, often cloyingly material. This suburb in fiction by Graham Swift, Nigel Williams and John Lanchester, and by Helen Simpson and Rachel Cusk, is up-close, urgently experienced, above all, *material*. Again, in contrast to the historical and cultural amnesia of Ballard and Sinclair, in these fictions the individual is portrayed as being at the centre of a dense network of local knowledges, personal and familial histories, vestigial class allegiances, local customs and personal intimacies. Residents (willingly or not) are at the centre of local networks of gossip, rumour, snooping, family dramas, peer groups, workplace pressures, neighbourly scrutiny and other forms of localised knowledge and practices.

There are, in fact, two varieties of this all-too-real 'everyday' type of suburb presented in recent fiction, differentiated along gender lines. These will be the focus of the remainder of

this chapter. The first version of the close, 'all-too-real' everyday fictional suburb is a (mostly) male tradition of unwonted *rejection* from a baffling and even malicious suburban environment. Male characters in this fictional subgenre are always incompetent and disempowered, incapable of understanding or coping with the urgent demands of the suburb. We have noted this trend for ejection in suburban fiction before, in the figure of Pooter, Mr Polly, and Jerome's Three Men and others. This tradition of the incompetent male who cannot physically manipulate the environment, and whose displacement is figured in the body, is continued in contemporary, male, writing. The second version of the unaccommodating suburb, discussed below, as produced by women writers, in this case Simpson and Cusk, and presents the suburban material environment as enclosing and swamping the individual. Here everyday suburban material fact does not eject the individual, it subsumes them.

Both these versions of the too-material suburb, as I also argued in chapter two, testify to a difficulty with establishing the truth of the objective reality of suburban life. The material world of the suburb here will not stay as neutral background but seems to have an independent will of its own. It is very useful to analyse this wayward materialism in recent suburban fiction by recourse to theories of new materialist ontologies, to forms of 'vital materialism'. This 'thingly turn', as Steven Connor has it, in recent thought, is an attempt, broadly speaking, to rethink our understanding of the material (Connor, 2008). The dominant common-sense view of materialism, underwritten by four centuries of Newtonian mechanics, and later, by Positivist science, is that there exists an objective realm of material fact, independent of our minds, that is readily observable and knowable from a detached, subjective viewpoint. Our everyday experience suggests that the objective, autonomous world is simply present, out there, and accessible to our perception of it. The foundations of modern materialism, as John Searle puts are that 'reality is objective' (and that this objective 'the world is made up entirely of material particles') and that science is the way to apprehend this because it, too, is objective. 'Science is objective', he argues, 'because reality itself is objective' (Searle, 1992: 10).

Vital materialism posits a new understanding of materialism, one that aims to rethink the dichotomy between the human subject and the non-human material, life and matter, between subject and objects. In an influential recent collection of essays, *New Materialisms* Coole and Frost argue that since 'post-classical physics, matter has become considerably more elusive (one might even say immaterial) and complex' and suggest that the ways 'we understand and

interact with nature are in need of updating' (Coole and Frost, 2010: 5). Jane Bennett, in her recent *Vibrant Matter*, aims to move away from a conception of matter as 'passive stuff, as raw brute and inert' and to introduce 'sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things' (Bennett 2010: viii). By 'vitality' Bennett means a material realm that is autonomous, existing independently of mind, and which contains the potential to 'act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (Bennett, 2010: viii). Importantly, Bennett emphasises the intransigence of vital things, the innate power 'to impede or block the will and design of humans' (Bennett, 2010: viii). This agency of the non-human, which also of course, undermines a belief in the peerless efficacy of the human will to act and change the world, predominates in the suburban fiction that follows.

Vital materialism, then, offers a chance to read suburban fictions, with its unpredictable and wayward things, as marking a difficulty with the notion of a settled 'Newtonian' universe of observable, predictable and mind-independent external reality that can be securely known by the neutral observer. Such a materialism destabilises any cosy realist relationship between subject and object, mind and world. Here, these poles tend to mingle and swap sides. We can go further and argue that the 'vibrant' and wayward suburban material environment explored below is a fictional representation of a metaphysical problem; that is, the problem of free will. As the formerly 'dead' material world gains liveliness, so the self here must also experience changes in the capacity for individual freedom to act. Briefly, where the individual, under the weight of nineteenth century deterministic materialism, loses all independent volition, vital materialism hints that the subject is not alone at the mercy of a relentless material environment.[42] An 'actant', argues Jane Bennett, 'never really acts alone' (Bennett, 2010: 21). On this view agency always depends 'on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces (Bennett, 2010: viii). The suburban fiction discussed below raises these problems of independent volition in a 'vibrant' world, in a comic register.

The comic tradition of the displaced suburban male, then, the individual at the mercy of unfathomable material agency, and incapable of expressing his will, has a lengthy lineage. A stock figure here is the hopeless DIYer, where male suburban unbelonging is literalised as material discord. The 'English passion' Hanif Kureishi notes, is 'not for self-improvement or culture or wit... but for DIY', that is 'the painstaking accumulation of comfort' (Kureishi,

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[42] The dull horror of this crushing clockwork materialism is brilliantly evoked in the amoral, puppet-like, terrorists described in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (Conrad, 2000).

1990: 75). This process for making the habitat comfortable always, however, produces the opposite, as the intransigent material world and suburban male incompetence combine to produces chaos and discomfort. In suburban fiction, and in numerous depiction on TV dramas and sitcoms, in film and advertising, the immediate physical environment of the house and its contents tends to take on a malign uncontrollable life of its own, develops a kind of perverse, bloody-minded autonomy. The domestic male is rendered by the physics of the object world as childlike, emasculated, impotent, and unable to cope with the demands of the domestic environment.

There are numerous fictional instances of the incompetent domestic suburban male. Recent examples occur in Blake Morrison's *South of the River* (Morrison, 2008) and John O'Farrell's *The Best a Man Can Get* (O'Farrell, 2001). In Morrison's saga of suburban south London, Nat, a housebound intellectual and unsuccessful writer, is defined by his ineffectual unworldliness and domestic incompetence. His displacement from professional life and modern mores is marked by a bumbling inability to cope with everyday tasks, other people and new technologies. In Farrell's novel of similarly incompetent North London suburban fatherhood, the panicky new dad's unfittingness for the role is underlined by his impractical uselessness. He is superfluous ('I felt redundant from the outset...I was the useless one who had no idea what to do') is eventually ejected withdraws from the family, reverting to the pursuits of delayed adolescence (O'Farrell, 2001: 47). These characters are incapable of ordering a fast-moving, youth-dominated, technologically complex, environment, also frequently coded as female.[43]

Henry Farr, in Nigel Williams's 1989 comic novel *The Wimbledon Poisoner*, is a standard anonymous male suburbanite in this suburban fictional tradition, that is, ineffectual and invisible (Williams, 1989). 'I'm the quiet little man in the corner' he admits, 'the man who looked like he might do something – and then didn't' (Williams, 1989: 269). Like his literary ancestor, *Diary of a Nobody's* Charles Pooter, Farr is both drastically cut off from suburban environment (uncomprehending and isolated) while at the same time being horribly sunk into it, and unable to see any way out. Farr can make no sense of Wimbledon at all. He has been

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[43] The complex male dissociation from what may be termed a densely proscribed suburban 'normal life' is also the underlying theme of the contemporary subgenre 'Lad Lit' novels, by Tony Parsons and Nick Hornby. See Parson's 2002 novel *Man and Boy* (Parsons, 2008) and Hornby's 1992 novels *Fever Pitch* (Hornby, 2000) and 2002's *How to be Good* (Hornby, 2002) Both focus on deracinated young men in the north London suburbs bewilderingly negotiating a post nuclear-family suburban environment which both ejects and pulls them in. Both writers present male characters yearning for alternatives to previously secure domestic structures; to belonging, family, identity, and social role. Again these characters cannot negotiate the suburb. Both, as Ian Sansom point out, 'portray the pathetic English male, struggling with obscure, atavistic impulses which threaten to destroy anything resembling a good life' (Sansom, 2001: 4).

working for years on an absolutely definitive, and hence unpublishable, 'Complete History' of the suburb.[44] This task is comically absurd, of course, as the suburb has no history and could never be complete (the suburb will not come into focus as a knowable subject). Farr's disconnected, myopic, grudge-filled monomania provides the novel's comedy. As I have mentioned above, suburban Wimbledon presents a standard problem of suburban proximity. It is a curious object of knowledge experienced as both too distant and incomprehensible (comprising an illegible background), and yet also is perceived as too close (an incomprehensible complex and dense network of social and familial contact).The suburb, for Farr, will not stay at the correct distance and this proximity is presented in terms of the material environment.

Farr's response to his enraged sense of inconsequence and incomprehension is to become another staple of suburban fiction; the domestic poisoner. He decides to poison his wife, using the example of Everett Maltby, the semi-mythic original 'Wimbledon Poisoner' (Farr is thus positioned as ineffectual copy of an uncertain original). Poison in fact illustrates nicely certain facets of a vibrant materiality. Poison promises, almost magically, that a tiny amount of a toxic substance can effect huge and lethal material changes on the body. As a material substance that has hugely transformative powers and potency it, of course, completely dominates the individual.

As we have come to expect from the alienated suburban male Farr makes a terrible job of being a poisoner. His claim to distinction, being an individual, as an infamous murderer, is constantly undercut by his own lack of agency. Indeed the potent agency of the poison is contrasted with Farr's bumbling inefficacy. Effecting desired change is beyond Farr's abilities. He soon comes to realise, while selecting poison types, calculating dosages and methods of delivery that he is as 'pathetically unqualified in the art of murder as he was at golf or philosophy' (Williams, 1989: 22). Even buying poison in the first place leads to an extended comedy of inefficiency and undesired outcomes, to confusion, pseudonyms, bad disguises and forged documents. Farr himself doesn't carry through the act of poisoning. Or rather he goes through the physical actions of administering a dose of laced 'Chicken Thallium' (the domestic and the toxic neatly combined in a meal laced with poison), but, in fact, someone else's accidental activities (involving farcical plate- swapping) are finally

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[44] Echoes here of Mr Aked, the compiler of 'The Psychology of the Suburbs' in Arnold Bennett's first novel *A Man from the North* (1898) discussed in chapter 3 (Bennett, 1994).

responsible for the actual poisoning that happens. The wrong person dies (a fatally poisoned dinner guest).

We are here, of course, as Farr's name hints, in the realm of *farce*. Farce depends precisely on this lack of individual agency in a baffling and unpredictable external world, hence the genre's emphasis on outrageous plot twists, ineffectual characters, disguises and impersonations and, of course, on physical comedy. There is a strong suggestion in *The Wimbledon Poisoner* that everything is actually controlled by an implacable external force quite beyond Farr's individual agency. Farr idly wills murders to happen, even does some rudimentary preparation – and, incredibly, despite his incompetent bumbling, things *do* happen, people actually do actually die. Yet, Farr actually has no power over the real here – it's all accidental, done for him by another uncontrollable agency. In the novel it is as if Farr's will is carried out, in a roundabout way, by the material world itself. Occasionally there is a coincidence of his will and the vital forces of material world. The material develops agency here, while, in turn, Farr loses any sense of free will. He even starts to lose individual identity. At one stage he cannot even be sure if he will murder or not: 'He knew that at any moment he might try to slip something into Jackson's food '(Williams, 1989: 221). He cannot commit murder, just as his suburban antecedents fail to put up a shelf.

This dislocation of the individual, and the problem of material determination versus individual free will, is also central to the south London suburbs portrayed in Graham Swift's fiction. Swift does make a claim for the uniqueness of the locale, the specific density and sense of belonging of suburbs. 'There is a certain inescapable attachment' Swift argues of south London '...I really feel that this is my place' (O'Mahony, 2003 n.p.). This is true of locales is Swift's work: south- west London suburbia in 1980's *The Sweetshop Owner* (Swift, 1997), the" 0" degree longitude of 1983's *Waterland* (Swift, 2002), the Bermondsey of 1996's *Last Orders* (Swift, 1996) and the Wimbledon of *The Light of Day* (Swift, 2003). On the other hand, while Swift presents a familiar, everyday, lived-in locality, dense with complex community relations and a keen sense of the unique history of place, he also suggests the impossibility of ever really belonging. The Swiftian suburb is very specific, based on a locale, but is also presented as remote and individually alienating. Swift's south London then is, peculiarly, both familiar and strange, characters both rooted and yet cast adrift.

In Swift's fiction this paradoxical sense of the suburban everyday as both homely and unsettling evokes a sense of a critical *lack* in human affairs. Swift's novels focus on the something missing; the overall tonal quality here is sombre mourning or nostalgia.[45] Male characters in particular repeatedly fail to connect themselves to larger narratives of cultural tradition, to meaningful historical antecedence, or to ties of kinship and community. Characters can discover no context, no resonant depths, to their lives, and they desperately try to establish networks of connectivity, of modes of belonging. Swift's south London suburban novels chart these broken lines of connectivity. This sense of disconnection and ejection from a familiar locale is central to Swift's first novel, *The Sweetshop Owner* (Swift, 1997). The novel articulates the disconcerting strangeness of the suburban scene; both familiar and unfamiliar. The 'High Street' here is not given a precise geographical location (though seemingly an amalgam of Sydenham and Wandsworth) but presents the typical solid features of that particular kind of suburban landscape.

The novel chronicles unchanging suburban domestic and commercial routines, from the late 1930s up to Willy Chapman's death, the day of the novel's action, in 1974. 'How monotonously, how anonymously those years passed' Chapman thinks (Swift, 1997: 75). Emphasised here is the sheer defamiliarised oddness of the everyday familiar, the novel underscoring this doubling with the phrasal repetition 'the same and not the same'. The suburban scene is paradoxical. It is both solidly material, full of familiar objects, yet remains disconcertingly alien; Chapman noting how, while there is 'nothing new', yet 'everything was eternally new' (Swift, 1997:117). Even the violent irruption and material devastation of World War Two changes everything and yet still leaves everything intact; 'It was same placid scene...over which the bombers flew, yet it was not the same; like the ravaged, bomb-scarred streets of London - the same but not the same' (Swift, 1997:79).

In order to anchor himself to this nebulous material world and to exert some king of agency, Chapman develops a pattern of rigid behavioural repetition, of obsessive habits, a 'frame of routine' (Swift, 1997: 219). Habits are also linked, of course, to 'the home' (Middle English 'habiten' means 'to dwell in'). Habits should underscore belonging and attach the individual to the everyday through repetition and familiarity. Yet habits, of course, tend to also become matters not of free-will, but of unconscious routine. The habituated can lose sight of what is in front of them. Despite having unvarying habits based on familiar solid objects – 'the keys,

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[45] Wendy Wheeler identifies this lack, and its mourning, as the key feature in Swift's writing, an "attempt to domesticate through small narratives the sublime and *unheimlich* ('unhomely') narrative of human mortality" (Luckhurst and Marks, 1999: 63).

the briefcase, the dark-gray suit for working' – Chapman is haunted by his own impermanence and unreality (Swift, 1997: 219). This sense of the unreality what Michael Bracewell calls suburban 'unreal reality' (Bracewell, 2002: 113) is compounded by Chapman's increasing obsession with the ungraspable nature of material objects. Chapman, the sweet-shop owner, spends his days handling the objects of an increasingly complex and abundant consumer culture. This miscellaneous material glut (his shop sells everything), the 'frozen food, electric mixers, LP records' he sees all around him, promises 'something new, something new in a shiny cover' (Swift, 1997: 132). But the material here is also presented as insubstantial; 'the shop was useless; its contents as flimsy as coupons' (Swift, 1997: 99). Chapman's material goods are immaterial, are just surfaces without substance. This is a materiality which 'promised real goods, real riches within but was itself quite specious' (Swift, 1997: 98). The purely chimerical nature of his work dealing with such 'useless things' with transient commodities only increases Chapman's sense of unreality(Swift, 1997: 132),.

Chapman is unable to act in the world and his will is neutered by material environment. He becomes an automaton, blindly buffeted by suburban things. At night he ponders on the unreal spectre of this fabricated 'daytime animation' that 'capers before him like some jerky phantom' (Swift, 1997: 133). In a discussion of suburban fiction, featuring this directionless, disconnected suburban male, Ian Sansom argues that 'the real benchmark for the contemporary novel about the male in crisis' is John Lanchester's *Mr Phillips* (Sansom, 2001: n.p). *Mr Phillips* (Lanchester, 2000) with its eponymous clerk commuting daily from his south London 'crescent of low-squatting semi-detached Edwardian villas' fits into the tradition of lowly suburban 'Nobody' fiction established by Dickens, the Grossmiths, H.G. Wells, Jerome K. Jerome and E. M. Forster, discussed fully in chapter three above (Lanchester, 2000: 7). The suburban clerk in all these fictions is powerless and disconnected, not fitting in to the neatly bifurcated spheres of work (where he is bossed, meek, bored, deskilled) or the compensatory satisfactions of home (where he is frequently also bossed, but also incompetent, invisible and overwhelmed by the sheer material indifference of all-too-material affluent domesticity). The Nobody, of course, lacks any agency; things just happen. Mr Phillips is a more extravagant example of the deracinated suburban clerk as he belongs neither in the suburban home, nor in the alienated labour of the office; he is in fact, in that increasingly common contemporary condition, newly unemployed. He has not told anybody this and, in the novel, spends a day wandering aimlessly, killing time, around central London.

Mr Phillips is distanced from the materially 'real' world. Being secretly unemployed, he spends the day following the ghost of a daily routine rather than the routine itself.

He *is* keenly aware of the existence of an everyday world with its material facticity and comes into close contact with a huge variety of objects and individuals on his random journey (he gets especially close to a filthy carpet in a bank where he lies prostrate during a robbery, noting possibilities of 'dog shit on shoes, pigeon shit, urine, rubbish, spilt things' (Lanchester, 2000: 191). At the same time he is distanced from reality. He starts the novel awaking from an 'anxious dream' and there follows an endless catalogue of benumbed semi-conscious states: daydream, idle fantasies, half-memories, thought experiments, baroque musings on intractable subjects (money, sex), and also an extensive catalogue of common sayings, truisms, mottoes, urban myths, prejudices. Mr Phillips lives in another dimension, in absolute solitude, at an oblique angle to the real.

Expelled from the 'real', Mr Phillips becomes obsessed with the workings of his own consciousness. This intense solipsism constitutes, for Adam Phillips, 'a kind of magical realism for Little England'; the 'surrealism' of the external world Mr Phillips travels through 'is barely distinguishable from the logical oddities of his internal world' (Phillips, 2000: n.p). Mr Phillips creates his world in the act of his complex mental wanderings. He is 'redundant Cartesian man' Adam Philips argues, an individual mental 'I', distinct from the material world. He 'thinks strangely and therefore he is' yet the cogito here does not prove his existence (Phillips, 2000: n.p). Like Swift's sweetshop owner, Mr Phillips develops ways to anchor himself to this slippery everyday world. One way he attempts this is by obsessive cataloguing; as an accountant he obsessively lists and groups the material world. On waking he first inventories the room's contents: 'lamps, a glass of water, a cloth doily' (Lanchester, 2000: 5). Dealing professionally with money, with number and arithmetic provides another way of organising his nebulous world; frequency, statistics, probabilities, patterns. His preferred model of worldly apperception is double-entry book keeping. On discovering this system of balances, 'suddenly it seemed a whole new language in which to describe the world ... Things became more clear, more starkly lit' (Lanchester, 2000:60). The irony here, of course, is that the semi-detached clerk, who cannot read the world, presupposes that he has, in fact, special knowledge of that world. Mr Phillips is convinced that he has true insight into the performance of everyday social convention: largely that it is determined by sublimated sexual desire.[46]

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[46] This coincides with B. S. Johnson's 1973 novel of suburban clerkdom, *Christy Malry's Own Double Entry* (Johnson, 2002), which I have do not have the space to discuss in full. This novel features an angry clerk faced with a bewildering moral and social system, yet who knows the truth and thus seeks to avenge every perceived slight by retaliating in kind. The myopic alienated clerk is the one who sees the world as it really is, who cannot just cannot accept social convention.

Mr Phillips' tangential experience of a world that he cannot get close to produces a passivity. He lacks agency, any notion of self-determination. Again, like Chapman, he appears in the novel as an automaton; he drifts, has chance encounters, cannot make things happen. Mr Phillips experiences his 'whole body, more or less, is resistant to the will' (Lanchester, 2000: 28). In fact Mr Phillips does experience one crucial moment of free will in the novel and, revealingly, this is experienced as a complete removal of material entanglement. After wandering innocently into a bank robbery, Mr Phillips, obeying orders, lies on the floor for a few moments, experiencing a very English embarrassment (the body here not wanting to be seen) and tries to literally bury himself in the carpet. But then something astonishing happens. He stands up and speaks: 'I'm not going to get down... I think everyone should feel free to stand up' (Lanchester, 2000: 209). Here, Mr Phillips 'feels a great sensation of lightness', as if his life is has been 'a crushing weight, a rucksack filled with bricks' and he has now 'managed to shift the burden'. Here this sudden, brief sense of release is accompanied by a sense of absolute clarity, one that we have seen on many occasions before in suburban fiction, in Dickens, Conan Doyle and Bennett, where material impediments to seeing in the suburbs (walls, roofs) are magically dissolved. Now 'he could float upwards...and then he would be up through the roof, looking down at the building and out across Knightsbridge, the traffic, the way you can fly in a dream'. This weightless visioning will, at last, make London legible. The metropolis will turn into 'an aerial photograph and then into a map of itself' (Lanchester, 2000: 211).

This mode of 'up-close' everyday suburban writing, where suburban residents are presented as feeling themselves *ejected* from the matrix of pressing, materiality, has a counterpart where individuals are *smothered* by suburban things. The recalcitrance of the object world, for fictional *male* characters, is exchanged here, in suburban-set writing by Helen Simpson and Rachel Cusk (and numerous others that I have no room to discuss here)[47] for a concern with the details of women's subjective experience of everyday life. Here where women as mothers tend to stay at home there is an emphasis on the weightiness of the subject, in particular the body, of female characters. Where the vitality of the material environment seemed to block agency for the men, for women motherhood is presented as bodily determined. This materiality is not presented as 'vibrant', in Jane Bennett's terms; rather, it seems deadening. It also seems old, even anachronistic; the lack of autonomy, biological

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[47] This tradition also appear in the popular 'yummy-mummy' subgenre in work by Jenny Eclair, Camberwell *Beauty* (Eclair, 2000), Sarah May, *The Rise and Fall of the Queen of Suburbia* (May, 2006) and Lucy Cavendish *Storm in a Teacup* (Cavendish, 2010). On a more serious level Jane Gardham's *The Queen of the Tambourine*, (Gardham, 1992) explores one woman's complex entanglement in the affairs of her unfathomable south London suburban neighbours. In the crime genre, Minette Walters, presents densely material environments that destroy individuals.

determinism and strictly patrolled gender roles is experienced, especially in Helen Simpson's work, as a shocking return to pre-contemporary, pre-feminist, overtly materially laborious, ways of life. The suburb, as a model of modern living, suddenly seems pre-modern.

A scene in Helen Simpson's title story from her 2001 collection *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life*, neatly illustrates this gendered differentiation in suburban fiction. Here the morning starts with parents and children in bed, 'a heap of bodies' amongst 'the mulch of soft sheets' (Simpson, 2001: 22). Then, the male gets ready to go work, is ejected ('No! No! Get *away*, Daddy!' cry the children), he 'glares' at them 'impotently', then 'turns on his heel like a pantomime villain'. A 'moment later they heard the front door slam' as the father leaves for work (Simpson, 2001: 24). Dorrie, the mother's children, then spends a laborious day at home with the children. Simpson's story illustrates perfectly the dynamic of much suburban fiction where the male character is expelled from a materially dense domestic scene (notice the 'mulch') that he fails to feel at home in, and where the female character, by contrast, is horribly embroiled. Where the male suburban experience is rejection, for women it is frequently a crushing weight (in Dorrie's case the literal weight of her children pinning her to the bed). Both modes work to complicate individual autonomy.

Women here are weighed down by the necessary 'dirty work' of domestic drudging, physically traumatised by childbirth and child care, the sheer material labour of familial maintenance. In 'Hey Yeah', Dorrie is presented as *all* body, dragged down, often literally, by motherhood. Like a 'slow giantess' she gets out of bed, 'unwinding herself from his knotty embrace' and slowly 'detaching the fingers' of her children (Simpson, 2001: 24). She moves blindly through a sluggish terrain of household detritus (food, dirty clothes, evidence of bodily functions) which she likens to 'wading through mud' (Simpson, 200: 25). Dorrie is, again, like Farr and Chapman mentioned above, the directionless automaton here, expressing no free-will and she staggers through her day. While she is reduced to sluggish body, in direct contrast to Lanchester's Mr Phillips, her conscious self, her mind, wastes away. She complains that she can 'no longer hear herself think', and other mothers repeatedly discuss how 'brain-dead' they feel. The self- determination of the rational mind acting freely on a passive world is no longer tenable. She is transformed, as a mother, is subsumed into the purely corporeal. Dorrie 'barely recognises herself' (Simpson, 2001: 32).

This suburban domestic material entrapment figured as the body of the mother, and the terrifying lack of free-will this entails, is central to the opening story of *Hey Yeah Right Get a*

Life, 'Lentils and Lilies'. Suburban teenager Jade, 'down along the suburban pleasantness of Miniver Road', is desperate to escape the suburb.[48] On the verge of leaving school Jade is 'about to be let out', she is 'about to start careering round like a lustrous loose cannon' (Simpson, 2001: 2). Jade, as opposed to Dorrie, has direction; she wants to go somewhere. She resolves that she was 'never going to go dead inside or live somewhere boring like this' (Simpson, 2001: 3). The weightless and fleet-footed Jade, 'floating in the sunshine, moving like a panther' is free of the inert matter of the maternal body (Simpson, 2001: 4). She is terrified by dreary suburban stasis and constriction The suburb presses in on her, its weighty constrictions demolishing barriers; she can 'sense babies breathing in cots in upstairs rooms' and 'solitary women becalmed somewhere downstairs'. She vows that she would 'never be like her mother...lost forever in a forest of twitching detail' of 'juggling' and '"running the family"' (Simpson, 2001: 3). Echoing Orwell's George Bowling (but emphasising its crudely reproductive function), Jade, in disgust, views the suburb as 'rows of identical hutches, so neat and tidy and narrow minded' (Simpson, 2001:7).

At this point Jade, moving quickly, full of nimble thinking and day-dreaming in fairy-tale bright weightlessness, becomes, temporarily, snagged by the material. She is brought down to earth, literally stopped in her tracks by 'trouble'; bizarrely, by a child, prostrate on the pavement, with a lentil stuck up his nose (Simpson, 2001: 5). This is an irruption of the material, the messy, that she fears most; a needy child and an ineffectually fussing mother. Unlike male suburbanites who are forced out by egregious suburban materiality, Jade is unavoidably detained by it. Jade, fearfully, does 'not want to be implicated in the flabby womany-ness of the proceedings' (Simpson, 2001: 6). The sticky messiness of suburban motherhood is precisely the danger that ambitious, weightless Jade fears most, and she stares contemptuously at the 'overweight figure in front of her, ludicrously top-heavy in its bulky stained sweatshirt and saggy leggings' (Simpson, 2001: 7). Jade's nightmarish suburban entanglement (the old uncanny fear of movement-without-motion (as we saw above in Sinclair's suburban excursions) is centred on the sluggish gravity of motherhood and, more specifically, again on the abject body of the mother. This mother in the story, the 'overweight figure', this 'great useless lump' is typical of Simpson's mothers. She is repulsive, with 'ragged cuticles', 'heels that 'stuck out the back of her sandals like hunks of parmesan', with 'eyes like dull pinheads' (Simpson, 2001: 7). At the start of the story collection Simpson quotes tellingly from *War and Peace,* where Tolstoy compares the youthful Natasha

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[48] A reference here to Jan Struther's 1937 novel *Mrs Miniver,* made in to an extremely successful film in 1942, and presenting British domestic fortitude in World War 2.

Rostova's 'slim, mobile' figure with the frumpy mother-of-four she had become; so much that now her 'soul was not visible at all' (Simpson, 200). Eventually, motherhood completely weighs down and annihilates the individual self.

In an earlier collection of stories *Dear George* (Simpson, 1996) Simpson charts the slow drift towards parenthood of thirty-something uncommitted suburban couples. The suburban domestic trap, the gradual move toward the family, in Simpson's work, is always weightily material: courtship and seduction rituals, sex, pregnancy, birth, childcare are all overwhelmingly body-centred, the individual subsumed by the grossly material, by the needs of 'the fleshy envelope' (Simpson, 1996: 30). A couple on holiday, aimlessly, are undecided whether to have children or not, the prospect ironically presented as promising fixity and permanence; '"It would be nothing but good for you' he whispered, "you're not really rooted at the moment... Too light"' (Simpson, 1996: 56). In 'To Her Unsteady Boyfriend' the narrator gently chides her partner; 'I want to be a mother...I want to be a nice ripe fruit pear on the sun-warmed bricks of a walled garden' (Simpson, 1996: 67). An over-term expectant mother in 'Last Orders' is transformed into 'a bulbous bottle, unreliably stoppered' (Simpson, 1996: 69). She has become heavy and dulled, prey to 'heavy slumber, thick and threadbare like hessian' punctuated with 'brief thresholds of glimmering incomprehension' (Simpson, 1996: 69). She is in the process of transformation, changing painfully into motherhood; 'you will not be you any more, her ego told her id...you will change into somebody quite different, overnight□ a Mother' (Simpson, 1996: 77).

The return of the material, as I suggested above, is a profound shock in the novel as it is horrible redolent of a previous era. This is the return of the material, of the body, in a most unwelcome form. As Terry Eagleton caustically observes, in *After Theory* (2004), 'among students of culture the body is an immensely fashionable subject' (Eagleton, 2004: 2). But, he adds, what is studied is 'usually the erotic body, not the famished one', there is an 'interest in coupling bodies, but not the labouring' (Eagleton, 2004: 2) Neither, we could add, is the body of the mother this fashionable kind of body. Jade thinks, in 'Lentils and Lilies', that the suburban scene she witnesses resembles 'something from the nineteen fifties' (Simpson 1995, 8). Women experience, in Simpson's stories, the maternal body and physical domestic entrapment as deeply anachronistic. As the labouring body itself disappears from the experience of everyday contemporary life in developed countries (with deindustrialisation, technology, outsourcing of labour, weightless electronic communications) its reappearance is shocking. Motherly drudgery is the atavistic element that will not go away, that cannot be

resolved even in what are perceived to be 'enlightened' post-feminist times. Female characters work here with the nagging sense that domestic material labour is something that should not be happening (at least not to them).This is something the educated, ambitious, middle-class professional women in Simpson's stories, imagined had been banished years ago.

Rachel Cusk's writing also addresses female maternal experience as paradoxically both contemporary (self-determination, career paths, empowerment and choice) and yet plagued by the pre-modern (the dragging materiality of motherhood, nurturing, and domesticity). In her first novel, *Saving Agnes* (Cusk, 1994), a North London suburbanite, pondering one possible future, thinks fearfully *how easy it would be* to 'sink without trace into a world of strange men ...and squalid flats in Tooting' (Cusk, 1994: 22). The suburb here is presented as a swamp, swallowing and erasing the individual entirely. In *Arlington Park*, Cusk's 2007 suburban-set novel, Maisie observes her husband's return from work and details the contrast of her 'implication in the domestic life of the household' directly contrasted with 'his innocence of it' (Cusk, 2007: 171). Again, mothers are sunk into domestic materiality while men are ejected from it. As we saw in Simpson's work, the repressive and restrictive domestic sphere is presented as abjectly physical, as a 'strong atmosphere of sordid confinement', a 'rancid wave', a 'warm den of compromise' (Cusk, 2007: 172).

Cusk is considered to be an acute observer of the private, of ordinary everyday life, so as 'to make art', as James Lasdun argues, 'out of the frictions and details of everyday life' (Lasdun, no pagination). *Arlington Park*, as Lasdun notes, 'applies itself to the most mundane objects and moments - the act of parking a car, the look of an untidy bedroom or a fashion boutique' (Lasdun, 2006: n.p.). Cusk herself has argued for the importance of the everyday, placing in centrally as the only worthwhile subject for the literary. Cusk has notoriously castigated women's reading group book choices, in a 2005 essay 'An Outsider', because the books these women liked to read 'bore no relation to their own existence, to the kinds of houses they lived in, the relationships they had' (Cusk, 2005: n.p.). They would rather, Cusk sniffily relates, read 'lies. More books about time-travel, or some past that never existed, or people who grow wings and fly' (Cusk, 2005: n.p.). Unfortunately, Cusk concludes, in the English novel 'the domestic world is subjugated, or furbished up like a painted backdrop' (Cusk, 2005 n.p.).

Cusk's titular suburb of Arlington Park contains many examples of an unspeakable 'underneath', that common substrata of everyday things that both supports the functioning of everyday domesticity, but which can never be mentioned (like the labouring mothers in Helen

Simpson who must be hidden away). Unlike say, for John Lanchester's Mr Phillips, where the everyday quotidian, the dreary stuff of dull repetitive afternoons, is made bearable by recourse to a fund of common-sense truths, or to ingenious flights of fancy, or even statistical observation, here there is just recalcitrant materiality. In fact the material takes on the form, in Cusk's contemporary suburb, of mess. 'Messes', as David Trotter tells us, 'tend to be nobody's fault. Messes just happen' (Trotter, 2000: 2). 'This little house' Juliet, the outsider figure in the novel thinks, 'with its stained carpets, its shopping, its people...the rain-sodden distances of Arlington Park' (Cusk, 2007: 31). Cusk's novel is dense with messes of different kinds, unified by the endless rain which erodes difference and distance and melds everything together. The suburb of Arlington Park itself is supposed to be an antidote to the haphazard messy layout of its adjacent city town, the latter with its random 'tortuous streets...grimy streets and big bombed streets', its 'hospital and old theatre, multiplex cinema...multi-storey car park and office blocks'. The suburb, by contrast, is presented as neat and ordered. It has 'rows of bay-fronted houses, Georgian properties behind their gates, tidy streets... and neat paths and bushes' (Cusk, 2007: 5). Yet this suburb is also full of disorder. Mothers especially oversee a range of uncontrollable messes: spillages, stains, accidents, smudges, wayward feedings, various body fluids, not to mention, smells, screams and tantrums. The infants and babies here are mess personified; stained, multiply incontinent, sticky, grubby, garrulous, undirected, accident-prone, unpredictable. One toddler's marker-pen on a pristine white sofa produces a 'big red patch like a stain of blood'. On the carpet there were 'other, differently – coloured stains', where 'inky, suppurating' felt-tip pens 'touched beige fibres and bled into them' (Cusk, 2007:71). The mess here clearly erodes boundaries, the body leaking into the environment, the anxious uncertainty created by the sticky substance, the inside mingling horribly with the outside.

The messes in Arlington Park provoke violent physical over- reactions. '"I could kill you", she whispered. 'I could kill you'", is the mother's response to the marker-pen incident (Cusk, 2007: 72). There are numerous outbreaks of extreme emotion and outbursts of violence. Later, one of the mothers 'threw her daughter's lunchbox at the wall', where it 'burst like a firework' (Cusk, 2007: 172). We hear of 'violent arguments', 'slamming doors and full-throated screams' (Cusk, 2007: 50), all created by minor messes. Again, these passionate outbursts sparked by the messes that mire Cusk's characters (the offending toddler is also violently 'thrown back down among the cushions') derive precisely from lack of individual free will (Cusk, 2007: 71). 'The sharpness in the response they (messes) produce', Trotter

argues, 'is the knowledge it brings of contingency' (Trotter, 2000: 2). Here, again, as with our suburban males, things just seem to happen without human agency.

The oppressively material suburb figured here closes in on its female characters. 'This is what it boiled down to', complains Juliet, the most severely trapped and resentful character, 'all of history; a place of purely material being, traversed by private thoughts' (Cusk, 2007: 22). Even Juliet's 'private thoughts' do not, unlike Lanchester's Mr Phillips's, move out and away from the immediate, observable, material present. This suburb, 'where women drank coffee all day and pushed prams around...and men went to work and never came back', is experienced as a limited and sealed world (Cusk, 2007: 22). This detachment and isolation is further reinforced (as we noted above in Lanchester's novel) by the device of setting the novel in the course of a single day. The horizons are narrowed here; the domestic is a very delimiting space.

This material oppression pushes down, finally closing in on the body itself. The novel's action takes place in various intricately detailed and claustrophobic interiors; in cars, kitchens, living rooms, shopping malls. Childcare consists of endless demands and negotiations for goods and services, for food, treats, feedings, equipment, journeys, drop-offs, pick-ups, time-tables, shopping, feedings and equipment. The women in the novel, mostly mothers, are trapped, thwarted, lacking in free will, stripped of identity, all resentment focussed relentlessly on the weight of material stuff. The body here, as in Simpson's work, is also pummelled, exhausted, drained and detached from a core sense of self- identity. Juliet demands a hairdresser cuts off her own long hair, 'all of it' in a desperate bid to know who she is, what she looks like, and to exert some control over her world. '"I don't care what you do, she orders the startled hairdresser, "just cut it off!"' (Cusk, 2007: 38).

The end result of this violent and smothering material suburbanity is a deathly stillness, as the individual finally becomes hardens to a mineral-like density and resembles inorganic rock.[49] For one of the mothers in the novel, Maisie, the emotions generated from the 'grey, homogenous spaces', seeing 'herself as imprisoned for life', appear as if from 'remote geological past, like lava' (Cusk, 2007: 171). These feelings harden 'solidifying greyly in seconds' (Cusk, 2007: 171). At the shopping mall a group of mothers aimlessly meander in an interdeterminate zone between death and life; zombified consumers looking for a place to stop. In the course of the novel, Juliet slowly shrinks and constricts into herself, and deadens,

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[49] The novel's very title surely contains an echo of that vast necropolis, the U.S National Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia.

with a 'feeling of lead building up in her veins' (Cusk, 2007: 37). She is like 'stone' and finally, a corpse. Juliet concludes that suburban domestic constriction has killed her: 'actually, I'm dead. I was murdered four years ago' (Cusk, 2007: 24). This is the condition of full-time suburban motherhood: 'All men are murderers...All of them. They murder women' (Cusk, 2007: 18).

Conclusion: Suburban Non-being

This thesis has argued that the suburb presents a challenge to our observational and representational abilities. By 'suburb' we also need to include that wider range of peripheral built environments, council estates, New Towns, gated communities and exurbs, that have formed, over the past century and a half, the key domestic habitat of modernity in the developed world. The experience of living in such spaces is an urgent one because they are frequently presented as being unintelligible habitats. This modern suburb, because it is single-use domestic, peripheral, architecturally and topographically repetitive, because it does not anchor the individual in a narrative of familial ties or offer any connection to locality, is not conducive to the formation of an enriching life-world. This is how the suburb is presented in most suburban fiction.

The suburb presents problems for the desire to derive meaning from the perceived environment. Or, put in broader, 'global semiotic' terms, the differentiation of 'objects' from 'things', the creation of an 'objective' reality itself. The suburb must be made to mean something: It cannot be the non-signifying space that it appears to be. Thus, popular suburban fiction frequently seek to provide us with suggestions of what may lie beneath the inscrutable surface of the suburban scene: This is normally criminality, secretiveness, absurdist farce, familial tensions and latterly, sexual transgression and apocalyptic vision .The suburb is frequently portrayed as a stage, as fantasy, as that fantasy place which must continually perform its own lack of real substance.

Suburban experience, in fiction, is thus presented as estranging and this in the particular sense of appearing strange. This is what I have defined above as a perception of the suburban uncanny. This is the unsettling sense that the suburban habitat, though banal and often experienced as being all too familiar, is, at the same time, perceived to be distanced and unreal. This disjunction forms the key tone of most suburban-set writing. Consequently, because the suburb is difficult to bring into focus, many fictions portray suburban characters as simple ciphers, emblems of mild unbelonging, who are absurd, comical, powerless, put-upon, bumbling and, above all, dull.

This curious perception of suburban unreality, I argued above, produces a repeated emphasis, in much suburban fiction, on various kinds of material difficulties. The realm of objective, material fact itself seems threatened. As we have seen, the material things of the suburb

suffocate, or attack, or dissolve away entirely. The objective here comes to include the body itself, rendering individuals themselves, in turn, as objects. This all points to a profound semiotic crisis: to the anxiety that these impenetrable spaces of modernity cannot be read and interpreted. These exemplary and anxious sites of modernity cannot be constituted as objects of knowledge. In this sense of course they can never be, as they are frequently advertised, a home.

Finally, this repeated emphasis on forms of material problems in suburban fiction ultimately figures individuals as lacking social visibility. This is the suburb as natural home of the Nobody; the individual who lacks both material being *and* social significance. This curious problematic material status of the lived environment, in the fictional suburb, and the reification of the suburban individual as they are, bodily, transformed into quasi-objects, also reflects a broader concern with questions of representation and power. Suburban fictional individuals, those who live on the periphery of the cultural, social and economic centres, are ultimately presented as having a kind of non-existence. These are the unperceivable and inconsequential individuals of modern mass suburban civilisation. In this sense, suburban fiction represents, as Terry Eagleton puts it in *After Theory*: 'the "non-being" of those who have been shut out of the current system' (Eagleton, 2004: 220).

It is now tempting to see these forms of suburban semiotic illegibility, and their spectral anxiety over various kinds of identities and differentiations, as reflected in the equally semiotic illegible speculations that haunt late modernist capitalist society itself. The illegibility of suburban life thus becomes the general impenetrability of contemporary life.

Reading Suburban Narratives

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