Welcome to the Dreamhouse:

The Suburban Gothic and the Demise of the Contemporary Neoliberal American Dream

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Abstract

This thesis examines the American dream's deteriorating façade to reveal the failed promises of mid-century American neoliberalism as promoted through the ideology and consumer behaviours of the suburban milieu. Motivated by recent global events and the ongoing influence of the US on Australia's own suburban fantasy, this research interrogates the origins of the contradictory American dream. Central to this are the commodity objects and images that nostalgically perpetuate its permanency and the defining political, economic and cultural shifts of the early 1980s and 1990s. Rather than situate this investigation within the present extremities of global politics and accelerated hyper commodification, I argue that there is much to learn from revisiting the foundations of American neoliberalism if there are to be meaningful ideological shifts now and in the future.

This study begins by outlining its methodological framework, establishing an historical overview of the gothic and American gothic as a means to scrutinise the recurring anxieties of a given period. I propose that the suburban gothic serves as a mode of critical inquiry into the incongruities of the suburban milieu in the late twentieth century. I maintain that by drawing upon the unique devices, tone and expression of the early 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic, a more profound interrogation of the contemporary neoliberal condition is revealed, leading to potentials for transformation in the present. This thesis traces political and philosophical debates that argue that the prolonged global spread of the American dream and the maintenance of its neoliberal ideals relies on the manufacturing of our desire for the "good life," and is constructed by consumer imagery. These propositions are contextualised through social psychology and the defining characteristics of our unconscious manipulation.

This research uses photography and the cognitive mechanisms of denial and dissonance to undermine the consumer images persuasive intent. The readymade and found object are also employed as representative symbols of the American dream. By exploiting discarded and nostalgic commodified icons of suburbia and intervening with their kitsch veneer, the research aims to disclose the hollow embellishments of the objects' neoliberal narratives and ideals. Through this process, I discover that a core component of these ongoing neoliberal abuses is the construction of sentimentalised narratives of childhood and their corruption by the seemingly innocuous and commodified surfaces we consume.

Statement of Originality

This thesis entitled *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*: *The Suburban Gothic and the Demise of the Contemporary Neoliberal American Dream* has not been previously submitted for any other degree or for any other purpose. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. All the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

(signed)
Amy Carkeek

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Introduction

Origins of the Project: Personal Reflections on a Changing World

When I started this project in 2011, the world was dominated not only by the economic but also the social and cultural hangover of the 2008 US-led global financial crisis (GFC). At the time, US President Barak Obama described the catastrophe as a disgrace and a direct result of the greed and irresponsibility that has dominated Washington and Wall Street for years.[1] However, in a revealing and contradictory neoliberal twist, Obama and the US senate voted for a $700 billion relief package to the very institutions and corporate bodies responsible for the GFC.[2] While Obama claimed those at fault would be held accountable, the perpetrators of this national, and indeed global crime were left financially and legally unscathed.

Here in "the lucky country," Australia was the only developed nation to technically avoid recession.[3] Then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd provided Australians with a taxpayer-funded $54.6 billion stimulus package to encourage immediate consumer spending and to stabilise the Australian economy. Housing, a weak sector at the time, received a significant boost—a time-limited grant to first-time home owners and interest rate cuts of up to 50%.[4] While perceived as positive for the average family household, there were negative impacts at a national level, as Australia's big four banks came to monopolise mortgage finance and thus the concentration of wealth and power.[5] Similarly, the much-debated negative gearing continued to pit potential first home owners against experienced property investors. The subsequent increase in unemployment, disproportionate house price/income ratios, and growing population have all

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[1] "Senator Barack Obama Speech," C-SPAN Video, 4:00 at 00:37, posted October 1, 2008, accessed March 23, 2021, https://www.c-span.org/video/?281526-7/senator-barack-obama-speech&event=281526&playEvent.
[2] The Troubled Assert Relief Program (TARP) is a US government program that purchases toxic assets "The World According to TARP" World Finance; The Voice of The Market, posted February 17, 2021, accessed March 23, 2021, https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/the-world-according-to-tarp.
[3] Phil Dobbie, "How Australia Ducked the Crisis," CBS NEWS, last updated October 26, 2009, accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-australia-ducked-the-crisis/.
[4] "Cash Rate Target," Reserve Bank of Australia, accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.rba.gov.au/statistics/cash-rate/.
[5] David Richardson, The Australian Institute, "The Rise and Rise of the Big Banks: Concentration of Ownership," The Australian Institute, December 2021, accessed March 9, 2021, https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TB-15-The-rise-and-rise-of-the-big-banks_4.pdf. This concentration of ownership came to a head when a Royal Commission exposed the Big Four's corporate culture in 2019. Christopher Niesche, "Key Findings from the Banking Royal Commission Final Report," Australian Institute of Company Directors, posted March 1, 2019, accessed March 9, 2021, https://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/membership/company-director-magazine/2019-back-editions/march/royal-commission.

contributed to the growing housing affordability issues in present-day Australia and in turn have exposed concerns for Australia's future suburban dream due to the economic and ideological parallels between the two nations.[6]

Personal Motivation and Divisions in My Practice

When the GFC unfolded, I started to acknowledge my own sense of disillusionment in and betrayal of the values I was brought up to believe in. The Australian dream I was taught to aspire to was in line with what gender and cultural studies scholar Fiona Allon calls "the Australian way of life": you worked 40 hours a week, owned a house and had a car in the driveway. This meant security, individual virtue, and that you were a decent citizen.[7] In response to the contradictory messages that became noticeably visible through the GFC, I started to question the very notion of our "great" dream, what it meant post-GFC, and how this differed from the vision that was instilled in me in the late 1980s and 1990s. I became interested in the long-term impact the US had had on the shifting ideological and economic values of Australia's supposed egalitarian dream and that there was an obvious need for a renewed interrogation into how the overtly deteriorating American good life had arrived at this point.

My early photographic career consisted of what felt like two oppositional platforms: my art practice and a commercial practice. While I always sensed I was in between the two worlds, what connected both for me was the process and act of construction. In one role I was creating the glossy veneer I had been taught to desire and aspire to through advertising, entertainment and popular culture, while in the other I was seeking to reveal what was behind it. It was the notion of simultaneously constructing illusion and "reality" that interested me in both. In particular, I was drawn to the idea that while the viewer of commercial imagery knows the photographic representation is a fantasy, they nevertheless consider it 'real', either consciously or unconsciously, as they are drawn into a world where things are not what they are in another. This persuasive power of the photographic and its aptitude to fabricate fantasy and a new reality are what bridged the two worlds I photographically worked in. This tenuous relationship between photography and the disillusionment I felt for the contemporary Australian dream was the nexus for this PhD. Caught in a state of the in-between, I found myself at once wanting to

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[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "The Global Financial Crisis and Its Impact on Australia," accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/1301.0Chapter27092009%E2%80%9310.
[7] Fiona Allon, *Renovation Nation: Our Obsession with Home* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2008), 65–67. ProQuest Ebrary.

believe in a nostalgic veneer of an egalitarian Australia, while also recognising the failures of a system that constructed its own myth. Moreover, I was contemplating the perpetuation of the dream, its desire and achievability through—among other strategies—the commodified photographic images and fantasy worlds (that I personally constructed) as mechanisms to persuade viewers of a much larger illusion.

Global Upheavals During My Candidature

During my candidature, another two global upheavals occurred that have impacted the core values of Western democracy and the economic freedoms of neoliberalism. Needless to say, these events have impacted my research, its processes and outcomes. The first was in 2016, when Americans elected celebrity media spectacle Donald Trump as President.[8] It is important to remember that Trump won the election by promising to "make America great again"[9] and that he would do so by resuscitating the American dream.[10] He alleged he would bring back jobs to the working-class by reviving the manufacturing industry. This "promise" was analysed by many critics at the time as a veiled attempt to mislead the American people into believing they would, or even could, return to the past—a nostalgic 1950s post-war industrial America.[11] Over the course of Trump's four years in office, much social and cultural damage was achieved, and a new kind of neoliberal deception emerged that has further diminished the very foundations of democracy.

The second upheaval came in early 2020, when a global pandemic spread across the world. Again, the notion of liberal democracy was challenged, if not exposed, when citizens witnessed

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[8] American scholar and critical theorist Douglas Kellner has argued that since the 1990s, the US has been living in the age of spectacle politics, where presidencies are staged and presented in cinematic terms. Douglas Kellner, "Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism," University of Texas, posted January 14, 2017, accessed March 21, 2021, https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/14_1/Kellner-Donald-Trump-Media.htm.

[9] "Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement," C-SPAN, Video, 57:08, uploaded June 16, 2015, accessed April 17, 2018, https://www.c-span.org/video/?326473-1/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-announcement. This speech sounded comparable to Ronald Regan's successful 1980 Presidential campaign speech "let's make America great again." See "The Presidency: 1980 Presidential Acceptance Speech," July 17, 1980, C-SPAN, video 46:38, accessed March 21, 2021, https://www.c-span.org/video/?4055-1/1980-presidential-acceptance-speech.

[10] The American Dream is defined as "An American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism and especially material prosperity; also: the prosperity or life that is the realization of this ideal." "The American Dream," *Merriam Webster*, accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/American%20dream.

[11] Noam Chomsky speaks of "a diversionary process" as attention is drawn centre stage on Trump and his "buffoonery," while those working behind the curtain go unnoticed. Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, "Noam Chomksy Diagnoses the Trump Era: The President has Abetted the Collapse of a Decaying System; Chomsky Explains How," *The Nation*, posted October, 3, 2017, accessed March 23, 2021, https://www.thenation.com/article/noam-chomsky-diagnoses-the-trump-era/.

a valuing of the economy over human life. Another strange outcome of this pandemic is that Australian housing prices skyrocketed, reaching a record high in February 2021.[12] As COVID-19 forced many workers into the home and onto globally connected computers, possibilities for lifestyle/location transpired.

Project Overview

Such events have strengthened the validity of this research, as it seeks to better understand the contemporary neoliberal condition and what has become an increasingly conflicting point in time. The motivation for this PhD is the US's influence on Australia's suburban fantasy. The goal, however, is to interrogate the American dream's deteriorating façade, to expose how this has happened over time, and to facilitate an ideological shift in the present. Specifically, I aim for this project to encapsulate the tension between the decaying and unsustainable fantasy of a nostalgic post-war American dream and to reveal the intensifying economic and social pressures of present-day neoliberalism and the aspirational ideal of a prosperous lifestyle as evidenced by home ownership.

I argue throughout this thesis that there is a need to employ the suburban gothic as a methodology and a mode of critical inquiry that is anchored in the American suburbs and the home of the contemporary neoliberal experience. I propose that central to this is a necessity to interrogate the current neoliberal condition through a more profound and tonally complex suburban gothic expression—one that balances the fluctuating sense of failure and achievement, optimism and disillusionment and the ludicrousness and severity of the contemporary situation. This thesis and the studio outcomes therefore return to the era when late capitalism spread throughout the West and started to impact our way of life, prompting neoliberalism as we experience it today. Hence, an early 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic interrogated the American suburbs in a manifestation that was unique to this period, and I suggest it is necessary to revise its strategies of inquiry in the present. I do so not to be nostalgic, but to find a method for a more affectual, rather than reactionary or nihilistic, means of investigation.

[12] Michael Janda, "House Prices Return to Record Highs as COVID Rally Continues into 2021," posted February 1, 2021, accessed March 23, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-01/home-prices-return-to-record-highs-as-covid-rally-continues/13108044.

My approach to examining the suburbs differs in that I am not interested in centring my investigation on the lifestyle of post-war/postmodern Australian suburbia. While I am motivated by the blurring between the US and Australia and the increased similarity in these nations' ideological values and national myths, the focus of this PhD is to return to and examine the post-war origins of the American dream as nostalgically perpetuated, and its inevitable demise. I will argue that central to this is the significant role that advertising and entertainment imagery—or what I define from here as consumer images (still and moving)—has had on the construction of the American dream. This research also endeavours to better understand the contradictions within my own photographic practice and how my previous commercial experiences have come to strengthen its examinations.

Aims and Intentions

Through better understanding the American dream and the mechanisms used to manufacture our desire for its seductive veneer, the studio outcomes aim to develop a more targeted and nuanced method to my visual examination. Specifically, I set out to do the following: more deeply understand and apply the suburban gothic as a mode of inquiry into the political, ideological and economic inconsistencies of the supposedly democratic dream; employ kitsch and nostalgia and their inconspicuous veneer to create an unnerving juxtaposition as to emphasise the contradiction and emptiness of the contemporary neoliberal American dream; create a polemic between individual feelings about the failure and disillusionment in the dream, its narratives and ideals, and the unregulated and uncritical consumption of the consumer images and objects that perpetuate the fantasy; physically exploit devalued readymade and found objects that are nostalgic commodified icons of suburbia to expose the hollow surfaces that characterise the embellishments of consumer narratives and essences of the neoliberal dream; and finally, reveal the persuasive authority of the consumer image and its ability to influence society while it manufactures consent through a veneer of illusion. My project is therefore driven by the research question: *How can the suburban gothic be employed as a mode of critical inquiry into the contradictions of contemporary neoliberalism and the demise of the American dream?* This thesis addresses how these aims are founded, formulated and achieved through the studio research component to this PhD and in turn how this question is addressed.

Definitions

Before explaining how this research is theoretically framed, I must clarify how I define neoliberalism. My research aligns with Canadian geographers Simon Springer and Kean Birch and British economic and human geographer Julie MacLeavy, who characterise neoliberalism as an extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society.[13] According to them, neoliberalism comprises rhetoric and ideologies, and it "operates through a range of practices and processes that combine social, cultural and economic domains to constitute new spaces and subjects."[14] This description is fundamental to my research as I propose that it is through the construction and dissemination of consumer images and objects (among other strategies) that neoliberal ideologies are spread. It is therefore that my neoliberal examination is framed through a critique of consumption and the organised exploitation of mass entertainment media and the citizen.

Before moving forward, I must be clear that I recognise the contradictions within my own investigation. I also acknowledge my privileged position and that even though I grew up in a rural working-class family, the opportunities I have access to in life are a result of the mass displacement, loss of life, and ongoing exploitation of Australia's first nation's people and the lands on which we live.[15] I acknowledge that the "freedoms" I am afforded such as those that are fundamental to the "Australian way of life" are only possible due to European colonisation.[16] I am also cognisant that as I cautiously pursue the Australian dream, I implicitly contribute to the prolongation of this corrosive system and the inequalities that I seek to expose.[17] In turn, I am grappling with a conflicting part of me that holds onto, through my own nostalgia, the very romanticised ideals and lifestyle that I scrutinise. At the heart of this is a

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[13] Simon Springer, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy, "An Introduction to Neoliberalism," in *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Simon Springer, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.
[14] Kim England and Kevin Ward, "Theorizing Neoliberalization," in Springer et al., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 57.
[15] The land I grew up on is Dja Dja Wurrung country, home of the Jaara peoples. In the mid-1800s, large deposits of gold were found on country, and this caused the mass migration of people seeking to financially benefit from the natural resource. This saw the destruction of country, sacred sites and the dispossession of indigenous peoples. See "Dja Dja Wurrung Clans: Aboriginal Corporation," website, accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.djadjawurrung.com.au.
[16] For an in-depth discussion on the cost of British colonisation on first-nations peoples by Australian political journalist Stan Grant, see "Stan Grant: Racism and The Australian Dream," The Ethics Centre, YouTube video, 08:35, posted January 24, 2016, accessed March 23, 2021, https://ethics.org.au/stan-grants-speech/.
[17] The Australian gothic, similarly to the American gothic, examines the darkness that has been bestowed onto the land and Australia's First Nations People due to European colonisation. While this history is fundamental to our present neoliberal condition and its extractive global spread, I am exploring the permeation of the US's cultural and ideological domination within Australia and therefore engage with the American and not the Australian gothic.

naive sense of hope that we can all achieve *some* version of a more egalitarian lifestyle. This practice-led PhD is also an examination of such contradictory states of personal thought and sentiment.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1: The Suburban Gothic and the Surface of The American Dream provides the methodological context for this research project. The first section conveys a historical overview and outlines the gothic's core conventions and characteristics. I refer to the works of several contemporary gothic scholars to establish its origins and ability to return throughout Western history to probe recurring individual and collective anxieties through fictional narratives and specific tropes. This exploration creates the foundational framework for this research's studio methodology.

The following section explains how early American gothic authors modified traditional European gothic tropes and characteristics to metaphorically scrutinise the shifting political and social anxieties of an early American landscape and psyche. This discussion provides the theoretical context to the American gothic, its political objective and the ways in which it functions as a mode of critical inquiry into the distinct cultural concerns of the new nations optimistic surface. The section is central to disclosing the governing system's impact upon society, the individual, and the American consciousness. While I refer to the works of numerous contemporary literature and gothic scholars, the ideas of American literature and culture scholar Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet are fundamental to supporting my methodological proposition, as she positions the 1980s as a defining moment in the initiation of contemporary neoliberalism and the revival of not just the American gothic, but also a global and neoliberal gothic.

In the final section, I situate the suburbs and their nostalgic post-war façade as a core intermediary for the perpetuation of the American dream. Drawing predominantly from Irish scholar of American horror and popular culture Bernice Murphy and her comprehensive survey of suburban gothic, this section clarifies four core characteristics which facilitate the American dream and how the suburban gothic distinctively employs them to undermine their neoliberal motivations.

Next, Chapter 2: The Hypocrisy of Neoliberal Politics and the Influence of the Consumer Image examines neoliberalism's ability to disseminate its growth-based and extractive

ideologies through the manufacturing and preservation of the American dream. Through a blended theoretical framework, I argue that this has been able to occur (in part) through the construction of consumer images. This chapter is divided into three sections.

In the first two, I engage with already established leftist assessments by American political analyst Chris Hedges and American philosopher Noam Chomsky. They suggest this longstanding strategy of using mass media as distraction and control is obscured through the construction of commodified illusions and spectacles within popular culture, and in turn, that these images not only construct the aspirational façade of the American dream, but that they manufacture our consent for its preservation. In the final section, I explore these propositions through the lens of social psychology. To dissect how this is able to occur, I refer to American social psychology scholar Karen E. Dill-Shackleford and her ongoing investigation into how social influence is carried out through entertainment and mass media. Central to Dill-Shackleford's ideas and my argument is our unconscious psychological manipulation and capacity to deny the persuasive power that fictional narratives have in shaping our beliefs and behaviours.

In Chapter 3: The Politics of Tone and Visual Language, I contextualise both my studio methodology and theoretical framework through an in-depth overview of tone and visual language. The chapter is composed of six sections. The first two provide an overview of the visual languages employed in the studio outcomes and clarify how they function as methods of neoliberal examination. Firstly, I formulate a historical Marxist critique and draw upon important twentieth century discourse before I consider the ideas of several current scholars and the seemingly superficial language of sentiment and cuteness. These views are expanded upon by three contemporary cultural and philosophy scholars as they explain how kitsch has been able to advance and consume the present-day world. In undertaking this discussion, I identify five key characteristics that enable kitsch's sweet surface aesthetic to deceive consumers, and in succession, identify how I employ it as a strategy to scrutinise the commodification of the suburban home and its consumer lifestyle.

Following this, the second section positions the studio outcomes' use of nostalgia as a defining visual language and method to politically and psychologically scrutinise the neoliberal values that the found objects surface hold. I draw attention to various contemporary scholars to explain how the readymade's creative process and its final combination act as a gesture of revolt. I refer to these ideas to provide a framework for the readymade as a method of neoliberal scrutiny

and to clarify how it can engage viewers in ideological transformation through its affectual nature and production of delay. These characteristics are further studied through the found object, specifically its chance encounter and its inherent psychoanalytical past. While I draw upon the ideas of numerous critics and scholars, it is the work of American art historian and critic Eva Díaz, British art theorist Margert Iversen, and American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant that transformed the way I understood my creative processes, languages and methods, and my use of the discarded found object. Fundamental to this is the found commodity objects psychological value and liminality, and that it offers fulfilment while concealing that which it symbolically promises.

The succeeding section frames the specifics of my research's methodology and the precise sensibility and expression of tone. Here I undertake an in-depth analysis of two iconic suburban gothic films, *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), as they are exemplary gothic inquiries into the rise of present-day neoliberalism and the escalating paradoxes that characterised this period. This analysis draws from the opinions of several film critics, disciplines and scholars and clarifies how *Blue Velvet* interrogates nostalgia and nostalgic icons through the idyllic 1950s suburban veneer, thus exposing the contradictions of an unravelling 1980s American dream. Following, I explain that *Scissorhands* represents a significant shift in suburban gothic expression, and I reinforce that this deviation reflects the anxieties of suburban teenagers as they experience a crisis of community and the political, economic and social changes of the time. This overview supports my argument that an interrogation of the present-day neoliberal American dream requires a similar complexity in tonal expression as to be polemical and sanction greater viewer transformation.

In the fifth section, I expand upon these findings and draw parallels between this specific suburban gothic manifestation and how two contemporary taxidermy artists, British Polly Morgan and New Zealander Julia deVille, comparably employ emotive tension to examine the ongoing pressures of present-day neoliberalism. I explain how and why both artists marry this particular visual language with the found object and readymade juxtaposition as methods of neoliberal revolt, and in turn, how they inform my studio outcomes. Specific to this overview is taxidermy as a form of nostalgia that embodies both life and death and that through physical intervention the artist's reveal our human longing for the dead animal's preservation and a past that no longer exists. To substantiate this, I draw support from American cultural historian and

curator Rachel Poliquin. This section proposes that taxidermy as a found object is a fitting analogy for my suburban gothic investigation of the American dream.

The final section extends this contextualisation. I analyse the works of contemporary artists British Barnaby Barford, Australian Penny Byrne and British Jessica Harrison and their very specific approach to discarded kitsch decorative figurines. I further examine the objects surface and how the obsolete ornament embodies broad societal ideologies through its adorned exterior. Unlike the previous, these practitioners use satire, the grotesque and dark humour to confront their situations. In undertaking this assessment in combination with the preceding, I was better able to realise my own polemical expression of tone.

The last Chapter, Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Gothic Interventions and the Ornamental Figurine, analyses six final bodies of work against the stated aims of the PhD. This chapter revisits these five aims for the reader before I outline the core priorities and objectives and critically analyse the studio outcomes in response to the stated aims. This chapter evaluates the chronological development of the visual works through three separate analyses and identifies the achievements and breakdowns of the outcomes.

To conclude, this introduction has provided a personal context, present-day political, economic and social framework, an overview of this project, and the chapter structure for which these investigations will evolve. The following chapter will outline the methodology for the studio outcomes and provide the historical context and reasoning for how and why this is applicable.

Chapter 1: The Gothic as a Physical Manifestation of the American Dream

I told you Bernard, never place your trust in us. We're only human. Inevitably we will disappoint you.
——Dr Robert Ford[18]

The purpose of this first chapter is to provide the methodological context for this research project so as to interrogate the idealised veneer of contemporary Western society. Of emphasis is the notion of the corrupt and decaying American dream and the forces that continue to preserve the impossible illusion of its commodified ideals. Pertinent to this construction is the suburban dream and the role that the consumer image plays in perpetuating such a façade. To interrogate the physical manifestation of the American dream, the suburbs and its idyllic lifestyle, the suburban gothic will be employed as it is understood by contemporary gothic critics as a mode of critical inquiry and it is therefore methodological.

What the suburban gothic offers early twenty-first century Western society is a vehicle that examines that which underpins the suburbs' surface, and the recurring concerns of the American suburban middle-class. The suburban gothic scrutinises not only the economic, political, and social occurrences that construct and dominate the suburbs, but also the psychological repercussions on those who inhabit them. By identifying the core concerns, devices, and tropes, this chapter will demonstrate how the suburban gothic methodologically interrogates the suburbs façade through its metaphoric, psychological, and fictional dramatisation. In clarifying these key characteristics, this chapter will provide the framework, and the argument, that there is a need to revisit the suburbs and a specific expression of gothic inquiry to more deeply examine the commodification and global spread of America's contemporary neoliberal values, aspirations, and desires.

To quantify the suburban gothic as a methodology and a mode of critical inquiry this chapter will be divided into three sections: The Gothic: A Historical Overview in a Time of Recurring Anxieties; The American Gothic: Revealing the Duality of the American Surface; and The Suburban Gothic: A Dystopian Dream. To clarify the relationship between the three sections I will briefly summarise their core ideas.

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[18] *Westworld,* season 1, episode 9, "The Well-Tempered Clavier," directed by Michelle MacLaren, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy, Dan Dietz and Kath Lingenfelter, USA: HBO, 2016, aired November 28, 2016, on Foxtel Australia, https://www.foxtel.com.au/watch/westworld html.

The first section will provide a historical overview of the gothic and outline the primary conventions and key characteristics that have ensured its longevity. I will draw upon three influential contemporary critics: English scholar of eighteenth-century literature and gothic author E.J. Clery gothic scholar Jerrold E. Hogle; and British scholar of nineteenth century American culture Allan Lloyd-Smith. I will also define the uncanny as outlined by Austrian founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud. Although exhausted, this characterisation is pivotal to understanding the fundamentals of the gothic, and therefore the suburban gothic. In providing this foundational framework, this section will establish the gothic's European origins and the underpinnings for the following two sections.

The second section clarifies what the American gothic is and lay the foundations for how it informs the suburban gothic. To achieve this, it is necessary to differentiate it from its European aristocratic counterpart. To explain its distinctive metaphoric approach to undermining a past and present America and its idyllic façade, and in turn that it is a method of critical inquiry, support will be drawn from Lloyd-Smith, Canadian English scholar Eric Savoy, English literature scholar Justin D. Edwards, and British gothic scholar Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet. Monnet's views are pertinent in that she defines the 1980s as a turning point, for not only America but the world. She positions this era as the initiation of contemporary neoliberalism and the rise of a global and neoliberal gothic. Consequently, this is when the American gothic begins to voraciously interrogate the surface of the American dream as it is understood in a postmodern consumer-driven capitalist society.

The final section ascertains the suburban gothic as the core methodology and mode of inquiry into the American dream. By doing so, the American suburbs and home are identified as a space of entrapment, consumption, and a veneer of class-based values. To outline this in detail, the work of Bernice M. Murphy will be discussed. Murphy is one of the few scholars to recognise the significance of the suburban gothic as a mode of critical inquiry and I therefore undertake an extensive overview of her research. Her insights are fundamental as they clarify the suburban gothic's use of a number of core characteristics to both expose and contradict them. Like Monnet, Murphy also positions the 1980s as central to the significant shifts in American politics and the broader social concerns for the American dream.

1.1 The Gothic: A Historical Overview in a Time of Recurring Anxieties

I may die; but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.
——Dr Victor Frankenstein's Monster[19]

In order to understand the suburban gothic as the core methodological framework for this research, it is first necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the gothic and clarify its function, mechanisms, and notably its "look" and "feel." This will, alongside the second section on the American gothic, lay the foundations for the research and provide an outline to address its core concern: interrogating the deceitful veneer of a twenty-first century, increasingly global, neoliberal American "dream."

According to British art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon, the gothic has a long and sordid history which has seen it mutate, transform, and cultivate the popular consciousness. Fictional and fantastical narratives explore the unseen and the grotesque, exposing the social and political concerns of the times. Permanently moving in and out of popular attention and taste, the gothic periodically returns from the past to scrutinise the present and warn of a potential and frightening future.[20] While there is considerable scholarly literature exploring the 250-year-old genre, the focus here is limited to the core conventions of the gothic as a mode to examine individual and collective fears and apprehensions, caused due to rapid societal and technological progression and that which causes such change. To explain this, I will outline four of its key characteristics: the ability to speak of truths through fiction; the gothic as contradiction through the exploration of conflicting desires and fears; the space of the liminal and the in-between; and the uncanny.

The First Gothic Novel: An Interrogation into a Collapsing System

The first gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *Otranto* (1764),[21] seems inferior to its future gothic variations; however, it paved the way for the gothic's future, its narrative devices, and symbolic mechanisms. Above all, the tale is a rebellion against the orthodoxy of the time. Deceptively

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[19] Mary W Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 168.
[20] *The Art of Gothic Britain's Midnight Hour,* episode 3, "Blood for Sale: Gothic Goes Global," directed by Ian Leese and Paul Tickell, written by Andrew Graham-Dixon. Dailymotion video, 59:17 from BBC FOUR, aired October 3, 2014, London: UK, accessed September 9, 2017, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2j9p8o.
[21] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto,* ed. Michael Gamer (London: Penguin Books, 2001; orig. pub. 1764). The novel is renowned for originally being published pseudonymously and was claimed to be a found manuscript of an Italian Catholic priest. This mysteriousness added to the novel's elusiveness and popular interest. See E.J. Clery, "The Genesis of "Gothic" fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

appearing to Walpole as an apparition in a dream (or possibly a nightmare), *Otranto* references a medieval time gone by, where superstition and religious beliefs controlled both the individual and society. Walpole uses the architecture of the Middle Ages—the gothic castle—as the main character and a narrative device. The haunted castle is treated with caution and fear, warning readers of the ability for the past to return and haunt (both individually and collectively)—and with romanticism and humour—through the 'other-worldly' and 'unexplainable' events that occur (Figure 1). In near opposition to his present, Walpole situates this past with fondness and nostalgia, as a time not yet subjected to the current scientific and rational scrutiny of the Enlightenment Age.[22]

Figure 1. Susanna Duncombe (née Highmore), *The Ghost Scene from The Castle of Otranto*, n.d., graphite, ink and watercolour on paper, 18.7 x 11 cm, Tate (T04244), digital image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).

Clery explains that while Walpole was astute for recruiting the emerging cult of Shakespearean drama and tragedy, his innovation and foresight was in blending comedy with misfortune, thus breaking with neo-classical literary rules and tradition, and marking the beginning of a new "Gothic" genre.[23] Clery also argues that Walpole's fiction does more than exist within the

[22] *The Art of Gothic Britain's Midnight Hour,* episode 1, "Liberty, Diversity, Depravity," directed by Ian Leese and Paul Tickell, written by Andrew Graham-Dixon. Dailymotion video, 59:03 from BBC 4. London: UK, October 20, 2014, accessed September 9, 2017, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2j737i.
[23] E.J. Clery, *Horace Walpole: The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, ed. W.S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiv–xv.

conventions of the genre, and that the work should be assessed as a historical product of cultural and political concerns.[24] She maintains it is a contemporary critique of the aristocracy: "as a work of terror, it invites the reader to reveal the nightmarish collapse of a system of power that contains the seeds of its own destruction."[25] Thus, Walpole's *Otranto* not only emphasises the concerns of the times within the leisure class and rising bourgeoisie, but it also dehumanises the oppressive and contradictory nature of a power structure that produces such privileges. It is this gothic examination of a corrupt and collapsing system, and specifically modern-day neoliberalism's nostalgic construct of the American dream, which gives rise to this research.

Gothic Fiction and the Power to Address the Unspeakable Truth

Hogle maintains that the gothic can function as a powerful mode of cultural inquiry precisely because it uses fiction and fantasy to probe our individual and societal fears and anxieties. The gothic is an investigation into the trepidations that are not only common—from the internal to the widely social—but have recurred throughout Western culture since the eighteenth century. It is the gothic's ability to draw upon such distresses, of the near, or distant past—often at periods of social, religious, and political crisis and times of significant change—that enables it to haunt both the present and the future. This is what gives the gothic its power and longevity.[26] The gothic often takes the form of melodramatic fiction, depicting evil and grotesque "others," which act as allegorical devices for the modern condition and the return of the repressed. These monsters take various symbolic forms, such as; ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and zombies, as they represent both life and death, and the space of the in-between.[27] Such archetypal devices allow the audience to project countless changing apprehensions onto the haunted spaces and monstrous "others."[28] As Hogle explains, "This way our contradictions can be confronted by, yet removed from us, into the seemingly unreal, the alien, the ancient, and the grotesque."[29] The gothic tale is hence a place of hidden and unspeakable actions and desires of a supposedly civil and middle-class society.

[24] Ibid., xxiii.
[25] Ibid., xxxii–xxxiii.
[26] Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 4.
[27] Ibid., 1–7.
[28] Specific and relevant examples of modern-day archetypes and motifs shall be introduced in the following sections of this chapter.
[29] Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 6.

The Gothic as Contradiction

According to Hogle, the gothic is inherently contradictory, as it articulates the middle-class's conflicting fears and desires through the foundation of chaos and death in a blatantly fictional style.[30] This contradiction permits the gothic to tenaciously reflect the human psyche in all of its complexities. Exemplary of this is Mary Shelley's iconic *Frankenstein* (1818).[31] The gothic tale conflates the major changes in modes of cultural production of the time and thus the contradictory hopes and fears that these stimulate in white middle-class readers.[32] The gothic therefore interrogates and exposes these class-based fears, revealing the desires for future possibilities of human creation, and consequently control by man—but, with both trepidation of, and nostalgia for, the past and its systems of belief. Therefore, the gothic can and does act as a paradox. On one hand, it creates fear, and on the other, an imagined idealism—a longing for a previous period or moment in time which we fantasise of as being simpler, less complicated, and in contrast to an unfamiliar and uncertain future.

Frankenstein (Figure 2) is a prototype of such incompatible thoughts—it sits between the old and the new, the past and the future—between the attraction of the old alchemy and the reality of modern biochemistry.[33] As Lloyd-Smith recognises, Shelley's novel is a lasting warning of a growing industrialism and the nostalgia that transpired for a supposedly simpler time and its past structures. Equally, it was an expression of fear of those structures and the oppressive society they suggested.[34]

The gothic is therefore used as escapism from both past and future, while paradoxically prompting a fear of both. In turn, the gothic mutually mirrors and unravels the self-contradictory nature of humans, and the power structures and systems which frame our ever-shifting modes of thought. Hence, I suggest that the gothic may not be as much contradictory as it is a simultaneous representation and exploration of two opposing characteristics, and therefore, symbolises a space of the in-between.

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[30] Ibid., 5.
[31] Marry Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: The Original Uncensored Edition,* e-artnow; 2013, accessed April 9, 2021, https://search-ebscohost-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=575314&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* 5.
[34] Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction,* 7.

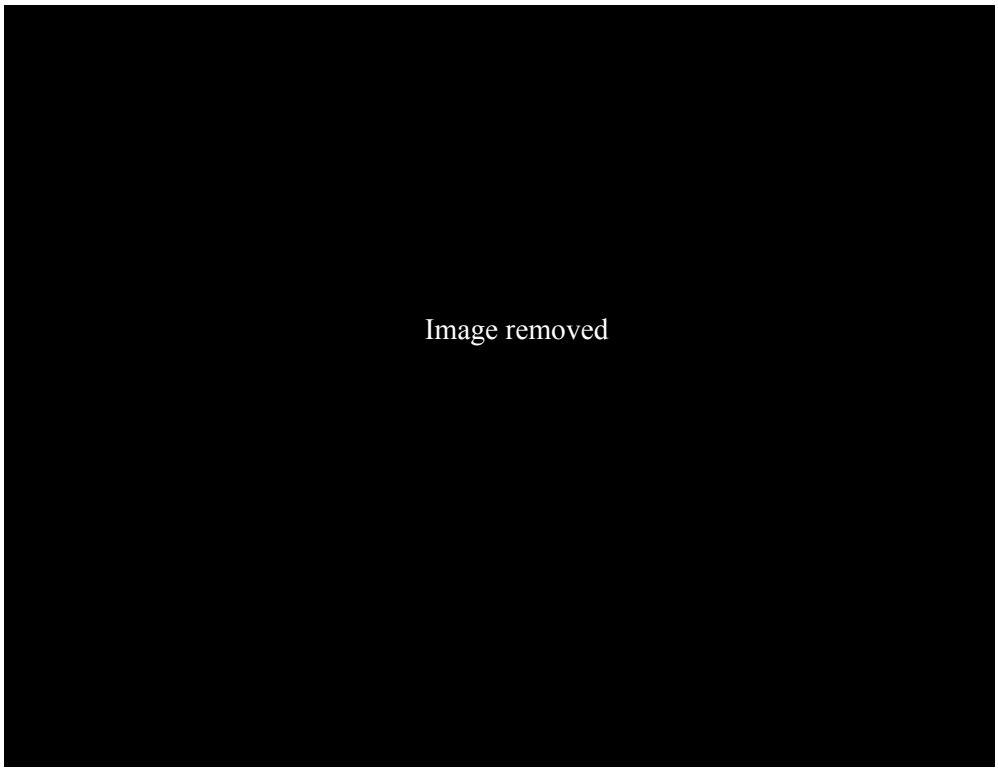

Figure 2. Colin Clive and Dwight Frye in *Frankenstein* (1931), Universal Studios.

The Liminal Space

While one of the main concerns of the gothic imagination is to overthrow past orders of authority, the gothic is also subsequently perturbed by the conflicts of self and the liminal space, where opposing desires and behaviours are simultaneously present.[35] Considering the oppositional nature of the gothic, Lloyd-Smith explains there is an exhilarating experience of transgression for the reader, as they must continually confront opposing forces within themselves, and the fiction, with the offering of closure—while all from the luxury and safety of their own homes.[36] He therefore says the gothic sits within areas of liminality and transition, between opposing individuals, and also between opposing characteristics of self—simultaneously being outside and inside oneself. He writes, "Extreme polarities of lightness and darkness, black and white ascriptions of evil and virtue…both outside and sometimes within the self, are focused upon in this attention to the liminal."[37] It is this liminal space and the in-between, one of oppositions, contradictions, tensions, and desires—within both the self, and the broader context of society—that reflects our current and contemporary anxieties of progress and change. The gothic can therefore reveal the consequences and artifice of aspiring

[35] Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* 4.
[36] Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction,* 5.
[37] Ibid., 6.

to modern day advancements while contradictorily fearing them. It also fluctuates between the laws of reality—being contextualised within the familiar, and the possibilities of the artificial, unworldly, of life and death, the real and 'unreal'. It is Freud's account of the uncanny, or "Das Unhemilich" (1919),[38] that best articulates this sentiment, and which has come to epitomise the gothic.

The Uncanny

Many critics frame the gothic through the lens of Freud's classification of the uncanny, as his contribution undeniably ensures that it is a core convention and characteristic. Although his concept is overused in theoretical analyses, I engage with Freud's seminal essay as a way to provide a clear foundation for the origins of the uncanny and the tropes and experiences that can generate it.[39] I will therefore outline his definition and six core characteristics that create the feeling of the uncanny, as he proposes that the human mind has the ability to repress memories as anxiety, and for the unconscious to bring them to the surface through elements of fear. These characteristics and their feelings—psychological artifice; the double; repressed memories; the haunted house; a loss of distinction between reality and imagination; and the power of the storyteller to control the audience and their perception of reality—are core to the studio research in that they create an oppositional tension between objects, the ideals their surfaces embody, and the situations they are within, thus creating a psychological discomfort and a state of cognitive dissonance for the audience. As will be demonstrated in the next two sections, the uncanny is fundamental to both the American gothic and its more specified sub-genre, the suburban gothic.

In "Das Unheimlich," Freud examines German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch's theory of the uncanny and advances the "theory of the qualities of the feeling" and the circumstances and instances with which this can occur.[40] While Jentsch credits the uncanny to an "intellectual" uncertainty if one is not familiar with an experience, Freud disputes this, arguing that not all

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[38] Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimlich," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917-1919), An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works,* London: Vintage Books, 2001), 218–256.

[39] For a contemporary discussion and an attempt by editors to expand Freud's parameters of the uncanny within the modern, see Jo Collins and John Jervis, *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[40] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917-1919), An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 219. Also see Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of The Uncanny (1906): Ernst Jentsch," trans. Roy Sellars, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties,* 216–228.

new or unfamiliar situations are uncanny, and that "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny."[41] Freud defines the German word *unheimlich* (unhomely) as being opposite to *heimlich* (homely)—and *heimisch* means native—contrary to what is familiar: "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc,"[42] and "the *unheimlich*: eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear."[43] These two opposing states simultaneously merge as one, yet remain very different.[44] This liminal space, from *heimlich* to *unheimlich,* therefore creates the uneasy and uncertain feeling of the uncanny—that something can be visible, homely and familiar, while at the same time concealed, frightening or strange, but without being in opposition. It is this particular ambiguous and unsettling feeling that the studio research employs as a device, rather than the more familiar and anticipated horror-centric characteristics of the gothic.

Freud outlines the key attributes—the things, impressions, events, and situations—that are able to arouse a feeling of the uncanny. He cites Jentsch's example of the two extremes of death and life, and the doubts as to whether an animate being is "really" alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be in fact animate. Jentsch claims that leaving the reader with a feeling of uncertainty as to whether a character is a human being or an automaton—and doing so in a manner that leaves the audience not focussing their attention directly on this uncertainty—is one of the most successful devices for creating uncanny effects.[45] Jentsch calls this "psychological artifice," and it drives the uncanny. The following five characteristics that Freud defines as being key to producing the feeling of the uncanny are pertinent to this research, specifically in regard to the found and readymade objects I have used:

1. The uncertainty of what we are witnessing; a blurring between the lines of the "real" and the "unreal." In particular, mental states such as madness, delirium, hysteria, panic and their relationship to what is being experienced as "real" by the character and reader.[46]

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[41] Ibid., 221.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 224. Freud's definition is in line with German Lexicographer Daniel Sanders's earlier definition of the *heimlich* in *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860) *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* is a dictionary of the German language which Sanders published. Freud makes various references to it throughout his essay. It is the German definition and language to which Freud refers. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* 222.
[44] Ibid., 224–225.
[45] Ibid., 226–227.
[46] Ibid., 227.

2. The double: a doubling, dividing and interchanging of self. Specifically, characters that are considered identical due to looking alike and having mental processes leaping from one character to the other—processes that Freud calls "mental telepathy."[47]

3. Repression and repressed memories (the familiar), which form within the mind as anxieties, only to return and recur in another form (the unfamiliar). This is a principal feature of the uncanny, as it is a realisation of the *heimlich* becoming or extending into the *unheimlich,* encompassing both definitions at once. Repression of memories and the revival of past traumas and events is deeply rooted in the uncanny, and is a core underpinning of the gothic narrative.

4. The haunted house, which holds spirits and ghosts of the dead.[48] Freud neglects to deliberate on the context of the house and its significance, which is noteworthy due to the universal understanding of the "home" as (ideologically) safe and familiar and a violation of this feeling sits within the liminal space of the uncanny.

5. The uncanny is produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is destroyed, such as when something that we conceive as imaginary comes to life, appearing before us in "reality," or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises. This is the tension between "real" and "not real" in both a physical and mental state or form. To have what one can imagine in the mind come to life, or reality, is often more real and uncanny (and possibly terrifying) than what one encounters in their "real-life" experiences.[49]

This framework of the uncanny occurring within the "real" and/or the "unreal" is of importance for this project; specifically, Freud's argument that experiencing the uncanny in or through "imaginative productions" as being unequal to "reality." Fiction or "non-reality," Freud believes, is a much more fertile environment for the uncanny than "real life," as there are greater means to create it in the fantasy of fiction—which, once fully entered by the viewer, is not "reality tested." The storyteller, Freud believes, has a strong hold over the audience and the emotions, actions and ideas they can have us believe.[50] This concept is particularly important to this research as it reflects the argument that consumer images and their neoliberal narratives

[47] Ibid., 234.
[48] Ibid., 241–243.
[49] Ibid., 244.
[50] Ibid., 249–250.

have the ability to transport audiences into a state of passive experience and consumption, trusting in the ideas and ideologies within the fantasy due to a loss of rational and critical thought. These concepts will be discussed in detail in the second chapter, as they are also the foundation for media and social psychology and the methods that enable our psychological transportation through and denial of consumer images.[51]

Conclusion

The first section of this chapter has provided a historical overview of the gothic and established it as a fictional mode of examining individual and collective fears and apprehensions—caused due to rapid societal progression and change—as well as defining three of its core characteristics. Walpole's *Otranto* not only demonstrated this foundation and the gothic's future, but it also exposed the contradictory desires of the bourgeoisie while signifying and interrogating a corrupt and collapsing system of power, a convention of the gothic that still remains. *Frankenstein* evidenced that the gothic has always drawn on fictional and fantastical narratives to examine the concerns and apprehensions of modern-day society, while also probing the deeper mental psyche of the individual. This novel also exposes our conflicting desires—our fear of and longing for the past, in comparison to an unknown future. Finally, it was established that the gothic's longevity and popularity lies in its ability to rest within the liminal, the uncanny, and the physical and psychological spaces of the in-between that we struggle to comprehend. Having considered how the gothic psychologically takes form and the conventions it adopts, I can now turn the discussion to the gothic within a contemporary American context; specifically, to the significance the American gothic as a neoliberal examination of the capitalist "dream" and its decaying façade.

1.2 The American Gothic: Revealing the Duality of the American Surface

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.
——Edgar Allan Poe[52]

This section will clarify how the gothic's characteristics and tropes continue to be employed within the American gothic, and how they are modified to reflect the shifting anxieties of the American landscape and psyche. As this research focusses specifically on the external

[51] The notion of narrative persuasion through transportation will be expanded upon in Chapter 2.
[52] Edgar Allan Poe, "A Dream Within A Dream," in *The Poetical Works of Edgar Alan Poe* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1978), 11.

influences upon the American dream and its neoliberal progress, the following considers how such factors have motivated the American gothic. Prior to undertaking a comprehensive overview, I clarify how the American gothic has evolved from its European origins. I will elaborate on this through a succinct definition and identification of the American gothic's core characteristics. To do so, the views of modern-day gothic critics' Lloyd-Smith, Savoy, Edwards, Monnet and Blake will be referred to.

The subsequent discussion will then provide the theoretical context for the contemporary American gothic as a critical mode of inquiry, its relevance in modern-day society, and in turn, its importance as a framework for this research. In undertaking this evaluation, I will identify the political intent that drives the American gothic, and that which it seeks to unveil, as represented through the uncanny, metaphorical, and liminal spaces. In doing so, I will also expose the consequential impact this system has on society and the individual, and therefore the American psyche. I must first acknowledge that the contemporary American gothic is broad in scope and it often blends and interweaves with other genres, such as soap opera, family melodrama, comedy, sci-fi, and horror, making it habitually misunderstood or dismissed in popular culture as a purely aesthetic visual genre, often void of its long history and acute political intent. While many contemporary televisual texts focus on the vampire[53] and post zombie-apocalyptic gothic, this research is concerned with the need to revisit a 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic, so as to probe the growing concerns of the present, but with the particular interpretation and sensibility that is unique to this globally defining period. By examining the contemporary neoliberal American dream through the lens of the suburban gothic, the research outcomes aim for the audience to speculate on their desire to not only attain but also preserve the suburban fantasy. Likewise, it is aimed that individuals come to contemplate their own role within the broader master narrative of the West—that of infinite growth, expansion, and consumption.[54]

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[53] I define five key overarching sub-genres within the contemporary televisual American gothic: (1) the traditional vampire gothic; (2) teenage/parody gothic; (3) gothic sci-fi/horror and apocalyptic gothic; (4) the suburban gothic; and 5) post-apocalyptic/American imperial gothic. While the vampire film has been embedded in the popular conscious since the silent horror film *Nosferatu* (1922), in 2008 the vampire was revived as the gothic monster of the times and *Twilight* (novel and subsequent film franchise) became a global phenomenon.
[54] "The West" is short for the Western world, or Western civilisation, and it has its origins in the geographical positioning of countries in Western Europe and the Americas. Culturally speaking, Western countries are similar in customs, traditions and religion, predominantly being based on Christianity and those whose ethnic origins can be traced back to Europe. "Westernization," *Britannica*, accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Westernization.

Before delineating the aforementioned, I will briefly highlight some scholarly debate about whether the gothic is a genre or a mode. I make the case for the gothic as a mode of inquiry and therefore a methodology and address its positioning within this research project.

Gothic: Mode vs Genre

There are several similar yet slightly differing assessments I wish to identify. These are from Savoy and Martin, Monnet, and American comparative literature scholar Stephen Shapiro. Savoy and Martin determine that American gothic is not a cohesive genre or mode, but a discursive study into a national self, rather than a specified and formulaic historical account. The pair see the approach of the latter as non-conducive, as the gothic "coheres" around poetics, narrative structuration, and it places the reader on the edge of symbolic dissolution. They argue that such generic categorisation does not allow for the gothic's "multivalent tendencies."[55]

Monnet, on the other hand, distinguishes that in more recent times film scholars have produced significant research into genre, isolating authors who argue that genre is no longer a stable category, but rather that it serves the classification interests of the user—allowing critics to focus on what genres *are* rather than what they *do* in specific contexts. Monnet paraphrases: "many critics have stopped calling the gothic a genre altogether and opt for more fluid terms, e.g., 'mode' or 'discursive site'."[56] Monnet concludes, that while these labels are useful, the expression of genre has now come to encompass and accommodate the flexibility suggested by these terms.[57]

In response to such indeterminate views, and within the context of this research, I identify with Shapiro, who defines the American gothic as more than an embellished language; rather, it probes the political, philosophical and economic, and is "itself a mode of critical inquiry into capitalist modernity."[58] If, as Shapiro suggests, gothic is a mode of investigation into the

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[55] Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), vii.
[56] Robert Miles, quoted in Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Furnham: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 19. ProQuest Ebrary. Miles is the author of Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy (UK: Routledge: 1993).
[57] Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Farnham: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 18–19, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/lib/griffith/detail.action?docID=513945.
[58] Stephen Shapiro, "Introduction: Material Gothic." *Gothic Studies* 10, no 1 (2008): 2, https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.10.1.2.

contemporaneous, then American gothic critically positions this examination at the heart of the economic and cultural powerhouse of contemporary Western ideology: the US.

Finally, it is perhaps Lloyd-Smith who can provide a closing insight on the debate and the strong historical relationship between both mode and genre, when he says of early American gothic literature: "The Gothic often provides a voice for silent or repressed concerns and disenfranchised groups, its distanced parallels with reality offering implicit critiques of accepted institutions and behaviours."[59] It is this unique capability that enables the gothic to function as a mode of critical inquiry.

Historical Context: Defining the American Gothic

The European gothic contained particular characteristics that were significant to its own cultural concerns and feudal landscapes: medieval castles, aristocracies and monastic oppressions.[60] Since its founding in the late eighteenth century, the American gothic has sought to probe the anxieties specific to the American experience. By comparison, Lloyd-Smith suggests that the US has a vastly different landscape and history; namely, it was colonised under imperialist rule (as was Australia) and produced a violent slave trade for the native indigenous and African American peoples. It therefore has a distinctive set of anxieties and conflicts to that of the European experience. As Lloyd-Smith states, "certain aspects of the American experience may be understood as inherently gothic, religious intensities, frontier immensities, isolation, and violence; above all perhaps the shadows cast by slavery and radical attitudes."[61] Hence, Lloyd-Smith ascertains that for many years, authors have sought to articulate their own dark understanding of what it is that lay beneath the new nation's optimistic surface.

Differentiating the American Gothic: Politics and Strange New Tropes

Savoy analyses early American gothic literature and its intention in relation to psychoanalysis. Specifically, he identifies Freud's uncanny and melancholia, and the distinctive development of innovative and strange tropes, figures, and rhetorical techniques that gothic fiction authors Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan

[59] Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*, 135.
[60] Ibid., 27.
[61] Ibid., 25.

Poe brought to a literary genre that was endeavouring to find its own identity.[62] Savoy draws on the US's dark and violent history, and the paradox of an idealised land in pursuit of happiness, as central to enabling those writing within the American gothic mode to be innovative and experimental. Its power, he claims, comes from situating the perverse anxieties of national crimes and wilful human desires (as forms, techniques and themes), thus laying the haunted, uncanny, and the return of the repressed into the depths of everyday life, and therefore the mainstream American public and its psyche.[63]

Tropes and Characteristics: The Traditional and New Frontiers

Savoy recognises the key conventions and tropes of the gothic—the abject, the uncanny, the monstrous, female oppression, madness and melancholia, death, and repression of the past and its consistent relationship with the notion of the "Real"[64]—as having continued into early American gothic literature.[65] However, he identifies the following five characteristics as being central to the American gothic: strangeness; [66] metaphor and personification; a political agenda to engage with audience;[67] melancholy and the macabre;[68] and the ability to transform the "normal" into the monstrous, thus generating fear, conflict and the uncanny.[69] They are significant to this research, and will be discussed below, as they draw the American gothic into its own specific discourse and expression.

Strangeness

In contrast to the Europeans' unambiguous tropes in literature, the Americans introduced a strangeness, using metaphor and personification as a method of signifying a distinct and dark America and its fears. Savoy classifies the use of metaphor in early American gothic literature as being difficult to define, and often having double meanings.[70] He highlights Hawthorne's

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[62] Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 178.
[63] Ibid., 168–171.
[64] Savoy draws upon Malcom Bowie's definition of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's notion of the Real," as "that which lies outside the symbolic process, and it is to be found in the mental as well as the material world." Malcom Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 94. Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 169.
[65] Ibid., 169.
[66] Ibid., 169–171.
[67] Ibid., 175.
[68] Ibid., 173–182.
[69] Ibid., 180–181.
[70] Ibid., 174.

The Scarlet Letter (1850),[71] which uses a non-distinct object (the "letter A") (Figure 3) that the main character Hester Prynne is forced to wear on her clothing as punishment for adultery and as a warning to other women—an overt sign of patriarchal control. The letter A is uncertain in its inherent meaning and its symbolic referent, which, Savoy suggests, is its terrifying power.[72]

Metaphor and Personification

Savoy also draws upon the traumatic novel *Weiland* (1798),[73] in which the main character, Theodore Weiland, transforms into a grotesque, murdering ventriloquist. Having killed his wife and their children as evidence of his religious devotion, he breaks free from jail and attempts to murder his sister Clara. Savoy questions what leads one to such a grotesque transformation, proposing it may be a personification of the more deep-rooted issues in American society, rather than the cause within the character himself.[74] "Person-ification," Savoy states, "gives abstract ideas a physical form, allows the dead to rise, and for objects to assume a menacing pseudo life."[75] It is this power of metaphor and the abstract notions of personification that this research employs as a means to create tension within the highly symbolic objects chosen.

[71] Nathaniel Hawthorn, *The Scarlett Letter* (London: Vintage Books), 2008.
[72] Savoy does explore the oppression of women through *The Scarlet Letter* and other seminal novels, however I will not be focusing on this expansive and significant characteristic of the gothic, nor the racial aspects of colonisation, as both are themselves deeply relevant, complex, and worthy of their own study. Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," 177.
[73] Charles Brockden Brown, *Weiland or The Transformation,* 1798, Gutenberg Press, Ebook, last updated January 25, 2013, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/792/792-h/792-h.htm.
[74] Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," 172–173.
[75] Ibid., 168.

Figure 3. A. V. S. Anthony, *Hester Prynne & Pearl Before the Stock,* Engraved Illustration*,* 1878.

Politics, Melancholia and the Monstrous

In evidencing the final three characteristics, Savoy singles out Poe as significant in his literary comment on race, and the cultural significance of "blackness" in the white American mind. Although not writing directly to the national shame of slavery, Savoy identifies Poe's work as an exploration of the deep oppression and violence inherent in white culture and thus, gothicising and transforming the "normative" race into the monstrous.[76] Savoy says *The Raven* (1845)[77] is an example of political commentary through metaphor and personification (Figure 4). The black bird exists as a symbol of madness, mourning, death and melancholia. However, the raven is a sign not just of a personal or cultural melancholia, "but the abject underside of a national 'normality.'"[78] While on the surface Poe's works may not reflect the deep-seated concerns of racial objectification and violence within a white America, Savoy argues that Poe's use of personification and metaphor through non-specific tropes and the strong usage of the

[76] Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," 182.
[77] Edgar Allan Poe, and Gustav Doré. *The Raven*, Minneapolis: Learner Publishing Group), 2018, accessed April 5, 2021, Proquest Ebrary.
[78] Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," 182.

macabre and melancholic does generate an unnerving lack of certainty in readers.[79] In my research, I use personification, metaphor and the macabre to imply that the decorative figurines of children are performing acts of grotesque violence or immoral behaviour. The tension lies in that it is not clear if the ornaments are willing or vulnerable in the implied actions and the broader inferences of such narratives.

Figure 4. Gustav Doré. Illustration from *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, 1884.

A Contemporary Gothic within America: The Domestic and the Virtual

Edwards positions the contemporary American gothic within America's most pressing cultural and social fears: (1) the death of the industrial age and the rise of the neoliberal global economy; and (2) advancements in digital technology and the networked information system. In identifying these two principal concerns, Edwards recognises that the contemporary American gothic's unique mode of metaphoric inquiry raises greater and more complex ontological questions about the human condition. While he does acknowledge that there is a ubiquity in the contemporary American gothic, he highlights that its strength lies in its ability to

[79] Ibid.

defamiliarise audiences through the fictional, while simultaneously chartering new sociocultural phenomena that are not immediately intelligible.[80] As a result, he locates the domestic space as being central to the realisation of the physical and virtual, and the psychological manifestation of both. Together the spaces are causes of much present day anxiety because the internet and its dissemination through home and personal computing has created its own ghosts and ghouls. Edwards gives the example of Slender Man,[81] a tall thin faceless man who walks the digital hallways of cyberspace and who is, Edwards claims, "a manifestation of gothic that reflects contemporary social and cultural concerns about technology and its significant changes to everyday practices and attitudes."[82] Slender Man (Figure 5) is therefore a past gothic representation of fear, manifested as a contemporary distress of external "digital" monsters—personal computer hacking, corporate monitoring, viruses and government surveillance—entering the private and physical space through the unrestricted presence of the screen.

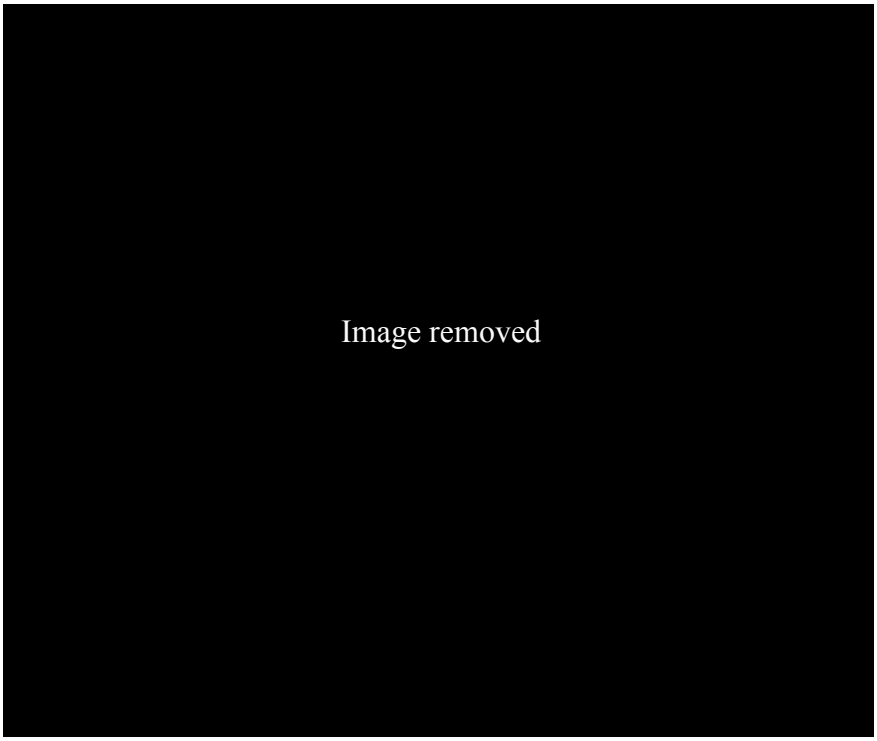

Figure 5. Victor Surge, Image 2: *Slender Man*, 2009.

[80] Justin Edwards, "Contemporary American Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Jeffery Andrew Weinstock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 81.
[81] Slender Man is an online, faceless, tall fictional character who wears a black suit and has extremely long arms. Created by Victor Surge, Slender Man came to life on the internet in 2009 as two digitally composited images. Adam Daniel, "Beware the Slenderman: How Users Created the Boogieman of the Internet," *The Conversation,* posted January 24, 2017, accessed March 26, 2018, https://theconversation.com/beware-the-slenderman-how-users-created-the-boogieman-of-the-internet-71338.
[82] Edwards, "Contemporary American Gothic," 77.

The Surface of Nostalgia and America's Longing for Its Own Lost Future

In outlining the complexities and fears of a system in probable social and economic collapse, Edwards compares the decline of the past industrialised world and its spectres with the present and the post-industrial era's digital transformations.[83] Referring to American science fiction author Bruce Sterling[84] and his exploration of "Atemporality"[85] in our new global, networked, and increasingly automated era, Edwards recognises that with this comes a decaying rearrangement of past and outmoded structures.[86] In Sterling's world, we see the imminent collapse of the financial infrastructure, and the fall of the hypercapitalist and hypertechnological system, reigniting the past ghost of socialist rule. This future, Sterling and Edwards propose, is explicitly haunted by America's nostalgia for a lost future.[87] By positioning the contemporary gothic within Sterling's yet-to-be post-post-industrial America—which is driven by an anachronistic and "hyper" industrialised capitalist system—Edwards paints a larger image of the collision of two epochs. Their convergence prompts an atemporality, where the immediacy of the present is replaced with the ghost of both the past and future. It is neither dead nor alive, absent nor present.[88] Thus, Edwards and Sterling not only draw attention to America's present and impending global impact, but also to Americans' fraught desire for a nostalgic past in light of their imminent future.

The 1980s: A Neoliberal Turn in the American Gothic

Monnet's research, while broad in scope, is concerned with the emotional and political characteristics of genre, including American gothic.[89] Her study focusses specifically on the political and its influence on the American gothic, as Monnet positions imperialist rule and its select American master narrative as the conduit for both the contemporary American and neoliberal gothic. Although Monnet does not specifically define the neoliberal gothic as a sub-

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[83] Ibid., 76.
[84] Bruce Sterling is an American science fiction author, net critic, and cyberspace theorist who is recognised for his major contribution to cyberpunk and his futuristic insights. "Bruce Sterling," European Graduate School, accessed March 26, 2018, http://egs.edu/faculty/bruce-sterling.
[85] Atemporality, as Sterling describes it, is "about the nature of historical knowledge and what we know of the past and about the present and future and how we represent history to ourselves." Bruce Sperling, "Bruce Sperling on Atemporality (excerpt)," YouTube video 5:53, posted March 1, 2010, accessed March 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKqFFkmHbCM.
[86] Edwards, "Contemporary American Gothic," 77–78.
[87] Ibid., 78.
[88] Ibid., 78–79.
[89] For a full profile on Monnet, see Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, "Hello," Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's personal academic website, posted September 14, 2010, accessed February 2, 2018, http://people.unil.ch/agnieszkasoltysikmonnet/.

section of the American gothic, her views are important to reference as they reinforce two pertinent points: firstly, the 1980s represent a key turning point in not only the American psyche, but also the beginning of the global neoliberal system and those whom it effects; and secondly, the 1980s clearly demonstrate the gothic mode's ability to examine the global neoliberal capitalist system and allow audiences to critically engage with its effects. These key points both connect the neoliberal gothic to and separate it from the American gothic, and therefore its inquiry into the capitalist-driven ideology of the American dream. These ideas will be discussed in a historical and contemporary context as well as on a national and then a global level.

Imperialism and the American Narrative

Monnet believes that if one is to attempt to understand contemporary American popular culture and how the country has arrived at its current point, a return to America's origins is necessary—specifically to imperialism and the convergence of select narratives. Monnet argues individuals must look at the imperialist master narrative, or "national mythology" of infinite growth—geographically, politically and economically—and America's belief that it is exceptional and somehow morally elite. Over time, such narratives and ideals have become normalised, and in contemporary popular culture, such values have now become glamorised, creating an even narrower and undisputed ideological framework for the American dream.[90]

The Uncanny

Acknowledging the significance of psychoanalysis and the intellectually unexplainable as a language to understand the "conflicted psyche"—specifically, the sublime and Freud's uncanny, "something familiar which has been repressed"—Monnet detects critics of gothic and their reliance upon the uncanny as a fixed concept.[91] In evolving the theory, she exchanges Freud's notion of the repressed with what psychologists now call "denial." Denial or self-deception, Monnet argues, can work at the level of the individual or the group, where inconvenient or disagreeable facts are screened out of "official reality" and collective consciousness. Monnet goes on to state, "one does not need to have read Freud in order to

[90]Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, interviewed by Johan Höglund, March 26, 2017. "S2S Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet on Empire, Popular Culture and the Adventure Narrative," YouTube video, 6:06, posted by LNUC Concurrences, March 31, 2017, last accessed November 3, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGg1ple20bo.

[91] Monnet, *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic,* 23.

understand that knowledge that is both present and absent will generate odd cognitive effects."[92] While this is a welcomed addition to defining the uncanny, in re-clarifying the importance of Freud's contribution, it is not only the absence and presence of knowledge that creates a cognitive dissonance, but also the feeling of the two extremes co-existing concurrently, and how this is emotionally processed.

The 1980s: A Gothic Turn

To position the gothic within the contemporary and postmodern, Monnet affirms that "The American Gothic is now characterised by a politicised critical historicism."[93] She explains that the 1980s American gothic became a dystopian vision of American culture and history, a mode of voicing disillusionment with Reagan's vision of America. She states: "A recurrent rhetorical feature of the American gothic is to imagine gothic as occupying the space 'beneath' the surface of America, metaphorically speaking, because it is somehow hidden from casual view."[94] To identify the visual tone of such dichotomies, Monnet recognises the iconic and seemingly idyllic opening scene (Figure 6) of David Lynch's influential film *Blue Velvet*[95]—where a scene of a suburban home, a perfect blue sky, red roses, and a white picket fence is quickly interrupted as the camera pans beneath the surface of the freshly mowed lawn to a seething mass of bugs—as being representative of such an analysis.[96]

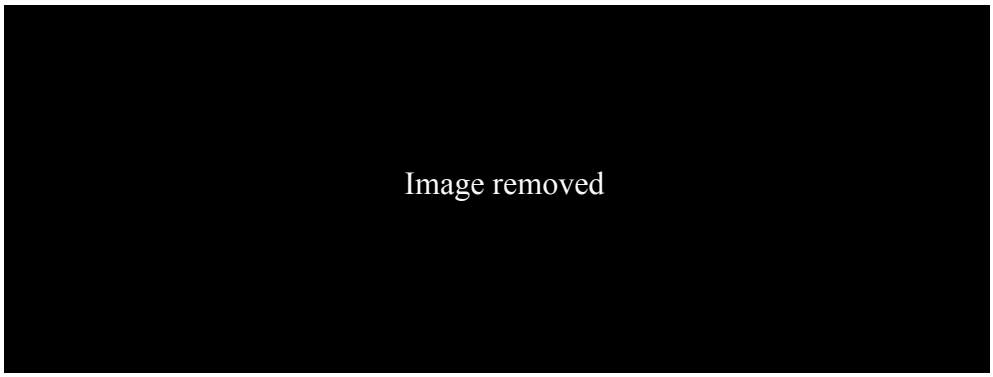

Figure 6. Opening scene, *Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).

Conversely, Monnet cautions against simply reducing American gothic to an exploration of that which is behind, beneath, or deep inside American culture and history, as she argues it is also the role of the gothic to "frame and focus on the contradictions between such irreconcilable

[92] Ibid., 24.
[93] Ibid., 7.
[94] Ibid., 8–9.
[95] *Blue Velvet*, DVD, directed by David Lynch (USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).
[96] Edwards and Monnet, *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture*, 9.

paradigms."[97] Savoy echoes such sentiment, maintaining that the American gothic does not simply "give voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of the American dream";[98] as such, a purely oppositional reading is reductive. These conflicting worlds of dream and nightmare, he explains, actually interface and interact with each other.[99] Again, we see attention drawn to the contradictory, uncanny and the liminal nature of the gothic, however now positioned within a contemporary and highly incongruous 1980s American context. The American gothic is therefore specific to America's dominant concerns, particularly the consequences of globalisation, the larger imperial master narrative of exponential growth, and the myth of the American dream.

A Contemporary and Neoliberal Gothic

Monnet and Blake's *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age*[100] is a collection of essays that engage with the geopolitical context of the gothic's migration to the popular and the global masses since the 1980s. Like Edwards, Monnet and Blake identify the ubiquity of gothic tropes in popular culture, with the book interrogating a number of global gothic texts that are united by the will to interrogate the ways in which neoliberal economics and the rapid rise of neoliberal individualism have impacted the modern world. As a whole, the book is invested in ideological dimensions, specifically the social and existential consequences of thirty years of global capitalism.[101] Monnet again emphasises 1980s America—not just as a political turning point for America, but a global climax in world history—as Reagan and Thatcher established a global neoliberalism and the notion of radical individualism. Monnet and Blake position this moment as fundamental to understanding the global capitalist system we know and live within today; deregulation and financial freedom of markets, cuts to public spending, loss of trade unions, lower taxes and the transfer of public amenities to the private sector have all allowed exponential growth for the financially and corporate elite, and that which the essays critique: the US-led war on terror, the financial crisis of 2008, and the revolution in advanced technologies.[102]

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Savoy, "The Rise of American Gothic," 167.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, *The Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
[101] Ibid., 1–3.
[102] Ibid., 4–6.

Gothic Tropes as a Strategy to Survive Neoliberal Capitalism

As already clarified, the traditional gothic monster has long been used to scrutinise social norms and values, modes of identity, and the monstrosity that lies within us all.[103] Monnet and Blake ascertain that the texts discussed in many of the essays thrive on the use of the gothic monster as a means to investigate the contemporary neoliberal "survival of the fittest" mentality, and the assertion by this system that there is no alternative to such thinking.[104] Likewise, they confirm how acts of violence against the subject/s caused by neoliberal circumstances are interrogated by a myriad of contemporary gothic narratives, and that they enable the audience to think through some "strategies of resistance to the economic actuality of neoliberal economics and the ideologies of selfhood and society they entail."[105] The book's focus is to demonstrate the ways in which the essays and their selected international gothic texts interrogate the often ignored or unspoken human cost of neoliberal policies and economic outcomes. As Monnet and Blake conclude, "what forcibly emerges from the collection is a sense of economic, existential and humanitarian crisis—the neoliberal experiment having led us to war, to environmental catastrophe and to levels of inequality unprecedented in modern times."[106] Lastly, they suggest that what is unique to this survey and its selected gothic texts is the lack of humour and fantasy, as the austerity of the "real" seems to prevail in confronting such imminent atrocities. Therefore, the neoliberal gothic is able to not only detect the political and economic concerns of the neoliberal capitalist system, but also the ideologies which are constructed by it. The gothic provides, through the monstrous and the metaphor, a psychological space for the audience to consider their role within, and response to, such a system and the reality of its effects. While my studio work interrogates the impacts of global neoliberalism as initiated by Reganism and a 1980s America, I do not seek to do so through such a clear-cut examination of the "real." Rather my outcomes aim to exploit the fantasy narratives, ideals and languages that have been employed to ensure the "dreams" global reach and this is achieved through a complex balance of opposing sentiments and that which they infer.

[103] Ibid., 6.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., 11.
[106] Ibid., 14. Although at no point do Monnet and Blake specifically identify the neoliberal gothic as an extension of the American gothic, they clearly connect the relationship between the two, overtly acknowledging the influence of America and its gothic concerns on the nations of the world.

Conclusion

This section has provided both an historical overview and a contemporary insight into the American gothic. In evidencing it as a mode of inquiry, I have positioned the American gothic as a critical tool for political investigation, characterised by its own cultural history, dominating powers and social anxieties. I explained that early American gothic authors generated a unique language for expressing the deep-rooted concerns of an early America and the governing powers responsible for its oppressive and violent past. Through strange tropes, themes and rhetorical devices, it is revealed that the outwardly "normal" can easily transform into the monstrous, often through the psychological manifestation of the subject (self) being "shadowed" by a deep and dark American psyche. It is this metaphoric and macabre exploration of the collective and individual consciousness that the contemporary American gothic seeks to further expose.

Following, I identified two overarching concerns of the contemporary gothic: industrial collapse; and advancing technologies and the networked system. By locating external neoliberal fears within our homes through the virtual monsters we allow to enter, I suggested we long for a simpler past. In doing so, I drew attention to our own strange nostalgia for an industrialised past and the impossibility of it ever arriving as our future. Next, it was confirmed that as the middle class began to question the viability and ideologies of the 1980s and its fraught American dream, so the American gothic subsequently altered the methods used to probe the symbolism of this surface and its duality. To position the consequences of this globally spreading neoliberal system, the American gothic and its contemporary tropes and motifs scrutinise the now global anxieties of this unremitting profit- and growth-driven system while providing audiences with strategies of resistance. Subsequently, it was reasoned that in attempting to understand how the US, and indeed the West, has come to its current point of cultural crisis, one must look back to imperialist rule and the select master narrative of the US. It was suggested that over time, this has become normalised and this ideological indoctrination—and the contemporary consumer-driven American dream—now defines global citizens, culture and politics. Finally, this section has confirmed that the American gothic is more than an unassuming stylistic visual genre, as often perceived in contemporary popular culture, and that it is capable of rigorous investigation into the American individual and collective psyche. The third and final section of this chapter will now examine the core methodological framework of this research: the suburban gothic.

1.3 The Suburban Gothic: A Dystopian Dream

You can't choose between life and death when we're dealing with what is in between.
——Tangina Barrons[107]

This section realises the first stages of addressing my research question, as it provides the framework for the construction and examination of Western society's idealised veneer—the suburbs and home ownership—as fabricated through the neoliberal American dream. Firstly, I will contextualise and provide a definition, overview and foundation for the suburban gothic. This mode of gothic inquiry will provide the strategies to critically interrogate the ideological, economic and political dimensions of the suburban dream, while also examining the psychological mindset of those who inhabit this space and their endless pursuit of its commodified veneer. To do so, I will draw from Murphy, as she is currently the only critic to compile a comprehensive survey of suburban gothic texts in a still greatly under-examined gothic mode. While other critics and scholars study the suburbs and the texts that seek to reveal the darker side of the suburban reality, few do so through the critical lens of the suburban gothic. In fact, Murphy claims that there has seldom been a consideration of the suburban gothic as a specific sub-section to the wider American gothic, and furthermore that the suburban gothic has mostly gone unnoticed by suburban literary critics.[108] Thus, Murphy's contribution to this field of research is significant and justifies the need to refer to her work so profusely.[109]

I will now provide a general overview of the suburban gothic as defined by Murphy, before discussing the main external motivators of the suburban gothic. Following, I will identify and analyse four key characteristics that are crucial in the manufacturing and maintaining of the suburban dream as an idealised way of life. These characteristics will be discussed through the suburban gothic's use of them to undermine their intent. They are as follows: television—as a conduit between worlds and dimensions, and of surface representations of the suburbs;

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[107] *Poltergeist,* directed by Tobe Hooper (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982), DVD.
[108] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture,* 11–12.
[109] Much has been written about the American suburbs and their literary and televisual representations from a sociological or historical perspective; however, as Murphy argues, the suburban gothic has received little critical attention, except for Kim Ian Mischasiw, "Some Stations of Suburban Gothic," in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative,* ed Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City, IA, USA: Iowa Press, 2009), 327–257. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture,* 12. One contemporary scholar who does use a blended framework of post-feminism and the suburban gothic (as opposed to the gothic or American gothic) to critique contemporary female representation on screen is Melanie Waters. See Melanie Waters, "The Horrors of Home: Feminism and Femininity in the Suburban Gothic," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 58–73.

advertising and entertainment as fabricators of desire for the suburbs and its surface veneer; nostalgia as device to manufacture and drive the desire for the myth; and the home as a space of conformity, consumption, entrapment and psychological turmoil. These characteristics are critical to the studio outcomes and assist in forming the research's overall aims.

To evidence these points, I will examine *Poltergeist* (1982)[110]—a seminal suburban gothic film of the 1980s—that Murphy recognises as noteworthy because it is representative of the early stages of the neoliberal capitalist shifts of the 1980s, and the façade of the suburban "dream." Prior to this, it is necessary to discuss nostalgia as outlined by American political theorist Fredric Jameson, so as to provide a postmodern framework for the texts. I will then contextualise Jameson's argument within the suburbs, where I clarify that nostalgia undermines our knowledge of the suburban dream and its ongoing idyllic surface, as argued by American media studies scholar David R. Coon. I will also introduce two key theoretical figures within gothic television, American law scholar Lenora Ledwon and English film and television scholar Helen Wheatley, both of whom argue the television is itself an uncanny and gothic medium.

Through undertaking the aforementioned, this section will demonstrate how the suburban gothic will form the methodological foundation for this research. In turn, this will provide the basis to further argue that the consumer image is central to the dream's veneer, its fabrication, representation, and hyper-materialistic (global) progression.

Defining the Suburban Gothic

The suburban gothic is a sub-genre of the American gothic tradition that dramatises anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of America in the post–World War Two era. It refers to narratives situated within the suburban setting and employs suburban concerns and protagonists.[111] Murphy frames the suburban gothic in three ways: firstly, the economic, political and social framework that influences the suburbs and the anxieties these cause its inhabitants;[112] secondly, what tropes and motifs are explored in response to this; and finally, how they're reconfigured and repeated within a suburban context.[113] As previously established with other gothic modes, the suburban gothic has its own core tropes and motifs; however, they

[110] *Poltergeist,* directed by Tobe Hooper (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982), DVD.
[111] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 2.
[112] Ibid., 5.
[113] Ibid., 12.

fluctuate in their domination and relevance in response to the overriding political, economic and social anxieties of the time. This has been evidenced throughout both gothic and American gothic history, specifically through the anxieties of war, economic instability, and oppression of race and/or gender. Since their mass development in the 1950s, the American suburbs have been a locale for responding to and reflecting all three.

Similarities and Differences: The American Gothic

The suburban gothic and early American gothic are closely connected, as both draw upon the implied in-between space—of utopian ideals and the foundations of a new mode of living in America, and the rather dark realities of such a pursuit. What separates these two gothics is the insignificance of geographical location in the suburban gothic. This lack of whereabouts draws attention to the sheer ubiquity of the suburban landscape, and the irrelevance of geographical setting highlights that every fictional suburb acts as a stand in for all American suburbs.[114] To the contrary, geographic location and its history was not only of importance for early American gothic authors, but fundamental.[115] Instead of the geographical location being central to the suburban gothic narrative and its concerns, the suburb *is* the anxiety, a generic milieu for a collection of recurring apprehensions specific to every suburb within America.

The Suburban Dream and Its Utopian Ideals

The American suburbs were produced rapidly after World War Two, in unprecedented economic prosperity and expansion. Critics came to see the mass of indistinguishable homes as a disease—a counter narrative to the national identity of unique individualism, progress and optimism. Recent veterans of war and their young, white middle class and upwardly mobile families were encouraged, and enthusiastic to leave the overcrowded cities to the newly developed and spacious suburbs. For some, the suburban dream and "the good life"[116]

[114] Ibid., 10–11.
[115] Ibid., 7. For Charles Brockden Brown, it was Philadelphia, *Wieland* 1798) and for Nathaniel Hawthorne, and later Stephen King, it was New England. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture,* 10.
[116] A rudimentary explanation of "the good life" is as a philosophical term for the life one would like to live. The Good Life and its virtues of happiness and pleasure has in more recent times come to be inextricably associated with consumption. See Otar Hellevik, "Is The Good Life Sustainable?: A Three-Decade Study of Values, Happiness and Sustainability in Norway," in *Sustainable Consumption and the Good Life: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Karen Lykke Syse and Martin Lee Mueller (New York: Routledge, 2015), 55–79.

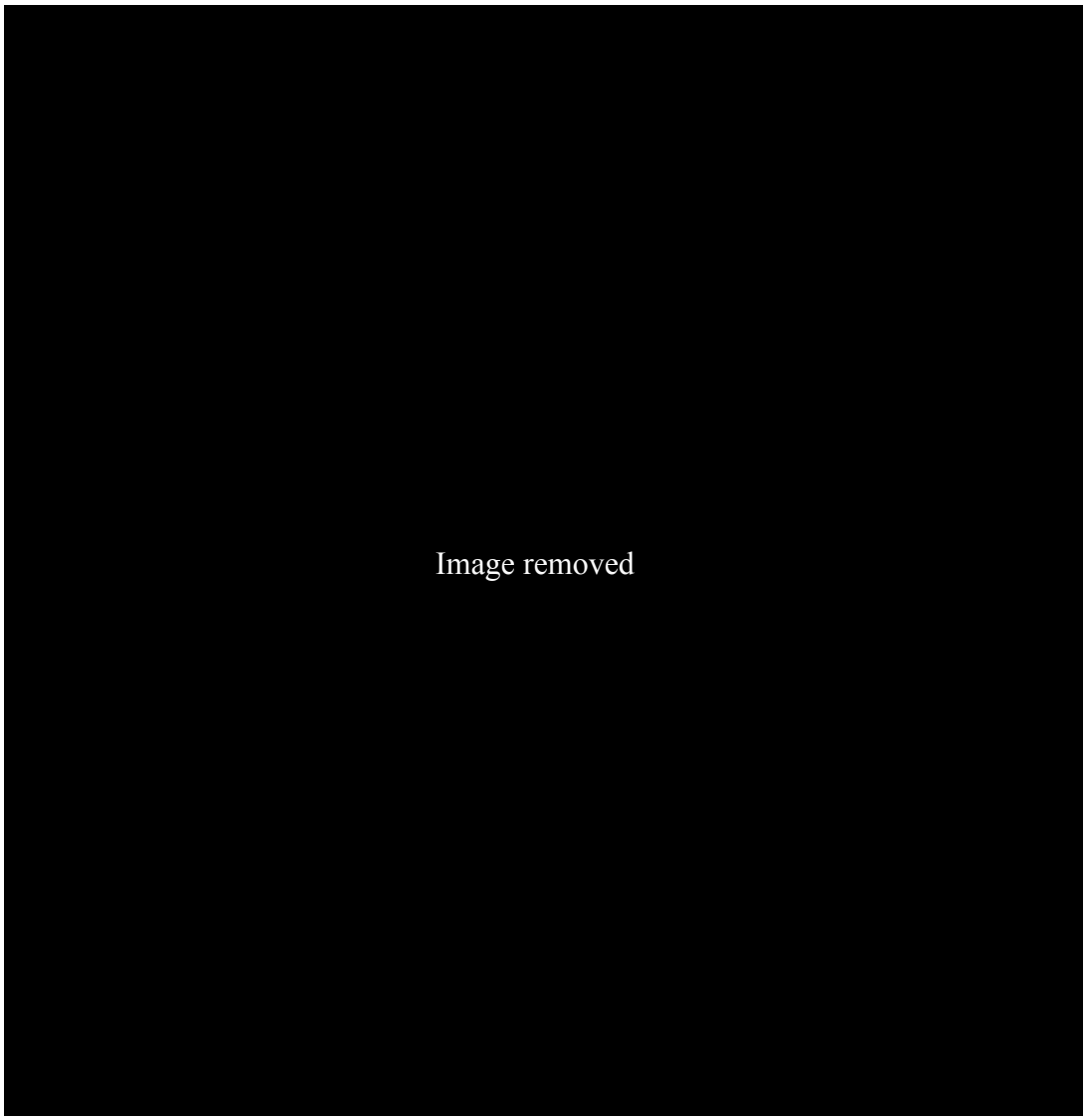

Figure 7. Good Year Advertisement, 1950s.

was born—a utopian paradise of expanding growth and opportunity (Figure 7). However, opponents of the suburbs saw the identical kit-homes as a physical manifestation of all that was wrong with American society at the time; explicitly, they came to signify mindless conventionality and conformity. The suburbs have always therefore represented a world of duality and parallel narratives. Given that they are literally located between the urban and the rural, positioned both physically and psychologically within the liminal, it is not surprising that the suburbs have always been a timely setting for horror and the gothic.[117] The suburban gothic therefore acts as a critical voice that authorises an opposition to the pro-suburban rhetoric conveyed by government, developers, and big business.[118] It is specifically this dramatisation which the suburban gothic is concerned with. As Murphy states:

[117] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 4–5.
[118] Ibid.

> Suburban gothic is the mode which has the most to tell us about the myriad social, economic, and cultural transformations which shaped American society during the late twentieth century, and the way in which people incorporated these into their own lives.[119]

She continues, "the suburban gothic has always had much more to do with how people perceive suburbia than the reality of such neighbourhoods."[120] Consequently, it is not only the unconsciousness of the suburbs and its occupants that the suburban gothic is engrossed in, but also the surface that represents it.

The Suburban Gothic Concerns

Murphy classifies two key concerns of suburban critics and the suburban gothic: (1) the deterioration of the physical environment due to mass development—and in more recent times the questioning of its sustainability, both economically and environmentally;[121] and (2) the mental state of those who live within these fabricated environments.[122] Central to both trepidations is the family home, which now replaces the European haunted castle as the station of terror.[123] The home reflects both the mental toll of those living within it, and the trauma of the land which it is built upon. The consequence is that its oblivious occupants are turned into mindless, materialistic and unhappy robots,[124] as they seek social and economic advancement at all costs.[125] Thus, essential to the suburban gothic's representation of home as idyllic, calm and safe is the juxtaposition of family secrets, and acts of the uncanny. Things are never quite what they seem on the pleasant surface of the suburbs, neighbours always have something to hide; families keep the curtains closed on their own skeletons in the closet; and there is always a sense of strangeness.[126]

Common Tropes

Given the gothic's convention for scrutinising the extremities and the liminal, it is not unexpected that Murphy positions the suburban gothic as exploitative of a set of contradictory

[119] Ibid., 5.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid., 193–198.
[122] Ibid., 2.
[123] Ibid., 105.
[124] Ibid., 74.
[125] Ibid., 109.
[126] Ibid., 2–3.

attitudes towards the suburban utopian dream, and within a set of binary oppositions. Specifically she outlines these contradictions within a dystopian suburban nightmare as follows: security and home ownership develops into debt and financial entrapment; a fresh start for the family and safe place for children turns into a place of unhappiness and predators of children; a family-focused, quiet milieu becomes a haunted destroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources; an opportunity to live among likeminded people who take pride in their home and its presentation converts into living alongside people who have turned into mindless conformists, consuming their way into materialism; and finally, a place insulated from the dangers of the outside world is actually a place of great danger from within, and not as anticipated, from without.[127] According to Murphy, the suburban gothic therefore reminds us that within the illusion of utopia is the inevitability and reality of its nightmare. This insight reflects the notions previously identified through the American gothic: the mode does not simply reveal the underside of the American dream but rather that these conflicting states of dream and nightmare co-exist in a liminal space because they are interdependent of each other.

Plots and Tropes

Murphy recognises four common and generic plot tropes and characteristics within suburban gothic texts: danger coming from people in the house next door or one's own family (rather than externally); the child/teenager under threat; child/teenager turned murderer; and parents turning into avenging vigilantes. From these recurrent themes stems three constant concerns for parents and those who not only obtain, but are trying to uphold, their suburban dream—or at least the surface of the dream—that of class, social standing, and wealth. Specific to these are anxieties of property prices and expenditure, such as do-it-yourself (DIY) and repair costs.[128] Here we see the influence of consumption and materialism within the suburban dream as a constant source of worry, and this highlights the significant role that advertising and materialism play within not only the creation of the suburban dream but its preservation and progression. Such familial tropes and plots will be discussed when analysing *Poltergeist*, a text Murphy identifies as exemplary of this.

The Core External Impacts upon the Suburban Gothic

[127] Ibid., 3.
[128] Ibid.

When outlining early suburban gothic, Murphy is clear in arguing that the post-war preoccupations with horror and science fiction were not only due to contemporary Cold War anxieties of invasion, but also insecurities caused by unprecedented changes at the time.[129] As already discussed, this is the core function of the gothic. The gothic has always resurfaced throughout history and at times of great scientific and technological progression, and when there has been uncertainty throughout the West in national and cultural identity. The three external influences Murphy indicates as central to these concerns are war, economic fluctuation, and oppression and inequality of gender/race (thus, political, economic, and social), and that the motivation of all three is a capitalist growth-driven system.[130] Given the current global anxieties in all aspects of inequality—political, economic, and social—it is evident that the West is again in need of a certain gothic and its return; specifically for the US (and Australia) is the dominant ideology of home ownership as a means to control society and our collective and individual aspirations. The manufactured fear of losing access to this nostalgic fantasy by the invasion of others, "the other/invasion" or not ever achieving it, is what ensures many of the anxieties of our time continue. Again, these concerns have always been core provocations for the American gothic, however, what is specific to the suburban gothic is the framework of the ideological, psychological, and economic entrapment of the home. Class, social standing, and wealth become the test in maintaining the suburban dream, and this ensures suburbanites are trapped in a cycle of unescapable consumption of goods, leisure and services, keeping up external appearances, and to ensure one "fits in." In investing such large amounts of ambition and attention into the surface of the home, the inside can only naturally start to fracture and decay. Murphy calls this conformity to materialism and the American dream "depersonalisation," and it often occurs through "dehumanisation"—body replacement, or an "invisible" invasion—and it is one of the key suburban gothic tropes.[131] This demonstrates that, as with the gothic and the American gothic, there are core tropes and motifs used, but as Murphy confirms, they are unique to the suburban milieu. Now that a foundation for the suburban gothic has been established, I can elaborate on 1980s America and the influences of these times on both the broader American psyche and the suburban gothic.

The 1980s: A Period of Great Change

[129] Ibid., 69.
[130] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture,* 73–86.
[131] Ibid., 71.

As recognised earlier, Monnet identified the 1980s as important in their political and economic shifts, thus paving the way for a rise of the American gothic's concentration on the dissatisfaction with the American dream, and the consequent revealing of what lies beneath its surface. The early 1980s saw a rise of contradictions in the everyday reality of Americans'. Publicly, there was a return to conservatism as Reagan attempted to resuscitate the family values of a 1950s America;[132] yet, this generation came of age trusting, as those before them did, in unstoppable economic progress. Being told they were entitled to the suburban dream and a materialistic life that would generate "happiness," the generation of the 1980s would be the first to "face the prospect of doing worse than their parents did."[133] The 1980s was to expose, in opposition to Reagan's political message, that in the face of economic downturn and fracturing family relationships, the suburban dream may not be an achievable possibility for the next aspiring middle class generation. Therefore, the 1980s are significant for the suburban gothic, as this mode of inquiry strives to reveal the contradiction and artificial nature of an increasingly materialistic suburban dream and the subsequent decaying of the family unit.

Nostalgia

Before commencing an examination of *Poltergeist,* it is important to introduce nostalgia, so its influence in both the construction and maintenance of the suburbs as a utopian dream is apparent. Of significance is how the suburban gothic uses nostalgia as a device to reveal its manipulative control. The views of Jameson are key in defining nostalgia and deliberating its pertinence as an artificial surface in postmodernity. In clarifying nostalgia's role as the surface image of the suburban dream's manufacturing, representation, and its ongoing expansion as an ideological framework, the work of Coon will be briefly outlined.

Nostalgia and Its Importance as Contradiction

As outlined earlier, the use of the past is one of the gothic's core conventions, acting as a disruptive device used to conjure the anxiety of repressed and past events to return and haunt the present. However, referencing the past can conflict with one's nostalgia. This conflict occurs through the juxtaposition of a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past[134] with a frightening and unknown possible future. The suburban gothic also relies

[132] Ibid., 127.
[133] Ibid., 111.
[134] "Nostalgia," *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed February 2, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nostalgia.

upon the past, and specifically nostalgia, as the suburban dream is not only dependent upon it to remain, but also it is the very foundation of its construction. Like the gothic, the suburban dream is a contradictory artifice, founded on fake and counterfeit representations from its beginning.

Fredric Jameson: Nostalgia and Postmodernity

This idea of artifice being perceived as an apparent "truthful" veneer while simultaneously existing as a simulated representation is fundamental to postmodernity. Jameson explains that nostalgia is significant to postmodernism, and as we are further removed from an experience or a specific period through temporality, we often long to experience the "idea" of that moment or period. However, this often entails a select recollection, an idyllic and glorified fantasy. Nostalgia then, according to Jameson, has seeped into popular culture, continually reducing the "actuality" of a situation or moment in favour of an idealised representation. The postmodern plagiarises plots and reinvents the past, reducing it to a "feel" and a "look"—"a decorative overlay."[135] This aesthetic can no doubt only be created from the already existing plethora of commodified visual representations circulating in popular culture. Jameson identifies that, "All we can really do is 'represent' our ideas and cultural stereotypes about the past,"[136] thus often creating a flattened, ambiguous, and diminished version of that specific preceding time. This is what Jameson refers to as the "disappearance of history and the simulacrum of the past, the reduction to the present."[137]

David R. Coon: Nostalgia, the Suburbs, and the Image

Coon also speaks to private and collective nostalgia, and the significant role that television and media (which, by nature are commercial) play in constructing and visualising it. Specifically, he addresses this in relation to society's understanding of, and desiring for, the American suburbs. History, memory and nostalgia, he explains, "all work to construct and reconstruct a past in a way that helps us make meaning in the present."[138] Coon specifically recognises that the rapid pace of the modern and post-industrialised world has caused us to be individually and

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[135] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 9–10.
[136] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents,* ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso. 1988), 20.
[137] Nico Baumbach, Damon R Young, and Genevieve Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text,* 137, no. 2. (2016): 145, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3468026.
[138] Coon, "Traditional Values: Nostalgia and Self-Reflexivity in Visual Representation of Suburbia," 40.

collectively more nostalgic for a previous time which seems slower and simpler in all aspects.[139] At the heart of constructing such nostalgia for the utopian ideologies of the suburbs is the image and what Coon calls, "surface level references to the past."[140] He goes on to clarify that in critiquing nostalgia, films such as *The Truman Show* (1998)[141] and *Pleasantville* (1998)[142] draw attention to the construction of the suburban veneer by using the surface image as a vehicle to obscure the reality that lies beneath it. Thus, they highlight the boundaries between reality and artifice.[143] What the films demonstrate, Coon argues, is "how our knowledge of the past is actually a carefully constructed interpretation of reality."[144] As a result, these films and others like them explore the manipulative potential for nostalgia as constructed through images in television and other media.[145]

What becomes evident through Jameson's and Coon's arguments is that nostalgia deceitfully creates the utopian ideologies of the suburban dream and its representation through a cycle of related and commodified historical images—a simulacrum. However, nostalgia is also used by critics as a device to reveal this constructed artifice, thereby exposing the surface image as a concealer of its own reality, and our understanding of that reality which lies beneath it. It is thus evident that there is a Machiavellian nature to nostalgia, and therefore its employment as a contradictory device within the gothic, and the fabrication of the suburban dream becomes apparent. Likewise, I use nostalgia as a core characteristic and device in my work to not only lure the viewer into my deranged suburban world, but to then expose them to the fraught nature of their own desires as well as expose the dualism of the past/present, fantasy/reality resistance.

The 1980s and *Poltergeist*

The following section will discuss *Poltergeist* and its parallels to an early 1980s American society and its anxieties. The analysis of the film discloses a new suburban gothic plot device and trope, as it reflects the deterioration of family relationships in a changing political and economic climate. This is revealed and will be explained through a shift in protagonists, from adults to children, who are often left vulnerable to threat from those within the family home or suburban neighbourhood. While *Poltergeist* employs all four of the suburban gothic

[139] Ibid., 39.
[140] Coon, "Traditional Values: Nostalgia and Self-Reflexivity in Visual Representation of Suburbia," 45.
[141] *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1998), DVD.
[142] *Pleasantville*, directed by Garry Ross (USA: New Line Cinema, 1998), DVD.
[143] Coon, "Traditional Values: Nostalgia and Self-Reflexivity in visual Representation of Suburbia," 46.
[144] Ibid., 53.
[145] Ibid., 40.

characteristics that Murphy identifies as crucial to its interrogation, the focus of this section is the role of advertising, television and the home within the suburbs and the gothic. Nostalgia, employed through the film's conservative family values (as promoted by Regan), is implied throughout the analysis. A discussion of advertising is relevant because it continues to dominate the contemporary suburbs. Within the 1980s suburban gothic narrative, advertising now symbolises greed and the beginnings of an individualistic, self-vested, and increasingly materialistic suburban dream that is void of community and concern for one's neighbours. A discussion of the television is also important as it extends beyond that of visual representations, which construct and depict the suburbs, and it now additionally functions as a specific suburban gothic trope and a conduit to other dimensions. To gain a greater insight, the ideas of Ledwon and Wheatley will be introduced, both of whom argue the television is itself an uncanny and gothic medium. Finally, the significance of the home will again be the focus, as it continues to play a metaphoric role as a place of entrapment and psychological disorder. Not just as a site of materialism and consumption, the home in *Poltergeist* is a place of supernatural haunting, controlling its inhabitants and the land on which the home is built. The examination of these distinctive and future dominant shifts in the suburban gothic allows for this research project's investigation into not just the external impacts *upon* the suburban dream, but more generally, what effects the materialisation of this dream has on those living *within* it. The intention for undertaking this study is to position the underlying premise of this research, which is focused on the impact that consumer images, their televisual representations and their relationship to fantasy and nostalgia have in manufacturing the illusion of the suburban dream.

Children as Focus

What was new to the suburban gothic of the early 1980s was that children were now the centre of domestic terror. *Poltergeist* fixates on the central character and youngest child of the Freeling family—Carol Anne—being lured from the home by a supernatural "beast" into an alternate dimension. Murphy ascertains this domesticating of the supernatural is near molestation of children.[146] This gothic use of metaphor implies a connection to a broader social anxiety of relationship breakdowns within the family home, and that parents were not able to protect their children, or may themselves be the perpetrators of physical or psychological acts of violence.[147] As Murphy reasons, this narrative approach directly contradicts the core utopian

[146] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 131.
[147] Ibid., 153.

assumption of the suburban dream—that of a family friendly and safe location protected from the outside world—and the suburban gothic's necessity to exploit this through a set of dualistic oppositions which create the dystopian suburban nightmare.[148]

Advertising and Greed: Aspiring to Materialism and the Dream

A recurring narrative within the suburban gothic is the desire for protagonists to socially and economically advance, which costs them everything, as they become enslaved to the house and the suburbs.[149] *Poltergeist* exaggerates this notion of the suburban home as all-consuming of its inhabitants. While the film idyllically portrays Reagan's 1980s resuscitation of the traditional 1950s nuclear family centred values and "togetherness"[150]—endorsed through the central family of the Freelings—it also conflictingly depicts the decaying values of a contemporary capitalist social veneer; contempt for the land and those who have long passed; the over emphasis on money, class and upward mobility; and the increasingly up-scaled suburban dream with its associated materialistic possessions.[151] The film thus portrays the pervasiveness of advertising for the suburban dream, and its materialistic nature. Early on, we see billboards which position the film as being centred on the new phase of development within the "Cuesta Verda" housing estate. The family's father, Steve Freeling, is a realtor, who is successfully and aggressively selling the suburban dream to other families in pursuit of it.[152] His boss, Mr. Teague, is the financially motivated and ruthless housing developer of Cuesta Verda, and he insists on suburban growth at all costs. Murphy evidences the priority of the home and its materialist additions over social relations, when she points to Carol Anne's recently deceased and memorialised canary Tweety that is unearthed by a bulldozer to make way for a new swimming pool. This intrusive and oblivious action is an allegory for the cracks forming in the idyllic surface of suburban family and home, contempt for the dead (Figure 8) as well as revealing a hint of the destruction that is yet to meet the Freelings.[153]

[148] Ibid., 3.
[149] Ibid., 109.
[150] Ibid., 127.
[151] Ibid., 131–132.
[152] Ibid., 127.
[153] Ibid., 128.

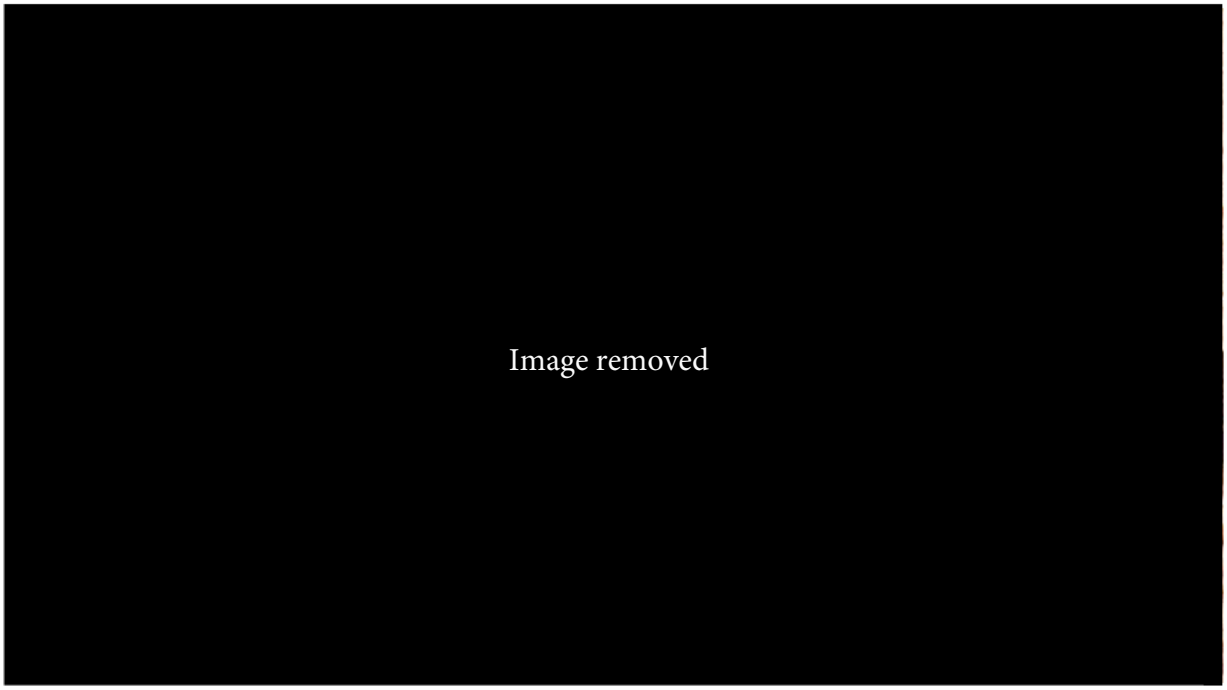

Figure 8. Diane (JoBeth Williams) among the dead who are buried under the future family swimming pool, *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982).

TV as Conduit

Just as the suburbs act as an in-between space—positioned geographically between the urban and rural—so the television also acts as a space of the liminal. In *Poltergeist,* the television is a sign of transition and transformation for the supernatural as it performs as a conduit to the "other side," acting as a possible portal to hell (Figure 9). Supernatural activity, or "the TV people," are able to enter the domestic sphere through this trusted, "family centred" commodity device, enabling the "The Beast," to communicate with, and eventually abduct Carol Anne.[154] Murphy reminds us of the close relationship between the suburbs and the television as they both came into maturity together; the role of the television being to reflect and enhance the migration to the suburbs in a post-war America.[155] In the Freelings' home, multiple television screens are permanently left on, a reminder of this domestic commodity's central significance and relationship to the family and home. In the suburban gothic, the television is often used as a conduit. It is a chief metaphorical device, acting as an omen of imminent danger, frequently

[154] Ibid., 129.
[155] Ibid.

left on in backgrounds of domestic scenes,[156] and surpassing this, it can be a channel for metaphysical travel of evil.[157]

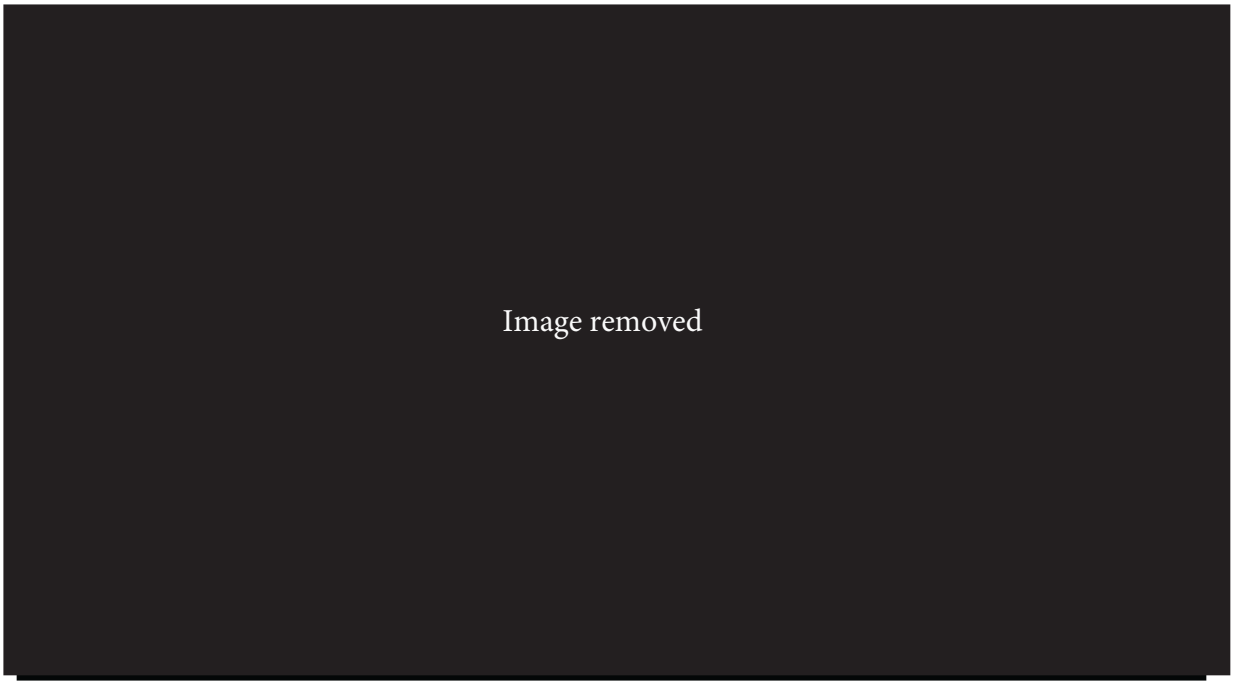

Figure 9. Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) reaches for the television as "The Beast" communicates with her, *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982).

Gothic Television and the Uncanny

Ledwon and Wheatley both position the television as crucial to the uncanny nature of gothic inquiry of and within the suburban home. Ledwon, who coined the term "Gothic Television," argues the television is an ideal medium for gothic investigation, as "it is after all a mysterious box simultaneously *inhabited* by spirit images of ourselves and *inhabiting* our living rooms."[158] Wheatley concurs that the television is an exemplary medium for the gothic narrative. She is interested in the "specific relationship between the gothic as a genre concerned with domestic spaces and narratives and television as an inherently domestic medium."[159] Both emphasise that gothic television is relevant within a postmodern context due to connotations of the domestic space and the manifestations occurring within this space. Moreover, Ledwon proposes that the gothic television is itself uncanny. Television is the most domestic of all

[156] As seen in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Scream* (1996). See *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, directed by Wes Craven (USA: New Line Cinema, 1984), DVD. and *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven (USA: Dimension Films, 1996), DVD.
[157] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 150. Also seen in *Shocker* (1989) *Shocker,* directed by Wes Craven (USA: Universal City Studios, 1989), DVD.
[158] Lenora Ledwon, "*Twin Peaks* and the Television Gothic," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1993): 263.
[159] Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 2–3.

mediums and is therefore the most likely location for the gothic. The television can create a sense of the uncanny, precisely by drawing on the unfamiliarity of the familiar, thus making it strangely disturbing.[160] According to Ledwon, the television, which is home to the gothic, is frightening because it is accepted into the domestic space, yet it projects something altogether disturbing about the domestic back into it.[161]

For Wheatley, gothic television is also concerned with the home and family as a site of trouble and anxiety, and its defining element is its awareness of the domestic space as a site for such gothic and uncanny possibilities.[162] In conducting an overview of what gothic television looks and feels like, its tropes and narrative devices, Wheatley states the following are present:

> …a mood of dread/or terror inclined to evoke fear or disgust in the viewer; the presence of highly stereotyped characters and plots…(e.g. the hero or heroine trapped in a menacing domestic situation by an evil villain,); representations of the supernatural which are either overt…or implied…; a proclivity towards the structures and images of the uncanny; and perhaps most importantly homes and families, which are haunted, tortured or troubled in some way. Gothic television is visually dark, with a mise-en-scène dominated by drab and dismal colours, shadows and closed-in spaces.[163]

While Murphy agrees with Wheatley's concept of what defines the tropes, tone and aesthetics of gothic television, she recognises that the suburban gothic can also adopt a colourful and cheerful exterior alongside clichéd murders and absurd acts of violence.[164] This mode of contemporary suburban gothic is a postmodern composite of traditional genres and their tropes, such as soap opera, comedy, gothic, drama, and murder mystery, which has seen gothic and certainly American gothic television thrive in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[165] This overview of the television as inherently gothic is crucial to my studio outcomes as I interpret the idealised consumer images of suburbia that come into the home as gothic monsters, both entering and extracting from the domestic space. Moreover, the television acts as a liminal space and a conduit for these transformations. The duality identified in the surface

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[160] Ledwon, "*Twin Peaks* and the Television Gothic," 263.
[161] Ibid., 264.
[162] Ibid., 18–23.
[163] Ibid., 3.
[164] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 186. Murphy is referring to the television series *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012). See Marc Cherry, *Desperate Housewives* (USA: Touchstone Television, 20042012), Television Broadcast.
[165] Carol Margaret Davison, "The American Dream/The American Nightmare: American Gothic on the Small Screen," in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2014), 488.

look and feel of the suburban gothic is also pertinent, as I employ the visual language of kitsch and nostalgia and a darker despair as strategies to reveal something more untoward within the suburban home.

The Possessed and Haunted House

It is not only the television that functions as an uncanny trope in *Poltergeist*—acting as a portal for the possessed and evil spirits from the afterlife, or those of other dimensions—but also the home itself. While it is the television that permits Carol Anne and her mother Diane to communicate from different dimensions, it is a possessed closet in her bedroom (Figure 10) which initially pulls Carol Anne into another dimension.[166] The roof of the house also operates as an entry and exit point for the spirits, as well as a variety of objects that fall from the ceiling. Other inanimate features of the home and land are also possessed. For example, the evil "beast" tries to lure Carol Anne's brother Robbie, first by a possessed tree, and later by a living evil clown doll.[167]

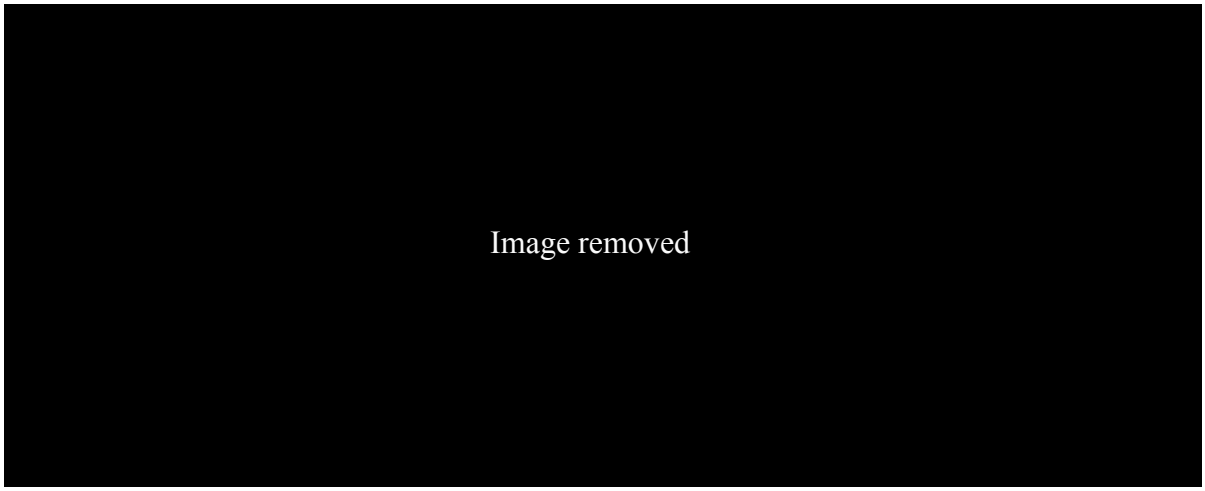

Figure 10. Carol Anne's bedroom and the possessed closet, *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982).

Throughout the dramatic experiences within their suburban dream home, the Freelings never confide in neighbours or pursue the authorities for help. Rather, they conceal their family secret. Murphy emphasises this masking as another defining plot trope of the suburban gothic, as everything must be sorted out within the confines of the family, or with a witness who is external to the suburbs and narrative.[168] Instead, as if normal and expected, the Freelings enlist parapsychologist Dr Lesh and medium Tangina to cleanse the house of evil spirits. Tangina

[166] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture,* 130.
[167] Ibid., 131.
[168] Ibid., 113.

domesticates the predatory "beast," emphasising that "family togetherness" is the only option for defeating the evil spirit and for the safe return of Carol Anne.[169]

1.4 Conclusion

In summarising, *Poltergeist* reveals a shift in the suburban gothic's narrative devices and tropes that reflected the anxieties of a changing 1980s America. Through the recruitment of a supernatural "beast," the film speaks of concerns for decaying family relations as an outcome of Reagan's contradictory messages and the pressure on those who are trying to maintain the suburban dream. By exaggerating the Freelings' entrapment within the home through abduction and supernatural possession, the film allegorically demonstrates how omnipresent advertising and materialistic consumption is to the construction of the suburban dream—that which the suburban gothic paradoxically turns into a nightmare. Finally, it was clarified that central to *Poltergeist* and the suburban gothic is the television and home, acting as uncanny sites for both the construction and interrogation of the American dream.

This chapter has established the suburban gothic as a critical mode of inquiry and therefore a methodological framework for this research project. Through overviewing the gothic's historical significance and core characteristics, the case has been made that it is a fictional form of storytelling used to examine the individual and societal fears of a given period—caused by the rapid progression and changes within society. Likewise, it was clarified that the uncanny, liminal, and the gothic's state of inevitable contradiction have ensured its popularity and for it to re-appear throughout Western history to investigate the governing systems of control.

The American gothic located the gothic within a contemporary and postmodern America. This explained how America's own political and cultural influences, and thus recurring social anxieties, have created a unique use of strange and metaphoric tropes that have allowed the American gothic to expose the dark underside to a promised and optimistic nation. By clarifying how the American gothic scrutinised the reality of a burgeoning 1980s and a now globally spreading neoliberal system—and what lies behind the smokescreen of the nation's own illusion—it has been evidenced that the American gothic is much more than a stylistic genre: it is a critical mode of inquiry.

[169] Ibid., 131.

Finally, an in-depth overview of the suburban gothic has situated this mode as the foundational methodology for this research to interrogate the ideological, economic, and political dimensions of the suburban dream. By establishing its core characteristics, this chapter has identified the underpinning for this research's examination of a contemporary neoliberal American dream and its illusory veneer. Central to this is the ongoing myth of a nostalgic suburban past that never existed, and an unspoiled future that can never be obtained. Here in-between these two worlds the suburban gothic lies, interrogating and contradicting the system which has corrupted such a notion, while revealing the monstrosity of its creation.

I will now expand on the politics of the consumer image and how the American dream has been able to manufacture and manipulate its consumers.

Chapter 2: The Hypocrisy of Neoliberal Politics and the Influence of the Consumer Image

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imaging the end of the world.
—Fredric Jameson[170]

Our current times are politically, economically, and ideologically polarised and the democratic promises of neoliberalism are inherently contradictory. It is in the enduring claims of the "freedoms" of a deregulated global trade market[171] that the system's undermining of democracy and political freedom is exposed,[172] for it has been shown that neoliberalism's political strategy is designed to support international expansion and increased power, income and wealth for the upper classes.[173]

While much critical discourse exists on neoliberalism, this research acknowledges the complexity of such a concept and that there are multiple definitions. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, this research aligns with Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, who define neoliberalism as an extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society.[174] Moreover, neoliberalism is seen as being governed by the mobilising of political rhetoric and ideologies, and operating "through a range of practices and processes that combine social, cultural and economic domains to constitute new spaces and subjects."[175] Key to this is neoliberalism's need to instil a series of values and social practices in individuals that are embedded in conventions of governance, which in turn, ensures its global spread.[176] How this is achieved is the focus of this chapter and its purpose is to reveal the

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[170] Fredric Jameson, "Future City," in *New Left Review* 21 (May–June 2003): 76, accessed July 27, 2018, https://newleftreview-org.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/issues/II21/articles/fredric-jameson-future-city.
[171] The first major Free Trade Agreement was the North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, Mexico and the US in 1994. "North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)," Office of the United States Trade Representative, accessed March 3, 2020, https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/north-american-free-trade-agreement-nafta.
[172] Jason Hickel, "Neoliberalism and The End of Democracy," in Springer et al., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 142.
[173] Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, "The Crisis of Neoliberalism," in Springer et al., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 551. This proposition echoes Karl Marx's analysis of early capitalism as well as the contemporary discourse on what can be called a crisis of neoliberalism. See Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolotics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (New York: Verso, 2017).
[174] Simon Springer, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy, "An Introduction to Neoliberalism," in Springer et al., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 2.
[175] Australian economic geographers Phillip O'Neil and Sally Weller (2014) in Kim England and Kevin Ward, "Theorizing Neoliberalization," in Springer et al., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 57.
[176] Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, "An Introduction to Neoliberalism," 2.

insidiously normalised subject which this research project critiques. Specifically, this chapter examines neoliberalism's ability to disseminate its growth-based and extractive ideologies through the manufacturing and perseverance of the American dream, as constructed (in part) through consumer images. The following provides context for the key goal of this research project—to encourage greater individual criticality of the mechanisms employed to perpetuate the American dream, that is, the fantasy veneer of neoliberalism's autocratic global expansion.

To expand upon these ideas, the chapter will be divided into three sections: The Collapse of the American Dream and the Triumph of Spectacle; The American Dream and The Manufacturing of Consent; and Contemporary Media Receptions: How Fantasy Became Reality. The first two aim to establish a foundation for this project's argument and engage with a leftist assessment of neoliberal politics. In doing so, the Chapter intends to demonstrate what can be gained in the present by drawing upon already recognised and widely known criticisms by the left, and to establish that there is a lasting need for an alternative and oppositional voice to the dominant right.[177] While many nations around the world endorse national myths as propagandist mechanisms of citizen control—arguably much worse in supposed totalitarian regimes such as Russia, China and North Korea—the focus of here is the American dream as a politically manufactured spectacle of distraction and apparatus of control, that is promoted as the foundation of a democratic society. To highlight the level of concern for the future of democracy under contemporary neoliberalism, the works of Chris Hedges and Noam Chomsky will be discussed. In referring to their arguments, I propose that the contemporary neoliberal capitalist system is not intended for the benefit of the citizen, but rather is an organised exploitation of them through mass media.[178]

The third section will establish how these consumer images are psychologically able to persuade. The aim is not to undertake an overview of the ubiquitous and fragmented landscape of contemporary media spaces, the globally networked circulation of images and their

[177] Late British cultural theorist Mark Fisher argued that since the fall of communism and the Berlin Wall in 1989, capitalism has successfully presented itself as the only realistic political-economic system in contemporary culture. Fisher also claimed that unstrained belief in this system conditioned not only the production of culture, but that it has become an invisible barrier for most of global society that constrains individuals of their imagination, thought and action, and thus their ability to envision an alternative to this globally dominant system. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009), 1–16.

[178] The notion of neoliberalism and the consumer images and commodities that construct its ideologies (conveyed through the manufacturing of the American dream and the commodified "good life") as a form of control is not a new concept. It emerged with Karl Marx's study of industrial capitalism and the conceptualisation of labour to capital through pre-existing forms of production.

hyperconsumption, but rather to explain how individuals are psychologically able to be persuaded by such mediated expressions and why they continue to be incessantly influential. To argue this premise, support will be drawn from Karen E. Dill-Shackleford.

2.1 The Collapse of the American Dream and the Triumph of Spectacle

> *They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and…then retreated back into their money…and let other people clean up the mess they had made.*
> ——Nick Carraway[179]

The US has always been driven by its belief in meritocracy and the notion of an egalitarian and classless society. The core democratic and political values of the American dream are fixed in the possibility of individual achievement and equal opportunities for all citizens to prosper; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.[180] James Adam Truslow, who popularised the notion of the American dream, famously wrote:

> The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement…It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.[181]

In stark contrast to this ideological framework, recent US President Trump actively abolished such democratic ideals when he: enforced a travel ban for several Muslim-majority countries; detained Mexican women and children in make-shift cages in South Texas;[182] created eight largescale prototypes for a "Wall" that was to be installed along the US/Mexico border; and deployed the US Military and Homeland National Guard to protect American soil from these "undocumented Mexican immigrants." Trump was condemned, although not impeached, for his legally questionable and overt hypocrisies. This included: ongoing FBI allegations of colluding with Russia in hacking to win the 2016 presidency; persistently discouraging the public from engaging with informed factual information by claiming that all news is fake; and

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[179] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 201. ProQuest Ebrary.
[180] "1d. Democratic Values—Liberty, Equality, Justice." *American Government Online Textbook: US History*, accessed July 29, 2018, http://www.ushistory.org/gov/1d.asp.
[181] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, London: Georg Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1933), 404.
[182] Tom McCarthy, "Trump is 100% Right: David Horowitz, The Thinker Who Sponsored Stephen Miller," The Guardian, posted June 20, 2018, accessed August 7, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/20/donald-trump-david-horowitz-stephen-miller-family-separation-border-policy.

what has been viewed as cementing his political demise, the inciting of the Capitol Hill Riots.[183] Critics have referred to these tactics as attempts to undermine democracy and the free press.[184] Meanwhile, Republicans have reformed legislations and policies to transform the direction of the country, and in the process have negatively affected the most disadvantaged and positively benefited the wealthiest, and thus created an even greater divide.

A Leftist Critique: The Hypocrisy of Political Spectacle and Consumption

Given the aforementioned, the purpose of the following section is to demonstrate the hypocrisy and spectacle of American neoliberal politics, the notion of a decaying democracy, and the power of consumer images and the values which they epitomise. As the American dream is increasingly perpetuated through government and corporate control, consumer images and mass consumption, I aim to establish that the dream's veneer of egalitarian values is fabricated to conceal that behind its surface lies only manufactured desire and nostalgia for its existence.

The consequent intention of this section is to identify and confirm this research's position about America's continual acceptance of a fractured, commodified and unattainable dream that is controlled by a neoliberal elite minority. These views are central to this research as they reflect the anxieties of the American and suburban gothic that were discussed in Chapter 1. These notions are fundamental to the exploration in the visual research and will be discussed in further detail in the research outcomes chapter. Firstly, Hedges will be discussed, as he argues that the American government is run by an oligarchy who control the mass media and manufacture a culture of spectacles as a strategy of distraction and control.[185] Following, Chomsky's ideas are drawn upon, as he provides the historical context for the longstanding social control of

[183] Prior to the 2021 election, Trump tweeted allegations of voter fraud and urged his supporters to converge on the US Capitol. This turned into an unprecedented and violent protest as rioters stormed Capitol in an attempt to undermine the democratic party. Trump would later face his second impeachment and acquittal. "Capitol Riots Timeline: The Evidence Presented Against Trump," BBC News, posted February 13, 2021, accessed April 7, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916.
[184] Peter Baker, "A Mob and the Breach of Democracy: The Violent End of the Trump Era," The New York Times, published January 6, 2021, accessed April 7, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/trump-congress html.
[185] While Hedges's more recent critiques of the "Age of Trump" and the concerns for the rise of fascism due to global neoliberal capitalism are relevant, they address more specific concerns which are not the core focus of this research. Therefore, this section focuses on Hedges's pre-Trump critique and his argument of the triumph of the spectacle which has caused citizens to shift their values, thus facilitating the rise of Trump and the global Neoliberal right. See Chris Hedges, *America: The Farewell Tour* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

American society by the ruling elite.[186] Both intellects are formative for this research as they connect government and corporations to the construction of superficial and commodified illusions within popular culture, reveal the power of consumer images and their narratives, and contextualise the critical role that these images have in the construction of the American dream and its aspirational façade

The US: A Culture of Illusion

Hedges has been reporting for over a decade that America is in a period of unprecedented moral decay and that Americans are now living in the age of moral nihilism.[187] He argues that the country has been converted into a façade, saying "it has become the greatest illusion in a culture of illusions."[188] The deception is that of a corrupt government and corporate elite and late-capitalism's deregulated global free-trade market. Hedges maintains that to conceal America's continued decline, the government upholds a veneer of democracy and an ethic that it no longer possesses.[189] As was identified and discussed in the previous chapter, America's imperialist beginnings and its master narrative of infinite growth are responsible for the cultural expectations and entitlements of the American people. Similarly, Hedges also identifies that there is a conflict between America's imperialist narrative of unlimited growth and the notion of democracy, asserting that the two are "incompatible."[190] He argues that democracy is not about self-interest and personal gain, and that a functioning democracy "must often defy the economic interest of elites on behalf of its citizens."[191] It is this longstanding and misguided notion of, and belief in, endless growth as equating to democracy that he argues has allowed for an advancing oligarchy—a power structure ruled by and for the wealthy elite.

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[186] Chomsky's assessment is critical to this research as it addresses the larger symptom of the current neoliberal condition and the rise of Trump and the alt right. Rather than speaking directly of Trump's tactics and populist rational, Chomsky draws upon his long career as a social critic and political activist to expose a historical condition that has been escalating since America's founding and the wealthy and ruling elite who sought to separate themselves from the masses. See C. J. Polychroniou, "Interview: Noam Chomsky on the Breakdown of American Society and a World in Transition," Truthout, published June 12, 2016, accessed November 23, 2019, https://truthout.org/articles/noam-chomsky-on-the-breakdown-of-american-society-and-a-world-in-transition/.
[187] Chris Hedges, "America Is in Need of a Moral Bail out," uploaded by Truthdig, last modified March 23, 2009, accessed April 4, 2018, https://www.truthdig.com/articles/america-is-in-need-of-a-moral-bailout/.
[188] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion,* 143.
[189] Ibid. The American Dream is founded on a set of ideals which are rooted in the Declaration of Independence: Democracy, Rights, Liberty, Opportunity and Equality. The United States has a democratic form of government whose political leaders are expected to answer to and represent its citizens. "Part One: Constitutional Democracy: An Outline of Essential Elements," Centre for Civic Education, accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.civiced.org/resources/publications/resource-materials/390-constitutional-democracy.
[190] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion,*185–186.
[191] Ibid.

The Oligarchs and Their System

Hedges recognises the causes of America's decay as being, among other factors, a loss of jobs, housing foreclosures, an economic crisis, politically and economically manufactured wars, and an over-bloated military budget.[192] He argues that the American people have been misguided—even lied to—by those who are elected to serve them.[193] Hedges insists that while these governing figures and the policies and laws they advocate should have the people's interest at heart, they have instead destroyed the financial system, the manufacturing sector, and corrupted democracy. The American citizen, he contends, is passive and in denial about this, believing things will somehow improve, and that happiness and prosperity are imminent.[194] He insists that this belief is continually reinforced by government and mass media, which propagate that increased consumer borrowing and spending will ensure jobs, a re-inflation of real-estate values, and a return to an inflated stock market.[195] As was proposed in the introduction to this thesis, Americans are desperate to reinstate the promise of an industrialised future and the illusion of the American dream, or what Hedges calls a return to the "bubble economy." Either way, he says this offers nothing but illusions of infinite wealth, growth and mobility.[196] The American public are therefore encouraged to deny the reality of the present as they are fed unrelenting fabrications and ironies on how to achieve such an impossible illusion.[197] While Australia is in a different situation, the American context is nevertheless highly influential as reasoned in the ideas of former Australian banker and corporate treasurer Satyajit Das, who argues that Australians are literally consuming their future as they borrow from it to sustain their present excessive and convenient lifestyles.[198]

Nostalgia and Illusions of Reality: A Triumph of Spectacle

As discussed in Chapter 1, Coon and Jameson acknowledge the role nostalgia and the image play in constructing the surface representation of an idyllic post-war American suburban

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[192] Ibid., 144–145. See "Chris Hedges: Are We Witnessing The Collapse of The American Empire?," Real Clear Politics, YouTube video, 27:42, posted by Tim Haines, September 16, 2018, accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/09/16/chris_hedges_are_we_witnessing_the_collapse_of_the_american_empire.html.
[193] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion,* 143–144.
[194] Ibid., 142.
[195] Ibid., 143.
[196] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion*, 143.
[197] Ibid., 142–143.
[198] Satyajit Das, "Consuming Our Future," ABC Big Ideas Podcast, MP3, 53:52, published March 9, 2017, accessed April 7, 2021, http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2018/01/bia_20180116.mp3.

dream. Not only do such representations fabricate a collective and individual desire for such a construct, but by doing so, they reduce the reality of the suburbs to a superficial veneer. Nostalgia is therefore a powerful and manipulative device used to manufacture illusions of reality. Likewise, Hedges raises the authoritative use of nostalgia when speaking of the language currently being employed to construct the belief in the contemporary American dream. He insists the same symbols, icons, civic, patriotic, and historical language are used by government, corporations, and advertisers to construct the myth of the dream. Hedges says that the oligarchs have exploited Americans into participating in the illusion of patriotism and democracy while the oligarchs systematically destroy the very structure that has created such freedoms.[199] Hedges argues that central to achieving this is the system of spectacle and celebrity culture and its consumption. The purpose for this "elaborate staging of spectacle," he claims, is to deceive Americans, as this way, individuals are distracted and engrossed in fantasy, and are therefore not paying attention to the reality of the world which is falling apart around them.[200]

Moreover, Hedges maintains that this culture of spectacle consumption becomes more problematic when fantasy surpasses reality and changes society's expectations, aspirations, values and morals.[201] He asserts that Americans are living in a world of narcissism and self-interest which is created by the worship of celebrity culture and reality TV. These relentless representations construct a culture of surface exteriors as consumers are told they can find happiness and success through the consumption of products and appearances.[202] Hedges contends that over time this has changed Americans' values, as this culture of spectacle and the commodified self encourages taking pleasure in others' downfall, humiliation, betrayal, and the idealisation of the ruthless winner. In turn, he says, compassion, competence, intelligence and solidarity are seen as forms of weakness.[203] At the heart of these values and this culture is the ethics of the corporation—the ethics of non-restrictive capitalism.[204] Finally,

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[199] Ibid., 142.
[200] Ibid., 168–169.
[201] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion,* 26–27. This research is aware of the complexities of the concept of the real and therefore reality. Due to limitations, when referring to reality I will be encompassing Lacan's notion that the real is made up of a triad alongside the symbolic and the imaginary. Therefore, reality and the real is created and perceived through material and physical matter, symbolic and cultural values and lived experience, and thus it is at once all of these. See "Real, The (Lacan)," Encyclopedia.com, last updated November 12, 2019, accessed December 12, 2019, https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/real-lacan.
[202] Ibid., 23–27.
[203] Ibid., 30.
[204] Ibid., 33.

Hedges adds that this constructs "the cult of distraction," the role of which is to seduce those who engage with it into mindless and imitative consumption.[205] Desiring and valuing the lifestyles of celebrity spectacle culture therefore deflects the masses from any form of moral questioning of growing inequality, corruption, and economic collapse.[206] While celebrity culture is less relevant to this research, it is necessary to mention the triumph of spectacle through this lens as it is one of the main vehicles that Hedges identifies as being used to reduce the American dream and its aspirations to a commodified surface of self and society. Likewise, it is this spectacle and the allure of wealth and fantasy that allows consumers of consumer imagery to escape reality and to enter a fantasy world, become progressively uncritical or apathetic, and to long for the shallow veneer of an excessive neoliberal American dream and its good life.

The Role of the Image and the Screen

Central to the visual representation of these spectacles is the television and screen. Providing comfort and familiarity, the television enables viewers to create a false sense of intimacy with those whom and that which it visually represents.[207] In our contemporary image-based economy, this false sense of connection is coupled with Hollywood's and advertising's motivations, select narratives, pseudo dramas, and exorbitant production values.[208] This guarantees the images being consumed are highly sophisticated in surface appearance and they therefore appear "real" even when people know they are fabricated. Hedges states, "they are capable because they can evoke a powerful emotional response of overwhelming reality and

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[205] Ibid., 38.

[206] It should be confirmed that this line of thought, specifically the consumer as passive and uncritical, reflects twentieth-century Marxist intellects such as those from the Frankfurt School and later Canadian philosopher and media theorist Marshal McLuhan. Similarly to Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Frankfurt School) and later Debord and Baurdrillard, Douglas Kellner argues that although consumer capitalism is a hegemonic force that constructs and controls individuals as consumers, media consumers are not completely passive in their consumption of media spectacles and are not at the total mercy of hegemonic capitalism as a form of "absolute" social and cultural control. "Youth, Media, Spectacle and New Media: Douglas Kellner," recorded July 16, 2013, McNaster University, posted by McMaster Humanities, November 6, 2013, YouTube video, 37:01 at 13:57, accessed December 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T05G1KQMlUA.

[207] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion*, 44–45. This false sense of intimacy is known as Parasocial interaction (PSI), a psychological relationship experienced by viewers of mass media and entertainment with those which it depicts, specifically through television and social media. When a viewer forms a one-sided psychological relationship with a mediated personality it is known as a parasocial relationship. When a viewer becomes so familiar and engaged with a mediated personality, they can feel that they know the constructed representation personally. Celebrities and the media's depiction of them often nurture and encourage this illusion of intimacy. "Overview: Parasocial Interaction," Oxford Reference Website, accessed May 18, 2018, http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100305809.

[208] Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion*, 49.

replace it with a fictional narrative that often becomes accepted as truth."[209] This notion that individuals can no longer distinguish between truth and fiction or fantasy and reality—as constructed by media and mass entertainment images—and that they come to interpret reality through such illusions is central to Hedges' proposition and is at the core of this research project.[210] To further this argument, it is necessary to explain how visual media representations psychologically persuade us, and this is positioned within the multifaceted domain of media and social psychology. These ideas will be introduced briefly in the third part of this chapter as they form an important foundational framework to this research project.

Conclusion

This section has argued that those in power in the US have constructed a culture of illusions through a capitalist and global free-trade market society, that the ruling elite control the media and its representations and that they continue to manufacture this fantasy through a veneer of nostalgia. Moreover, it has been suggested that it is easier to aspire to and be consumed by this veneer of commodified self and spectacle than it is to see the surface for what it is: a thinly veiled illusion of democracy and egalitarianism.

2.2 The American Dream and Manufacturing Consent

> *Neoliberal democracy…instead of citizens it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged viewers who feel demoralized and socially powerless.*
> ——Noam Chomsky[211]

Like Hedges, Chomsky argues that the corporate and state control of mass media and information in the US has been used as a means for governing thought, beliefs, and attitudes, and that this has slowly caused the deterioration of the American dream.[212] While Hedges' opinions focus on the role of the image within popular culture and the triumph of spectacle,

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[209] Ibid., 50.
[210] Ibid., 51. This school of thought is central to postmodern theory and Jean Baudrillard's interest in Marxist theory (particularly Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life and the production of space), consumerism, the development of the system of signs (drawing upon social semiology and appropriating Roland Barthes adaption of semiotics), how they influence everyday social activities, and the impact that technology and mass media all have on social life. See Jean Baudrillard, "The Socio-ideological System of Objects and Their Consumption," in *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005): 147–216, and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).
[211] Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 11.
[212] Peter Hutchinson, Kelly Nyks and Jared P. Scott, eds., *Requiem for the American Dream* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), xi.

Chomsky positions the corporate control of mass media by the wealthy elite as a form of social control through propaganda. Accordingly, this section will suggest that over time this has caused the decline of the egalitarian values upon which the US claims to be founded. This section provides the research project with an oppositional insight into the apparent democratic values and ideals of the contemporary neoliberal capitalist American dream. It should be noted that while there are many critics of the American government, corporate elite and the late capitalist system—especially since the election of Trump—Chomsky contributes historical context, measure, and the complexity of the intent behind such a governing system.[213] Furthermore, Chomsky has become one of the key political critics to decipher what Trump's election promises (and his appointment in general) means for the future of democracy, the American dream, and the rest of the world.[214]

While Chomsky has undertaken an expansive breadth of political analysis over the decades, in this section I will be engaging with his views on governmental systems of control and more specifically his idea of "The Principles of Concentration of Wealth and Power."[215] With the intention of focusing only on the most relevant points, I will be discussing just one of Chomsky's ten principles that make up the concentration of wealth and power: Manufacturing Consent. By undertaking this detailed overview, I will establish how this particular principle is fundamental to the broader system of control as fabricated through the veneer of the neoliberal American dream and its core values. This principle is most relevant to this research as it reveals the US government's creation of the advertising industry—and its incessant, historic and ubiquitous public relations (PR) industry—as a method to influence the general populace. This mechanism is able to occur through a deep-rooted governance of beliefs and by the fabrication

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[213] Late British scholar and cultural theorist Mark Fisher and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek are two outspoken intellectual critics of the "crisis" of capitalism and the lack of individuals and the political left to perceive alternatives. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), and Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to The End of Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2014). Understandably, Chomsky has received criticism from the far right. See David Horowitz, "The Sick Mind of Noam Chomsky," Salon, uploaded September 26, 2001, accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.salon.com/control/2001/09/26/treason_2/.

[214] See "Noam Chomsky: We Must Confront the 'Ultranationalists, Reactionary' Movements Growing Across Globe," Democracy Now!, YouTube video, 59:05, uploaded May 27, 2019, accessed May 7, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/shows/2019/5/27?autostart=true.

[215] Chomsky identifies ten principles in total that work collectively and concurrently as part of a larger long-standing strategy by the governing powers. The goal of the principles is to achieve the continued and increased wealth and power for the already economic elite. See Noam Chomsky, *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth and Power*, edited by Peter Hutchinson, Kelly Nyks and Jared P. Scott (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), and *Requiem for the American Dream,* directed by Peter D. Hutchins, Kelly Nyks, and Jared P. Scott (Naked City Films, 2015), streaming video, 1:21:66, accessed March 14, 2017, https://australia nownetflix.com/requiem-for-the-american-dream/.

of immaterial desires, thereby manufacturing the consent of the populace for the powerful elite to maintain its self-interested agendas under the mask of democracy.[216]

In defining the principle Manufacturing Consent, Chomsky outlines four key strategies which are of importance to this research project as they contribute to the hypocritical and perverse domination of democracy by the elite. All four will be outlined and clarified shortly, but first I will briefly outline the background for Chomsky's argument by addressing what he perceives the problem to be: the erosion of democracy and the continued increase of inequality. What this section will reveal is how a system that is driven by exponential power for the elite has managed to fabricate the illusion of a permanent and egalitarian dream.

Erosion of Democracy and Increased Inequality

In 2015, Chomsky declared that the American dream had collapsed[217] and that those responsible are the privileged and private sectors who rule the capitalist American dream, strive to eradicate democracy, and ensure their own continuing privileges. He contends that through control and fear, the neoliberals that run the state capitalist system have increasingly worn down the population through greater class divide and by destroying social solidarity by method of propaganda.[218] Chomsky states that the government and corporately organised system have over time caused the erosion of democracy and equality—the two fundamental and foremost values of the American dream.[219] To clarify, he explains that if democracy is to be given to the general population, it must be taken from the hands of the privileged and powerful. What this elite class have always sought, since the nation's founding, is to reduce democracy for the masses while also increasing their inequity.[220] What deeply concerns Chomsky about this

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[216] *Requiem for the American Dream* film.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Chomsky argues we do not have a capitalist system but rather a state-run capitalist system, where the state undertakes a substantial role in the economic, innovation, development, sciences etc., to keep the private sector viable and in control. Chomsky does propose there are alternatives to capitalism as it currently exists and blames government and corporate propaganda. See "Noam Chomsky: The Alternative to Capitalism," uploaded by Chomsky's Philosophy, YouTube video, 3:55, accessed May 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUzquEya6Lw.
[219] Peter Hutchinson, Kelly Nyks and Jared P. Scott, eds., *Requiem for the American Dream* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), xiii. Chomsky also identifies that the 1980s are central to the current situation in American and global politics as Reagan and Thatcher drove policies that enriched the already wealthy, while allowing the rest of society to suffer. Ibid., 51–54.
[220] It should also be reiterated that "real" democracy in a settler-colonial imperialist society such as the US, and certainly Australia, comes at a shameful and immoral price. Firstly, through the decimating of the indigenous population, secondly; the mass slavery of another segment of society, and thirdly; by overseeing exploitive labour and overseas conquests. Hutchinson et al., *Requiem for the American Dream,* 6–7. For an Indigenous

organised system of manipulation is that it has been created to maintain power in the (purportedly) freest of societies (the US and the UK) and not in overtly authoritarian or totalitarian societies.[221]

Strategy One: Controlling the Masses, Their Beliefs and Attitudes

It is now quite commonly understood and accepted that Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, severely influenced Europe and the US's Public Relations (PR) industry. His infamous and controversial book *Propaganda* (1928)[222] became a manual to the industry, which, Chomsky claims, provided a then "honest" theoretical guide in a post-war industrial climate.[223] He says that after the war, freedom increased and physical force no longer kept the opinions of the population silent.[224] At that point, Bernays argued that the "intelligent minority" were to govern the country as the masses were not mentally capable. To achieve this, Bernays maintained there had to be an "engineering of consent"[225] and consequently the PR industry and successive rise of the advertising industry was produced and organised by the government as a means to regulate the masses. As Chomsky argues, by manipulating beliefs through manufacturing consumers, the populace was kept preoccupied, passive, and distracted from political intent.[226]

Strategy Two: Fabricating Consumers, Constructing Desire

Chomsky recognises Veblen's notion of "fabricating consumers"[227] as central to the early PR and advertising industries and the construction of three critical frameworks: the creation of want; the notion of obtaining these wants as to be nearly within one's reach; and to ensure that these wants became the essence of one's life. In doing so, citizens could be intentionally

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perspective into the cost of The Great Australian Dream for First Nations Peoples of Australia, see Stan Grant, *Quarterly Essay 64 The Australian Dream: Blood, History and Becoming* (Melbourne: Schwartz Publishing Pty. Ltd., 2016), https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/lib/griffith/reader.action?docID=4592001.

[221] *Requiem for The American Dream*, 55:14.

[222] For insight into controlling the masses through propaganda and the psychology of public relations, see Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2005), 71–134.

[223] Hutchinson et al., *Requiem for the American Dream*, 124.

[224] "Noam Chomsky: Advertising," uploaded by Chomsky's Philosophy, YouTube video, 5:00, August 25, 2015, accessed April 11, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfIwUlY44CM.

[225] Hutchinson et al., *Requiem for the American Dream*, 124.

[226] "Noam Chomsky: Advertising," at 2:40.

[227] American-Norwegian economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the terms conspicuous consumption and conspicuous Leisure (1899). Both are performed in society to demonstrate the accumulation of wealth, reputation, and social status. See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* ed Martha Banta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46–74, accessed April 23, 2018, ProQuest Ebrary.

controlled—trapped in an ongoing cycle of consumption and thus be distracted from engaging in political awareness and debate.[228] In the 1920s, this was achieved by "directing people to the superficial things in life, like fashionable consumption."[229] He says that the longstanding goal of these industries is to control the entire population in all aspects of life and the best way to manipulate society into a perfectly organised system is to base it on a dyad or a pairing. The pair is the individual and isolated consumer and a piece of technology—such as television and later networked computers—that influence beliefs and attitudes through visually presenting the individual with a "perfect life."[230] These corporate-and government-organised technologies inform people about most aspects of the individual and collective life, explicitly—that which warrants a decent and good life.[231]

Strategy Three: Manufacturing Consent and the Propaganda Model

Chomsky positions corporately controlled mass media—news, journalism and broadcast, and the advertising and PR industries—as propaganda. He argues that these media are designed specifically to embark on mass supremacy through the control of thought by the corporate and government elite. In their renowned co-authored *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1998),[232] Chomksy and American economist Edward Herman state:

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.[233]

Manufacturing Consent, and its revered Propaganda Model, investigates the structural features derived from the fact that the dominant mass media are firmly embedded in the capitalist free

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[228] Hutchinson et al., *Requiem for the American Dream,* 125.
[229] *Requiem for The American Dream* film, at 56:54.
[230] Ibid., at 58:00.
[231] Hutchinson et al., *Requiem for the American Dream*, 126.
[232] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). Manufacturing Consent was also made into a documentary in 1992. *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick USA: Zeitgeist Films, 1992. Streaming Video, 2:47:37, Films for Action, accessed November 27, 2019, https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/manufacturing-consent-noam-chomsky-and-the-media/.
[233] "A Propaganda Model, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky: Excerpted from *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988," accessed May 7, 2018, https://chomsky.info/consent01/.

market.[234] Chomsky and Herman therefore argue that they are entrenched with systemic biases based on these news and information platforms having four specific filters: being driven by profit; owned by the corporate elite and conglomerates; funded by advertisers; and informed by government sources.[235] While the Propaganda Model relates to twentieth century mass media and a "yet to be" global digitally networked society, Chomsky and Herman later ascertain the same framework is applicable, if not more so, in today's politically and technologically globalised world and in the age of corporately colonised new media.[236]

It should also be noted that although Chomsky and Herman define advertising as just one of the filters of the Propaganda Model, the model's structure of monopolised profit-driven funding, ownership and control can easily be applied to the broader advertising industry. This is particularly so because advertising's role is to not only sell products and services, but to also sell ideologies, influence beliefs and to create irrational and uninformed consumers. To achieve this, Chomksy says, industry invests enormous amounts of money, expertise, and effort into the sophisticated production of the messages it conveys. This manufacturing of consent drives illogical choices in consumers and the purchasing of commodities, even when the consumer knows this is not a rational decision.[237] To explain how such a psychologically powerful influence is possible, the following section of this chapter will investigate the capability advertising has in persuading our social learning and behaviour.

Strategy Four: The Advertising of Political Candidates to Sell the Myth of the American Dream

The final layer to constructing the illusion of the American dream through propaganda is to fabricate the politicians who sell its ideals to the people. According to Chomsky, the marketing of political candidates and their heavily constructed promises are nothing short of manufactured myths of the American dream. He claims this is, since Reagan in the 1980s, one

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[234] The Propaganda Model and its five filters: Ownership; Advertising; Sourcing; Flak, and; Anti-communism, was developed through empirical data for Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). Its intent was to investigate the structure of the mass media—specifically news broadcasters and journalism—and its behaviour and influence on society. Prior to this, the mass media hadn't been overtly interrogated before as having an ingrained bias in presenting "facts" to audiences due to the corporate control of media. Edward S. Herman, "The Propaganda Model Revisited," *Monthly Re*view 69, no. 8 (January 2018): 45, http://dx.doi.org/10.14452/MR-069-08-2018-01_4.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Andrew Mullen, "Twenty Years On: The Second-Order Prediction of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no 4 (2010): 681, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0163443710367714.

[237] *Requiem for the American Dream* film, at 59:00 and 59:15.

of the advertising industry's most significant contributions to propaganda. As a more recent example, Chomsky isolates Obama's 2008 election campaign as an empty promise that only offered an illusion of change.[238]

Conclusion

To summarise, the key points relayed in this section are that a political and governing system that is driven by the interests of the elite few has undermined democracy and exploited the masses. Likewise, it has been proposed that over time, this has enabled the increased fabrication of obedient consumers and that this ensures citizens are unmindful to the wealthy elite's manipulation as they are caught in a cycle of media images and the desire for the good life.

In the next section, I will discuss the psychology behind how consumer imagery is able to achieve such pervasive social influence—coaxing consumers social values and behaviours, at an often-unconscious level—and why this is seldom acknowledged for its persuasive power and long-term effects.

2.3 Contemporary Media Receptions: How Fantasy Became Reality

Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore…we must be over the rainbow.
——Dorothy, *Wizard of Oz*[239]

The effects of advertising, its persuasive capabilities, and the construction of stereotypes and their representations have been analysed for decades.[240] Since the 1990s, American communications scholar Sut Jhally has argued that we are perpetually immersed in a world of physical and virtual advertising imagery of increasing sophistication and we have consequently lost our awareness of its ability to govern individual perceptions of self and societal values, and thus its colonising of culture.[241] There are three major modern-day shifts that have transformed the contemporary dominance of the consumer image: the unprecedented escalation

[238] Obama's 2008 election campaign slogan promised "Hope and Change" to voters. Peter Hutchinson, Kelly Nyks and Jared P. Scott, ed., *Requiem for the American Dream,* 129–130.
[239] *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming and George Cukor (California: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).
[240] Five key critics examining the social, cultural and political influences of mass media image are British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, British communications scholar Sut Jhally, African American feminist intellect and activist bell hooks, American advertising critic, author and filmmaker Jean Kilbourne, and American media critic and scholar Douglas Rushkoff.
[241] Sut Jhally, "Advertising at the Edge of The Apocalypse," Media Education Foundation, 2017, Kanopy Streamed video, 62:00 at 3:00, accessed December 1, 2019, https://griffith.kanopy.com/video/advertising-edge-apocalypse.

of the networked society[242] and the democratisation of digital technologies; the increasing (American/global) monopolisation[243] and corporate ownership of media and big tech companies;[244] and, the sheer quantity and quality of consumer images being globally created, circulated and consumed.[245] In contemplating these ideas, this section suggests that in our contemporary epoch of monopolised media production and its global consumption and prosumption[246] it is necessary to re-examine how consumer images are so powerful in their influence.

It should also be clarified that this research is not concerned with examining the digitally networked image, but rather, is aware that such developments and their acceleration only deepen the consumer image's capability to influence notions of, and aspirations for, the neoliberal American dream. This notion is pertinent to this research as one of its key aims is to reinforce the need for continued scrutinisation of the consumer image and its deceptive surface. The following section will propose that consumer imagery progressively influences our understanding of social behaviour and therefore our cultural insight and expectations yet is seldom recognised by consumers for its extraordinary persuasive power and embedded indoctrinating effects. Since my studio outcomes use the tropes, mechanisms and aesthetics of

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[242] The Networked Society is a term that was coined by European sociologist Manuel Castell and it refers to the social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the global spread of digital information and communication technologies. He claims that The Network Society is the social structure of the Information Age and therefore positions the power of society with the organisations and institutions that control the network. Manuel Castells, "A Network Theory of Power," *International Journal of Communication*, No.5. (2011): 775, accessed February 22, 2020, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1136.

[243] According to Forbes' 2019 Global 2000 list, there are five American media conglomerates that are in the top six global broadcast and cable media companies: Comcast; Walt Disney; Charter Communications; CBS and; DISH Network. "The World's Largest Public Companies: 2019 Ranking," Forbes, accessed December 2019, https://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#header:revenue_sortreverse:true_industry:Broadcasting%20%26%20Cable.

[244] Douglas Rushkoff, *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016), 82–93. The five big media tech companies of Silicon Valley—Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft—are increasingly criticised for being unregulated monopolies. Olivia Solon and Sabrina Siddiqui "Forget Wall Street—Silicon Valley Is The New Political Power in Washington," *The Guardian,* September 3, 2017, accessed June 28, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/03/silicon-valley-politics-lobbying-washington.

[245] In 2017, Americans spent on average 12 hours per day with major media content. "Time Spent With Media in the U.S. 2011–2018," Statista, last edited by Amy Watson 30 April, 2019, accessed July 22, 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/278544/time-spent-with-media-in-the-us/. In the same year the US spent over 206 billion USD on media advertising—predominantly television and digital media platforms "Advertising Spending in the U.S. 2015–2022," last updated by A. Guttmann, 28 March, 2019, accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/272314/advertising-spending-in-the-us/.

[246] Prosumption is a term that refers to the simultaneous combination of production and consumption, or to both produce and consume media and commodities. The term was coined by American futurist Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*—a warning of the economic and social consequences of rapid and seismic technological shifts in a very short duration of time.. George Ritze and Nathan Jurgenson, "Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital Prosumer," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10 no. 1, 2010): 17–20, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1469540509354673.

advertising to provoke criticality, a discussion of these concepts is required and relevant to this chapter. This will be undertaken in the following section, and in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

To explain how the consumer image achieves its persuasive power, I will refer solely to the work of Karen E. Dill-Shackleford and her ongoing investigation into how social influence is carried out through mass entertainment media.[247] While Dill-Shackleford's research emphasis differs in focus to mine,[248] the overarching premise reflects that of this project. Specifically, her work relates to this research project's central argument—that consumer images inform individual's social behaviour and values, and in turn, their desire for the ideals of the neoliberal American dream and its consumer lifestyle. Dill-Shackleford's findings provide an overall framework for this project as they suggest that most people believe others are manipulated by advertising and entertainment but they are somehow not; thus, many people will subsequently deny being unconsciously manipulated by consumer images.[249] Her work also establishes the psychological reasoning behind the arguments proposed by Hedges and Chomsky, particularly, the lasting cultural impact of consuming select narratives and stereotypes and their representations and how this in turn affects concepts of self and society.

Fantasy vs Reality: Society's Perceptions of Mass Entertainment Images

Dill-Shackleford argues that we socially learn through our exposure to mass media and entertainment imagery, yet we are habitually in denial about the persuasive power it has over us.[250] In turn, she says this enables a higher level of manipulation to occur.[251] Dill-Shackleford also maintains that we learn about others through the mediation of social interactions which

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[247] Karen E. Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–4.
[248] Dill-Shackleford's research examines the effects that gender and racial stereotypes within video games have on society's general understanding of social groups—specifically women and African American males. Karen E. Dill and Kathryn P. Thill, "Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Existing Sexist Media Depictions," *Sex Roles* 57, no. 11–12. (December 2007): 851–864. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9278-1. It should be confirmed that Dill-Shackleford doesn't overtly separate entertainment and advertising (nor differing media such as video games, music videos and television) but rather, she speaks of all as powerful and influential modern augmentations on traditional storytelling.
[249] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality*, 8 and 26.
[250] Dill-Shackleford labels social learning through imagery (moving and still images which represents social content and interactions) as the theory of media imagery and social learning (MISL). She distinguishes that there needs to be a greater level of media literacy in society given the rise of mass entertainment media and its power in society. Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 71.
[251] Ibid., 6–7.

are represented in mass entertainment media,[252] arguing that the use of social storytelling in media can and does influence behaviour toward the specific social group represented.[253]

To understand how this occurs, Dill-Shackleford states we must understand that contemporary mass media and entertainment is a storytelling device.[254] Storytelling is a way to share experiences and values, but because we generally understand mass entertainment as fantasy or fiction, she says individuals and the broader society do not consider these messages to be intentionally manipulative (of them personally).[255] According to Dill-Shackleford, this deception is achieved through the notion of "fantasy"[256] and she argues that we generally make two basic errors of judgement in our consumption of mass entertainment:

1. Believing that fantasy stories in no way shape our realities.

2. Believing that media's reason for being is to entertain us rather than persuade us.[257]

Third-Person Effect

Dill-Shackleford draws support from research that identifies the majority of people believe that entertainment media has no effect on them at all.[258] Specifically, she identifies American sociologist W. Phillips Davison's the "third person effect,"[259] which she defines as "the phenomenon that people believe others are affected by exposure to media, but personally they're not affected."[260] To demonstrate Davison's hypothesis, Dill-Shackleford refers to a study which is indicative of one of this research's motivating concerns: exactly how is it that people know what they think they know, and what role do media images play in the construction of this knowledge and belief? In partial response to the question at hand, I will refer to Dill-Shackleford's discussion on American sociologist Ira Glasser and his early

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[252] Ibid., 4.
[253] Karen E. Dill and Melinda C. R. Burgess, "Seeing Is Believing," 197.
[254] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality*, 77.
[255] Ibid., 79.
[256] Ibid., 5.
[257] Ibid., 7.
[258] Ibid., 6–7.
[259] The Third Person Effect is a hypothesis that was developed by American sociologist W. Phillips Davison (1983) and proposes that "a person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself." W. Philips, Davison. "The Third-Person Effect in Communication," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 1, http://www.jstor.org/stable/i348001.
[260] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 8.

research into television and its ability to construct the perception of reality. Glasser identified that for many people, television is "more real than the reality it is supposed to be mediating."[261] Accordingly, he carried out a study asking numerous participants specific questions about the workings of the criminal justice system. What Glasser's study found is that most people believed detective work and the solving of crimes was a process matching that of television entertainment. Particularly of interest to this research project is that the individuals' understanding had no connection to any personal or first-hand experience of their own, and this turned out to be consistently different form the way things worked in real life.[262] This observational study leads to Dill-Shackleford's argument (which is fundamental to this research project): that, in general, individuals believe they are not affected by media because they believe they understand the difference between fantasy and reality.[263]

Fantasy vs Reality—or Truth and Its Relationship to Fiction

Dill-Shackleford's key proposition is that individuals consciously believe that they understand the distinction between fantasy and fiction and that entertainment cannot change their real-world thoughts and behaviours, because they trust that only reality, and not fantasy, can affect them.[264] It is this blurring between reality and fantasy, and the space of the in-between, where the ability to persuade lies. As Dill-Shackleford points out, "the reality of a fictional story is not whether it is a fantasy or a creation; it is whether it is believable and attractive."[265] It is therefore the story's strength and sophistication and the relationship between truth and fiction that requires the viewer's unconscious attention. It is only then, in this space between truth and fiction, or the liminal, that viewers can start to imagine the possibility of a given mediated social situation or character as actually being real.[266] The strategies employed in this project's studio outcomes will incorporate this liminal space to create an unsettling juxtaposition which

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[261] Ira Glasser, "Television and the Construction of Reality," *A Review of General Semantics* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 158, www.jstor.org/stable/42579442.
[262] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 8., and Ira Glasser, "Television and the Construction of Reality," *A Review of General Semantics* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 159–161, www.jstor.org/stable/42579442.
[263] While Hedges previously argued that Americans live in an "empire of illusion" where American culture has been replaced with images of spectacle and fantasy, Dill-Shackleford identifies how we are psychologically manipulated into believing this fantasy does not affect our understanding of our reality. Dill-Shackleford's study aligns with the philosophical thoughts of Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Umberto Eco and Fredric Jameson, who all argue that there is no longer a distinct version of reality, but rather that we live in such a state of constant abstraction and that there is no longer any distinction between reality and its simulation. Dill-Shackleford therefore provides a framework for how this can occur to the individual at a psychological level.
[264] Dill and Burgess, "Seeing Is Believing," 199.
[265] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 10.
[266] Ibid.

forces viewers to observe the duality and coexistence of the worlds they believe are in opposition, while also exposing this carefully constructed space of intentional manipulation and influence.

Based on previous research,[267] Dill-Shackleford also explains that there is a failure of reality monitoring by viewers in that they cannot differentiate between media imagery of social characters and people seen in real life. Rather, she says, the viewer does not consciously distinguish between what is fact and fiction or what is real and fantasy.[268] That is, even if individual's "know" that a story is fictional and may therefore define it as less "factual," they can still unconsciously and consciously be persuaded by elements of the characters, the social situations, and their representations.[269] It is the uncritical consumption of images and narratives which then enables messages about social groups, situations and characters to seep into the viewer's unconscious, thus normalising such representations. Accordingly, the studio outcomes of this project draw upon the absurd and blatantly artificial to create a space of tension and liminality, where, through the audience's unconscious attention, they find some form of reality in the implied narratives, although consciously knowing they are fictional fantasies.

Stereotypes as Normative Perceptions

To argue how consumer images can persuade viewers of social characters, situations, and groups, I will briefly discuss the power of positive and negative social stereotypes. According to Dill-Shackleford, research suggests that commonly seen media characterisations, such as affluence, are formed as a normative perception by viewers as exposure increases.[270] To the degree viewers see a certain social depiction, they believe it to be true, and this can have both positive and negative effects.[271] For example, as viewers come to believe affluence is normal through media representations and exposure, they can become distressed if they are not

[267] Dill-Shackleford refers to research undertaken into the role of reality monitoring: the process by which people distinguish memories of real events from memories of imagined events, which suggests that "the occurrence of imagined events can inflate the perceived frequency of corresponding real events." Morgan P. Slusher and Craig A. Anderson. When Reality Monitoring Fails: The Role of Imagination in Stereotype Maintenance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 4 (April 1987): 653–662.
[268] Dill and Burgess, "Seeing Is Believing," 198.
[269] Karen E. Dill and Melanie C. Green, "Engaging with Stories and Characters: Learning, Persuasion, and Transportation into Narrative Worlds," in *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology* ed. Karen E. Dill (New York: Oxford, 2013), 453.
[270] Thomas C. O'Guinn and L.J. Shrum, "The Role of Television in the Construction of Consumer Reality," *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, no 4 (March 1997): 278–294, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2489565.
[271] Dill and Burgess, "Seeing Is Believing," 201–202.

similarly wealthy and therefore seek ways to fit in with the desired social group. Likewise, if viewers see ongoing negative or derogatory representations, they are socially learning prejudice.[272] As Dill-Shackleford states, "Mass media images persuade our culture, subtly infusing social biases into the public consciousness, often without our direct awareness."[273] She continues:

> Our behaviours, thoughts, and feelings toward members of groups that are stereotyped by the mass media are influenced at an unconscious level. Even though we may not consciously hold the stereotype, we may unconsciously act upon it, for better or worse.[274]

Dill-Shackleford therefore argues that when the media perpetuates social biases repeatedly and over long periods of time, the effects can be subtle and become embedded.[275] In considering Dill-Shackleford's findings, this research maintains that advertising and entertainment has, over decades, progressively manufactured and increasingly normalised the ongoing commodification of the American dream and its neoliberal ideals and values. Mass entertainment—or consumer imagery—and its measured representations, social stereotypes and characterisations have thus gradually increased the neoliberal capitalist intent of constructing an aspiring materialistic, individualistic and profit driven culture in search of the neoliberal dream and its good life. To further support this argument, I will now briefly introduce and outline three key theories that Dill-Shackleford examines and that are relevant to this research as they enable the consumer image to effectively persuade and manipulate the audience on an unconscious level. These are narrative persuasion, the sleeper effect, and transportation theory. Following this, I will point out two common psychological concepts that Dill-Shackleford reasons are key to all denial theories and are responsible for the rejection of social learning through media imagery. These theories will also be discussed in relation to my research outcomes in Chapter 4.

Narrative Persuasion and The Sleeper Effect

The sleeper effect occurs when persuasion through fictional narratives is delayed, increases over time, and as the original source becomes more remote.[276] Dill-Shackleford explains that

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[272] Ibid., 202–203.
[273] Ibid., 203.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Dill and Green, "Engaging with Stories and Characters," 453, and Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 12.

research demonstrates that fictional narratives can often be as powerful as factual ones in influencing and changing beliefs because "we integrate the information or misinformation into our mental storehouse of information without consciousness of where and how we acquired the information, and therefore without critical analysis of the source."[277] Dill-Shackleford also confirms that studies suggest that when false information is inserted into fictional narratives, viewers come to believe this information as true.[278] This unconscious acceptance of fictional information therefore establishes storytelling through media as a persuasive and highly influential mode of communication.

As a result of this understanding, the studio outcomes employ the deliberate production of delay as a core characteristic of the readymade, and work in an oppositional way to the sleeper effect. By forming new readymade juxtapositions and contradicting the commodity objects fictional narrative and nostalgic façade, the studio outcomes expose the objects' persuasive and manipulative intent. This is achieved through a pause in the perpetuation of object and image consumption and a delay in recognition. Therefore, it is aimed that the viewer shifts their ideological understanding of the commodity object and thus critical transformation can occur.

Transportation Theory

In justifying her argument for an individual's unconscious ability to be persuaded through fictional narratives, Dill-Shackleford refers to key transportation theory scholars who define the process of becoming fully immersed and "lost" in a media entertainment story as "transportation into a narrative world."[279] The authors she references specify that transportation theory provides a lens to understanding the enjoyment of narratives in entertainment and that it involves immersion, consequences of media exposure, and the circumstances to which positive emotions are enhanced or reduced (attention, imagery, and feelings). Dill-Shackleford reiterates these findings in that due to our level of engagement in a fictional media story—or a combination of concentration, affective engagement and mental imagery—viewers may lose track of time and become immersed in the narrative.[280] Thus, viewers can become persuaded, rather uncritically, believing the points of view of the story and characters, as they are possibly

[277] Ibid., 451.
[278] Ibid., and Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 12.
[279] Melanie C. Green, Timothy C. Brock and Geoff F. Kaufman, "Understanding Media Enjoyment: The Role of Transportation into Narrative Worlds," *Communication Theory* 14, no. 4 (November 2004): 312. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2004.tb00317.x.
[280] Dill and Green, "Engaging with Stories and Characters," 451.

not aware of the more subtle implications that are suggested, such as desires, stereotypes and values.[281] Consequently, one can therefore adopt new beliefs and attitudes about the real world as based on mediated fictional stories.[282] If this level of involvement occurs, Dill-Shackleford says, we have suspended our disbelief and this also facilitates the level of persuasion. Likewise, she proposes that due to this lack of scrutiny and the disbelief that entertainment is able to persuade—even after viewing it—the individual believes they never need to critically evaluate the fiction and the factual nature of the information being consumed.[283] Hence, Dill-Shackleford argues that the unconscious ability to uncritically accept fictional stories and their social representations can lead to subtle and unrecognised effects on viewer's beliefs and attitudes.

Transportation theory informs this research project's studio outcomes as they consider the psychological and emotional characteristics that enable the neoliberal narrative and its values and ideals to continually persuade the viewer of its enduring necessity. By employing the optimistic surface of nostalgia and the hopeful innocence of a past suburban dream, the studio outcomes aim to contradict such a sentiment, thereby exposing its hollowness, a lingering sense of disillusionment and the viewers ability to suspend disbelief. In facilitating this suspension of disbelief—as transportation theory identifies—the ideals, values and beliefs of the neoliberal fantasy are not able to be uncritically consumed but are rather unnervingly juxtaposed and thus their reality revealed. Similarly, by engaging with kitsch and its inconspicuous veneer of easily consumable cuteness and sentimental narratives, a more melancholic and grotesque intent is exposed, and thus too is how kitsch reduces culture to a mere diluted constituent of the neoliberal dream's capitalist production system.

Denial Theory

To explain the psychological reasons why consumers mostly deny the effects of mass entertainment images and their impact upon our social leaning (behaviours, values and interactions), I will engage briefly with two key concepts that Dill-Shackleford identifies as fundamental for all denial theories: cognitive dissonance and the ego. This is relevant to the research because it identifies the unconscious level of denial that individuals and society at

[281] Ibid., 452.
[282] Ibid., 451–452, and Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 12.
[283] Dill and Green, "Engaging with Stories and Characters," 452.

large have when absorbing mediated ideals, values and behaviours, as conveyed through the veneer of the neoliberal American dream.

Dill-Shackleford defines cognitive dissonance as "the idea that mental inconsistencies cause discomfort that we are motivated to change, often through rationalization."[284] According to American social psychologist Leon Festinger,[285] cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort caused due to simultaneously holding two or more inconsistent beliefs, ideas, or values. Since humans strive for consistency in their lives and knowledge of self and world, Festinger argues that they may not psychologically accept inconsistencies, but rather attempt to rationalise them.[286] For example, the person who continues to smoke while knowing it is bad for their health will attempt to rationalise this choice. If one can't justify it and the cognitive inconsistency remains, rather than be psychologically uncomfortable, they will continue to reduce this dissonance by further reasoning to achieve consistency or consonance. Festinger therefore proposes that dissonance within cognitions is a core motivating factor for psychological reasoning.[287] According to Dill-Shackleford, cognitive dissonance is essentially a psychological defence mechanism for the ego, and she argues that this is why individuals defend the media and their representations, their choice to consume it, and to justify that it has no effect. Moreover, the stronger the unconscious dissonance (discomfort) that one may feel—for instance, if one does recognise that media images manipulate and persuade—the more powerful the drive becomes to reduce it. Therefore, not only does the individual increase their validation of media consumption, but they outright defend the media.[288] Dill-Shackleford maintains this is how we can psychologically rationalise and justify our behaviour of media consumption.[289]

The project's studio outcomes thus draw upon cognitive dissonance as a core method of emphasising the contradiction of the contemporary neoliberal American dream. By continually creating a polemic which forces the audience into a position of duality—where they can

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[284] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 20.
[285] American social psychologist Leon Festinger first developed the theory of cognitive dissonance in his seminal book A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).
[286] Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 1–2.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 21–22.
[289] Dill-Shackleford expands upon other psychological outcomes cognitive behaviour can cause such as the perception of choice and the individual's control of their viewing decisions. This leads to the idea that because an individual 'chooses' to view media, they believe that it can't harm them. This is an example of psychological denial. Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality,* 23–25.

perceive the coexistence of opposition within the suburban dream—the viewer becomes situated in a moral predicament. The individual must then decide to either vindicate their dissonance or recognise their part in the neoliberal dream and its global consequences by revaluating their assumed understanding of not only the readymade and found objects I employ, but their own social behaviour, desires, values, and beliefs as connected to their consumer behaviour.

2.4 Conclusion

By discussing Dill-Shackleford's research and her theory of media images and social learning (MISL), this section has endeavoured to establish the psychological mechanisms that consumer images use to progressively influence and persuade. In doing so, it can be more fully understood how consuming such representations and their select narratives and stereotypes can have long-term effects on individual and societal knowledge, understandings and ideals.

Through undertaking a leftist overview of neoliberal American politics, this chapter has established the way in which consumer images are employed to undermine democracy. Moreover, a framework has been formed for this research project in not only how the contemporary condition has occurred, but what may be gained from returning to the origins of neoliberal capitalism. By identifying the oligarchy's intent for continued power and increased wealth, it was clarified that the freedom of neoliberal capitalism and the free market allows for their continued control of media, the long-term erosion of democracy and the exploitation of the masses. Furthermore, it was suggested that this has ensured a triumph of spectacle and a culture that consumes the rhetoric and language of nostalgic illusions which are void of moral direction and values, and that this deceptive façade is now central to the contemporary neoliberal dream.

Also outlined was the psychological mechanisms that consumer images use to manipulate and persuade at an often-unconscious level. Accordingly, it was proposed that consumer images have standardised the materialistic desires of a commodified and supposedly democratic neoliberal American dream, all the while continuing to remain underestimated by the general populace. Finally, this chapter contextualised one of the key objectives of this research, which is to encourage greater criticality of the mechanisms employed to perpetuate the neoliberal American dream, its tyrannical global expansion, and the role the individual plays within its

enduring preservation. Next, I will introduce the visual languages, forms and method that have been used in the studio outcomes and clarify how they are political in nature and application.

Chapter 3: The Politics of Tone and Visual Language

What if cute isn't just about powerlessness and innocence but also plays with, mocks, ironizes the value we attach to power—as well as our assumptions about who has power and who doesn't?
—Simon May[290]

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the visual languages, forms and methods I have employed in the studio research and to explain how they relate to my topic of inquiry. That is, how the suburban gothic can function as a critical mode of inquiry to expose the deceptive veneer of the contemporary neoliberal American dream. To do so, this contextual review is split into six sections: Kitsch: A Political Overview; The Readymade and the Found Object: A Liminal Space of Transformation; The Return of 1980s and 1990s Suburban Gothic; Ramifications of Neoliberalism: Life and Death and the Artworks of Polly Morgan and Julia deVille; and Embellished Surfaces in the Home: Barnaby Barford, Penny Byrne and Jessica Harrison. To clarify the relationship between these sections, I will briefly outline their primary concepts.

The first two sections will provide an overview of the visual language employed within the research: kitsch, the readymade and the found object. These three components are discussed to clarify how they function as expressions of neoliberal inquiry. Firstly, kitsch and its manipulative intent will lay the foundation for the studio outcomes' use of its sentimental façade. Following this, the readymade and the found object will be examined to contextualise the research's use of nostalgia. It is proposed that due to these forms' ability to politically and psychologically scrutinise the commodity object's past-life and ideological value through newly formed juxtapositions, they are employed as methods of inquiry into the nostalgic surface of the contemporary neoliberal American dream and its core conduit—the suburbs. By establishing this framework, it will become apparent how a distinct balance of these visual elements is able to create a polemic, forcing the audience into a liminal space of delay and transformation.

In the following section, I provide a framework for the research's methodology and a more introspective contemporary suburban gothic inquiry. It is proposed that to better interrogate

[290] Simon May, *The Power of Cute* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

our contemporary neoliberal condition there is a need to return to the 1980s and 1990s, as this period is central to the rise of neoliberalism and, in turn, to a particular method of suburban gothic examination that is more psychologically and emotionally complex. To demonstrate how this is achieved, two iconic suburban/American gothic films will be analysed: *Blue Velvet* and *Edward Scissorhands*.

The final two sections consist of an analysis of five contemporary visual practitioners, Polly Morgan, Julia deVille, Barnaby Barford, Penny Byrne and Jessica Harrison. These artists extrapolate the sensitivities and tonal complexities of the early 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic inquiry and visual language previously outlined, but from a present-day perspective. They also employ the language of kitsch, the readymade, and the found object as forms of critical interrogation into the ongoing pressures and embellished surface ideals of contemporary neoliberal society. This analysis will provide the research outcomes with a precise understanding of how such a detailed polemical tone, created through the specificity of outdated decorative figurines and their physical manipulation, is able to position the viewer within a space of duality and moral discomfort. To support these ideas and cohere their relevance and relations, this chapter will draw from numerous scholars and their disciplines, definitions and work.

Before continuing this chapter, I must clarify that while the studio outcomes of this research project are photographic, this thesis will not be undertaking an overview of photography and its relationship to reality, mediation or representation. Because the previous chapter argued that the consumer image (which is inherently photographic) is a core constituent used to influence individuals of the neoliberal American dream, it would seem appropriate to embark on a discussion of the cultural and philosophical discourse of commodified photographic representations. Likewise, because the television and networked screen have been acknowledged as significant throughout this thesis, it may also be deemed necessary to engage with contemporary scholarship on the digitally networked screen and the post-photography movement.[291] As relevant as these ideas are to the research and studio outcomes, the focus of

[291] Contemporary philosophers, artists and theorists Lev Manovich, Hito Steyerl and Daniel Rubenstein examine ideas of post-representational photography and its mediation through digital imaging technologies as fractured from earlier postmodern debates (Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag) as they suggest the photographic now functions as digital data that circulates in a free-floating globally networked (cybernetic) system. See "Victoria Hattam and Hito Steyerl: Photography and Political Agency, Image and Truth," YouTube video, 38:45, uploaded May, 2014, Art & Education, e-flux, accessed April 7, 2021, https://www.artandeducation net/classroom/video/66423/victoria-hattam-and-hito-steyerl-photography-and-political-agency.

this chapter is the methodologies, forms, and expressions of visual language that function as critical modes of inquiry into neoliberalism as specific to the idealised and commodified good life of the suburbs and home.

3.1 Kitsch: A Brief Political Overview

> *Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!*
> —Milan Kundera[292]

The term "kitsch"[293] conjures images of cute large-eyed kittens (Figure 11), children with kites in green pastures, and nostalgic collectables. However, this section will argue that kitsch has a dark and deceitful side to its sweet and sentimental surface. While its taxonomy and the artefacts that represent it are historic and broad,[294] this research will focus upon kitsch as a Marxist critique. Also discussed are the bourgeoisie and their bad taste consumer lifestyle, and the emotions and surface aesthetics that kitsch not only produces but also commands through its consumption. In doing so, one of the five stated aims of this project will be addressed—that is, to employ kitsch and its optimistic veneer to create an unnerving juxtaposition, so as to emphasise the contradictory and hollow nature of the neoliberal American dream. Because kitsch—or rather, sweet kitsch—deceives consumers through its palatable and romanticised façade, it is employed in the studio outcomes as a vehicle to scrutinise its role in the commodification of the suburban home and lifestyle. By juxtaposing kitsch's sentimental surface, a polysemy is created, and therefore an uncanny alternative is proposed.

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[292] Milan Kundera, *The Incredible Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 251.
[293] Kitsch (from the German verb *verkitschen,* meaning "to make cheap") has its origins in mid-nineteenth century Munich, where local art production saw small-scale hand-made works made en masse and sold cheaply. Gordon C. F. Bearn, "Kitsch," in *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Kelley, Oxford Reference, accessed March 21, 2019, http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199747108.001.0001/acref-9780199747108-e-437.
[294] Kjellman-Chapin explains that kitsch is incredibly difficult to define "due to its multifarious nature, there are multiple species and subtypes of kitsch." However, necessary is the notion of "high" cultural artefacts that are imitated through mimicry and thus diminished in cultural value, or a bypass of this mimicry and high culture altogether, where kitsch is purely mass-produced, cheaply made goods with no redeeming value. It is both the mimicry of cultural artefacts and the purely mass-produced that this research is concerned with. Monica Kjellman-Chapin, "The Politics of Kitsch," *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 1 (December 2009): 28–29.

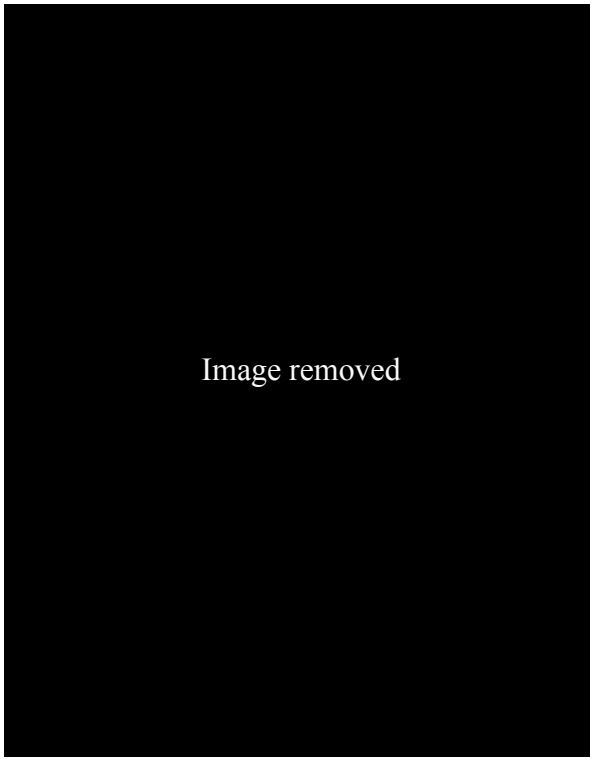

Figure 11. Cute Kitten from *Happy Kitty Bunny Pony: A Saccharine Mouthful of Super Cute*.

The following section will therefore provide a brief overview of five key characteristics of kitsch as relevant to this research and outlined and discussed by American art critic Clement Greenberg, Romanian literary critic Matei Calinescu, American philosopher Robert C. Solomon and American author Daniel Harris. Lastly, I will deliberate more recent views as recognised by British cultural sociologist Ruth Holiday and critical cultural theorist Tracey Potts as well as German philosopher Thorsten Botz-Bornstein.

Kitsch: Simulacra and Control

In his formative essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch,"[295] Greenberg positions kitsch within a Marxist framework and as a product of the industrial revolution. He argues that with the rise of the urban masses comes a demand for a new form of culture, fit for consumption and separate to that of the elite.[296] For Greenberg, kitsch is the antithesis of genuine culture[297] and is at the hands of the industrial and profit-driven machine. He claims kitsch is a simulacrum of "genuine culture"—"vicarious experience and faked sensations" that are easily palatable and therefore

[295] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 3–33.
[296] Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," 9–10.
[297] For Greenberg, genuine culture refers to avant-garde culture and it is a production of the Western bourgeois. This has been made possible, he says, by a new kind of criticism of society and its social order, an historical criticism. Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," 4.

consumable.[298] Furthermore, he argues kitsch is a mechanism of control by which governments seek to condition the masses. By forcing the working class to become dissatisfied with society and the social order enforced, a separation of the classes occurs—and with it, the criticism of 'true culture', its tastes, and values.[299] It is for this reason, Greenberg insists, that kitsch is able to prevail: a counterfeit that pretends to ask nothing of its consumers, all the while allowing political regimes to gain popularity with the masses,[300] and reducing genuine culture to a watered-down and (essential) commodified constituent of the production system.[301]

It is kitsch's ability to be dismissed as naive and easily consumable that enables it to be employed in the studio outcomes as an oppositional device. By contrasting its sentimental surface with the melancholic, violent or uncanny, I seek to generate a tension between the perception of kitsch and the connotations that the work implies.

Postmodernity, Taste, Consumption and the Middle Class

Calinescu disputes Greenberg's views, and rather positions kitsch with the middle class, their hedonism, and lack of taste.[302] Highlighting connections between bad taste and the history of modern technology, Calinescu defines modern bad taste as consisting mostly of "an ideologically manipulated illusion of taste."[303] Thus, he argues, mass culture can be described in terms of ideology or false consciousness.[304] Drawing from Adorno and Horkheimer,[305] Calinescu asserts that kitsch responds to the psychological and sociological expression of the bourgeois middle-class lifestyle. He contends that kitsch is now desired by both the upper and

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[298] Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," 10–11.
[299] Ibid., 12–17.
[300] Ibid., 19.
[301] Ibid., 10–11.
[302] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism,* 247–248.
[303] Ibid., 240. Seminal kitsch critic Gillo Dorfles also identifies the mechanical machine as being critical in the development of reproduction and the "quick distribution of art." Gillo Dorfles, "Kitsch," in *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Book, 1968), 29.
[304] Ibid., 240. "False consciousness" is a term first coined in 1893 by German Marxist philosopher Friedrich Engels and is used by Marxist sociologists to describe human servitude. "False consciousness hinders the universal class of the proletariat in its liberating and developmental role, and it leads the bourgeoisie to misleadingly cast its sectional outlook as a universally valid view." John Scott, "False Consciousness," *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed March 11, 2019, http://www.oxfordreference.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/view/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-802.
[305] Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and other critical theorists of the Frankfurt School saw the mass media entertainment and commercialised popular culture as producing symbolic goods, needs and consumers, and thus it depoliticised the working class. "Culture Industry," Oxford Reference, accessed May 13, 2019, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652757.

lower classes, therefore becoming the "ideal lifestyle" of the masses.[306] Key for Calinescu is that as the affluent mass consumer society gains an increase in leisure time, so individuals start to pursue the social ideal of expressing their taste through consumer objects that are used to decorate their homes.[307] Accordingly, the home is central to kitsch and the contemporary's unruly consumption, since it represents the average tastes, aesthetics and consumer routines of the growing and aspiring middle-class masses.[308]

Calinescu argues that as notions of beauty and taste continually shift and are redefined throughout the times, so kitsch must be understood in the context of the time period that the commodity was produced and consumed, and thus popularised by the masses. Furthermore, he recognises that what is deemed as bad taste in one epoch may not be in another, and that the real kitsch has to be understood as relevant to the needs of an affluent and self-indulgent middle-class consumer society.[309] Such a notion is key to the studio research as the language and aesthetics of kitsch that are employed (as depicted through suburban icons and consumer objects and images) are specific to an early postmodern period (1950s to early 2000s) and postmodernism's ability to continually reduce and recycle the past into a nostalgic surface that circulates within the present.[310]

Sentimentality

In "Kitsch and Sentimentality,"[311] Solomon sets out to disentangle the philosophical and ethical characteristics of kitsch. He interrogates what he describes as sweet kitsch: art or intended art that unapologetically appeals to the softer, sweeter sentiments, such as sweet wide-eyed puppies and children.[312] Explicitly, he maintains it is sentimentality and the "deep suspicions" of human emotions that guarantee kitsch is unfavourable and seen as in bad taste. Solomon is in defence of kitsch and its unapologetic "tender sentiment," and he seeks to rectify our distaste for kitsch and the sentimentalist.[313] As my own research specifically utilises "sweet kitsch" and

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[306] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity,* 241–244.
[307] Ibid., 243–245.
[308] Ibid., 249–250.
[309] Ibid., 243.
[310] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents,* ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 20.
[311] Robert C. Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no 1 (Winter 1991): 1–14.
[312] Ibid., 1.
[313] Ibid., 6. Solomon draws upon philosophical figures such as Immanuel Kant and his unprecedented attack on sentiment and sentimentality, as well as the dismissal of early-mid nineteenth century female popular literature as "sentimental trash."

aspects of sentimentality as a language and strategy to subvert its intended undertones and emotions, it is important that I briefly discuss the role that it has in kitsch.

While agreeing that the cheaply mass-produced "K-Mart style" artefacts are critical in defining social class and manufacturing apparent values of the masses,[314] Solomon claims that not all kitsch can be considered in this way. Specifically, he refers to the cheapening of emotional values as implied through kitsch and that "what is obligatory as 'compassion' or 'sympathy' in one age may be dismissed as mere sentimentality in another."[315] It is this lack of respect for sentimentality and the gentler emotions that Solomon argues enables kitsch's ongoing connection to the fake. Such feelings, he claims, continue to be associated with a lesser than human quality, as cheap infers low class: "One cannot understand the attack on kitsch without…the fact that the 'high' class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings…"[316] For Solomon, it is the rejection, or fear, of emotions that are deemed as sweet or nostalgic that is the issue for kitsch, not its implication to the fake.[317] Solomon's argument returns us to Greenberg's idea that kitsch is enforced by the ruling elite as a means of separating "high" from "low" class, not only through socio-economic status, education and taste but also through emotional understanding. It is through this ongoing separation of class and the ruling elite's emotional rejection that kitsch is able to control the masses, their expectations and values, and therefore their desires and aspirations.

It is this proposed denial of sentiment, the fear of softer emotions, and the anxiety of being identified as lower class that allow for a more layered approach and complexity of tone in the studio work. As audiences initially read the sentimental emotions of kitsch in the works, they may fail to appreciate the more indirect and menacing connotations. This tension therefore allows a reflective and uneasy feeling, as the studio outcomes aim for the viewer to slowly realise their own immersion in the increasingly inaccessible neoliberal dream and their desire for the excessive middle-class suburban lifestyle.

Cuteness

[314] Ibid., 3.
[315] Ibid., 3–4.
[316] Ibid., 9.
[317] Ibid., 13.

Harris states his critique of kitsch is not political, nor is it a historical or class summary of popular culture.[318] For him, the effects of the capitalist system must be analysed at the level of the individual consumer and their lifestyle, where he claims, we are surrounded by the aesthetics of cuteness—teddy bears, puppies and kittens.[319] Because of this, Harris argues it is applicable to the tastes of all classes.[320] Unlike Solomon, who proposes kitsch is divided by class and that one can fail to enjoy the sentiments that such sweet kitsch images arouse, Harris suggests we actually fetishise cuteness and its aesthetic pleasure. He also suggests that cute is not attractive or physically appealing, rather, it is more closely linked with the grotesque and the malformed. For instance, dolls with oversized arms and bloated faces are a deliberate intention to elicit from consumers the complex emotions of aesthetic seduction, specifically, pity. He states, "something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone."[321] Furthermore, Harris insists that cuteness aestheticises unhappiness, helplessness and deformity, arguing that cuteness is essential to the marketplace, as consumers will embrace products that have a feeling of motherlessness, ostracism and melancholy.[322] To evidence this, he draws upon what he calls "narcissism of cuteness" and the rhetorical strategy of anthropomorphism. Specifically, he identifies the use of anthropomorphised animals in commercial examples such as children's books and luxury fashion photography. Such a tactic, he says, reveals our human chauvinism and our attempt to re-write history according to "an iconographic agenda" which multiplies our own image and reverberates it, ruthlessly supressing the non-human and allowing nothing—not even our own children—to be separate and distinct from us.[323] Harris goes as far as to claim we are co-conspirators in a game of make-believe where we force children into some form of delusional state of cuteness.[324] Thus, for Harris, cuteness "is not something we find in our children but something we do to them."[325] Accordingly, this aesthetic of cuteness and its ideological expectations of behaviour have influenced children from a very young age, and he maintains that as adults and consumers, we are implicit in the formation and perpetuation of the ideologies, rituals and aesthetics of cuteness that the consumer image constructs.

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[318] Daniel Harris, "Cuteness," in *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.
[319] Ibid., 1–2.
[320] Ibid., xiv–xv.
[321] Ibid., 3–4.
[322] Ibid., 4–5.
[323] Ibid., 12.
[324] Ibid., 13–15.
[325] Ibid., 5.

This concept of cuteness as a commodified and "chauvinistic" construct is important as it conveys a sentimental and idealistic manufacturing of the romanticised behaviours and ideological expectations of children. This is explored through the studio work and my adoption of mass-produced ornamental figurines that depict innocent children and their implied narratives. Likewise, the grotesque, melancholic and malformed as cute are also relevant, as I utilise these sweet figurines and physically intrude their surface to depict violent and discomforting situations. Similarly, I find malformed taxidermy that are specifically associated with the façade of cuteness, children and their pets. Both subjects are composed photographically to be alone in constructed scenarios, thus employing the aforementioned sentimental emotions of loneliness, melancholia and pity, while seducing the audience through the subject's vulnerability. In creating this comparison between the surface aesthetics of cute and the newly ascribed melancholic and grotesque behaviours, the work is able to challenge what Harris argues is our obsession with infantilism and its consumer aesthetic.[326]

Contemporary Discussions

In more recent debates, kitsch is again under interrogation as classifications of class, taste and the impact of globalisation on mass culture, art and consumption shift existing ideas of (artistic) values.[327] Holliday and Potts suggest that in contemporary times, Bourdieu's influential concept of social distinctions and class-based tastes requires re-establishing.[328] They state: "social distinction has become a permanent makeover show; the ability to churn and distribute symbolic value is the new class imperative."[329] The pair propose that if kitsch is by definition tasteless or in poor taste,[330] and taste is connected to a contemporary and fluctuating acceptance of class, then kitsch has entered a new phase of its life, a bad taste democracy where anything goes.[331] Botz-Bornstein radicalises this notion when suggesting "kitsch has consumed the world." Not only is kitsch the ideal lifestyle of the middle-class, as Calinescu proposed some

[326] Harris, "Cuteness," 20–21.
[327] Max Ryynänen, "Contemporary Kitsch: The Death of Pseudo-Art and The Birth of Everyday Cheesiness (A Postcolonial Inquiry)," *Theoria Terra Aestheticae* 1 (2018): 80–83. http://terraaestheticae.ru/index.php/terraaestheticae/article/view/12/25.
[328] In the 1970s, French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu theorised the link between education and culture and the intersections of taste, class and education. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010, orig. pub. 1979). Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 26.
[329] Holliday and Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste*, 27.
[330] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, kitsch is defined as: Art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way. "Kitsch," *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed April 21, 2019, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/kitsch.
[331] Holiday and Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste*, 26.

forty years ago, but, according to Botz-Bornstein, the global political and "nouveau" elite are the new contemporary consumers of kitsch in what he identifies as "conspicuous vulgarity." Botz-Bornstein draws upon more adverse studies of kitsch, as he argues that it has its origins in the "impulses of narcissism."[332] Central to his argument is Soviet philosopher Tomas Kulka's proposition that kitsch does not contribute to the analysis of culture or create new needs or expectations, but rather it repackages and aestheticises culture, thus re-establishing existing conventions.[333] Escalating this view, Botz-Bornstein argues that kitsch has its roots in "an intrinsically narcissistic impulse" and he claims this is why kitsch thrives in a neoliberal society.[334] Clarifying how narcissistic-fuelled kitsch has become the contemporary norm in taste and attraction, Botz-Bornstein identifies social media, the culture of "I,"[335] and "kitsch truths" as responsible for the reaffirmation of one's own "truth."[336] Accordingly, he suggests kitsch is redefining our perception of truth and culture, and the information society and image culture is enabling kitsch to narcissistically thrive, permitting individuals to self-reference their own limited cultures and versions of self without ever being confronted with the culture of other.[337]

This concept is further explicated by identifying "deculturation," a phenomenon in which a particular group is deprived of one or more aspects of its identity."[338] Botz-Bornstein says that kitsch, empowered by global neoliberal society, reduces culture to a quantitative standardisation and can therefore only produce a decultured environment. The kitsch aesthetic thus enforces deculturation due to the reduction of all knowledge and culture to the rhetoric and utopia of "excellence" and "cuteness."[339] The culture of excellence is not only a product

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[332] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "How Kitsch Consumed the World," *The Conversation*, September 26, 2017, accessed April 19, 2019, https://theconversation.com/how-kitsch-consumed-the-world-83823.
[333] Thomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art (*University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), 27.
[334] Botz-Bornstein, "How Kitsch Consumed the World: Narcissistic Impulse."
[335] For a brief overview of the history of narcissism in postmodern capitalist culture and how this relates to current debates of media and cultural narcissism, see Imogen Tyler, "From 'The Me Decade' to 'The Me Millennium': The Cultural History of Narcissism," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 343–363, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1367877907080148. For a more comprehensive introduction, see the seminal work on the subject: Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).
[336] Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Neoliberalism, Fundamentalism and Kitsch* (London: Bloomsbury. 2019), 75.
[337] Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics*, 11–12.
[338] Ibid., 2. The concept of deculturation emerged from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his influential text *Sociologie de l'Algerie* (1958) and refers to the effects of colonialism and modern forms of economy and society, as an outcome of capitalist accumulation and their impact on 'traditional' society. According to Bourdieu, these traditional and indigenous ways of life were fundamentally undermined due to the modern socio-economic forms introduced by colonial Europeans. See Jeremy, F. Lane, *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 12.
[339] Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics*, 99.

of aggressive globalised capitalism and conservative neoliberalism, but also a result of both neoliberals and progressive liberal thinkers who promote ideas of cultural excellence through the freedom and liberalisation of the individual self.[340] This liberal self, Botz-Bornstein maintains, can only be free because of one's own cultural disembodiment.[341] In Botz-Bornstein's views we can identify a return to one of Greenberg's principal arguments, that while kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its consumers, it actually reduces "genuine," true and authentic culture to a diminished commodified constituent of the production system. Thus, according to Botz-Bornstein, kitsch is now not only a form of government control of the working classes, or even as Calinescu proposes, a reflection of mass society in search of the ideal (consumer) lifestyle, but kitsch and its cuteness is now intricately woven throughout all of society, creating narcissistic, decultured individualists as a non-class-based form of global neoliberal control. It is this reduction of culture and truths and the cycle of self-referencing and perpetuating aspirations of consumption that the studio outcomes seek to interrupt. Through employing kitsch, its bourgeois mass-appeal, nostalgic characteristics, bad taste and sentimentality—and intersecting its pleasurable and easily consumed surface—the studio outcomes aim to challenge the romanticised emotions associated with the suburbs and the idealised neoliberal narratives that consumer images and objects convey.

Conclusion

This section has argued that in kitsch's modest façade is a contradictory and deceitful intent. It was identified that through the middle-class bourgeoisie and their self-indulgent and bad taste lifestyle (as shaped by the hands of the ruling elite), kitsch functions as a form of class-based political control. Yet in contemporary society, it appeals to the masses as a form of expressing the "ideal lifestyle." It was proposed that kitsch reduces the complexities of culture to commodified cuteness and that it manufactures the expected behaviours of children as a form of governance and to resuscitate the neoliberal narrative and ideologies that we as a society are taught to desire. What is fundamental to achieving this saccharine and grotesque manipulation of faked sensations is a globalised neoliberal system that has enabled kitsch to take over, producing a narcissistic self-confirming and decultured global society. Finally, in identifying kitsch's intent and relevance to the contemporary, one of the five stated aims of this project has been briefly introduced.

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[340] Ibid., 28.
[341] Ibid., 161.

3.2 The Readymade and the Found Object: A Liminal Space of Transformation

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.
——Marcel Duchamp[342]

This section is dedicated to the readymade and the found object as artistic methods of critical inquiry into advancing neoliberal capitalism as they are fundamental to the visual language of this research project.[343] The purpose is to introduce and discuss the process, political and psychological characteristics of these key visual methods, while clarifying how they contextualise the studio research's use of nostalgia. This overview will explain how the particular characteristics of the readymade and the found object critically examine the neoliberal dream and its ostentatious narratives and ideals, as conveyed through commodified icons of suburbia. These characteristics are as follows: the objects' selection and juxtaposition (achieved through the artist's intuitive creative process); that this process creates "gestures" of revolt and critical responses to the acceleration of modern capitalism; and that the contemporary readymade is able to engage viewers and is political in its inquiry due to its affectual nature and deliberate production of "delay." These three characteristics are examined further through the found object and two of its core features: the chance encounter, and its inherent psychoanalytical past. These features are connected by the notion that the found object is simultaneously lost and found and consequently exists in a state of liminality. This enables a reigniting of a past trauma in the newly found object as it further hides the void that its artificial surface deceives us into believing it has filled.

These key points are based on the research of American education scholar Ryan Everly Gildersleeve and qualitative research expert Kelly W. Guyotte, German philosopher Bernd Scherer, American critical theorist and art historian Jaimey Hamilton Faris, British anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy, American scholar of French and comparative literature Katherine Conley, Eva Díaz, Margert Iversen, and Lauren Berlant.

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[342] Marcel Duchamp in *The Creative Act* 1957, cited in "The Culmination of The Paradigms," in Dennis Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern: Purity and Experience in American Art Criticism 1900-1960* (New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing and Printing, 2005), 137.
[343] Although much of the scholarship on Duchamp and the readymade is centred around his critique of art, its judgment, and the role of the art institute, my research is not interested in such discussions and is rather concerned with using art as a process and a form of, and space for, neoliberal critique.

This discussion addresses a key aim of this research, which is to uncover the hollow surfaces that represent the embellishments of consumer narratives and the ideals of the neoliberal dream through the manipulation of devalued readymade and found objects that are nostalgic commodified icons of suburbia. It is envisioned that in understanding these readymade methods as critical processes, there will be a capacity to comprehend another aim of this research—to create a polemic between individual feelings about the failure and disillusionment in the neoliberal dream and the unregulated and uncritical consumption of consumer images and objects that perpetuate such a fantasy. This latter aim will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter, firstly through a filmic suburban gothic overview and then through the contextual review.

Duchamp's Readymade, the Creative Process, and Unfixing Understandings

For Marcel Duchamp, what was significant to the "already made" object and his process of selection was upholding a sense of complete indifference to the readymade's aesthetic qualities.[344] He believed the final aim of the art-object should not be based solely on visual perception, aesthetics and judgement, but rather on the "grey matter" and our urge for understanding.[345] Hence, the creative process was critical to Duchamp's readymades and their intent, which was to interrogate categories, upend definitions, and confront the artistic establishment. This was achieved not just through object selection but experiments in their positioning and spatial and material relationships.[346] More recently, scholars have advocated that Duchamp's readymades are not artworks at all, but rather conceptual notions aimed at encouraging viewers to reconsider their own perception and understanding of "truth."[347] Furthering this notion, Gildersleeve and Guyotte argue that the readymade is a "liminal and multiplicitous qualitative methodology" and that its objective "includes disruptions of excepted truths, unfixing understandings, playful resistance, and palpating otherwise static

[344] "Marcel Duchamp Talks with Martin Freidman about the Readymade," Walker Art Center, posted February 16, 2002, YouTube video, 2:51, accessed November 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYqDpNmnu8I.
[345] "Marcel Duchamp Interview on Art and Dada (1956)," filmed by National Broadcasting Company, A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp and James Johnson Sweeny: Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Philadelphia Museum of Art, YouTube video 29:09 at 21:30, posted by Manufacturing Intellect, accessed November 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzwADsrOEJk.
[346] Duchamp has said that originally the readymades were never meant to be shown to the public but were rather personal experiments. Kamien-Kazhdan, "Duchamp: Not an Original in The Conventional Sense," 71.
[347] Ibid., 76.

interpretations."[348] They do not limit the readymade methodology to a form that merely challenges art and the establishment, nor to the preconceived notions of traditional aesthetic values and practices. Rather, they recognise its extensive capacity to disrupt what is assumed knowledge and that through the readymade encounter, new ways of thinking can occur. Gildersleeve and Guyotte explain that because it is unable to be understood as a process that builds concepts through its affects, as well as being at a loss to be defined as a concrete "thing," the readymade methodology is positioned permanently within the liminal and as a practical artistic process, a subversive way of thinking, and a very productive method of inquiry. It can thus reveal new ways of knowing and therefore expose the critical fractures inherent in the capitalist system of production.[349]

Consequently, the studio research employs readymade commodity objects that are symbols of suburbia and juxtaposes them as a strategy to interrupt the audience's accepted perception of the object, its relationship to self, and the neoliberal capitalist system that produces it.

Duchamp's Readymades as "Gestures" of Revolt

Scherer argues that Duchamp's readymade creative and "spiritual" process was more important than the art-object outcome, suggesting we look to him not for his final readymades but for his "gestures" and the process of their creation.[350] He questions what is at the core of Duchamp's readymades and subsequently, what this means in, and for, contemporary society.[351] These gestures are defined by Scherer as three-fold revolts, two of which are relevant to this research. These are the revolt against:

1. The market: Duchamp selects objects that have no value of themselves and are industrially produced; and

[348] Ryan Everly Gildersleeve and Kelly W. Guyotte, "Readymade Methodology," *Qualitative Inquiry* (October, 2019): 2. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077800419881661.
[349] Ibid., 5–6.
[350] "Introduction: The Readymade Century: Bernd Scherer and Dieter Daniels," YouTube video 33:46 at 3:25, posted by HKW 100 Years of Now, December 4, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW4P2crTS8E.
[351] A century after Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), *The Readymade Century International Symposium* (2017), hosted by Hause der Kulturen der Welt, integrated perspectives on cultural theory and practice-led research to examine the readymade in terms of the circulation of goods in the age of globalisation, of on-demand production, and new conflict zones due to intellectual property. "The Readymade Century," accessed December 2, 2019, https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/the_ready_made_century/the_ready_made_century_start.php.

2. Time: Duchamp responded to the acceleration of production times due to industrial advancements.[352]

Scherer identifies these gestures of revolt to clarify the artistic, political and social pressures that Duchamp was experiencing in this period, stating that he formed them by "recontextualising the industrialised object by relating it to the time of the subject." As objects became mechanically produced, they were completely detached from the subject (consumer and/or artist), and Scherer claims it is a reconnection between the two (object and subject) that was fundamental to Duchamp's search. This reconnection occurs in the creative process—object selection, positioning, lighting, staging, etc.—and it is this "spirit," or how the work was created, not the work's outcome, that Duchamp was wanting to draw attention to. This process allows for objective and subjective aspects of the object (such as value and function) to be again reconnected with the individual (and a reconsidering of their relationship to the object), or for "the reanimation of the object." Scherer upholds that as the material world of the early twentieth century became the defining force of reality, and human/object relations were diminished and commodified, so Duchamp's readymade creative process was more important than the art-object outcome. Accordingly, he argues that the object's "spiritual" reconnection to subject is Duchamp's revolt against a burgeoning consumer culture and his time.[353]

Like Duchamp, this project's readymade gestures are defined by a revolt against the capitalist market in that the commodity objects I find originate from a mass-produced globalised process of production. The readymade objects I find and select have a cultural value that is commodified and embedded in their inferred sappy surface and it is my reconnection between subject/self and object/commodity that enables the revolt to occur. The studio outcomes are therefore concerned with how the capitalist market commodifies the neoliberal narratives and ideals that their surface embellishments manufacture and perpetuate. Moreover, my readymade revolts are (indirectly) concerned with the acceleration of time. It is through neoliberalism's increased speed of production (as a result of digitally advanced and global networked technologies) that unprecedented levels of production and consumption have been able to occur and that these suburban icons are now devalued and critically ripe as readymades. As was suggested in Chapter 2, this acceleration in production has meant that the individual and society have become increasingly detached from the manipulative intent of the broader neoliberal

[352] Ibid., 3:55.
[353] Ibid., 5:08–7:56.

system and those who govern it. Such augmented shifts have imposed a suspension of disbelief that facilitates a desire for the past and supposedly democratic American dream, that which is driven by the contemporary neoliberal and hypercommodified good life.

The Contemporary Readymade and Its Political Interrogation through Affect and Delay

Similarly to Gildersleeve, Guyotte and Scherer, Hamilton Faris recognises the significance of the readymade and its creative process as a form of neoliberal capitalist examination. She acknowledges that through affect and delay, the contemporary readymade encourages criticality in the viewer and a rethinking of their social relationship to commodity objects. Hamilton Faris says that the contemporary readymade provides political, informational, and affectual tools for viewers, helping them to visualise how objects already communicate. She states, "they challenge us, as viewers and subjects of contemporary capitalism, to become curious about our connections to our daily objects as well as to the larger assemblages of politics and representation at play around them."[354] Although Hamilton Faris argues that the contemporary readymade is more focused on the commodification of the object's materiality (human or earthly) within the advanced capitalist system of production, the readymade's function and intent has remained the same—for the artist to probe the complex and interconnected social and political relations between commodity object and viewer, and thus to interrogate capitalism and its advancing systems of production.[355]

One characteristic that Hamilton Faris recognises as critical in achieving this depth of viewer contemplation is the production of a dissonant and critical delay, and a shift in the readymade's affectual nature. She defines the affectual readymade as "any instance of an aesthetic moment in which the commodity is used by an artist to momentarily resist capitalism's perpetual commoditizing process."[356] The potential for this affect is conditional upon a brief moment of misperception and it is central to the success of the work. Hamilton Faris recognises this

[354] Jaimey Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Goods: Global Dimensions of the Readymade* (Chicago: Intellect Books Ltd., The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.
[355] Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Goods*, 5.
[356] Hamilton Faris borrows the concept of the affectual readymade from philosophy and material theory—specifically, Austrian philosopher Stephen Zepke, who provides new insight into the readymade's material relations within a larger understanding of capitalism's processes. Stephen Zepke is a specialist in Deleuzian and Guattarian philosophy. Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Grounds*, 11–14.

momentary pause as a delay[357] "in the perpetuation of object and image consumption," that is intentional, critical to the work, and necessary for the transformation of the viewer.[358] She says this delay in recognition and establishment of meaning is what causes dissonance and therefore a reorganisation of political and economic visibility. Although deceptively simple, the readymade "insists on an affective and ideological shift of understanding the same object, positioned in a different context, in a different way."[359] For the success of the affectual readymade and the audience's transformation, it is crucial that this moment of misrecognition and delay is recognised by the viewer. In this realisation, it is suggested, comes an affectual change in the viewer's understanding of the commodities employed in the readymade forms.

André Breton: Chance Encounters, the Found Object, and the Artist

Related to Duchamp's readymade is André Breton's "chance encounter" and the found object.[360] In his novel *Nadja* (1928),[361] Breton reflects upon a series of fortuitous meetings (specifically, Nadja, a woman he encounters at the end of a flea market) as he recounts his wanderings (flânerie)[362] through Paris. This chance encounter is described as "the coincidental intersection of two aimless wanderings"[363] and it became a seminal aspect of Surrealist

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[357] The "delay" is a Duchampian concept that is defined as an "indecisive reunion" of its different meanings. This can (by definition) refer to a moment which serves to slow down time, or move it ahead, as in a watch or clock, or "the momentary delay when one starts to play one of the notes of a chord, but prolongs for a few moments the note of the proceeding cord, a note that needs for its resolution the one which is delayed." Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp, Appearance Stripped Bare*, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 94–95.

[358] Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Grounds*, 18. Hamilton Faris is referencing French philosopher Jacques Ranciére and what he calls "dissensus": The idea that dissensus consists of a certain impropriety which disrupts understanding and reveals a gap between politics and process. Jacques Ranciére, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 2–3.

[359] Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Grounds*, 17–18.

[360] It should be noted that Breton's found object, or *objet trouvé,* referred to natural objects, such as a pebbles, a man-made object or an object made from machinery, "Objet trouvé," *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed December 4, 2019, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100243703. I use the term as a reference to found objects that have been created solely for the purpose of commodification. This includes taxidermy which is a man-made re-creation of a natural specimen, as well as mass-produced machine-made objects.

[361] André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

[362] The French term "flânerie" is to be aimless or in an idle quality or state. "Flânerie," *Merriam-Webster,* website, accessed December 11, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fl%C3%A2nerie.he figure of the flâneur is emblematic of French nineteenth-century literature and refers to French poet Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) where a man of leisure strolls and wonders the streets passionately observing modern urban life. See "Art Term: flaneur," TATE website, accessed December 11, 2019, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/flaneur.

[363] Silvia Kadiu, "Surrealism in Andre Breton's *Nadja*," *Opticon1826,* no. 16 (2014): 2, accessed December 4, 2019, https://go-gale-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=griffith&id=GALE|A472989564&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.

practice. According to MacClancy, for Breton and the Surrealists, the chance encounter was particularly important for the individual who happened upon it, and in doing so, whose previously felt inner desires were confirmed. What could be perceived as mere coincidence was to the Surrealists a highly significant meeting that served to reveal the connection between conscious and unconscious—as influenced by Freud.[364] Above all, MacClancy confirms that the chance encounter with the object had Surrealist value "because of the meaning it embodied for its discoverer."[365]

Conley also emphasises Breton's belief in the ethereal state of the found object due to the chance encounter. She explains that for Breton, objects had their own "forces" or "latencies," and he was open to their mysterious or "ghostly" qualities and what they would gently communicate to him.[366] Moreover, Díaz explains that throughout *Nadja*, the objects that Breton obtains are not acquired, but rather, they are in pursuit of, and speak to him, as he is drawn to objects that are charged with powerful affect. She writes:

> Previously lost to history, their outmoded, no longer useful forms embody, personify even, the aspirations and longings of their owners. A found object, then, is a deeply poignant piece of someone's repurposed trash, an unwanted, outmoded object still pregnant with prior use. As opposed to forms of casual recycling, the found object is a form of historical recovery that activates highly charged aspects of the past in the service of the present.[367]

These ideas are important to my readymade selections and creative process. A found object that is a readymade commodity and also an icon of suburbia has its own commodified past and embodies a rejected, outdated or devalued ideological and social value—as determined by neoliberal ideologies and its period of production. There are an infinite number of objects I could choose in the process of the readymade/found object selection; however, I always respond to the objects I chance encounter, as this individual experience and the specific readymade's veneer determines if they are selected, what will become of them, and what is required for their intervention and collocation. This only becomes apparent after time with them and through the readymade creative process. As Conley and Dìaz both suggest, the past

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[364] Jeremy MacClancy, "Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 3 (September 1995): 497.
[365] Ibid., 508.
[366] Katherine Conley, "Collecting Ghostly Things: André Breton and Joseph Cornell," *Modernism/modernity* 24 no. 2 (April 2017): 266–267, https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2017.0021.
[367] Eva Díaz, "A Critical Glossary of Space and Sculpture," in *Unmonumental: The Object in The 21st Century*, New York: Phaidon Press, 2007): 207–208.

life of the object, or its ghost, is significant to the readymade's selection as this provides the object's context and its sentimentally laden kitsch surface that is then contrasted and subjugated, thus in relation to tone, creating a very specific polemical sensibility that also exposes the contradictory nature of its embellished veneer.

Liminality and Unattainable Desire of The Lost/Found Object

To clarify the difference between the readymade and found object, Iversen states: "while the readymade is essentially indifferent, multiple, and mass-produced, the found object is essentially singular or irreplaceable, and both lost and found."[368] Such a suggestion positions Breton's found object as unique, and in its finding, the artist of the present embodies the object's individual and historical past. If the singular object is to be found, it must at the same time be lost, therefore contemporaneously encompassing both states of being.[369] To support her argument, Iversen says that Breton's exploration of the unconscious and the found object's meaning—as interpreted by the artist upon a chance encounter—is informed by Lacan's and Freud's theories of psychoanalysis.[370] She also suggests that the pair would have influenced each other and this causes her to pair Breton's found object with Lacan's *Objet petit a*, or lost object.[371] To further support her ideas, Iversen refers to American art critic Hal Foster. Foster opposes Breton's notion that the found object is an endorsement of the artist's unconscious and the desire to find the anticipated, maintaining that the found object does not merely represent a simple wish fulfilment, but rather is laced with both desire and death. Foster says that the found object cannot exist unless it has been lost and in unison it represents "a hole in the integrity of the world and the thing that is found to hide it."[372] This trickery or duality is central to this research, as it emphasises how one can never be fulfilled through the consumption of a found (commodity) object, as the void which the object fills is only superficially concealed.

In Foster's proposition is one of Iversen's underlying points: that in the realm of lost objects, the object is cut from its "symbolically articulated reality." Once found by the artist, the lost

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[368] Margaret Iversen, Readymade, Found Object, Photograph," *Art Journal* 63, no.2 (Summer, 2004): 50, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2004.10791125.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Ibid., 49.
[371] The concept of *objet petit a* is that the lost object is a symbol for the unattainable and impossible object of desire that can never be satisfied. Lacan suggests that humans are inherently lacking, and we therefore seek fulfilment beyond biological satisfaction. Lewis A. Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire: The *Object Petit A* in Lacanian Theory," *Journal of The American Psychoanalytic Association* 1 no. 53 (March, 2015): 84–89.
[372] Iversen, "Readymade, Found Object, Photograph," 49; and Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), 37–40.

object's psychic value and trauma (due to its loss or discarding) can be reinstated through the creative process in a new form and space—the unconscious.[373] That is, what was once desirable is no longer and is rejected—removed from its symbolic reality. However, once found, the object's past life can return, albeit in a liminal space, as it is reimagined in the mind of the artist, soon to be realised through the creative process. Nevertheless, for Foster and Iversen, the finding of the object does not repair the trauma of the lost object, its rejection, and the hole in the world that its loss represents; rather, the found object merely conceals that this void exists.

This also relates directly to what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," or objects that are desired and hold the promise of something that is possible to achieve.[374] She suggests cruel optimism has existed since the 1980s and is in direct relation to the social-democratic promises of the post-war American dream. Berlant explains that whatever the experience of optimism, it becomes cruel when the object/s and scenario/s that promise the fantasy's possibility and fulfilment are actually what holds one back from achieving it. Likewise, she says "the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way."[375] Therefore, Berlant proposes that in finding the object and having an optimistic attachment or sense of fulfilment, the individual believes they are closer to filling the void that the object has itself created and therefore its surface optimism is not only deceptive but also cruel.

Such insights inform this project's use of the found object as they suggest that the found object is able to return the one who finds it (artist) back to its past and the fantasy of fulfilment that it promises. Likewise, the found object is always in a state of duality, being at once lost and found, dead and alive, and existing in both the past and the present. This liminality enables the lost/found dichotomy to represent all that is wrong with the world, while also being the desired object that conceals that such a reality exists. The found object is thus representative of the lost object and the fantasies such an object promises. Furthermore, in its new life (created by the artist), the found object equally embodies our desire and its demise, thus becoming the thing that obscures our understanding that this desire is never attainable. These notions are evidenced

[373] Ibid., 53–54.
[374] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 25.
[375] Ibid., 2.

in the studio outcomes' use of found objects that are also lost or discarded and devalued commodities. For example, the Sony Trinitron television, bird bath, blonde wig, and ornamental figurines used in my works are all commodified icons of a past suburbia and each represents a nostalgic, and essentially departed, set of values and ideals. Likewise, examples of taxidermy are employed as found commodity objects that symbolise the uncanny surface of the animal's past life and our human longing for its preservation. Therefore, they too become an embodiment (or souvenirs) of nostalgia and the past narratives we long to be true. These found objects are therefore representative of a lost time and an unattainable desire for its return. As the found object is always connected to the hole that it both fills and creates, my newly formed readymades exist within the liminal and uncanny, paradoxically supporting the nostalgic suburban fantasy while also critically disputing it.

Conclusion

This section has contextualised the research project's use of the readymade and the found object as methods of inquiry into nostalgia and the embellished surfaces of the commodity objects that perpetuate the American dream's illusory façade. Next, I will examine three early 1980s–1990s suburban films and unpack their unique tonal specificity of gothic interrogation.

3.3 The Return of 1980s and 1990s Suburban Gothic Films

> *The suburban Gothic deserves to be considered one of the most significant and most revealing undercurrents in American popular culture.*
> ——Bernice Murphy[376]

This section maintains there is a need to return to a more contemplative and tonally nuanced method of neoliberal gothic inquiry. The purpose of this overview is to set the scene for this research's methodology and its refined polemical sensibility in tone. To understand how this is achieved, I will revisit the 1980s as it was the turning point for global neoliberalism and the peak of the suburban gothic's interrogation of the American dream through the metaphor of the suburbs. Specifically, two seminal suburban gothic films—*Blue Velvet* and *Edward Scissorhands* [377]—will be analysed, as they are exemplary of the rising ironies that characterised this time. This filmic overview will be initiated in response to the research's methodology, processes and languages—specifically, the suburban gothic, kitsch and

[376] Bernice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 200.
[377] *Edward Scissorhands*, directed by Tim Burton (USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1990), DVD.

nostalgia—and the distinctions of tone and emotion are surveyed and discussed in relation to the studio outcomes. To achieve this, I engage with several scholars and their analyses. This overview will establish the foundation for the upcoming examination of visual practitioners who further contextualise the readymade and the found object and emphasise a detailed balance in tension and tone as forms of neoliberal critique.

Blue Velvet

Real ignorance is bliss. That's what Blue Velvet is about.
——David Lynch[378]

This section analyses *Blue Velvet* as it is a significant example in the canon of American gothic films that probe the surface of the suburbs. Relevant to the studio outcomes is the film's approach to the interrogation of nostalgia through the juxtaposition of familiar. I will draw upon the writing of American film history and screen critic Robert Arnett, as his work provides an understanding of how the American/suburban gothic film functions as a neoliberal investigation. American religion and popular culture scholar Irena Makarushka and American sociologist Norman K. Denzin are also discussed, as they address how *Blue Velvet* employs nostalgia as a mode of critical inquiry into the contradictions of the apparently egalitarian American dream. Makarushka focuses on the film's use of nostalgic icons as an assertion of the American dream's demise, whereas Denzin draws attention to their use as signifiers of terror while paradoxically acting as a vehicle for humour and parody. American psychologists Danielle Knafo and Kenneth Feiner's ideas are also outlined to ascertain how nostalgia and its optimistic façade is used to create an unsettling cognisance of the suburbs. Specifically, they identify the abrupt contrast of comedy and tragedy as a means to stress the antithetical reality of the neoliberal dream. Finally, Knafo and Feiner clarify how positioning the audience within a moral conundrum can create a polemic between a feeling of disappointment in the neoliberal dream's promises and the continued consumption of that which perpetuates the fantasy. These ideas are relevant to the studio outcomes as they explain how nostalgia and its abrupt contrast in tone can bare its unnerving contradiction.

Disrupting the Suburban Surface

[378] "Deciphering *Blue Velvet* By William Rabkin (1986 Interview with David Lynch)," The Master Cylinder, posted December 24, 2018, accessed December 11, 2019, https://0themastercylinder0.wordpress.com/2018/12/24/deciphering-blue-velvet-by-william-rabkin-1986-interview-with-david-lynch/.

Arnett categorises *Blue Velvet* as one of the few Hollywood films in the 1980s that was responding to an important moment in history. Defining the film not as American gothic but as "eighties noir," he says it rejected Hollywood's reaffirmation of Regan's America to explore the darker side of his promises. In particular, that *Blue Velvet* wanted to demonstrate the false dream state embedded in the ideology of affirmation in nearly all Hollywood films of the time.[379] Arnett states that mainstream Hollywood endorsed Reagan's outlook through narratives of non-American or the Other as nemesis, advanced technology, the reunification of families, and the promotion of 1950s suburban middle-class family values. He argues that 1980s noir used this expected Hollywood narrative structure to critique society by juxtaposing it with the familiar. An example of this is the protagonist who often descends into a fantasy world outside of his own that fuels his obsessions and inner desires. In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey Beaumont is propelled into the dark and violent "nightmare" world of Frank Booth, where he finds himself living out fantasies and behaviours (as his own gothic double) that are similar to the evil villain. Arnett claims this comparison allows the hero to see the reality of his normal and insulated world and thus recognise the institutions of Reagan's America as a deceptive dream mistaken for reality.[380] While my studio outcomes do not employ a protagonist, it has been highlighted that the figurines are understood as characters in the suburban world I have created. While it was never an intention to develop a central character, I do believe the anthropmorphisation of inanimate objects such as taxidermy and decorative ornaments has enabled this relationship between audience and object (protagonist), thus allowing the viewer to be implicit in the parallel suburban world that my readymade and found objects find themselves in.

The Suburban Gothic Inquiry: Nostalgia

To authorise *Blue Velvet*'s use of nostalgia as a form of inquiry into the deceptive surface of the suburbs and the larger American master narrative, Makarushka suggests that in its persuasive presence we come to see the reality of nostalgia's purpose. She says that director David Lynch creates a disorientating and coexistent time passage, where past, future, and present conflate into a dreamworld of contradiction. Makarushka claims the film raises questions about the likelihood of imminent change and if the future can ever be anything more

[379] Robert Arnett "Eighties Noir: The Dissenting Voice in Regan's America," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34, no 3 (2006):124–125, doi10.3200/JPFT.34.3.123-129.
[380] Ibid.

than "a replay of unresolved past experiences pictured through metaphors…"[381] She maintains this is reinforced through affectionate songs and iconic symbols of more supposedly innocent times (Figure 12). For example, the primary colours and icons of the opening scene present the surface of the American dream and these are contrasted with the cooler colours of the dramatic and ominous underworld. For Makarushka, these images are "volatile, haunting, and suspiciously familiar."[382] Hence, *Blue Velvet* is a critical deconstruction of the master narratives of the American experience and it tells the story of the demise of its nostalgic icons while always warning of the risks of mistaking their claims for reality.[383] According to Makarushka, Lynch's cynical use of American nostalgia suggests that this is all we have left.[384]

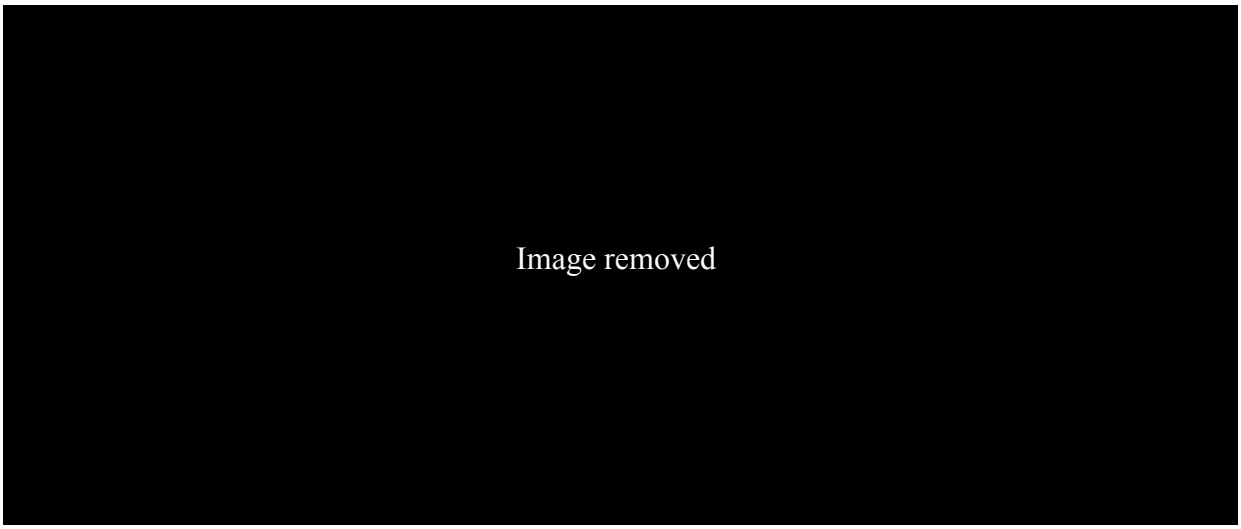

Figure 12. Fireman waving in opening scene, *Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).

Denzin believes that Lynch's use of nostalgia is specific to the political and social context of the 1980s. He says that the film reverberates and reproduces the tensions and contradictions that defined the time and that explicit to this is the employment of postmodern nostalgia as a critical device.[385] Denzin explains that by using nostalgia, Lynch ridicules the idealistic past while at the same time keeping it alive, and he does so by the creation of strange, violent and timeless worlds that merge into the present.[386] In this liminal, disorientating and uncanny space, nostalgia is laden with terror as sentimental signifiers—specifically, 1950s and '60s rock and roll music—as they are employed as a warning sign of imminent danger.[387]

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[381] Makarushka, "Ambiguity of Evil and the American Dream in Blue Velvet," 42.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid., 39.
[384] Ibid., 42.
[385] Norman K. Denzin, "Blue Velvet: Postmodern Contradictions," *Theory, Culture & Society* 5 (June 1998): 462.
[386] Ibid., 471.
[387] Ibid., 462–463.

Denzin also suggests that nostalgia is a form of pastiche and parody. He proposes that there is an element of (dark) humour and obvious fakery that is present in the film—an observation that differs considerably to Makarushka and others. Denzin maintains that from the iconic opening, the hyperreal signs suggest the film is going to be a parody of 1940s small-town American films. Yet, the audience witnesses an overlay of past surfaces (or what Denzin recognises as a "plagiarising of the past"), when they experience sophisticated 1980s computerised medical equipment in a 1940s style hospital room, as this effaces the boundaries between past and present.[388] According to Denzin, it is in this collapse of temporalities that *Blue Velvet* can be seen as pushing the boundaries of this condensed present, further and further into the future, where the unreal and the hyperreal are one, where anything is possible and things are not as they seem.[389] These ideas inform the balance of tension and tone in the studios outcomes, as they intend to position the audience on the edge of nostalgic optimism and its paradoxical disillusionment. This unease leaves the viewer suspended in an uncanny space where past and present ideals have collapsed, and where such incongruities must be confronted.

The Nostalgic Surface as an Unnerving Juxtaposition

Knafo and Feiner speak directly to how nostalgia's optimistic surface is employed in *Blue Velvet* to create an unsettling contrast. In the idyllic and hyperreal opening scene, Lynch situates notions of innocence with suburban happenings. We meet a man, Jeffrey's father, watering the family's manicured garden. The scene then shifts inside the nostalgically laden home where Jeffrey's mother is sipping a cup of tea while watching television. It is here on the screen that audiences witness (as if voyeurs or detectives in a crime show) an image of a gun slowly entering a room (Figure 13). This mediated scene mirrors the outside world before a sudden contrast in tone dramatically occurs and Jeffrey's father falls to the ground holding his neck.

[388] Ibid., 469.
[389] Ibid., 463.

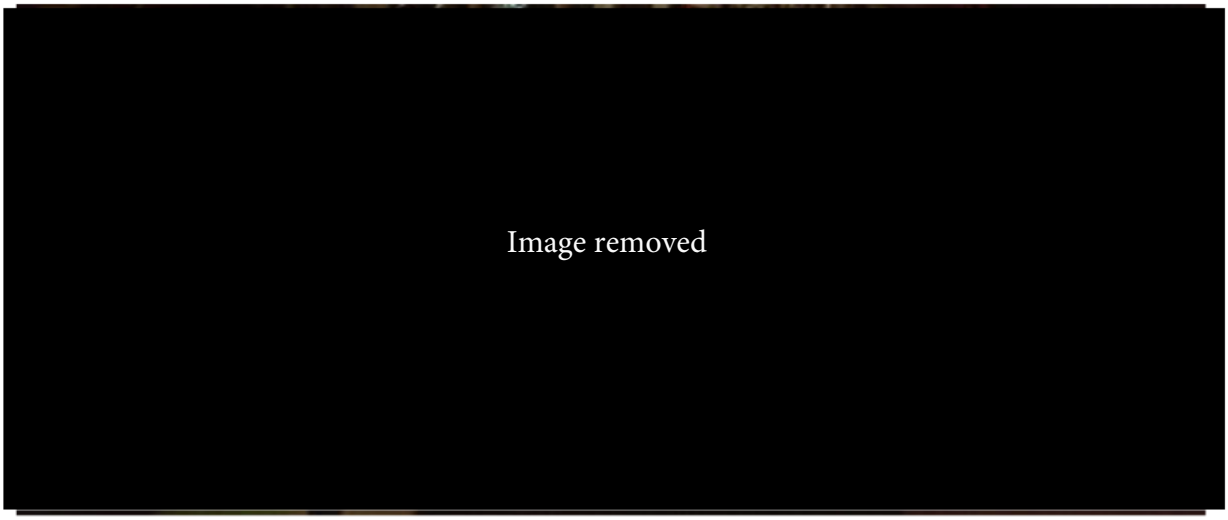

Figure 13. Gun and Television, *Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).

This abrupt opposition creates a disconcerting tension, as it isn't clear if the man has been bitten or has had a stroke. As Jeffrey's father lies incapacitated, there is yet another tonal shift as he holds the flailing hose that sprays water from his crotch, only before being attacked by the family dog. According to Knafo and Feiner, it is at this point that "tragedy and comedy merge, as do reality and fantasy, to create suspense and elevate curiosity as well as uncertainty."[390] What this sudden contrast in scenes achieves is a moment where the viewer is caught between two scenarios yet is none the wiser. In this liminal space, nostalgia acts as a broader metaphor for the fracturing of the American dream and the optimistic expectations of the suburbs' idealistic surface. This unsettling opening scene sets the tone for the entire film, and once the dream's surface is separated, there is no going back. Such a perturbing conflict, used to convey a suspended sense of belief, is something that the research outcomes utilise throughout the project. This was exaggerated in the final three series of works as they took on a much darker polemical tone by emphasising the balance of tragedy and comedy as to heighten the implied narratives and juxtapositions.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images

While *Blue Velvet* doesn't interrogate the uncritical consumption of consumer images directly, it does create a polemic between the idealistic veneer that these images have perpetuated over time and the sense that the American dream's hopeful surface may not be all that it seems. Knafo and Feiner define *Blue Velvet* as "an inverted vision of the American dream and its

[390] Danielle Knafo and Kenneth Feiner, "Film Review Essay Blue Velvet: David Lynch's Primal Scene," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 83, no. 6 (2002): 1446.

'comfortable, orderly secure and moral life', revealing that behind the thin façade of 'normality' lurks an underworld permeated by evil corruption and disorder."[391] Moreover, they maintain that Jeffrey is forced to confront his own desires and capacities for violence as he becomes drawn into the dark fantasy world of the unknown. As he crosses the idyllic suburban veneer to the darker side of Lumberton, he shatters the illusion of childhood innocence and the American dream. It is because of this duality that the film creates a polemic for the audience, as it forces the viewer to encounter a moral testing, as they too are implicated through narrative stimulus in the perverse actions of Jeffrey.[392]

Conclusion

This overview has informed the studio outcomes of the specific polemical tone they seek to create. Explained was how *Blue Velvet* uses nostalgia and the suburbs' optimistic veneer to abruptly reveal its failure. This is achieved through a balance of oppositional emotions and actions and a tone which juxtaposes the past's sentimentality for the suburban lifestyle with chaos and violence. It was suggested that this positions both the protagonist and the audience in a contradictory world, and that this liminality and unsettling sensibility facilitate the past and its ideals to be compressed and ridiculed, while contradictorily perpetuating them. To emphasise the antithetical reality of the neoliberal dream, it was proposed that *Blue Velvet* locates the audience alongside the protagonist's immoral experiences. In doing so, the dream's surface order is fractured, and the viewer is left to contemplate not only the broader neoliberal system and its intent, but also their own discontent in the reality of its deception.

Edward Scissorhands

You can't buy the necessities of life with cookies.
—Bill Bogg[393]

Although the 1980s were a decisive period for American politics and the suburban gothic's scrutinisation of Reagan America, 1989 saw a new set of anxieties arise under the presidential election of George Bush.[394] According to Australian cultural studies scholar Christina Lee, American 1990s cinema became a platform for such concerns, as teenage protagonists

[391] Ibid., 1445.
[392] Ibid., 1446.
[393] *Edward Scissorhands*.
[394] In the early 1990s, the US saw a growing sense of economic decline and social inequality due to the reality of the now globalised and competitive economy. See Michael Prowse, "Is America in Decline?," *Harvard Business Review: Currency*, July–August, 1992), accessed January 2, 2020, https://hbr.org/1992/07/is-america-in-decline.

conveyed the anguish felt by a generation of youth. Lee says, these films examined the disparity between Generation X and the Baby Boomers and articulated "society's own crisis of community," specifically, the dramatic political, social and cultural changes of the times.[395]

While there is an abundance of 1990s suburban youth coming-of-age films that explore these issues in a myriad of ways,[396] I recommend that *Edward Scissorhands* is unique in its critical examination of the American dream. As a suburban gothic inquiry, *Scissorhands* represents a significant shift from the 1980s and its focus on children as innocent victims of domestic terror, as it examines the melancholic suburban experience of young adult Edward. What *Scissorhands*'s interrogation achieves is a liminal space for deeper audience scrutiny that is, like *Blue Velvet* (and *Poltergeist*), specific to the anxieties and emotions of its time. Melancholia, pity and dark humour are employed in the film as signifiers for the long-term consequences of 1980s neoliberal consumerist behaviour, society's mounting cynicism for the suburbs' sentimental façade, the dream's achievement, and the growing mistrust of those outside neoliberalism's conventions. To deliberate this further, the following overview will introduce the ideas of several scholars, authors and critics, American scholars of English literature Mark Walling and Robert Markley, American scholar of English Joshua David Bellin, and British film critic Colin Odell. These insights are pertinent to this research as they position *Scissorhands* within the context of a suburban gothic neoliberal examination by probing (and exaggerating) the failings of the suburbs and their social and psychological impact.

A Quaint Suburban Fantasy

Scissorhands is a comedic tragedy that overlays a fantasy vision of suburbia upon a gothic fairy-tale. The setting is a quintessential suburban cul-de-sac—a nostalgic and appropriated past America.[397] According to Walling, the film is "an allegory of a corrupt society's unwillingness to be redeemed by the purity of goodness…society has matured into a world that is intolerant and vicious as it gave up on a broader social consciousness of trust, honesty and

[395] Lee, *Screening Generation X*, 2–4.
[396] See *Pleasantville*, directed by Gary Ross (USA: New Line Cinema, 1998), DVD; *SubUrbia*. directed by Richard Linklater (USA: Castlerock Entertainment, 1996), DVD; and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, directed by Todd Solondz (USA: Suburban Pictures, 1995), DVD.
[397] Robert Markley, "Geek/Goth: Remediation and Nostalgia in Time Burton's Edward Scissorhands," in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (London, Duke University Press, 2007), 278.

make believe…"[398] In keeping with the social deterioration in the suburbs, Odell says the film is an exploration of the limits of suburbia. He suggests director Tim Burton marries the "twee and mundane" with the gothic and disjointed, and it is in this contradiction that the pastel suburban houses represent the conformist constraints of the suburban milieu and the community's stance against anything that breaks with tradition.[399]

At the core of *Scissorhands* is an examination of the neoliberal capitalist outsider—the monstrous Other—as a device to position the audience in a liminal space and a moral quandary. This enables the viewer an awareness of their own conformist behaviour and the breakdown of social relations through the self-interested and sordid attitude evoked by the pursuit of the American dream. Although there is some scholarship on the significance of the film as a suburban gothic neoliberal critique that interrogates the contradictions of late capitalism's fracturing American dream, it is limited.[400] This brief analysis intends to uphold that this critique is at the heart of the film.

Suburban Gothic Inquiry: Advertising and the Home

Scissorhands most evidently employs nostalgia to critically examine the contradictions of the illusory American dream, as played out in the suburban milieu. However, it is the film's use of two interrelated suburban gothic characteristics—advertising and the home as a space of conformity and psychological entrapment—that I will focus on. These features demonstrate (through exaggeration) the suburban inhabitants' uncritical faith in the neoliberal machine, and in turn their conformist behaviour and psychological disconnection from the happenings and people around them. As these two characteristics intertwine in their use and outcomes, they will be discussed similarly and as they arise.

The first introduction to the authority of advertising and its resulting conformist neoliberal behaviour is in the homogenised archetypal surface of the subdivided pastel-coloured houses

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[398] Mark Walling, "Jonny Depp is a Bi Baby! The Philosophical Significance of Tim Burton's Preoccupation with Childhood Consciousness," in *The Philosophy of Tim Burton*, ed. Jennifer L. McMahon (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 76–77.
[399] Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, "An Uncommonly Gentle Man," in *Tim Burton* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 44.
[400] Much of the scholarship and analysis of *Edward Scissorhands* focuses on the film as a metaphor for Burton's own introverted life as Outsider artist. See Mark Salisbury, *Burton on Burton* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995). Also popular is the film's function as romantic and/or gendered/queer/monstrous gothic fantasy. See Jacky Curtis Dubowsky, "Queer Monster Good: Frankenstein and Edward Scissorhands," in *Intersecting Film, Music and Queerness: Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2016), 173–207. While connected, in the context of this research, such insights are less relevant.

that fill the suburban cul-de-sac (Figure 14). In his analysis of the film, Markley suggests that the suburbia of *Scissorhands* is a "superficial surface, an idyll which lacks depth and substance as it has no history and engenders no self-analysis."[401] It is in this strange façade of the shallow and surreal suburbs that Markley observes the social deterioration of its inhabitants through the mistreatment of Edward as Other. This is explored not through gothic horror or the supernatural as in *Poltergeist*, but rather, by employing Edward as a trope to reveal the suburbanite's own monstrosity, caused by their embrace of a superficial suburban world.[402] This insincere world is exemplified through the Bogg family (Peg Bogg is the neighbourhood Avon lady and enthusiast of the capitalist entrepreneurial spirit) and their cynical and repugnant neighbours.[403] It is in these characters that we witness a range of stereotypical suburban rituals that are connected to the ideals of advertising and its commercialised language and behaviours.

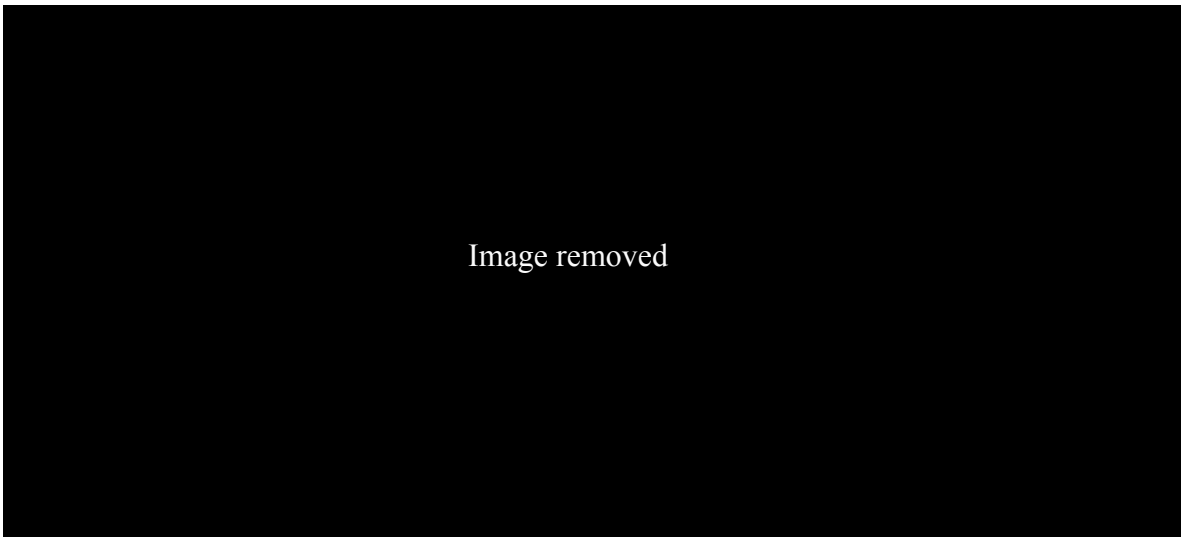

Figure 14. The cul-de-sac, *Edward Scissorhands*, directed by Tim Burton (USA: Twentieth Century Fox. 1990).

Throughout the film, the audience observes Peg and husband Bill's trust in the neoliberal machine for guidance in their conventional suburban life. This occurs through a series of normative suburban rituals, as encouraged through advertising and entertainment, and that are often awkward in their circumstances. This tension creates an underlying psychological disconnect of those who occupy the family home and the darkly comedic, yet melancholic, manner used to express this. As an example, Markley detects one scene where Peg "deals with" Edward's "Otherness" by profusely applying Avon's light concealing cream to his cut and

[401] Robert Markley, "Geek/Goth: Remediation and Nostalgia in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*," in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (London, Duke University Press, 2007), 282.
[402] Ibid., 290.
[403] Odell, "An Uncommonly Gentle Man," in *Tim Burton*, 42.

scarred face. Unable to hide his differences, Peg consults the Avon Master Handbook before phoning Avon to seek expert individual advice (Figure 15).[404]

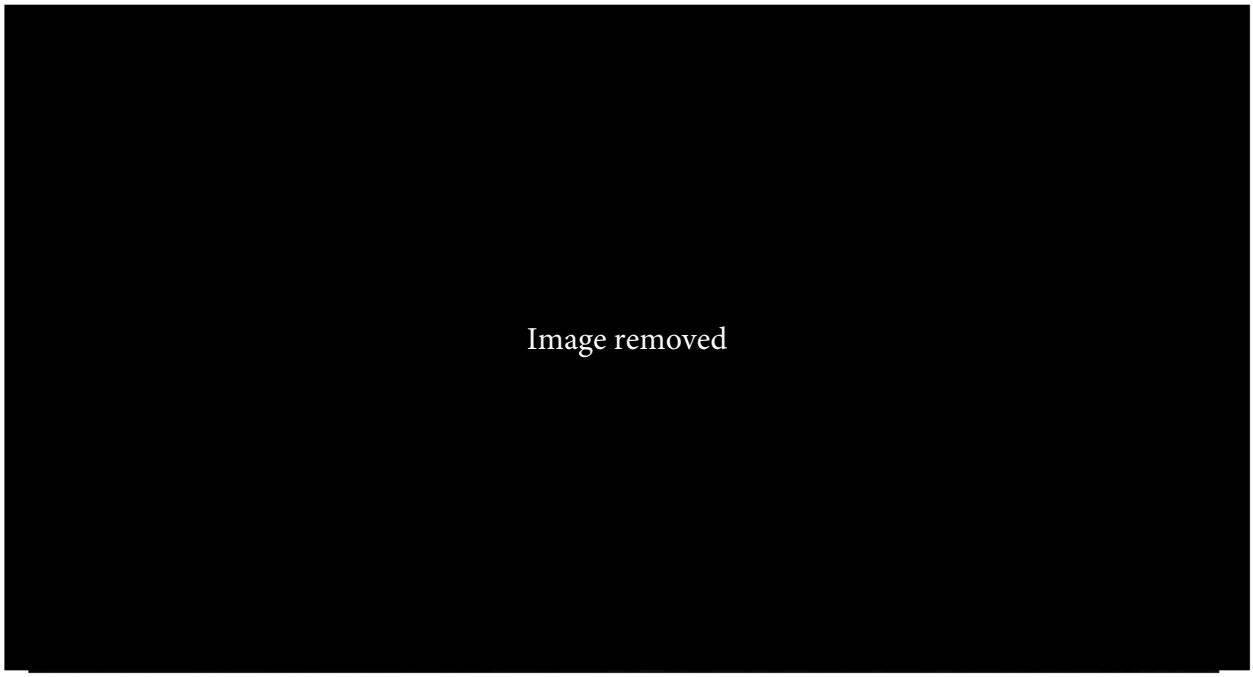

Figure 15. Peg (Dianne West) calls upon Avon, *Edward Scissorhands*, directed by Tim Burton (USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1990).

In another scene, Bill and Edward have a "father and son" chat in the family den, where Bill assesses his teenage daughter's sexuality and Edward unknowingly drinks a glass of whisky through a straw before passing out. Such moments highlight Peg and Bill's separation from not just Edward, but their own reality and ongoing faith in the neoliberal machine to provide direction and answers. Equally, Markley confirms that such scenes illuminate that Edward cannot be assimilated into their "normal" suburban world, no matter how much Peg and Bill naively try. Markley also recognises just how engrained the conformist behaviours of the idyllic suburbs are, when throughout the film Peg and Bill appear mentally detached from their environment and that their preoccupation is always with the home and the performance of its rituals and gestures: family dinners, clichéd conversations, weekend barbecues, fatherly chats and maintenance of the lawns. Finally, it is in this apparent "normalness" that Markley says *Scissorhands* reveals how strange the suburbs actually are.[405]

Such analysis and scenes inform the first series of the studio outcomes as the works planned to expose the social deterioration and hollowness of the suburbs through the surreal juxtaposition of kitsch readymade and found commodity objects. These objects symbolise a type of

[404] Markley, "Geek/Goth," 288.
[405] Ibid.

performed suburban ritualisation—not a collective engagement like a BBQ—but rather, more solitary consumer acts that construct one's suburban veneer. This is exaggerated through the suburban gothic's use of nostalgia, and the kitsch and artificial colours of the series and its suburban surface.

The Kitsch Surface as Unnerving Juxtaposition

By contrasting the unassuming aesthetics of kitsch against the suburban inhabitants and their sordid behaviour, *Scissorhands* creates an unsettling, pitiful and melancholic tone that reveals the callous reality of the suburbs and, therefore, the neoliberal American dream. To expand upon this superficial culture, Bellin highlights the use of kitsch and simulated suburban surface through the construction techniques of cinema itself. He identifies the pastel-coloured houses as not being reminiscent of any real American suburb, but more of a movie set, constructed only as a surface for display. He says within this "prefabricated paradise," the kitschy furnishings (particularly the simulated consumer objects) reveal a tackiness and transparentness in their attempts to impersonate the real.[406] For Bellin, *Scissorhands* is a film that exposes how a suburban community's fabricated tale, including those images and narratives consumed through the screen, shape its perceptions and beliefs.[407] It is thus that in *Scissorhands*'s kitsch and clearly faked veneer that the audience is able to perceive the reality of the suburb's and thus the deception of the neoliberal dream.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images

Through the discussion of the manifestation of suburban gothic and kitsch, it can be observed that a polemical tone has also been established. That is, *Scissorhands* creates a polemic for the audience by exaggerating the authority of advertising and entertainment within the suburbs and the consumerist behaviours of its "suburban drones."[408] Through a superficial and failed suburban fairy-tale fantasy, the film exposes the failure of the egalitarian neoliberal dream and its more disheartening reality.

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[406] Bellin, "Seeing Things,"184.
[407] Ibid., 188.
[408] Frank Rose also recognises the optimistic yet superficial kitsch surface of suburban conformity when he identifies a plethora of middle-class mass-appeal decorative commodities that the "suburban drones" consume. Rose, "Tim's Cut Up," 64.

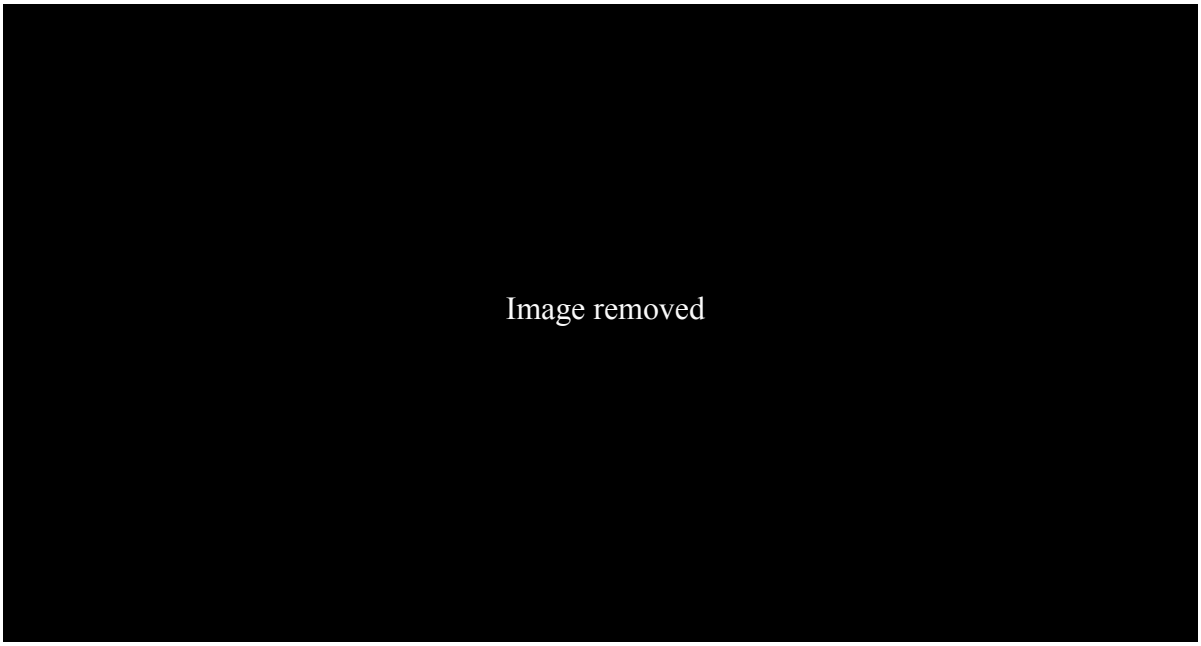

Figure 16. Peg and Edward on a daytime talk show, *Edward Scissorhands,* directed by Tim Burton (USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1990).

One example of how this polemic is shaped is when Edward is willingly forced by Peg into the epitome of postmodern spectacle as a guest on a daytime talk show (Figure 16). Like the soap opera, the talk show was a late 1980s and '90s phenomena in American (and Australian) suburban homes. These entertainment productions advanced reality TV and the culture of celebrity spectacle, which Hedges argues has created a "culture of illusion"—a society that is distracted, superficial and compliant, and that can no longer determine between reality and illusion. In *Scissorhands*, the talk show is employed as a device to again reveal the middle-class bourgeoisie's neoliberal conformity and their insensitive nature. As a series of surface-level questions are asked by the audience, a mature lady with a peroxide perm and pearls enquires, "Have you ever thought of having corrective surgery or prosthetics? I know a surgeon who may be able to help you," to which Edward replies, "I'd like to meet him." As Bellin explains, what this scene does is expose how popular media construct notions of "Otherness," but furthermore, it functions as a reminder that the audience are not just witnessing conformist behaviour of segregation, but that they are participating in these processes.[409] Finally, as Odell suggests, what *Scissorhands* achieves in terms of its tone and representation of gothic narrative is a voice for the disenfranchised while upholding a streak of despair about modern society. According to Odell, the film triumphs as Burton leaves the viewer unaware that they are watching a cynical film, allowing the audience to further consider society's cruelties and

[409] Bellin, "Seeing Things," 189.

hypocrisies without forcing its moral tale and depriving them of denouement for society's intrinsic problems.[410]

Conclusion

This analysis has clarified that *Scissorhands* echoes a sense of disillusionment in the utopian suburbs, as specific to young adults in an early 1990s' America. It has been explained that the film employs the suburban gothics use of advertising and the home as a space of psychological entrapment to interrogate the artificial and kitsch surface of the suburbs. Through this veneer, *Scissorhands* created a polemical tone that is melancholic, hollow and cynical, and therefore positioned in the liminal, as the audience witness not just the social deterioration of the suburbs, but that they are implicit in the preservation of this neoliberal façade.

The purpose of this section has been to establish the underlying experience of tone for this research's studio outcomes. What these analyses have clarified is that by extrapolating the four core suburban gothic characteristics and visual elements such as kitsch and artifice—as well as specific liminal tonal nuances that slip between satire, comedy and tragedy, anxiety, melancholia violence and disillusionment—these films have established a targeted suburban gothic examination of the American dream, as specific to this defining period. Thus, I suggest that revisiting this distinct method of examination can assist the present-day individual to critically engage with the absurdity and origins of the contemporary neoliberal dream and therefore better contemplate their individual role in its perpetuation.

Following, the studio research identified these specific methods of examination within a number of contemporary artists works who also achieve the particular polemical tone that I knew I wanted to express in my own outcomes. The following section will therefore undertake a detailed analysis of several artists who work with kitsch and the readymade and found object as a method of neoliberal critique. By considering their work in response to this research project's aims, the outcomes will further contextualise the research's methodology and its specific application of tone.

[410] Odell, "An Uncommonly Gentle Man," 43.

3.4 Ramifications of Neoliberalism: Life and Death and the Works of Polly Morgan and Julia deVille

It is this hopeless intention to reanimate death that really touches me. I find it melancholic…I also find it pathetic, this ridiculous idea of suspending death…
—Chloë Brown[411]

The following section will contextualise the works of two contemporary taxidermy artists, Polly Morgan and Julia deVille. This overview will discuss how a particular balance in tone and tension that is suggestive of the suburban gothic films just analysed is employed through the artists' use of found objects and readymade placements to critically examine the ongoing pressures of contemporary neoliberalism. This study will also clarify how both artists use taxidermy as an uncanny medium that in its liminality embodies both life and death and thus acts as an object of nostalgia. To expand upon these ideas, I will look at several of the artists' works as well as draw upon the ideas of American cultural historian and curator Rachel Poliquin. Morgan's and deVille's methods of inquiry are important to my studio research because their works function as forms of revolt against modern day neoliberalism's deteriorating veneer while exposing the romanticised narratives that society longs for. This overview will therefore propose that taxidermy is a fitting analogy for the suburban gothic examination of the American dream and can thus be employed to reveal its incongruous nature.

Ramifications of Neoliberalism

Morgan refers to her early taxidermy works as relating to the past lives, narratives and associated symbolisms of the animal. One key characteristic in her practice is her belief that taxidermy is a kind of magic or trickery, and that this allows for the construction of illusion and an uncanny space where the viewer can never really know if the animal is dead or alive.[412] By employing the traditional techniques of taxidermy that have been historically aimed at "preserving the illusion of life indefinitely," and placing the animals in surreal and symbolically loaded juxtapositions, Morgan undermines the original role of taxidermy.[413] It is

[411] Chloë Brown is a contemporary British multimedia artist who works with taxidermy and other found materials. Erik Frank, "Melancholic Taxidermy," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature and Visual Culture, Botched Taxidermy* 7 (Autumn 2008): 52.
[412] "Polly Morgan: Dead Animals, or the Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art," YouTube video, 1:02:15, at 4:20 and 18:40, uploaded by Brown University, February 5, 2006, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYrI4AMa2M4.
[413] Giovanni Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 34.

this use of the animal/object as a direct act of subversion, both exposing and concealing the anticipated, that this research is interested with.

Morgan's work navigates the liminal and contradictory, and I propose it can be understood as simultaneously conveying and being a direct result of the pressures of contemporary neoliberalism. This is reflected through individual narratives that hold a nostalgia for humanity's optimism, while also expressing a subtler sense of pessimism for such perseverance. In turn, I suggest that in Morgan's gothic and emotionally focused approach, the taxidermy animal/object and its newly formed juxtaposition can function as a metaphor for the present-day disappointment in, and effects of, the contemporary neoliberal condition. By analysing how this particular tension is achieved, my studio research has been able to develop its own distinctive polemical sensibility so as to reveal the inherent contradiction of the suburban narrative and commodity icons it scrutinises.

DeVille's aims to alter the way society considers the production and consumption of animals and to shift perceptions of the individual and their role within this extractive and contradictory system.[414] DeVille is also drawn to the socially constructed notion of animal worth and how the value of life is arbitrarily attributed.[415] Her readymade combinations pose questions of entitlement, value, and worth, and how such privileges are conflictingly applied in both life and death. While my research is not directly concerned with the politics and ethics of animal consumption, it has employed taxidermy as a readymade and found commodity that acts as an analogy for the hypocrisy of neoliberal values and the effects of our consumer-driven behaviour. By drawing from deVille's delicate, melancholic and at times slightly humorous receptivity, my research outcomes aim to highlight the unconstrained desire for the neoliberal dream's deceitful surface, the psychological impact and ramifications of this longing, and to therefore create a liminality that encourages a more reflective response in the viewer.

Suburban Gothic Inquiry: Nostalgia

I suggest that taxidermy functions as a gothic trope and a mode of critical inquiry into the American dream because of its uncanny strangeness and its intrinsic relationship to human

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[414] "On the Couch with Julia deVille," *Arts Review*, posted September 26, 2018, accessed March 10, 2020, https://artsreview.com.au/on-the-couch-with-julia-deville/.
[415] "Ethical Taxidermist Julia deVille Explores Holograms and Quantum Physics," The Mix, YouTube video, 7:13, at 2:40, uploaded by ABC News (Australia), October 3, 2018, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNKoyLJYDQY.

longing. According to Poliquin, taxidermy, or "the animal thing," is heightened in strangeness as it only exists due to human desire and intervention. Therefore, the animal's new life has a more morbid reality than in its death, in that its death is continuous, and there is a blurring of the recognisable and the unknown. This want to restrain the inevitability of death expresses a certain type of human desire that Poliquin calls narratives of longing, and these narratives, she argues, drive the creation of all taxidermy. Taxidermy, or this nostalgic "souvenir," is a powerful fragment that removes the difference between reality and fantasy, or what was and what we desire it to be. Furthermore, Poliquin insists that this power is only possible due to the impossibility of fulfillment. These narratives of longing and the nostalgia that is embodied within taxidermy can never be fulfilled, as the experience (or dream) we desire will only ever exist in the past and is therefore always just beyond our reach.[416] Thus, I suggest that taxidermy can be an allegory for the past narratives and ideals of a post-war American dream and its contradictory and illusory nature. These ideas directly align with the notion of the found object as containing the trauma of the past (lost object), and that its finding can only ever conceal the void that the object has created. Such concepts are explored in the studio outcomes through my use of taxidermy as a reference to a nostalgically laden suburbia and remembrances of childhood pets. By creating readymade juxtapositions with cute yet uncanny "animal things," I evoke a strange feeling of uncertainty through my works, as the animal/objects simulate narratives of sentimentalised suburban rituals that have gone slightly askew.

The Kitsch Surface as Unnerving Juxtaposition

DeVille's *Neapolitan* (2013) (Figure 17) employs the saccharine surface of kitsch to subvert childhood memories of Neapolitan ice-cream. By undermining the expectations of kitsch, deVille employs it as a core strategy to confront her audience, and in doing so, evokes a discomforting, yet darkly humorous tone, revealing a more untoward experience of the much-loved childhood dessert.

[416] Rachel Poliquin, *Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 6–8. There are seven characteristics that Poliquin defines as forming the narrative of longing: wonder, beauty, spectacle, order, narrative, allegory, and remembrance.

Figure 17. Julia deVille, *Neapolitan,* 2013, three dyed chicks, onyx, antique ice cream scoop, 9 x 29 x 9 cm.

At first glance, *Neapolitan* questions the relationship between two outwardly disparate yet related objects: a nineteenth-century antique ice-cream scoop (a referent to the European origins of ice-cream) and three small chicks that engender the colours of childhood innocence and that themselves act as a connotation for Neapolitan ice-cream: baby pink, chocolate and vanilla. The beaks of two chicks are open and are suggestive of sound, at once symbolic of hunger, while also being a desperate plea for survival. In this association, deVille evokes a disconcerting tone and exposes the contradictory nature of our neoliberal values and behaviour. To consume such helpless chicks is initially unthinkable, yet it can be read as morbidly humorous because of its reality. Furthermore, in the absence of violence is its implied presence, as the viewer is forced to imagine the chick's future and what may already have become of their missing mother. In the act of their taxidermical preservation, the chicks epitomise the longing for a collective narrative that such cute sentient creatures are above the act of human slaughter and consumption. By emphasising these contradictions with such a delicate expression, deVille's work conjures feelings of childlike optimism while also highlighting the hypocrisy of such manufactured and idealistic desires and the treachery of the system that promotes them.

Similarly, the studio outcomes employ expression and tone through the easily consumable surface of kitsch taxidermic animals to joyfully lure the audience before exposing the deception of the suburbs and the American dream. Once engaged in the sentimental narratives of childhood memories, the works aim to slowly conjure a more incongruous feeling and the sense

that the animal/object's once optimistic surface and its newly formed combination are not what they seem.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images and Objects and Their Neoliberal Fantasies

Figure 18. Polly Morgan, *To Every Seed His Own Body*, 2006, taxidermy, chandelier, prayer book, glass, wood, 20 x 22cm.

In *To Every Seed His Own Body* (2006) (Figure 18), Morgan induces a sense of disillusionment in the materialistic promises of the neoliberal good life. The fragile bird is a metaphor for the failures of the narratives and ideals that society has come to long for through the uncritical preoccupation with consumer images and their commodified objects of desire. Poliquin identifies this approach to taxidermy and its strange juxtaposition as an allegory of despair. She reasons that because the audience is unable to determine the motive for the animal's death (as opposed to the natural landscapes and techniques of traditional museum dioramas), it becomes a stand-in for the universality of despair.[417] Poliquin clarifies that when sadness occurs due to the failing of a dream, the emotion becomes linked to a physical loss of someone, or something.

[417] "Rachel Poliquin: Taxidermy and a Poetics of Strangeness," YouTube video, 43:23, at 7:25, uploaded by Brown University, March 9, 2016, accessed March 22, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_68hDnsVXr4.

With this loss comes remembrance, and with it, a longing for the departed. In this absence is a sentimental yearning for a token or an object, something that can physically be touched as a souvenir of the ideology of the dream and its remembrance.[418] Such notions support my studio research's proposition that the taxidermy animal—specifically common suburban inhabitants, such as small birds, ducklings and mice—act as an allegory for the impossible fulfilment of the suburbs and the commodified good life.

The Readymade and Found Object and the Hollow Surface Embellishments of the Neoliberal Dream

Figure 19. Polly Morgan, *For Sorrow,* 2007, glass, plinth, taxidermy, Bakelite telephone 43.5 x 43.5 x 164 cm.

In *For Sorrow* (2007) (Figure 19), Morgan physically manipulates readymade and found objects to expose the surfaces that represent the inflated narratives and ideals of the neoliberal American dream. The taxidermy magpie (a familiar guest to the suburban backyard) and the Bakelite home telephone (the core early twentieth century telecommunication device) are both icons of the suburbs. Morgan employs the readymade as a method of political inquiry to subvert the commodity objects' assumed meaning and thus, the viewers' relationship with both magpie and telephone. I suggest *For Sorrow* employs the bird's narratives of longing and a past readymade icon to expose their contradiction—specifically, the broader and unseen reality of this once hopeful industrial invention and the smart surveillance technologies that we allow to now enter the family home. Hence, I suggest *For Sorrow* is a revolt against the contemporaneous and our current era of uncritical mass consumption and ungoverned corporate surveillance. The new arrangement and the found object expose the void that it

[418] Rachel Poliquin, "Objects of Loss and Remembrance," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature and Visual Culture, Rogue Taxidermy* 6 (Summer: 2008): 4–5, accessed March 22, 2020, http://www.antennae.org.uk/back-issues-2008/4583459061.

conceals, as well as the telephone's cruel optimism and the deception of advancing technology. Such methods of revolt are relevant to my studio outcomes, as I also juxtapose taxidermy and commodity objects to subvert the implied meaning of the suburban icons I employ and the idealised narratives of neoliberalism they promote.

The Consumer Image: A Persuasive Authority

While the works of Morgan and deVille do not directly reference or interrogate the persuasive authority of the consumer image, I advocate this is implied through their readymade combinations. By employing readymade commodities, which are symbolic icons of neoliberal capitalism's progress and privilege, these artists' work encourages the audience to contextualise the relationship between taxidermy and commodity. In doing so, the viewer is positioned in a liminal space where they can contemplate the dishonest promises that such objects of longing mutually offer and refute. By comprehending taxidermy as an embodiment of society's narratives of longing for a past America and its suburban dream, the viewer can realise they exist as a consequence of their own desire for its endless preservation. Throughout the process of this transformation, it is possible for the audience to then comprehend that their own desire has been manufactured through endless images and objects of illusion.

Conclusion

This section has discussed how Morgan and deVille employ a specific sensibility in tone to critically examine the endless pressures and consequences of contemporary neoliberalism. It was explained that because of the uncanny nature of taxidermy, its ability to function as an allegory of despair, and an embodiment of society's ideological narratives of longing, the artists' readymade juxtapositions momentarily suspend the viewer's disbelief, before abruptly and despondently exposing the failings of contemporary neoliberalism and its illusive American dream.

3.5 Embellished Surfaces in the Home: Barnaby Barford, Penny Byrne and Jessica Harrison

> *By 'consumer society', I mean one in which commodities are increasingly used to express the core values of that society but also become the principal form through which people come to see, recognise and understand those values.*
> ——Daniel Miller[419]

[419] Daniel Miller, *Consumption and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 40.

This section will analyse the work of three contemporary artists: Barnaby Barford, Penny Byrne and Jessica Harrison. All three artists use discarded mass-produced readymade and found figurines as a method to critically investigate the commodified narratives and ideals that their ornamental surfaces nostalgically preserve. British archaeologists Paul Mullins and Nigel Jeffries suggest that while decorative commodity goods such as porcelain figurines have been an important domestic ornamental display since the early nineteenth century, their material consumption was an important part of invoking affluence and ideological symbolism in the Victorian era. Moreover, the figurines' surface aesthetics embodies broader social and consumer meanings.[420] To explore this idea of the ornament and its embellished exterior as influencing social values, and to clarify how these three artists disrupt the external trappings of such anachronistic commodities, I will compare their individual and distinctive approaches to sensibility and tone. Further to the previous taxidermy-focused analysis, this detailed discussion will contextualise the readymade and the found commodity object as forms of inquiry into the nostalgic façade of the neoliberal dream and, in turn, its continued abuse and abandonment. By examining the specifics of expression through the modification of surface and readymade juxtaposition, this study will contribute to the studio outcomes' own nuanced approach to tone. Since one of the core aims of the PhD outcomes is to locate the audience in a space of contemplation and for transformation to occur, the viewer must be prompted to feel the inconsistencies of the neoliberal dream and its surface promises, while at once realising they too contribute to the fantasy's preservation.

The Mutilation of Surfaces

Barford's series *The Battle of Trafalgar* (2010),[421] *The Good, The Bad and The Belle* (2009)[422] and *Private Lives* (2008)[423] juxtapose found ornamental figurines that the artist finds, physically dismembers, and seamlessly reconstructs into new and darkly humorous tableaux. His readymade amalgamations convey what could be understood as a glimpse into the not-so-distant future (or possibly the present) and the aftermath of social collapse—where the sweet

[420] Paul R. Mullins and Nigel Jeffries, "The Banality of Gilding: Innocuous Materiality and Transatlantic Consumption in the Gilded Age," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16 (2012): 759, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10761-012-0206-x.

[421] Barnaby Barford, *The Battle of Trafalgar* (2010), accessed July12, 2020, https://barnabybarford.co.uk/work/the-battle-of-trafalgar.
[422] Barnaby Barford, *The Good, The Bad and The Belle* (2009), accessed July 12, 2020, https://barnabybarford.co.uk/work/the-good-the-bad-the-belle-2009.
[423] Barnaby Barford, *Private Lives* (2008), accessed July 12, 2020, https://barnabybarford.co.uk/work/private-lives.

surface of childhood innocence meets the realities of a world gone morally awry. Darkly satirical, Barford's narratives convey the deplorable in human behaviour; nasty, calculating, violent and greedy, they offer a timely reminder of the pitfalls of neoliberal ideologies and our systemic denial of a failing system.[424]

Byrne also uses discarded porcelain figurines as a form of political subversion. Undermining the idyllic symbolism of these charming figures and their history, Byrne physically interferes with their surfaces—adding new cautionary motifs such as polished gas masks, yellow hi-vis vests and black masks of anonymity. More so than Barford, Byrne's works scrutinise the global consequences of empire, colonisation and conservative politics, yet they also accentuate the citizen's dissent by means of ideological protests and mass resistance. Seeking to inform her audience on the consequences of our denial, Byrne employs humour, satire and parody to confront the viewer and overstate the issue at hand.[425] Particularly, she highlights the absurdity of the West's egalitarian ideologies and their foundations—alluding to the endless impacts of neoliberalism's global expansion, while revealing our individual and collective contribution to its preservation.

Harrison's series *Broken* (2010–2014)[426] utilises found ornaments as a form of social and political examination. Her work transforms figurines of sentimentalised young women, by physically mutilating their surface with acts of brutality—thus dissecting outdated ideals of female presentation and deportment. By engaging with these timeless souvenirs of femininity, we are reminded that the capitalist market and the domestic space continue to encourage such values and behaviours.[427] Harrison's macabre interventions force the audience to not only witness the impact of such pressures, but they also remind us that change is futile.

Suburban Gothic Inquiry: The Home as a Space of Conformity, Consumption and Psychological Turmoil

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[424] In Claudia Clare, *Subversive Ceramics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 118.
[425] Inga Walton, "Vicious Figurines: Penny Byrne's Ceramic Advocacy," *Ceramics: Art and Perception* no. 72 (June-August 2008): 21.
[426] Jessica Harrison, *Broken* (2010–2014), personal website, accessed July 12, 2020, https://jessicaharrison.studio/work/broken-ladies.
[427] Maurizia Paolucci, "The British Uncanny: Reusing Surrealist Energies in Jessica Harrison's Art," *engramma* 158 (September 2018), accessed April 13, 2020, http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3484.

Figure 20. Barnaby Barford, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, from the series 'Private Lives', 2008, bone china, porcelain, metal, enamel paint, 27 x 29 cm

A common trope used in the suburban gothic is the child-turned-murderer, as such a proposition represents a corruption of innocence and the family as an idyllic institution. *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (2008) (Figure 20) is an example of such an analogy and of how Barford's perverse sensibility scrutinises the diminishing psychological state of those who conform to the suburban façade. Mary's deadly behaviour is paradoxical and implied. Fashioned in baby pink, she lifts her dress provocatively, behaving in opposition to the sentimental surface of childhood and to that which the figurine and title imply.[428] The young girl could not be trusted as a future mother as she is cooking her own beloved pet lamb. Indicative of her deranged and murderous turn—Mary appears psychologically detached, staring off into the distance, her lamb impaled over an open rotisserie. Although drawn into the mawkish façade of childhood, the viewer soon realises the somewhat perverse reality to the narrative Barford offers. By proposing the corruption of childhood, the audience is left to contemplate the psychological effects of the family and home.

This idea of childhood behaviours being influenced and exploited by the saccharine surface of the ornamental figurine has informed the final three series of my research project's outcomes.

[428] Although providing context for the characters and their unfortunate juxtaposition, the title reminds the audience of nostalgic childhood stories and the more sinister origins of many childhood fables. Nursery rhymes, have a darker intent than mere entertainment. "The Darker Side of Nursery Rhymes," BBC, posted June 11, 2015, accessed April 13, 2020, http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150610-the-dark-side-of-nursery-rhymes.

By physically intervening with the figure's surface and altering the nostalgic values and narratives they connote, I reveal a more unsettling kind of behaviour. It is in the coexistence of the past ideals of childhood virtue and the suburban gothic's uncanny and violent tropes, that the newly fashioned figurines infer the home as a strange and hostile space. By being displayed on crocheted doilies,[429] the readymades are further understood as both important ornamental objects and a representation of outdated middle-class values.

The Kitsch Surface as Unnerving Juxtaposition

Figure 21. Penny Byrne, *Bird Flu H5N6,* 2017, repurposed vintage porcelain figurines, epoxy putty, enamel paints, 14 x 11 x 6 cm.

Byrne's figurines in *Bird Flu H5N6* (2017) (Figure 21) are on the surface kitsch and celebratory, iconising the working class and their ongoing contribution to the family and home. However, the work's title and physical appendages suggest a more unnerving narrative and a

[429] A doily is an ornamental mat which is used for protecting the surface of furniture and displaying decorative objects that convey class and promote conversation. In the 1800s, young Victorian women were expected to have a supply in their hope chest to be used when they set up the family home. Crocheted doilies were common throughout the first several decades of the twentieth century and were considered part of middle-class household etiquette. See Beverly Gordon, "The Push-Pull of Doilies: Revered, Reviled, and Reconceived," *Piecework Magazine*, posted January 24, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, https://pieceworkmagazine.com/push-pull-doily/.

cynical analysis of the 2014 Bird Flu outbreak.[430] Upon further contemplation, it becomes evident that the mass-produced figures can also be interpreted as a form of class separation and control. In creating this comparison, Byrne pointedly exposes the reality of the class/wealth divide within neoliberal society and the dangers of modern-day animal farming and the global free-trade market. The addition of two handmade respiratory masks propels the workers into a potentially dystopian future, suggesting that even in the likelihood of contamination they must continue their commitment to the system which provides for them. Furthermore, in analysing *Bird Flu* in the present-day context of COVID-19, Byrne's work takes on an even more disturbing quality, as if gothically warning us not only of the return of a veracious virus, but also that we are implicit in its reoccurrence. Thus, what Byrne's work exposes is the unheeding hypocrisy of neoliberal democracy and the reality of those who pay the price for our collective (yet discriminatory) privilege.

The figurines I have chance encounters with are outdated in the sentiment and values that their surfaces suggest. I specifically select figurines that convey overly sentimental, obedient and innocent behaviours or actions, so as to juxtapose their intent and reveal their absurdity. In doing so, I intended to prompt a moral conundrum in the audience, as they contemplate both their own longing for such manufactured childhood behaviours while realising they are central to the (undue) ramifications of such desires.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images and Objects and Their Neoliberal Fantasies

[430] It is reported that the H5N6 influenza virus originated from China in early May 2014. Beuy Joob and Wiwanitkit Viroj, "H5N6 Influenza Virus Infection, the Newest Influenza," *Asian Pacific Journal of Tropical Biomedicine* 5, no. 6 (June 2015): 434–437, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2221169115000672.

Figure 22. Barnaby Barford, *Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned*, 2010, porcelain, concreate, enamel paint, other media, 13 x 23 x 15 cm.

Barford's unsettling combinations rely upon the audience's repository of hypercommodified Disneyesque representations (saccharine, exaggerated, kind and carefree) as a means to expose our collective and uncritical consumption of such commercialised ideals. By adopting the mass-produced and once popular porcelain figurine, Barford encourages the viewer to reflect upon the commodity object's apparent decorative function and intent. Barford's assault on the audience is further inflated by contrasting the expected and familiar, constructing darkly satirical narratives that intend to shock and unsettle. In *Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned* (2010) (Figure 22), a figure of a young male wearing modern-day apparel holds a large metal pole in one hand and a knife in the other. Behind him is a sweet and harmless-looking female figurine—emphasised by her demure pale green dress and pinafore, and her innocent gesture. Shockingly, she too holds a knife, elevated high, as if about to plunge it into the boy, with her stare directed at the back of the boy's head. Finally, the pair are surrounded by litter and empty alcohol cans, not the expected environment for two such young children. The work is satirical, yet unnerving and slightly melancholic. It is Barford's overlay of adult failure and its realities that throws the viewer into a potentially troubled space of contemplation. His newly iconised tableaux therefore thrusts the viewer into a polemical assault on the sugary images of childhood fantasy that we uncritically consume, all the while corrupting such ideals through our own vulgarity.

It is the specificity of tone and emotional experience within Barford's work, created through the contrast of the familiar and the unexpected, that is most relevant to my own. Like Barford, I aim to position the audience within an uncomfortable space where they are forced to question the consequences of their neoliberal aspirations. Some of my works use humour and shock to

lure the audience while others evoke a melancholic calmness to their ambiguous actions. Specifically, the works imply a duplicity in their implied meaning, and this is used to coerce the audience into questioning their own uncritical consumption of commodity objects and their imbedded neoliberal ideals, and in turn, that which they project onto their supposedly innocent surface.

The Readymade and the Found Object: Hollow Surface Embellishments of the Neoliberal Dream

Harrison physically maims anachronistic commodity objects of "middle-class Englishness" and their associated values to critically examine the lasting hypocrisy and idealised standards that they represent.[431]

[431] Priscilla Frank, "Feminist Artist Gives Porcelain Dolls and Awesomely Grotesque Makeover," *Huffington Post*, last updated December 7, 2017, accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/jessica-harrison_n_4740198?ri18n=true, and Maurizia Paolucci, "The British Uncanny: Reusing Surrealist Energies in Jessica Harrison's Art," *engramma* 158 (September 2018), accessed April 13, 2020, http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3484.

Figure 23. Jessica Harrison, *Roberta*, 2014. Found ceramic, epoxy resin, enamel paint, 21 x 15.5 x 13.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Chris Park.

Roberta (2014) (Figure 23) consists of a stereotypically Western model of beauty and femininity—less English and more Disney princess—with poufy blonde flowing hair and an equally elaborate blue and pink dress. Drawing the viewer in is a hand reaching up, gracefully pulling aside a large flap of bloodied skin to reveal a handmade imitation human skull. It is possibly not the inference to acts of violent self-mutilation that disturb, but rather the uncanny calmness of "Roberta" and the delicate posture she continues to embrace. It is this in-between space that enables the figure to act as a gesture of revolt against the everlasting pressures of female deportment and the feminine ideal. As if driven by madness, yet emotionless to the physical pain that Harrison inflicts, Roberta unmasks herself to potentially unleash society's lasting and systemic burden. Harrison says of her work, "they're not being subjected to this disembowelment, or decapitation; they're actually participating…they're very much initiating

their own demise."[432] This statement assumes Roberta has reclaimed her control. However, by recontextualising early twentieth-century figurines that are simulations of nineteenth-century polite middle-class Englishness, Harrison's gestures expose that the embellished surfaces of feminine ideals and the narratives they promote, are not only fixed in contemporary neoliberal consumer society and the home, but that their escape is as unattainable as it is violent.

I also physically alter the figurines I employ, and I do so to infer (potential) acts of violence—both narratively in the newly formed combinations and as part of the creative process. Like Harrison, in my works it is the suggested stillness and disassociation of the figurines and their respective situations that evokes an unnerving response from the audience. My gestures of revolt juxtapose the exaggerated surface narratives of childhood against the plausibility of the strange and at times disturbing actions suggested. By doing so, I seek to position the audience where they must question if the (child) figurines are the perpetrators or protectors, or like us, are both.

Lastly, as Harrison's figurines remind us, not only have consumer images and commodity objects shaped society's values and our perception of women and their expectations over decades, but they have also continually repackaged them, manufacturing our consent through a smokescreen of illusion.

3.6 Conclusion

This section has examined the works of three contemporary artists who employ outdated decorative readymade and found commodities to physically deface the permanent trappings that such symbolically loaded surfaces preserve. It is in their abruptness that the newly fashioned ornaments critically examine neoliberalism's deceptive exterior and that which society is coerced to strive for. By doing so, the works not only suggest the hypocrisy of neoliberal politics and the American dream, but they also expose the abuse and abandonment of a system that continues to promise the impossible.

By outlining the visual languages, forms and methods that are used within my studio research, this chapter has explained how kitsch, the readymade and found object inform the interrogation of contemporary neoliberalism through its core intermediary, the American dream and its

[432] Angelique Joy, "Delicate Hearts & Bleeding Porcelain: Sculptures by Jessica Harrison," Beautiful Bizarre: Art, Culture, Couture, posted August 3, 2019, accessed April 12, 2020, https://beautifulbizarre.net/2019/08/03/sculptures-by-jessica-harrison/.

suburban façade. To argue the importance of early 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic as methodology for a more profound interrogation of the present-day neoliberal condition, I analysed two seminal American/suburban gothic films. This overview identified the influence of a distinct approach to visually conveying tone as to examine the disillusionment and concerns of the times. Finally, these expressions were contextualised through five contemporary artists who I propose each successfully extrapolate the sensitivities and tonal complexities of the early 1980s and 1990s, but from within the present-day neoliberal condition. Next, I will review my studio outcomes and clarify how they address the specific aims and intentions of this project.

Chapter 4: Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Gothic Interventions and the Longing for a Sentimental Childhood[433]

I'm hoping to find escape routes in the mediated past through which we might exit—not into some liberation myth of an enlightenment future, but rather to back to the present where we might actually make a difference.
—Lynn Spigel[434]

I have created over one hundred artworks during my PhD candidature. However, in this chapter, I will only analyse the five series that address and realise the specific intentions and aims of this project. The main goal for the studio outcomes has been to utilise the suburban gothic as a methodology and a specific mode of inquiry into the globally spreading neoliberal American dream. The concern was to appropriate or simulate readymade objects with cheap materials, such as papier-mâché, cardboard, and plaster of Paris. I then worked towards developing the more tonally detailed qualities of a 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic, before exploiting more appropriate readymade and found objects, so as to create newly formed associations as modes of neoliberal capitalist revolt. Finally, I sought to formulate the appropriate language and tone as to balance the swaying contradictions of the suburban façade. In this chapter, each body of work will be discussed and the core priorities and objectives outlined, before undertaking a critical analysis of the outcomes in response to the stated aims of the research.

Research Aims

The purpose of this chapter is to remind the reader of the research aims and to clarify how they are individual forms of neoliberal inquiry, while also discussing how they are engaged with and expressed through the studio results. The first research aim relates to the central premise of this project: that the aspirational middle-class suburban milieu and its commodified good life are used by the governing elite as a core mediator for the contemporary neoliberal American dream. Specifically, the first aim focuses on how the suburban gothic can be used as a mode of critical inquiry to expose the ideological, political and economic contradictions of the supposedly democratic neoliberal American dream. As outlined in Chapter 1, the suburban gothic acts as a dark and uncanny opposition to this utopian dream, because it scrutinises the

[433] The title of this chapter draws on the title of screen cultures scholar Lynn Spigel's investigation into post–World War Two America and its expanding media and visual culture. Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
[434] Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 405.

idyllic surface of the suburbs and its materialistic lifestyle through metaphoric, psychological, and fictional dramatisation. Fundamental to the suburban gothic's approach, and therefore this aim, is the way in which it uses one or more of its four core characteristics—nostalgia, the home, advertising and entertainment, and the television—to reveal their (opposing) influence in the construction of the suburban fantasy. Within the context of this research, the suburban gothic and its characteristics are employed to expose this incongruity through a particular visual language and polemical sensibility.

The second aim relates more specifically to the seemingly innocent and emotive nature of the visual language used in the construction of the dream, and more precisely to the suburbs' idyllic façade. Because the consumer image and its façade purposely expresses a jovial language of achievable fantasy to manipulate audiences, the studio outcomes seek to subvert this deceptive veneer. The works therefore engage with the optimistic surfaces of kitsch and nostalgia to create an unsettling juxtaposition. This is achieved through melancholia, pity, the grotesque and dark humour, and it is aimed that this will emphasise the contradiction and futility of the contemporary neoliberal dream. Such an approach does not intend to reveal the artifice of the dream's surface, but rather the reality of both surfaces coexisting in an unsettling liminality. Accordingly, it is hoped that the viewer is further situated within a liminal space where they come to realise this unsettling coexistence and are therefore positioned within a moral predicament. It is anticipated that as the viewer contemplates their own dismissal of kitsch's sweet surface, and in turn, their nostalgic longing for the past.

The third aim relates further to the audience. A primary goal of this project is to facilitate viewer contemplation and to promote further criticality within the individual regarding their contribution to the exploitative neoliberal system. To achieve this, the research aims to create a polemic between individual feelings about the failure and disillusionment in the neoliberal dream, its narratives and ideals, and the unregulated and uncritical consumption of consumer images and objects that perpetuate the fantasy. It is hoped that this antagonistic tone will engage audiences in greater criticality of the consumer images and objects they consume and the neoliberal ideologies that such representations continue to preserve. Accordingly, it is aimed that this insight also exposes the inability to ever achieve the lasting promises that home ownership and the idealised good life promote.

The fourth aim relates to nostalgic commodified icons of suburbia in the form of readymade and found objects. Alongside the consumer images that sell the nostalgic narratives and ideals

of the American dream and the suburbs are the kitsch objects that have come to signify the outdated aspirational bourgeoisie suburban lifestyle. Through the chance encounter with devalued readymade and found objects (such as obsolete decorative figurines, taxidermy and other suburban commodity icons) and their physical disfiguration, it is anticipated that the unfulfilled neoliberal consumer narratives and principles their surfaces uphold will become visible.

The fifth and final aim relates to the politics of the consumer image and its ability to psychologically influence social learning and behaviours through prolonged consumption. The intent of this aim is to reveal the persuasive authority of the consumer image over the individual and society while it manufactures their consent through a veneer of illusion. It is important for this thesis to illuminate the lasting neoliberal intent behind what are considered predominantly as fictional images of fantasy and mass entertainment, and that are therefore perceived as powerless to effect consumers and their day-to-day reality. Because these images are seldom recognised for their persuasive power and long-term effects, this PhD project aims to expose how social influence is progressively carried out through the unregulated and uncritical consumption of consumer images. As a result, the studio outcomes seek to reveal how consumer images can inform an individual's social behaviour and values, and in turn, their desire for the undemocratic ideals of the neoliberal American dream and its untenable consumer lifestyle. It is anticipated that once perceived, individuals can more acutely contemplate their consumption and the influence these consumer images have on their desire for the neoliberal good life.

Now that I have outlined the project's five research aims, I will evaluate the five final bodies of studio research against these criteria. This will explain the critical methods, strategies and languages used as they relate to the studio methodologies outlined in Chapter 1 and the contextual review of Chapter 3. This will be undertaken in three sections: Even Our Dreams Are Fake; Ruin; and You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It Too, It's Going to Be a Long Night, and Welcome to the Dreamhouse.

4.1 Even Our Dreams Are Fake

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.
——Jane[435]

The following section will introduce the first body of work arising from the studio research. It will trace the evolution of these primary visual explorations, their methodology and outcomes, and demonstrate how my studio research progressed into a targeted interrogation of the contemporary suburban façade and the more complex mechanisms of influence at play. At this preliminary stage of the research, there were five priorities: to employ kitsch readymade commodity objects that were icons of a sentimental American suburbia; to use their associated symbolism to expose their artifice; to appropriate them through imperfect casting methods and handmade processes; to use two to three elements within the frame to create uncanny juxtapositions; and to develop a specific balance in tension and tone to reveal the discontent I was feeling toward these commodity objects and their hollow promises which inherently promote neoliberal narratives. Achieving this distinctive tone was the key focus and core challenge for the series. By undermining the persuasive authority of the consumer image, *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* seeks to uncover its convincing trickery and therefore how it produces the individual's consent through a thinly veiled fantasy. These primary goals shaped the basis of my research's objectives and they will therefore be discussed in relation to the final five aims.

Critical Reflection against Stated Aims

Within this first body of work—a brightly coloured monochrome still life series—several core suburban gothic characteristics were referenced from the already established suburban gothic films. This included the suburbs' kitsch veneer, white picket fence, the family pet canary, the suburban home, and the omnipresent television.[436]

Suburban Gothic Inquiry

While at this initial stage of my research I had not yet identified the specificity of suburban gothic as the core methodology, I was intuitively referencing it. In particular, the psychological states and emotions being addressed were the feelings evoked by danger coming from within

[435] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), 13.
[436] These elements refer specifically to *Poltergeist, Blue Velvet* and *Edward Scissorhands*.

the home; the anxiety caused by striving for and maintaining the suburban façade; and the home as a site of conflicting states of dream and nightmare. To bare the domestic as a space of conformity, consumption and material entrapment, I juxtaposed the familiar with incongruous elements to reveal the suburbs' decaying surface, and in turn, the declining mental state of those inhabiting this liminal space. This process sought a conflict within the work that focused on the psychological manifestations within this staged setting, while also unsettling the viewer's understanding of their own entangled role in a much larger flawed and deteriorating system.

An example of how this is achieved is through distorting the idyllic and familiar. Commodity objects, suburban consumer behaviours and their neoliberal values are all scrutinised through a pastiche of past surfaces: the now obsolete and useless Apple iPod; a melting face liquidating from underneath a platinum blonde wig; and the welcoming of nature and its subsequent fumigation. All of these associations aim to disclose a strangely serene, yet progressively rupturing, suburban setting. These surreal moments act as fragmented narratives that are intended to provoke criticality about the ease with which one can unknowingly be enslaved into maintaining the suburban veneer and the psychological toll that this takes on those who strive for and inhabit this environment. Although this series doesn't directly portray a haunted or possessed house, it establishes the scene for such future and "other-worldly" events.

The television is fundamental to the surface representations that enter the home. While I wasoriginally focussed on revealing the artifice of the iconic suburban commodities that the television and its consumer images fetishise, the priority of the series was to create a delicate balance in tone to contradict their surface values and ideological intent. *Untitled #5* (

Plate 5) became a turning point in the research as it opened new ways of thinking about how I construct ideas about the suburban façade. By my uncovering of the artifice of the objects' ideological surface (that of shimmering imitation consumer images), the television's static noise was exposed for what it is—an inescapable suspended simulation and a mechanism of surveillance and control. In doing so, the television was revealed as an uncanny conduit between dimensions where neoliberal monsters can freely enter and exit the home. This work's dualism established the specificity of the suburban gothic as the appropriate methodology, while it also unveiled the uncanny nature of the television.

The Kitsch and Nostalgic Surface and Their Unnerving Juxtaposition

To simulate the sentimental feeling of a past suburbia that is endlessly reworked and appropriated throughout postmodern and present-day society, I ascribed the language of a nostalgic 1950s and 1970s American suburban kitsch aesthetic. By manipulating a pastiche of kitsch and nostalgic surfaces and their values, I achieved one of the aims for this series—creating an unnerving juxtaposition that emphasises the contradiction and hollowness of the neoliberal dream.

Utilising the sweet and sentimental exterior of kitsch and exploiting its surface exposes that inherent in its assumed naiveté is its ability to control the masses and to reduce more complex understandings of culture to mass-produced commodities within the neoliberal capitalist system. This incongruity is expressed in *Nature's Golden Goodness* (Plate 7) as it engages the past and iconic ritual of displaying a birdbath to invite not only nature, but also other suburban inhabitants, to admire one's well-kept veneer. Instead of native birds, the readymade juxtaposition depicts cute ducklings who are not bathing in water, but rather in Kellogg's cornflakes. The affectionate nature of the ducklings connotes the love for adorable childhood pets and defines one of the core characteristics of kitsch—cuteness and society's perversion to fetishise its surface pleasure. While the ducklings' uncanny double draws attention, the deformed two-headed 'animal thing' invites the audience to not only pity the anthropomorphised and malformed, but also to deliberate that in their failing cuteness, they represent the endless manufacturing of romanticised childhood images and their longing. In the following series, these ideas of a sentimentalised childhood and its deceiving nature became a key focus expressed through taxidermy and then later decorative and ornamental commodity objects.

While it was not necessarily clear at the outset, I realised that I had begun to utilise the device of nostalgia to successfully express my research concerns. The contradictory mechanism of nostalgia is identified as a principal strategy of the suburban gothic as it evokes the confliction of one's own past and the ability to reconcile it with the present.[437] An example of this is the lurid colours assigned in the works as they are intentionally indicative of 1970s Tupperware

[437] As already confirmed, a core convention of the gothic is to juxtapose the past against the present, causing it to erupt—conjuring anxieties, repressed memories, and their return to the present. Nostalgia, however, longs for the return of a past and idealised memory that isn't lived but is rather experienced through romanticised representations. The more we long for a past memory, the further we are removed through temporality; and past, present, and future can collide in a flattened surface image and its representations.

commercials,[438] or of then fashionable kitchen appliance advertisements. It is aimed that the colours playfully attract the audience and nostalgically reference a humbler period when brilliant colours were desired in the home. Also kitsch in nature, the monochrome palette was utilised to exaggerate and flatten the past and to reinvent it within the present—a reduced, idealised and pleasing surface that is easily consumed—before the certainty of its contents and their newly ascribed meanings are realised. The series' colourful monochromatic façade is intended as both a reference to the artificiality of the mid-twentieth century consumer veneer and of the consumer's desire to achieve and maintain it.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images and Objects and Their Neoliberal Fantasies

As already articulated, the core goal for this body of work was to develop a particular tension that would be achieved through the readymade objects found and selected. Specifically, the objective was to express a nuanced polemical sensibility in tone and a feeling where the elements were always teetering on the edge of psychological and emotional conflict—simultaneously expressing both failure and achievement as well as disillusionment and a pathetic optimism. The purpose of this polarity was to create a suspension of disbelief while also revealing the hidden neoliberal illusion and its deceptive finish. To do this, surreal elements such as dripping fluids, suspended and botched taxidermy,[439] hollow replica commodities, and fog are used as symbols to oppose the artificial and idyllic expectations of the suburbs. The earliest works are more pitiful and melancholic in tone, while subsequent ones evoke a light humour to induce such viewer realisations. This meticulous balance also creates an uncanniness, and consequently, the audience can perceive the dream's duality and that it exists in an uncomfortable liminality. Alongside this specific sense, I was also forming the fictional world in which this suburban gothic narrative would occur. Neither American nor Australian, it is intended to be somewhere strangely familiar yet ambiguous, an artificial fantasy and an anywhere suburban milieu. This infers not only to the suburbs' ubiquity, but also to the increasing similarities between the present day neoliberal American dream and its

[438] "1980 Tupperware Commercial," YouTube video 0:30, uploaded by deputay, May 30, 2012, accessed June 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0umSUhWebiQ.
[439] Botched taxidermy is a term coined by British scholar Steve Baker as a theorisation of the postmodern taxidermy animal in art and where taxidermy botched an element of the animal body or got it "wrong" in one way or another. Steve Baker, "Something's Gone Wrong Again," *Antennae*: *Botched Taxidermy* 7 (Autumn 2008): 4, accessed August 13, 2020, http://www.antennae.org.uk/back-issues-2008/4583459061.

expansive influence on the West—particularly Australia and its own increasingly inequitable dream.

The Readymade and the Found Object and the Hollow Surface Embellishments of the Neoliberal Dream

When commencing my studio research, I was initially most concerned with appropriating or simulating readymade objects with cheap, readily available materials, such as papier-mâché, cardboard, and plaster of Paris. I was exploring the relationship between the found readymades—which were commodified icons of suburbia—the handmade replica or simulation, and notions of the "real" and "fake." I was questioning how these objects came to epitomise the American dream and the utopian surface of the suburbs, and how I could draw attention to the loss of distinction between their reality and the illusion they manufacture.

This inquiry drove the need to appropriate the "original" object and I came to understand this was for two reasons. Firstly, I was engaging with the found readymade commodity object and its handmade imitation as a personal retaliation against the mass production and consumption of commodities, and secondly, as a strategy to infer the object's corruption. Through its replication, the act of physical manipulation exposes the icon's hollowness and the nostalgia for its own existence. The appropriated forms I made therefore aimed to disclose the unseen and to interrupt the overstated surface narratives inherent in the object's representation and that preserve the suburban fantasy.

The readymade commodities utilised in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* consist of past and sentimental American icons—a pastiche of the 1950s through to the early 2000s. Because they are replicas of outdated commodities, my readymade 'gestures' seek to question their past ideological and thus broader political value—a revolt against the past, the present, and the unknown future. In contrasting them with the contemporary, its system of capitalist production and neoliberal ideals, my gestures aim to reveal the commodity's long-term influence and affect. This is achieved by relating the object to the time of the subject (consumer/artist) (i.e., 1950s platinum blonde wig) to the present day. The juxtaposition thus exposes what is concealed and that which connects the two. In turn, this causes a reanimation between object and subject (viewer), as individuals are seduced by the superficial surface of the 'gesture' before the understanding of the object/subject relationship is disrupted. Within this revolt, it is aimed that a delay is formed before the viewer contemplates their own unconscious relationship

to the commodity and the long-standing perception of the suburban dream as an egalitarian 'truth'.

This use of delay is central to the readymade's political interrogation, as is its affect. While some juxtapositions were not originally clear in their political intent, their affect and delay were always intended to pause the viewer's immediate consumption of both image and object. The level of unease applied to individual readymades is unique, and thus the momentary delay for each work is anticipated to be distinct. These idiosyncratic moments are critical for establishing dissonance, the reorganisation of viewers' accepted understanding of what these commodities signify, and what their true purpose is. While the found object is a method of political inquiry and intuitively applied throughout this body of work, it was only later recognised as a principal priority in my research. Therefore, this aim will be discussed in detail when analysing the studio outcomes for *Ruin* and the subsequent three series, as it was through these works that the found object was to become better understood as a significant visual language and form of neoliberal inquiry.

The Consumer Image: A Persuasive Authority

My studio outcomes draw upon the tropes, mechanisms and aesthetics of advertising to challenge their neoliberal intentions, and thus to provoke criticality about the consumer image and its influence. As discussed in Chapter 2, central to this authority is the consumer image's ability to conceal its intent. Disguised as mere entertainment, the consumer image sits within the liminal space between reality and fantasy, and this is what allows it to so effectively persuade. This effect is conveyed through the oppositional states of reality and imaginary and the uncanny. By exaggerating the consumer image's fantasy while at the same time illuminating its trickery, the gap in our perception is exposed. Excreting liquid drips from an iconic platinum blonde wig (a reference to the suburban female archetype) (Plate 3) and puppeteer strings infer the inferior and now obsolete Apple iPod is a worthless, yet still controlling, toy (

Plate 6). Also suggested, as Chomksy argued, is that this dyad or pairing of human and technology has a powerful hold on a globally networked consumer society through its presentation of the 'perfect' lifestyle. I perceive the iPods and their white screen of death

(WSOD)[440] as a metaphor for the monopolised mass media, communication technology industries and the digitally networked global system as structures of neoliberal power and manipulation.[441] What I hope is apparent in the fragile and pathetic iPod replicas is that the commodity, the consumer image, and the advancements of communication technology are designed to never satisfy, and that the commodity's seductive surface exists only to obscure its inconceivable deception.

Conclusion

This discussion of the first series has outlined the evolution of the studio research and assessed its outcomes against the stated aims. By summarising the initial priorities for this body of visual outcomes, I have delineated how the research aims came to form a targeted suburban gothic interrogation into the idyllic suburban milieu and the more intricate devices driving its façade. I explained the importance of deciphering the appropriate balance of tone and that this has established the foundations for not only this body of work, but for the research outcomes as a whole. *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* has clarified how this defining priority and specific polemical sensibility in tone positions the audience in an oppositional and uncanny space of contemplation and transformation. Finally, the stage for this fictional suburban gothic narrative has been set, and the foundations for the research's neoliberal suburban gothic inquiry explained.

[440] A white screen pf death, or WSoD, refers to the blank white screen that occurs when Apple products, specifically handheld devices, have stop working due to issues with their operating system. See Vangie Beal, "WSoD—White Screen of Death," Webopedia, accessed August 2, 2020, https://www.webopedia.com/TERM/W/white_screen_of_death.html.

[441] This notion can be further exemplified in relation to three recent and historically defining global privacy breaches; the Facebook data collection scandal, the Cambridge Analytica data scandal and the Edward Snowdon exposé. See Jessie Hempel, "Facebook in the Age of the Big Tech Whistleblower: It Was No Secret That Cambridge Analytica Was Manipulating People With Big Data. But it Took a Former Employee's Reckoning to Provoke Outrage," *Wired*, posted March 19, 2018, accessed August 2, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/whistleblowers-on-cambridge-analytica-and-the-question-of-big-data/.

PLATES

Even Our Dreams Are Fake

Plate 1. Amy Carkeek, *Untitled #1*, 2012, archival inkjet print

Plate 2. Amy Carkeek, *Untitled #2*, 2012, archival inkjet print

Plate 3. Amy Carkeek, *Untitled #3*, 2012, archival inkjet print

Plate 4. Amy Carkeek, *Untitled #4*, 2012, archival inkjet print

Plate 5. Amy Carkeek, *Untitled #5*, 2012, archival inkjet print

Plate 6. Amy Carkeek, *Darling, Why Don't You Play with Your iPuppets?*, 2013, archival inkjet print

Plate 7. Amy Carkeek, *Nature's Golden Goodness*, 2014, archival inkjet print

4.2 Ruin

We never see completely the ramifications of fantasy itself—its costs, its rewards, its effects…the ramifications remain always on the horizon, yet to be discovered, which allows the spectator to retain some desire and avoid fully committing to the fantasy.
—Todd McGowan"[442]

In this section, the processes, analysis, and discoveries in the second series, *Ruin*, is discussed in light of the PhD project's specific criteria. The main intent for this body of work was to further scrutinise strategies of artifice but with an emphasis on exploring fantasy and desire through the sentimental construction of childhood while still utilising the language of kitsch and a melancholic tone. Although considered ultimately unsuccessful, *Ruin* formed the basis of my understanding for how best to visually express the nuanced relationship between the readymade and found objects used in the work and the void that these objects of nostalgia and longing conceal. Specifically, I focussed on four core visual explorations in this series. These are that the narrative is situated in an uncanny and liminal world that stages its performed behaviours on a plinth; that I use pathetic and malformed taxidermy that are souvenirs of longing and hold an enduring life-like presence of (un)dead childhood pets; that I explore the collapse of the past/present as well as interior/exterior dichotomies; and that I engage with readymade and found commodity objects that contextualise the manufacturing of neoliberal childhood narratives.

In relation to the neoliberal dream, this series sees the expression of a new matrix of concerns that relate to fantasy and desire and the collision of the past within the present. I came to further conceptualise this notion through reviewing *Blue Velvet* and Lynch's capacity to present audiences with an alternative fantasy world where the deceptive power of desire becomes visible.[443] This development enabled me to perceive my suburban world another way. In *Ruin*, I saw that I needed to invest in the neoliberal fantasy by conveying the collision of the old world (the optimism of industrialisation) within the new (a postmodern spectacle and a pastiche of artificial surfaces), creating a third world: a cold and infinite space where the internal and external are conflated with both the past and present.

Suburban Gothic Inquiry

[442] Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 21.
[443] McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch*, 23.

Ruin adopts the suburban gothic's use of the home as an uncanny space of conformity and psychological entrapment, and it aims to emphasise its all-consuming and illusive nature. In this series, I further developed the purpose of taxidermy. Specifically, I expanded these objects as pathetic characters frozen in time—suspended within the liminal and fixed between two worlds, perpetually anticipating the fulfilment of the suburban fantasy. I conceptualised the plinth as a classical stage for these neoliberal narratives. The plinth is intended to operate as both an iconising of the past and a fitting analogy for the artificial and performed expectations within the suburban home. It references status and wealth; however, the kitsch nature of the impoverished papier-mâché replica seeks to ridicule the suburbanites. It was through this series that I began to further consider Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's modern interpretation of the uncanny and the human ability for self-denial of a given situation and its inherent psychological impact. The objective was thus to anthropomorphise these uncanny "animal things." The narrative world I was pursuing is one where the gothic creatures are living with a delusional level of self-denial within their pitiful realities. For example, the two-headed mouse struggles, yet persists, to climb to the top of the ornamental stage where the objects of idyllic childhood narratives belong. While the taxidermy pets encapsulate many relevant ideas in relation to the suburban gothic, they are domesticated undead creatures that are allegorical of repression and repressed memories that recur within the suburban home. Purposely positioning the taxidermy within these sentimental narratives of childhood, I aimed for these pathetic characters to feel as if they were trapped in a void where time stands still and the anxieties of striving for and achieving the suburban dream endlessly repeat.

The Kitsch Surface as Unnerving Juxtaposition

My experimentation in *Ruin* approached the characteristics of kitsch and its saccharine surface differently to the previous series. In particular, *Ruin* used kitsch and its unassertive veneer of sentimentality to aggravate the romanticisation of childhood stories. Specifically, I contemplated the seeds of the suburban dream being planted and nurtured throughout childhood and how a certain combination of kitsch elements could emphasise this. I have used sentimentality in this series as a mechanism to subvert the hidden ideologies of the nostalgically burdened taxidermy characters. The reason for using this mechanism was to exploit the viewer's emotions, particularly through the malformed domesticated 'pets' with their implicit helplessness. Furthermore, through my tapping into of the audiences' acceptance of this

sentiment and its melancholic yet romanticised façade, viewers start to contemplate the emptiness of the neoliberal dream and their own endless pursuit of its impossible fulfilment.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and the Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images and Objects and Their Neoliberal Fantasies

Throughout all the works, a polemical sensibility in tone is intended to express my disillusionment in the ideals of the contemporary neoliberal dream. Within this series I use readymade and found objects of childhood desire in a liminal space bathed in cold light. The goal was to reveal the depth to the fantasy's influence and its imminent disappointment. While *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* acted as a darkly humorous yet slightly gloomy gothic warning of the fraying suburban veneer, *Ruin* explores the consequences of fulfilling one's desire and of fully entering the neoliberal fantasy. In the cold blue void, there is no hope and no future. The series is intended to reference Hedge's "cult of distraction" as the taxidermy characters are suspended in search of a past that never existed and an unspoiled future that is impossible to obtain.

The Readymade and the Found Object and the Hollow Surface Embellishments of the Neoliberal Dream

The purpose of the readymade is as an expression of "gestures of revolt" against the acceleration of neoliberalism. This is achieved specifically through affect and delay. It was through making *Ruin* that I came to better comprehend how the lost and devalued object can exemplify its (traumatic) past life, and through its finding and combination, be exploited to expose its pretence. This was explored in the series through the taxidermy characters and their uncanny duality (simultaneously dead and alive). Moreover, the "animal things" further personify the found object's past life,[444] its correlation to imagined tales of childhood and our desire for the animal's preservation. Because the "animal thing" is only possible due to its death, the violence of this act is embodied in the taxidermy characters deformed yet romanticised surface. Consumed by our desire to relive the sweet innocence of childhood, the taxidermy I adopt are an embodiment of both our longing for the past as well as its imminent

[444] It should be mentioned that the taxidermy are also readymade commodities. They were purchased from the internet and made in China and Australia. Also, I must clarify that unlike deVille and Morgan, I am not interested in creating my own taxidermy from found animals, but rather see their creation as a commodity (for sale globally through the advancement of the internet and digital technologies) as a significant case in point of that even in their death, animals are further reduced to commodities for the spread of neoliberal ideologies.

demise. In their strange new positionings, the bunny, two-headed mouse and featherless canary can be seen to create an allegory of despair and a longing for a departed childhood, while at the same time revealing the impossibility of such an unremitting fantasy. Further to the liminality of the uncanny creatures is their inherent state of being mutually both lost and found. In this unison, the 'animal things' simultaneously represent a void in the contemporary neoliberal world and the romanticised 'thing' which is found to conceal it.

The Consumer Image: A Persuasive Authority

Also central to *Ruin* was to reveal that even in the innocence of childhood we are not free from the neoliberal system and its influence. By using anthropomorphised found objects that embody childhood and its idealised histories—a metaphoric decorative porcelain swan, and children's story books that perpetuate neoliberal tales of fantasy—I wanted to draw attention to this perversion of childhood and in doing so, slowly confront the audience with the reality that even in this early stage of development we are being primed and persuaded to willingly prolong the neoliberal illusion.

Conclusion

Ruin is effective in scrutinising the strategies of artifice, neoliberal corruption and the manufacturing of childhood ideals, which is achieved predominantly through the vehicles of the readymade and found object. However, overall, I deemed the work as unsuccessful. While it aligned with the suburban gothic as a methodology, I felt the series was too far removed from the previous kitsch and unhinged suburban world I had created in the first series which more accurately expressed the sensibility I was seeking. Specifically, this relates to the desired mechanism of polemical tone. *Ruin* is dominated by a melancholic tone that isn't polemical, as it lacks the necessary duality to lure the audience with the dream's paradoxical optimism. Although the work creates an intense dispirited atmosphere that forces the viewer to contemplate the emptiness of the neoliberal fantasy, the balance is skewed. This pitiful sorrow thrusts the taxidermy characters into failure, therefore not conveying the desired oscillating tension and the dream's antithetical nature. Consequently, I realised I needed to emphasise this balance in subsequent works as it was fundamental to the sensibility I needed to express.

The final work I made in the series proved to be instructive. *She Wasn't Sure What She Was Looking at Anymore* (Plate 11) uses a found decorative porcelain swan, an object that made me

consider the role of domestic ornaments as unquestioned commodified embodiments of both the purity and deceit of childhood. This work would be the initiation of the following three series and of a different approach to the readymade as an icon of suburbia and its handling. Finally, one of the key findings of *Ruin* was that rather than observing the dream from outside as in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake,* it was important to step inside the fantasy. Once inside, a liminal world is created where internal desires of longing and the realisation of the fantasy's failure are externalised. In *Ruin*, the betrayal of childhood collides with hope, not for the future, but our endless longing for a more promising past. It is this realisation that would subsequently lead to the following series use of ornamental figurines of idyllic childhood behaviours which would be physically manipulated to exaggerate the unsettling consequences of such longing and desire.

PLATES

Ruin

Plate 8. Amy Carkeek, *Waiting Seemed to Take Forever*, 2016, archival inkjet print

Plate 9. Amy Carkeek, *All That Remained Was Persuasion*, 2016, archival inkjet print

Plate 10. Amy Carkeek, *A Conversation We Should Have Had Earlier*, 2016, archival inkjet print

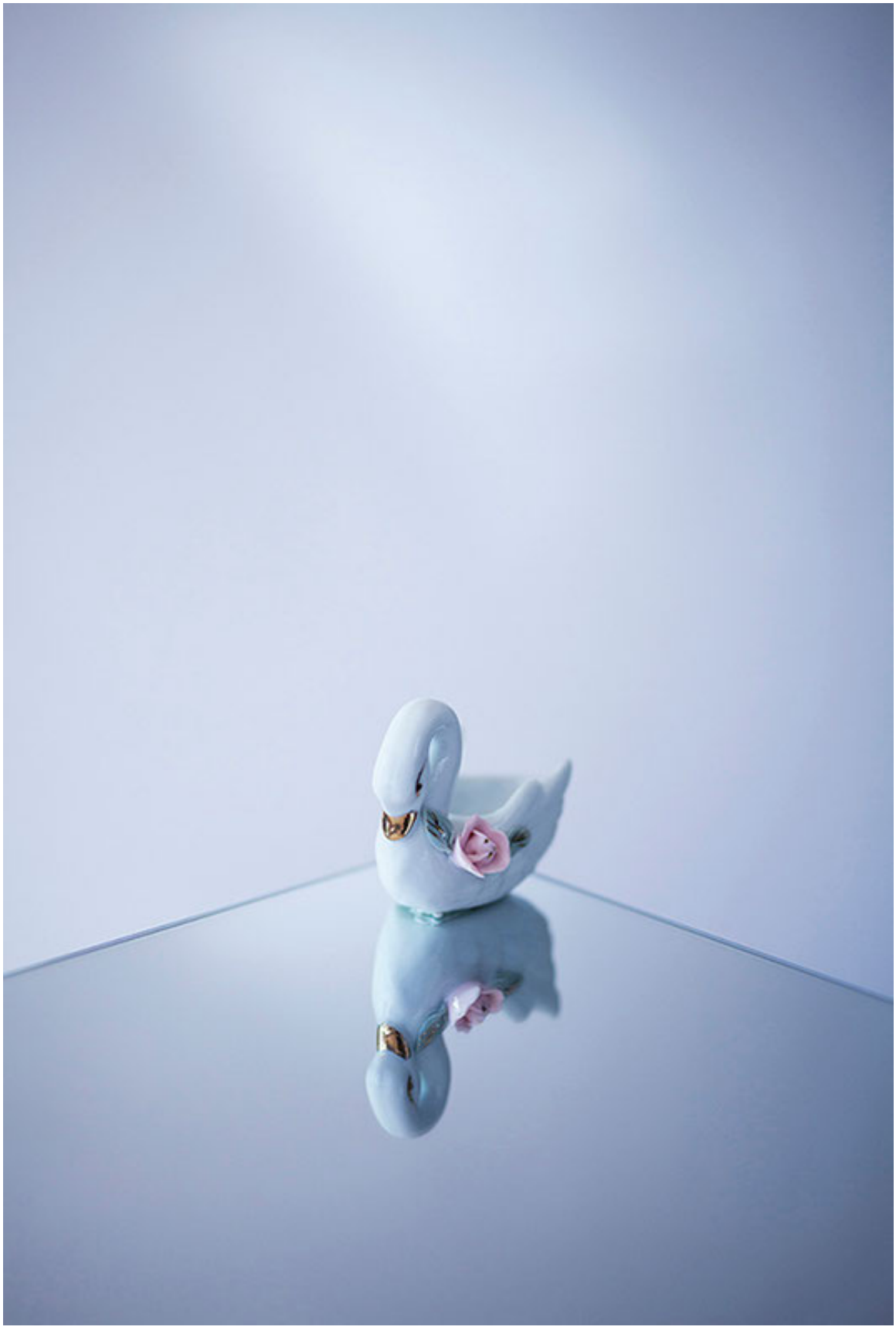

Plate 11. Amy Carkeek, *She Wasn't Sure What She Was Looking at Anymore*, 2016, archival inkjet print

4.3 You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It Too, It's Going to Be a Long Night, and Welcome to the Dreamhouse

...such anxieties revolve around the central problem of keeping childhood separate from adulthood.
—Lynn Spigel[445]

To rectify the tonal imbalance of *Ruin*, and to exaggerate the incomprehensibility of more recent present-day neoliberal politics,[446] the subsequent works started to cultivate a darker and more cynical tone that would be juxtaposed with found objects that are also commodified and saccharine embodiments of a romanticised childhood. Similarly to *Ruin*, this contrast would be achieved through the uncanny as it is a vehicle for the human propensity for self-denial of a given situation and the subsequent psychological impact. This gothic characteristic is discussed throughout the following analysis as relevant.

The following section will review the final three bodies of studio research and will clarify how they have effectively interrogated contemporary neoliberalism and the suburban façade. All three series are analysed together as they explore the same ideas but have slightly different emphases. Significant to this iteration of studio outcomes is the specifics of 1980s suburban gothic, its dramatisation of the suburban-dream-turned-nightmare trope and its focus on child as protagonist turned murderer/vigilante. Also core was refining the approach to the found object, its chance encounter and its newly formed readymade combination as a gesture of neoliberal rebellion. To achieve this, I deemed it necessary to reengage with was the handmade processes of the first series. However, I did not want to appropriate the found object and reference the simulacra as I had previously, but rather, I wanted to physically intervene in the object's past life and reveal its liminality and instilled psychic state. Similarly to before, my intervention would be left visible, so as to reveal the corruption of the surface, its implied connotations and neoliberal intent. Lastly, in creating a more tonally precise suburban gothic interrogation, I aimed for the audience to be more intensely situated in a delayed state of psychological conflict as their relationship to the commodity object is challenged and the viewer positioned in a more unsettling moral dilemma.

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[445] Lynn Spigel, "Seducing the Innocent: Childhood and Television in Postwar America," in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 211.
[446] The first work from these three series (*Little boy blue*) was created just days after Trump was elected on November 6, 2016. All three series were made in the early stages of Trump's presidency 2016–2018 and what some critics said at the time was the beginning of the end of Western democracy. See Ben Wright, "Does Trump Win Mark the End for Liberal Democracy?, *BBC News*, posted November 11, 2016, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/37949669.

Chronological Overview

The first series, *You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It Too*, focuses on the uncanny liminality I felt the decorative figures sat within: an idealised moment in childhood and an allusion to a past that never existed. In physically violating their surface (by removing fixed elements or adding handmade appendages), I wanted to intensify the idea that the ornaments were symbolic of a strange collision between the past and present, while drawing attention to our ability to deny such a situation. While this focus continues in the following two series, other elements are prioritised.

In *It's Going to Be a Long Night*, I returned to *Poltergeist* and the violation of the sterile middle-class suburban inhabitants through child as "Other," violence, the uncanny and the abject (in particular, the concealing of mouths and excretion of bodily fluids). In doing so, I aimed to leave the audience in a state of unease, uncertain if the ornaments (as commodity objects and a reference to childhood) are the perpetrators, or victims, of neoliberalism's inherent acts of violence and control.

The final series, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, focused more intensely on the chance encounter and the found object, the suburban dream's "narratives of longing," and our desire for a manufactured and romanticised childhood, as advocated through the commodity object. Rather than emphasise the hollowness of this desire as I did in *Ruin*, or convey innate acts of violence as in *It's Going to be a Long Night*, I instead chose to amplify the disturbing undertone of our collective delusion. Through encountering objects that were indicative of a particularly passive and "feminine" childhood, my objective was to assertively probe the sentimental embellishments of kitsch and its more grotesque undertones.

Critical Reflection against Stated Aims

Suburban Gothic Inquiry

The suburban gothic's focus in these three series was to refine the staging and coexistence of the suburban dream/nightmare trope and the psychological entrapment of the home. Specifically, I wanted to emphasise this through the demonic and possessed home and child as "Other." The physical interventions of individual surfaces and their implied connotations became a manifestation of such tropes: A replica mandolin is replaced with a machine gun, a bed full of puppies becomes a massacre site, and two children feed on each other's brains. These allegories are further extended through the metaphorical silencing of mouths and the

concealment of vision. This hostile act—of both control and denial—suggests the figurines are manipulated through the monstrous. In turn, the distinction between subject (audience) and object (commodity and the found object) or between self and Other (child/parent) collapses as the viewer is left to grapple with a more troubling possibility.

The Kitsch Surface as Unnerving Juxtaposition

All the works exploit kitsch and its cute and sentimental surface as a strategy of disruption, but all have slightly different tonal emphasises. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* takes advantage of this approach through its light pastel figures that exhibit more "harmless" feminine gestures: a wind-up musical figure dressed in a large sunhat and bountiful dress (Plate 21); a girl laying on grass with legs and buttocks in the air (Plate 22); a domestic encounter between a girl and her kittens (Plate 23); and a girl skipping through the grass (Plate 20). Such archetypal behaviours demonstrate a fetishised aesthetic capitalised on to reinforce neoliberalism's ideals, yet they are easily dismissed by consumers due to the more tender and nostalgic emotions they summon. Through physical modification, the works seek to divulge such trappings as well as the more disturbing predispositions of kitsch.

Finally, the handcrafted doily has been used as another sentimental and outdated kitsch object of the home; one that infers femininity, an idealised image of woman, their domesticity, and entrapment to the family home.[447] I subvert this not only through my gestures of uprising, but also by the lighting that implies something untoward outside of the photographic frame and deeper within the domestic space.

A Polemical Tone: Disillusionment and Uncritical Consumption of Consumer Images and Objects and Their Neoliberal Fantasies

As already stated, achieving a polemical tone was the core goal of these three bodies of work. By contrasting outdated decorative figurines and their surface narratives of childhood innocence with possessed acts of violence or the unseemly, I aim to create an audience

[447] By the mid-nineteenth century, domestic handicrafts such as doilies had come to signify the "moral managerial virtues of the bourgeoisie." In turn, members of other classes started emulating these middle-class ideals through domestic crafts, the function of which was to signify womanhood and represent the embodiment of the woman's more "pretty" or "elegant" qualities, and the otherwise invisible aspects of her identity. Talia Schaffer, "Women's Work: The History of the Victorian Domestic Craft," in *Crafting the Women Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 27. ProQuest Ebrary.

experience that will be two-fold. Firstly, through the lens of present-day neoliberalism, viewers should realise the simultaneous manufacturing and corruption of childhood, while also recognising the role that the commodity object and its surface narrative have played in perpetuating such idealistic fantasies and expectations. Secondly, by engaging with these found and outdated decorative commodities, it is anticipated that the viewer will grasp the exploitation of the home through our individual and often uncritical consumption of (external) consumer objects and their demure veneers. In manipulating the nostalgic and unassuming surface of these (past) ornaments, these works aim to embody the failure of the neoliberal fantasy, our collective and individual stake hold, and our likelihood of denying and perpetuating this situation.

The Readymade and Found Object and the Hollow Surface Embellishments of the Neoliberal Dream

These three series specifically focus on furthering the found object, its chance encounter and its newly formed readymade combination as a gesture of revolt. While I knew that I would use found and obsolete decorative figurines for the forthcoming works, it was only when I experienced a chance encounter with a figure of a boy dressed as a clown playing a mandolin (*Little Boy Blue*) that I knew I would physically violate its surface to reveal the elaboration of neoliberal ideals through the commodities exterior. I interpreted the chance encounter and the finding of the ornaments as key to my creative process and how the new readymades may take form. This encounter motivated me to recover an aspect of the ornament's past-life within the present, as I interpreted them as psychic, trauma-laden incarnations—commodities that are frozen or lost in a previous era, but that equally expose the trappings of the past within the consciousness of the present. Likewise, through my encounter with the object's their inherent failure and "cruel optimism" is realised. By disfiguring them, I aim to disclose that it is in the surfaces' promise of an idealised childhood and its fulfilment, that these objects are themselves what impair one's ability to ever attain such an existence.

Moreover, all objects are indicative of postmodern pastiche; their narratives are disconnected from the contemporary and void of their larger neoliberal context. Other than depicting an idealisation of peaceful "children" at play, what indicates the found objects' underhandedness is the individual characters, their actions, and accompanying components. These are seen as a significant point in the development of my final interventions and their combinations and how they will come to act as neoliberal gestures of revolt. Finally, my readymades are expanded

through their photographic compositions and ominous lighting. By using spatial voids and intensifying shadows, the photographic not only offers a more sinister experience, but also extends the readymades' production of dissonance and delay and thus increases viewer scrutiny.

The Consumer Image: A Persuasive Authority

The final three series seek to convey the persuasive authority of the neoliberal system and the ability for the consumer image (and object) to influence social values and behaviours. Through the surface fantasy of childhood, these commodity ornaments can manufacture a collective agreement as to what the masses perceive as aspirational and of worth. Most specific to these works was my intention to reveal to the viewer our individual and collective denial of such a situation. To do so, the works accentuate a suspension of disbelief as a mechanism used to postpone the viewer's awareness of the object's persuasive intent. As already discussed, this is achieved through the combination of elements and their treatment. Accordingly, it is intended that the viewer is psychologically confronted as they are forced to consider the expectations and values we often uncritically and unconsciously consume under the guise of mass entertainment images and home decoration. Central to this is that the viewer suspends critical judgement, as it is often perceived that such entertainment façades are unable to affect one's social actions and values. I expose this deceptiveness through the surface of the kitsch objects which are juxtaposed with more disturbingly suggestive behaviours. This disjunction should disrupt the viewers understanding and unveil their own ability to deny the consumer image/object, its intent, and implications. This was successfully demonstrated early on when exhibiting the work. Here a viewer disclosed her own cognitive dissonance and ingrained denial when she accused me of harming children to produce these works. Such a suggestion is obviously false, as the works do not engage with children, but rather highlight the effects of our continued collective fallacy and our denial that consumer images and objects manipulate our expectations and in turn, our desires and their consequences.

Conclusion

This section has explained how the final three bodies of studio outcomes have sought to interrogate contemporary neoliberalism through the suburban façade. I have described how the specifics of tone have been balanced with a more exaggerated, darker and more cynical tone, as to cultivate a distinctive suburban gothic inquiry, as informed by the particulars of 1980s

suburban gothic. I have confirmed that central to achieving this detailed polemical sensibility was to increase the dramatics of the suburban dream/nightmare trope and to expand the found object and readymade as gestures of neoliberal revolt. I have also clarified that core to realising this was the chance encounter of a certain kitsch and outdated decorative figurine as well as their implied surface narratives and ideals, the object's past-life and psychic state alongside the finer details of my physical interventions. Thus, I have suggested that these final studio outcomes will position the audience in a liminality as they contemplate their individual relationship to the object, the broader connotations implied, our collective misconception and propensity for denial, and in turn, to question who the perpetrators of our collective fantasy actually are.

This chapter has reviewed the final five bodies of studio outcomes and clarified how they address the stated aims and intentions of this PhD project. This overview has provided a chronological journey of my research's discoveries and how the visual languages, forms and methods have been engaged with to form a particular type of targeted suburban gothic investigation. In undertaking this analysis, I have explained how the studio outcomes have effectively implemented the suburban gothic—informed by a more contemplative 1980s and 1990s method of neoliberal inquiry—into the inegalitarian, and globally spreading, neoliberal American dream.

To demonstrate this, *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* identified the primary priorities and concerns for the studio outcomes while laying the foundations for the research outcomes as a whole. Specific to this review was my construction of a slightly deranged suburban world that aimed to position the audience within a liminal and strange space of reflection. This body of visual outcomes set the exterior scene for the suburban world I was creating and initiated the overall tone of my specific type of neoliberal suburban gothic inquiry. In evaluating the second body of visual outcomes, *Ruin*, I clarified why it was deemed as unsuccessful. I explained that throughout producing this work, a number of key insights occurred and that these were critical to the direction of the following three bodies of studio outcomes. First was the distortion of tone and that this overly melancholic state reaffirmed the failure of the contemporary neoliberal dream but lacked the fluctuating tension between hopefulness and discontent I was seeking. Second was grasping the importance of the found and readymade object as an embodiment of the manufacturing of childhood ideals.

The final analysis consisted of three bodies of work, as all explored the same ideas, methods and languages, but each had slightly different focuses. This evaluation described how these works interrogated contemporary neoliberalism through the suburban façade. Particular to this was the achievement of a specific polemical tone and that this is critical to my unique suburban gothic inquiry. Finally, this overview explained that central to this method was the corruption of the surface of the found and readymade commodity object and that this best takes shape through the violation of outdated kitsch figurines whose façades depict sentimentalised neoliberal narratives of childhood.

PLATES

You Can’t Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

Plate 12. Amy Carkeek, *Children Should Be Seen and Not Heard*, 2016, archival inkjet print

Plate 13. Amy Carkeek, *A Bed Full of Lies*, 2016, archival inkjet print

Plate 14. Amy Carkeek, *This Little Piggy Went to Market*, 2016, archival inkjet print

Plate 15. Amy Carkeek, *Little Boy Blue*, 2016, archival inkjet print

PLATES

It's Going to Be a Long Night

Plate 16. Amy Carkeek, *We Shall Meet in a Place Where There Is No Darkness*, 2017, archival inkjet print

Plate 17. Amy Carkeek, *Come Play With Us*, 2017, archival inkjet print

Plate 18. Amy Carkeek, *I'm Your Worst Nightmare Come True*, 2017, archival inkjet print

Plate 19. Amy Carkeek, *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*, 2017, archival inkjet print

PLATES

Welcome to the Dreamhouse

Plate 20. Amy Carkeek, *Sweet Pea, It's Just An Illusion*, 2018, archival inkjet print

Plate 21. Amy Carkeek, *You Can't Learn By Forgetting*, 2018, archival inkjet print

Plate 22. Amy Carkeek, *Assume All Responsibility*, 2018, archival inkjet print

Plate 23. Amy Carkeek, *These Things Will Come Up Nice and White*, 2018, archival inkjet print

Conclusion

To clarify the contradictions of our rapidly accelerating neoliberal condition, I started this thesis by explaining how those accountable for the 2008 GFC—Wall Street and the US banking elite—were not only saved from financial ruin, but that the US President justified their fiscal bailout as a prerequisite for saving the victims of this national crime, the "everyday" American people. I contextualised the absurdity of this economic disaster and the US government's response and overviewed the Australian government's economic rejoinder and its impact on the housing market. To better comprehend the present neoliberal condition, I suggested that this outcome and the ongoing influence of the US has exposed a need to re-evaluate the origins of post-war American neoliberalism and its authority and impetus.

Following on from this, I contextualised how my research has been motivated by the cultural and economic domination that the US has upon Australia, our own progressively commodified neoliberal "dream," and my growing sense of discontent in the culturally entrenched myth, its failed promises, and their achievement. I described how these sentiments came to a head mid-GFC, as I simultaneously reflected on the feelings of conflict I held towards my photographic practices. Fundamental to this was my construction of artificial fantasy worlds that were created in one context to sell neoliberal ideals, and to expose such mechanisms of persuasion in the other. The case I made to further interrogate our present neoliberal condition is personal, although more broadly applicable, as I have sought to reconcile with the contradictions of our time. I therefore revisited a method of inquiry that has recurred throughout American history and at times of great uncertainty and fear.

To further my argument that the motivations and ideals that govern Western democracy are skewed, I recognised two global events that occurred during my candidature and that have contributed to a visible demise in the West's egalitarian foundations and that have shaped my PhD outcomes: the election of US President Donald Trump (2017–2021) and the COVID-19 global pandemic (2020–).

Following this, I outlined five specific aims that framed this project before expanding upon them in detail within the chapter overviews. This thesis has explored how the contemporary neoliberal American dream, its democratic veneer and the intermediary for its ideological

aspiration—the suburban home and good life—are in a state of increasing demise. A core goal for this project was to define a specific suburban gothic methodology and a unique expression in tone so as to critically, yet allegorically, interrogate this deteriorating façade, the system that controls it, and its underlying need for nostalgia.

In the first chapter, I defined the details of my methodology and clarified how the suburban gothic is a critical mode of inquiry into the central conduit of the American dream—the suburban milieu and home. To clarify, I overviewed the historical significance of the gothic and its core characteristics and established how through fictional storytelling the gothic is able to examine individual and societal fears, which are caused by external controls and the rapid advancements of a given era.

To situate the gothic within a contemporary America and to explain how its examination is unique in its social, political and cultural concerns, I elaborated on the strange and metaphoric tropes that early American gothic authors created as to interrogate and expose the darker side of America's optimistic façade. I recognised that essential to the American gothic's postmodern examination is the American dream's core ideological stronghold, the suburbs, and a now globally spreading neoliberal system. After undertaking this overview, I positioned the core characteristics of the suburban gothic as fundamental to my contemporary neoliberal inquiry. I then clarified that central to my argument is the construction of the ongoing myth of a past and nostalgic suburban dream that never existed and the continued promises of an illusory future that can never be obtained.

In Chapter 2, I delineated a theoretical framework for how this veneer has been able to so powerfully persuade. I engaged with an oppositional and leftist review and focused on the construction of the American dream as an ideological façade that is politically manufactured and is now a spectacle of distraction and a device used to govern. From here, the thesis made the argument that consumer images have been manufactured to undermine democracy. To achieve this, I identified that those in power have fabricated a culture of illusions through a capitalist global free-trade market and the control of mass entertainment media and its representations. I proposed that essential to the spectacles of distractions that circulate our screens is a fantasy of national identity and a myth of nostalgia. From here, I provided a historical foundation and the specifics for how this has been able to occur over time. Significant to this argument and this thesis is that it is easier for individuals and society to consume such

spectacles rather than to see them for what they are: a thinly veiled illusion of democracy and egalitarianism.

In the following section of the chapter, I referred to the field of social psychology and developed a framework to further clarify how consumer images, or spectacles of diversion, are able to socially influence. I explained that this transpires via psychological mechanisms that function often at the unconscious level. Stereotypes, narrative persuasion, transportation and denial theory all contribute to the long-term influence on our beliefs and behaviours. I asserted that the desire for the American dream and its neoliberal facade has been able to puncture our rational response and has become normalised. It was argued that essential to this is our belief that fictional stories and representations are unable to influence our day-to-day reality, and we are consequently less critical of them, enabling them to more easily persuade. I then described how these findings are key to my studio outcomes as I employ the methods of dissonance and contradiction to expose their intent.

Having concluded the methodological and theoretical framework for this PhD, I outlined the visual languages, forms and methods used within my studio work. Here I aimed to confirm how these approaches are used as forms of neoliberal revolt, and also the significance of tone and its tension as a polemical strategy as to more complexly convey the oscillating feelings of contradiction and the possibility/failure dichotomy for the American dream's achievement. Moreover, I explained that this emotionally charged strategy intends to position the viewer in a moral predicament, state of liminality, and it is hoped, to undergo a form of ideological transformation. I proposed this can be achieved by manipulating kitsch and the readymade and found object as they can be used as strategies of disruption to expose their surfaces' deceitful nature. Fundamental to this discussion was the realisation that the found object is itself liminal, psychically embodying both the past and present and existing in a state of the in-between.

In Chapter 4, I undertook an analysis of five final bodies of work. While the discussion on the first series established my uncanny and strange suburban world, the second identified two significant outcomes, both of which were fundamental in the studio works' progression and that saw the subsequent three series refine their examination and more succinctly address my research question. Throughout these analyses, and indeed the previous chapters, I clarified in detail how the studio outcomes addressed my five aims and developed a more targeted and nuanced language as specific to the suburban gothic tropes I employed. These tropes are as follows: the role of advertising; television as conduit for gothic monsters and other dimensions;

the haunted house; children as focus/possessed; and nostalgia. The role of advertising was explored in the studio outcomes through the commodity objects that I found and physically manipulated and through their readymade juxtaposition. These objects were all selected as they are icons of a sentimentalised and past suburbia and the lighting, colour palette and composition either referenced the language and tropes of advertising or actively sought to subvert them. The television or screen has been employed as a conduit for neoliberal monsters to enter and leave the home in *Untitled #5* and *Darling Why Don't You Play with Your iPuppets?* Through the static shimmering screen and the WSoD, these communication devices reveal that they are more than they appear and are actually two-fold mechanisms of surveillance and control. The haunted house or the deranged suburban 'anywhere' was established in the first series *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* by lurid iridescent colours and the staging of surreal juxtapositions. Unnervingly humorous, but slightly melancholic, this series sets the exterior scene for what would become in the later series a disturbing suburban home of violence and childhood deceit. This is achieved specifically through the mutilated found objects that are laden with childhood sentimentality, as well as the repeated placement of the domestic doily. Children as possessed and 'demonic other' is explored through these outdated decorative figurines and their surface narratives of childhood innocence which are contrasted with possessed acts of violence. To simulate the sentimental feeling of an endlessly appropriated and perpetuated past suburbia, I ascribed the language of a nostalgic 1950s and 1970s American suburban kitsch aesthetic in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* while in the later series the outdated figures and their archetypal behaviours are employed to exaggerate how such objects can easily be dismissed due to the more tender and nostalgic emotions they summon.

As stated in the opening to this thesis, I am aware that my PhD's motivations are fraught with contradiction. This consciousness lends itself to the gothic and therefore underpins my PhD's incentive, processes and outcomes. By creating my own unhinged suburban world, I have been able to project my present-day middle-class anxieties (which are repressions of the past and the ideals I was bought up to believe in) onto the tragic and sinister gothic monsters I have created. As Catherine Spooner reminds us, "the contemporary gothic is not preoccupied with the end of the world, but rather the end of innocence."[448] In turn, my gothic monsters encompass a duality of the individual and it is assumed a broader national psyche that recognises the betrayal of a supposedly democratic system and that worries about the discordant present and the

[448] Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 23.

unfathomable global challenges of the future. Discovered throughout this project was that a core component to these ongoing neoliberal abuses are the sentimentalised narratives of childhood and their corruption by the outwardly harmless surfaces we expend though consumer images and objects. I have not sought to illustrate a dystopian or frightening future like other contemporary gothic studies, but rather to reveal the (psychological) consequences of neoliberalism's deceit as well as to scrutinise the ramifications of our collective and individual pursuit of a nostalgic past and our desire for its persistence within the present.

This research has led me to conclude that a return to a particular and past suburban gothic and the specific nuanced polemical tone I sought to produce is a necessary method of inquiry into our peculiar times. It interrogates not just the surface of the neoliberal dream's ideological stronghold, but the emotional and psychological implications of our desire for such a fantasy. While I am cautious of my own contradiction, I am also aware that we must continue to scrutinise the origins of our aspirations and desires precisely because we do not see how they shape what we perceive, and therefore, we must envision the consequences of living them out. By revisiting the expression of an early 1980s and 1990s suburban gothic, my studio outcomes and this thesis have attempted to demonstrate that in returning to the modern-day roots of global neoliberalism and the spread of the American dream, we can more profoundly comprehend the contemporary neoliberal condition, learn something revealing of ourselves in the present, and it is hoped, make meaningful change in the future. By engaging with a diverse expanse of theoretical disciplines, I have been able to contextualise the intersections between political, cultural and social theory, gothic, film, cinema and popular culture studies, social psychology, philosophy and art historical perspectives to more deeply inform my practice. By integrating this broad theoretical inquiry in combination with a methodological framework that focuses on the conflicting nature of the system that informs and governs every aspect of our collective life, I believe my research offers a more multifaceted insight into our contemporary neoliberal condition. Also, I have recognised that what I once perceived as a divide in my practice is actually its strength. I now appreciate that opposition is inherent in the focus and methods of my studio work and like the gothic, my role is to frame and emphasise the contradictions between such irreconcilable paradigms. By drawing from an inclusive theoretical framework and a targeted methodological inquiry, I have been able to relate the social, political, economic and cultural significance of the consumer image and object to our everyday way of life and our unrestrained neoliberal desires.

Furthermore, I am confident that I have demonstrated that there is a need to engage with the complexities of the issues of our times in a more emotionally intricate way in order to scrutinise the West's systems of control and to reveal the underlying nature of human longing and behaviour. Finally, I believe this research can aid a more valuable examination of contemporary neoliberalism, the demise of the American dream and the US's continued influence upon a future Australia. This is because, at its best, the (suburban) gothic forces us to confront the conflicting, unspeakable, repressed and denied within Western power structures, how this has manifested within the suburban home, but also, it reveals opposing forces within ourselves and the incongruous nature of the human condition.

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