

**Even Our Dreams Are Fake:
Suburban Illusions and Their Gothic Interventions**

Abstract

Even Our Dreams Are Fake (2012-2014) is a series of photographs that were motivated by what I perceived at the time as a progressively deteriorating Australian dream. While the US's cultural and consumer influence upon the Australian dream is apparent in a contemporary context, this practice-led research is concerned with examining the nostalgic ideals of a mid-twentieth century American dream and how this fantasy is able to persistently rework itself through the incongruities of an accelerating neoliberal present. This research explores the aspirational suburban lifestyle as a core conduit to the broader neoliberal American dream. In this article, I propose that by employing a specific mode of 1980s and 1990s Suburban Gothic and its distinct tone, *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* can aid a more meaningful insight into the paradoxes of the neoliberal American dream and our sustained individual and collective entanglement within it. To do so, I outline how mass entertainment media and imagery alongside nostalgia are able to persuade and influence. It is suggested that when used together with neoliberal narratives, they can leave audiences in denial about their power and intent. Following this, I discuss two important Suburban Gothic filmic texts and how their characteristics, devices, and tropes form the foundations for the suburban world constructed in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake*.

Key Words: neoliberal American Dream, suburban dream, Suburban Gothic, consumer imagery, constructed photography

While not knowing what the near future and our now present would hold, it was in 2012 and post Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08 that I started to pay significant attention to the increasingly visible contradictions in Australia's egalitarian national narrative and to realise the likelihood that I would never achieve the Great Australian Dream of homeownership. Like many, this aspiration has been instilled in me since childhood – the suburban home being central to the idyllic Australian way of life, a symbol of security, individual virtue, and civility (Allon 2008: 65-67). Although I comprehended that the Australian dream was problematic, I found I paradoxically desired it all the same. However, rather than identify the parallels between a mid-twentieth or early twenty-first century US and Australia and our shared economic and consumer histories, I was more interested in investigating how the ideological foundation of a supposedly democratic and sentimentally past American dream has been able to perpetuate and govern so categorically. In better understanding the mechanisms employed, I felt I could gain a deeper understanding into the contemporary neoliberal American condition, and in turn, what I saw as Australia's own diminishing situation. This impulse framed my practice-led research and formed the foundations for the photographic series *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* (2012-14), a body of work that employs a particular mode of 1980s and 1990s' Suburban Gothic so as to examine the role of mass entertainment images (or what I define as consumer images) and nostalgia that exist in the construction and perseverance of the neoliberal American dream through its core conduit: the serene suburban home and its attendant lifestyle.

Defining the American Dream and Neoliberalism

The most recent phase of capitalism in liberal countries such as the US and Australia is known as neoliberalism. 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, to

be made possible through the ‘free markets’ of capitalism (Chomsky et al 2017). To assist capitalism in achieving this, through the 20th century governments introduced more market regulation and welfare services to citizens. However, in the early 1980s this trend began to be reversed, ushering in neoliberalism (Harvey 2005).

Neoliberalism is characterised as an extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society (Springer, Birch, MacLeavy 2016: 2). It comprises rhetoric and ideologies of competitive market forces, and it ‘operates through a range of practices and processes that combine social, cultural, and economic domains to constitute new spaces and subjects’ (Springer et al. 2016: 57). It is this idea of financial gain and persistent growth as fundamental to, and interwoven through, culture and society that is of specific interest to this research. The 1980s are also of interest to my research as they are essential to neoliberalism’s ability to penetrate all facets of life.

Then US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher established neoliberalism through the capitalist market by deregulating global free-trade and encouraging radical individualism (Blake and Monnet 2017: 4-6). It is in this collision of neoliberalism, egalitarian ideals, and the governing elite, that the supposed meritocratic values of the American dream become hijacked. According to philosopher Noam Chomsky, the 1980s drove policies that enriched the already wealthy, while allowing the rest of society to suffer. (Chomsky 2017: 51-54). Further to this, American literature and culture scholar Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argues that it is the imperial narrative and the US’s national mythology of infinite growth – geographically, politically, and economically – that have, over time, allowed such neoliberal narratives and ideals to become normalised. Such values, she suggests, have

now become glamorised, creating an even narrower and undisputed ideological framework for the contemporary neoliberal American dream (Monnet 2017: 6:06).

Defining the Suburban Gothic

The Suburban Gothic is a sub-genre of the literary and televisual 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. American horror and popular culture scholar Bernice Murphy (2009) 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; and (2) the mental state of those who live within these fabricated environments. Central to both trepidations is the family home, which now replaces the European Gothic’s haunted castle as the station of terror. The Suburban Gothic examines the ramifications of achieving the aspirational suburban lifestyle, as its oblivious occupants are apparently turned into mindless, materialistic, and unhappy robots, while they seek social and economic advancement at all costs (Murphy 2009: 74-198). 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 (Murphy 2009: 2-3). The Suburban Gothic therefore scrutinises not only the economic, political, and social occurrences that construct and dominate the suburbs, but also the psychological repercussions on those who achieve the dream and occupy the suburban milieu. As a method of inquiry, 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.

Constructing the Myth: Neoliberal Elites, Fantasy as Reality and Nostalgia

In his overview of those responsible for driving the myth of an industrialised American dream into the neoliberal present, journalist and author Chris Hedges (2009) isolates the neoliberal elite (government and corporate) as responsible. He argues that the American people have been misguided, and even lied to, by those who are elected to serve them, because the government have destroyed the financial system and the manufacturing sector, and corrupted democracy. Hedges suggests Americans are desperate to reinstate the promise of an industrialised future and the illusion of the American dream, or what he calls a return to the bubble economy. He claims that such motivations offer nothing but fantasies of infinite wealth, growth, and mobility, and that 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 (Hedges 2009: 142-144). Central to Hedges' argument and the ways in which such neoliberal narratives are embedded in the American psyche is through visual representations of lifestyle and access and the narrative that happiness and success can be achieved through the consumption of products and appearances. (Hedges 2009: 23-27). Key to the continued flow of commodified representations is the influence of monopolised technology and digital media companies, advertising, Hollywood cinema, and the television and screen (Hedges 2009: 168-169).

To contextualise how mass entertainment media can influence and persuade, social psychologist Karen E. Dill-Shackleford (2012-2016) says that we learn socially through our exposure to such media and its imagery; however, she argues we are habitually in denial about this fact, which enables a higher level of manipulation to occur (Dill-Shackleford 2016: 71). Dill-Shackleford also maintains that we learn about others through the mediation of represented social interactions, reasoning that the use of social storytelling in media can and does influence

behaviour toward the specific social group depicted (Dill and Burgess 2012: 197). This prompting can occur because storytelling is a way to share experiences and values, but since we generally understand mass entertainment as fiction, individuals and the broader society do not consider these messages to be manipulative of them personally (Dill and Burgess 2012: 79). According to Dill-Shackleford, this deception is achieved through the notion of fantasy, 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; and (2) believing that media's reason for being is to entertain us rather than persuade us (Dill-Shackleford 2016: 7).

Dill-Shackleford's key proposition is that individuals consciously believe 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 (Dill and Burgess 2012: 199). This blurring, and the space of the in-between, is where the ability to induce lies. As Dill-Shackleford points out, 'the reality of a fictional story is not whether it is a fantasy or a fiction; it is whether it is believable and attractive' (Dill-Shackleford 2016: 10). It is therefore the story's strength and sophistication and the relationship between truth and fabrication that requires the viewer's unconscious attention. Consequently, this space of the in-between is where audiences can start to imagine the possibility of a given mediated social situation or character as actually being 'real' (Dill-Shackleford 2016: 10). This liminal space and its duality, as well as its inherent contradictions, are central to my work, as it embodies desires, tensions, and oppositions – within both the self and the broader context of society – and it reflects our current and contemporary anxieties of progress and change (Lloyd-Smith 2004: 5-6).

Also important is the ability for consumer images to influence the idealised lifestyle, values, and behaviours of the neoliberal American dream. Accordingly, I employ photography – a medium that is known for constructing artifice and desire through entertainment and advertising yet, paradoxically, is embedded in a (contested) historical discourse of mirroring ‘reality’ and representations of ‘truth’ (Sontag [1977] 2008, Tagg [1988] 1993). While audiences know the photographic representation is fictional, they nevertheless come to consider it believable, either consciously or unconsciously, as they are drawn into an enticing world that is full of promise. This influential power of the photographic and its aptitude to fabricate fantasy enables it to formulate illusions while simultaneously exposing the medium’s function in their creation.

In his research into the role of popular media and the collective myth of a post-World War Two American suburban ideal, American popular media scholar David R. Coon (2013) examines private and collective nostalgia and the significant role that television and media play in its creation and visualisation. History, memory, and nostalgia ‘all work to construct and reconstruct a past in a way that helps us make meaning in the present’ (Coon 2013: 40). Coon specifically recognises that the rapid pace of the modern and post-industrialised world has caused us to be individually and collectively more nostalgic for a previous time that seems slower and simpler in all aspects. At the heart of manufacturing nostalgia for the utopian ideals of the suburbs is the image and its surface level references to the past (Coon 2013: 39-45). Coon clarifies that in critiquing nostalgia, iconic American films such as *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998) and *Pleasantville* (Ross 1998) draw attention to the production 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. What the films demonstrate, Coon argues, is ‘how our knowledge of the past is actually a carefully constructed interpretation of reality’ (Coon 2013: 53). As a result, these films, and others like them, explore the

manipulative potential for nostalgia as fabricated through consumer images in television and other mass entertainment media.

Clarifying how nostalgia can reduce the complexities of the past to a surface image, philosopher Fredric Jameson (1988, 1991) explains that nostalgia is significant to postmodernity and that as we have become further removed from an experience or a specific period through temporality, we often long to experience the 'idea' of that moment or period. Conversely, this habitually entails a select recollection, an idyllic and glorified fantasy. According to Jameson, nostalgia 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' (Jameson 1991: 9-10). This aesthetic can no doubt only be created from the plethora of already existing commodified visual representations circulating in popular culture. Jameson determines that 'all we can really do is "represent" our ideas and cultural stereotypes about the past' (Jameson 1988: 20), thus 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' (Baumbach, Young and Yue 2016: 145). Thus, my photographic series *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* employs nostalgia as a core strategy to expose how the reduced and overly sentimental visual narratives of a past suburban ideal are skewed. This is achieved through various devices and juxtapositions, including kitsch, the found commodity object, garish colours, suburban rituals, and inferences to mawkish childhood behaviours and their longing.

Nostalgia and Contradiction in the Suburban Gothic

Comparably, yet incongruously, the use of the past is one of the Suburban Gothic's core conventions, acting as a disruptive device used to conjure the anxiety of repressed and historical events to return and haunt the present. The Suburban Gothic employs nostalgia as a principal characteristic, as the suburban dream's existence is not only dependent upon it but is the foundation of its conception (Murphy 2009: 136). However, referencing the past can and does conflict with one's nostalgia as this encounter occurs through the juxtaposition of a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a previous period and proposes a possibly frightening and unknown future (Hogle 2002: 4). Therefore, in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* I use nostalgia as a core device to not only lure the viewer into my disturbed yet melancholic suburban world, but to then subject them to the fraught nature of their own desires while exposing the dualism of the past/present, fantasy/reality resistance.

Contradictions and a 1980s America

To understand the significance of this postmodern era of Suburban Gothic inquiry, the disillusionment in early 1980s American culture must be clarified. Due to the rise of conflicts in Americans everyday reality, the 1980s saw questions emerge about burgeoning neoliberal ideals. The Suburban Gothic of this time therefore witnessed new plots and narrative devices emerge as fraught relationships between parents and children appeared, and the notion of family values projected a much darker outlook (Murphy 2009: 136). This generation came of age trusting, as those before them did, in unstoppable economic progress. Being fed the propaganda of the suburban dream and a materialistic life that would generate happiness, these contemporaries would be the first to face the prospect of doing worse than did their parents (Murphy 2009: 111). The 1980s are therefore significant to the Suburban Gothic as they revealed, in contrast to Reagan's political message, that the suburban dream may not be an achievable possibility for the next aspiring middle-class generation. Similar parallels can be

made today, as such concerns continue to be evidenced in a post-Trump America and as the economic and social divide widens not only in the US but also increasingly here in Australia. At the same time, the rhetoric conveyed in contemporary Western society conflictingly maintains that the suburban dream and its excessive lifestyle is an entitlement and achievable aspiration for all (Das 2017).

1980s and 1990s Suburban Gothic Films

In defining the key components to the suburban dream's construction, Murphy identifies four aspects as being crucial: television, advertising/entertainment, the home, and nostalgia. In turn, she explains that the Suburban Gothic employs these mechanisms as core methods to examine their unscrupulous intent (Murphy 2009: 99). In the following section, two of these core mechanisms – (1) the home as a space of conformity, consumption, entrapment and psychological turmoil; and (2) nostalgia as a device to manufacture and drive the desire for the dream – alongside subtle expressions in tone, are analysed in Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* (1982) and Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1991). Following this, I discuss the works in *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* and the use of such Suburban Gothic characteristics.

In *Poltergeist*, the suburban home and its entrapment are core to the film's narrative, as is the use of nostalgia and the rhetoric of conservative family values. Such conformity, materialistic enslavement, and fear of external threats are scrutinised through the Freeling family and an evil supernatural invasion of the home. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner (1996) argues that *Poltergeist* explores the lifestyle of the new affluent suburban middle-class and presents 'symbolic projections of insecurities and fears' (Kellner 1996: 220). He also suggests that the film is an example of the allegorical anxieties concerning the deteriorating conditions for the middle-classes under a conservative Reagan government. Kellner asserts that *Poltergeist*

addresses the main economic pressure of the 1980s and the American dream's principal aspiration – specifically, the fear of maintaining and losing the family home, as well as the fear of falling from the affluent middle-class into the lower-class bracket (Kellner 1996: 217-226). Drawing our attention to the materialistic entrapment of the home and the Freeling family's conformity to the burgeoning suburbs, Kellner acknowledges the family's large split-level house, omnipresent multichannel televisions, electronic gadgets, bountiful toys and a 'treasure house of commodities for every conceivable purpose' (Kellner 1996: 221). Moreover, by showing good families being attacked by supernatural monsters, or the 'other', Kellner maintains that *Poltergeist* acts as a metaphorical and ideological symbol of the nuclear middle-class family and its portrayal as the most viable institution in the suburban milieu (Kellner 1996: 219-221). However, American film scholar Murray Leeder (2008) disagrees, disclosing several cracks in this perfect veneer that undermine and satirise the conservative nuclear family. Instead, Leeder observes a cynical tone in the film that represents the façade of the perfect family as employed to critique such social expectations (Leeder 2008: 12-13). Thus, through individual and collective nostalgia the Freeling's come to represent both the conservative ideals of Reagan's promised nuclear family, while also revealing the contradictions of this nostalgic illusion.

In *Edward Scissorhands*, we witness a different kind of examination of anxiety within the home as well as the use of nostalgia as a contrary device. The film is a comedic tragedy that overlays a fantasy vision of suburbia upon a Gothic fairy-tale. The setting of the film is a quintessential suburban cul-de-sac, a sentimental and appropriated past America. In contrast, at the end of the street sits a medieval style Gothic mansion. Here, we meet Edward, a Frankensteinian creation who awaits his impossible human transformation, as protagonist Peg happens upon him while selling Avon products door to door (Markley 2007: 278-282). In his analysis of the film,

literature scholar Robert Markley (2007) 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’ (Markley 2007: 282). It is in this strange veneer of the glib and surreal suburbs that we observe the social deterioration of its inhabitants through the mistreatment of Edward as Other. This is not explored through Gothic horror or the supernatural but rather by employing Edward as a trope to reveal the suburbanites’ own monstrosity, caused by their embrace of a superficial suburban world (Markley 2007: 290).

What makes *Scissorhands*’ entrapment of the home unique when compared to other Suburban Gothic films is the underlying psychological disconnect of those who occupy the family household, and the darkly comedic yet melancholic tone used to express this. Throughout the film, Peg and her husband Bill appear mentally detached from their environment. The characters’ preoccupation is always with the home and the performance of its rituals and gestures: family dinners and clichéd conversations, weekend barbecues, fatherly chats and maintenance of the lawns and hedges (Markley 2007: 288). *Scissorhands* is thus a Suburban Gothic text, a mode that critically investigates, through fictional narrative, nostalgia, and allegory, the growing concerns of a politically accelerating and socially declining late 1980s and early 1990s America.

Even Our Dreams Are Fake

In *Even Our Dreams Are Fake*, I deliberately construct a recognisable yet anywhere suburban world that is a pastiche of nostalgic suburban surfaces. Through utilising the Suburban Gothic, I aim to create a contrast between the idealised past and its early stages of capitalism, and the present – a hollow and rapacious neoliberal illusion. The ideological stronghold of the suburbs is exposed through the juxtaposition of selected iconic elements. Specifically, it is the Suburban

Gothic's examination of the emotions being evoked by the fear of danger coming from within 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 that enable my examination of this decaying surface and, in turn, the declining mental state of those inhabiting this space of the in-between.

In the works, each potentially joyful suburban narrative and ritual is distorted, happily recognisable in its depiction, yet unhinged and futile in its failed realisation. The series aims to employ a feeling of nostalgic optimism and playfulness before a slow sense of deflation and emptiness emerges. The tension this juxtaposition evokes is intended to produce a sense of the uncanny, as the desired suburban narrative loses its shine, leaving a sense of dishonesty and discontent in the promises such elements convey. This process seeks to create a conflict within the work that focuses 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 weakening 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. These associations aim to disclose a strangely serene, yet progressively rupturing, suburban setting. The surreal moments act as fragmented narratives that intend 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 occupy this environment.

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

1950s and 1970s American suburban kitsch aesthetic. By manipulating a pastiche of kitsch and nostalgic surfaces and their values, I sought to create an unnerving juxtaposition that emphasises the incongruity of the present-day neoliberal American 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* (2014) 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 façade. 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 (Harris 2001: 3-4). 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 desire.

Lurid colours are assigned in the works as they are intentionally indicative of 1970s Tupperware commercials, or of then fashionable kitchen appliance advertisements. It is intended that the colours playfully attract the audience and nostalgically reference a humbler period when newly attainable brilliant colours were desired in the home. Also kitsch in nature, the monochrome palette is 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 surface is used as both a reference to the artificiality of the mid-twentieth century consumer façade and of the consumer's desire to achieve and maintain it.

Finally, to investigate the implicit economic privilege and inherent anxieties of the suburbs' materialism, my work also enlists the iconic television. In a contemporary context, such technology is now a sign of a globally networked communication system. In the present, we understand that with such commodities comes spectres of the external world – neoliberal monsters who enter our homes and survey our lives (Edwards 2017: 81). Conflictingly, it is the manufactured fantasy of the suburban milieu and our enslavement to upgrading the home as a signifier of middle-class affluence that has enabled such an invasion to occur. In *Untitled # 5* (2012) a 1979 Sony Trinitron television floats suspended in a magenta oval void. The screen sparkles with shimmering tinsel curtains – an allegory for the optimistic and aspirational images that it relentlessly projects into the home. Likewise, the repetitive pattern suggests the artifice of the television image and the reality of the static white noise that invades the domestic space. Similarly, this dazzling illusion can act as a hypnotic enticement while external observations take place, extracting aspects of the interior and its occupants through a familiar yet uncanny and all-seeing device.

As discussed in this paper, I suggest that through returning to a specific 1980s and early 1990s Suburban Gothic, its distinct tone and methods of interrogation, we may find insight into the contemporary neoliberal condition. Through the Suburban Gothic films analysed in this article I have sought to better understand the conflicts that lie beneath the surface of the American façade and the significance of the 1980s neoliberal turn. In the process, I have discovered that in the suburbs the irreconcilable worlds of dream and nightmare and past, present, and future, interrelate with and are dependent upon each other. *Even Our Dreams Are Fake* aims to

illuminate such anomalies as well as expose the authority of the consumer image and the narratives it conveys, revealing that its authority is enabled precisely because we refute such influence. I have suggested that as long as the governing neoliberal elite project such embellished images into our homes (while simultaneously extracting others), and we continue to deny the consequences of our desires, nostalgia for the suburban fantasy and the illusion of a past and sustainable American dream – both in the US and Australia – will persist, becoming ever more volatile and unstable.

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