



Suburban Dreams: Imagining and Building the Good Life. By Greg Dickinson. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015. 250 pp. ISBN: 9780817318635.

The title of Greg Dickinson's book, *Suburban Dreams: Imagining and Building the Good Life*, is a nod to Macek's (2006) *Urban Nightmares*, a study of the right-wing discourses and economic disinvestments that degraded the American inner city in the second half of the twentieth century. On first glance, one might be forgiven for viewing Dickinson's title as one inflected with irony, but Dickinson's book is a work of sincerity. Far from providing a polemic against the oft-maligned suburbs, Dickinson instead encourages readers to consider the space-time in which the American suburbs make sense.

The world that makes suburbia possible is riddled with the spatial anxieties of modernity—nostalgia, agoraphobia, claustrophobia, the uncanny—all psychological conditions linked to changes in the arrangement of space-time that included the introduction of standard time, increased movement across space, railway timetables, and closely disciplined clockwork in industry. Dickinson argues that these material changes prevented an absorption of the past into the present and thus an intense longing for the past resulted. In other words, modernity's irresistible onward march of progress erased prior habits of living with the past, and with psychological consequences. Cue the suburbs.

Importantly, *Suburban Dreams* is not a socio-psychological book, it is steadfastly rhetorical in its theoretical orientation. Dickinson wields a deft touch when explaining the links between rhetoric and space. Readers from the communication field will be aware of the concept of *topos* to some extent, and Dickinson defines it here as a starting place that surfaced in mnemonic devices in the classical world. As a way to remember, a mnemonic would have us recall a familiar place in our minds and then structure our ideas around that familiar place. This familiar place (*topos*) of suburbia is a starting point for thought and dreams, not only for those who live there, but for anyone who has taken in the American suburbs in the form of cultural texts. In these early moves, Dickinson makes rhetoric expansive enough to give rhetoricians purview over the dynamics between landscape, thought, and experience. As such, spatial rhetorics are spaces that speak and argue to their audiences, who in turn devise material rhetorics in their use of space.

As the fifth canon of rhetoric, memory often gets interpreted as the recall of previously composed content for speech, but for Dickinson, memory-images structure "arguments, buildings, and performances," giving *topoi* a latitude that straddles the imaginary, the symbolic and the material (p. 30). Later in the book, Dickinson describes *topoi* as spatial stories that make connections and draw boundaries. For these spatial stories, Dickinson turns to the storyteller's medium—film—and a series of motion pictures that have foregrounded suburban landscapes. This is the first step in Dickinson's weave of the symbolic and the material.

At the beginning of the chapter, “Imagining the Good Life,” Dickinson suggests how a motion picture, *Pleasantville* (1998), “is framed as a comparison/contrast argument about suburbia” (p. 46). The following chapter, “Building the Good Life,” also demonstrates Dickinson’s vision of rhetoric as the suasive force within texts: “entrances are like introductions to speeches ... The entrances announce, in shorthand form, the values of the development” (p. 90). For Dickinson, these rhetorics, whether symbolic or material, are about persuasion. But this persuasion touches not only minds and bodies, but souls too.

Dickinson suggests that the human soul is touched by imaginations, suburban landscapes, and human performances. In other words, verbal arguments about safety only go so far, but to experience the feeling of safety in the context of a world rendered unsafe by modernist progress and the seemingly random existential threats posed since 2001 is to be party to the spatial rhetorics of suburbia. Rhetorics that offer a feeling, a remedy, touch the soul and so rhetoric, for Dickinson, resembles Plato’s (370 BC) definition in the *Phaedrus*: “a leading of the soul” (261A, p. 44; 271C, p. 58), and sheds any relativistic character.

These suburban rhetorics are found in the physical buildings and gardens, the performances of dining and worship, and the arguments encoded into the spatial stories of the big screen. Dickinson succeeds in describing rhetoric as a holistic feeling that wraps the reader in the iterative process of having our still-modern anxieties assuaged by the suburbs. Bizarrely, I found that Dickinson had revealed the rhetorical appeals of Olive Garden Italian Kitchen restaurants to such a degree that I wanted to visit one; a feeling toward the chain that I have never experienced before, and has since waned.

In telling spatial stories, Dickinson’s prose soothes the reader and indeed, suburbia seems appealing until Dickinson highlights some of the forgetting work that suburbia also encourages. Dickinson takes in a sermon at the Central Christian Church in suburban Las Vegas, Nevada, on the anniversary weekend of Bloody Sunday, the march on Selma. The pastor quotes Exodus, and one could justifiably assume this is a reference to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who had made such moving use of the material shortly before his assassination. Yet Dickinson tells us how the pastor strips Exodus of its civic potential, and instead turns it inward, in the spirit of suburban safety, to the family and the individual.

With Dickinson, I came to a more sympathetic understanding of the suburbs, but not without recognition of the uneasiness that comes with the homogeneity and flatness that are invoked in the spatial stories of these landscapes. Rhetoric can indeed touch the soul, which gives us all the more reason and urgency to study it.

References

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