Unsafe Houses: The Narrative Inversion of Suburban Morality in Popular Film

Joan Faber McAlister

Critical representations of suburbia in popular film over the last decade, such as 1999's *American Beauty* and 1998's *Pleasantville*, depict the idealized American suburban neighborhood as a site fraught with sexual repression and a place inhabited by residents whose deepest desires go unfulfilled. Such a critique relies on a contrast with established cultural narratives that cast urban space as a “territory of sexual discoveries,” wherein forbidden erotic fantasies can be entertained and even indulged (Chisholm 200). This tendency to highlight sexuality in urban contexts and ignore erotic practices in suburbia has been noted, not only in popular media representations, but also in scholarship. The authors of a collection of essays entitled *De-centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* argue that sexuality in “non-metropolitan” spaces has garnered little attention, while “sexual identities and politics in the city are privileged” by cultural critics and scholars (Phillips). Such a propensity to eroticize urban space enacts a corollary de-sexualization of suburban sites that makes filmic critiques of the suburban home and neighborhood as repressive more plausible in the popular imaginary.

However, while cinematic representations of suburbia as an environment that inhibits sexual expression have entered popular

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culture, such films also operate to affirm key values and concepts that shore up the American dream of a home in the suburbs and ultimately celebrate this social landscape as a place of “safety and comfort” (Dickinson 226). This dual perspective is created through cinematic visions acknowledging the imperfections that can emerge in suburbia, while also reassuring viewers that its cultural environs remain havens from truly deviant sexualities and subjectivities—dangers more commonly associated with the “deteriorating social and moral conditions” of urban landscapes in the popular imaginary (Macek 1). As Laura Christian notes in her reading of a film often classed among critical depictions of suburbia, Todd Haynes’ Safe, characters in suburban narratives tend to embrace the popular definition of the “white, upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood” as an alternative to its undesirable other: the “urban ghetto” that must remain exterior to it (108).

This paper considers how two recent films, 2007’s Disturbia and 2006’s Little Children, provide a more subversive portrait of daily life in the suburbs through narratives that invert the suburban moral order to suggest that these settings are unsafe ground for their youngest residents. This new critical angle is significant, given that the welfare of children was regularly cited as a justification for abandoning the city in favor of suburban homes, neighborhoods, and schools in the wake of a postwar movement to “sweep away urban clutter” and to “purify communal spaces” by building new developments for young families (Spigel 189). More recently, maintaining the inviolability of the suburb in the interest of children has been a common rationale underlying efforts to fortify the boundaries of suburban space with the addition of security measures such as gates, fences, and guarded entrances (Low).

Given the status and character of suburbia in popular culture in late twentieth century America, the potential of alternative depictions to undermine public faith in the suburban neighborhood as the ideal place to raise a family marks a considerable extension of the cinematic critique of these normalized settings of daily life. The narrative inversions enacted through Disturbia and Little Children not only replace the components of what Baumgartner identified as a “moral minimalism” guiding social relations in the suburb (e.g.,
conflict-avoidance, non-violence, and tolerance) with their antitheses, but also overturn traditional hierarchies of normalcy and deviance within which the characters, practices, and scenes are placed in cultural narratives. In so doing, both films seem to exhibit the subversive potential of narrative inversion that has been noted by literary and rhetorical critics who have explored this trope in relation to marginalized subjectivities and identities produced through economies of gender, race, and sexuality.¹

However, although Homi Bhabha describes narrative inversions as speaking from a position that is “neither monocular or monologic,” thus enacting a “splitting” or “alienation of the subject” that carries the potential to disrupt a hegemonic order, I argue that the elements remaining untouched in the upending of Disturbia and Little Children reveal both the limits of the subversive potential of these films and the sacrosanct center of suburban morality that has yet to be destabilized in popular American cinema (301). That the cinematic adaptations of the screenplay and novel on which these two films were based removed a particular liminal figure—one whose indeterminacy and ambiguity moves the narratives beyond a monosexual frame—supports Marjorie Garber’s contention that bisexuality is a radically indeterminate (neither/nor/both/and) category that may threaten the assumptions making subjectivity possible (527). Although films like American Beauty challenge the historical association of queer identities and practices with urban contexts (Chisholm) and draw attention to the hazards of heteronormativity, even cinematic narratives inverting moral hierarchies preserve the monosexual pivot on which suburban identities and social relations hinge.

In the 2007 film Disturbia, the safety and well-being of the teen-aged members of a suburban household is called into question and the cynical gaze of alienated youth reveals the hypocrisy of

¹ Narrative inversion as a strategy to subvert a hegemonic order has been more thoroughly explored by literary critics, but it has also been noted in rhetorical criticism of public address. One example of rhetorical criticism taking up the potential political functions of narrative inversion can be found in Suzanne Pullon and Roseann M. Mandziuk Fitch, Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).
conventional conceptions of the good neighbor, normal residential behavior, and preferred settings of American family life. The film is set in an affluent neighborhood where the main character, a teenaged boy named Kale, is placed on house arrest for punching a teacher (explained as part of a pattern of erratic behavior Kale exhibits in the aftermath of the traumatic death of his father). An alienated youth trapped in the bland homogeneity of suburban residential life, Kale feels the pain of confinement at home much more keenly when his mother revokes his high-tech entertainment privileges, which forces him to entertain himself by discovering a “reality without the TV” outside his window. Regularly described as a teen remake of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 film Rear Window, Disturbia is also reminiscent of 1984’s Body Double, in that the hero is a voyeur whose primary motive is spying on his object of erotic desire but who inadvertently uncovers murder in the neighborhood. However, unlike Rear Window and Body Double, Disturbia relocates the hero’s window (through which he observes dangerous deviance) from an urban apartment to a suburban family home.

As its title suggests, the suburban location is central to both Disturbia’s plot and characters: the narrative concerns elements of suburban cultural practices masking dangers historically associated with urban space (crime, violence, sexual immorality) and the main characters are disaffected teen residents endangered by their isolated locale and the horrors hiding beneath the surface of the structures designed to protect them. Beyond indicating a menace in the neighborhood, Disturbia’s title also embodies the critical perspective on suburban space the film offers, through which we learn that (in the words of the main character) “perfect little houses hide really twisted secrets.” The name “Disturbia” invokes both the cynical disdain of the urbane teen gaze and the young resident’s fascination with the truly disturbing traumas lurking beneath the façades of the attractive homes lining the suburban street. The former is highlighted as the title is introduced into the narrative itself, when the main character remarks that “only in disturbia” will one find the kind of behavior he sees: the trivial routines of the suburban adult include adulterous affairs, the oldies station is also the soundtrack for seducing a stranger, and hyper-obsession with lawn care indicates
deeper disorders. The darker reading of “disturbia” is suggested earlier when the title first appears in the film, coming into view just after Kale backs away from the gruesome sight of his father’s death in a car accident, and grows along with our suspicion that a next-door neighbor is guilty of grisly crimes. The title’s oscillation between disdain and deep anxiety is apropos for the adolescent subjects featured in the film, who are living through a time of life popularly represented as a limbo created by growing alienation from authority figures and genuine fear of the dangers of an adult world.

The narrative perspective of the captive teen resident of suburban space is amplified by the synthetic “eyes” Kale employs for his spying: the binoculars that serve as the central plot device and are prominently featured on the film’s promotional posters, website, and DVD packaging. What appears inside the lens of the binoculars on the movie posters plays on the stereotypical themes of sex and violence that the film offers young viewers, signified by the primary objects of the main character’s voyeuristic fantasy life: his scantily-clad love-interest and the ominous neighbor later revealed to be a serial killer.

It is through Kale’s eyes that we come to view a very familiar cultural space with a mixture of contempt and terror. By invoking conventions and clichés of suburbia, Disturbia both builds on recent critiques of its norms and expands on them to render the emblematic American Dream home as a house of horrors. Common cultural references create Kale’s neighborhood as recognizably suburban, such as the comically regular dog walking, lawn care, and departures and arrivals of commuters that make up the average day in the neighborhood. From Kale’s point of view, we come to see these features of suburban life as not only absurdly routinized, but hypocritical, deceptive, and sinister. The clockwork uniformity with which Mr. Pilch returns home for a romantic rendezvous with his maid in his wife’s absence, the compulsive lawn care habits of Mr. Turner, who “mows twice a day” and kills an invading rabbit with his bare hands, and the politely estranged family next door (the mother “always says ‘please’ but she’s got that tone”) all come under Kale’s critical gaze. This teen perspective on suburban life, as embodied by Kale, is crucial to the narrative inversion of the suburban moral
hierarchy that the film enacts, through which a voyeuristic juvenile delinquent becomes the hero and the respectable adult property-owner is demonized. This inversion turns Kale’s potentially prurient gaze into a critical examination of suburban life and a heroic vigilance that eventually protects, rather than endangers, its sexual object in ways reminiscent of the conversion of *American Beauty*’s young voyeur into a “romantic hero” (Karlyn 81). Kale’s critical perspective extends to ridiculing the fantasy of suburbia as a pure space that shields happy family life from corrupt urban influences and deriding hopes that this domestic ideal can restore the traditional family to a state of innocence and domestic bliss. When his love interest confesses that her family has relocated to the “‘burbs” to distance themselves from the city’s extra-marital “temptations,” Kale laughs, saying, “What’d they think, the extra bathroom would help? Maybe a two-car garage? You know what, honey? Infidelity? Forget about it...look at the storage space!” Refusing to embrace a nostalgic longing for the perfect family of a suburban past that has been lost, *Disturbia* sets the happy memories of the last day Kale spent with his father in a mountain stream far from their family home. Even these scenes undercut the possibility of a mythic fantasy when Kale pokes fun at the “father-son moment” by making a tongue-in-cheek confession that he has gotten a girl from Reno pregnant and will soon be moving into “a trailer park.” In a deleted scene made available on the DVD, Kale’s mother also resists a romantic gloss over familial history, acknowledging that even when Kale’s father was alive, there was yelling in the house. By refusing to locate threats to happiness in an urban past or celebrate a suburban present as the ideal, *Disturbia* inverts the affective order of the pursuit of the American dream of home ownership. For Kale, happy family life is comprised of memories set outside the suburban setting, which becomes a site of loss, discontent, and terror as the narrative unfolds.

Conventions of domestic space as inhabited by adolescent residents are invoked in *Disturbia* even as the film alters them: it pokes fun at the expectation that teenaged boys masturbate in the bathroom by revealing the ankle monitor to be the itch that Kale ecstatically scratches, the erudite setting of his father’s den is perverted in the interest of an adolescent desire to “peep” at a
neighbor in the swimming pool, and the main character’s bedroom is the typical teen “disaster” that later becomes a scene of terror. The family home itself, the inner sanctum that the suburban neighborhood has long been thought to protect is re-imagined in Disturbia, not as a place that gets invaded by external threats, but as a site permeated by perversity. While Kale’s voyeurism is eventually redeemed by the romance that ensues between him and his love interest, other deviant practices are revealed to indicate dangerous pathology.

The critical teen eye turned on the suburban neighborhood notes a number of ominous irregularities for this cultural space in Disturbia. Late-night activity, a one-night stand, and an old car with a dented fender might be marked out as deviant in the affluent development Kale inhabits, but as the narrative progresses, they become sinister clues. Kale (joined by the enticing female neighbor and his best friend) discovers that Mr. Turner is, indeed, a serial killer, in an investigation that culminates in a confrontation transforming the suburban home into a nightmarish setting. We learn that the attractive, pleasant house Mr. Turner inhabits hides terrible secrets from which Kale’s own home can offer little protection. The roomy addition between Mr. Turner’s house and garage is really a laboratory for mutilating the bodies of his victims, whose remains are stuffed into the mysterious spaces requisite to suburban design: the ventilation ducts, crawl spaces, and basements that often provoke the curiosity and fear of the children who live in them.

Kale’s willingness to break into and enter his neighbor’s home, along with his technologically enhanced spying (he inhabits the social world of the affluent teen, in which cell phones, digital video cameras, and internet use are commonplace) allow him to capture the lifeless visage of the killer’s most recent victim through the grate of a cold-air return. This discovery gives Kale the proof he needs, but it also makes him a target for Mr. Turner, who abducts his mother and makes Kale’s house and yard the scene of a terrifying struggle. When Mr. Turner bursts through the door of Kale’s bedroom with a baseball bat, Kale has to abandon his house, flee to the yard, and eventually, brave the recesses of his neighbor’s home to rescue his mother. After searching Mr. Turner’s attractive house to find dead
bodies, instruments of torture, embalming paraphernalia, and the personal effects of his victims, Kale kills his neighbor in a violent struggle in Turner’s dark and cavernous basement. These narrative twists effectively turn the suburban house inside out, making its deepest recesses the source of danger and relocating refuge to the home’s exterior. For Kale and his friends, it is the public space that lies beyond the yard—a space that allows Kales’ ankle monitor to trigger a more direct form of surveillance by the police—that affords safety, and the confines of the family home are anything but comforting. It is at the foundation of the suburban home that Kale must face his deepest fears to rescue his only remaining parent from death and dismemberment.

By the end of the film, Kale has become a heroic neighborhood vigilante in the eyes of his new girlfriend (who has turned from erotic object in the window to an aggressive sexual subject in her own right), pursuing an “ongoing offensive against neighborhood evil.” Although this line of dialogue is delivered in jest after Kale takes his revenge on the adolescent “sleeper cell” of porn-loving pranksters who terrorize the neighborhood, *Disturbia* affirms his status as hero through a narrative that begins with valorized contempt, proceeds to perceptive suspicion, and culminates in a horrific discovery.

The titillating paranoia that renders suburbia a creepy and even terrifying place to the discerning teen in *Disturbia* is amplified by the official website for the film, which exports this perspective to suburbs everywhere (“Disturbia”). The main page of the site displays a surreal image of Kale’s room, over which he (binoculars in hand) is crudely pasted, as though part of some rudimentary collage—a trademark signifier of the serial killer in film. By looking closely at Kale’s room while running the mouse over the scene, the visitor finds secret buttons to follow that lead to separate pages on the site. One of these, located over the image of Kale’s computer monitor, is entitled “Disturbia Suburbia” and opens with ominous questions slowly “typed” across the window (the first in white and the second in red and highlighted): “How well do you know your neighbors?”…“Or do you know your neighbors at all?” Visitors are then invited to enter their own zip codes and shown a view from Google’s satellite mapping system. If the zip code entered is valid and
the visitor clicks on the red bulls-eye on the map, a series of documents resembling newspaper clippings will appear, describing an average resident of the selected area whose behavior goes from unremarkable, to odd, and finally, criminal (resulting in charges of assault, burglary, embezzlement, or murder). These reports suggest that visitors should keep their eyes open in their own neighborhoods, and that even a seemingly “normal” resident can exhibit behavior foreshadowing a turn to illegal and/or violent acts.

Following up on this theme, a button located under a small globe on Kale’s desk labeled “Dark Secrets” (harder to find and only available when the screen “floats” that part of the image into view) invites visitors to post “real life stories of just how creepy neighbors can be,” detailing the “late hours,” “strange and suspicious visitors,” and “unexplainable noises in the middle of the night” they have witnessed in their own neighborhoods. These interactive features of Disturbia’s website encourage fans to identify with the teen residents portrayed in the film and turn a watchful eye on the neighborhood, reinforcing the warning that is the tagline on posters for the film: “Every killer lives next door to someone.” The direction of the surveillance enacted through the neighborhood watch, once the purview of adult property owners who targeted teen hoodlums as a threat, has been reversed: the latter are now to police the former. Furthermore, a space designed to facilitate adult residents’ efforts to protect children from strangers is now inhabited by estranged children who regard familiar adults as potential threats.

Overall, the critique of suburban morality that Disturbia offers viewers is effected though a narrative inverting the traditional profiles of protagonist and antagonist, the categories of normal and deviant neighborhood behavior, and the status of suburban home and the places it is designed to exclude. By converting a violent and voyeuristic youth into a hero and a conscientious neighbor into a psychotic killer, Disturbia’s narrative champions the disaffected teen hoodlum commonly denigrated in popular media as a threat to the sanctity of the good neighborhood and casts suspicion on the residents at the top of the suburban hierarchy: adult male homeowners who carefully observe social codes and the dictates of property value. Likewise, aberrant practices like peeping at neighbors
for sexual gratification and breaking and entering become normalized as *Disturbia*’s narrative runs its course, while relocating to suburbia from the city and performing normal tasks like dog-walking and lawn care are ridiculed and even pathologized. Furthermore, by re-positioning threats long associated with urban (public) places (such as crime and sexual immorality) inside the suburban neighborhood and depicting horrors emanating from the deepest recesses of the family home—horrors that cause residents to run to the streets in terror, *Disturbia* dramatically reverses the direction of affluent flight.

If *Disturbia* overturns the moral high ground suburbia once occupied in popular culture by raising questions about whether its homes and neighborhoods are ideal, desirable, or even safe places for teenagers to call home, *Little Children* (2006) prods viewers in an even softer spot: the axiom that the suburban home is the ideal place for parents to raise small children. Littered with case studies in childhood gone wrong, *Little Children* explores how suburban space can be home to events that traumatically arrest childhood: estrangement, adultery, divorce, death of a parent, childhood sexual abuse or even the violent death of the child. A darkly satirical study of the hypocrisies and disappointments of suburban life, *Little Children* goes beyond finding suburbia to be an environment that harbors dangers for children to indicting suburban culture for its role in creating those threats. Furthermore, by casting doubt upon such sacred concepts as the mother-child bond and eliciting sympathy for those at the bottom of the moral hierarchy, *Little Children* ultimately inverts conventional categories by pathologizing the “normal” residents of suburbia and normalizing the pathologies represented as the biggest threats to the dream of a happy family life in the suburbs.

Opening with local television coverage of the release and return of a “convicted sex offender” to an affluent suburban neighborhood (as seen from the living room of the ex-convict’s home), *Little Children* sets a foreboding tone from the first frames. Dramatic cuts between ornate clocks and the faces and body parts of Hummel-styled figurines (the popular German-made collectibles that exaggerate childish features and depict children in idyllic, innocent poses) in the sex offender’s residence, as well as images of the suburb as seen from the window of a train, provoke anxiety that danger is
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bearing down on the youngest residents of the community. Comments from parent’s concerned about the entry of a “dangerous predator” into the neighborhood emphasize that children are the suburb’s raison d’etre by equating the presence of a man convicted of “indecent acts with a minor” in their midst to “having an alcoholic work in a bar” from a local newscast are featured. The middle-class suburban residents interviewed express outrage over their own children being exposed to the crime and deviance long depicted as the natural backdrop for the lives of “underclass and inner-city teens” in popular film (Ramlow 117). It is significant that viewers see this program from the perspective of the one member of the fictional community who anticipates the sex offender’s return, defends him against the prejudice he will soon face, and loves him unconditionally: his mother. From its first moments, Little Children forces viewers to assume an outlook on suburban culture that takes in the price paid by those who violate its moral standards by focusing on the persecution those norms can legitimate.

A sense of dread about the outcome of Ronald “Ronnie” McGorvey (the sex offender) coming to the neighborhood pervades the entire film, but the possibility of sexual abuse is not the only danger to the happiness of children it represents. The other residents that we come to know in Little Children are adults whose desire and ability to protect the youngest members of the community is dubious for a variety of reasons. In addition to Ronnie, the main characters include: Sarah, a feminist and former graduate student who is estranged from the neighborhood housewives and the “unknowable little person” who is her daughter Lucy; Brad, a stay-at-home father who repeatedly fails the bar exam, is emasculated by his wife’s career and control over their finances (he describes her as “the one who wears the pants in the family”), and is jealous of her intimacy with their son; Richard, Sarah’s husband and Lucy’s father, who has become addicted to Internet pornography; and Larry, Brad’s best friend, a former police officer who has become verbally abusive to his wife and children.

The central plot of Little Children concerns Sarah and Brad meeting, developing a growing attraction to one another and beginning an affair whose outcome becomes apparent in the final
scenes of the film. As Sarah and Brad move from an initial violation of suburban propriety (their first kiss, just after they have been introduced at the playground, prompts mothers to run to remove their children from view of this shocking indiscretion) to a full-blown affair that has them contemplating dissolving their marriages, the ominous tension surrounding Ronnie's inability to reintegrate into "good" society and control his "psychosexual" urges builds. A sense that the film is leading to a tragic collision of the two story lines is heightened by Sarah's growing frustration with the marital ties separating her from Brad as well as her progressive neglect of her own daughter, and by Larry's increasingly frantic pursuit of Ronnie. After a fatal confrontation on the McGorvey's front lawn leaves Ronnie's mother dead and her son unhinged by grief, Sarah's decision to take Lucy to a neighborhood playground after dark to meet and run away with Brad precipitates an inevitable convergence of the two narrative strands that places Lucy in jeopardy.

In significant ways, *Little Children* can be seen as a study in arrested childhood in suburbia. The characters in the film often seem to suffer from traumatic events that halted their development, and, in some cases, have left them unable to cope with adult life. Brad, who spends his time watching skateboarders and playing football (with no pads and no helmet) rather than studying for the bar exam, was traumatized by the death of his mother at an age when these sports would have been more socially acceptable hobbies. Brad's wife, Kathy, who is distant, cold, and demanding, has grown up in the wake of her parent's marital problems and her mother's distrust of all men. Sheila, Ronnie's blind date, has suffered a mental breakdown that her therapist attributes to repressed sexual abuse, and it is her childlike fragility and emotional wounds that attract Ronnie and repel other suitors. Ronnie has returned to his mother's house as an adult who continually seeks intimate contact with children. Each of these characters has had the order of typical life events inverted in some way that contributes to their anomie. From Brad's early loss of his mother and delayed career path to Ronnie's middle-aged attraction to children and dependant status, these inversions render *Little Children's* characters deviant by making their life stories appear out of order in the context of a typical suburban narrative.
While the adults of the film seem to be struggling with the aftereffects of arrested childhood, the children it features are in danger of suffering the same fate. Lucy’s affection for a mother who is emotionally withdrawn and occasionally incompetent (if not unfit), her father’s pornography addiction, and the impending collapse of their marriage provoke anxiety about her future. Brad’s inability to pass the bar exam and pursue a career outside the home, as well as his plan to run away with Sarah, raise questions about the type of father figure he will be for his son Aaron. In addition to these potential precursors of psychological trauma, the film also depicts more dramatic threats to children. Larry’s obsession with driving Ronnie McGorvey from the neighborhood is potentially threatening (one resident complains that he is “scaring the kids”) given his drinking and history of mistakenly shooting an innocent child in the line of duty. And of course, the sinister presence of Ronnie in the neighborhood (particularly given his tendency to be drawn to the local swimming pool, schoolyard, and playgrounds) suggests that any of the children who live there may become victims of sexual abuse.

The suburban setting of Little Children is central to its narrative’s efficacy in undermining the assumption that suburbia’s moral order helps to constitute it as the site of idyllic family life. Specific features of suburban design that mark it as a family-friendly space, such as playgrounds, swimming pools, and quiet residential streets, are recast in Little Children as elements that facilitate the alienation, pedophilic desire, and adultery that are the most ominous threats to the youngest residents the film depicts.

In playground scenes illustrating how the sub-culture dominated by full-time mothers has alienated both Sarah (whose feminist sensibilities and education set her apart) and Brad (whose status as stay-at-home dad makes him a neighborhood oddity and sex object), Little Children portrays the stifling rigidity of suburban cultural norms. The authority of the idealized maternal figure is embodied in the suburban mothers who make daily trips to the playground grueling for atypical parents like Sarah and Brad. Under the unforgiving gaze of the self-appointed and self-righteous experts on parenting that police the playground, Sarah’s bitterness and frustration, and Brad’s self-doubt and loneliness, grows. The playground also feeds Ronnie’s
pedophilic desires and serves as an erotic stimulus for his masturbation while he is on a blind date with Sheila, an act made possible by the characteristically suburban features of the park: its isolation from other public spaces and proximity to quiet residential streets. And in the final scenes of the film, the neighborhood playground becomes the site of Sarah’s attempted rendezvous with her lover and the setting for a frightening and tragic confrontation with Ronnie.

The neighborhood swimming pool, rather than a site of wholesome family fun, becomes charged with sexual immorality and deviance as it enables the voyeurism of Sarah and Brad (who steal glances at each other’s swimsuit-clad forms) and Ronnie (who views the thrashing bodies of swimming children through a snorkeling mask). In these scenes, the pool becomes a space that facilitates adultery and pedophilia, while contributing to the fanatical vigilantism that will eventually be pathologized by the film.

Even the quiet residential drives, so often touted as safer than busy city streets, become ominous in *Little Children’s* portrait of suburban life. The hurried walks Sarah takes with her only close friend down wide, deserted boulevards work to heighten the sense of isolation the narrative links to her growing discontent. It is also these dark and empty streets that contribute to Sarah’s panic at the close of the film, when Lucy wanders down the pavement to stand alone in the dim glow of a single utility pole—a sharp illustration of the lonely night life of suburbia into which this child might have disappeared without a trace.

*Little Children* also makes use of the architecture of the affluent, single-family home to illustrate (and undermine) suburban moral codes. The peripheral, and potentially subversive, relation of Sarah and Brad’s affair to normative family life is sharply illustrated by the sites of their sexual encounters. While the public swimming pool and local playground are the places where Sarah and Brad engage in flirtation, they can only fully consummate their desires in the basement and attic of the house Sarah shares with her husband and child. These unfinished spaces of the home, places designated for storing away memories of pre-marital life, become the scenes of new erotic encounters and emotional intimacies. Placing these sexual
trysts in such settings suggests that, like other undiscovered problems lurking in the basement or attic (subjects that inspire anxiety in both suburban children and home-owners), Sarah and Brad’s extra-marital affair has the potential to undermine the foundation, or blow the lid off of, the structure that houses the suburban nuclear family in popular representations.

In addition to illustrating how specific features of suburban space contribute to the alienation and deviance that can become a threat to its youngest residents, *Little Children* critically examines the daily lives of the well-adjusted adult residents of suburbia in ways that cast doubt on their normality. In doing so, the film presents a critique of suburban culture that pathologizes some of the normative practices of this environment. The primary filmic device for estranging viewers from the typical settings of the film is the voice of the narrator (Will Lyman, of PBS’s *Frontline* series). Early in the film, the narrator is cast in a perspective sympathetic to Sarah’s view of the housewives at the neighborhood park, as he describes her efforts to “mask her familiar feeling of desperation” by thinking of herself as an anthropologist, “a researcher studying the behavior of typical suburban women” rather than a “typical suburban woman herself.” Encouraged to view the film as a documentary on suburban culture and Sarah as its researcher, the audience is invited to share her observations about its pointless, or even disturbing, norms.

Through the narrator, we learn that 10:30 snack time is sacred because “rigid adherence to a timetable” is viewed by Mary Ann (the self-appointed, authoritarian leader of the playground mothers) as “not only the key to a healthy marriage, but to effective parenting as well.” The critical distance the narrator imparts makes it possible to immediately detect Sarah’s sarcasm when she calls Mary Ann’s suggestion to leave a checklist by the door (Sarah has forgotten to bring Lucy’s morning snack, once again) “really helpful,” and when she follows up their suggestions that Ronnie be castrated for his pedophilia with her own proposal to nail his penis over the schoolhouse door. As the tension over the presence of Ronnie in the neighborhood mounts among the “concerned parents,” we see their increasingly-frantic attempts to drive him from the neighborhood
through the eyes of Sarah, who finds them “just as bad” as the act of indecent exposure that sent Ronnie to prison.

The disembodied voice of the narrator also describes Brad’s observations about the affection shared between his wife and son, which only becomes deviant when viewed through his eyes: her cold reception of Brad and the almost erotic embrace she gives Aaron, the revealing lingerie she wears with Aaron in their bed, and her insistence on sleeping with Aaron, whom she describes as her “guy” and “the cutie…sleeping right next to me.” The jealousy Brad feels over his wife’s affective bond with their son suggests that he suspects not only an emotional displacement has taken place, but also a sexual one. Similarly, the way that the playground mothers intersperse comments about their unsatisfying sex lives with their husbands with detailed discussions of techniques for potty-training their sons contributes to the sense that there is something unhealthy about the typical suburban mother’s attachment to her children. Although the film does not directly hypothesize a cause for Ronnie’s “psycho-sexual disorder,” his close relationship with, and dependence on, his “Mommy,” his inability to wash his own dishes, drive a car, or have an adult sexual relationship points to the worst possible outcome of the overly-intimate maternal bond.

In assuming a critical perspective on suburbia that casts the familiar in a strange light, Little Children follows films such as 1998’s Pleasantville and 1999’s American Beauty. Although Little Children goes beyond the disdain for the rigidity and repression of suburban daily life that these other films evidence to pathologizing its normative figures and practices, its most unique contribution to critical cinematic representations lies in the way that it normalizes infamous threats to family life. By encouraging viewers to sympathize—even empathize—with the aberrant practices of seemingly unredeemable characters and offering truths about the human condition that contradict conventional propriety, Little Children completes the moral inversion initiated by its critique of suburbia.

Focusing on the disappointments and frustrations Sarah and Brad face as full-time caregivers of young children and exposing their struggles and hopes, Little Children’s narrative invites viewers to excuse their adultery. This is significant, given that each parent uses
her/his child to facilitate their infidelity, and both Lucy and Aaron cannot avoid being caught up in the affair that comes to dominate the daytime lives of Brad and Sarah. Although Sarah’s claim that the literary character of Madame Bovary in the novel of the same name was “in her own way...a feminist” is scoffed at by Mary Ann (who deems her a “slut”), our sympathies lie with Sarah as we watch her try to justify her own actions. Despite enabling identification with Sarah, *Little Children* also makes it hard for its audience to demonize her porn-addicted husband. In explaining his fascination with “Slutty Kay” to himself, Richard draws some wisdom from his observations of his neighbor (a “transvestite”) and his co-worker (who has “anonymous sex with other men in public restrooms”), to reach a conclusion voiced by the narrator: “Life had taught Richard that it was ridiculous to be at war with your own desires—we want what we want and there isn’t much we can do about it.”

This lesson carries over to the other characters in the film as well, since both Sarah and Brad seem simply ill-suited to the role of full-time suburban parent, helpless in the face of their desire for each other, and genuinely remorseful over their failings. Beyond sympathizing with the inability of its characters to wage a war against their own desires, the narrative rationalizes them as products of the cultural environment in which they find themselves. *Little Children* vividly illustrates how the mind-numbing banality of Sarah’s life in the suburb has left her desperately unfulfilled, and depicts Sarah and Lucy as both suffering under the presumption that maternal instinct will provide the skill and satisfaction requisite to full-time parenting. This portrait makes it hard not to extend the same sympathy to Sarah that she expresses for Madame Bovary, whose “hunger for an alternative and refusal to accept anything else” she champions. Likewise, the film ascribes much of Brad’s isolation and gnawing self-doubt to the gender norms that he has violated by failing the bar exam and becoming a stay-at-home dad. His precarious position in the affluent suburban neighborhood, where he is objectified rather than befriended by the full-time mothers and where he and Kathy can barely afford to rent on their single income, contributes to his loneliness and becomes a catalyst for his eventual infidelity. Overall, *Little Children* suggests that suburban cultural norms may actually
engender the parental neglect and marital infidelity that violate its standards of morality.

But while the capacity of Little Children to garner sympathy for irresponsible parents and unfaithful spouses is notable, it is its compassionate portrait of a pedophilic sex offender that is truly remarkable. Through the eyes of Sarah and Brad we view Ronnie's antagonists, Mary Ann, Larry, and other “concerned parents,” as fanatical in their efforts to drive him from the neighborhood, and brutal in their proposal to castrate him for his crime. When Ronnie acknowledges that he has a “psychosexual disorder,” claims that he wants to desire an adult girlfriend, shows genuine affection for his mother, and is initially kind to the fragile Sheila on their date, viewers are encouraged to see him as a complex, if flawed, character. Given Ronnie’s criminal history, the way he stalks the children at the playground and pool, and his eventual foul treatment of Sheila, the film’s potential to solicit sympathy on his behalf is impressive.

Although Mary Ann and Larry view Ronnie as little more that a dangerous animal to be neutered and made docile, his mother asserts his humanity in a way that links him to the other flawed characters in the narrative, saying:

You’re a miracle, Ronnie. We’re all miracles. Do you know why? Because as humans, every day we go about our business and all that time we know—we all know—that the things we love, the people we love, at any time can all be taken away. We live knowing that and we keep going anyway. Animals don’t do that.

Like Sarah, who loves a married man and despairs of a happy ending to the affair, Brad, who risks his home, son, and only source of income, and Larry, who loses his job and his family, but continues to work tirelessly to protect the children of the neighborhood, Ronnie is nothing less than a characteristically flawed human being. For May, her son Ronnie is as miraculous as the day he was born, a child no less precious than any other.

Ultimately, despite our anxiety for the wellbeing of Lucy, Aaron, and the other neighborhood children, the only child who is critically wounded in Little Children is Ronnie. Driven by grief and a desire to “be a good boy” (his mother’s last words to him), Ronnie fulfills the
Joan Faber McAlister

desires of his antagonists by castrating himself. The fear that Ronnie will assault Lucy in the climax of the film quickly turns to horror and pity, as he staggers into Larry’s arms, bleeding profusely, and declaring that he’s “gonna be good now.” This event, which completes the inversion of the sexual predator’s status from villain to victim that Little Children’s narrative enacts, illustrates the brutal price that those who will not (or cannot) conform to suburbia’s codes of sexual morality may pay. In the final moments of the film, the narrator voices Larry’s newfound compassion for Ronnie as he rushes him to the hospital: “He knew Ronnie had done some bad things in the past, but so had Larry. You couldn’t change the past, but the future could be a different story. And it had to start somewhere.” As Little Children’s final words sink in, viewers are assured that Brad has decided to go home to his wife, and we see Sarah huddled around the sleeping form of Lucy in contrition.

By ending in this way, Little Children blunts the force of some of its critique of suburbia, as the main characters do not abandon their marriages for each other and our sense that Sarah is on her way to becoming (in the words of Kate Winslet from an interview about her portrayal of the character) “a proper parent,” reaffirming the sacred maternal bond.2 However, Larry’s care for Ronnie at the end of the film, as well as the implication that the affair has helped both Sarah and Brad grow up in some important ways, enhances the way that the film undermines assumptions about who the “little children” of suburbia are, and casts serious doubts on the benefits of its moral standards and cultural norms in protecting them.

Critical and/or comical portraits of suburban culture are not new to film, and both Disturbia and Little Children continue earlier efforts to castigate the rigidity, dull uniformity, and disappointments that mid-twentieth century dreams of a happy life in the suburbs had once obscured. As one Village Voice critic who reviewed Little Children observed, “Suburbia continues to serve as the dartboard of choice for filmmakers bent on demonstrating their urbane superiority to the dull

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2 This quote is taken from an interview that reappears on multiple websites advertising and reviewing the film. For examples, see http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?sid=125 and http://en.epochtimes.com/news/7-2-20/51901.html.
denizens of tract housing.”3 However, both Disturbia and Little Children substantially up the ante in the critique of suburban life by undermining the rationale that ensuring the welfare of children justifies all the sacrifices and compromises that a move to the suburbs might entail. Furthermore, both films invert the hierarchy in which suburbia has long been preferred over its urban other by depicting this cultural space, with its atomistic tendencies, insular private homes, and rigid moral codes, as a threat to the happiness and safety of the young residents it was supposed to shelter.

However, the use of inversion as a subversive strategy has limits in that the upending of a moral order does not necessarily destabilize its structure. A simple reversal of the contents of moral categories does not erode the binary system in which normalcy/pathology, conformity/deviance, and morality/immorality operate. In the case of critical representations of suburban moral codes, the dualities underwriting gendered and sexual identities cannot be deconstructed through inversion alone.

The historical significance of the trope of inversion in the construction of sexual subjectivity, most notably in Freud’s diagnosis of gender deviance and same-sex desire as a turning away from the “normal” channel of sexual expression, makes its usage in a critique of a heteronormative cultural space of special interest to sexuality scholars and queer theorists. Literary critics have linked narrative inversion to the capacity of texts to subvert sexual mores and destabilize normative subjectivities, finding the trope to challenge heteronormativity (Nelson), and to place not only characters, but also readers/viewers, in a perverse relation to normative sexuality (Gallagher). But while both Disturbia and Little Children enact narrative inversions, the subversive potential of both films is constrained in that neither undermines the dual moral, gender, and sexual structures through which its characters, practices, and settings make sense—although the original texts from which they were adapted showed greater promise in this regard.

A close look at the written narratives from which Disturbia and Little Children were drawn indicates a particular element of their

critical representations of suburban life that did not make it off the page and onto the big screen, one with the potential to destabilize the binaries through which gender and sexuality work to generate fixed identities. In the original script for Disturbia, Mr. Pilch’s routine rendezvous with the maid after his wife exits the house varies from the one Kale observes onscreen in one important way: the affair is not conducted with the young and slender Linda seen in the film, but a character described as “heavy set, male maid, LONNIE, 35” in the script.4 Little Children similarly censors a same-sex affair from the literary narrative—one that is significant for the development of the main character. Sarah’s feminist views and her unfeminine appearance (“boyish […] with eyebrows thicker than Brad thought necessary”), qualities that repulse the neighbor women and intrigue Brad, are explained in the opening of the novel on which the film was based. In Tom Perotta’s novel, Sarah’s unique sensibilities and aesthetics proceed from her former activism for gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizations and her college affair with a Korean-American woman named Amelia. Sarah’s heartbreak over this relationship’s end, which made Richard’s “quiet authority” and conventional manners so appealing, is offered as the reason that she has “ended up at this godforsaken playground” in the first scene of the book (Perotta 14).

Since the characteristically heteronormative aspects of suburban culture have already been introduced in American Beauty, a film that depicted neighborhood resistance to same-sex couples and repressed homosexual desire and still managed to succeed at the box office and win five Oscars, why should the affairs of Mr. Pilch and Sarah be censored from Disturbia and Little Children? Some distinctions in the way that American Beauty portrays homosexuality suggest reasons why the same-sex affairs in Disturbia’s script and the novel Little Children did not survive adaptation to the screen. As Karlyn has argued, American Beauty presents “conflicted views” of homosexuality (84). The presence of an attractive, well-adjusted gay male couple (perhaps the only happy family we encounter in American Beauty) and the

4 The script for Disturbia, as written by Christopher Landon and Carl Ellsworth, is available at http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Disturbia.html.
violent consequences of repressed homoerotic desire, apparent in the Colonel’s brutal treatment of his wife and son and his eventual murder of Lester, work to negotiate the threat that same-sex desire poses to suburbia’s heteronormativity (Karlyn 84). If such desire is openly acknowledged and forms the basis of a new identity, happy monogamy, affluence, and integration can ensue. However, the repression of homoerotic desire that turns the family home into a closet and a marriage into an alibi, poses a serious threat to the hegemonic status of the suburban American dream.

The same-sex affairs that appear in written versions of *Disturbia* and *Little Children* are a departure from ground covered by *American Beauty*, in that the characters that engage in them do so unaffectedly, leaving their sexual orientation radically ambiguous. Is Mr. Pilch a closeted homosexual, or does he just enjoy sex with Lonnie in much the same way that he might with his wife or another woman? Was Sarah’s affair with Amelia in college “experimental” or was it akin to her passionate and sincere attachment to Todd (Brad’s character in the novel)? Perhaps the instability such relationships introduce into the suburban cultural milieu, one in which monosexuality has long been the unspoken basis of upholding not only moral standards, but also gender roles and sexual identities, still poses too grave a threat to be represented in film—even in projects unabashedly critical of middle-class morality. The threat that bisexuality represents in these narratives may lie in its capacity to go beyond inversion to open a liminal space between categories.

The opening narration of *Little Children* positioning the character of Sarah as an anthropologist who is “studying the behavior of typical suburban women,” initiates the kind of narrative inversion that Homi Bhabha finds characteristic of ethnographic writing, wherein the authorial subject is also a cultural object. According to Bhabha, the possibility that such an inversion can disrupt a hegemonic order stems from the “liminality” it introduces, through which “marginal voice or minority discourses” may speak and be heard (301). The subject/object of ethnography is liminal in that it becomes visible only in the space between the performance of narrating and the text of the narration—it can be permanently fixed in neither. In *Little Children*, it is only in the movement between the categories of
anthropologist/cultural object that Sarah’s becomes discernable as (alienated) subject—she masters the critical gaze that the film enacts even as she is mastered by it. In this sense, the narrative does introduce liminality, but it is a space that is foreclosed by the hegemonic order that renders Sarah’s trials intelligible to a sympathetic (perhaps empathetic) viewer as heterosexual desire, marital infidelity, and, ultimately, contrition and a return to the maternal role. The potential for the character of Sarah in Tom Perotta’s novel to become a more liminal and subversive figure than her cinematic counterpart rests in her indeterminate sexuality, which has the potential to push her outside the framework of unambiguous sexual identity, monogamy, and femininity.

As Marjorie Garber has argued, bisexuality has the potential to defy traditional categories of subjectivity and cultural performance to enact an “eroticism of everyday life” that permeates a social order with ambiguity. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s reading of the Van Gogh painting of peasant shoes in which he deconstructs a basic cultural presumption—the notion of the pair—Garber argues that bisexuality threatens the sacrosanct cultural figure of the couple. The significance of this threat cannot be underestimated in Garber’s view, as it is this figure that “makes possible not only ‘normalcy’ but also narrative and identity” (527). Without such basic assumptions as the pair or the couple, as well as the duality that renders a vast array of oppositional pairings recognizable (male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, moral and immoral), a narrative cannot proceed; it cannot be placed within what Michel Foucault might term the “grid of intelligibility” within which sexual practices and identities (and the constitutive capacity of the former in relation to the latter) make sense (93).5

With the removal of the ambiguity marking the sexualities of characters in both the original script for Disturbia and the novel Little Children from the cinematic versions of these narratives, the potential for such representations of suburban life to go beyond inversion to subversion of its moral order is limited. However, the appearance of

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5 For a more substantive discussion of the significance of this Foucaultian concept to rhetorical criticism, see Biesecker.
the liminal figure of the bisexual in written texts that sketch a critical portrait of the mythic home of the American middle-class family suggests that cinematic critiques of suburban culture may soon move into new territory—to explore places where serial monogamy, the binary of gendered identities, and both homo- and heteronormativity may also come under the critical gaze of a public that seems increasingly disenchanted with conventional depictions of suburbia.

Works Cited


