

1. Videos

How peri-urban lifestyles are portrayed in TV series

By
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Ioanis Deroide, a history professor who prepares students for the selective Sciences Po universities, tackles the question of how peri-urban landscapes and lifestyles are represented in French and foreign television series.

Before introducing this survey of suburban spaces in television series, two points are worth mentioning: first, while some American series set in the suburbs or having chosen the suburbs as their theme have been highly successful I'm thinking in particular of "Desperate Housewives", most contemporary TV series in the United States and elsewhere, are strictly urban, and are set in city centres, not in the outskirts. Likewise, when a generic setting is chosen, as in many sitcoms, the suburbs are mostly approached from an urban perspective, a critical, even satirical, point of view.

From urban to peri-urban

To start with, let's see how television series portray people's journeys from the city centre to the suburbs, either for a house move or just a simple commute.

Who's the boss

In the scene before the extract we've just seen, and which opens the series, the hero, an Italian-American called Tony Micelli, explains to one of his neighbours that he has to leave Brooklyn, where he has always lived, to protect his pre-teen daughter from the neighbourhood's increasing insecurity, this is the mid- 1980s. So, in the opening credits, we see him leave for the distant outskirts of New York, all the way to Connecticut, shown here as a completely different world: of the freeway soon gives way to a setting where the charming homes, the proximity to nature, and the ubiquitous green spaces in particular are indicators of the quality of life. Everything seems set for the start of what the song proclaims as a "brand new life", safe from the violence of the big city.

The second clip also has New York as its point of departure, but shows us a very different landscape.

The Sopranos

From the car of Mafia boss Tony Soprano, who's on his way home, we cross the boundaries that separate the urban from the peri-urban: we leave Manhattan through the Lincoln Tunnel and then take the New Jersey Turnpike. Gradually we leave the city behind, glimpsing the New York City skyline, with the twin towers of the World Trade Center, in the rear-view mirror, entering a space where three very peri-urban features predominate. The first is transport, by road, rail, air, and even by sea. The area is

crisscrossed with horizontal and vertical lines, bridges and passing planes. Then there are the storage tanks, especially for oil and gas, labelled with messages promoting safe driving. Finally, there is industrial production: we distinctly see the refineries and other factories with smoking chimneys. A few isolated monuments stand out in this rather horrible landscape: the Statue of Liberty, seen in the distance, as well as Newark Cathedral. In the second part of the opening credits the space becomes more residential, the streets lined with houses of various sizes, but within the scale of the neighbourhood. A few local shops are the only things that break up this monotonous layout. As in "Who's the Boss", the landscape becomes greener the further we get from the city centre, especially as the characters live in well-to-do suburbs in both series. The third clip in this first section takes us to the outskirts of Toronto.

Durham County

The writers of this police series introduce us to "Durham County", where the hero and his family have just moved, by showing us a piece of what we might call peri-urban furniture: a high-voltage electricity pylon. The multiplication of these pylons, a good example of amenities that are sited away from city centres, gives a graphic dimension to the protagonists' new environment, a very generic housing development, as well as implying a threat, a danger.

Stop

We see also that the characters' physical and psychological states, a mother suffering from cancer and a very hostile teenage daughter, reinforce the idea that this move is going to have tragic consequences.

Violence is often present

So we can see that moving from the centre to the outskirts is always accompanied by a change of scenery, for better or worse. Let's examine these peri-urban landscapes a bit more closely to determine, beyond these differences, their recurring characteristics.

CSI

In this extract we can say that, visually speaking, peri-urban space is approached diagonally: we move horizontally from the centre outward, from the famous Las Vegas Strip, lit up by its hotels and casinos, to a suburb that stretches right to the foothills of the mountains. Then we do a vertical dive from the sky down to the ground, and from the basement right into the crawl space of a house. What's being suggested here is that the real suburban landscape is hidden. The peaceful, sunny housing estates, far from the turmoil of the Strip and its vices, are actually places of violence and death, too, represented here by a skeleton's hand cemented into the very foundations of the building.

We also find this theme of a latent violence poised to erupt in the French series "Braquo".

Braquo

In this silent landscape with its deserted street, motionless under the sun, a triple murder can be committed in just moments, with complete impunity. Later in the episode we see a full-scale shoot-out take place against this motionless backdrop, an eruption of violence that ends with a return to the initial silence, once one gang has got the better of the other and disappeared, leaving only dead bodies behind.

In "CSI", "Braquo" and most of these series, the residential street is the iconic suburban landscape.

Misfits

In "Misfits", a series for teenagers filmed in Thamesmead, about 15km from the centre of London, we have a different setting. In this scene, taken from the first episode, we see a housing development, marked out by four tower blocks each a dozen storeys high, overlooking a lake. A vast area once again with very few people in it, which allows the writers to imagine that an extraordinary phenomenon can occur without any witnesses other than the main characters. In this case it's a supernatural storm that

bestows super powers on the protagonists.

Kaseifu no mita

We find this sense of isolation, though in a much more introspective and contemplative way, in "Kaseifu No Mita", a Japanese series set mainly on the banks of a river. This kind of landscape, the banks of rivers or streams, are often found in Japanese series, both animations and films, and are used as places to retreat to in solitude or to hide in, often marked by their lack of buildings, as these waterways are subject to regular flooding. Here peri-urban spaces are in closer contact with nature.

Different continent, different landscapes, that's what we see in the first few seconds of the great Brazilian telenovela of 2012, great in terms of ratings and media hype, "Avenida Brasil".

Avenida Brasil

This series takes its name from an urban motorway linking the centre of Rio de Janeiro to its western outskirts. The fictional Divino neighbourhood, where most of the action takes place, is interesting for us Europeans in that it shows a different side of the famous Brazilian city. We find the usual "clichés" of football, hot weather, conviviality and parties, but without the usual picture-postcard images of beaches or Corcovado National Park. Instead it highlights the spaces and daily activities of middle, and working-class people, which is quite unusual for a telenovela. We also see how mobility is represented in this area through the cars that use "Brazil Avenue" as well as through its public transport.

Peri-urban social life

That extract also gives us a glimpse of suburban social life, which we will now study more closely.

Suburgatory

"Suburgatory", coined from the words "suburb" and "purgatory", is the title of a comedy that was created on the back of the success of "Desperate Housewives". Like its predecessor, this series is a satire of peri-urban living, but with one difference: while "Wisteria Lane" was the centre of the world in "Desperate Housewives", the heroes of "Suburgatory" are hardened New Yorkers who have moved to the suburbs, hence the choice of title, which draws the comparison with a suburban life where most leisure activities are done in a group. While the Big City is a largely anonymous place where people can melt into the crowd, the suburbs are where everyone is always under the gaze of their neighbours, a place where social interaction is demonstrative and flashy, like the clothes they wear, which astonish the hero George's New York friends when they come to visit him.

Weeds

In the dark comedy "Weeds", the satirical element is even more important, as its famous theme song suggests. Here, the identity of the lifestyles and destinies of the inhabitants are the subjects of mockery. As the theme song says: they all live in the same "ticky-tacky" houses, and they all become doctors, lawyers or business managers.

At the end of the third series, a forest fire, this is California, ravages the suburb. The heroine, Nancy Botwin, is suspected of causing this catastrophe because of her involvement in marijuana trafficking. But her answer offers a much simpler explanation: the disaster is the result of natural causes such as the dry climate and high winds. But most of all, as Nancy says at the end of this scene, it's due to the overpopulation of this wooded area, in other words, to its peri-urbanisation.

The Slap

The last excerpt takes us to Australia, to the outskirts of Melbourne. There's a barbecue for Hector, an Australian of Greek origin, to celebrate his 40th birthday. Through this scene, "The Slap" introduces us to a multicultural community including an Aborigine who has converted to Islam, that is much more socially diverse than the ones we find in American series. Yet this mixed society is not exempt from tensions and deviant behaviour: Hector is an adulterer, and his guests do not all like one another very

much. So, rather than the conviviality we'd expect in these circumstances, the irritation builds up until one act, the slap that gives the series its title, shatters this group of friends and neighbours.

Peri-urban areas: a favourite place for the contemporary imagination

So, television series offer us a vision of peri-urban life that is not particularly flattering, between emptiness and violence, social conformity and petty, even criminal, offences. "Appearances are deceptive" seems to be the much-repeated maxim. So we mustn't look to them for a subtle, nuanced, or even realistic view of peri-urban areas. However, we should give these series credit for having made peri-urban areas a permanent feature of our collective representations, to have given it life, even if that life is only images, and to have made it one of the favourite places for the contemporary imagination.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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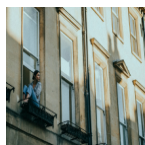
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