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“First they built the roads”: The Automobile Agent in Arcade Fire’s *The Suburbs*

Urban historian Dr. Kenneth Jackson calls the suburbs “the quintessential physical achievement of the United States,” an achievement “perhaps more representative of its culture than big cars, tall buildings, or professional football” (*Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* 4). Over half of Americans live in the suburbs, and approximately 169 thousand of the United State’s 3.79 million square miles is populated by suburban development. Clearly the suburbs are a significant part of American life, as custom to America, they say, as apple pie.

A space so expansive and primary to America indicates its significance in the American discourse. By ‘discourse’ I do not mean merely a preoccupation with language. Discourse as a category is much broader: it is a question of “what was being said in what was said?” with various relationships, actions, laws, beliefs, and objects. Space functions as a discourse. Like any other discourse, it takes part in a larger conversation. It shapes and is shaped by its relationship to ideologies and power.

The suburbs grew exponentially in the 20th century due to several key factors that encouraged individual families and businesses to migrate and expand it. Government policies, like subsidies and tax breaks, persuaded businesses to build new suburban structures rather than fix-up old urban structures (which costed more). The larger supply of available housing property outside the city decreased the cost of living in those communities for individuals looking to move out into the suburb. The Federal Housing Administration made the decreased cost further accessible for purchase through FHA loans after WWII. These loans enabled many Americans to move to the suburbs who normally would have been unable to afford a house in the suburbs.

The wealthy began their flight to the suburbs from the cities earlier than most Americans in the late 19th century, but shifting morals and values encouraged more Americans to move from the 1950s onward. As the move became continually more affordable, the city became an even more concentrated place of business and an environment even more dangerous as the upper classes moved away. The suburbs then functioned as the family space where one could escape the dirty, hostile city. As Kenneth Jackson notes, “Family came to be a personal bastion against society, a place of refuge, free from outside control,” with “the emerging values of domesticity, privacy, and isolation reach[ing] fullest development in the United States.(47-8). Through the suburb/city and public/private binary, the suburbs came to provide an illusion of insulated space in which people were safe to cultivate a family free from the possible threats one might encounter in the larger world.

The most important factor to suburban expansion--the factor and its influence which will be the primary focus of this paper--is the advent of sufficient self-transport in the late 19th early 20th centuries. Self-transport revolutionized the way people lived because for the first time in history, people were able to live apart from their workplace (Jackson 4-5). Timely transportation methods meant Americans could occupy multiple

spaces and effectively delineate roles and meanings to various, different spaces. Invariably, this meant that one's identity was no longer rooted to a specific context. Instead, one could perceive their identity as a traveling agent.

Democracy and Suburban Identity

When the suburbs gained critical mass in the post-WWII era, they came to represent a re-invented, better-than-ever America (ix). In his book *When America Became Suburban*, Robert A. Beauregard conflates American democracy with the suburban lifestyle and consumerism. Due to the fact that consumer choice became an expression of democratic identity, the suburban and therefore automobile identity became the dominate, proper American identity.

Beauregard states that vital link between American democracy, consumerism and suburbanization blossomed during the "ideological contest" known as the Cold War (x). It was then that true power of the American democratic message was "derived from a conflation of freedom and democracy with consumption and lifestyles." Individualism had always been an important part of the American identity from the Declaration of Independence to Emerson's "Self Reliance." Even Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans had "propensity to think of themselves as 'standing alone,' owning nothing to ancestors or contemporaries" on a trip from France (Siegel 19).

In the 20th century, American individualism emphasized one's ownership as means of expression. Possessive individualism, or individualism which "posits the individual as 'essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them,'" argued that the extent to which one is seen as the owner of their faculties and property indicates the magnitude of their liberty; one's ability to own expressed one's freedom--which inevitably results in the idea that the more one owns, the more freedom he has (Siegel 14).

If the (reductionistic) portrait of Communism emphasized latitudinal over longitudinal wealth, American democracy proves the merits of individual rights (and ownership) over social rights, or longitudinal rather than latitudinal measures of success. The availability of products and the freedom to purchase whatever products one pleased touts the superiority of capitalist democracy over communist dictatorship. When one emulates domestic prosperity through ownership (which includes homeownership and car ownership), one emulates American nationalism and democracy.

Democracy and Space

In *Eviction: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Duetsche argues that despite the fact that we live a democratic American society where we believe we are free to express ourselves through ownership, governmental and quasi-governmental structures function as aristocrats who dictate how we live. Duetsche traces the origins of democracy back to the democratic revolutionaries who challenged monarchical governments and their absolutism. Once democratic revolutionaries overthrew these powers, monarchies could no longer legitimize themselves by appealing to divine right or primogeniture (273). The

public adopted the idea that socio-political power resides within individuals and that individuals themselves could ratiocinate without monarchical aid.

This democratic culture created in the absence of monarchical rule is a culture of uncertainty. Without an authoritarian structure to which one could appeal for socio-political truth, individuals can equally express themselves with equal un/certainty. Therefore, true democracy persists on dislocation, conflict, and antagonisms that question continually reigning powers and social order (276). The hallmark of democracy, says Lefort, is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life" (272).

Duetsche, following in the tradition of Hannah Arendt perceives public space and social presentation as a key place where democratic conflict manifests. Arendt notes that throughout history, societies that strove for democratic society rested on the presence of others. Freedom itself "needed, therefore, a place where people could come together—the agora, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper" (31) In other words, 'one's expression must appear publicly, must be observed and refereed, in order to qualify as significant; to be significant, an idea must be *socially* significant.

The public space, or the place where one can be seen, becomes a discourse over which the elite, or those who control a disproportionately advantageous amount of wealth and power, gain the social control. The elite do not want this "excess of democracy" where people are free to question and revolutionize social and political order with equal certitude. If people have the opportunity to challenge discourse and societal structures without limits and boundaries, it means the public will challenge the power and resources of the elite (277). The elite structures--government entities, corporations, etc--can provide some sense of boundaries by limiting social representation via space. On this model, Governmental or quasi-governmental entities determine some use of space is "self-evident and uniformly beneficial" for the public and appropriate that space, or give the social space "a 'proper,' hence incontestable, meaning." When that space is imbued with an absolute meaning, it "clos[es] down public space." Laws, regulations and ordinances prevent an individual from acting in the space freely.

The creation of "public space" intended for the public channels antagonism into categories of "the people" or those who wish to affirm the proper meaning of that space, and those who question this public space—essentially, the homeless. In her book Duetsche is discussing the literal homeless in a public space, but the characterization of homeless can also apply to any people who subvert or question the dominant, conventional values of public space. If Duetsche is right, the public will defend the assigned definition of the public space and criticize anyone who goes against that definition of space. The homeless figure represents disorder, unrest, and conflict, all of which are considered negative in the face of the public good. The public space defines a public who enjoys it, and the homeless figure disrupts an "organic unity" from the outside, thereby becoming "a positive embodiment of the element that prevents society from achieving closure" (286). In the case of the suburbs, for instance, the homeless figure is one who perhaps does not affirm all suburban values of consumerism, does not define democracy this way. Overall, the homeless person is an acceptable scape goat to the society, essentially the cause for any flaw with the system (instead of the system itself).

The Ideology of Self-Transport: Automobility

Jackson claims that the suburbs are the 'quintessential physical achievement of the United States' and his assertion is undoubtedly true. But Jackson's analysis suggests a primacy of the American suburb, a belief that suburb functions as philosophical base, and around which, only after, discourse flows. Jackson's analysis does not, however, demonstrate how the suburbs stem from discourse. The American automobile (and its various iterations, such as the open, free American Highway) perhaps symbolizes a discourse that is coextensive, or that perhaps even predates the suburbs. Only by analyzing this metaphorical image can one fully comprehend the significance of Jackson's critical work.

Automobility as a field of study is at its root the ideology of self-transportation, or the system of values and ideas formed by one's ability to move one's self freely and efficiently over a vast range of spaces and contexts through the automobile.

This ideology, or worldview is labeled distinctly American (although the automobilized worldview is not limited to Americans). Seiler contends it is thoroughly American "to claim automobility as one's habitat and habitus" (8). Automobility's natural home would be a place in which 160, 955 miles of government-sponsored trans-continental Interstate Highway System fuels and facilitates a citizen's self-transport from work, to home, to leisure, etc. all across the country. It would be a place in which 90% of its citizen live within 5 miles of the IHS. And it would be a place that continues to construct new roads, to the point where the vast IHS takes up only a small percentage of the nation's 4 million miles of road.

The American people, the residents of this automobile country, depend on the motor vehicle with equal gravity. According to the national atlas, transportation accounts for 19 percent of spending by the average household in America - as much as for food and health care combined - and is second only to housing costs. In his essay "The Crisis in American Walking," Tom Vanderbilt notes that Americans walk the least out of any industrialized nation. Walking has instead become a lost mode, "perceived as not a legitimate way to travel but a necessary adjunct to one's car journey, a hobby, or something that people without cars—those pitiable 'vulnerable road users,' as they are called with charitable condescension—do." The American driving habitus is so pronounced that walker has become essentially marginalized, or Vanderbilt calls her, a participant in "an almost hidden narrative running beneath the main vehicular text" of America.

Vanderbilt's choice to phrase the walking/automobile relationship in terms of a narrative text testifies to the fact that the vehicle and its relationship to space can be considered a (dominant) discourse of movement. Cotton Sieler would agree with Vanderbilt's assessment, and would even go so far as to argue that non-participation in the automobile system is considered 'un-American' (*Republic Of Drivers: A Cultural History Of Automobility In America* 6).

If a "public space" is the space where individuals see and are seen by others as they engage in public affairs, the most predominant form of public space designated by

the government--the one created and designed for the public good--is the road and the Interstate Highway System, or as it is referred by the US Department of Transportation, "the Greatest Public Works Project in History." The point at which the government commissions road and highway care, funds bailouts to automotive companies and initiates research and development on alternative sources of energy for fuel in order to uphold the automobile, non-participation in the automotive system could be considered non-cooperative at least and a threat to democracy at worst.

Arcade Fire's album *The Suburbs* shows the manifestation of automobility through the various speaker's increasingly insular scope of self-expression and sense of freedom and space. By narrowing one's sense of space, the automobile becomes the only mechanism through which the American suburbanite can self-express, but the car and the road function as a simulacrum for freedom and escape, proving that true societal rebellion is unachievable, and rejected, even if it is attemptable.

Space becomes reduced to its driveability.

Harmful to the democratic discourse envisioned by Lefort and others

The Suburbs

"In the suburbs I / I learned to drive" opens the speaker in the album's first song "The Suburbs I" (ll.1-2). By opening the album with these first few lines, the Suburbs speaker already establishes automobility's significance. It is in these introductory lines that the speaker fuses two facts: (1) that he grew up in the suburbs and (2) that it was there where he learned how to drive. The line is repeated in the song "Suburban War" and functions to signify that driving is not only an embedded into life in the suburbs, but that attaining a driver's license is an important part of an individual's life: a significant step toward maturation. The significant changes in The Suburbs Man's identity and relationship to others coincides with his adolescence, or this period in which he learns to drive.

The Suburb man first presents the suburbs as an insular world where the only wars that could exist take place are between "your part of town against mine" and where he sees his former friends "standing on the opposite shore" (ll.7-8). The exaggerated geographical space between the two groups demonstrates the scale by which the speaker views himself and the other suburban kids: they have their own suburban world insulated from the macropolitical world.

As the song progresses, however, one observes the way the narrow, insular scope of the suburbs narrows even further. At first the Suburb man and all his friends were all kids "screamin and running through the yard" together and next divided on opposite shores, growing increasingly fragmented from one another as they embark on their own trajectories. As the Suburb speaker becomes an adult, his friends disappear into his memory and he shifts from dividing his part of town against another to dividing the 'home' space between others and himself. He feels so fragmented from the community that he no longer refers to a present we, or even another person. He only repeats "sometimes I can't believe it/I'm moving past the feeling" indicating that he now

feels numb, or that his problem is something for which his only coping mechanism is movement.

The first song sets the paradigm: the speakers throughout the album tend to see themselves as separate and alien from their surrounding, a product of the suburb and the automobile's narrowing scope. As time goes on and the speakers preside over more expansive space than 'the yard,' the suburbanites are only fragmented from other lasting relationships.

As the spatial insularity becomes increasingly smaller, the metaphor of the car symbolizes one's insulated womb, where one is shielded from the world. In the angsty teenage mind of "Suburban War," the car is the safe place to which one can go to be alone. The Suburban War boy implores someone to go for a drive with him just to see the town, stating "There's nothing to do/But I'll unwind when I'm with you" (ll.3-4). Siegel states that the reason cars are able to provide a safe space is that "Cars express, and assure of, belonging, of being part and having a place." Outside of the car, the boy feels alienated, inside he finds a safe space where he is free to express the fact that he misses his old friend and 'searches for him in every passing car' (ll. 23-24).

The song ends with the Suburban War boy unable to cope with the fact that "they keep erasing all the streets we grew up in" and that his friends are dividing into smaller groups growing more alienated from one another (l. 33). Ignorant of any alternative, he decides to 'choose a side' and fall into the angry, angsty, isolated narrative around him (ll. 23). He finishes the song with the cry "all my old friends, they don't know me now/ all my old friends/Wait" (ll.48-49). This cry suggests that shielded in his only safe space, the speaker has decided to accept the shrinking intimacy between him and other people and put on a brave face to the world. The claim that his old friends now, "wait" in a song with war imagery conveys the severity of the distance between other individuals and himself; it is a severity almost violent.

A similar (albeit less angsty) view of others appears in "Modern Man" as the speaker "waits in line" with the fragmented individuals around him. His 'waiting in line for a number' suggests a commute to the city where he generates income to bring home to his house in the suburbs. Throughout the song, the Modern Man speaker only sees others in terms of how they function in the public sphere, the rest of the time he is alienated from them. Although he is among a group of people "waiting in line," he does not believe that they are in a predicament similar to him, or that they are capable of talking to one another: he believes "the people behind" him "can't understand" him, even though they share the same line.

The line becomes a very real symbol for the automobile agent. Architects design roads to prevent contact and traffic spatially isolates people. In the Modern Man's vehicular life, he maintains distance to protect himself from others; he navigates similar routes but avoids collisions. It appears that 'waiting in line' also suggests that the Modern Man speaker perceives others as obstacles to his time, effort, participation in the public sphere, etc; they cannot understand how he feels, they only impede his 'getting ahead.'

The vehicular life not only influences one's relationships with others, it also influences one's relationship to space. Jorg Beckmann claims "Automobilisation entails a human being using an automobile to explore space, [which] suggests that its 'what one can do with the automobile as a vehicle,' ie- 'where one can go and what one is

able to do when it gets there" (*Social Change and Sustainable Transport* 101). This sort of view reduces space to its utility value, its drivability the gaze is fixated on the road and any space that is not drivable is not significant.

In "Modern Man," space is merely consolidated to the road and the line, which evinces the idea the very image of the road causes its subjects, its drivers, to perceive and engage nature not in its inherently multivalent sense, but rather through a new type of singularity, if at all. "Wasted Hours" reflects the same attitude--the kids in which the way the kids spend their time is directly related to how space has been carved up around them. The speaker states "First they built the road, then they built the town/ That's why we're still driving around and around/ And all we see are kids in buses longing to be free." Here the speaker notes that the town is framed, even trapped by the road, and that the only thing they can do is waste hours walking around the same paved paths. All the images in this song, whether "kids in buses" or the "endless suburbs stretched out thin and dead" center around the roads. The speaker correctly observes that the self-transport ideology, or the roads, is more foundational to the suburban fabric than is the actual suburban community, or the town.

The speaker similarly notes the significance of the road over the city in "We Used to Wait." The downtown area of a city should function as the social epicenter but instead, The We Used to Wait speaker calls the downtown a "wilderness," a place abandoned or uncultivated. In contrast, the speaker and his friends "spent hours just walking around," indicating that car and the road are prioritized yet again. He notes that the significance of the road over the town is purposeful: they have nowhere else to go besides designed, designated places.

Trapped in their strictly confined lives, people throughout the album fixate on the car as a tool of freedom. In "Wasted Hours" for instance, the speaker watches "kids on the buses longing to be free," or wanting to embark on their own trajectory on the open road outside of the congested bus. Dissatisfied with his current lifestyle and friend group, the "Ready to Start" speaker repeats over and over that "my mind is open wide/Now I'm ready to start," a phrase which connotes turning the keys in the ignition and driving toward a new path on the open road (ll. 14-15).

Mark Simpson suggests that the reason Americans yearn for mobility is that mobility ensures the inhabitants of their representability as free American subjects. The very ease and impulse with which one can move is what Atkinson calls a key characteristic of automobility: "'Just do it!' is central to the postmodern mentality and the car facilitates us actually, in practice to do it towards whatever is the destination of this particular journey but sealed off from the social world outside" (4). The world becomes a background to the intimate interior foreground inside the car where the subject is the center and anytime life feels claustrophobic or meaningless in the insular town, one can hop into the car to escape.

Unfortunately, as the album shows, the car merely functions as a simulacrum for freedom. A simulacrum, according to Jean Baudrillard, is an image intended to simulate something in reality that inevitably replaces that reality. The image replaces the original in four steps. First: the simulacrum reflects basic reality, or for instance, an object like the car reflects one's ability to move freely. Second, it masks and perverts the basic reality, or the object obscures the the relationship--the car is equated with free movement instead of just reflecting it. Soon the simulacrum replaces reality, masking

the absence of the Real thing, or the car becomes the only way an individual can move. Finally, the image becomes its own end or simulacra, bearing no relation or root in reality whatsoever, just merely functioning as an end in itself (one drives the car to understand what 'free movement' is). This process is driven by consumerism and technology, which generate these new simulacra for economic profit. Over time, specifically through a capitalist impulse, one equates her autonomy with her ability to own and consume property. Baudrillard states that this hyperreality is "[the] perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" because it forgoes the difficult/complex/bad parts of the Real for entertainment/commodification purposes and exploits good feelings and ideals for profit. Those who market the simulacrum streamline the process in order to maximize capital gain.

As per the nature of simulacrum, the automobile masks and eventually replaces freedom in the album. True freedom as conceptualized by Lefort, Duetsche and Arendt lies in the individual's ability to permit conflict, dislocation and social re-order as part of the social system. As Americans utilize the automobile in their pursuit of the Real through simulacra, (which is itself a simulation), the very act of chasing becomes the only way she can express herself.

What the album makes inescapably clear is that a truly automobile agent does not exist. In "Half Light II," for instance, the speaker strives to escape from the dominante (oppressive values) and fails to do so. The song begins with the speaker unsure what to do "now that San Francisco's gone" (l. 1). San Francisco functions as the symbol (or as Joan Didion called it, the Bethlehem) for the revolution of the 1960s, where the Hippies could gather to protest the spiritually vacuous, insular society obsessed with prosperity/appearance and discover new centers of meaning.

Unfortunately, the speaker in "Half Light II" states this place is 'gone,' and his only option is to "pack it in" and "head back East" (ll. 2-5). The spiritually vacuous society remains undefeated and without another option in front of him, he chooses to travel to the next frontier, the justification being "even in the half light/we can see that something's gotta give" (ll. 6-7). Or in other words, something somewhere must offer what they've been looking for, as long as they keep looking. This statement certainly falls in line with Baudrillard's procession of simulacra, which claims that the consumer has no place to turn in a hyperreal reality, and will continually cast off and on new simulations to try to fulfill that void.

The speaker is uprooted once more "when...the markets crash," and then returns West (ll. 9, 14). He continues to search for a place to call home, recognizing at the end of the song that he is trapped in a system which does not "give" anything. He prays to God that he, the speaker, will not live to see "The death of everything that's wild" and yet the song ends with him "in the town where I was born" repeating "One day they will see it's long gone" (ll. 23-29). Despite the speaker's attempt to chart new meaningful territory, he realizes the territory has already been charted, the landscape tamed, and that all the roads merely lead him back to the same place he started.

In "Empty Room," the speaker buys into the same logic of escape. In the song she claims someone once important to her, perhaps her husband, has fallen into the the role of a passive consumer. He was once "burning" and passionate but now he's "black and grey" (l. 9). She tries to avoid the same trajectory and turns to the car. She states,

When I'm by myself
I can be myself
And my life is coming
But I don't know when

The second half of her statement questions the first: supposedly, when she is by herself in her own space, she can finally be herself, or exercise her agency. Since the car is the primary location of personal space, the listener imagines her shutting the door in her car, facing forward and thinking “Now What?” Supposedly, now that she has this solitary space and should find some new avenue of freedom that evades the same complacency yet the song ends with her still waiting for it.

Similarly, in “Modern Man the speaker may recognize his discontent with his circumstances, but he can never do anything about it. He compares his life to “a record that’s skipping,” or a series of events that only repeat themselves, certainly not the image of freedom (l. ____). He can only repeat that his entrapment “makes [him] feel like—” without filling in the blank, but he recognizes that it makes him feel “like something don’t feel right.” It may make him feel “like a number” but he has no mode of escape; his only foreseeable option is to “erase the number of a modern man” (l. ____).

In “The ‘Mobility View’ of the Danish Automobile Club FDM” Beckmann follows the advertisements of Danish cars to observe “the human being is gradually bracketed out of the representations of automobilization.” When car advertisements first debuted, the cars were often depicted on scenic country roads with happy couples and families in the seats. Between the 1960s and 1970s, he notes that the advertisements change: “humans and automobiles somehow merge[d] together to form an ‘automotive unit’” in which people were no longer depicted driving the car in scenery (102). By the 1980s and 90s, the driver was removed from the picture all together. Read through the lens of simulacra, these advertisements show the car comes to replace the driver fully. This is of primary concern to Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality* in which he describes the “paradox of freedom.” The paradox of freedom is the point at which an individual accepts an open-market economy’s simulacra as true (in the case of the car, that it represents freedom) and she deludes herself into believing she is free in this truth to create identity and philosophy, when, on the contrary, she is a prisoner to the simulacra which has no meaning beyond itself, although it may appear to symbolize something greater. The consumer under the paradox of freedom is totally passive, and “must agree to behave like robots” (48).

In the case of the car, this shift to a totally passive consumer is represented by the song “Deep Blue.” In “Deep Blue” the speaker discusses technology/human identity replacement through the infamous chess match between Garry Kasparov and IBM supercomputer Deep Blue. The chess match was significant because it was the first time a computer won a match against a world chessmaster, symbolizing the supremacy of technology over humanity.

The speaker reminisces about when he was “a child,” or young, naive and hopeful, and he heard a song from a passing car “And prayed to a dying star” (ll. 7-8). The Deep Blue man alludes to the faith he invested in the car as a child as a means of

escape from “feeling barely alive.” He claims that prayer merely went out to a “dying star” or a simulation that offered transient hope and inevitably faded out.

Like the star that faded out, the speaker believes that the natural world is fading out to be replaced by the artificial world. He states “The show is over so take a bow/ We’re living in the shadows” (ll. __). “The shadows” is a perfect image for simulacra. The speaker realizes that human identity is becoming further and further replaced by the simulation of humanity and life through technology. His realization coincides with the automobile culture where “object[s] displace human beings as relationships partners and embedding environments, or that they increasingly mediate human relationships” (Black, Nijkamp 105). The speaker implores another person to “put the cellphone down for a while,” along with her laptop and try to listen for something “breathing” instead. Unfortunately technology’s momentum is too strong. The speaker ends the song states “In the night there is something wild...I feel it, it’s leaving me” or that he is losing grip on what is left of reality and falling into complacency.

Rebellion and the Attempts to Subvert the Automobilized System

Many throughout the album attempt to subvert and rebel against their confines rather than abide by the traditional values. Speakers like the men in “Ready to Start” and “Modern Man” have followed the correct trajectory, although it leaves them dissatisfied. Others, like the kids in “Rococo” and “Sprawl II,” wish to rebel, yet do so poorly because they abide by the same patterns of rebellion as those who conform. They cannot re-imagine new avenues of rebellion, outside of simulacra and the automobile.

The first way the album establishes this is by characterizing the “rebellious kids” as image-obsessed. In “Rococo” where the “modern” kids go downtown to listen to the underground bands, the Rococo speaker demonstrates that they are more concerned about constructing new images, preferences and individuality through consumer items than about actual ideas—specifically in this song, through music. The Rococo speaker claims the modern kids “build it up just to burn it back down,” or affirm a certain trend as cool just to arbitrarily dismiss it later once it has become popular. Although they try to “seem wild,” philosophize and “great big words that they don’t understand,” the Rococo speaker states “they are so tame,” and that “they will eat right out of your hand” (ll. __, 3). In an interview with Ryan Dombal of Pitchfork magazine, Butler states that the luxurious Rococo era was “the most opulent time in French history, and the darkest shit was going on in Haiti at the same time. There are these images of French aristocrats with big collars and big hair in the jungle in Haiti trying to do their tea parties with flies buzzing around.” To call the song Rococo is to compare that time period with our current era—one that values consumerism and image all the while embedded in a context that is destructive and wasteful.

The same sentiment occurs in “Suburban War.” Although the speaker uses serious and striking imagery of war to discuss the divides between different cliques, the divides between ‘tribes’ really come down to arbitrary product choice and image. Either one ‘grows his hair’ or ‘cuts his hair’ to redefine himself. It is “the music [which] divides/us into tribes,” or essentially, a product choice and image that carves up social space. The speaker, who describes his town as one “built to change...[w]here all the streets get rearranged” sets an apt backdrop to demonstrate the temporality of

relationships/identity/product choice. One makes a choice in order to conform, for instance “you grew your hair so I grew mine.”

These are the same kids mentioned in “Month of May” who “are all standing with their arms folded tight” (l. 14). The crossed arms of the kids indicates that they are inactive, and contrasted against the ‘punk-rock’-style music of the song, not trying to accomplish any political subversion. The Month of May speaker implores “I know [your burden is] heavy, I know it ain’t light/ But how you gonna lift it with your arms folded tight?” (ll. 22-23). The kids with their arm folded tight, without letting loose, are more concerned by what the others around them think of them and the ‘cool’ image than with the actual problems and pain they face. Automobile identity and simulacra separates individuals rather than unifies them; it is predicated on the individualist consumer and his freedom of movement. The individual becomes so preoccupied with these that his that ideas of revolution “fade away.”

In the article “Why Does Hollywood Hate the Suburbs?” writer Siegel argues that artists and intellectuals have long depicted as a place of spiritual/mental death. It seems that to those in post-WWII culture, “it went without saying that the suburbs could transform the people who had committed the error of moving to them into the walking -- make that driving -- dead.”

Siegel believes that in some ways, the suburb enables those who critique it to feel better about their own hypocrisy. Since cities have begun to be influenced by the suburbs through big-box stores and major corporations, those who are against the suburbs may need to critique it in order to feel that the “increasingly anodyne and homogenous cities are still adventurous and challenging places to live.” The rebellious art school kids in “Ready to Start” who tell the speaker that ‘businessmen will drink his blood’ or essentially, cause him to suffer are just as unable to escape the suburban structure as the Modern Man.

Lastly, the album points out that often the go-to tool for the person who is trying to rebel is, again, the very tool of the elite. The kids in “The Suburbs I” and in “Suburban War” reference the fact that they know they will “never survive” here in the suburbs and their solution is to “grab your mother’s keys, we’re leavin” (ll.--). Despite the fact that they feel they will not survive and they want to escape the structure, their ‘go-to’ resource is the very tool upon which the structure is fabricated. They think they can drive to escape the suburb but as Siegel asserts “the driving subject moves along grooves created, surveyed, and administered by that apparatus, and is also legible to it through the various modes of enumeration--driver’s licensing and insurance, for example--connected to the nation-state and corporate capitalism (9). This is an image of rebellion, a simulacrum of freedom which still affirms the same structures: when they leave, they drive on the roads that merely lead them “around and around and around.”

Stifling of True Rebellion

The album’s true rebellion seems to come from those who produce conflict via rejecting the car or auto-mobility. The first instance in which there appears to be real and possible change is “Half Light I.” In “Half Light I,” the Half Light girl realizes that the pristine suburb is a thin veneer, merely a simulation of community. She claims “we walk through these streets/we know so well/ and the houses hide so much.” Essentially, the girl contrasts the over-used, over-worn roads with which they are all familiar with the

intimate space of the house, where “none of us can tell/ they hide the ocean in a shell.” She recognizes that the suburban structure is superficial, and people like the Modern Man never engage with others fully. It is important that this realization occurs as she is walking: when she is outside of the car, her gaze is free to shift from the driveable space to the world around her. What she is able to see in the “Half Light” is enough to motivate her and others to ‘retake the streets’ and refuse to listen to authority, proclaiming “we’re not listening.”

Another song in which legitimate rebellion occurs is “Sprawl II.” Music critic John Doran calls “Sprawl II” the most significant song on the album and that its line “Quit these pretentious things and just punch the clock” is the most important lyric in the album. In “Sprawl II,” the speaker rejects traditional values and conventions of society. She opens with “they heard me singing and they told me to stop/quit these pretentious things and just punch the clock,” in other words, ‘they’ encouraged her to pursue conventional, smooth routes of life, or the proper trajectory. Throughout the song, she questions the conventional method in the darkness. She states “these days” along the proper trajectory, “my life I feel it has no purpose/ that late at night the feelings spring to the surface.” As Vogel notes, although one grows up in the suburbs and has a sense of comfort, the “‘signs’ of our imprisonment” become more apparent as we grow older. Our consumption, or skewed values and ahistoricism stretch out with no end. The result of this claustrophobic feeling is complacency. Because of the suburbs ubiquity, one must accept complacently fate and “just punch the clock,” or in Eco’s terms, become passive to the whims of postmodern society.

Darkness may traditionally connote fear and evil, but for The Sprawl II female and her close community, darkness is where one feels safe. Vogel states that darkness functions as a place where one is not bombarded by image, simulations, and those who own the discourse in the light. She claims that “on the surface the city lights shine/ They’re calling at me, come and find your kind,” or the shallow city lights beckon her to participate in the structure and find her ‘unique’ tribe, or band of consumers. “Darkness” is the narrator’s answer to the whirlwind of structures, forces, and information that surround her is “a challenge to a generation fed on seductive bright mirages: ‘I need the darkness/ Someone please cut the lights’” (Vogel).

Light as a symbol functions beyond safety from simulations. For the elite who attempt to confine and control, darkness proves dangerous; those who cannot be identified by the light cannot be accounted for. The structures of safety, security, and identification are all questioned in the darkness. Horkheimer and Adorno claim, “the necessary inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible (1232). One cannot locate the target in the dark. Especially when she and the others violate spatial confines. She and others “run” which indicates that they have disregarded their ‘mother’s keys’ like those in “The Suburbs I.” When they bike to the nearest park ‘to sit under the swings and kiss in the dark’ she subverts curfew, the automobile as the only form of transportation, and the assigned function of the park, effectively questioning the ‘certain’ meanings of public space.

The kids in “Sprawl II” may have reinvisioned some new form of rebellion by reinvisioning movement and space, but the song shows that this new rebellion will ultimately be overcome by automobile values. The community responds to the act of rebellion twofold: First, they view the kids as hostile to the community and the public

good. Once the Sprawl II girl refuses the patterns set out in front of her, the community screams at her, "*We don't need your kind,*" or that she should leave the public space because she threatens their stable society.

The second prong of the response is that they invoke authorities. The song ends with the sound of police sirens, implemented to uphold the 'public good' and reinforce the proper trajectories of space and self-expression.

Eco claims that for a simulacrum to function properly, consumers must agree to behave and have their actions dictated/regulated to them. When they comply they can "have not only 'the real thing' but the abundance of the reconstructed truth" (48). People are willing to accept these conditions because they believe that the reconstructed truth corresponds much more to our daydream demands: we prefer the filtered and faked action-packed yet tamed nature to the real, uneventful nature. Applied to the suburbs, many of the consequences are accepted rather willingly, because the structure and illusion is preferred to the possible realities.

The album seems to indicate, there is no escape from the sprawl. The song "Sprawl II" asks whether we can never get away from the sprawl. The answer appears to come in the song that follows: "The Suburbs Continued." The very name of the song with "continued" indicates that regardless of the angst and the yearning for something else one feels throughout their lives in the suburb from adolescence to adulthood, the Suburban man ends complacent and resolved, wishing that

If I could have it back
All of the time that we wasted
I would waste it again
You know I'd love to waste it again
Waste it again and again and again

The song is nostalgic and sentimental, one that manifests Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that "Both escape and elopement are predesigned to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to forget" (Norton 1232). Simulacra and pleasure ultimately win out in the end for the suburbanite as no other viable alternatives exist.

The End of the Suburbs?

The album might claim that the sprawl is inescapable, but perhaps the sprawl is soon to meet its inevitable end. As Black and Njikamp note, automobilisation, imposes dangers, threats, and risks on its own fabric--the very problem with automobility is that it digs its own grave. The album debuts in 2010, a period in which macropolitical events compromise the insulated structure of the suburb. "The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of The American Dream" documentary claims that the cheap oil and energy the suburbs depend on is supposed to reach its highest production between 2007 and 2011. The supply of oil required to very literally fuel the automobile lifestyle wanes while global climate change linked to the methane gas produced by the car becomes a more real and significant issue for scientists.

Likewise, the housing foreclosure crisis combined with the rising costs of living in the suburbs results in many suburban homes being abandoned. A Metropolitan Institute

at Virginia Tech predicts that "by 2025 there will be as many as 22 million unwanted large-lot homes in suburban areas" (Farewell to Suburbia?) And according to Sabrina Tavernise, the poverty roll has increased by five million in the suburbs. While once the suburbs housed upper middle class families, many suburbs have become ghost towns. The simulation of the automobile identity must evolve to accommodate these changing factors if it is going to continue to remain the American identity.