Suburbia through Film
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:30-1:45pm, PSFA 318

HIST 435 (Schedule #21647)        Spring, 2015
Professor Andrew Wiese
Office: 531 Arts and Letters
Office Hours: TTh 11am-12pm; M 2:30-3:30pm
Telephone: 594-3358 or 594-5262 (History Department)
Email: awiese@mail.sdsu.edu

Required Reading:
- Required Readings on Blackboard (BB)

Course Requirements:
1. Attendance, contribution to discussion, and in-class exercises. (30 percent)
2. Take-Home Midterm Examination. Distributed Thursday, Mar 12. Due Tuesday, Mar 17 (20 percent)
3. Group Project: Suburbia on Film - 3-5 minute film and 5-page essay. (30 percent). Due Tuesday, April 28
4. Final Exam, Thursday, May 14, 10:30am-12:30pm, PSFA 318 (20 percent)

The dominant mode of living in the modern United States is suburban. Since World War II, the proportion of Americans living in suburbs has ballooned from 15 to more than 50 percent of the population, and in cities such as San Diego, nearly everyone lives in neighborhoods that are "suburban" in one way or another. Suburbanization not only produced a set of distinctive physical environments – decentralized, low-density landscapes of functionally separate zones of residence, commerce, etc., predominated by single family homes and reliant on automobiles – but it also shaped crucial historical processes. These include the rise of a consumer society, the evolution of the American family, changing politics, the role of the state, and the formation of class, race, and gender identities.

As these examples suggest, suburbia was more than a landscape or a social setting. For more than century, suburbs have been closely linked to ideas about success, family, home, nation, and the "American dream" itself. In other words, suburbia is very much a landscape of the mind. One factor shaping this mental landscape since World War II has been the visual media of film and television. In these years, the mythmaking power of moving pictures has collided with the American dreamscape of suburbia with increasing frequency and intensity.

Starting from the premise that film is a rich historical document, we will approach film, as a lens through which to understand key themes in 20th century U.S. history and as a “mirror” for historical change. Second, because films, like other forms of mass media, also affect the social currents flowing around them, we will pay special attention to the
ways that visual media have shaped ideas, landscapes, and behavior. In particular, we will examine the links between the landscapes of suburbia and changing social distinctions of race, class, and gender.

This semester, we will examine a selection of Hollywood films from these and other historical and theoretical perspectives, examining the relationships between cinema and suburbia. In particular, we will pay attention to the way films represent urban and suburban landscapes, housing, family life, and social values and practices associated with class, race, and gender.

Course Objectives:
By the end of this term students should be able to:
- Explain critical changes in U.S. suburbs and suburban life in the 20th century.
- Explain the impact of visual media such as film and television on the making of American suburbia.
- Explain the impact of American suburbs (and metropolitan space in general) on the making of social distinctions such as class, race, and gender in the 20th century U.S.
- Explain the impact of social distinctions such as class, race, and gender on the making of U.S. metropolitan and suburban space in the 20th century.
- Analyze and interpret film and television as a source of historical evidence.

Academic integrity:
It should go without saying that academic integrity is expected of every student. Students guilty of plagiarism – that is, formally representing someone else’s words or ideas as your own – will, at minimum, receive a zero for the assignment and may receive an F for the course. Examples of plagiarism include uncited use of language – paragraphs, sentences, phrases, verbs – ideas, or organization from another author. The recycling of graded work from another course for which you have received credit is also unacceptable. All material drawn from outside sources should be cited using Chicago/Turabian bibliographic style. Academic dishonesty may be grounds for dismissal from the University, and each case will be judged according to its severity. See the SDSU General Catalogue, 2012-13 for more on academic integrity at SDSU.

The Course:

Week 1: Jan. 22
Introduction to the course
Film: Weeds, Episode 1 (2005)
Reading: Nicolaides and Wiese, Suburb Reader [SR], Intro: 1-9, Ch 1: Intro, 13-14; Essay: 1-1, 1-2; Ch. 4: Intro, 99-100, and Doc: 4-3 thru 4-6; Essay 4-2.
(Please bring assigned reading material and detailed notes with you to class.)

Week 2: Jan. 27-29
Silent Cities and Suburbs
Film: Work, Charles Chaplin (1915); One Week, Buster Keaton (1922);
Reading: SR, Ch 2: Intros and Doc: 2-3, 2-6 thru 2-9, Essay: 2-1, 2-2;
Doc: 6-5; Ch 7 Intro, 193-95; Doc: 7-1, 7-2, 7-6 thru 7-8, and Essay: 7-1.
Week 3: Feb. 3-5   A New Deal for the Suburbs

**Film:** *The City*, Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke (1938) 44m

**Reading:** *SR*, Ch 6: Intro: 163-65, Doc: 6-1, 6-2, 6-6; Ch. 8: Intro, 225-26; Doc: 8-2 thru 8-4, 8-6, 8-7; Essays: 8-1, 8-2

Week 4: Feb. 10-12   The Promise of Postwar Suburbia

**Film:** *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, H.C. Potter (1948), 93m


Week 5: Feb. 17-19   Sit-com Suburbia

**Films:** *Leave it to Beaver / I Love Lucy / In the Suburbs*


Week 6: Feb. 24-26   Little Boxes: Critiques of Postwar Suburbia

**Film:** *The Graduate*, Mike Nichols (1967), 105m

**Reading:** *SR*, Ch 10: read entire chapter, except Docs 10-5 thru 10-7; Robert Beuka, “One Word… Plastics,” (Spring, 2000), 12-21 (BB)

Week 7: Mar. 3-5   Forbidden Neighbors: Race and Postwar Suburbia

**Film:** *A Raisin in the Sun*, Daniel Petri (1961), 128m


Week 8: Mar. 10-12   Suburbia in an Age of Feminism

**Film:** *The Stepford Wives*, Bryan Forbes (1975), 115m

**Reading:** *SR*, Ch 10: Doc: 10-5 thru 10-7; Arlie Hochschild, *Second Shift*, (1989/2003) excerpt; (BB); Anna Silver, “The Cyborg Mystique: *The Stepford Wives* and 2nd Wave...
Feminism,” (2002) (BB)

* Distribute Take-Home Midterm Exam (Thursday, Mar. 12)

Week 9: Mar. 17-19  The Kids are All Right -- Children and Family in Changing Suburbia

   **Film:**  *Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Amy Heckerling (1982), 91m*

   **Reading:**  *SR*, Ch 12: Essay: 12-1; Ch14: Doc: 14-4, 14-5; Margaret Crawford, “The World in a Shopping Mall,” (1992), 3-30 (BB)

* Take Home Midterm Exam due in class (Tuesday, Mar. 17)

Week 10: Mar. 24-26  African American Suburbia from Spike Lee to Tyler Perry

   **Films:**  *Crooklyn, Spike Lee (1994), 112m  
               Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Tyler Perry (2005)*

   **Reading:**  *SR*, Ch 12: Intro; Doc: 12-1, 12-3 thru 12-5;  
                  Ch 14: Intro; Doc: 14-1, 14-2;  

Week 11:  Spring Break - No Classes

Week 12: Apr. 7-9  Further Suburban Diversity since 1970

   **Film:**  *Better Luck Tomorrow, Justin Lin (2003), 99m*

   **Reading:**  *SR*, Ch 14: Doc: 14-3; Essay: 14-1;  
                 Wendy Cheng, "The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Suburban Racial Formation in Los Angeles’s San Gabriel Valley” (2013) (BB);  

Week 13: Apr. 14-16  Landscapes of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Control

   **Films:**  *The Truman Show, Peter Weir (1998), 102m  

   **Reading:**  *SR*, Ch 15: read entire chapter; Robert Beuka, “Cue the Sun: Soundings from Millennial Suburbia,” (2003), (BB)

Week 14: Apr. 21-23  Library Days, work on final projects

Week 15: Apr. 28-30  The Future of Suburbia

   **Films:**  *The End of Suburbia, Gregory Greene (2004), 78 min.*

   **Reading:**  *SR*, Ch 16: Intro; Doc: 16-2 thru 16-6, 16-10;  
                 Peter Calthorpe, *Urbanism in an Age of Climate Change* (2013) (BB)
* Final Projects due, Tuesday, April 28, in class.

Week 16: May 5  Suburbia on Film Project - premiers and discussion

* Final Exam: Thursday, May 14, 10:30am-12:30pm, PSFA 318.