Staging the Suburban Ideal in Revolutionary Road and The Corrections

Performing and Disrupting the “Performance of Normal”

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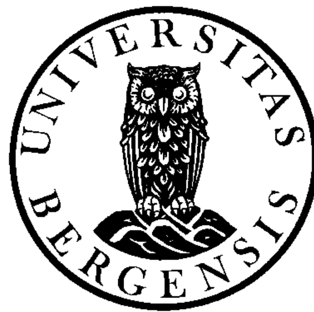

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Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg iscenesettelsen av familieidealet i amerikanske ”suburbia” referert til som ”the suburban ideal” i litterær framstilling, i de amerikanske romanene *Revolutionary Road* skrevet av Richard Yates i 1961 og *The Corrections* av Jonathan Franzen fra 2001. Til tross for førti år mellom publikasjonene ser vi fremtredende likheter i måten å kritisere dette familieidealet. Oppgaven forsøker å ”gå etter” kritikken helt konkret ved å bruke rammeverket ”site-specific performance” opprinnelig fra samtidskunst, som jeg bruker som verktøy i litteraturen. Ved å lese det prototypiske familiehjemmet, ”the suburban home,” som en *performance site*, hvorav stuen, stolen, og bordet blir lest som fokuserte *performance sites,* vil vi få frem måten romanene kritiserer idealet, ved å identifisere det som ligger under overflaten av iscenesettelsen. Her identifiseres fenomenet kjedsomhet og dets effekter, samt ”sentimental dispossession” som tilsier en slags emosjonell fattigdom som følge av investering og tiltro til materiell velstand og ”det gode liv.” Jeg argumenterer at iscenesettelsen av ”the suburban ideal” krever en ”performance of normal” som igjen krever å bli lest gjennom en institusjonell modell av *site* (som er en av de tre modellene introdusert i Miwon Kwon sin bok *One Place After Another*), men som blir utfordret av romanenes insistering på å lese *the performance sites* gjennom en annen modell, nemlig ”the discursive site.” Gjennom denne utradisjonelle og ekspanderende modellen blir selve effektene av kjedsomhet og ”sentimental dispossession” lest som en *site*, mulig gjennom en modifisering av stuen, stolen og bordet. Denne modifiseringen skjer ved hjelp av motparten av the ”performance of normal,” anormale presentasjoner eller ”abnormal performances,” som forstyrrer og avbryter iscenesettelsen av idealet. Hvert av de to kapitlene i oppgaven tar for seg hver sin roman. Kapittel 1 dedikert til Yates sin roman viser hvordan iscenesettelsen av idealet fortsetter å ”leve” i det prototypiske familiehjemmet i litteraturen, men at det til stadig blir forstyrret. Vi tar for oss stuen som *performance site* og ser hvordan hovedkarakterene April og Frank Wheeler går i hver sin retning: den ene tilpasser seg reglene til idealet, mens den andre går imot, grunnet en løsrivelse fra en stedsorientert identitet. Kapittel 2 tar for seg stolen og bordet som *performance sites* og går i dybden på kjedsomhet som et fenomen, samt måten den franske filosofen Gaston Bachelard leser huset og dets rom og interiør som poetiske bilder i bevisstheten. Franzens roman viser også en tendens til løsrivelse fra en stedsorientert identitet, og i bunn og grunn en motstand til iscenesettelsen av idealet gjennom en humoristisk og samtidig seriøs beskrivelse av to katastrofale familiemiddager.

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Introduction

> The family was the house's soul.
>
> The waking mind was like the light in a house.
>
> The soul was like the gopher in his hole.
>
> Consciousness was to brain as family was to house.
>
> (Franzen 267)[1]

This poetic literary depiction of the family home is taken from the 2001 novel *The Corrections* written by Jonathan Franzen. The storyline is set in the fictional suburb of St.Jude in the Midwest in the late 90s. The novel finds its place in a suburban literary tradition that flourished along with the boom of American suburban homes from the beginning of the twentieth century. Since its beginnings, the single-family home in a white middle-class community represented a prototype of the suburban home, configuring an ideal of family togetherness and prosperity to support the suburban home's moral values and stylistic idiom. Catherine Jurca describes the prototype home as providing spiritual as well as material shelter, being family-oriented, private and nurturing (Jurca 5). In the 1995 sociological study "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," Laura J. Miller articulates these values as an embodiment of "the suburban ideal:"

> The suburban ideal is about finding a homogenous community of like-minded people, about living in a home that provides comfort and diversion, and quite centrally, about finding an environment in which family ties can be strengthened. (Miller 395)

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[1] In the particular edition of *The Corrections* I have chosen to use, this paragraph is set up as a poem in the middle of the page, but it has come to my knowledge that it may appear otherwise in other editions.

As Jurca argues, most of American novels involving suburbia predict the downfall of the "suburban dream," thus their intentions have been to critique its culture. At the forefront of this critique is what she calls "sentimental dispossession," meaning the calamitous effects of emotional investment in property depicted as a state of spiritual and cultural impoverishment (Jurca 6, 7). Such sentimental dispossession is eminently patent in the already mentioned novel written by Franzen, as well as in the 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* written by Richard Yates, set in the fictional suburb of Revolutionary Road in Connecticut during the mid fifties. This thesis will treat sentimental dispossession in the suburban home as a leading motif in these two novels as they represent the suburban literary tradition and critiques of its culture. My analytical approach is not one of a plot-thematic structure, but rather a thematic close-reading of performance in a selection of scenes. Such an approach requires a long introduction in order to give the reader an overview of the various theories that I build into one framework.

Despite the forty-year gap between their publications, Yates in 1961 and Franzen in 2001, we shall detect similarities and dissimilarities of their critiques of the suburban ideal, and do so by reading the literary representation of the suburban home as a *site*. There are, of course, numerous possibilities of approach to this subject, for instance a thematic approach or through the lens of popular culture, but I find the field of *site-specificity* the most applicable and rewarding. I am aware that it is a field belonging to the discourse of art and performance studies, but I will apply it to literature because I believe the novels *ask* to be read accordingly, typified in a language of performance vocabulary. Already in the opening scene in *Revolutionary Road,* readers are introduced to performance and staging, as the scene is set in an empty auditorium, complete with a casting crew and a director: "Remember this. We're not just putting on a play here. We're establishing a community theater, and that's a pretty important thing to be doing"

(Yates 5). In more ways than one, the novel presents a role-play within a role-play where the main protagonists, Frank and April Wheeler, are literary constructions also performing a happy couple in their own home. The living room sets the stage, where the narrator of the novel functions as a director, saying, after the characters comfortably arrange themselves in sofa cushions and chairs, "they were ready to begin" (58). And so begins *Revolutionary Road's* "performance of normal."

The thesis consists of two chapters, each devoted to the respective novels. Through analyses of a selection of scenes that look specifically at the living room, the dinner table, and the chair as performance sites, we shall expose the deficiencies and failures of the suburban ideal's attempts to be performed as a "performance of normal," but also acknowledge its triumph in its survival and continuance. As a framework, site-specificity enables us to read the suburban home in the two literary works not solely as a building and house, but as a structure serving an ideological function. I will use the term "performance of normal" to identify the performances that belong to the institutional site on the one hand, and, on the other, "abnormal performances" to address performances that challenge and threaten the operations of the first. I will unpack these terms a bit later. The rest of this introduction provides a brief overview of some key aspects that I want to address in both chapters, some more relevant than others as the subsequent discussions will show. First, we shall take a closer look at site-specific performance as well as French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's theory as a point of departure, and from there expand to other components.

Introducing Site-Specific Performance in Literature

The field of site specificity in art emerged in the 1960s and 70s. Broadly speaking, *site* is commonly understood as a place, space or position. In her book *One Place After Another,* Miwon Kwon draws on the history and theory of site-specificity, as well as addressing political progressivism and critical debates concerning the siting of art in the era of late capitalism. In Kwon's mapping of site, three models stand dominant: the phenomenological, the institutional, and the discursive site (Kwon 30). The first represents the traditional view of site as containing actual physical attributes of a tangible location, like the size of a room and its length, height, shape and texture (Kwon 11). The institutional model stands as a cultural framework operating with historical, social and political matters, placing the site in context. Kwon tells us that the modern museum and gallery space "was perceived not solely in terms of basic dimensions and proportion but as an institutional disguise, a normative exhibition convention serving an ideological function" (Kwon 13). The gallery space's ideological function was, she says, to promote itself as objective and disinterested to the outer world, through a disclosing of architectural features revealed as coded mechanisms used to separate its space of art from the outer sphere (13).

This example gives an idea of how an institutional reading of site may reveal its ideological function, and in our analyses of the suburban home as an institutional site in literary presentation we shall recognize its ideological function as follows: the aesthetic exteriority of the house, with its physical proportions as well as furnishings inside its rooms, displays a perfected orderliness serving an ideological function in its decree of expecting the same balance to be acted out by its residents. Kwon explains the notion of site-specificity in relation to the institutional site as follows:

> To be “specific” to such a site, in turn, is to decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden operations – to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art’s meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value…
>
> (Kwon 14)

As an embodiment of the suburban ideal’s ideology, the suburban home stands dependent on its social modes of conduct as well as the physical arrangement and aesthetics of the house. In the article “Manner Books and Suburban Houses,” Simon J. Bronner provides a study from the perspective of traditional aesthetics in the discourse of art and architecture, focusing on the interrelationship between these two facets, epitomized in the following passage:

> The suburban house is a middle-class movement toward a private structural order and aesthetics within a preset public convention. Indeed, the suburban house can be said to “behave” as we do, taking on a proper social role while maintaining an outlet for personal expression and feeling. The house has a manner in part designated by its structure and in part by implicit expectations of conduct within. It has a character defined in relation to its surroundings and the company it keeps.
>
> (Bronner 65)

The social role of the suburban home is here brilliantly illustrated by Bronner in his depiction of its “character” and “behavior.” The “implicit expectations of conduct within” its structural order helps us to observe the ways the ideal wants to “live” in the home. Although Bronner does not refer to performance theory, I find his observations highly relevant to our discussion as it enables us to notice how the suburban home “asks” to be read in literature as a phenomenological and institutional site of performance.

Over the past thirty years, however, the discursive vector has dominated the field of site-specific performance, representing the site as "a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate" (Kwon 26). This model is superior to the other two as it consists of an overlap of the locational and institutional. It is not dependent on a definition of site as a precondition, but is determined first and foremost by its content, and then "verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation" (26). Kwon tells us that out from the discursive model springs the "functional site" proposed by James Meyer as a movement, a process, and operation occurring between sites, described as informational, ungrounded, temporary, fluid, and devoid of a particular focus of meaning (29). The "locational" anchor in the discursive domain, Kwon argues, lies in the realm of sociopolitical issues, and she lists racism, ecological crisis, sexism and homelessness as "sited" in works by artists in its field (Kwon 28). Discursive site-specific artwork is uprooted from material practice, whereof the site is the artist's engagement with sociopolitical issues. This thesis' analyses and engagement with *Revolutionary Road's* and *The Corrections*' critique of the suburban ideal will be "sited" in a discursive reading of the performance sites.

The shift of focal point to a discursive lens opens up a whole new way to read the performance site. I argue that the novels propose a query to the placement of the suburban home in an institutional and phenomenological discourse of site (its physical constructions and ideological functions). The effects of sentimental dispossession and claustrophobia of family togetherness will be "sited" as critiques of the suburban ideal through a modification of the living room, the table and the chair, and this "siting" will moreover occur in spaces which I will

refer to as "escapes."[2] Here, I incorporate Bachelard's theory, and suggest that poetic images, constituting spaces of the house, may be read as such "escapes." In order to identify these escapes, we must look at some primary elements that make up Bachelard's phenomenological study of the house as an archetypal image.

His book *The Poetics of Space,* published in 1958, captures the essence of his study introducing the notion of reading its spaces as images of lived experience. A primary aspect of his theory is the childhood home as an embodiment of the "oneiric house" characteristic of dreams (Bachelard 15). Poetic images are received in the reader's imagination and dreaming consciousness (Bachelard xix), introducing a phenomenology of the soul. In the essay "Gaston Bachelard and the Phenomenology of the Reading Consciousness," James S. Hans unpacks some of Bachelard's main concepts, clarifying the idea of the reader's psyche as a composition of a mind and a soul. The objective aspect of the psyche lies in the mind whereas the soul is the subjective (Hans 315-16). This is the reason why Bachelard claims that the image, subjective in itself, is experienced in the soul, as it comes *before* thought in the realm of the soul (Bachelard xxii). In turn, this opens up for a possession of the images' space and a dwelling in its qualities.

The concept of the already mentioned "escapes" starts with Bachelard's understanding of the archetypal house and its body of images as spaces located in the consciousness. The qualities of Bachelard's images feature security, well-being and warmth, also elements that support the vision of a nurturing family-life in the suburban home. However, in both novels we also find

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[2] Understanding "escape" as an occupation of space, the term fits naturally into the various models of site. In the Oxford English Dictionary, we also find the following definition of "escape:" "Mental or emotional distraction, esp. by way of literature or music, from the realities of life" (OED, *escape*, 1b). In relation to music, we surely find "soundscapes" which are in the most general sense escapes in sound. The "escapes" we will find in the subsequent analyses function as mental and emotional distractions.

indications and references to the suburban home conveyed as a prison, leading the characters to look for places freed from this imprisonment of performing the "normal." In *Revolutionary Road,* one of the focal characters, April Wheeler, escapes to the woods, and she has an encounter with what Kwon refers to as a "wrong place" (Kwon 164). Through April's encounter, the novel presents the suburban home as a discursive site in its "siting" of April's loss of a place-bound identity and detachment from the suburban home.

In *The Corrections,* Alfred escapes to the image of the chair, to a space in his own consciousness. The critique of family togetherness becomes "sited" in the chair and escape, where Alfred embraces privacy and "abnormal performances." It is a decisive element that his escape occurs in the basement separate from the rest of the house. Actual and concrete in its physicality, the basement's location underground in the suburban home evokes a kind of psychology of the house inspired by Bachelard, which he explains as follows: "…to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house" (Bachelard 17).[3] Here, Bachelard is saying that as readers of the spaces of the house, we are constantly re-imagining and reconstructing its body of images, "reading" the house as a vertical being with a polarity of cellar and attic (Bachelard 17). These concepts will be left for now, and further unpacked in the second chapter.

Introducing the Novels and Their Staging of the 'Host' and the 'Ghost'

Bachelard furthermore views space as a layering of lived experience, including past use as well as present and future, and he observes the friction between the three as follows: "Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at

[3] "All these images" are the body of images that make up the oneiric house.

others, stimulating one another" (Bachelard 6). The French scholar Michel De Certeau's makes a similar observation in understanding space as "a practiced place" (Certeau 117). He distinguishes between place and space where "place" is defined as a location and an instantaneous configuration of positions characteristic of stability, whereas "space" is not a fixed location, but rather a composition of intersections of mobile elements (117). Space is thus oriented and situated by place. Building on Certeau's definitions of space and place, Cathy Turner introduces a vocabulary of the 'host' and 'ghost,' where the 'host' is the site and the 'ghost' is the performance that "visits" the 'host.' She explains this interaction between the 'host' and 'ghost' as follows:

> The 'host' is already the layered 'space' formed by lived experience, so that the givens of site-specific performance comprise not only the machinery of 'place', but also the patina it has acquired with past use.
>
> (Turner 374)

In chapter one of this thesis dedicated to *Revolutionary Road*, we shall examine the ways in which 'ghosts' of "abnormal performanes" regularly "visit" the living room in the Wheeler's home, being the 'host.' The attempt of the abnormal 'ghosts' is to rewrite the space of the living room into something other than what the suburban ideal demands. In their failure, however, we see the re-establishment of the 'host' as a stage for the suburban ideal to be performed, and in this a continuation and reinforcement of the ideal in literary presentation. However, *Revolutionary Road* demonstrates glimpses of interruption and "truth" transpiercing the performance of the ideal. Hence, despite the ideal's triumph, the 'host' remains perpetually haunted by abnormal performances, a part of what I believe to be *Revolutionary Road's* critique that beneath the surface of the ideal's "normality" is the reality of boredom and emptiness that

will persist as long as the ideal lives. As tools to work with in this part of our discussion we shall introduce the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen's philosophy of boredom as well as engaging with other scholars. While chapter one explores mainly the living room as performance site, chapter two provides an in-depth examination of the chair and the table as performance sites.

Chapter two devoted to *The Corrections* provides a close-reading of two selected dinner scenes that expose the instabilities of the "performance of normal," engaging primarily with Svendsen's philosophy of boredom. We will read the dinner table, as well as Alfred's chair, as institutional sites becoming modified to discursive sites, supported by Svendsen as well as Bachelard's way of reading the chair as a poetic image. We have briefly unpacked some of Bachelard's thoughts concerning this condition, the most prominent aspect being that the image provides an escape to a space in the consciousness from the "performance of normal." For the purposes of this introduction, however, we shall unpack the complexities of the concept of the image in its discussion later.

In order to distinguish which performances belong to the "performance of normal" on the one hand and "abnormal performances" on the other, we must return to the institutional reading of the suburban home as site and its ideological function. The configuration of the suburban ideal involves a consumer mentality profoundly embedded within its ideology, and a multi-layering mirrors this mentality. The sequence of these layers goes from exterior to interior: the outer layer comprises the notion of an appearance to represent one's personality, position of career and so forth. The layer beneath contains the exteriority of the house and homeownership. The inner layer encompasses the emotional and personal aspects of an individual's life, and a notion of

"buying" good mental health. In the following excerpt, Frank Wheeler in Yates' novel articulates the logical interplay between these three layers:

> Taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health, having another child to prove that the first one hadn't been a mistake, buying a house in the country because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it.
>
> (Yates 51)

These interconnections show that all three layers, or facets, rely on one another, and are ingrained within a communal system of lifestyle. The phrase "the next logical step," as well as the words "responsibility," "orderliness," and "good health" all reflect an appointed expectation of how family life in suburbia is supposed to be lived. Frank's appearance is a "correct" way of portrayal related to an advertising mode of presentation as he is described with "the kind of unemphatic good looks that an advertising photographer might use to portray the discerning consumer of well-made but inexpensive merchandise" (Yates 12). In chapter two devoted to *The Corrections*, the exterior seems to be fortunate also for Gary Lambert: he has a successful career, a beautiful home, a loving family. On the surface, his life looks prosperous. Nonetheless we soon learn that he is emotionally impoverished, the reason being, as will be argued in the second chapter of this thesis, clinical depression and abuse of alcohol. He is described as materialistic: "Gary wanted to enjoy being a man of wealth and leisure" (Franzen 194-95), and his sister thinks he is "obsessed with money" (217). Gary's relationship to consumer culture seems a bit ambivalent, and awareness of its emotional aspects comes across in a warning to his son Caleb: "Your feelings change after you buy things" (155). At the same time, he acts quite inconsiderate

in deciding, on behalf of the whole family, that Alfred and Enid's house must be put on the market for sale. Although he claims the motivation to be his parents' economic footholds as well as his father's Parkinson's disease, his intentions are actually to inherit the values of their property. In response to Gary's proposal to put the house up for sale, Denise echoes Enid's emotional ties to the house: "She loves that house. That house *is* her quality of life" (211), which brings us to the second layer concerning homeownership.

Customizing the Suburban Home

In literary representation of homeownership, house and body make a significant interrelationship as exemplified in Chip's experience of his parents' house:

> The tiles, like every other physical constituent of the house, were suffused with the fact of their ownership by Enid and Alfred, saturated with an aura of belonging to this family. The house felt more like a body – softer, more mortal and organic – than like a building. (Franzen 538)

This passage brilliantly depicts the emotional investment in homeownership, which really is an investment in family togetherness and identity. In the comparison to a body is a personification of the house, also predominant in Alfred's depiction of his blue leather chair with human-like arms to fall asleep in, and even more interestingly, the chair as characteristic of an emotional life demonstrated in Alfred's "grief at its betrayal" (Franzen 10) when Enid disapproves of its placement in the living room. In the opening excerpt of this introduction, the phrase "The family was the house's soul" and a little later "Consciousness was to brain as family was to house" (Franzen 267), illustrates the house with a soul and compares the presence of the family to a human consciousness. Other tropes of similar articulation are identified in a scene called "The

Dinner of Revenge" where a split of family unity in the Lambert home is described as "the mind of a depressed person" (267), drawing an intriguing correlation between mental disorder and family togetherness in the suburban home.

Homeownership is in essence the purchase and ownership of a house, most typically a single-family house. During the rise of the suburbs, the rooms of the quintessential suburban house were usually designed for home activities and leisure, with special focus on the multipurpose room or the so-called "family room." James A. Jacobs reports in a 2006 article called "Social and Spatial Change in the Postwar Family Room," that the family room was typically the living center of the house while the kitchen was the work center (Jacobs 78). In order for all family members to engage in an activity or a chore in the same room and not separate rooms, the family room was intentionally designed for work *and* play, such as eating, socializing, organizing laundry, sewing, reading, playing games, and so forth (Jacobs 72). In this way, the family room supported the suburban vision of casual living and family togetherness. The family room is however absent in Yates' and Franzen's novels, perhaps an indication of a critique of the suburban ideal as chief arranger of the house's design, but these remain speculations.

Buying a house gives the possibility of customizing it according to taste and choice, and in this way "personalize" it. In the opening paragraph of Bronner's article he states that, "the arrangement of the house is *a response* to manners and customs as well as to the demands of an architect or an engineer" (Bronner 61, my emphasis). It is safe to say then, that the aesthetics of the suburban home is clearly not accidental: it is structured to mirror the suburban ideal to the uttermost detail, also reflected in the following description of the Wheeler's home in *Revolutionary Road*:

> The very symmetry of the place was undeniably appealing – the fact that all its corners made right angles, that each of its floorboards lay straight and true, that its doors hung in perfect balance and closed without scraping in efficient clicks. Enjoying the light heft and feel of these doorknobs, they could fancy themselves at home here.
>
> (Yates 30)

The Wheeler's home is here depicted as a place of balance and full of promising possibilities. A symmetric exteriority of the house is a visible proof of order, encouraging an expectation of a corresponding harmony to the lives it shelters: "The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms, among these trees" (30). The irrefutable interrelations between form, conduct and the personal is also emphasized by Bronner:

> Structuring the environment of the home according to aesthetic and social principles of interrelated form and conduct directly affects, in turn, the perception, clarification, and alteration of one's psychological, social, and physical worlds.
>
> (Bronner 64)

From this point of view, we may observe the ways in which the suburban ideal employs its ideological operation in the house in both novels, with the staging of the "performance of normal" as its manifestation. The ideal depends on the furnishings inside the house as much as it does on its "moral codes," evident in its staging of family dinners around the table as a token of togetherness. The interplay between these various principles grounds the suburban ideal with a solid foothold, but also one that brings about manipulation. A set system of rules to play by is a form of exercising control - a control evident in the ways the home as a stage demands conformity and renounces performances that do not fit into its system. The novels thus reveal manipulation through the *staging* of the ideal and their representation of it as a game.

Jurca claims that homeownership in American suburban novels "presumes an almost automatic discrepancy between material and spiritual shelter, structure and sentiment" (Jurca 4), and that "the artifacts and habits of domestic culture are seen to jeopardize or to destroy the home's emotional texture" (5). This discrepancy is rooted in the sentimental dispossession introduced at the beginning of this introduction, stating the experience of feeling spiritually and emotionally impoverished by property and homeownership. Its effects threaten the "home's emotional texture," bringing about a conflict between the 'host's' insistence on conformity and togetherness, and 'ghosts' from the outside embodying the effects of sentimental dispossession, like boredom, meaninglessness and emptiness. Turner cites Lefebvre marking such a tension, not in relation to the suburban home per se but the tension between the 'host' and 'ghost' in a general sense, as "… the friction of what is of the place and what is brought *to* the place" (Turner 374). However, since the beginnings of the emergence of an American suburban "canon" writers of its genre have marked the effects of sentimental dispossession as a factor of homeownership, suggesting that what I here call 'ghosts' of dispossession are not merely "visiting" the 'host,' but are in fact persistently fused within its structure, though covered and hidden. In small glimpses of "truth," the two literary works expose these 'ghosts' of dispossession in existential afflictions existing beneath the "performance of normal." Thus follows a natural peeling off to the final and inner layer, to the inner core of the self where existential afflictions are identified.

1. Staging the Suburban Ideal in Revolutionary Road

1.1 The Living Room

> It's as if everybody'd made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self- deception. The hell with reality! Let's have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue; let's all be good consumers and have a lot of Togetherness and bring our children up in a bath of sentimentality – Daddy's a great man because he makes a living, Mummy's a great woman because she's stuck by Daddy all these years – and if old reality ever does pop out and say Boo we'll all get busy and pretend it never happened.
>
> (Yates 66)

These are the words of the protagonist Frank Wheeler in Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road*. What the literary character is describing can be recognized as a critique of, or an attack on, the suburban ideal of family life. The passage introduces us to the role of "Daddy" as provider for the family, "Mummy" as a loyal wife, and their obedient children. These roles support the ideal of family togetherness, an ideal that has been performed again and again in the suburban home in its literary presentation. Laura J. Miller claims that from its beginnings it has been associated with a particular vision of family life, one that encourages family members to favor each other's company over activities and attractions occurring outside the domestic sphere (Miller 394). Frank and April challenge this ideal in their questioning of its authenticity like Frank does in the excerpt above, but also in the acknowledgement of other 'ghosts' that intrude

on the “performance of normal” in the living room, predominantly the ‘ghost’ of boredom. At the end of the novel, however, Frank conforms to the “performance of normal” while April loses her place-bound identity and detaches herself from the suburban home. The ‘host’s’ refusal to accommodate April’s modified and altered role as “Mummy” ultimately resolves in her death. In order for April’s life to be honest and authentic, it must be lived on her own terms outside the ideal of family togetherness, demonstrated in her death and echoed in her very last thoughts before she dies: “(…) If you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone” (Yates 311).

In Frank’s rather sarcastic illustration of the ideal’s various roles, he juxtaposes reality to the ideal’s particular vision of family life. Although reality is a fairly extensive concept, I will mainly draw attention to the ways reality appears in Yates’ novel as ‘ghosts’ of “abnormal performances” intruding on the “performance of normal.” These ‘ghosts,’ namely boredom and the effects of sentimental dispossession, modify the ‘host,’ in turn enabling us to “read” the ‘host’ as a discursive site. As tools of analysis we shall engage with Kwon, Svendsen and Bachelard mainly, and our approach to the novel will be a fixed focus on a few selected scenes chiefly occurring in the living room. The first of these scenes takes place about midway in the novel. The Wheelers have, after countless fights, finally agreed on one thing: they want out of the “sentimental lie of the suburbs” (Yates 112), and have decided to move to Paris.

To break the news, they invite their neighbors, Howard and Helen Givings and their son John, over to their living room for an evening of drinks and socializing. John suffers from a mental disorder whose diagnosis is unknown. The unfamiliarity of his illness threatens the rules of behavior to the “performance of normal.” John deliberately dresses in hospital clothes in preference over “normal” clothing, his exterior appearance suggesting a resistance to conformity.

In a sociological study done in 1988 on how people in American suburbs manage conflicts, Mary Pat Baumgartner comments on homogeneity as a distinctive part of the social system of suburbia (Baumgartner 10). Homogeneity celebrates a community of like-minded people, and Baumgartner argues that suburbanites monitor their environments closely to identify "those who do not belong" (10). Precisely because John sticks out from the crowd, his behavior is examined more closely by his neighbors who gossip about him, and he is identified as someone who does not fit into the suburban lifestyle.

In fear of what uncomfortable things her son might say, Helen Givings makes small talk of the weather: "oh, *look*, the sun's coming out!" and "maybe we'll see a rainbow. Wouldn't that be lovely?" (Yates 186-87), reflecting a kind of fairytale-like perception of the world. John, on the other hand, repels small talk and cuts down to the truth about their performance: "You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, then you got to have a job you don't like" (187). Here, he mocks the ideal, but also completely undermines it, eroding the constructions of its staging to expose its game. Even though John's exclamation pinpoints an underlying truth, it is imbued with irony. Since irony neither reveals explicitly nor entirely conceals the truth but simply implies it, this in-between-ness is part of the reason why John's "abnormal performance" fails to disrupt the performance completely. What he does manage to do, however, is calling attention to the fact that the suburban lifestyle is performed and "played" like a game. In spite of this exposure, John is not taken seriously and his voice is invalid because he is "mad." This is part of the novel's irony then, that the character who appears irrational is the one who actually recognizes what is going on beneath the surface of performance.

The verb "play" is defined as the following: "to exercise or occupy oneself, and to be engaged with some activity; to act, operate, work." These connotations stipulate busyness, often functioning as a preoccupation to avoid boredom and a feeling of standing still. Philosopher Lars Svendsen views boredom as a phenomenon of modernity, and implicates the obsession with busyness as a tool for preventing boredom, because, he says, individuals do not cope well with "empty time" (Svendsen 21, 23). In agreement with Svendsen's ideas, I argue that the issue lies not in empty time per se, but in what empty time reveals. Svendsen's citation of Kierkegaard's vigorous description of boredom exhibits the state of experience that empty time may divulge: "I lie outstretched, inactive; the only thing I see is: emptiness; the only thing I live off: emptiness; the only thing I move in: emptiness. I do not even experience pain" (Svendsen 25). Kierkegaard here illuminates the effects of existential boredom as a state of inactiveness, indifference and numbness. Most of all, existential boredom demands an exposure to the core of the self, revealed as nothingness and emptiness.

The book *A Philosophy of Boredom* written by Svendsen, was first published in 1999 in Norwegian and reissued in English six years later. Svendsen defines boredom as the absence of personal meaning in an individual's life (45), and through an analysis of Heidegger's lectures on boredom, he examines the effects of boredom as notions of meaninglessness and emptiness. To do so, he uses Martin Doehlemann's typology consisting of four types of boredom (41-42). "Situative boredom" signifies the experience of boredom in waiting, like taking the bus or sitting in a waiting room before an appointment to the dentist. "Boredom of satiety" denotes a boredom of repetitiveness where one's actions are made on automatic control. "Existential boredom" and "creative boredom" are the two types I will focus most on in my discussion, the latter serving as a catalyst to do something new, while the existential encompasses a profound lack of meaning in

life. The following scene in the novel, occurring prior to the one with John Givings, portrays "situative boredom" as an intrinsic quality of the suburban lifestyle, compelling April to experience a "creative boredom" that leads to momentum.

In this scene we are introduced to the neighbors Milly and Shep Campbell, who are invited over for drinks and socializing in the living room. April plays the role of happy wife for the evening: "At least she would have to laugh and talk in their company; at least she would have to smile at him from time to time and call him "darling"" (57). The characters engage in conversation about everyday trivialities like education, work, gossip, supermarkets and food recipes. The evening is described as "the dreariest kind of suburban time filler" (66). Frank candidly claims the suburban lifestyle to be a state of self-deception, but the three fellow characters in the room do not respond to his remark: "But it seemed to have no effect. The three of them sat watching politely while he talked, and when he stopped they looked mildly relieved, like pupils at the end of a lecture" (66). An important aspect to note is the fact that they are watching like an audience, instead of listening as friends, affirming that this is a *staged* evening of socializing. Frank retreats to the kitchen, but soon comes back "re-establishing himself on the sofa" (67) to join back in on the performance. This scene additionally demonstrates small talk functioning as a sustainer of the "performance of normal."

At one point during the scene, Milly is the only character who keeps up the small talk in fear of what might happen if she stops: "(...) the house would fill with a silence as thick as water, an impossibly deep, wide pool in which she would flounder and drown" (61). The language in this passage reflects a rhythm of sound to the words "thick," "deep," "wide," "flounder," and "drown." Their meaning gives the reader a sense of an overwhelming atmosphere, a sense of suffocation, drowning and going down, which drives the process of descent into lost-ness. A

corresponding illustration of descent can be found in Bachelard's study of dwelling places in the oneiric house and its "cosmic roots" (the basement). He borrows Henri Bosco's example of a tower with a "cosmic cellar" covered in subterranean water (Bachelard 23), and emphasizes the notion of going down to the bottom of the tower where the water awaits. In a similar way, Milly must keep the small talk actively intact so that "the performance of normal" does not descend into endless "waters" of silence, with its unknown and frightening depths. However, she does not succeed, hence a tangible discomfort settles over the room (Yates 59). Into the performance seeps a ghostlike atmosphere popping out with a "Boo!" resonating with Frank saying "if old reality ever does pop out and say Boo we'll all get busy and pretend it never happened" (66).

The ghostliness marks its actuality also in April's eyes. She looks at Frank with "a stare of pitying boredom" further described as something haunting: "It haunted him all night, while he slept alone; it was still there in the morning, when he swallowed his coffee and backed down in the driveway in the crumpled old Ford he used for a station car" (68). Here we have the portrayal of one type of boredom "haunting" the other: The repetitiveness infused in Frank's everyday life exhibits a "boredom of satiety" haunted by "the stare of pitying boredom" revealed as a creative boredom, evident in April's contemplation on the previous evening: "… I don't think I've ever been more bored and depressed and fed up in my life than I was last night," which in turn leads her to new ideas: "Honestly, Frank, it was like a revelation or something" (110-11).

As already mentioned, creative boredom denotes the compelling force to do something new, serving as a sort of "energizing boredom" suggested by Dennis Brissett and Robert P. Snow in their article "Boredom: Where the Future Isn't." They problematize the paradox prominent in the term "energizing boredom" where activeness meets inactiveness, challenging the bored self to mobilize towards a momentum (Brissett and Snow 243). Brissett and Snow define the general

understanding of boredom as the preoccupation and disinterest in what one already has. Momentum, by contrast, produces flow and interest in one's life:

> Momentum involves an appreciation, interest and sense of possibly exercising control over what is yet to come, a leaning into life. It is a matter of being on the verge of something that will implicate the self. Momentum entails self- eventuation – a feeling that something new about the self will emerge and that this emergence will have something to do with how and/or what the individual will be doing.
> (Brissett and Snow 240)

Flow and mobilization awaken a desire to break out from one's current situation, and Svendsen grounds such mobilization in "the problematic self" that is continually searching for content and meaning, what we may refer to as self-realization (Svendsen 30). It is these characteristics of "energizing boredom" then, that compel the Wheelers to break out of the suburban lifestyle and plan a new life in Paris. The perception that a geographical move across the Atlantic Ocean in itself brings about a renewal of self is grounded in the belief that one's identity is fundamentally tied to a place in its physical actualities. Kwon elaborates on this correlation and the connection between location and identity, which I will return to in a bit.

The momentum that springs out from "energizing boredom" is the Wheelers' starting point for a reconstruction of identity, a "leaning into life" and into self-realization. The probability of falling into the same pattern, however, is not far from reach. Could they not end up just as miserable in Paris as they are in Revolutionary Road? According to April, Paris promises Frank more time and the opportunity to "find himself," also a motto in the philosophy of self-realization: "You'll be finding yourself. You'll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You'll have *time*" (Yates 109). But the things listed here are not dependent on a

geographical move to Europe, in fact they are possible anywhere. This indicates that they are looking for the answer in the wrong places, and, as Svendsen suggests, attack the symptoms rather than the "disease:"

> Boredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied. In order to remove this discomfort, we attack the symptoms rather than the disease itself, and search for all sorts of meaning-surrogates. (Svendsen 30)

The disease itself, according to Svendsen, is an emptiness of meaning (Svendsen 31). His statement reveals a number of aspects: one is that the performance of the suburban ideal does not satisfy the longing for meaning in life, and secondly, April and Frank's idea of a new life in Paris is merely a "meaning-surrogate." In their case, "energizing boredom" leads only to an escape from their current situation, an avoidance of confronting the real issue where they are. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that April and Frank tie their identities to a place in a fundamental way, putting all their hopes of authentic happiness in Paris. Here, I want to bring Kwon into discussion, and her acknowledgements of Lucy Lippard's ideas about identity "as fundamentally tied to our relationship to places and the histories they embody" (Kwon 158). Mobility of the self "through voluntary migrations or forced displacements" results, according to Lippard, in a disability to locate ourselves (158). The places tied to our identities are referred to as "right" places, and these are supposed to reflect an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity:

> Often we are comforted by the thought that a place is ours, that we belong to it, even come from it, and therefore are tied to it in some fundamental way. Such places ("right" places?) are thought to reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity.

(Kwon 163)

The literary representation of the suburban home is an excellent exemplification of such a "right" place. Embedded within the suburban ideal that "lives" in the suburban home are the roles of Daddy the provider, Mummy the loyal wife, and obedient children, introduced in the opening excerpt of this chapter as component roles configuring a "perfect family." These identities are more than tied to the suburban home - they are its products. A confrontation with the "disease" of boredom then, involves a detachment of a place-bound identity that is tied to, and a product of, the suburban home. In a bit, we shall see how April manages to do so, but in her success follows her defeat in death. The turning point in the novel happens when April declares the news about an unexpected pregnancy, at once demanding a reconsideration of the Paris plan.

The news prompts a shift in Frank, evident in his very first thoughts about the pregnancy: "The pressure was off; life had come mercifully back to normal" (207). "Normal" here implies a relief and a return to the "performance of normal." Frank starts to picture a new life in Revolutionary Road, and claims that what they dream about can be achieved in suburbia, in a new and improved house and street: "Who knew how much broader and more interesting their lives might become?" (208). His thoughts devote a renewed conformity to the suburban ideal, echoing the assumption that a balanced exterior will solve the imbalanced emotional aspects of life – a construct of thought that we recognize from the introduction of this thesis, where we recall the arrangement of the suburban home expecting an exterior orderliness to mirror the lives it shelters. The phrase "the gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made fit these rooms, among the trees" (30) achieves a newfound value in this case, and Frank's earlier experiences of the suburban lifestyle as a state of "self-deception" seems suddenly irrelevant.

Frank embraces a momentum offered by the suburban ideal, a “leaning into life,” or more accurately a leaning into the performance constructed by the ideal. April, on the other hand, embraces the kind of momentum that Brissett and Snow talk about - a leaning into self-eventuation and mobilization. The first step April makes towards such a mobilization is in the escape to a place outside the house, to the woods.

1.2 The Woods

Distinctive of the woods is its darkness and wild nature, all of which establishes a vast contrast to the familiar, bright, organized and comfortable suburban home. The woods, or the forest, is defined as “a wild uncultivated waste, a wilderness” and “wilderness” is furthermore understood as “something figured as a region of a wild or desolate character, or in which one wanders or loses one’s way (…)” A place where one “loses one’s way” assumes the characteristics of a “wrong” place, its definition as follows: “In contrast, the “wrong” place is generally thought of as a place where one feels one does not belong – unfamiliar, disorienting, destabilizing, even threatening” (Kwon 163-64). Here, the term “wrong” does not signify the erroneous or mistaken, but rather the threatening and unfamiliar. Kwon also reminds us that “right” and “wrong” places are not determined objectively, but rather by a subject’s relation to it (Kwon 38).[4]

The novel shows that for April, the suburban home as a “right” place does not ensure a sense of belonging - rather the contrary. We see this towards the end of the novel, after her escape to the woods, when she reflects on the conflict between her own personal desires and the role of identity the ideal has constructed for her:

[4] This is from Kwon’s article “The Wrong Place” written in 2000.

> You found you were saying yes when you meant no, and ‘We’ve got to be together in this thing’ when you meant the very opposite (…) and then you were face to face, in total darkness, with the knowledge that you didn’t know who you were.
>
> (Yates 304-05)

What these reflections reveal is first and foremost a disorienting and destabilizing effect on her identity, and secondly, a desire for the opposite of togetherness. What she expresses is an instability of self, a confusion, a lost-ness. We may trace such an instability in what Kwon calls an encounter with a “wrong” place: “An encounter with a “wrong” place is likely to expose the instability of the “right” place, and by extension the instability of the self” (Kwon 164). April’s encounter with the wildness of the woods has exposed the “darkness” of the suburban home - a darkness not in the word’s general understanding, but one of an imprisonment of performance that does not welcome momentum and mobilization of the self.

What incites April to go to the woods, whether it is its wild and uncultivated characteristics, or the need for isolation, the novel does not explicitly tell us, but we do know that she goes there. Interestingly, “to go to the woods” is a familiar phrase signifying the loss of social status and banishment from society. In a way then, April banishes herself from the homogenous community of the suburbs, and is no longer fundamentally tied to the suburban home. The characteristics of a “wrong” place in itself abolishes any form of attachment and personal tie, and so considering the woods as such a “wrong” place where April escapes, she succeeds in detaching her identity from the suburban home. Along with a detachment of place, according to Lippard, comes a disability to locate oneself (Kwon 158). April struggles to locate herself in between the role of the “performance of normal” on the one hand, and the “non-role” in the “wrong” place on the other.

The novel shows glimpses of what seems to reflect a confused and distant identity in April also prior to her encounter with the woods, demonstrated in a scene towards the end of the novel where, after a night out drinking with the Campbells, April ends up alone with Shep. After they have sex, she says quite bluntly that she does not know who he is. Shep tells her to stop talking in riddles, but she replies the following: "'I'm not. I really don't know who you are.' (…) 'And even if I did,' she said, 'I'm afraid it wouldn't help because you see I don't know who I am, either'" (Yates 262). The model of "right" versus "wrong" place is in April's case turned on its head. The suburban home is to April a "wrong" place in its disorienting effects on her identity. It threatens her desire for mobility and momentum, and finally, she does not relate to a sense of belonging there. However, in her detachment from the suburban home, she no longer has a place to refer to as a "right" one. The woods is not given much contemplation or attention to in the novel, and so it becomes too easy for us to mark the woods as April's new "right" place, since we do not have any solid validation to back up such an argument. What the novel *does* imply, however, is a crisis of identity evident in April's disability to locate herself. Kwon asserts that the opposite of a place-bound identity is a nomadic one (Kwon 159). There is no implication of April embracing such a nomadic identity, however. Consequently, the woods is the only reference point to a prospective "outside," meaning any place outside the "performance of normal" ruling in the suburban home.

The very first scene set in the woods is during John Givings' first visitation, and as we recall, this is when he accuses the Wheelers of "playing house," causing uncomfortable friction between the various performances in the living room.[5] John is invited to take a stroll in the woods to ease some of its tension: "Up in the woods behind the house, steaming in the sun, the

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[5] See page 18.

newly rainwashed earth gave off an invigorating fragrance" (188). Natural elements of sunlight, rain, and the "fragrance" of the earth represent a kind of natural easiness and delight that can only be experienced outside the house. The woods is an open field of space where "walls" consist of trees and bushes scattered across the naked soil, with vague physical proportions and no definite marking of territory. The moment they step outside the house, John and the Wheelers are "relaxing in an unexpected sense of camaraderie" (188-89). The natural surroundings set a completely different atmosphere with the premise that conversation is unbound by any roles and performances. Walking around in this relaxed setting, the three of them talk about what lies beneath the "performance of normal," which Frank calls a "Hopeless Emptiness" and John agrees: "Because maybe it does take a certain amount of guts to see the emptiness, but it takes a whole hell of a lot more to see the hopelessness" (189).

The ramifications of a "Hopeless Emptiness" are closely related, if not identical, to the effects of "sentimental dispossession" mentioned in the introduction. This dispossession is to say that although one possesses a charming house, an expensive car and a lucrative job, material prosperity and homeownership may actually result in the experience of feeling indigent and impoverished in the aspects of life that avail the emotional and spiritual. Its effects are at the worst the experience of emptiness and lack of meaning. John marks the hopelessness as the most burdensome, but all these effects intersect and overlap. The despair intrinsic in "Hopeless Emptiness" is palpable also in April's desperate need for a place outside the house, urging the escape to the woods after a huge fight with Frank.

Her unexpected pregnancy is the starting point of their problems. "Mummy" is a crucial role in the ideal of family togetherness, but April disrupts this role when she decides to use a bulb of a rubber syringe to remove the growing child in her belly. Frank attempts to discourage

April to go through with the intended abortion, and "diagnoses" her as irrational and unstable: "We ought to have you see a psychoanalyst" (226). Again, mental illness is used as an excuse to not take what is said seriously. It insinuates that if one disagrees with, and does not play along with the "performance of normal," one is mentally unstable. In this way, as with John Givings, April's voice is invalid, and her desires are neglected.

During the Givings' last visitation, John is discouraged and upset to learn that Frank and April have decided to not start a new life in Paris after all. Inquiring to know the reason why, the tension in the living room escalates and reaches its climactic point with John's following statement: "You figure it's more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all, or – Wow, that did it! Look at his face! What's the matter, Wheeler? Am I getting warm?" (286-87). John's statement provokes Frank to burst out in rage and clench his fists. This is the second time "Hopeless Emptiness" is spoken about and referred to. Here in the living room "Hopeless Emptiness" appears as a 'ghost' not unlike Frank's reality popping out with a "Boo!" disrupting the "performance of normal." While Mrs. Givings excuses John's impolite insistency on his mental illness, Frank does not see this as an adequate justification, because whether sick or not sick, John has hit a nerve.

What follows is a "painful silence," and they all stand grouped in the middle of the room whereas John "was the only one of them who seemed at peace" (287). The fact that he is at peace and the other characters are not, indicates a modification of the 'host.' John's "abnormal performance" stands triumphant as a 'ghost' that does not only "visit" but also transgress the implicit rules of the 'host,' and succeeds. This modification may be an example of what Turner claims is a rewriting of the 'host:' "Each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting" (Turner 373). This rewriting and modification of the

'host' welcomes a "siting" of "Hopeless Emptiness" and the effects of sentimental dispossession. A discursive reading of the 'host' thus exposes what lies beneath the surface of the comfortable "performance of normal:" a "Hopeless Emptiness," a despair and a meaninglessness that is not supposed to be there, but pops out with a Boo!

The novel "asks" its readers to pay attention to words that are written in capital letters, producing a "pop-out" kind of effect. Such informal and atypical usage of capitalization exemplified in "Hopeless Emptiness" appears throughout the entire novel, often in relation to phrases and words that carry a significant meaning or truth. These truths concern the characters' mental and emotional aspects, as the following examples illustrate: "(…) if you want this baby it's going to be All Your Responsibility" (111), "(…) it was my own Emotional Problem" (257), and "Am I just supposed to Face Up to my Problems and start being a different person tomorrow morning, or what?" (226). Interestingly, Jonathan Franzen's novel takes on a similar usage of capitalization, calling attention to the same kinds of emotional and mental links: "(…) and in general paint the opposite of the picture of Good Mental Health that he'd intended to create (…)" (Franzen 229), and "(…) she'd shopped for the Dinner of Revenge" (249). I will come back to this in the next chapter on *The Corrections.*

Let us return to the scene in the novel. In Frank's next statement, after the Givings' leave, he confirms that John has spoken the truth: "Everything That Man Said Is True, Right?" (289). April agrees, and the following fight between them affirms a modification of the 'host,' since Frank and April now interact not in the roles of husband and wife, but as two separate individuals. When they do not have a performance of togetherness to conform to in this moment, the scene quickly bursts into a huge fight, and fragmentary glimpses of truth seeps in. Frank calls April "an empty, hollow fucking shell of a woman" (291), and furthermore, he exclaims:

> 'Why the hell didn't you get rid of it, when you had the chance? Because listen. Listen: I got news for you.' The great pressure that began to be eased inside him now, as he slowly and quietly intoned his next words, made it seem that this was *a cleaner breakthrough into truth* than any he had ever made before: 'I wish to God that you'd done it.'
>
> (Yates 291, my italics)

Although Frank thinks to himself that the "breakthrough into truth" lies in the way he intones his words, it more so lies in what he actually says. The breakthrough into truth is that only in his role as loyal husband and father does Frank aspire to build their lives on the ideal of family togetherness, welcoming a new member to their family. On the other hand, when he is not playing the role of "Daddy" the provider, he directly admits that he does not want to have another baby. However, the "abnormal performances" that are in this moment exposing the instabilities of the "performance of normal" are soon to meet resistance. Turner reminds us that a site is a space always in process and never finalized (Turner 374). What happens next in this scene shows that the "performance of normal" attempts to reclaim its territory as 'host' and succeeds, evident in the shift in Frank. April refuses to conform and consequently escapes into the woods, while Frank soon reverts back to the original performance.

Frank chases after her, but she warns him to come nearer: "Don't come any *closer*. Can't I even get away from you in the *woods*?" (293). Whereas April experiences a claustrophobia in the house and wants privacy, Frank, on the other hand, "was meekly grateful for the protective shell of the house around him" (295). Bachelard affirms the house as provider of protection and shelter: "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6). He compares the house to a cradle and states that "life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (7). Frank "shut himself

inside it" (Yates 295), "it" meaning the house, and thus chooses the suburban home to be his "cradle" and "shell." Furthermore, Bachelard suggests that a creature may be hiding in his or her "shell" in preparation of a way out: "the most dynamic escapes take place in cases of repressed being" (Bachelard 111). In a way, Yates' novel portrays April as such a repressed being inside a suburban home preparing for an escape into the wild woods. Miller states that the experience of claustrophobia inside the suburban home may be a consequence of the expectation that all emotional and companionship needs will be met by the members of the family (Miller 414). The novel shows that Frank and April do not fulfill what these expectations require. Both look for sexual satisfaction in other partners and cheat on each other, and they seek different kinds of momentum, going in separate directions.

After spending half of the night in the woods, April returns to the house, and in the following morning an idyllic and romanticized performance of married life is staged in the kitchen:

> The table was carefully set with two plates for breakfast. The kitchen was filled with sunlight and with the aromas of coffee and bacon. April was at the stove, wearing a fresh maternity dress, and she looked up at him with a shy smile. "Good morning," she said. (Yates 296)

This passage is a brilliant portrayal of how the suburban ideal wants to be staged in the suburban home. Taken out of its context, the scene beams with happiness and love. Read in context of the rest of the novel, however, we know that all is an act, as Frank confirms: "It would be better just to join her in the playing of this game, this strange, elaborate pretense that nothing had happened yesterday" (296). His choice to play along with the game rather than to resist it is justified accordingly: "Life did, after all, have to go on" (296). The conversation that follows is

superficial and reinforces the façade: "'It certainly is a – nice morning out, isn't it?' he said. 'Yes; it is. Would you like scrambled eggs, or fried?'" (296). It is no coincidence that this scene is subsequent to the one with the fight, emphasizing the vigorous contrast between what is directed and expected by the suburban ideal and what is not.

However, it is peculiar that April all of a sudden is devoted to act her role of "Mummy" and loyal wife, considering her newly detachment from the suburban home. Considering what happens next though, we know that April is about to go through with the abortion. The perfectly staged breakfast is a goodbye to her husband. She leaves him a note, saying: "Dear Frank, whatever happens please don't blame yourself" (310). The decision to have an abortion can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile her detachment to the home, with the momentum she craves as an individual. Kwon calls attention to the recognition of our contradictory desires for the "right" and "wrong" place at the same time (Kwon 36),[6] and she inquires into the meaning of this "doubleness of experience." The only way for April to reconcile such a "doubleness of experience" is to alter her role as "Mummy" in the "right" place to fit with her individual aspirations, while maintaining her role for her two other children: "'But I've *had* two children,' she said. 'Doesn't that count in my favor?'" (225).

After Frank leaves to go to work, April makes preparations in the house for the abortion, and an uncomfortable silence fills the house, becoming "extraordinarily quiet" (310). Silence, as we recall form an earlier scene, drives the process of descent into lost-ness, depicted in Milly's experience of drowning in endless waters of silence. In this scene, silence functions as a warning that something crucial is about to happen, namely April's descent into the lost-ness of a place-bound identity. The suburban ideal requires full devotion to its roles in the home. Since a

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[6] From Kwon's "The Wrong Place," 2000.

modification of its performance is not welcomed by the 'host,' April is, in the act of aborting her baby, "aborted" from her role as "Mummy" and from the novel. The novel thus critiques the suburban ideal through April's refusal to conform and in her ultimate descent – the death of her unborn child and of her self.

1.3 The Neighborhood

> But then he saw the house – really saw it – long and milk-white in the moonlight, with black windows, the only darkened house on the road.
>
> (Yates 324)

This is Frank's description of their house the first time he is back from the hospital after April's death. It stands out from the rest of the neighborhood as "the only darkened house on the road," its exteriority thus demonstrating that the "performance of normal" has been disturbed. Inside the house, the presence of April lingers: "How could she be dead when the house was alive with the sound of her and the sense of her?" (324). Bachelard's reading of poetic images in the house is here of relevance, and of particular interest is the concept of *the qualities* of the image. Hans discusses Bachelard's images of the wardrobe and the drawer, and their quality of *intimacy*. He states that we will experience these qualities if we manage to receive the poetic image at its onset (Hans 318). In relation to the scene of the novel, we see that Frank goes to April's wardrobe and drawers in the bedroom to experience the intimacy of her voice: "He went quickly back to the bedroom and shut himself inside the closet, among the clothes" (325). Frank's reception of this quality of intimacy is, however, interrupted by an "imposer" Shep Campbell, entering the house:

> But after that interruption, April's voice no longer spoke to him. He tried for hours to recapture it, whispering words for it to say, going back to *the closet* time and again and into *the drawers* of her dressing table and into the kitchen, where he thought the pantry

> shelves and the racked plates and coffee cups would surely contain the ghost of her, but it was gone.
>
> (Yates 325, my emphasis).

To find out why Frank is unable to recapture the intimacy of April's voice, we must unpack a bit more of Bachelard's theory, though not all of its complexity, but I shall consider a few valid points relevant to our discussion. The first note to consider is that the image, in a successful reception of it, comes before thought, in the realm of the soul (Hans 316). Bachelard asserts that the soul deals with the image not in a manner of observation, but of experience. Hans explains that there is no dichotomy of subject and object in the realm of the soul, and no temporality nor historicity. Consequently, Hans states, all critical objective pretensions are left behind (Hans 317). In turn, this makes possible for the image to be "taken as it is" before thought has the chance to conceptualize it or fit it into a pattern. It is only in receiving the image at its purity that we are able to experience its qualities.

Returning to the scene in the novel and relating it to Bachelard's theory then, we see that before Shep Campbell makes an entrance in the house, Frank dwells in the image of the closet. Frank, in the realm of his soul, receives the image at its purity, enabling him to experience the intimacy of April's voice until he is interrupted. Employing Bachelard's theory as tool of analysis in this scene enables us to take further the notion of April's ghost in the house, showing how it marks its haunting presence not only on the exteriority of the house but also in its interior design and furniture. Bachelard asserts that the image of the wardrobe contains an entity of depth, a store of daydreams of intimacy and a passage into secrets (Bachelard 78). His image of the wardrobe thus offers the 'ghosts' belonging to "abnormal performances" to be kept and stored as secrets, available to be *dwelled in* from time to time. In turn, the 'ghosts' subside if the

reception is interrupted, becoming conceptualized and fit into a pattern of "the performance of normal."

Despite the absence of the Wheelers after April's death, the house harbors the haunting presence of her ghost, depicted in Helen Givings' later description of the empty house: "Remember how dreary it looked all winter? All cold and dark and – well, spooky. Creepy-crawly" (335-36). The 'ghosts' of the abnormal will keep visiting the Wheeler's house, the 'host,' as long as "the ghost of April" is stored in the image of the wardrobe. The contrast between this house and the rest of the neighborhood is not so much about April dying in one of its rooms as it is about the 'ghosts' of the abnormal still visiting the 'host.' Turner states that, "space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings – a palimpsest" (Turner 373). A palimpsest, in this case a palimpsest of space, suggests that writing has partially or entirely been erased to make room for another interpretation and rewriting of it. The novel portrays 'ghosts' of "abnormal performances" as having partially been erased from the house, yet remain indisputably inscribed into its layers of space, and the 'host' is reluctantly haunted by them. Helen Givings describes the newly moved-in neighbors, the Braces, as a "delightful young couple" who conforms to the "performance of normal." They give a "lift" to the Wheelers' house, now perked up and clean, with lights in the windows (336). The suburban ideal thus continues to live in the suburban home.

In the conclusion of this chapter, I want to consider the Campbell's portrayal of Frank in a conversation with the Braces. Milly says that Frank seems to be keeping busy in an upgraded position at the company Knox (329), the same job Frank himself earlier referred to as the "dullest job you could possibly imagine" (78). Shep holds an opinion of Frank which he keeps to himself: "And it was even worse than that: he was *boring*. He must have spent at least an hour

talking about his half-assed job, and God only knew how many other hours on his other favorite subject…" (331, my italics). To a much larger extent than earlier, Frank's life now mirrors the people that once were the center of his scorn and mockery. The ongoing circle of boredom permeated in the everyday life of suburbia is reinforced also in Milly's trivial routines: "…and in the morning she'd get up and come humping downstairs again in her torn dressing gown with its smell of sleep and orange juice and cough syrup and stale deodorant, *and go on living*" (333, my emphasis). The novel thus ends with the triumph of the suburban ideal's continued persistence in the literary presentation of the suburban home, a life that one must simply "go on living." Through the character of April, however, this "shelter" of house is conveyed more like an imprisonment of performance and conformity. A portrayal of the suburban home as a prison takes on a similar representation in *The Corrections*, which we now will turn to.

> Our imagination, our consciousness, needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, it's longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia). Thus, novels *and* houses furnish a dwelling place- a spatial construct – that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts.
>
> (Mezei and Briganti)

2. Staging the Suburban Ideal in The Corrections

2.1 A Prison House

Midway in Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections,* a scene from about twenty-thirty years back in time is recalled. Alfred and Enid are young parents, Gary and Chipper are six and ten years old, and Denise is not yet born. The scene is as follows: Alfred is examining his son Gary's miniature jail built with popsicle sticks. At the dinner table only hours earlier, Gary has been eager to announce his masterpiece to his father (Franzen 253), but when Alfred studies it alone the same evening, he is disappointed because it does not match his own image of how a jail should look like:

> Just inside Gary's door, reeking of Elmer's glue, was a *jail* of popsicle sticks. The jail bore no relation to the elaborate *house of correction* that Alfred had imagined. It was a crude roofless square, crudely bisected. Its floor plan, in fact, was exactly the binominal square he'd evoked before dinner. And this, this here in the jail's largest room, this

> bollixed knot of semisoft glue and broken Popsicle sticks was a – doll's wheelbarrow? Miniature step stool? *Electric chair.*
>
> (Franzen 271, my emphasis)

This paragraph reveals a number of important facets: A "house of correction" is what Alfred expected the jail to look like, and the parallel between a jail and a house is intriguing. The notion of correcting something is repeated throughout the novel, like when the character Gary says that "his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life" (179), and it is of course the title of the novel, *The Corrections*. The novel wants to say something about correcting, however, that is not confined to a jail per se, but also dominates in the family home. Typically in a family, parents correct their children to inspire discipline. Implied in "correction" are also the connotations of modification and alteration, bringing to mind the agenda of 'ghosts' visiting the 'host:' to alter and modify its space. In this way, there is a sense of a haunting correction persistent throughout the novel - a correction inspired by the suburban ideal of conduct. Gary's jail or "house of correction" is also a foreshadowing of how the novel ends: Alfred is put in a hospital and strapped to a wheelchair, locked to a place that attempts to correct his Parkinson's disease.

The second facet in the passage above worth pointing out is the electric chair placed in the middle of the square, an anticipation of Alfred's blue leather chair - that he will later buy and inhabit. Gary's electric chair also brings about connotations like execution and punishment, naming death as the doorway to an ultimate escape out of the suburban home and out of one self, also a foreshadowing of Alfred's thoughts about suicide when he later is locked to the wheelchair at St. Lukes. Further on in the scene above we read that Alfred "found himself susceptible to the poignancy of the chair's having been made" (272), and his sensitivity to the

electric chair of popsicles strangely anticipates the emotional attachment to his own chair later in the novel.

The novel introduces Alfred's blue leather chair as a piece of furniture complementing the living room, a monument to the comfortable lifestyle of the suburban ideal that wants to rule in the family home. The chair as such an institutional site relies on the ideal's ideological advocacy, and for the purposes of this part of the discussion it is necessary to repeat, from the introduction, its function: the aesthetic exteriority of the house, with its physical proportions as well as furnishings inside its rooms, displays a perfected orderliness serving an ideological function in its decree of expecting the same balance to be acted out by its residents. Through the character of Alfred and Chip, however, the novel proposes a discursive reading of the house, the chair and the table. Such a reading exposes the institutional site's hidden ideological operations, which in essence is the attempt to correct Chipper's resistance and correct Alfred's and Gary's mental disorders, in order for them to become "normal" and fit into an "emotionally happy family." Before we proceed on, I want to remind the reader about Turner's concept of the 'host' and 'ghost' and its connection to the word "correction" that I briefly referred to on the previous page.

When I talk about the 'host' in this chapter, I refer mainly to three various sites: The house of the Lambert family as a prototype of the Suburban home, Alfred's chair, and the dinner table. In *Revolutionary Road*, the 'host' represented the site of the living room, its 'ghosts' composed of the "performance of normal" in tension with "abnormal performances." The "performance of normal" was displayed as the staging of the suburban ideal as a role-play, where the characters were well aware of its enactment. Franzen's novel reverberates with some of these 'ghosts' exemplified in the staging of the perfect family dinner around the kitchen table in two

different scenes, two dinners that from start to end are quite disastrous. These will be analyzed later in this chapter. For now, we will return to the chair and the house and examine them as 'hosts,' and incorporate Bachelard's theory of *The Poetics of Space.* First, we shall unpack some of Bachelard's main principles as a point of departure, and from there detect whether his concept of the poetic image, in our case the chair, can be read as a functional site springing out from the discursive model.

The basis of Bachelard's theory is the field of phenomenology and the philosophy of the structures and experiences of the consciousness. His representation of the house as an oneiric house characteristic of dreams, invites us to daydream and dwell in the images that constitute the oneiric house, meaning to "live in this house that is gone" and possess its space: "But in the daydream itself, the recollection of moments of confined, simple, shut-in space are experiences of heartwarming space, of a space that does not seek to become extended, but would like above all still to be possessed" (Bachelard 10). Overall, this helps us to get a grasp of what the space within the image, for instance the chair, is like: confined, simple and shut-in. That space, Bachelard says, would like to be possessed. This possession in turn signifies to capture the image at its purity, as I already discussed in the previous chapter. There we saw that when Frank grasped the quality of the wardrobe as the image appeared, he was able to dwell in the quality of intimacy of April's voice and presence, and in this way he possessed its space. Possession of the image thus offers an escape into the spaces of the imagination, beyond the reality of physical structures, and it is what this escape in turn offers, that compels Alfred to inhabit his chair. We will get back to the concept of the escape in more detail in the next subchapter.

The quality of Bachelard's image of the house is that of *well-being*, originated in our "first universe" and the shelter where we grew up and created our very first memories. By

dreaming of "the house we were born in," Bachelard believes we can "participate in this original warmth" (Bachelard 7). Hans explains this notion as follows: "We return to these images to bring back well-being, to expand our happiness in maturity through a reliving of primal images" (Hans 319). Childhood is thus a vital aspect of the house as an archetypal image: "Bachelard's archetypes and their trans-subjectivity are connected to our early life, our childhood, and it is to our childhood that these images lead" (Hans 319). Hans reminds us that Bachelard's poetic images are primal and therefore not tied to reality (Hans 317), and so the intention is not to relive actual events of childhood, but rather to dwell in its qualities of well-being, security, protection, warmth and so forth, as Bachelard himself affirms: "It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us" (Bachelard 16). Franzen's novel, however, problematizes the quality of well-being in the fact that a *child* has constructed the miniature jail of popsicles. We must account for the possibility that Gary builds this jail from his own experience of his childhood home, dominated not exclusively by the quality of well-being, but also by claustrophobia and punishment, or correction. The novel reveals that Alfred would, when his children were young, punish them with spanking: "RIGHT NOW, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, OR DO YOU NEED A SPANKING?" (260).

With this knowledge in hand, let us now return to the scene where Alfred examines the jail of popsicle sticks. The mismatch between Gary's handmade electric chair and Alfred's own "precise mental image of an electric chair" (272) leads Alfred to question if there is also a mismatch between the actual hardwood floor beneath him and his own precise mental image of it:

> Maybe a floor became truly a floor in his mental reconstruction of it. The floor's nature was to some extent inarguable, of course; the wood definitely existed and had measurable

> properties. But there was a *second* floor, the floor as mirrored in his head, and he worried that the beleaguered "reality" that he championed was not the reality of an actual floor in an actual bedroom but the reality of a floor in his head which was idealized and no more worthy, therefore, than one of Enid's silly fantasies.
>
> (Franzen 272)

Alfred here juxtaposes "the reality of an actual floor" to "the reality of a floor in his head," suggesting that the house can be read in more ways than one, and that the floor in his head is also a "reality" - if not real in actual physical attributes, it is real in his consciousness. It is the same with Bachelard's poetic images of the archetypal house: as already mentioned, they are primal and not tied to reality, but depends on the spaces of the consciousness. The way Alfred "reads" the house in the excerpt above builds on an ambiguity and uncertainty, also features of the discursive site (Kwon 160). The novel in a way "asks" for the house to be read through this lens, evident in Alfred's questioning of "the seemingly real hardwood floor on which he knelt" versus "the floor as mirrored in his head" (272) - an inquiry resonating with the last decades' discussions in the field of site-specific art, of what determines a site: its physical measurements, its cultural and political implications and context, or an overlap of these.

The latter suggestion, the overlap, is placed in a discursive model of site, and from this model springs the "functional site," which I briefly illustrated in the introduction. Meyer claims that the functional site is "structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist" (Kwon 29). Closely related to this is Hans observation that the movement of Bachelard's poetic images is progressive, the dynamic feature of the image explicating its unfixed form: "Once the image has

been grasped, once its salience has struck the soul, the reader is free to *move to* the memories the image leads to (…)" (Hans 323, my emphasis). As we already know, Bachelard's image is only graspable at the moment it appears, in an encounter with its purity. If we are to receive the image as Bachelard wants us to receive it, it demands no context because, as Hans affirms, comparison kills the effect of the image (Hans 323). In an essay on spaces of intertextuality, Marko Juvan acknowledges Bachelard's theory of poetic images, but disagrees with Bachelard's perception on context, and concludes that "… when we are moving through them (spaces) we are also carrying with us memories and projections of other lived or imaginary places, cultural contexts, and social environments" (*Spaces of Intertextuality/The Intertextuality of Space,* 92). This particular way of moving through spaces carries similarities to the movement of the functional site as a sequence of events and actions through spaces, an overlap of layers in a contextual pattern.

Furthermore, Meyer claims that the meaning of the functional site is devoid of a particular focus (Kwon 29). Bachelard's poetic images demand an autonomous meaning, and finds its particular focus in the quality of the image. These qualities constitute security, well-being and so forth. In Bachelard's characterization of a space constructed in the consciousness, or the functional site's description of space as an encompassment of sequences of events, it is quite difficult to fully grasp its abstract and complex dimensions. This is why it is relevant for this discussion to look to other references in the discourse of literature depicting spaces of the consciousness.

In the nineteenth century American poetic tradition, we may look to Emily Dickinson, who used an architectural and spatial vocabulary in her poetry to grant the space of the mind as deserving of a virtual space, demonstrated in the first verse in her poem number 670, cited from Suzanne Juhasz' article on Emily Dickinson and the space of the mind:

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted

One need not be a House-

The Brain has Corridors- surpassing

Material Place-

Dickinson here compares the space of the brain to the structure of a house with corridors and chambers, a very similar way of reading space as Bachelard. Whilst he believes that the space within the image is confined, simple and shut-in, Dickinson writes that the space within the brain, or consciousness, surpasses material place and space. A similar architectural vocabulary is also prominent in *The Corrections* in “the floor as mirrored in his head” (272), and “consciousness was to brain as family was to house” (267), connecting spaces of the house to the consciousness. Juhasz highlights the poem cited above and celebrates the limitlessness of spatial vocabulary: “Specifically, terms drawn from architecture, geography and space-travel define a location that is enclosed, private, yet changeable in dimension, that can alter suddenly and violently, that can become vast and limitless” (Juhasz 87). The altering of space expands its limits, and we may trace such modification back to the performativity of ‘ghosts’ consistently questing for a modification and rewriting of the space of the ‘host.’

An architectural and spatial vocabulary describing the spaces of the consciousness as capable of altering and expanding, renders a threat to the ‘host.’ Such an expanding opens up for a reading of the space of the suburban home that exceeds the limits of an institutional and phenomenological site. Though, as we will see in the conclusion of this thesis, the “performance of normal” attempts to invade the space of the brain through something called the “Corecktall process,” which we will explore in more detail in the conclusion. Furthermore, Bachelard asserts that we are constantly reimagining the reality of the body of images that constitutes the house in

our consciousness (Bachelard 17). This reconstruction and reimagining of space and its reality rests on the self-reliant agency of the reader of the images, independent of an overarching imperative. The 'host' insists on a homogenous conformity to its "performance of normal," but Bachelard's theory shows that the spaces of the 'host' can be read as something other than what the 'host' demands.

In the next subchapter, we will see that a modification of the space constituting the image of the chair occurs first and foremost by its relocation to the basement. Here, Alfred's 'ghosts' become harmonized with the "irrationality of the depths" of the "dark entity of the house" (Bachelard 18), suggested in Bachelard's notion of the verticality of the house.[7] Miller claims that the suburban home was originally projected as a private space for each individual family to retreat to from the outside world (Miller 398), but the novel shows that Alfred retreats from his family to the basement - and more importantly, to his chair.

2.2 Inhabiting the Chair

A few years back in time in the novel, Alfred has picked out a blue leather chair in a furniture store, conveniently matching the Chinese blue rug in the living room (Franzen 9). First and foremost, he looks for "something really comfortable" (9), but after spending a lifetime providing for others, Alfred desires more than merely comfortableness: "He needed a monument to his need" (9). Naming it "an engineer's chair" it is epitomized as a worthy tribute to his many years of hard work. Years later, while redecorating the living room, Enid insists that Alfred's

[7] "The verticality of the house" is a tool of analysis used by Bachelard to help distinguish the body of images of the house. More details are to be explored on page 48.

beloved chair must be discarded. Alfred repeatedly asks the question "what about the chair," and gets immensely offended when Enid replies that she does not even like it: "Enid's words filled him with such sorrow – he felt such pity for the chair, such solidarity with it, such astonished grief at its betrayal – that he pulled off the dropcloth and sank into its arms and fell asleep" (10). Human-like characteristics are added to the object such as falling asleep in "its arms" and bestowing on it the ability to feel betrayal. The question "what about the chair" is really not about the commodity, but is merely an echo of the underlying question, "what about me?"

From the start of the novel, we learn about Alfred's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease and depression, and interestingly the novel links Alfred's sickness to his chair. Mental illnesses appear in Franzen's novel as a threat in a similar way as with John Givings and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, the two characters who do not conform to the ideal. To Enid, the chair serves not only as a daily reminder of Alfred's sickness, but is also a preservation of it. Since it does not complement an "emotionally healthy family," Enid banishes the chair from the living room. Its relocation to the basement, however, is a repression of Alfred's reality, and a way for Alfred to take back and "possess" his own reality is to inhabit the chair. Indeed, in relation to Bachelard's assertion that "a nest may protect the dreamer from the hostility of the world" (103), Alfred protects himself from Enid's lack of understanding in the inhabiting of the chair in a room of privacy. Bachelard tells us that we value corners and "nests" to inhabit and curl up comfortably in a house (Bachelard xxxviii), and we may read Alfred's chair as such a "nest." The quality of "nests" is *security* (Bachelard 102), bringing to mind aspects of safety and absence of anxiety and fear. As Hans tells us, the poetic image does not signify an actual picture of the chair, but rather the qualities this image brings about (Hans 318). In other words, if we say

that Alfred dwells within the image of the chair, it means that Alfred dwells in its qualities of security and well-being.

There is a tension between the "performance of normal's" repression of his reality on the one hand, insisting on a correcting, and, on the other, Alfred's refusal to be corrected. The only way for Alfred to preserve his reality is to "follow" the chair to the basement: "Life came to be lived underground" (Franzen 10). It is not only Alfred who comes to live underground, but his depression and Parkinson's disease, too. Enid tells her daughter that Alfred "does nothing all day but sit in his chair" (65), only for Denise to reply: "Mother, he's depressed." Symptoms of depression, in a general sense, implies a loss of joy and of living, but this state might also be an effect of sentimental dispossession. In his chair, Alfred is left in privacy and loneliness, to the core of himself.

The symptoms of Alfred's disorders are irrational and child-like behavior, a degradation of his own rationality, driving the process of *descent.* We need Bachelard's model of the verticality of the house to trace this descent. He says that the house works as "a *tool for analysis* of the human soul" (xxxvii), and when talking about the "psychology of the house" he proposes the house as a vertical being with two opposite poles: the attic and the basement. Furthermore, Bachelard claims that by going up the stairs to the attic, one experiences harmony with the verticality of the house. On the other hand, going *down* the stairs to the cellar violates this logical verticality, and sanctions harmony with the irrational:

> But it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths.
>
> (Bachelard 18)

“Subterranean forces” suggests that which is buried and hidden underground. Bachelard asserts that poetic images not only hold various qualities, but also bear within themselves an esthetics of hidden things (Bachelard xxxvii). I thus propose that Alfred’s illnesses are hidden and kept in the image of the chair. The staircase leads to the basement, to a place that, in its elements of madness, darkness and irrationality, implies what Kwon calls a “wrong” place. These elements are, according to Bachelard, buried within the walls of the cellar (Bachelard 20). Alfred’s encounter with the “wrong” place indicates a detachment from the “right” place. As he inhabits the chair in the basement, he makes it his home: “All inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (Bachelard 5). The novel shows that Alfred’s sense of belonging lies first and foremost in his chair, and not in the house per se. In fact, he expresses that he is “doomed to feel violently lonely” in a world that does not understand him, a world that refuses to “square with his version of reality” (272). In interpreting the “world” in terms of “surroundings” signifying his family and his home, Alfred reveals that he feels lonely in his own house. Inhabiting the chair, Alfred is able to reconstruct the reality of the image and modify its space, and in it, his loneliness and isolation are “sited” as effects of the ‘host’s’ refusal to accommodate his diseases.

In the previous chapter, we saw that April’s descent lead to a loss of a place-bound identity and a dramatic death. Alfred’s descent demonstrates a different kind, a descent to the “irrationality of the depths” where his body and rationality slowly but surely degrade. The way Alfred’s depression and Parkinson’s diagnosis is viewed by the other characters in the novel proves a partition between the “normal” and “abnormal,” also evident at the end of the novel when he is hospitalized at St. Lukes. Alfred is convinced that his physical therapist is a “black bastard” who gives him “the Eye to warn him of the harm she intended to do him at her earliest opportunity” (552). The confusion between Chip telling him that she is not harmful and Alfred’s

own conviction that she is, stresses him to the point of loss of physical control over the body: "The contradiction opened into a bottomless chasm. He stared into its depths, his mouth hanging open. A warm thing was crawling down his chin" (552). In a way, he is here staring into the depths of his own descent.

At the hospital there is also a chair, a wheelchair. However, this wheelchair is not a friendly "nest" of security for Alfred, but the very opposite. Its belt locks Alfred captive: "His only hope was to get his belt free of the chair somehow. Get himself free, make a dash, put an end to it" (551). Resonating with Gary's miniature jail of popsicles, Alfred experiences the hospital as a prison: "The question was: How to get out of this prison?" (549). He answers his own question in thoughts about suicide, but his weak body takes him nowhere, and begs his son Chip to end his life: "He banged on the arms of his captivating chair. 'You have to help me put an end to it!'" (556). The novel ends with Chip unwilling to fulfill his sick father's wishes.

By way of conclusion to this subchapter, we must recognize the strikingly similar way of critiquing the suburban ideal in *The Corrections* and *Revolutionary Road*. From Yates' novel, we recall the 'host's' refusal to accord with April's modification of her role as "Mummy," causing her destruction and death. We see similar conditions of refusal by the 'host' in the Lambert home. Placing Alfred in a hospital robs him of his privacy and even of love: "The odd truth about Alfred was that love, for him, was a matter not of approaching but of keeping away" and furthermore "you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy" (523). In the robbery of Alfred's escape then, Franzen's novel illustrates the continuation of the suburban ideal and its survival as a "performance of normal" in the literary presentation of the family home.

Let us do a brief recap before proceeding on to the final subchapter. Bachelard's theory has enabled us to read the suburban home and its furniture as poetic images and spaces capable of expanding and altering in the consciousness. His images offer an escape beyond the physical dimensions of the house (as a phenomenological site) as well as its ideological implications (an institutional site), verified in how Alfred dwells in the qualities of the image of the chair. The escape furthermore offers a reconstruction of the reality of the images of the house, transgressing the implicit rules of the 'host' requiring a "performance of normal," here transgressed and disturbed. The novel thus shows how the chair can be read as a discursive site, not determined by physicality or ideology, but by the modification of its space into a "wrong" place.

It is this modification of its space then, that enables us to see the novel's critique of the suburban ideal. It is a fairly complicated critique, but a prominent one. The chair becomes a site of Alfred's "abnormal performances," an encompassment of his degradation, isolation, loneliness and refusal, all functioning as 'ghosts' in harmony with the irrationality of the depths of the cellar. What this complicated critique exposes then, is a failure to stage family togetherness. In his escape and "nest," Alfred is indeed freed from the claustrophobia of family togetherness, embracing his privacy. Secondly, the novel critiques the suburban ideal's insistence on "normality" in its attempt to repress Alfred's disorders. In contrast to the "irrationality" of the basement, the room at St. Lukes is one of rationality, located "many stories up" (551) in the hospital, in harmony with the verticality of the building. Here, Alfred's diseases are viewed as a threat to be corrected.

With the absence of his chair at St.Lukes, Alfred now clings to his son Chip. And Chip, as we will see in the next part of the chapter, is another character in the novel who resists "the

performance of normal" in the house. The next scene we shall encounter is a dinner scene where, towards the end, Alfred recognizes himself in his son, like a ghost from his own childhood.

> Perhaps the most notable extension of the aesthetic
> system embodied in the suburban house is in dining.
> Simon J. Bronner

2.3 Staging The Table

"Table" derives from the Latin word "tabula" and denotes a piece of wood or tablet, "one forming a surface used for a particular purpose." The Anglo-Norman tradition from the 12th century established the Holy Communion as a customary conduct to occur around the table.[8] Since then, "the table" has been associated with fellowship, shared beliefs and mutual participation. This tradition of fellowship around the table also made its way into the American suburban home.[9] Collective meals around the table are considered essential to family life. In a sociological study from 2013, Shira Offer examines several family activities and routines in relation to adolescents' emotional well-being. She found that family meals were of most scholarly attention: "Scholars contend that family meals promote well-being by giving parents and children the opportunity to talk about important matters, provide support to each other, and

[8] "Table," *OED*, etymology: Holy Communion is the participation in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, which in Anglo-Norman tradition represented union and fellowship between Christians.

[9] It made its way, of course, into homes in countries, cultures and traditions throughout the world. For the purposes of this thesis, fellowship around the table in the stereotype suburban home grants a specific role of how family life *should* look like.

reinforce shared values" (Offer 28). Offer, however, questions the view by calling out this kind of family meal as a romanticized perception of family life, and the pitfall of this ideal, she says, is frustration, stress, boredom and tension between family members (Offer 28).

In considering "the table" as a literary motif and an institutional site, we may read it as a performance site which will enable us to expose the ways the suburban ideal modulates the table according to its cultural parameter, as portrayed in Franzen's novel. In order to reveal these operations, we will continue to use Turner's vocabulary of the 'host' and 'ghost,' and engage with Svendsen's philosophy of boredom. The novel questions the table as an institutional site and a fellowship token in its demonstration of 'ghosts' of boredom that invite a phenomenological as well as a discursive reading of it.

2.3.1 The Dinner of Revenge

There are several dinner scenes around the dining table in *The Corrections*, and this following analysis will look at two of them as these are significant in their failure of staging the ideal of family togetherness. Rather than constituting support and shared values, the dinners result in tension, boredom and separation. The first dinner scene we shall explore is called the "Dinner of Revenge," a scene narrated in retrospect. This dinner actually occurs only hours earlier to when Alfred examines Gary's jail of popsicles, still when Gary and Chipper are children and Alfred and Enid young parents.

As its title suggests, the "Dinner of Revenge" anticipates conflict. As readers, we are obliged to wonder, whose revenge is the dinner about? It is clear from the start that Enid Lambert is the one who marks this dinner as a revenge on her husband. His lack of appreciation for her

efforts as a loving and hard-working mother and loyal wife, is the motivation for her revenge. This is the first dinner they eat together as a family after Alfred has been away for an eleven-day trip (Franzen 249). Enid cooks "liver 'n' bacon" and arranges her seat by the table in the dining room, well aware of the role she is supposed to play: a loyal wife and mother who will provide her family with a nice home cooked meal. By taking part in the ritual of the dinner, joining in on conversation and behaving appropriately, she accepts her given role in this particular staging around the table.

The first indication of conflict occurs already while Enid prepares the meal: discovering only three strips of bacon instead of eight, she does not believe it will suffice for the entire family (251). Quite correctly, the dinner does not suffice – not only in matters of serving size, but also in terms of taste. The expectation that family members share similar interests and similar taste is according to Miller highly problematic and is a lack of respect for each other's dissimilarities and individualities (Miller 411). This lack of respect is visible around the table when Alfred expects and commands Chipper to eat his dinner, but because Chipper cannot stand the taste he refuses to eat (Franzen 260). The son's resistance immediately causes a conflict in the unity around the table: "two sides of the square table were happy and two were not" (257). The two happy ones are Gary and Enid, while the unhappy ones are the unwilling son and the angry father. Chipper's disobedience to his father's commands disrupts the performance of a perfect family dinner, and while Chipper is ordered to stay at the table until the food is eaten, the other three retreat to the basement: Alfred withdraws to a room of his own, while Gary and Enid go to another where they play Ping-Pong. The novel illustrates the split of unity in the house as follows:

> Maybe the futile light in a house with three people separately absorbed in the basement and only one upstairs, a little boy staring at a plate of cold food, was like the mind of a depressed person.
>
> (Franzen 267)

Again is the reappearance of mental illness, here depression, functioning as an intrusion on the performance of a "normal" family life. As we have detected in previous discussions, depression and other disorders serve as 'ghosts' that regularly visit the 'host,' picking on the portrait of a perfect family, sustaining a constant threat to its stability.

The house of the Lambert family resembles the "three-room arrangement," especially popular in prewar and postwar suburban houses built for middle- and working class families. In Jacobs' article on the family room and spatial change in the postwar suburban house, mentioned in the introduction, he reports that the "three-room arrangement" was structured to fit a kitchen as the work area, a living room, a dining room, plus an implied additional option in the basement (Jacobs 74). Although the spatial structure of the "three-room arrangement" was intended to provide optimal conditions for a family, the characters in the Lambert house occupy themselves in separate rooms. While Jacobs suggests that a two or three-story plan, which allows for "separateness" as well as "togetherness," may prevent claustrophobia of togetherness (Jacobs 76), the novel demonstrates the opposite: here is a separateness in a family where two of its members are having fun playing a game together, while the other two sit miserably alone by themselves, only a wooden floor keeping them apart. This similitude of character is what seems to connect the two - neither wants to fit into a "happy family life." Chipper sits alone in the dark by the table in the dining room while his father sits alone in the lab in the basement: "In the lab below the dining room Alfred sat with his head bowed in the darkness and his eyes closed" (263-

64). What the two of them share is a mutual resistance to the ideal, and it is through these two characters that the novel renders the possibility of reading the table and the house as discursive sites, modifying them into something else. Read discursively, the table loses its particular focus of meaning as a family token of togetherness.

The first kind of boredom Chipper encounters by the table is what Svendsen calls a case of situative boredom, which we recall from the previous chapter as the passing of time (Svendsen 41): "And if you sat at the dinner table long enough, whether in punishment or in refusal or simply in boredom, you never stopped sitting there. Some part of you sat there all your life" (Franzen 268). Chip sits there for all three reasons: in refusal to eat, in punishment, and in boredom. Svendsen explains that in situative boredom it is not time or a thing in itself which gives rise to boredom, but rather the situation in which the things are placed (Svendsen 119). Consequently, it is the robbed opportunity of leaving the table that changes Chipper's experience of time, thereby creating the experience of boredom. Taking a closer look though, we will also find traces of an existential and profound boredom. A key feature in Svendsen's analysis of Heidegger's lectures on boredom is the concept of *Dasein*. The term "Dasein" signifies "being-there," representing the kind of "being" individuals are, because we are *there* in the world (Svendsen 114). A mood, like the mood of boredom, is able to open up the space in which *Dasein* can relate to itself, affecting the totality of all objects, or "the world as a whole" (Svendsen 110). An effect of this mood of boredom, Svendsen explains, is the collapse of *Dasein* into one indifferent whole (123). In the scene of Chip by the table, such a collapse is what seems to happen. The language of the novel invites an emptiness and a nakedness through an illustration of coldness, silence and solitude. What the table intended to be is devoured and modified by 'ghosts' of boredom opening up the space in which *Dasein* collapses.

The food turns into something that Chipper picks apart and dissects, as he spends time peeling, scraping, examining and rearranging the food on his plate (Franzen 263). As with the food, the table itself also loses its original purpose as a token of fellowship: "Even the most extreme boredom had merciful limits. The dinner table, for example, possessed an underside that Chipper explored by resting his chin on the surface and stretching his arms out below" (264). Reading it as a phenomenological site, Chipper here acknowledges the table in its length, height, shape and texture: "Complicated intersections of roughly finished blocks and angles were punctuated, here and there, by deeply countersunk screws, little cylindrical wells with scratchy turnings of wood fiber around their mouths, irresistible to the probing finger" (264). Reading further on, however, we see that Chipper questions such a phenomenological reading of objects in the room, reflected in an uncertainty about their physicality, terms and references:

> It would have taken an effort of will, a reawakening, to summon the term "place mat" and apply it to the visual field that he had observed so intensely that its reality had dissolved in the observing… (269).

The phrase "its reality had dissolved in the observing" suggests that the phenomenological reading of the table has dissolved in Chipper's mood of boredom. Svendsen furthermore says that an effect of a mood of boredom is indifference to one's surroundings and to the self: "This indifference also characterizes me. I become an empty 'nobody' who can be experienced in my emptiness" (Svendsen 123). In emptiness, what remains is an encounter with *Dasein*: "The self is brought to a naked encounter with itself, as the self that is *there* and is left to its own devices" (Svendsen 122-23). The novel depicts Chipper experiencing such a naked encounter with the self: "After he scratched his head or rubbed his nose his fingers harbored something. *The smell of self*" (263, my italics), and Chipper describes "the smell of self" as a "taste of self-inflicted

suffering" (263). The remains in a naked encounter with the self is solely emptiness, but instead of becoming an "empty nobody" as Svendsen argues must happen in the collapse of *Dasein*, Chipper holds on to a refusal to conform, evident in his thoughts: "Only you and your refusal remained" (263). Preserved in his "mental states," Chipper's refusal serves as his means of survival of self in the midst of the collapse: "After three hours, the objects surrounding him were as drained of flavor as old bubble gum. His mental states were strong by comparison and overwhelmed them" (269). Chipper's 'ghost' of refusal and resistance modifies the table into a discursive site. The table is no longer a token of family togetherness, but a site of Chipper's mood of boredom, his solitude, emptiness, preservation of resistance, and refusal to conform to the "performance of normal."

The scene comes to its end as Chipper is finally gathered in the arms of his father and carried away from the table:

> The kitchen and dining room were ablaze in light, and there appeared to be a small boy slumped over the dining-room table, his face on his place mat. The scene was so wrong, so sick with Revenge that for a moment Alfred honestly thought the boy at the table was a ghost from his own childhood.
>
> (Franzen 271)

Time has seemed to stop in the mood of boredom, reflected in this stand-still picture almost frozen of movement. "The scene was so wrong" echoes the novel's critique of the staging of an idealized family dinner, a dinner gone on the wrong track. The word "Revenge" is capitalized and pops out from the passage, and Alfred's observation that the scene was "so sick with Revenge" affirms that 'ghosts' of revenge and separation have in this moment triumphed over the 'ghost' of togetherness. In a glimpse of recognition, although feeble and momentary, Alfred

recognizes his son's resistance to conformity also in himself, in form of a tangible ghost from his own childhood. This ghost reminds us of the haunting presence of April's ghost in the Wheelers' house in the previous chapter, reinforcing the notion of "abnormal performances" haunting and interrupting the "performance of normal." Although *The Corrections* reveals little about Alfred's childhood, the mention of it in the scene above reflects a pattern of reversal and going back, an anticipation of Alfred's return to a child-like behavior when he gets sick.

The going back to childhood is, according to Bachelard, the inevitable trajectory of daydreaming in every house, prompted by the desire to relive the safety and well-being of childhood. In Bachelard's understanding of the childhood home as a "shelter" of nurturing qualities, even boredom and solitude are depicted as a bracing advantage:

> How happy the child who really possesses his moments of solitude! It is a good thing, it is even salutary, for a child to have periods of boredom, for him to learn to know the dialectics of exaggerated play and causeless, pure boredom.
>
> (Bachelard 16)

Although the experience of boredom might serve advantage in terms of practicing endurance or the like, the discursive reading of the table in the novel does not illustrate Chip as a happy child possessing his moments of solitude, nor does it portray his mood of boredom as a good thing. The collapse of *Dasein* and 'ghost' of emptiness is described as a miserable self-inflicted suffering, and the 'ghost' of refusal causing a separation in the family is illustrated as "the mind of a depressed person" (267).

At the end of this scene, the other son, Gary, lies comfortably asleep in his bedroom. Although he behaves appropriately and neat as a child, he does not cope so well with family life as an adult. Throughout the novel, Gary expresses disgust with his father's diseases, saying:

"Dad has done *nothing* to take care of himself. He's sat in that fucking blue chair and wallowed in self-pity" (211). Despite Gary's efforts to not become like his father ("his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life" (179)), he later falls into the same pattern, indicated in the following dialogue between the two:

> "'It's because you are depressed, Dad. You are clinically depressed—'
>
> 'And so are you.'
>
> 'And the responsible thing would be to get some treatment.'
>
> 'Did you hear me? I said so are you.'
>
> 'What are you talking about?'
>
> 'Figure it out.'"
>
> (Franzen 174)

In the final part of the chapter, we will do a close-reading of a dinner scene with Gary and his family, and detect resemblances between him and his father in their way of coping with family life in their role as a dad and husband.

2.3.2 "It Sure Looked Like Family Life"

> Through the kitchen windows he could see Caroline thumb-wrestling Jonah. He could see her taking Aaron's headphones to listen to music, could see her nodding to the beat. It sure *looked* like family life. Was there really anything amiss here but the clinical depression of the man peering in?"
>
> (Franzen 164)

The passage depicts Gary Lambert as a spectator to his own family, on a regular afternoon in their home on Seminole Street in Philadelphia. The scene takes place in the novel's third chapter,

a chapter centering on Gary and his family. Gary is married to Caroline and together they have three sons: Aaron, Caleb and Jonah. Caroline insists that her husband is clinically depressed and tells their children behind his back, whereas Gary refuses such allegations in their presence. Nevertheless, we see above that Gary admits otherwise to himself: "Was there really anything amiss here but the clinical depression of the man peering in?" We are again confronted with mental illness as an interruption on the staging of the ideal family life. The following scene exhibits a home where everything seems perfectly in store for a family dinner around the table to be well staged, verified by Gary's promise of a successful afternoon: "I will make dinner *and* I will do the dishes *and* I may also trim the hedge, because I, for one, am feeling good!" (226). The dinner, however, is disastrous from beginning to end.

On the menu is "mixed grill" - a regular dinner in their home, we learn. Whilst cooking, Gary makes martinis, and the third martini he makes he drinks "in plain view of his entire family" (226). With all his attention on his drink, the grill is left unguarded and only moments later it stands in flames. Burnt meat is served, and the first part of the evening is rather unsuccessful. Gary has a hard time chewing the burnt meat, and with his family as an audience he "sat with the unchewed bird-flesh in his mouth until he realized that saliva was trickling down his chin – a poor way indeed to demonstrate good mental health" (227). He seems well aware of the fact that he eats like a child, and his wife confirms this child-like behavior when she speaks to him "as to a child" (227). There is a partition around the table between Gary and the rest of the family, also emphasized earlier in the chapter: "… his wife had strong allies in the house" (158). Feeling intimidated, Gary leaves the table in a burst of rage: "*Fuck* this Caroline! *Fuck* your whispering! I'm going to fucking go trim that fucking hedge!" (227). Clearly, the dinner is not one of togetherness, and Gary's plan of trimming the hedge also takes a disastrous course.

Cutting his right thumb with the running clipper (228), Gary causes a chaos of blood in the bathroom, and admits to himself that he has painted "the opposite of the picture of Good Mental Health that he'd intended to create…" (229). We may recall this atypical usage of capital letters also in *Revolutionary Road* meant to underscore a significant meaning and truth,[10] and here it operates similarly. In a way, the capitalization functions as a 'ghost' revealing the truth about Gary's performance: The meat he cooks on the grill gets burnt, then he eats dinner without manners, followed by a burst of rage and inappropriate language in front of his children, and finally he is unable to handle the running clipper. In his constant effort to prove to his family, as well as himself, that he is well capable to play by the rules of the "performance of normal," the pop-out-effect of the capitalization of "Good Mental Health" is there to show why indeed his performance falls through: the 'host' demands a good mental health, but this disastrous dinner scene shows that Gary's behavior demonstrates the opposite.

To clean up the (literally) bloody mess, Gary goes to the kitchen for a bucket and mop, but stops by the liquor cabinet. About to pour himself a fourth martini, he spots Caleb's camera over the top of the cabinet door. Earlier in the chapter, Caleb asks permission from his father to put a camera in the house: "”It's my new hobby," Caleb said. "I want to put a room under surveillance. Mom says I can do the kitchen if it's OK with you”" (153). Caleb reveals that the new hobby is actually Caroline's idea, and even more so, it is her idea to place it in the kitchen. Obviously, Caroline's agenda is to monitor her husband. After countless attempts to confront Gary with his clinical depression, Caroline figures that the camera will "catch" his disease like in a spider's web.

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[10] See page 30 in chapter 1: "Hopeless Emptiness" revealing what lies beneath the surface of the "performance of normal."

When Gary notices Caleb's camera, he returns the bottle to the cabinet as discretely as possible, and communicates through body language to the camera that Caleb must turn it off: "He therefore shook his head again and made a sweeping motion with his left hand, a film director's Cut!" (230). "A film director's Cut" introduces the kitchen as a stage, whereupon its performances are recorded and monitored. Again, we may draw upon similarities to *Revolutionary Road*, as we recall from its opening scene the casting crew and director calling attention to staging a performance. In Yates' opening scene, the director puts on a theatrical play where April Wheeler plays one of its roles, but in Franzen's novel the "director" and owner of the camera is Gary's own son, or wife, if you will. The "performance of normal" belonging to the 'host,' the house, claims its territory with the camera in the kitchen: Gary must now act in a certain manner, and if he does not, the recordings on the camera will prove his failure.

In her study on the moral order of suburbs, Baumgartner discovered that the family member who suffers emotional distress may be "unable to function normally and discharge obligations in the home" also causing embarrassment to other family members (Baumgartner 31). Caroline claims that Gary does not function normally like the rest of the "emotionally health family:"

> What you don't understand, Gary, is that this is an emotionally healthy family. I am a loving and deeply involved mother. I have three intelligent, creative, and emotionally healthy children. If you think there's a problem in this house, you better take a look at yourself.
>
> (Franzen 181)

Any behavior insinuating that he has depression, including his drinking problem, will be caught by the recordings of the camera, and so in refusal, or perhaps denial, Gary is determined that his problems will not see the light of day.

However, Jonah confronts his father: “You smell like al-co-hol.” In Gary’s attempt to repudiate his son’s accusation, Jonah only repeats it with assurance: “I’m talking about the al-co-hol you drank, though” (231). The two dashes put in the word “alcohol” prompts its utterance as a “matter-of-fact” statement, and contributes to a “pop-out” effect on the page, like we saw in Yates’ novel when “old reality” pops out with a “Boo!”[11] Alcohol is clearly an issue in Gary’s life, and the way he tries to hide it from the rest of his family is, according to himself, a “Warning Sign of depression” (154). There seems to be a pattern here: the two characters who are said to have depression are Gary and his father. Alfred retreats to his chair to escape from the claustrophobia of family togetherness, to a space where he and his diseases are left to privacy. In the same way, Gary goes to the liquor cabinet to escape from his mental problems and from claustrophobia, feeding his depression with “al-co-hol.” It seems, then, that there is a shared way of dealing with the pressures from the “performance of normal,” and that escaping is their way of performing resistance.

Caleb’s camera of surveillance in the kitchen functions as an imposer on Gary’s escape, putting into effect the ultimate claustrophobia. Consequently, Gary has no other choice but to give in to the staging of the “performance of normal: “’I surrender,’” Gary said” (234). This confession comes at the end of the chapter when Gary admits to Caroline that he is “extremely depressed” and something peculiar happens in the moment he surrenders: “Weeks of

[11] In the opening excerpt at page 16 in chapter 1, Frank Wheeler depicts reality and truth as an abrupt disturbance on the suburban ideal, popping out with a “Boo!” Frank says that this “Boo” is most often ignored in the preoccupation with busyness.

accumulated tension were draining from the room" (234). Their marriage seems to adjust accordingly as the relief of tension leads Gary and Caroline to engage in sexual intercourse for the first time in a while. More than just a relief of conflict between husband and wife, it is a relief of tension between Gary's refusal and Caroline's insistence on conformity. In admitting his depression out loud to his wife, there is an implied expectation that the next step is to get professional help in order to become "normal" and eventually what the 'host' demands: an "emotionally healthy family."

The final part of this thesis will rest on a conclusion that looks to the interrelationship between mental health and the suburban ideal. It will explore how the notion of "buying mental health" is portrayed as the ultimate "performance of normal."

Conclusion

In their essay "Reading the House: A Literary Perspective," Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti iterate Carsten and Hugh-Jones' observation on the house's interaction with the human body in literary representation as follows:

> House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. (841-42)

The passage addresses some of this thesis' main aspects. The exteriority of the suburban home, the furnishings of its interior design, its social conventions acquainted by the suburban ideal, and mental images as ways of reading the house, are all components in a broader picture of what this thesis has intended to encapsulate. The two primary works, the theoretical framework of site-specific performance, as well as the outline of the suburban home in literary tradition, all corroborate a recurrent thematic aspect concerning the interplay between house, body and mind, echoed in the line "consciousness was to brain as family was to house" (Franzen 267) from the opening passage in the introduction. The two primary works provide a similar way of critiquing the suburban ideal, portrayed as a prison and "house of correction." Their critiques are most absolute in the representation of the 'host' unmodified, meaning the unmodified continuance of the "performance of normal" in literature. In turn, this probes the inevitable question: what does their strikingly similar critique, despite the forty-year gap between their publications, reveal about the suburban ideal? In the latter part of this thesis' conclusion we shall see how a corresponding ideal to the "performance of normal" reverberates in our contemporary society in

a pattern of continuance. The first part of the conclusion explores the inner layer of the self as portrayed in the novels in relation to performance and consumer culture.

Buying Good Mental Health

The 2002 BBC documentary *The Century of the Self,* directed and written by Adam Curtis, provides an overview of how political power since the start of the twentieth century has exploited consumer commodities in order to control and manipulate the masses. Rebellion against consumer society was recognizable in the wave of individuals who sought to be freed from social control. The third episode of the documentary, "There is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads: He Must Be Destroyed," shows a wide range of methods in the field of psychoanalysis encouraging the individual to observe the self like an onion in the peeling off of layers to get to the inner core. The idea was that behind these layers, the discovery of simply emptiness and nothingness granted detachment from social control and paved the way to reinvent oneself (Curtis 2002).

The notion of peeling back layers to get to the inner core of the self is found in previous discussions of this thesis: in *The Corrections*, emptiness is unveiled most distinctively in Chipper's encounter with *Dasein* in a mood of boredom. In *Revolutionary Road* we identified a "Hopeless Emptiness" revealed as what Svendsen refers to as the "disease" of boredom. We also located an "energizing boredom" leading to momentum, and it is this particular momentum explicating a reinvention of the self that is echoed as point of attention in the BBC documentary, and the "feeling that something new about the self will emerge" (Brissett and Snow 240). *The Century of the Self* shows how consumer companies and political corporations nevertheless saw such a momentum as an opportunity to create and merchandise commodities that fitted these

individuals' new reinvented selves. In this way, citizens were, and still are, manipulated to exploitation by consumerist culture. In its second chapter centered on Chip's life, *The Corrections* gives a voice to such manipulation and exploitation in a factual and objective portrayal of consumer mentality, articulated by Chip as follows:

> A lack of desire to spend money becomes a symptom of disease that requires expensive medication. Which medication then destroys the libido, in other words destroys the appetite for the one pleasure in life that's free, which means the person has to spend even *more* money on compensatory pleasures. The very definition of mental 'health' is the ability to participate in the consumer economy. When you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying.
>
> (Franzen 31)

Here, Chip describes consumer economy in form of a ceaseless circle of manipulation upon an agenda of reaping a harvest of money from consumers. Most vital for us to note, however, is the remark on mental health as precisely the participation in such a circle of manipulative consumer culture. The "symptom of disease," Chip says, is the lack of participation and the lack of desire to spend money, in turn requiring expensive medication. In other words, if one does not play along with the "rules" of its game one becomes an outsider and diagnosed as mentally ill. By contrast, one is safe and sound, and more importantly, mentally stable, if one conforms to such participation. Chip implies that consumer economy's best card to play by is such diagnosis of mental disorder since it incites a "need" for therapy, a cruel manner of exploitation to make money and secure the loyalty of the consumer. In a way, in his depiction of it as a poisonous trap, Chip claims the circle of consumer mentality as a diagnosis in itself.

The closing line in Chip's statement, the notion of "buying" into therapy and buying mental health, invites us to draw a parallel to *Revolutionary Road* and Frank's conviction that April's "emotional difficulty" may be resolved by a psychoanalyst:

> He was richer by three thousand a year after shaking Pollock's thick hand that morning – a sound, satisfactory amount that would provide, among other things, a comfortable fund against which to draw for the costs of obstetrics and psychoanalysis.
>
> (Yates 264)

Frank describes the "satisfactory amount" not merely as a fund, but a comfortable one, falling into an alignment with the suburban ideal's promises of a comfortable and prosperous lifestyle. April, on the other hand, states that she will be more "comfortable alone" (264). The context here is that she is more comfortable sleeping alone than in a bed with her husband, yet it still is interesting that the character who is marked as mentally ill by her own husband, is the one who claims her own comfortableness, not in togetherness but in isolation and withdrawal. Frank suggests that April's emotional difficulty concerning motherhood and the abortion is rooted in a "denial of womanhood" that he has read about somewhere "in Freud or Krafft-Ebing or one of those people" (231). It seems then, that Frank has done the very thing Chip refers to as "buying into buying," by "buying into therapy" with his comfortable fund.

Another countenance to the idea of "buying good mental health" are the so-called ASLAN pills, introduced in *The Corrections* to Enid as a "personality optimizer" (Franzen 319) with a promise of making you "more flexible, more confident, happier with yourself" (320).[12]

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[12] Implied in the name ASLAN is of course the well known figure in C.S. Lewis' fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia,* where Aslan appears as a lion representing a Christ-like figure. Thereupon we may draw the lines between these "happy pills" in *The Corrections* taking on the role as a savior capable of wiping out all sin and error from one's life. On this note are countless

The most excessive form of "buying into therapy" appearing in Franzen's novel is arguably "the Corecktall process." It is defined as a "revolutionary neurobiological therapy" (187) that Denise and Gary get informed by and attend a meeting to know more about. Denise is optimistic while Gary is skeptical as to whether this is relevant for their sick father. It is an experimental program which claims to be not only therapeutic, but also a *cure* for neurological and psychiatric disorders, like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and depression (187). New on the medical marked and dependent on investors and millions of dollars, "Corecktall" is presented as a product one may purchase, agreeing with the idea of "buying" good mental health. Implied in the name "Corecktall" is a "correction" to get "normal" and an even bolder suggestion, a "Correct*ALL,*" that we may interpret as a correction of all 'ghosts' that offer resistance to normality.

Being a neurobiological therapy, "the Corecktall process" concerns first and foremost the brain, bringing about a kind of violent invasion into the psyche. Such invasion is fortified by Chip's friend Doug who reiterates to Chip some rather absurd ideas of a "powerful new technology:" "Say somebody offered you a new personality: would you take it? Say somebody said to you, *I will permanently rewire your mental hardware in whatever way you want.* Would you pay to have that done?" (Franzen 96). In the following descriptions of the "powerful new technology's" utility, the spatial dimensions of the brain resemble a house: "The brain's cleaned up every night when you get home from work, and nobody can bother you on the weekend…" and furthermore it is like "a kitchen that's roomier and handier" and "a big family room with an entertainment console" (97). The remark of the "family room" (mentioned in the introduction of

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aspects that would be interesting to explore, but since it is beyond the scope of this conclusion, we shall leave it to speculations in this footnote.

this thesis) informs us that this type of blueprint of spatial dimensions of a house applied to the brain resembles that of the prototype suburban home.

I want us here to recall Emily Dickinson's architectural vocabulary from the previous chapter, depicting corridors of the brain as limitless in dimension: "The Brain has Corridors – surpassing Material Place."[13] In comparison, the spatial measurements of the "powerful new technology" of the mental hardware depicted by Doug are confined to the exact proportions of the suburban home. In the introduction, we saw that in the symmetric and correct exterior design of the suburban home lies an expectation of a corresponding harmony and correctness in the lives of its residents. In the example from the passage above, we see explicitly the way the suburban ideal incorporates itself into every layer of the exterior to the interior. The aesthetic idiom of the suburban ideal is in this case transmitted onto the brain.

Of relevancy here is to repeat, from the introduction, Bronner's comments on the physical structure of the suburban house affecting "the perception, clarification, and alteration of one's psychological, social, and physical worlds" (Bronner 64). *Revolutionary Road* demonstrates the impact described here, of the aesthetic and social principles of the suburban ideal in the home. The characters' physical worlds are adjusted accordingly to the ideal demonstrated in Frank's need to "prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health" (51) by means of settling down in a nice house, establishing a family and working in a well-paid job, as these amount to "the next logical step" (51). The social aspects of their lives are also in alignment with the "recipe" of the ideal, as we have seen through concrete examples in our analyses of the staging of the perfect breakfast in the kitchen and evenings of socializing with neighbors in the living room. However, in the psychological worlds of Frank

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[13] See page 45 to read the rest of the poem.

and April there lies an awareness of the ideal's "game," described by April as "the great sentimental lie of the suburbs" (Yates 112) and by Frank as "a state of total self-deception" (66). *Revolutionary Road* thus demonstrates Bronner's statement quite clearly through its literary presentation.

In *The Corrections,* the suburban ideal does more than merely affect its characters on a physical, social and psychological level: it moreover demonstrates an invasion and infiltration into the psychological through the example of the "Corecktall" as well as the mental hardware. Surely, we must keep in mind that the latter is merely a hypothetical question and not something that actually happens in the novel, but it does reveal an implicit critique of the suburban ideal. The novel shows that the ideal that wants to "live" in the suburban home also wants to "live" in the brain. In this way, the brain becomes susceptible to it, but more importantly, a tool for the ideal's ultimate correction.

Before proceeding on to the final part of this conclusion, I want to draw attention to a relevant and important point in Brissett and Snow's article on boredom – namely the assertion that compensation and avoidance of boredom is utilized as a shield against self confrontation, as well as to eschew the "challenge of personal and social metamorphosis" (Brissett and Snow 241). In chapter two we saw how self-confrontation in a mood of boredom ensued an encounter with *Dasein*, bringing about the modification of the table, and Chipper's confrontation with "the smell of self" in this type of encounter. As earlier mentioned in relation to *The Century of Self,* the wave of "self-actualizers" was engaged with the idea of confronting the self in order to foster a kind of metamorphosis, leading to liberation from social control. The discussion in this thesis shows that the representation of the suburban ideal in Yates' and Franzen's novels does not welcome change or modification of its stage in the suburban home – this would be a threat to its

subsistence. This is one of the reasons why consumerism is so embedded within the suburban ideal: a consumer mentality is utilized to avoid boredom, thus avoiding a confrontation with the self. The cycle functions as a hamstring to metamorphosis, deterring the self from being freed from the social "rules" of the suburban ideal. Such insistence on conformity in the suburban home operates as a kind of imprisonment, reflected in Chip's description of being captive in a consumerist mentality of "buying into buying" but never offering a way out of it.

Expanding Out: Tracing the "Performance of Normal" in Contemporary Society

The reason why I chose to write my thesis about the suburban ideal and its "performance of normal" is largely due to the ideal's relevancy as a metaphor associated with a façade culture in our contemporary society. The notion of "having it all together" on the surface gives an impression of the same order existing underneath the superficial. The increasing pressure to meet high-scale expectations shows great consequences, some of which are quite disturbing. In Norway today, young people are, to a much larger degree than earlier, diagnosed with mental disorders, two of the most current ones are depression and anxiety. Whether it is a coincidence that this increase develops in a pace concurrent with the rise of social media may be speculated upon, but is a point worth reflecting on. Social media has opened up a whole new level of the "performance of normal," where individuals present their identities in various platforms on the internet, among the most utilized and popular are Facebook, blogs, Instagram and twitter. Such mediums offer an arena where the individual selects the best photographs, shares personal information as well as more general interests. We can undoubtedly assert that social media is a form of representation and a way of constructing and staging an identity on the internet.

I have been told that it is not unusual for young Norwegian teenagers to operate with two distinctive accounts on Instagram, one open for all people where he or she presents "their best self," and the other account accessible only to his or her closest group of friends where they post pictures that portray the unedited and unfiltered side of oneself. Since these teenagers can pick and choose what to put on display, they technically are their own authoritative director, and social media offer platforms where these identities may be performed. There is a shared tendency among consumers of social media of all ages to present "their best selves," and we may consequently trace the "performance of normal" from this thesis' literary discussions, developing into an ideal of a "performance of perfect" and even a "perfect self" in our own contemporary society. Interestingly, we find a celebration of the "perfect self" in *Revolutionary Road*, when April is talking about people she refers to as "marvelous golden people:"

> People who knew everything instinctively, who made their lives work out the way they wanted without ever trying, who never had to make the best of a bad job because it never occurred to them to do anything less than perfectly the first time. Sort of heroic super-people, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind, and I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I belonged among them…
>
> (Yates 258)

The ideal of such "heroic super-people" long predates the era of social media, and reflects a cogent desire to be a "super-human." More importantly, April's reflections reveal a longing for fellowship in the line "I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I belonged among them…" A desire for fellowship can also easily be traced in our contemporary society in the medium of social media, its function chiefly a platform of performance and

construction of identity, but also one of communication reflecting a form of community, or perhaps more accurately, a staged community.

In turn, this proposes social media as a functional site in the discursive model, with the "performance of perfect" as the ideal that wants to rule its platform. Social media meets the criteria of a functional site in its operation as a medium not determined by physical proportions, but by its content, existing as a field of knowledge and cultural exchange primarily by means of communication and representation. Observing social media as a functional site helps us to recognize similarities with the suburban ideal of literary presentation, one such similarity being the "performance of normal" operating as a management of behavior, and exercising control by means of its insistence on conformity. Consumers of social media adjust their (multiple) identities in accordance with an overarching ideal, a response to an invisible but clearly existing, implement of control.

The "performance of perfect" meets its counterpart on social media, principally on the blogosphere. The majority of blogs with the greatest number of daily readers most typically fit into categories of fashion, beauty, health and food, but the blogosphere also offers personal blogs written like diaries. In his book *Gi meg en Scene!,* Kristian A. Bjørkelo writes about the first era of blogging in Norway, and he asserts that psychiatry has promoted a forceful voice in the blogosphere since its beginnings. These personal blogs have rendered visible mental disorders, especially depression, bipolar and eating disorders (Bjørkelo 238-39). Often written in the name of a pseudonym, their writers dedicate their blogs to what Bjørkelo argues is "staging oneself as the mental or emotionally sick, to give the suffering one a face and a name, even if not a real

name" (241).[14] In making visible some of the "Hopeless Emptiness's" in contemporary society, this name and face raises awareness to the 'ghosts' and voices that were attempted silenced by the 'host' in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Corrections*. These pseudonyms and blogs offer a way of "performing the inner layer of the self," where they themselves draw the lines between sickness and health (Bjørkelo 241) and in this way diagnose themselves.

However, the blogs and pseudonyms operate upon the premises of a performance platform in social media, and in this way participate and contribute to the same performance that explicates the "performance of perfect." Bjørkelo claims that a pseudonym online offers the possibility to obtain a new name and identity freed from social and physical decrees (262), which brings us back to *The Century of the Self.* The wave of "self-actualizers" who embraced methods of psychoanalysis to gain liberation from social and political control prominent in society, were, as already mentioned in the beginning of this conclusion, taken advantage of by consumer companies and political corporations who saw these new reinvented selves as their gold mine. In this way, the wave of "self-actualizers" remained in the cycle they originally attempted to be freed from. In a similar way, the new self-created identities and pseudonyms online claiming freedom from social control operate as consumers of social media and remain in its medium.

In an article from the Norwegian newspaper *VG*, Siri Eggen writes that the increasing amount of time and energy spent on maintaining a façade of a perfect life, both on social media as well as in actual daily life, occurs at the expenses of building strong and good relationships between family members. The article cites psychiatrist and therapist Frode Thuen arguing that it has become less important for the average Norwegian to spend time building an identity as a

[14] The book has not yet been translated into English, so I have translated this myself. The Norwegian original reads as follows: "iscenesette seg sjølv som den psykisk sjuke, for å gje den lidande eit andlet og eit namn, om enn ikkje eit ekte namn" (Bjørkelo 241).

family unit, and traditional values of family togetherness and happiness come second to the individual self appearing successful. Although there is undoubtedly a definite critique of the ideal of family togetherness in *The Corrections*, the novel also shows the opposite, demonstrated in the final chapter when Enid chooses family togetherness over ASLAN pills, the already mentioned "personality optimizer:"

> "I want the real thing or I don't want anything." With her right hand Enid herded the pills into her left hand. She dumped them into the garbage grinder, turned on water, and ground them up. "What's the real thing?" Denise said when the noise subsided. "I want us all together for one last Christmas."
>
> (Franzen 526-27)

The novel here problematizes its own critique, and in a way contradicts it, because it explicitly says that the real thing is togetherness and puts it in juxtaposition to individual happiness. A little later though, in the final scene around the table on Christmas morning, Alfred falls off his chair in the loss of control over his body, and along with him, his plate, coffee cup and place mat plunge to the floor, and the staging of family togetherness fails yet again.

In the reinforcement of a "performance of normal" on social media in contemporary society, there is also an implied "CorrecktALL." On Instagram, an edited "selfie" is an artificial picture of reality, its program offering correction of "errors" in the choice of multiple filters and adjustments of light, all available for the consumer to promote the "perfect self." Although this kind of "CorrecktALL" merely touches the surface on Instagram, the correction of one's exterior appearance starts nonetheless in the consumer's perception of what kind of identity is worthy and desirable to promote to the outside world. Recalling the suburban home portrayed as a prison in literary presentation, we may trace a similar kind of imprisonment in social media. This

imprisonment is one of performance, and moreover, a correction of it, its imperative being the "performance of perfect." The act of posting a photo, a tweet, a Facebook status or a blogpost, crave attention, but is most of all a communicative act reflecting a longing for a fellowship. Several people I have talked to over the past year have told me that they want to cut off the connection with social media due to its pressure to perform and maintain a façade. However, they say they feel obliged to participate in its platform, most of all for fear of being excluded form a community that expands globally.

In bringing this thesis to a final end, I conclude with the argument that the suburban ideal and its "performance of normal" persist in other venues than the suburban home represented in American literature. Its countenance ventures a "performance of perfect" that lives as a functional site globally on the internet by means of a cultural and communicative exchange, only a keystroke away. The rapid production and popularity of smart phones and developing technologies that make available social media for the individual consumer, supports what Brissett and Snow call a "fast-paced service/consumer temporal ecology" (Brissett and Snow 245) where people are "obsessed with speed," evident in the growing tendency to multitask. Let me illustrate with an example, a consequence of the rapid evolvement and participation in social media: only ten-fifteen years ago, the most natural approach to interact with friends or acquaintances was to walk over to their house and physically knock on their door. In contemporary society today, however, people would almost jump in their sofa cushions in bewilderment if their doorbells rang unnoticed one regular afternoon. The discursive site consequently calls for an urgent seriousness, its community of social media lacking the concrete and physical interaction that throughout history has been a necessity in relationships.

Perhaps even more alarming is the failure to create an authentic counterpart to the "performance of perfect" on social media. The blogs, Instagram and Facebook accounts that attempt to make visible the less attractive sides of life, participate in the very same medium and circle of consumerism as their antagonists. The outside is then already a part of the performance medium, and hence, there is no outside to refer to. Being inside its medium, the consumer has to conform to its performance - to that of the "perfect" or the "imperfect," either way, they are performing. To echo the words of Chip Lambert's punchline, "when you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying," we may alter a few of its words but keep its meaning and leave this conclusion with the following argument: "When you perform on social media, you're buying into performance," and it does not offer a way out.

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