The current state of myths about single-family housing

The peri-urban dweller taken as a "character"

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This article is written in connection with research into peri-urban forms and territorial government of emerging spaces[1] and must be situated in an exploratory context. It does not therefore report on the results of research that has been completed; it discusses the problems thereof with a specific angle, which can be summed up as follows: peri-urban areas are often considered as devoid of substance (between town and country), and marked by a lack of imageability. Yet they are punctuated with and codified by a set of signs which must be taken seriously as they reflect capacities and values for their inhabitants. Do peri-urban areas structure an imaginary world and if so, how can it be described? This question ties in which the one raised by Michel Lussault about the figurative crisis of contemporary urban areas (Lussault, 2007, chapter 6).

Back to the future?

In the 1960s and '70s, several sociological works concentrated on peri-urban and single-family housing productions. They took a particularly critical stance, indeed characteristic of a period in French urban sociology, but also reflecting paradigms which have now mostly been abandoned. Each in their own way, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Roland Barthes, decoded myths of individuality and their effects in space. In no particular order, we can cite "the socio-ideological system of objects and consumption"; an analysis of the new peasantry in Debord, very much produced by urban planning that destroys historical towns to re-build a pseudo-countryside[2]; and Roland Barthes's analysis of myths. These authors lived in the centre of Paris; they more or less implicitly valued dense and varied space; and they were far removed from what they structurally analysed. Yet, when read again today, such analyses are often still very true, even if only by their contribution to the analysis of different orders since urban areas cannot be

limited to a 'system of supply', an analogy rapidly drawn with the market and the logic of mass distribution[3]. If peri-urban areas are produced by the practices and representations of those who live in them, they also (and maybe more than ever) form a market produced by an order the themes and schemes of which must be identified. It is then important to examine both the coincidences and gaps between these two inseparable fields of production. Hence the significance of film and advertising, a metaphorical sphere in which to observe this convergence.

Our proposal does not however endeavour to "correct", but it is based on the conviction that the myths about single-family housing deserve to be updated. The main part of the hypothesis underpinning this updating process is based on the idea that the peri-urban model is no longer centred around an object (the house), but relates to a world and to

an environment populated with a whole array of objects to which it adds substance and coherence, the diversification of the structures of supply obviously not involving a diversification of their content (social models).

While a considerable number of works today focus on mobility and, more broadly, on the social geography of peri-urban areas, our hypothesis is that the economic producers of such areas and their strategies are, on the other hand, somewhat neglected[4]. Furthermore, certain works substantiate a questionable view of the calculating individual, maximising the significance thereof or even recalling the importance of a (socio-economic) context, but with which individuals cope within a "chosen town". In this respect, it is interesting to re-read *"les pavillonnaires, étude psychosociologique d'un mode d'habitat"* or *"l'habitat pavillonnaire"*, both published in 1966[5], to realise that the attention paid to uses and appropriations was in no way advocating a theoretical model based on a conception of the all-powerful individual: Henri Lefebvre's preface in the second work mentioned proves this well, highlighting the double quality of a form of rehabilitation of single-family housing and of a fundamental criticism of its ideology.

On this level, the works written by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s were decisive in bringing up-to-date the close connections between individualism – the major ideological undercurrent of capitalism – and the social structures of the economy, being established at the time through property development. Admittedly, the contemporary injunction to "own a home" was nothing new and was part of a capitalistic tradition that can, without hesitation, be linked back to the words of Lamartine "enrichissez-vous !" ('get rich!'), promoting a model of a self-sufficient individual who achieves fulfilment by owning his home. But the sociologist did not content himself, like many of his epigones, with criticising individualism per se, or the economic sphere as being a cynical and Machiavellian monster; he endeavoured to bring out the subconscious and incorporated structures of influence through which dreams and illusions of individual happiness were emerging together with their social effects, deconstructing, more than the arrangements, the coincident schemes of housing aid distributed by the government and the profits of which were cleverly distributed, thus guaranteeing the reproduction of the illusion of individual freedom. To him, the identification of these schemes was only justified in that it brought to light the various dominations that lay within the rhetoric of sublimation disseminated in specific places of production and action such as the Home Show.

What has today become of this deconstruction of the single-family housing myth? Is it now "outdated"? The system of single-family housing production does not really seem to have changed, as several recent works dedicated to these issues show[6]. Changes have occurred though in terms of spatial reality, and consequently in models of society. Bourdieu had greatly anticipated the highly political

dimension of the economic system, the connection between *housing model* and *living pattern*, underlining how individuals, through their ability to be "spatial agents", simultaneously contributed to producing a new model of society[7]. His approach deserves to be examined in the light of current peri-urban realities by, like him, taking an interest in advertising, a major vehicle of the spirit of capitalism and of the way behaviour and ideas are formatted. Exactly how do current images give the roots of the myth renewed life? Before addressing this question more precisely, we will characterize the cognitive issues that legitimize such an undertaking. How exactly does the deconstruction of the imaginative worlds conveyed by visual productions (film, advertisements) help us to understand contemporary logics of urban fabric?

The first issue is above all *ethical* and *political*; in this sense, it is true to the spirit of revelation (or manifestation) of the influences dear to Bourdieu. In the rhetoric, the agents of the promotion henceforth include the inhabitants' expectations, not by any sudden philanthropy, but as part of a pragmatic process to adjust to the new forms of market competition. The ideal of control by the individual is very present (see below) but the rapid explosion of the number of indebted households in France in recent years proves the contrary (between 1995 and 2002, the number of files presented to the debt committee doubled and increased by 30% between 2002 and 2004): the myths about single-family housing exert more and more pressure as a sublimated model, a model of conformity, on households that are less and less able to cope with the financial implications.

The idea is not therefore to take a semiological approach just for the sake of it. The identification of imaginative worlds done namely by geographers of the humanist movement (A. Frémont, H. Gumuchian, etc.) resulted in a certain preclusion of the semiological approach: areas that are valued, rejected, imagined, or dreamed of, are only taken in themselves and for themselves, and do not necessarily bring out factors useful to understand current urban logics. In a word, it is neither realistic naivety (direct understanding through images and processes affecting peri-urban areas) nor aesthetics of the deconstruction.

An identification and analysis of spatial myths cannot, to our minds, be separated from the movements that shape

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4. M-C Jaillet's PHD on detached house builders dates back to 1981!

5. Cf. our bibliographic synthesis on the theme of "peri-urban structuring" to be published in 2007.

6. Cf. Antoine Gicquel's PHD on the single-family housing system.

7. And peri-urban inhabitants are often found in the "double bind": on the one hand their choice is confirmed in the model of individual property (cf. the house at 100,000 euros, for example), and on the other, they are branded for this "choice" which spoils the environment and which is sometimes interpreted as a form of separatism, of democratic deficiency.

the areas of the peri-urban condition, from the way they are structured by individuals and all the other parties involved. From a pragmatic point of view, the sublimated image of life in a single-family house does not say much about the reality of peri-urban areas. However, what it does tell us is that, like a measure included in a practice such as a loan or a building material, it plays the same role as the human or non-human agents identified by Bruno Latour. These myths are truly performative, not because they have any intrinsic force, but because they are part of those systems that "make the world progress" and, in doing so, produce it (performance).

Let us reformulate our hypothesis: the individualistic production of space is inconceivable without imaginative workings, in the same way as the status of global energy resources or the steel market. This explains the determination of the advertising sphere described by Dominique Quessada (1996) to constantly revive and renew the rhetoric, the content, rather than concrete objects[8]. An analysis of the myths thus becomes as least as legitimate as the analysis of the actual practices (mobility, movements) or the lives of its inhabitants. It can thus be examined entirely in its generic dimension (in the same way as a generic drug: less expensive than a branded drug from a specific producer). And this ties in with R. Barthes' point of how one must be positioning in relation to the message itself: "one must adopt an immanent position in relation to the object to be studied. All observation relating to the emission or reception of the message must thus be voluntarily abandoned (…)" (Barthes R., 1985, p. 243).

Various fields of investigation thus emerge, like the fields 'surveyed' by the semiologist: all advertising material (posters, brochures, TV videos and Flash videos broadcast on the Web), films and even TV series through their latent allusions. Attention has been paid in this area in order to examine various productions that make the peri-urban world visible.

The material builds up beyond the questions of cinematographic or artistic quality; it is above all important to us to identify a peri-urban world like a sort of character, to then be able to update all of its implications. To us, it is vital to consider an "extended" corpus that does not strictly focus on property development, since the peri-urban world is present in other types of commercial products such as the Internet, cars, etc.

This article does not aim to be representative, but expressive (hence the 'incursions' and 'probing', rather than a corpus which, for once, would be a production used subsequently in the research). The productions chosen are those which seem to be the most relevant by the visibility they give to the peri-urban world, as a medium for the story, a source, and not simply a setting (see below). What is shown is what can "make sense", reflect family spheres but also contribute, in doing so, to making them familiar, from certain angles and not others.

Imageability: on, by, or in the peri-urban world? The off-camera context in advertising and film

Works which have focused on advertising for example, have focused exclusively and obviously on the single-family and detached house. They have thus helped to reproduce a pattern of reducing the peri-urban area, and the way it is staged, to only one of its objects. Thus, an analysis of advertisements rarely leads to looking beyond or even inside the home. But, is peri-urban production limited to «the house», is the inhabited space limited to the housing? Or isn't this focus more precisely the demonstration of a change occurring in the way the peri-urban world is conveyed in pictures, a world that is acquiring a veritable status in all sorts of advertising strategies and not solely in that of property development? This hypothesis is all the more interesting to put to the test since it was tested in work done on the staging of interior space (Dumont, Madoeuf, 2006) and which namely revealed a reorientation in the sale of objects (tables, chairs, accessories) toward the sale of atmospheres (a house in Normandy, Christmas in the country). The hypothesis of a renewal in the imageability of the peri-urban world as a preferred place for individual production of space is convergent; furthermore, it confirms the idea that peri-urban areas are henceforth acquiring a status in their own right and becoming a true mythical world. This question brings us round to the problem of targeting the objects of investigation and the answer leads to distinguishing three major fields of investigation which are different yet in some ways connected.

– That of the *peri-urban area seen through its objects*, including its main one, the house. The advertisements and films in question thus focus *on the peri-urban area*. In this first group, the single-family house is mainly approached by objects, and the spectrum ranges from adverts for detached houses, via property in general, to head towards the world of kit production (DIY and accessory stores such as Leroy Merlin, Bricomat and Castorama). Building loans fall into this category and we are well aware, moreover, that all of the producers mentioned here do not limit themselves to single-family houses, which are only a single component in their range of products. Other objects, which are just are individualised, emerge: gardens, gnomes, neighbours, fences, etc. sometimes with spin-off effects such as adverts for lawn-mowers (peri-urban objects *par excellence*, since city-dwellers do not buy lawnmowers), tied in with the idea of the car ("open-top lawnmower" by Wolf!). In films, productions that specifically target the peri-urban context are few and far between and tend to sway towards the second function identified (see below) as in the film *Edward*

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8. Quessada shows for example, that dairy products have only changed very little in recent years, but that the ways of describing, staging and sublimating them have multiplied exponentially.

Scissorhands (Tim Burton, 1990) or *The Northerners* (Alex Van Warmerdam, 1995).

– That of the *peri-urban area as a character,* in the way that Paul Ricoeur or Fernand Braudel talked of quasi-character, which leads more to the stories, chronicles, fictions, dramas or anecdotes essentially made possible *by the peri-urban area*. In this case, research identifies a specifically peri-urban world which is an actor in its own right rather than simply the setting. The peri-urban context makes a decisive contribution to the advertisement, with all the features that are thus made specific to it, as conditions of possibility. In films, a very clear alternation can be seen, as shown in the examples below, between a context of possibility specific to sublimation (portrayal of social lifestyles, social models, ideal and idealised models) and, conversely, one of dereliction (horror films, pre-suicidal or depressive anxiety). In advertising, the range encompasses productions which 'take place in' peri-urban areas, structured around the individual; as a system of identification, advertisements excel in the way they convey peri-urban informity and standardisation, like the poster created by Publicis for the GPS systems fitted into Renault cars which, in a series of identical villages, actually find *THE* house being looked for. The peri-urban area is no longer a backdrop but 'classifies', by a major characteristic, -its loss of reference points (no streets, no symbolic features)-, the individual which carries it. This is similar to the canvas-covered cars used in the advertising campaign of Transilien SNCF in which the railway company once again played on the banality of villages ("Cancoun", "Nouillorc", etc.). This advert develops the idea of an insignificant symbolism of the peri-urban world compared to major cities. In this case, the description of these advertisements leads to working on the imageability, on what an "image" is in the representation that TV commercials set out to convey of the peri-urban world and life in housing estates. Several focuses can be identified: lack of fences, freedom, relationships between neighbours, etc. Some advertisements thus lend themselves to peri-urban contexts whereas others do not at all (home-delivered pizzas for instance). The growing presence of peri-urban areas in adverts for cars is also worth noting (Citroën, Peugeot).

This level must be completed by the used of peri-urban environments out of context. This function ties in with the two previous ones; the objects featured in it are not specifically peri-urban -plants, high data-rate Internet connections, breakfast products-, but they portray a sequence of the peri-urban story. This is particularly the case of the TV commercial for BNP Paribas bank which subverts the old German urban legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and replaces it with a peri-urban village. The allusion is extremely unrefined: the car driving through the peri-urban area with a loudspeaker inviting people to immediately go to the BNP branch replaces the rats in the tale with the inhabitants of the housing estate! The clichés unfold, with

the entire peri-urban world "speaking" for itself about an object which bears no relation to it, apart from offering… consumer loans. The schematic discourse (housing estate, children playing in the street, home-owner watering the garden, etc.) is played out to its full, with the commercial ending on a car that wakes up too late and is lost in the estate at night!

A very similar type of reasoning can be found in the advertisement for the Internet provider AOL and once again, there is no doubt reason to see a fortuitous circumstance: the car, the Internet as the links to the urban world. An elderly neighbour sourly looks on as a cheerful young executive sets off for work in the city in her car. Through her eyes, all the clichés of the peri-urban world are reviewed: watering the garden, appalling relationships between neighbours, car-parking, young children, bicycles, tranquillity and absence of fences, a small dog. The entire advert is structured around "life in the neighbourhood" which settles down again thanks to the AOL Box; a dog, the representative of the peri-urban world *par excellence*, talks about the human beings. Life in the neighbourhood is disturbed by children, but fortunately, there's the AOL box! And again it's the (peri-urban!) dog that talks about a world split in two: those who are bored with life in suburbia and those who are "captivated" because they can now spend their time surfing the Web. And here, the advert deploys its off-camera context with scathing irony: the dreariness of individualised peri-urban life in which the only alternative available is a PC connected 24/7 to the Internet[9]. Dependency is proposed to counter the overwhelming boredom, like the one caustically described by another film, by Pierre-Paul Renders, *Thomas est amoureux* (2001), the story of a young agoraphobic who lives solely in the virtual world, shut up inside his home. Another advertisement, created by Havas Advertising for the Peugeot PSA group (307), takes up the same themes, line for line: the jealous faces of neighbours spying over their hedges, children playing carefree out in the street of the housing estate…

This link between the Internet and the peri-urban environment is, it can be noted, highly present in films about peri-urban areas and individual peri-urban life. Once again, the link between the two registers can therefore be established through objects such as those of banks, insurance and cars, which immediately refer to objects of value. Many adverts underline that the 'place to show off your car' is now located in housing estates where everyone knows and sees everything. A substantial similarity can be seen between the AOL advertisements mentioned and the film *Edward Scissorhands*.

– Lastly, the register of films and advertising material

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9. This also echoes the pseudo concept of "rentring" developed by a mobile telephony operator and Internet provider encouraging people to open up to the world once they are at home …

In top: *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). Beneath : *Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990)

in the peri-urban area can be mentioned, although it is somewhat outside the scope of our analysis. This is an independent field that would appear to have little connection with the previous two. It reflects the strategies of locating advertising devices, and the major differences of such devices and their uses, particularly with those used in the hyper-urban environment. As an example, it can be noted that bus shelters are often more rundown, and that the advert turnover rate is fairly low. The peri-urban world is also the one in which the standard 4x3 billboard reigns, with much less well-designed materials (old metal structures, location on former farm buildings). For its part, *film in the*

peri-urban world reflects the growing presence of multiplexes. Yet, a relationship with the imageability of the peri-urban world does exist: the theme of the deserted multiplex can be found in several film productions, harking back to tensions between suburban and peri-urban areas more than between urban and suburban. This line of tension and of domination is found in the very content of advertisements and in the strategies of billposting companies: bus-shelter posters display numerous offers in a peri-urban context which relate directly to suburban sectors (shopping centres, Quick, MacDonald's, Casino cafeterias, etc.); these networks are deserted by large groups which opt exclusively

Dog Days, (Ulrich Seidl, 2002)

Dog Days, (Ulrich Seidl, 2002)

for hyper-urban areas to publicise Coca-Cola or women's lingerie.

Qualification of a character: themes as angles of analysis

Here, we will further examine the second line of investigation, and look at how story lines and plots are linked and even made possible by the peri-urban world. Without claiming to be exhaustive or representative, a few themes show how the peri-urban character has changed, and how it complicates the ideology of single-family housing of forty or so years ago… Complication, nonetheless, does not mean radical change, far from it: when, in the early 1970s, Phénix houses were launched onto the French market, they were presented in a form which admittedly seems caricatural to us today: isolation, claustrophobia and deviance were portrayed among inhabitants of apartment blocks, whereas self-realisation, family success and happiness were conveyed among inhabitants of single-family dwelling units[10]. But are the dogmatics relative to the "human scale" or to fulfilment through home-ownership now no longer relevant?

Here, we have particularly chosen themes which reveal the role 'given' to individuals in the production, reproduction and reorientation of peri-urban areas.

Extreme fluctuation between sublimation and dereliction

The focus on dereliction is cruelly documented in Ulrich Seidl's film *Dog Days*. In peri-urban Vienna, during a scorching summer, neighbourhood watch, extreme withdrawal into oneself and into one's home and total absence of relationships are portrayed. One of the characters, a roaming young female hitchhiker, bluntly questions the

drivers about their private lives and their sex life. The spatial component of the film actively contributes to the feeling of repetition and void: shopping strips, supermarket car-parks, large houses in standardised estates, vast homes basically furnished, sound (everything echoes), etc. The American film by Sam Mendes, *American Beauty* (1999), is similar but without the same cruelty. From an overhead view (as in many films set in peri-urban areas), the camera gradually descends, once the viewer has been able to see the extensive grid of tree-lined streets and houses. The main character is also the narrator: "My name is Lester Burnam. This is my neighbourhood, this is my street. This is my life". In the street there are small, white, plastic fences, mowed lawns, a central path, and rose bushes. On the estate which is reduced to three neighbouring houses, all the relationship are 'unusual': a homosexual couple, the family consisting of the film' main characters in which the mother constantly ridicules her husband and her daughter, and the new arrivals, a father in the armed forces who has a strong-arm conception of authority and terrorises his wife and daughter. Following his well-negotiated redundancy, Lester decides to change his life, which involves him doing a menial job, buying a flashy red car, taking drugs and keeping fit to revive his sex life. During this resurrection, all the family relationships completely change. His wife, who loses her lover because her husband blackmails him, is ready to kill him. His daughter plans to leave home. But, in the end, it is the neighbour who is responsible for his death (which we know is going to happen from the beginning). Everyone puts up a front and lies to each other and to themselves about who they are (the serviceman is homosexual, the teaser is a virgin, the wife is totally disturbed).

The very same fluctuation is found in the recent cartoon re-make by Tim Johnson and Karey Kirkpatrick, *Over the*

10. Cf. the text by P. Quérel (1975) reporting on a pedagogical experiment on counter-advertising, encompassing a semiological analysis of the advertisement portraying the Dupont and Durand families beneath the title "rent or mortgage"?".

American Beauty (Sam Mendes, 1999)

Hedge (2006), a veiled reference to the film by Jonathan Kaplan (1979), and through a comparison of the Australian series *Neighbours* by Chris Adshead (1985) and the short film of the same name by McLaren (1952). The two oldest films display a suburban world -turning peri-urban- dominated by the banality and triviality of drab relationships that a silly quarrel (a simple rose cut on a hedge between the two neighbours) turns into a murderous drama[11]; their contemporary version comprises a much smoother scenario, with the same underlying theme of boredom, with depression rather than murder, and a more sour view of peri-urban life.

Ordinary versions? So far, so near…

Two French films, both recent (*Podium*, by Yann Moix, 2003, and *Je vais bien, ne t'en fais pas*, by Philippe Lioret, 2006), do not go to these extremes but present a very "common" version of this peri-urban life. Although they are different, it is interesting to refer to them together on this point.

The focus is on families (the classic model) which, although they live in a housing estate (and in a model house in *Podium*), never see any neighbours, and in fact appear to have very little social life at all. They are seen inside their house, going about everyday activities such as eating (which they do very often), falling out (although we know they love one another), DIYing, doing homework, etc. Normal life, basically. And normal life that is further relatively boring. Definitely a condition of possibility, the peri-urban world and the consistency of the inhabited areas (house, transport, and centre of Paris on the one hand; model house, shopping centres, and small villages 'in the middle of

nowhere' on the other) greatly structure the two stories in relation to this tone. Fathers are seen coming home from work, often looking worn out; comments are made about traffic jams or the heat on the train; the logistics of transport are shown through the heroine (Lili) of *Je vais bien, ne t'en fais*, who gets dropped off at the train station by her father or driven home in the evening by a friend… In fact, on this occasion, Lili's dialogue in which she describes her estate like "the Truman Show", and quotes her brother who calls it "an Indian reservation" is particularly interesting, as is the way she asks her friend if he will manage to find his way back out.

However, without giving away the plot of *Je vais bien, ne t'en fais pas*, it turns out that the family in both of these films is actually quite unusual. Be it the passion of Bernard, a look-alike of Claude François, and his determination to win the spitting image competition, or the way the Tellier family manages to get through the crisis, the resources are found in themselves. And in fact, this ultimately appears to be the whole question: managing to find happiness and to make something of this monotonous -peri-urban- life. These films portray conscious, introspective and self-critical individuals who are able to make changes and to influence their own happiness (the parents will no doubt move to the seaside once Lili has left home) even though their daily universe tends (by geographism?) to distance them from their initial dream (owning their home, have a stable job, etc.) and to confine them to a daily life they simply put up with. These films appear to appropriate the criticism of peri-urban areas (dereliction, standardisation, etc.)

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11. Reasoning of this type is found in the "novels" by Michel Houellebecq, which prove or demonstrate phenomena of the collapse of local control of sociability.

On top and in the middle: *Podium* (Yann Moix, 2003) in the bottom: *Je vais bien, ne t'en fais pas* (Philippe Lioret, 2006)

to derive new images and narratives from them. One classical aspect that can be seen is that of everyday life as a source of standardising attitudes. Another is the highly contemporary injunction of finding fulfilment as an individual (and in the peri-urban world, this would not come as a surprise).

Markers of diversity

We could willingly agree with the analysis of property development made by S. Nivet when she highlights the uniformity and similarity of the products sold[12]. Another marked source is the opening credits sequence of the series *Weeds* (broadcast in France on channel M6) which, in a rather 'trash' version of *Desperate housewives*, underlines the uniformity of practices: the same houses, the same hamburger eaters, the same SUV owners, and the same joggers, which ultimately results in drug dealing in the neighbourhood!

At the same time, the development of 'niches' and customer segmentation results in shaping products and in including possible resources for readers. Housing tends to be segmented by market sections. S. Degoutin made a good analysis of this phenomenon, highly present in American gated communities which render explicit things that are usually still implicit in France. To mention only one example, Suncity sums up this idea by promoting "communities of interesting people like you." (www.suncity.com). Except for the working classes, which remain roughly targeted by values of stability (the counterpart of their social insecurity in the working world), housing estate marketing claims to have attributes in order to stand out. *Khor Immobilier* occupies the "urban enclosures" segment (sic) and refuses areas cut off from amenities; *Francelot* boasts that there is no need "to resign oneself to the uniformity of grid-like housing estates" and puts forward two principles thus argued:

"-balance is not born out of uniformity,

a harmonious balance is nurtured by well-managed diversity.

So, no cloning, no artistry, simply well-built diversity. And this concerns the size of the plots, the buyers and the constructions. No ghetto with free units on one side and clusters on the other. No segregation between home-owners and lessees. Because these accentuated polarities are sources of conflict and it's better to dissipate differences to achieve a harmonious balance."

The "convivial diversity" promoted is eminently contradictory but contrasts with *Maisons de l'avenir* and *Maisons familiales*, etc. After an explanation of how real-estate will be a safe investment for a long time to come, the developments proposed by the *Celeos* group are described as being "located in attractive areas, in harmony with the surroundings. The human-size developments are near living environments (shops, schools, etc.) which satisfy the latest quality and environmental standards." Here, diversity is tied in with an environmental aspect on which there is reason to dwell.

The clean and the dirty, healthy housing for a long life

On its Website, the UNCMI (*national association of detached house builders*) specifies that choosing a builder of detached houses brings assurance of a professional and reliable service. The environmental aspect is included as a matter of what makes sense (namely the layout on the plot) and within the framework of "the latest technical breakthroughs, the most high-performance solutions and processes: energy savings, insulation, acoustics, etc." For its part, the association "Maisons de qualité", consisting of builders, banks, expert institutions and consumer representatives, explains the urgent need for environmental measures, combining the house and the planet (right down to the visuals), but without mentioning any other level: action must be taken in favour of one's immediate environment.

"If you are about to build, then you are lucky, on two accounts! You are lucky because you are probably about to fulfil your lifelong dream, and also because today, you hold all the cards to combine your project with the project we all share, that of protecting our dear planet!"[13]

Scaled down to an individual level, this concern is then easily expressed by a whole range of measures consolidated by the fact that the plan was developed jointly with the environmental agency ADEME: integration of the project into the natural environment ("respect for wooded areas"), location of the house adapted to the natural restrictions of the land, reduced energy consumption in the home, ecological building materials both for sanitation and environmental purposes, and the list goes on. The home-owner thus becomes an "active militant": he protects himself and thus protects the planet which, seen from this angle, would appear to amount to the sum total of the individual plots! While the imagery is basic, -with an educational focus-, the text part of the messages nonetheless creates a veritable 'thrifty home-owner/inhabitant' character 'with a clear conscience', particularly by transferring "best practices": why hadn't he thought of it before?

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12. "Their discourse does not seem to focus on a desire for singularity or originality, as if they were referring to a unanimously shared culture and ambitions. Texts, page layout, graphics are all similar and this is true of all real-estate adverts dating from a given time." (Nivet, 2000, p.193). His corpus covers 40 years of publications of the property guide Indicateur Bertrand.

13. http://www.maisons-qualite.com/scripts/24environnement/ 24_contenu.asp?idpageenv=0.

The program *Weeds*, forecast in France on M6

Peri-urban imagery and construction/destitution of the individual

This intention to update the myths about single-family housing is underpinned by the desire to see analyses of the peri-urban world once again include those that seek to show the effects of an economic system, the current state of which (and, as a result, that of the works we have studied) is dominated by the question of the illusion of individual freedom and its effects, amongst other things, on space. By transiting from the mythologies of single-family housing to those of peri-urban areas, from the myth of an object to a quantity of objects and a diversification of the structures of offers, the whole challenge was to get to the heart of what helps to renew the roots of the myth and to preserve its legitimate illusions. This semiological come-back, both voluntary and re-examined (identification of the models imposed and knowledge of the processes that shape the peri-urban world), demonstrates the strength of these "messages" considered to be a constitutive and necessary dimension of spatial productions. The analysis of these visual productions led us to distinguish three key fields of possible investigation of peri-urban imageability and then to illustrate this peri-urban character in more depth. The four themes addressed are a good illustration of how the ideology of single-family housing is rendered more complex and of its hold on individuals, and thus reveal the need to take it further.

This brief incursion clarifies several key lines of expansion, particularly peri-urban production strategies through advertising, and its 'self-staging'. One approach we today regard as promising amounts to pragmatic semiology that does not deconstruct messages out of semiotic pleasure, but begins by questioning the visual element as a whole: images are situated acts, not actions; "displaying", before showing, involves physically occupying peri-urban areas

(reign of the 4x3m billboard) or virtually (conquering mental worlds). In advertising, it means conquering the areas which become structured by the criss-cross of skilfully laid out devices. These images are not therefore only those learned and technico-political images specific to the world of urban planning and public action in general (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2004), but also those seen in everyday life *via* advertising and films. Furthermore, attention must be paid to those that are "widely broadcast", without focussing solely on repertory cinema.

In this sense, the analysis of myths complements other investigations to qualify certain spatial orders. It is also tied in with the assertion that "landscapes bear the latent mark of the discourse that helped to change them, and an attentive visitor will recognise the wordy palimpsest of a few dozen issues of *Indicateur Bertrand* (property guide)" (Nivet S., 2000, p. 206). In the first part of our article we made reference to several older works. Thus, after making our first analyses of materials, we feel compelled to offer the reader this comment by Barthes: "I believe it is precisely this conversion of culture into a pseudo-nature that can define the ideology of our society" (Barthes R., 1985, p. 260). Indeed, while peri-urban imagery is not uniform, it does reveal the traits of a "human nature" which, and this aspect is important in research, is created in connection with economic models that seek to combine economic growth, social harmony and less impact on the environment.

Lastly, the existence of a link between the evolution of film productions and the modernity/post-modernity swing in Western-type societies[14] must be taken further. The discourse on the changing peri-urban world would seem

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4. Hence the advantage of making a comparison with other areas of film and other international contexts.

Internet view from the French lobby *Maison de qualité site*

precisely to take the ironist position formulated by American philosopher Richard Rorty: both taking the position of realist sublimation, but simultaneously remaining scathingly distant – a position particularly brought up to date by Tim Burton's film. Thus comes to mind all the aspects of this analysis that the urban world constantly wants the peri-urban sphere to shoulder when it is about to abandon doing so itself. It is precisely the revelation of this mirror effect made possible through film and advertising, that the peri-urban world makes a value contribution to understanding the processes that plague modern societies.

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Filmographie

1952, *Neighbours*, directed by Norman Mac Laren, short film, 8 minutes.

1979, *Over the edge*, directed by Jonathan Kaplan, with Pamela Ludwig, Matt Dillon and Vincent Spano, USA, 90 minutes.

1985, *Neighbours*, directed by Chris Adshead, Australian TV series.

1990, *Edward Scissorhands* directed by Tim Burton, with Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder, Dianne West, USA, 103 minutes.

1992 (released in 1995), *De Noorderlingen* (The Northerners), directed by Alex Van Warmerdam, Holland, 105 minutes.

1999, *American beaut*y, directed by Sam Mendes, with Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch, Allison Janney, USA, 120 minutes.

2001, *Thomas est amoureux*, directed by Pierre-Paul Renders, with Benoît Verhaert, Aylin Yay, Magali Pinglaut, France, Belgium, 97 minutes.

2002, *Dog Days*, directed by Ulrich Seidl, Maria Hofstätter, Alfred Mrwa, Erich Finsches, Austria, 120 minutes.

2003, *Podium*, directed by Yann Moix, with Benoît Poelvoorde, Jean-Paul Rouve, Julie Depardieu, France, 90 minutes.

2006, *Je vais bien, ne t'en fais pas*, directed by Philippe Lioret (adaptation of the novel of the same name written by Olivier Adam), with Mélanie Laurent, Kad Merad, Julien Boisselier, France, 100 mn.

2006, *Over the hedge*, directed by Tim Johnson and Karey Kirkpatrick (animated film remade from the film of the same name by Jonathan Kaplan), USA, 85 mn.

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