Perceptions, including their cinematic representations, have an influence on the evolutions of spaces. They influence the way in which we understand what spaces and places mean and how we deal with it. This research assumes the cinematic space reflects the intrinsic characteristics, the experience value and the typical dynamics of space. Prevalent perceptions of the Flemish urbanized landscape, a highly fragmented settlement structure resulting from an uncontrolled development, are widely divergent. On the one hand, urban planners as well as policy makers struggle to get grip on the congestion of this space, indicated as a Horizontal Metropolis. On the other hand, the pervasive suburban dream of a detached single-family house with a garden is strongly embedded in the Flemish cultural identity. Especially the suburban allotments of Flanders conflict with the plans for reducing the widespread settlement structure.

This research regards film as a unique representational medium, and thus a tool to discover a more nuanced image, mediating between the planological opinion and everyday experience, of this peculiar suburban context. The contemporary Flemish fiction films Violet (Bas Devos, 2014), Fucking Suburbia (Jeff Otte, 2012) and Nowhere man (Patrice Toye, 2008), are all dealing with the specific suburban conditions in Flanders. A cinematic analysis of these films in their reflection and relation to the discourse of urbanists and planners, will reveal a nuanced position regarding the experience of suburbia.

Cinema and the urban landscapes are closely intertwined. Since the very beginning of cinema, cities and urban landscapes have been a subject of interest for amateur and professional cinematographers. Furthermore, different aspects of the relationship between cinema and urban space has been demonstrated by many authors.¹ In our mediatized society, film, amongst others, influences the way we construct images of the world and, as a result, how we operate in it. Our understanding of (urban) space cannot be viewed independently of cinematic experience. Cinematic perceptions, in particular the depiction of spatial environment in films, represent, reflect and influence the evolutions of spaces. These perceptions determine not only the ideas about space, the way in which areas are depicted also affects those who live and work in it.

As urban planners analyze, interpret and design places, they formulate theories and concepts of space,² in order to understand its meaning and how it is used. Therefore, it is important for urban planners to consider perceptions of space, including those provided by the images on screen.

This consideration is particularly the case for the Flemish urban landscape and how this urbanized condition is perceived. For more than half a century now, the uncontrolled urbanization has been a difficult subject to tackle for urban planners as well as policy makers. This uncontrolled development resulted in a highly fragmented settlement structure covering almost the entire territory. Although Flanders is a densely populated region³, with a settlement area of 33%, Flanders has one of the lowest densities in terms of settlement structure.⁴

Peculiar allotments, defining the phenomenon suburbia in Flanders, are an essential component of the Flemish urban landscape. The phenomenon of the allotment – facilitated by different measures, the use of the car and purchasing power - was so extensive it became the dominant manner of urbanization in Flanders. These allotments are composed by a succession of the so-called fermette, a typical detached house styled to refer an old farmhouse.
The horizontal metropolis, one of the terms referring to this widespread urbanized condition, is a complex issue for spatial professionals. Furthermore, this professional environment has been repeatedly criticizing this spatial condition. A famous example hackling the Belgian development is the manifesto ‘The ugliest country in the world’ written by Renaat Braem in 1968. Today, after years of laissez faire, laissez passer-politics, also the governance feels the emergency to achieve a more concentrated spatial arrangement by means of planning. Moreover, urban planners severely critique the low-density suburban areas in which about 70% of Flemish people live. With a growing population this wasteful residential model not only affects energy consumption and the environment but also the quality of life. Planners voice an urgent need for densification of the centers to safeguard the remaining open space from further land parceling, combined with the development of new housing types.

On the contrary, the mindset of the Fleming has been stimulated over the years so private homeownership has become the norm. About one in four families lives in a typical allotment and a vast majority of the Belgians still aspires the ideal of owning a (semi)detached single-family house with a garden. Different surveys demonstrate how strongly this ideal is embedded in the Flemish cultural identity. In 2018 still four hectares of open space disappear every day in Flanders, hence suburbanization simply continues. Urban development plans seem to have little effect, despite the current sharpened policy with a strong emphasis on the challenge of densification. The negative perception of spatial professionals – low densities, high energy consumption, high car dependency, etc. - does not seem to have impact on the ‘suburban dream’, daily practice unimpededly continues consuming space. This paper hypothesizes that this (growing) distance between the urban discourse and the everyday life and practice is related to a different perception of this condition.

Figure 1: Violet - still 1:00:58.

FILM AS A MEDIATOR

Cinematic representation of the Flemish urban landscape can introduce a new perspective, one operating as a mediator to understand the discrepancy in perceptions on the horizontal metropolis and suburbia in particular. The capacity of film to mediate between realities and theories on the contemporary perceptions of the urban landscape, originates in a twofold quality of the cinematic image.

Firstly, film is a visual medium. It represents information about space and can thus function as a reading device by which information about the everyday surfaces. The moving image combines filmic characteristics – montage, lighting, storyline, camera position, mise-en-scène, soundtrack, … – with the attention for the everyday. Film functions as a mirror to the world. Pallasmaa describes how cinema articulates lived space (Henri Lefebvre), environments in use, everyday life scenes.

Secondly, film is narrative and spatio-temporal. The cinematic narratives reflect and interpret, thus as a social construction the moving images can be used to reshape concepts. City images create a specifically urban imaginary which is defined by Edward Soja as ‘our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate and decide to act in the places, spaces and communities in which we live.’ The stories told to us and by us, narratives structuring the practices of our everyday life, provide knowledge of the world. The narrative in both film and the city has been discussed extensively by authors as Koeck.

The intention of this paper is to use film as a (cultural) lens to gain insight in the everyday experience of the horizontal metropolis. Starting from the pronounced discrepancy in perception regarding the Flemish suburbs, the filmic visualizations of suburbia will be investigated in their reflection and relation to the discourse of urbanists and planners. Hence the research question of this paper, what are the prevalent cinematographic perceptions of Flemish suburbia in contemporary fiction films?

CINEMATIC PERCEPTIONS OF FLEMISH SUBURBIA

Postwar suburbia has been the setting for numerous suburban films since 1940s. Especially the last twenty years there is an increase of films set in (American) suburbs. Films like The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998), Pleasantville (Gary Ross, 1998), Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998) and American Beauty (Sam Mendes, 1999) are no longer depicting suburbia as a peaceful, idyllic realization of the American dream. These narratives located in clean, save and ordered allotments, reveal opposite feelings and tensions of imperfection and anxiety. Numerous studies focus on this peculiar portrayal of suburbia and demonstrate an evolution from a suburban utopia to dystopia. Although the allotments of Flanders are comparable to the American suburb - both composed of detached...
single-family houses and both in an ambiguous position of neither city nor countryside - there are no studies focusing on the contemporary representations of the Flemish suburbia in film.

In order to investigate the Flemish suburban context with film as an instrument to discern a more nuanced image, able to revise the pessimistic planological opinion, three fiction films were selected through criteria based on thematic features as well as production-related characteristics. The latter mainly concerns the origin of the film: a recent release date within ten years and Belgian director with home-grown funding. While the qualifying thematic specifications were mainly based on the synopsis incorporating location and (historical) situation of the narrative. In comparison with the manifold international ‘suburban films’ there is surprisingly little attention for suburbia in Flemish films. The selected films – Violet (Bas Devos, 2014), Fucking Suburbia (Jeff Otte, 2012) and Nowhere man (Patrice Toye, 2008) – are all dealing with the specific suburban conditions in Flanders.

These films will be described and analyzed in order to discover how these cinematic representations relate to urban planners point of view regarding suburbia and the pervasive suburban dream of the Fleming. The cinematic analysis focusses on the narrative rather than the technical aspects (camera position, soundtrack, light, etc.) and is structured in four parts. The first section is a general description of the storyline. The second part embodies a characterization of the constructed space and its specific function of the suburban in the narrative. Thirdly, crucial scenes will be highlighted in relation to the narrative and the representation of suburbia in order to discover the social construct of the film. Finally, the fourth part describes a general cinematographic construction of Flemish suburbia in the film.

Violet, the film directed by Bas Devos, captures the grief of fifteen-year-old Jesse. After he witnesses the random, lethal stabbing of his friend Jonas at the beginning of the film, the movie depicts how Jesse struggles to come to terms with himself and his environment after that trauma. Unable to answer the questions of his friends, a group of young BMX-rides, Jesse gets isolated and a growing feeling of loneliness complicates his mourning process.

The story is situated in the suburbs of a big city, a very average and recognizable Flemish allotment. This suburb is projected as a place of isolation and loneliness. The disafflicting atmosphere is accentuated by static camerawork, slow pace and selective sound. The camera focuses on unmoving characters, details and empty streets. The only signs of habitation are the shots with BMX-riders, apart from them the streets are deserted. Passengers occur only in the shopping mall in the city or driving along on the highway. The montage of these typical long shots of cinematographer Nicolas Karakatsanis creates the effect of a dilatory sequence of silent compositions. The spare and concrete sounds, fixating on environmental noises that are alternately natural and mechanical, contribute to an unnatural stillness.

In order to examine the connotations of the allotment for the characters, three specific scenes stand out. The first one is the evening scene where Jesse spies on Jonas’s family. Jesse stands alone outside, in the shadows, looking at the family of his deceased friend. Just like Jesse has to cope with his feelings of grief individually, the family members are also split up in separate rooms. Portrayed within lonely squares of light, each character is individually dealing with their pain. This scene reflects an enforced individuality, apparently also present in the at the scale of the neighborhood where different lives occur isolated next to each other.

The second scene deals with a feeling of absence, which is carefully constructed throughout the film. This is most explicit when Jesse returns from an encounter with Jonas’s father. Two bikes move quietly next to each other through the allotment, one of them has no rider. Jesse is on his own, holding the bike of his friend. The only sound in this scene is produced by the bikes. Again the silence reinforces the loneliness in this scene. (figure 1)

In the third scene, the final tracking shot, desolate environment and silence culminate. After Jesse’s father carries the crying boy home from finding him on the street at dawn, the camera starts moving. This contrasts with the overall static camera in the rest of the film. Like the crew of young bikers in the beginning of the film, the camera slowly hovers through the neighborhood. In complete silence, the shot takes six and a half minutes, the audience arrives in a big overwhelming cloud. (figure 2)
Generally, there is a predominant distant point of view in the cinematographic construction of the neighborhood. This is characterized by the overwhelming silence and the absence of many conversations, moreover, the action is often situated outside the boundaries of the frame. The murder in the openings scene is also depicted through the CCTV security monitors of the shopping mall. Furthermore, the alternation in shallow and focus in the images enhances this removed position. Finally, the abstract images of light that mark the transition between different scenes also underline a distorting time and space.

Jeff Otte’s short film, Fucking Suburbia, depicts two brothers with nothing to do during a hot summer in a boring neighborhood. The oldest of the two, a thirty-year-old man, temporarily moved back into the parental house to take care of their grandmother who is confined to bed. He doesn’t seem to connect with his peers who are building their house and having children. The younger brother tries to cope with the presence of his brother and puberty during an endless hot summer holiday.

Just like Violet, this story is set in a typical and very recognizable allotment. Again, this suburb is represented as a mundane, desolate environment. The streets are empty and deserted, nothing really happens. In contrast to Violet, where the violence happens in the shopping mall of the city, this narrative is completely situated within the neighborhood. The lack of action in the narrative combined with the oppressive heat creates a sluggish atmosphere.

Three particular scenes draw the attention in terms of the cinematic construction of the suburb. First, the barbecue party at the beginning of the film accentuates how the oldest brother feels alienated in this environment of settled people. Walking back home with a girl, he recollects memories of their youth in the neighborhood, when they played together in the street. The happy memories suggest he did fit in at the time.

Second, the fragment in which the camera observes the sixteen-year-old brother sitting with the other teenagers at the empty football field stresses difficulties these youngsters experience in finding their place. Especially this residential environment has not much to offer. They do not speak to each other, just wait for time to pass.

The most surreal representation of the neighborhood is caught in the scene when the camera follows the girl riding through the allotment on her bike in the twilight. On every parcel she passes there are people standing close to the road, on their own piece of land, all looking in the same direction. When she turns around the corner and passes the ice cream cart it becomes clear what everyone was waiting for. (figure 3)

The dominating boredom, both in the agenda of the characters as in the depicted environment, determines the overall representation of the suburb in this short movie.

Figure 3: Fucking Suburbia – still 0:17:33
The story of Nowhere man, co-written by Bjorn Olaf Johannessen and the director Patrice Toye, revolves around forty-year-old Tomas who stages his own death longing for a new start and a more spectacular life. Living an apparently average but good life, with a wonderful wife, he entertains fantasies of a different life. Soon after executing his plan and having set foot on a tropical island, he regrets his decision. The paradise he imagined appears to be a place of hard labor, violence and racism, a place where he is desperately lonely. After five years he tries to return to his former life, where his remarried wife now takes control of his life.

The first part of the film, before the fake suicide, is set in a residential district characterized by the big white villas. This environment represents the boredom and lack of authenticity the main character is struggling with. It seems like the protagonist feels not quite comfortable in that environment: he mocks the man at the party in the opening scene of the film and the lamentable condition of his front garden draws the attention.

The contrast of two scenes details the construct of suburbia in this motion picture. In the build-up to the escape, the aerial view of the big houses with worn-out lawns diverge from the bald and lamentable garden of the couple.

Symbolizing the man’s growing sense of unhappiness with his mundane life, the contrast with the other gardens show he does not belong there. (figure 4) At the moment the protagonist makes an effort to improve this situation, by planting a young tree in the garden, he decides to walk into the raging house fire to fake his suicide.

When the main character returns after five years in search for his wife and former life, the allotment is portrayed in spring. The condition of the house and the front garden has drastically improved. A nice garden with a mowed lawn, a fully grown tree, plants and bordered by a hedge is now the territory of a playing kid. (figure 5) The lifeless impression is exchanged for a pleasing and vivacious place as a new family moved in. Noteworthy, this is the last image of this neighborhood in the film, the following part of the movie is situated in the city.

Nowhere man presents a dual position regarding the residential outskirts. The suburbs of the first part, where the protagonist does not feel at ease and wants to escape, contrast with desirable suburbia, almost an utopian place.

CINEMATIC REFLECTIONS ON FLEMISH SUBURBIA

The thematic reading of these contemporary fiction films initiates nuanced reflections of spatial imagination of Flemish suburbia. The most pronounced reoccurring themes are dealing with the general atmosphere of the environment and stroke with the impressions of suburbia in contemporary American fiction films. According to the American counterpart the general depiction of the allotments is as mundane, boring quarters where the individuals live in isolation of each other. Moreover, the suburbs portrayed in these films are desolate, empty places.

Next to the distant ambiance created in the films, three reflections concerning the spatial imagination of Flemish suburbia can be articulated. Firstly, the protagonists of the three films seem somehow trapped in suburbia. In Violet this is visualized almost literally in the scene where Jesse rides around his district after the incident with his BMX-friends. Jesse’s mother has ordered him to stay in the street. The group wanders on their bikes through the streets when dissenting the conversation, suddenly one of the boys stops, changes direction and rides back. The whole group follows and stays within the
borders of the allotment. It seems death provides the only way to escape suburbia, as in Jonas’s case. This is also confirmed by the other two films. In Fucking suburbia, the oldest brother can only go back to Brussels after the death of his grandmother. And the protagonist of Nowhere man can only escape Suburbia by faking his own death.

Secondly, teenagers and adults seem to take different positions regarding their environment. The teenagers in Violet as well as those of Fucking suburbia, frequent the so-called wastelands. The skate park, the woods and the edge of the football field are the places of the teenagers, where they are not bound by the adult society. Here, the BMX-crew flies in the air, but comes down to earth when Jesse is called a coward by another biker who subsequently tells him he’s not welcome. Similarly, the difficulty of conversation of these teenagers is uncomfortably clear in Fucking Suburbia. There is infinite silence when they are together. Even when the younger brother isolates himself with the girl in the wood, they do not talk.

Thirdly, the central figures in the three films are part of a disrupted family which seems to disturb their experience of space and suburbia in particular. It is clear that the murder of Jonas in Violet shadows over his friend and the other bikers. In Fucking Suburbia, the absence of parents and the dying grandmother bears down on the two brothers. The main character of Nowhere man struggles with a crisis, he is deeply unsatisfied with his existence and convinced he is not good enough for his wife. In these disrupted conditions the environment of suburbia is a desolate place of distortion, imprisonment, isolation and individuality as described above. However, when the family is restored, another perception surfaces. In the final scene of Violet, the father finally succeeds in connecting with his son Jesse. At this point the camera starts moving through the allotment to leave the spectator in a foggy dream at the end. Hence, suggesting things will turn out right. A comparable reversion occurs when memories of childhood enter the narrative. When the oldest brother recalls memories of playing in the streets as a child, in Fucking Suburbia, a positive vibe is related to the allotment. He even indicates a house as beautiful. The scene with the ice cream car recalls the happiness of children in a dreamlike impression. Nowhere man combines the ideal of childhood and harmonious family in depicting how a happy family with a nice garden now lives in the house Tomas escaped from.

These suburbia are then nice surroundings for (innocent) children and harmonious families. Once this ideal, dreamlike situation (of childhood) is distorted, alienation and isolation sets in. The pervasive residential suburban dream simulates this utopian vision. Teenagers occupy a special position in this. Being in transition to adultery, they also inhabit these transition places.

CONCLUSION
Throughout this paper I have investigated the cinematographic perceptions of Flemish suburbia in a selection of contemporary fiction films. Reflecting back on the discrepancy between the urban discourse and the everyday life and practice, the films depict a similar tension. On the one hand, suburbia manifests itself as an idealized place. Children and undisturbed families experience suburbia as a paradise-like dream location. While, on the other hand, alienation through individual isolation and imprisonment is the overshadowing ambiance in these suburban movies. These critiques correspond with the rather negative urban discourse.

Apparently adults prefer the suburbs to create a living place for their family since these places allow to simulate
the paradise imagined in childhood. However, adultery, through puberty, involves alienation of this utopian image. Planners recognize this alienation and emphasize isolation and imprisonment. But in ignoring the inclination to realize this paradisiac settlement, planners reduce their impact. Moreover, planners stress the negative elements of suburbia, low densities, high energy consumption and car-dependency. They portray suburbia as a dystopian place without providing an alternative that can resemble the childhood utopia, which results in unexecuted plans.

Film was used to acquire knowledge and insight into the everyday and its intrinsic characteristics, the experience value and the typical dynamics of the Flemish urbanized landscape, or the horizontal metropolis. In particular the visualizations of suburbia depict a dichotomy between utopia and dystopia. This cognition can be deployed by planners to establish a more nuanced perspective and spatial opinion.

ENDNOTES


5. Other terms to describe this dispersed field of urban sprawl are dispersed city, nevelstad, edge city, città diffusa, città fractale, network city, generic city, tapijtmetropool, etc.


