

Name: Kelsey Jade Jones

Student Number: 2101007

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Question 3. Space and Place: *How do contemporary creative practices engage with the politics and poetics of space, including questions of displacement, postcolonial geography, affective architectures, or the uncanny? What critical frameworks can be used to analyse these spatial imaginaries?*

Abstract

American suburbia is a space shaped by narratives around The American Dream, prioritising ideals of domestic stability, privacy and security. Through their photographic practices, artists Todd Hido and Gregory Crewdson transform the familiar space of American suburbia into something strange and unsettling. Employing the uncanny as a critical strategy, they expose the ideological instability of suburban domestic space.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Henri Lefebvre, Sigmund Freud and Mark Fisher, this essay argues that the uncanny operates not simply as an aesthetic effect, but as a critical mode through which contradictions embedded within suburban domestic space become visible. Hido employs atmospheric ambiguity through distance and absence to subtly destabilise the domestic exterior, whilst Crewdson utilises artificiality and psychological tension to actively construct scenes of unease. Through these approaches, the suburban home is rendered uncanny through the transformation of the familiar into something unsettling. Read comparatively, these practices reveal suburban domesticity as a fragile spatial fiction, where coherence is dependent on ideological performance and careful maintenance of appearance. In this way, both artists reveal American suburbia as a fragile and ideologically constructed space, shaped by underlying psychological tension and instability.

The Uncanny Suburb: Todd Hido, Gregory Crewdson and the Instability of American Suburbia

How do the photographic practices of Todd Hido and Gregory Crewdson construct uncanny representations of domestic space within American suburbia? What do these reveal about the ideological instability of that space?

'Space' and 'place' are complex terms used across many disciplines. In art, the distinction between space and place is fundamental to understanding how meaning is both constructed and experienced. In its most basic form, space refers to the physical dimension. It is "experienced as the relative location of objects or places" (Tuan, Y.F, 1977. p.12). Place is a "unique entity with a history and a meaning", a "reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of people who have given it meaning" (Gale and Olsson, 1979. p.387). It is a space with an identity, that holds memory, emotion, and history. Hence, place is space as it is lived in and experienced. Suburbia, therefore, can be understood not only as a physical space but a place shaped by a specific culture and a set of corresponding expectations. American suburbia has been shaped by "the nation's tradition of expansive freedom and mobility" (Teaford, J.C. 2020. p.17). It is a space that reflects ideals of The American Dream, and perpetuates notions of "powerful and symbolically rich narratives about ideal American spaces and lifestyles" (Ward, C.A. 1999. p.10). Traditionally associated with ideals of privacy and domestic security, suburban space has often functioned as a powerful ideological image. However, within visual culture it repeatedly appears haunted by repression, and underlying instability.

Through intersecting frameworks of spatial production and psychoanalytic theory, the uncanny can be understood as a means of exposing the underlying tension within everyday space. Rather than treating the uncanny as a disturbance in domestic space, the discussion proposes that suburban space itself may operate through the uncanny. In this way, the suburban space becomes a structure in which repression and instability may reside. Through the photographic practices of Todd Hido and Gregory Crewdson, suburban domestic space is presented as a space where these contradictions and tensions become visible. Their work suggests that the uncanny does not only disrupt suburban ideology, but exposes instability as a core condition.

Spatial Theory: The Production of Suburban Space

In order to understand representations of American suburbia as an uncanny domestic space, it is necessary to first consider theoretical perspectives surrounding space and place. Contemporary understandings of space and place challenge the notion that space is neutral. Henri Lefebvre questioned how we understand the spaces that surround us, arguing that space is fundamentally

social, as social relations are deeply embedded within the production of space. Grounded in a Marxist framework, Lefebvre's work focussed on space as a product of power, that is shaped by social, political and economic forces. It is shaped by the dominant ideological and economic structures of capitalism. His concept of social space is particularly significant, as it shifts attention from space as a location of physical objects, towards the structures organising them. Lefebvre explains that social space is "not a thing among other things", and instead "subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity" (Lefebvre, H. 1991. p.73). Social space cannot be reduced simply to what exists, as the relationship between what exists is fundamental to creating a sense of place. We cannot understand space solely through what physically exists, as consideration must be given to how these elements are arranged and experienced, and the relationships between them. Lefebvre's work is an in-depth analysis of "how space is made", and how "it can be remade by and through social practice" (Zieleniec, 2018). As a result, according to Lefebvre, space is never neutral or fixed; it reflects the interests of those in power, and the relationships between what exists within it. Therefore, if space is socially constructed, and its meanings are not fixed, then it is inherently unstable and open to disruption. Thus, space remains subject to ongoing reproduction and transformation. Through this instability, we can see how space operates as a site through which broader ideological structures are both reinforced and challenged simultaneously. Such contradictions suggest instability is not an interruption of spatial order, rather it is generated within the production of space.

By understanding that space is socially produced, American suburbia can be understood as a spatial manifestation of capitalist ideology. It holds a cultural power that "evokes privatisation, white flight, conformity, environmental waste", whilst also suggesting "family, comfort, nature and revitalisation" (McDonogh, G.W. 2006. p.472). Suburban environments are constructed in a way that reflects ideals of security and normality; ideals that are produced through social, economic and political forces. Thus, the apparent stability of suburban space is conditional, and open to disruption. In this way, the suburb functions as a 'spatial fiction', which is maintained through repetition and regulation. The coherence of this fiction is dependent on suppressing contradictions, to maintain the appearance.

The instability of socially produced space becomes particularly significant when considering how it is experienced. Such instability makes it possible for space to shift from familiar to unfamiliar; this can be understood through the concept of the uncanny. The term was first used by Ernst Jentsch, a German psychiatrist, who described the uncanny as a feeling of being "not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned" (Jentsch, E. 1997). While writing about 'the uncanny', Jentsch avoids defining the term precisely, claiming that "such conceptual explanation would have very little value", as "the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody" (Jentsch, E. 1997). In his writing, Sigmund Freud develops this concept further through a lens of psychoanalysis. Critiquing Jentsch, Freud argues that this is not an exhaustive definition. He argues that, by only relating the uncanny to the unfamiliar, Jentsch reduces the uncanny to moments of intellectual uncertainty. To understand the concept, Freud explored the etymology of 'the uncanny'. He wrote about the German term 'unheimlich', literally meaning 'unhomely' and its relationship to 'heimlich', meaning 'homely'. Freud notes how "heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its anonymous unheimlich" (Freud, S. 2003. p.134). Through examining the root of the concept

linguistically, Freud suggests the familiar and unfamiliar, whilst opposites, are intertwined. The *unheimlich* belongs to the *heimlich*. Freud therefore argues that the uncanny instead refers to “actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed”; it is “something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open” (Freud, S. 2003. p.148). It is important to note this distinction: crucially, to Freud the uncanny is not produced by the unfamiliar, but by the transformation of the familiar into something strange.

Freud’s concept of the uncanny can be applied to American suburbia, a space resonant of the *heimlich*, as “suburbia has always evoked the idea of safety and security” (Huq, R. 2013. p.7). As American suburbia is a space that has been culturally coded as familiar and secure, it can become uncanny when presented in a way that subverts its sense of familiarity. In this sense, the uncanny does not emerge from the introduction of an unfamiliar element. Instead, it emerges from the destabilisation of what is familiar. In this sense, the uncanny exposes how spaces that are coded as secure are dependent on concealing exclusions and repressions. The perceived normality of suburban space is therefore fragile, and unfixed; it can be disrupted through shifts in the representation and perception of the space. Read alongside Lefebvre, Freud’s explanation of the uncanny suggests that ideological space can become uncanny due to contradictions that are embedded within the familiar.

Building on Freud’s concept of the uncanny, Mark Fisher developed his theories of ‘the weird’ and ‘the eerie’, shifting focus from psychoanalysis towards the experience of environments and atmospheres. Fisher critiques Freud for treating ‘the weird’ and ‘the eerie’ as interchangeable terms, and the way in which his writing and focus on the *unheimlich* has “crowded out the other two modes” (Fisher, M. 2016. p.7). Whilst Fisher acknowledges that “there is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* share”, in the sense they are all modes of being, he argues the most important differentiation between the concepts are their approach to and treatment of the strange (Fisher, M. 2016. p6-8). Fisher explains ‘the weird’ as having “a sense of wrongness”: it is “so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least not exist here” (Fisher, M. 2016. p.12). By contrast, the eerie is “constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence” (Fisher, M. 2016. p.55). By making this distinction, Fisher emphasises the importance of the role the environment plays. Whereas Freud places the uncanny in the return of the repressed, Fisher instead locates disturbance within atmosphere. Fisher shifts emphasis from psychology to the instability of environments. This moves the argument beyond psychoanalysis, instead allowing suburban space to be understood in terms of atmosphere.

Fisher’s definitions and distinction between the weird and the eerie can be used to understand American suburbia as a space in more depth, where meaning is produced not only by physical structures, but the atmospheres and qualities they create. The quiet streets of the American suburbs are an example of what Fisher labels as the eerie, created by a failure of presence. Similarly, the constructed nature of the idealised space can produce a sense of the weird, as elements can appear out of place within a familiar setting. Fisher’s writing provides an understanding of American suburbia as inherently unstable, as the seeming normality of the space is continually undermined by subtle

inconsistencies and absences within the space. What appears as suburban normality therefore depends as much on the atmosphere of absence and suppression, as on visible structures of order.

Together, these theoretical frameworks position American suburbia not simply as a place represented through the uncanny, but as a space that is fundamentally ideologically constructed and inherently unstable. The uncanny emerges not simply as an aesthetic, but as a critical mode where tensions embedded within suburban domestic space are visible. It is a space where the familiar can be rendered strange through shifts in representation and perception.

Atmosphere, Absence and the Uncanny: Todd Hido's *House Hunting* (2001)

Todd Hido's 2001 series *House Hunting* is "a portrait of suburban America", which he describes as a "raw look at white paint chipping off of picket fences" (Tylevich, K. n.d). The series, comprised of 26 colour photographs, depicts suburban homes across America, photographed at night. Within this series, Hido does something more than simply document American suburbia: he reconstructs it as an ideologically unstable fiction. Hido begins to challenge traditional notions immediately, within his photographic process. When photographing, Hido has stated that he doesn't ask for permission; instead, he openly discusses that he is allowed to take photos in public. He notes that "it's interesting that so many people regard their surroundings as inherently private" (Tylevich, K. n.d). Through doing so, in his work Hido immediately, from the process of making work, is undermining traditional ideas about suburbia as a private and secure space. He heightens and amplifies the false sense of privacy which suburban ideology is built upon, highlighting cracks within the presentation of suburbia. He exposes domestic security as being more of a performance than a reality.

House Hunting focuses on the portrayal of houses that are architecturally familiar, and possess the "ability to connect and identify with almost any viewer"; the images depict something that anyone could recognise as familiar (Tylevich, K. n.d). However, this familiarity is disrupted by Hido's visual presentation of the space. The series is characterised by long exposure, high colour saturation, and the way in which the houses "seem to glow in the dark" (Grundberg, A. 1998). Each house is illuminated by artificial light, striking against their dark surrounding and "isolated in the frame, almost like portrait subjects" (Grundberg, A. 1998). This artificial illumination paired with the dark surrounding transforms the buildings, making them visually striking. Hido creates a tension between the recognition of the architecture, and unfamiliarity due to the way they are presented. The images are an example of the familiar being presented in an unfamiliar way. Whilst the houses remain identifiable as examples of ordinary suburban architecture, the way they are photographed renders them unfamiliar, as though they exist outside of an everyday experience. This shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar, as explained by Freud, places the space in a realm of the uncanny: it is not the houses that are inherently unusual, instead it is the way they are experienced that produces unease. We, as viewers, are presented with the familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously, creating a point in which "the

meaning of the two opposite words, heimlich and unheimlich, tend to merge, indicating that what is most intimate for some reason becomes uncanny” (Benvenuto, S. 2025). By blurring the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, Hido destabilises the perception of suburban domestic space. The uncanny emerges from the disruption of what is familiar, revealing the instability embedded within suburbia itself. However, questions around whether Hido exposes suburban ideology, or transforms alienation itself into an aesthetic production remain open to critique.

This destabilisation of American suburbia is further reinforced through Hido’s visual language, which is used to transform a familiar domestic environment into a site of ambiguity. A key element of *House Hunting* is the framing technique across the series. Hido photographs the houses from a distance: across the street, behind a fence, from afar. Although windows are illuminated, details of the home are hidden within the image. We are unable to see into the houses, to catch a glimpse of what happens within, as the view is obstructed, often by curtains or reflections. The images offer a glimpse into the home, while continuing to keep it private: the viewer is still excluded. Hido photographs as a voyeur, putting viewers in the same position, communicating a sense that he’s “not from here” (Hido, T. & Halpern, G. 2014. p.20). It creates a sense of curiosity, and discomfort as the home is visible, but unknowable. This mix of curiosity and discomfort constructs an uncanny representation of suburbia by subtly destabilising the familiar, through distance and visual obstruction. The houses are visible, and familiar, yet inaccessible. Presenting the familiar environment of the suburbs with this distance, Hido is undermining traditional notions of suburbia as a space defined by privacy and domestic security. He presents the domestic space as visually exposed, yet emotionally closed. Through doing this, the boundary between public and private space becomes unstable. This tension between the visibility and inaccessibility of the home aligns with Freud’s concept of the uncanny as a “defamiliarisation of the familiar” (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013). Here, privacy seems to be less protected, but instead sustained through visual exclusion. Consequently, the suburban home becomes understood not as a stable site of privacy, but as a space where meaning is unstable, shaped by what is exposed and what is concealed.

A consistent visual motif through *House Hunting* are the bright lights that shine through windows, “giving some indication these structures are lived in” (Grundberg, A. 1998). These lights inside houses are one example of the way Hido depicts traces of presence, without confirmation. Throughout the series, we see traces of people in the space, through vehicles parked on the roadside, and tyre tracks through the snow. The images suggest someone should be there, yet no one is visible. *House Hunting* is visualisation of presence and absence simultaneously. These traces of presence create a sense of the eerie, which is composed by a failure of presence (Fisher, M. 2016. p.55). By suggesting presence without confirmation, Hido undermines the idea of suburbia as a lived in, and emotionally rich space. He subverts the traditional ideals of family life and intimacy that surround suburbia.

Todd Hido employs these visual strategies to create the uncanny through subtle shifts in perception. Traditionally, suburbia has been presented as “a site of promises, dreams and fantasies”, promoting ideals about “freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift” (Szélpál, L. 2012). Hido’s visual language within *House Hunting* juxtaposes this traditional presentation

of American suburbia. Through engaging the uncanny, Hido's work reveals suburban space as inherently unstable, whereby the familiar environment of the domestic space within American suburbia is continuously undermined by absence, distance and ambiguity. Hido critiques the myth of suburbia, and the "notion of suburbia embodying the American dream", suggesting these myths are sustained through repression and absence (Huq, R. 2013. p.7). He exposes the ideological construction of the space, suggesting the qualities that define suburbia are fragile and unfixed, therefore making them open to disruption. This instability is not a fracture in the structure of suburban space, but an inherent condition.

Staging the Uncanny: Gregory Crewdson's *Dream House* (2002)

Whilst Hido constructs the uncanny through subtle strategies of distance and absence, Gregory Crewdson produces the uncanny through detail-oriented staging. In his series *Dream House* (2002), Crewdson "peers into the unseen psychological dramas of domestic American Life" (Mansimov, E. 2022). He does not reveal the instability of suburban domestic space, but actively constructs it. Crewdson's process is an "epic production", involving a location crew of more than 40 people, with a budget of a small independent movie (Smith, D.W. 2008). Each image is a cinematic piece, constructed purposefully with a careful attention to detail, and control over each element of the image. It is through this process of construction that Crewdson's work demonstrates that the uncanny is not only intrinsic within suburban space, but can be deliberately produced: the space itself is revealed as a construct. Read through Lefebvre's work, this process of staging does more than aestheticise suburbia. Instead, it foregrounds domestic space as socially produced, performed and hence, vulnerable to disruption. The importance of the construction behind Crewdson's images is central to his visual language, in which suburban space is not observed, but deliberately staged and controlled. This control behind the images produces a sense of artificiality. The familiar environment of the suburban home is juxtaposed by the artificial aesthetic, and through what Fisher describes as 'weird', where there is a "sensation of wrongness" Crewdson's suburban scenes are misaligned with the ideological coherence they are supposed to embody (Fisher, M. 2016. p.8). The overt theatricality of Crewdson's images does not distance them from reality, rather it suggests that suburban reality itself is already theatrical.

Fisher explains that "the weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (Fisher, M. 2016. p.12). It is not what Crewdson's images portray creates a sense of the weird, rather how we interpret them. Suburbia is presented as a "retreat nurturing happy tranquillity and wholesome domesticity, a place conducive of the most desirably family life" (Teaford, J.C. 2020. p.8). In *Dream House*, this traditional myth of suburbia is juxtaposed by the artificiality of the images. This disrupts any sense of authenticity, creating an uncanny tension between reality and the artificial. This tension within Crewdson's work reveals that American suburbia, as a space, operates through a similar process of construction. *Dream House* echoes Lefebvre's idea that space is socially produced, constructed by imposed ideologies, and therefore unstable. Through the exaggerated construction

behind his images, Crewdson's imagery plays with the unstable nature of suburbia, suggesting the coherence of suburban life is dependent upon staging, performance and control. In this sense, Crewdson does not represent ideological instability symbolically, but instead formalises it through photographic construction. As space is unstable, the contrast between our perception and the reality of suburbia renders the space as weird, as it does not match our preconceived notions.

With an emphasis on "elaborately staged scenes of home interiors", *Dream House* seeks to expose and explore the unseen elements behind American suburbia. Several images from the series are staged inside the home, portraying highly detailed interiors such as living rooms and bedrooms. By staging his scenes within the home, Crewdson is subverting privacy, a typical idea of the suburban neighbourhood. Privacy appears less as a protected condition, but more as an ideological fiction. Read through Lefebvre and Freud's theoretical work, the domestic interior becomes not only a space where repression returns, but where ideological space reveals its contradictions. The images have an intrusive, unsettling atmosphere as they contradict the privacy associated with the space. This contradiction of a space traditionally associated with privacy being presented openly, in a vulnerable way, creates the uncanny. The hidden reality within the home is suddenly revealed, not as something new, but "something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (Freud, S and McIntock, D. 2003. p.148). Crewdson's images are a visualisation of what is repressed and hidden within the home, behind the facade of suburbia. This portrayal creates the uncanny, by revealing a familiar and repressed element. It reveals suburbia to be a space that is not inherently secure, but as a site structured by repression where the appearance of stability is subject to concealing psychological tension and emotional unease.

A key characteristic of Crewdson's work is the presentation of his characters, who play a significant role in *Dream House*. This series features characters that appear static and disconnected. Crewdson's characters are photographed in a way that mixes static stances, with subtle hints of potential movement. In this way, "his photographs encapsulate the uncanny essence that emerges from the delicate balance between these two contrasting states" (Özbek, E. A. 2025. p.8). Whilst they physically occupy the space, they do not fully inhabit it. In this way, the characters are physically present in a domestic environment, yet the images lack an emotional presence, aligning with Fisher's concept of the eerie as a failure of presence. This produces what Fisher describes as a question that "concerns the particular nature of the agent at work" (Fisher, M. 2016. p.56). Although a figure is visible, there is an absence of intention and narrative clarity resulting in uncertainty around agency. Subsequently, the viewer is left unable to determine what, if anything, is the driving force behind the scene. This absence of agency destabilises the domestic space itself. The suburban home is a space that connotes emotional intimacy and human connection. Instead, here it is rendered in a way that is psychologically ambiguous, as the figures do not confirm the existence of meaningful relationships within the space. This withdrawal of relational presence evokes the uncanny. Moreover, this presence of disconnected figures in Crewdson's work undermines the traditional myths around suburbia and the social values that prioritise "the centrality of the nuclear family, [and] the desire for a community of like-minded neighbours" inherent within the space (Coon, D.R. 2013. p.5). These figures function less as psychological subjects, rather more symptoms of spatial disconnection. They embody the breakdown between domestic space, intimacy and a meaningful presence. Yet, Crewdson's hyper-artifice

theatricality raises tensions between critique and spectacle. This invites the question of whether suburban instability is exposed, or aesthetically monumentalised.

Through *Dream House*, Crewdson critiques American suburbia, revealing it to be a space constructed and shaped by traditional American ideologies. He critiques it as a space defined by a staged facade that gives an appearance of normality and stability: an appearance which is maintained through control and performance. Crewdson's work reveals this construction, ultimately destabilising the ideological foundations that suburban domestic space is built upon. His work exposes the inherent ambiguity and disconnection that suburban domestic space relies on.

Conclusion

Through *House Hunting* and *Dream House*, Todd Hido and Gregory Crewdson explore the ideological instability of domestic space within American suburbia through the lens of the uncanny. While their visual strategies differ significantly, both Hido and Crewdson use their photographic practice not simply to represent suburban environments, but to interrogate and destabilise them.

Hido evokes the uncanny through absence and ambiguity, positioning the viewer as a voyeur. In a space that is typically understood as private, secure and welcoming, Hido instead creates a sense of alienation, as the viewer can see but not access the space. This tension between visibility and inaccessibility disrupts the familiarity of suburban space, revealing it as emotionally closed and psychologically uncertain. Thus, Hido undermines the notion that suburbia is a site of belonging, instead presenting it as a space defined by distance and disconnection.

In his high production images, Crewdson is able to meticulously construct an uncanny representation of suburban domestic space through theatrical disruption, artificiality and the presence of psychologically ambiguous figures. His images introduce a sense of disruption within the domestic interior, as he exposes the truth beneath the facade of suburban normality. Crewdson's emphasis on the precise construction within the scene reveals suburban life as a staged facade, where stability is maintained through performance rather than lived reality.

Taken together, these strategies do more than produce the uncanny as an aesthetic effect: they reveal the uncanny as a critical mode, through which the ideological foundations of suburban space can be exposed. They interrogate the myths inherent within the domestic space, revealing suburban space not as a neutral setting, but one shaped by cultural expectation, repetition and control. Both Hido and Crewdson challenge the perceived stability of suburban life by revealing that its values of privacy, security and belonging are dependent on the upkeep of performance, repression and carefully maintained appearance. Ultimately, both artists demonstrate that the familiarity associated with suburban domestic space is not inherent, but produced. Therefore, as shown in *House Hunting* and *Dream House*, it is structured by concealed instability. By constructing the uncanny within this space, they play on the traditional notions of suburban life to expose the underlying tensions that sustain the illusion of suburban normality, therefore revealing it to be a space defined by not only what is shown but also what is concealed. In this sense, suburban domestic space emerges not as a secure 'place',

but as a socially produced, psychologically unstable construct, whereby the familiar can become strange.

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