Gary Burns was born in Calgary and grew up in an area close to a mall. This childhood of malls and suburbs provided the background to his preoccupation with this aspect of Calgary’s urban identity. Unlike Maddin, whose Winnipeg roots were in the inner city, Burns’s early years were spent in a suburban environment. In Calgary, the lack of historical pedigree (Fort Calgary dates back to 1877; Fort Garry was established much earlier) gives more prominence to suburbia and all things new. Class conformity, upward mobility, and rising real estate values are at the core of the suburban promise. With shiny new malls and the automobile, suburbia remakes the urban in the image of eternal youth and childhood. Everything in suburbia bespeaks newness, success, security, and cleanliness. It’s the home of young families just “starting out.” Like birth, suburbia is often read as a beginning. It is also inscribed with a sense of
promise and future. Because Calgary has grown exponentially since the 1970s, while Winnipeg has stagnated in the same time period, Calgary developed a downtown core filled with new office towers where suburbanites work—the two sites of newness match each other. Winnipeg and Calgary are signposts of differing economic realities that are reflected in the contrasting work of Maddin and Burns.

Film Comment, a journal published by the Film Society of New York’s Lincoln Center, offers big city attitudes in its reviews, so in Mark Peranson’s review of Gary Burns’s signature film, waydowntown, he concludes that Burns’s Calgary must be added to “the vacant landscape of postmodern urbanism” along with Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto.1 This promotion of Calgary to the major leagues of North American cities is surprising, yet in terms of cinematic representation and the way in which waydowntown reflects a certain stereotyping of North American urbanity, Burns’s Calgary is a major player. The vacuity of corporate and suburban life is the defining characteristic of his city. This emptiness is missing in the work of the auteurs discussed in previous chapters. For example, Maelström’s Montréal is full of crowded downtown streets, high-rise life, and traffic: one cannot call this cityspace a “vacant landscape.” Rude’s Toronto is populated with rough streetscapes that reflect gritty social realities full of emotion and human drama. And even in the dead of a frigid winter, Maddin’s Winnipeg streets are alive with bundled-up humanity. But Burns’s urban universe is restricted to the claustrophobia and artificiality of shopping malls and Calgary’s hermetically sealed Plus-15 walkway system, which, when waydowntown was made, consisted of fourteen kilometres (now eighteen) of glassed-in and heated passageways linking all the major buildings in the downtown core. Burns’s cinematic Canadian city is like no other Canadian city discussed in this book because it reflects Americanized corporate architectural, commercial, and social values. The film’s reference to a “vacant landscape” relates to the emptiness of the corporate sphere for the human soul. That is why Calgary can be any North American city: it exists as a projection of late capitalist desire, which can transform any urban space into a corporate haven, a white-collar universe of contented or discontented slaves who can only negotiate this soulless environment through games and fantasy.

This image of Calgary as Canada’s most Americanized city (both politically and culturally) has grown out of the city’s economic dependence on the
energy industry, most of whose product (natural gas and oil) is destined for the United States. The city has the largest number of head offices in Canada after Toronto, making it a mecca for corporate ideology and proponents of free enterprise. The city’s elite project an entrepreneurial ethos of corporate conformity, urban boosterism, mindless consumerism, and ostentatious exhibition of new-found wealth. Calgary is a white-collar town proud of its conservatism and its capitalist identity. Not surprisingly, Canada’s currently ruling federal Conservative Party is rooted in Calgary, and the province of Alberta is a one-party state: in 2012, the Progressive Conservative Party won yet another election, making its rule continuous since 1971. Burns’s treatment of this dominant social environment in Calgary is satirical and subversive. The visual tropes in his films create a scathing critique of the anodyne beliefs that dominate the city. Propelled by the conventional tools of dark comedy, a genre that Burns manipulates to rhetorical advantage, his two major films about Calgary—*waydowntown* (2000) and the mockumentary *Radiant City* (2006)—portray stifling environments and robotic people.

When Burns (b. 1960) made *waydowntown*, he was forty years old. After studying fine arts at the University of Calgary, he went to film school at Concordia University, in Montréal, and quickly launched into a film career as an auteur director. His Montréal-inspired student film (*Happy Days*) became the basis for his first feature, aptly titled *The Suburbanators* (1995), a film about a pair of young white males who meet a pair of Arab men trying to retrieve some musical instruments from a friend’s apartment. The film was an ultra–low-budget production about white male slackers. The following description by reviewer Craig MacInnis highlights the contradictions that Burns exploits: “The way Burns catches the drab locality of the suburban West—a slacker’s repudiation of the nearby Rockies and their postcard grandeur—was, arguably, the best thing about *The Suburbanators*.”2 Burns was working within an emerging genre represented by such films as *Slacker* (1991) and *Dazed and Confused* (1993). He explained that “the film is about . . . boredom, about not having the ambition to do much of anything. It fits in with suburban alienation. . . . It’s realistic and that’s why people come up to us after the film and go: ‘Oh, man. I’ve been there. I know people like that.’”3

Burns continued the slacker theme in his second feature, *Kitchen Party* (1998), in which the same white twenty-something generation is portrayed
as living in suburban limbo. Both films were comedies inspired by his own
generation of white males who grew up in what Burns came to view as sub-
urban dysfunction.4 Burns claimed that *Kitchen Party* was shot in a bungalow
that “looked ‘exactly’ like the bungalows in which he grew up and par-
tied.”5 “You’ve got to write about the things you know,” he told an *Edmonton
Journal* writer. “I just looked back on my own experiences.”6 His world is the
primary fuel that drives his auteurist ambition. Burns treats the built sub-
urban and urban worlds as nongeographic, as cultural universes that could
fit any North American city. Yet his socially critical attitude toward suburbia
resulted in what one critic termed an “anti-Hollywood teen party movie.”7 In
other words, the protagonists did not learn any uplifting lessons as they do in
Hollywood versions.

Burns’s first two films have socially realistic, male-driven plots about a
generation that has become disconnected from the real world through their
upbringing in suburbia, a site characterized by a lack of conflict and contact,
programmed public space, and sameness. Burns could be very specific about
Calgary while at the same time offering the city’s image as a universal para-
digm. This was possible because his construction of urbanity is in harmony
with the new era of Canada-US free trade that generated a continental-ori-
ented Canadian economic and cultural life in the 1990s and 2000s. And of all
Canadian cities, Calgary is the most continentalist in its orientation.8 When
Burns applies the broader cultural lexicon of vacant urbanity to Calgary,
the city provides all the visual clues of vacuity that the filmmaker requires.
Brenda Longfellow, in her study of metropolitan dystopias, points out how
well Burns is able to show that “populist vernaculars, at least in Canada, are
indistinguishable from the globalizing effects of American cultural and eco-
nomic influence.”9

The greatest site of suburban alienation is the shopping mall, whose
existence is tied to the main means of locomotion in suburbia, the automo-
bile. “Malls are intensely ideological places,” writes Karen Virag in “From
West Edmonton Mall to the Westend Shopping Centre.”10 Calgary’s sister
city, Edmonton, boasts what was once the largest indoor mall in the world
(800 stores and services, 110 eateries, 5 million square feet, 20,000 park-
ing stalls), but it is cinematic Calgary that has come to represent “mallism”
in all its despoiling grandeur. *Mallism* is a term I use for both the ideological
valorization of the mall as a socioeconomic entity and for the physical space that it constructs. Its origins lie in the glassed-in arcades of nineteenth-century Paris that Walter Benjamin analyzed in his unfinished “Arcades Project.” Benjamin viewed arcades as a bourgeois phenomenon, home to the roving figure of the flâneur, who amused himself by wandering aimlessly through urban space, watching life go by. Burns likewise reads the mall as a bourgeois construction, but he sees in it a fundamental site of contemporary human alienation, a space inhabited by youth drifting through a meaningless existence generated by the absurd restrictions of suburban life. For Burns, Calgary’s commercial and residential infrastructure provided the perfect metaphor for youthful alienation.

MALLISM AND WAYDOWNTOWN

Calgary’s Plus-15 system comprises dozens of enclosed walkways approximately fifteen feet above street level that link downtown office towers. The walkway system has doubled in size in the past twenty years; developers of downtown office towers are offered an incentive of extra office space for “every foot of bridge or public easement they agree to build.” So the system has become self-perpetuating, spreading its tentacles throughout the downtown core, whose skyline, Manhattanesque in its density, represents a small population on a huge urban footprint. While the urban core is a jumble of high-rise buildings, this city of one million is spread over one of the largest land footprints in North America on a per capita basis. The glassed-in maze of passageways symbolizes the subservience of public space to corporate interests. Burns’s waydowntown was shot in the Plus-15 system and quickly gained cult status for its portrayal of the alienation of young workers. In the Canadian cinematic world, the film catapulted Burns into the spotlight.

Because many of the Plus-15 overpasses culminate in office tower “food courts” very similar to those found in suburban malls, the Plus-15 system may be said to emulate the suburban shopping experience as it funnels humanity to predetermined destinations. The system is rationalized as an extension of corporate Calgary, which doesn’t need to or want to experience the local weather or the underclass roaming the streets below. The heated Plus-15 network is
completely enclosed, so that office workers from suburbia can step into their attached heated garages at the front of their suburban homes, drive their cars on freeways to their downtown offices, park in a heated underground parking garage, walk to an elevator and ascend to the office. During lunch or coffee breaks, workers can access the entire downtown, including shops and eateries, using the walkways. At every moment of the day, suburbanites who work downtown are sealed from the outdoors. Using the Plus-15 overpasses, they never have to go outdoors and can simply repeat the same heated journey for the commute home, again never ever having to step outside into the open air or street. This generates a feeling of enclosure, a wall-like security and white-collar conformity for those from suburbia, many of whom have developed an aversion to or perhaps even fear of downtown street life. With the convenience of the Plus-15 system, they never have to leave their comfort zone; they can choose to spend the time away from the office with friends and colleagues with whom they share fashion, taste, and ideology. This Monday-to-Friday pattern can be repeated on weekends by driving from the house to a mall and back.

Longfellow considers the Plus-15 spaces, as portrayed by Burns, to be spaces of “irreducible banality, anonymity and reproducibility.” To capture this restrictive, banal reality, Burns begins his film with the youthful protagonist, Tom Bennett (Fabrizio Filippo), sitting in his car in the underground parkade of his office tower and smoking a joint before he returns to work. He and his alienated co-workers, all of similar vintage, have made a bet to see who can last the longest without going outdoors. The film begins on day 24, but the game is simply a commentary on every Calgary suburbanite who commutes downtown from their home, day after day, year after year, locked into the same hermetically sealed reality from which there is no escape.

The film’s symbolic impact was recognized early on, when the American distributor of waydowntown postponed its opening in New York until January 2002 because of the Twin Towers attack of September 11, 2001. Anything negative about the lifestyle choices of those slaving in office towers would have been considered an insensitive insult to the memory of the victims. Brenda Longfellow observes that whereas the phallic tower was once a statement of masculine authority, it became an indicator of extreme vulnerability with the September 11 attack. While office towers are usually associated in the popular media with narratives of corporate intrigue, Burns’s attack on the
meaninglessness of what goes on in them for most of their denizens gives corporate culture a sense of absurdity. According to the film, nobody employed in this milieu really works and nothing is really achieved. Instead, a great deal of energy is wasted on insignificant projects, like finding a gift for the boss or following the kleptomaniac boss to prevent him stealing from stores over the lunch hour. Interpersonal games are the main preoccupation of the cogs that work here. Brenda Longfellow offers a devastating description of how *waydowntown* and two other Canadian films produced in the same year depict urban life. “The city has been transformed,” she writes, “by the power of global corporate culture into a dystopian, soulless site of claustrophobic anonymity and redundant functionalism: chrome, steel and glass, food courts and malls.”

Urbanites are portrayed as “proletarianized white collar workers in their twenties and early thirties” who are “uniformly ethnically homogeneous (white).” She contends that the locus of *waydowntown* is “an anonymous, generic anyplace—or anyplace within continental North America.”

This conjunction of the “real” Calgary with Burns’s cinematic imaginary of the dystopian metropolis may be said to undermine the specifically Canadian character of the film, but it does so in a way that brings the issue of the Americanization of Canadian urban identity to the forefront. Curiously, the cinematic depictions of neither Montréal nor Toronto develop this link between Canada and the United States. The continentalist imperative that makes Calgary appear like any North American city is specifically linked to Burns’s virulent anti-surburbanism and anti-mallism. It is also linked to the generational focus of the film and its white-only universe, whose ethos has been formed through North American corporate advertising. Burns views global capitalist ideology as the enemy. In this way, *waydowntown* becomes a signature film about late-twentieth-century capitalism. That he never makes the “oil patch,” as it is known locally, part of his portrayal means that the film does not have to deal with the self-glorifying rhetoric of Calgary’s business class and its jobs-over-the-environment claims. By eliminating this fundamental aspect of Calgary’s socioeconomic reality, he is able to North Americanize the film. Other than the radio announcer’s voice-over identification of Calgary as the city in question at the beginning of the film, Calgary’s particularity is hidden to most non-Calgary audiences in favour of an anonymous urbanity.
In Burns’s hands, downtown as a fantasyland shopping experience is a counternarrative to the valorization of capitalist globalization. At the end of the film, the city is portrayed as a plaything existing under a glass bubble, a sealed cosmos. The city as mall is anti-natural. It is a space that is completely dependent on energy-devouring mechanical systems. As paradigmatic public space, it offers nothing except the distractions of consumerism in all its banality and anonymity. Every mall is the “same” essential place, engraved with tidiness and illusion. A mall in Dubai, in Beijing, or in Calgary is similarly constructed. The same air-conditioned universe of brand-name shops envelops the globe. When Burns portrays the aged Mr. Mathers, founder of the corporate office where Tom and the others work, as a spry kleptomaniac, he is playing a riff on capitalism as theft and corporate life as a mental illness.

Don McKellar, who plays Brad, Tom’s despondent co-worker, in the film, interviewed Gary Burns for the National Post when waydowntown premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2000. McKellar described the film as “a very Calgary film,” to which Burns replied, “Calgary hasn’t been overly represented on film. … This is one of the first films where Calgary is Calgary, and not some anonymous city.” In this interview for Canadian audiences, Burns was playing up the Calgary-specific urbanity of the city while at the same time maintaining the idea of the city space as an anonymous North American milieu. Burns’s overriding condemnation of the Plus-15 system implies a broader critique that reaches out to the very essence of late-twentieth-century urban-planning values: suburban sprawl, automobile-friendly infrastructure, and interiorized commerce, with everything contained and sealed like a lab. The ultimate descriptor is sterility—safe, secure, clean, and utterly devoid of any emotional or sensual interface. Everyone who enters the mall enters a space that belongs to, and is tightly controlled by, the corporate Other. In fact, the mall contains no genuine public space—legally, it is all private property—but it creates the illusion of being public space because anyone can enter it. The film cost a modest $1.5 million to shoot on video, and the locations were Calgary’s Eaton Centre, Bankers Hall, Canada Trust Tower, and TD Square—all part of the city’s urban-branded reality and all linked by Plus-15 overpasses. The presentation of Calgary as the epitome of anonymity and dullness aligns the city with the clichéd staples of sociological analysis. While Calgary has a significant Asian demographic, for one, it has never developed a diverse and vibrant urban
The City of Eternal Youth

The City of Eternal Youth

image. Compared to any Canadian city of a similar size, it appears as more or less monocultural. Perhaps that explains the surprise of the rest of the country when Calgarians elected the first Muslim mayor in North America in 2010. Nevertheless, the newness of the city (it began as a North-West Mounted Police fort in the 1870s), its links to Alberta’s oil business, and its overall white macho (and cowboy) identity make it a prime example of the kind of urbanity that Burns is trying to pillory. Film critic Rick Groen, writing in the Globe and Mail, found Burns’s portrayal of Calgary “surreal” and the film’s tone hyperbolic. The urban space becomes, in his words, “a patent absurdity,” no matter how real. Absurdity and surrealism are two qualities of Maddin’s filmic Winnipeg, but applying these qualities in Burns’s Calgary is quite different. While Maddin uses the devices of silent cinema (from diverse kinds of black-and-white film stock, to expressionist sets, to exaggerated pantomime) to construct his surrealist visual effects, Burns uses off-shade colour hues, banal dialogue, and stereotypical characters like a denigrated security guard to create his unreal-real world. It is not surprising that some consider waydowntown an exercise bordering on science fiction. This attribute is expressed in a scene portraying Tom, the protagonist, flying through the office and in daydream sequences of Tom as a Clark Kent/Superman character, first soaring and then diving to the rescue.

Calgary journalist Bob Blakey spoke to James Martin, one of Burns’s co-writers on the film, about the nightmarish aspects of office life depicted in waydowntown. Martin commented that Burns had never worked in the office towers of Calgary, but he said that he had and confessed that he didn’t find the experience as alienating as Burns portrays it to be. A Montréal reviewer, while acknowledging the element of exaggeration, termed the film “utterly believable.” That the film could resonate with a Montréaler suggests that Burns touched a raw nerve about contemporary urbanity. According to Ottawa reviewer Jay Stone, “waydowntown is populated by the very people you see at the very downtown malls the movie honours.” The mirroring of recognizable urbanity in Burns’s film is related to Calgary’s actual office space, its corporate identity, and its ability to be Everycity because it captures the monotony of office tower existence everywhere. The injection of the Plus-15 system, like a drug, enhances the experience and makes it even more surreal.

In a major study of Burns’s oeuvre, Patricia Gruben highlights a number of salient features of his films, including waydowntown. She notes, in particular,
waydowntown (Gary Burns, 2000). Courtesy of Burns Film Ltd.
how male-oriented all of his films are: “All four feature young [white] men
confined in highly controlled atmospheres, resisting the numbing effects of
conformity.”23 Regardless of whether the male imagination is epic-heroic, in
drama, or anti-heroic, in comedy, it narrates resistance against overwhelming
odds. Burns’s anti-heroes are slackers for whom employment is meaning-
less drudgery. Because members of his generation work in an environment of
“architectural and cultural blandness,” they can only find meaning in escaping
from that entrapment.24 waydowntown is much less autobiographical than his
first two realistic features. Since Burns had never worked in a corporate envi-
ronment, he approached that world with a certain sense of play and magic and
turned it into a comic-book image, a convenient way for his escapist male gener-
ation to enter an alien world. His gaze is not only white and male and youthful; it
is also working class, which brings a critical attitude and ideology to the film. He
visits the corporate world as if it is an alien planet. At the same time, he estab-
lishes the “reality” or actuality of Calgary by equating its skyline to the classic
skylines of other cinematic films and creating a split-screen montage of eleva-
tors, mall shops, and parkades that tell the audience that this city is like the city
they know, or like any city with an office-tower skyline. Human existence in this
space is “a bad drug trip.”25 This hallucinatory quality meshes with the illusion-
ary projections of retail malls, for which the made environment is pure artifice.
To remain sane, Burns argues, humans must alienate themselves from the mall
and adopt a critical stance toward its offerings.

This ideological bent to the film comes from Burns’s belief that he is,
as he specified in an interview, “serving the community” through his social
critique.26 That critique originates in a combination of his generation’s atti-
tudes and his working-class upbringing. Sharon Corder and Jack Blum, in
their commentary on the film’s “subversive charm,” claim that Burns’s politi-
cal sensibility is one of anti-Hollywood populism.27 By this, they mean that
the film displays a non-American populist outrage. In American populism, the
protagonist can rail against the omnipotent corporation, its greed and corrupt-
ing power, but he must always triumph over that evil presence and affirm the
strength of the heroic nonconformist. Burns takes a Canadian stance on popul-
ism: in his eyes, success, if any, is fleeting and indeterminate. A sole individual
might escape its grasp, but the grasp remains as tight as ever. The domina-
tion of modern life by the values of the corporation, whose only connection to
nature is a destructive one, means that humans become alienated from themselves as physical, natural creatures. They also become alienated from their social selves because the humanity promoted by corporate culture is selfish and uncaring toward others. In such an environment, interpersonal relations become flawed and confrontational. There is very little social support in a capitalist environment. Such a world is wide open to attack.

What is it exactly that makes this film such an insightful satire? With an anonymous skyline and a radio announcer’s voice blabbering in the background, Burns seeks to establish the typical urban milieu—the tedium of commuting in a car from a faraway suburb to work downtown. Then the screen is filled with a split-screen sequence of various downtown office venues—people in an elevator and the soon-to-be-identified protagonist, Tom, heading down numerous flights of stairs to a parking garage, where he sits in his car to smoke a joint, psyching himself up for another day in the workforce. The split screens are composed of different dominant hues—lime green, murky blue, and creamy yellow—which signal that realism is about to fall by the wayside. These garish, poor-quality, comic-book colours indicate that we are about to enter a cartoon realm of fantasy. The basic conflict in the film occurs when the daydreams and fantasies generated by the monotony and absurdity of office life clash with the humdrum existence of the workers.

When Tom steps out of his car to return to work, he sees a dead mouse, which he takes as a prop for one of his office pranks. While the radio announcer’s voice mentions Calgary in a fleeting moment that can easily be missed by the viewer, the Calgary-attuned audience immediate sees the significance of the dead mouse. It is a symbol of false rhetoric—Alberta’s oft-repeated claim that it is a rat-free province. Finding this “rat” in downtown Calgary signifies that all is not as it seems in the pristine universe of the city and its chest-thumping corporate culture. For the non-Calgary audience, the dead mouse is a sign that nothing natural can survive in this artificial world, which is a monstrous death trap. The only living creatures that do survive in the office are those that are sustained by artificial systems.

Tom provides his own voice-over narrative by describing the city in comic-book terms as levitating from the earth and then being covered by a huge glass dome. His thought is realized onscreen in a rather simple special effect in which the city is presented as a plaything ready to be picked up by a
Superman-type male hero and lifted from danger. The city as a comic-book fantasy is meant to symbolize youth and its problematic relationship with an adult reality to which it must reluctantly adjust. Tom’s musings help bring him into focus as the anti-hero of the film: he is too pretty to be a typical Hollywood square-jawed hero, and his purple-hued lips make him look like a badly coloured mannequin. But because he dreams, as Léolo would say, he is more than a cartoon. It is his dreams that actually guide him out of the prison (the mall) that he inhabits because they offer a counternarrative to the meaningless dominant discourse. The prison is actually constructed of glass, signifying a see-through entrapment, permeable by light but not air. The lack of fresh air is an oft-repeated observation by the characters in the film and refers to the stultifying “inside” atmosphere that encourages lethargy rather than action. The glass bubble over the imaginary floating city becomes the glass walls of the Plus-15 system of walkways, which, in turn, become the glass covering Tom’s cubicle ant farm, the glass windows of the office tower, the glass windows of the mall stores, and so on. We can see through the glass and what we see are humans as ants scurrying around, trapped in a bubble—an artificial environment from which there is no escape. In Burns’s cinematography, the human body is objectified as an organism caught on a treadmill or an escalator over which it has no control. It is simply being carried along.

Burns attacks the Plus-15 system because it is a replication of the much-despised mall and its ideology of consumerism. The mall pretends to be a streetscape with storefronts, eateries, and boutiques, but this streetscape is a totally constructed, corporately controlled reality that has no historical depth or evolutionary power. It has been made solely to foster commerce. The film’s constant reference to stale air presents this essential life force (air) as something that has been polluted and is debilitating. It is unnatural air. The metaphor of not being able to breathe, which the film exploits endlessly, implies that the mall brings on death, that it suffocates its users. In turn, suffocation suggests a tightening control, a stricture that has one by the throat. This unrelenting view comes from Burns’s view of the mall as an artificial environment much like the interior of a spaceship or an airplane. In contrast, the street outside is elemental. It has rain, wind, sun, smog, whatever weather is present. It also has panhandlers, the poor, the mentally ill—all of sorts of people. It has traffic and it has a streetscape that evolves with time as
buildings are torn down and replaced. It has a natural life that stands in stark contrast to the unnatural pristineness of the mall, whose purpose is to hide history and change. The constant, unchanging quality of the mall contrasts with the flux of the street, and it is that flux that Burns values. The enclosing sense of the mall feeds Burns's denunciatory rhetoric and his desire for the freedom of the street, its diversity, and its insecurity. In the mall, Burns tells us, one goes nowhere because wherever one goes, it is the same, while on the street one goes somewhere, because the streetscape changes. In numerous interviews about the film, Burns has denounced the Plus-15 system for destroying Calgary's downtown street life, degrading it to near nonexistence, which has been noted by numerous commentators on downtown Calgary's “dead” post–rush-hour ambience.

Burns adds some diversity to his film by featuring female characters and nonwhite men in minor roles. This could be simply for dramatic effect and to allow the farcical sex scenes to happen, or it could be a sign of comic maturity. Deadpan actor Don McKellar plays Brad, a forty-year-old office colleague who is going suicidal after twenty years at Mather, Mather, and Mather and whom Tom nicknames “Sadly I'm Bradley.” He too is glassed in. He has prepared a Molotov cocktail–style container (a two-litre pop bottle filled with marbles) to break the office window so that he can throw himself out. He repeatedly practices hurling the bottle but never breaks free. The “marbles” that weigh down the jar represent his mental health, as in “losing your marbles.” Tom, who has been in his first postgraduation job for only five months, doesn’t want to turn into a Bradley-like casualty. He senses that they are all being driven slowly insane by “polluted downtown air.” To help keep their sanity and to effect something outside their monotonous routine, four office workers have made a bet to stay indoors, in this polluted environment, for a month. They are Tom (Fabrizio Filippo), his nemesis Curt (Gordon Currie), Tom’s confidant Randy (Tobias Godson), and Sandra (Marya Delver), who is the newly minted assistant office major domo ordering people around. When Sandra asks Tom if he has “a minute,” he responds cheerfully, “millions.” Their work space becomes timeless in that the plot, which revolves around getting a gift for the boss's retirement party, takes place over a single lunch-hour on day 24 of their bet, during which time Tom sports a half-dozen-plus necktie changes. The sense of unchanging time, an eternity of boredom in which nothing changes except
the colour of your tie, is what Burns is trying to convey in this satire of white-collar work.

The comic-book spirit of the film is augmented by the office nicknames of various characters like Weepy Vicki and Sadly Bradley. Their identities fit the flat, two-dimensional plane of a comic book. Their comic-strip office life is filled with corny, interpersonal intrigues that are augmented by hallucinatory episodes like Tom’s glimpses of a Superman-like character in tights and cap or Brad’s masochistic stapling of slogans on his chest, or the continuous references to suicidal impulses. This is what life in the bubble leads to—madness. After being sent on an errand to buy Mr. Mather a retirement gift in the mall attached to the office, Tom, in one of his numerous soliloquies, asks sardonically, “What do you get a boss that has stolen everything?” What else but a glass vase, in keeping with the glass metaphor! The vase gets broken when Tom engages in a sexual tryst in his VW with someone he ogles in the food court. The breaking of the vase signifies the “breaking out” that will occur later in the film.

Tom’s questioning about the meaninglessness of work life applies to the whole capitalist structure in which he is a cog. He wonders if he is beginning to smell of decay, like the rottenness infecting Mr. Mather’s mind. This is the great worry of the young, those who enter into a world dominated by their elders and to which they must pay homage and allegiance. Tom wonders if he will end up as a Mr. Mather character, constantly followed by the young Sandra whenever he steps out of the office to prevent his being arrested for theft. Sadly Bradley is near suicidal after twenty years at the company, while the founder, Mr. Mather, has been there for fifty-six years and is so far gone that the only pleasure he has in life is shoplifting. It’s a mad, mad, mad, mad world, in the sense of being insane, but also angry.

Each of the four young white-collar workers in on the bet starts to unravel in the course of the lunch hour. Sandra’s self-esteem collapses because she has to spy on Mr. Mather. She develops symptoms of hypochondria and is assaulted by strange odours—frightening smells that eventually drive her outdoors, thereby causing her to lose the bet. Randy, meanwhile, becomes angrier and angrier; he is finally pushed outdoors while hidden inside a garbage can and then marooned, unable to get out. Curt, the corporate yes-man who hid the fact that he had once lived in the office tower for a whole year and so was a front runner to win, is so blind to the absurdity of his life that he never leaves it. The
only character who redeems himself is Tom, who claims that the inside air has made him “selfish and uncaring.” These are the values that life in the office and the mall promote, whether in the role of employee or consumer. This is the air of capitalism. Tom undergoes a conversion, apologizes to everyone whom he has somehow hurt, and decides to become a superman by stepping outside the building, thereby losing the bet. At one point, he yells out triumphantly, “I am not a winner!” Before Tom forsakes his job and goes outside, he symbolically liberates the ants. The film ends with a split-screen sequence that suggests his split personality and then a series of stop-frame close-ups of Tom’s eyes as he looks up from the street to the tower from which he has just escaped.

The fundamental motif of the film is the stereotypical comic-book male superhero that plays so successfully to young minds rebelling against parental control and the constant strictures of society. They can imagine themselves in a role in which they are superior to the adults who control them. Tom is a Clark Kent/Superman character, who by day is an ordinary mortal working at an ordinary job but who can, at any moment, shed his mortal identity and become the saviour of the world. He is shown flying through the air, and his role model is a mysterious Superman lookalike who appears to him from time to time in the film. While Tom cannot save “the world” from evil, he certainly can save himself from the evil world in which he lives. In this way, he is less American and more Canadian because his superpowers are limited to helping himself. In seeking forgiveness and offering restitution for his sins, Tom becomes a moral figure, transformed from a self-centred egotist to an altruistic, caring persona.

Burns’s use of the Superman figure is one way of Americanizing—and thus continentalizing: not only can this iconic comic-book hero can be considered the archetypal superhero, but Superman also offers a commentary on the male imagination and how it is informed by the myth of male heroism. While most of the males in the film are frightened characters crushed by their milieu, Tom is slightly different because he is trying to think his way out of the situation rather than keep himself drugged. His trickster personality turns out to be as clever as that of the epic hero Ulysses, who knows how to avoid entrapment and slay dragons. Tom’s filmic journey from anti-hero to hero isn’t exactly on the level of a Homeric epic, but his salvation is edifying for the audience. Unlike his earlier slacker films, Burns offers an olive branch of hope and
individual agency, thereby playing to the emotions of a mainstream audience. But the horror of the city as a mall and office-tower nightmare remains. The mall’s tentacle-like reach to every corner of existence continues unabated in spite of Tom’s escape from its clutches.

While the generational struggle and viewpoint in waydowntown is monolithic, the generic element is more complex. Burns mixes the conventions of black comedy with the comic-book genre in a preliminary attempt at a cross-genre film, but without the advanced animation, initially used in Hollywood films in the 1990s, that adapts comic-book and graphic-novel characters to the screen. Using simple technological effects, however, such as Tom flying through the mall (achieved by the actor being on a moving dolly with his tie covering up the supporting pole, which was airbrushed in postproduction) actually enhances the fantasy aspects of the film. waydowntown glorifies youth rebellion through humour and occasional use of fantasy. This easy-going approach to urbanity made the film an audience pleaser.

That the Superman motif represents an urban hero (the comic-book character Clark Kent works at a metropolitan newspaper) is apropos for a city that is meant to represent any North American city. The film’s spatiality is claustrophobic, but in a transparent way because of all the glass. This transparency symbolizes an internal imprisonment. Nobody forces the employees to play the game: it is a self-imposed survival game. Presenting urban space as brightly lit, ultraclean, and homogenized equates corporate culture with artificiality. The orality of the film resembles a series of sound bites as the denizens of the office speak in clipped phrases. Even Tom’s philosophical questioning is populist and simple to understand. The temporality of waydowntown is represented by a lack of heritage buildings, of historical depth, or of any substantive diversity, while the spirit of boredom and the need to rebel against the city’s imposed timelessness constructs the city as a site of inactivity and mental sleepwalking. The sense of automatism that the film conveys speaks of a robotic existence that is preprogrammed and unalterable.

Another aspect of the film’s spatiality and visuality is its use of verticality as the main spatial element. Life is an up-and-down experience: that is the main motion in the film. Going down to street level is the sign of liberation, whether by running down the stairways or throwing oneself off a ledge to the sidewalk below. The lateral movements inside the office or the mall are suggestive of
the ants in the glass case because they occur in designated passageways. With various levels of the glassed-in mall serving as another version of the ant farm, Burns also offers suggestions of earlier filmic views of a futuristic urbanity going back as far as the 1927 classic *Metropolis*. The emphasis in *waydowntown* on verticality and the artificiality of a mass society going about its mindless business is a resurrection of a trope in science fiction urbanity of the city as a vast vertical network of activity that is enclosed and imprisoning. There is no subjectivity, only objectivity. The verticality of the film serves as a metaphor for higher and lower morality. But this dimension disappears in Burns’s *Radiant City*, where suburbia has no elevation whatsoever. While downtown is vertical and monotonous, suburbia is flat and monotonous: they are two sides of the same urban coin, equally constricting and facile. Whereas Maddin creates a phantasmagorical city stirring with libidinal impulses, Burns creates its opposite—a saccharine entity that is so regimented that it invites rebellion.

**SUBURBIA AND RADIANT CITY**

With *Radiant City*, Burns moved to Calgary’s suburbs, a space that is the horizontal equivalent of the vertical space of *waydowntown*. Linked through the commuter-worker, who inhabits both spaces in the course of a day, both worlds are equally vacuous. Rather than the universe of young singles living in a high-rise office tower in *waydowntown*, we are presented with a world of young families living on a stretch of prairie filled with cookie-cutter neighbourhoods. Again, Burns turned to a collaborator, CBC journalist and radio host Jim Brown, this time for both the writing of the screenplay and the directing. While Maddin called *My Winnipeg* a “docu-fantasy,” Burns was working in a related genre, the faux documentary, a film genre that mixes fiction with nonfiction in much the same way that creative nonfiction blends fiction and nonfiction. The purpose of this mixing of opposites is to add a greater emotional element to the film, to illustrate dramatically the filmmaker’s point of view. The Moss family, the focal point of the film, is fictional, but the landscape of the Calgary suburbs is real enough, as are the various experts whom Burns engages to pillory the architecture and the social dynamics that suburbs create within families and their communities. In an interview with the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Burns explained
that living in Calgary means that “you can’t avoid suburbs. It’s the defining characteristic of this city.”

Although a few years earlier, he had said that it was the Plus-15 system and the mall that defined Calgary, they are in fact two sides of the same coin. While Maddin equates Winnipeg with snow, sleepwalking, and eroticism, Burns equates Calgary’s suburbs with “a skin disease.” Burns himself lives in Calgary’s inner city, in the funky neighbourhood of Sunnyside, a liberal-minded, mixed community of century-old homes, walk-up rental housing from the 1970s, and upscale townhouses, with a commercial district of coffee shops, restaurants and clothing stores only a few minutes’ walk away. Just as he never worked downtown, he does not live in the new suburbs that he describes. His “village” of Sunnyside is as far politically, socially, and architecturally as one can be in Calgary from the city’s ever-increasing suburban sprawl. In local mythology, Sunnyside represents nonconformity, just like Burns’s films do.

Radiant City was co-produced by the CBC, the NFB (National Film Board), and Burns’s own company, making it a production dominated by the public sector. Since both the CBC and the NFB share a legacy of social criticism, informed public discourse, and investment in the documentary mode of filmmaking, their involvement in the project confirms the film’s social messaging. In the same way that Maddin’s Saddest Music in the World and My Winnipeg complement each other in a fantasy depiction of one city, so Burns’s waydowntown and Radiant City constitute an exercise in twinned polemics. One of Canada’s most knowledgeable interpreters of Canadian cinema, Geoff Pevere, calls Radiant City “funny, astute and more than slightly unsettling.”

Burns’s rhetoric likens suburbs to monstrosities. Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell, as a commentator in the film, characterizes contemporary suburbia as “post-apocalyptic,” meaning that it represents science fiction film images of lifeless quiet. It is a kind of dead zone inhabited by zombies, who are mirror images of the automatons in the office tower and the mall. Everything is so neat, so tidy, so manicured that it looks unreal and artificial, just like a mall.

When the film debuted at the Calgary International Film Festival in the fall of 2006, a Calgary journalist described its subject matter as “the relentlessly beige miasma of cul de sacs that ring Calgary and most every city on the continent.” Again, we have the equation between Calgary and other North American cities, an indication of Burns’s ability to use Calgary to represent the worst of the continent’s contemporary urban space. Another aspect that
links Radiant City to waydowntown is the theme of fakeness. Co-writer Jim Brown describes the faux style of suburban houses as “fake Arts and Crafts, fake Tudor, or fake Victorian.” It is the same fakeness, the same sense of a false community (of consumers) that inhabits the mall. Both Brown and Burns are convinced that suburbia needs to be replaced with a “new urbanism” that includes mixed housing (read different classes), real rather than chain restaurants, convenient public transportation, and, most of all, a vibrant street life that comes from proximity and diversity.

While the filmmakers dream of an alternative to the fake facades of malls and suburban homes, those who share the corporate mindset that lies at the core of Calgary’s socioeconomic identity view both as beneficial. They see malls and suburbia as vibrant and attractive spaces, and they appreciate the emphasis on safety, security, and homogeneity. For Burns, the most problematic part of suburbia is its utopian aspirations. Radiant City is named after the imaginary urban universe, “Ville Radieuse,” conceived by French architect Le Corbusier in the 1930s. The whole idea of a “planned” community or urban space in which a person or a group decides how to satisfy human needs in a built environment is precisely the approach that Burns rejects. He prefers a denser, more varied, urban identity that reflects the historical evolution of a site.

While waydowntown has a single oblique reference to Calgary, the name of the city where Radiant City’s suburbs are located is never mentioned. Again, we have the urban anonymity that allows both films to speak for a wider identity than just Calgary. Burns’s collaborator, Jim Brown, grew up in the suburb of Don Mills (now part of Toronto) in the 1960s and 1970s. In comparing his childhood experience with the new suburban reality, he noted that contemporary suburbs are “completely different from those built in the ’60s and ’70s, where . . . you could still ride your bike to a whole bunch of different stores, the library, ball diamonds.” The whole idea of suburbia is the clustering of functions, but separating residences from services (such as malls) forces people to drive, sometimes long distances. In a nod to the architect Le Corbusier’s futuristic designs, however, Brown admits that along with the suburban emptiness, “there’s a geometric beauty, a modern, straight-line, clean-edged beauty, to these communities as well.”

Katherine Monk says that Radiant City is a journey “even further down the rabbit hole” than waydowntown. But she is wary of the faux documentary
style of the film, which, she argues, results in “generic visuals and predictable anti-suburb rhetoric.”

The view of suburbia presented in the film, both visually and narratively, takes up postmodernist deconstruction. By pasting the label “unsustainable” on suburbia, Burns ties it, as an economic phenomenon, to agribusiness monoculture, landscapes of chemical farming, tracts of clear-cutting, and rapacious commercial fisheries. Suburbia is constructed as a dystopia, an environmental disaster, and a threat to sustainable cities.

The film begins with aerial and ground shots of anonymous suburban tracts. In a glum, treeless landscape, we meet the actor-ensmbled Moss family—mother Anne, father Evan, son Nick and daughter Jennifer, plus toddler Emma. Mother and father are interviewed driving in their respective vehicles. The children are positioned in front of their homes like lost matchsticks. “I don’t know anyone who lives around us,” young Nick tells us. So there it is—a nuclear family in their cars living anonymously, or so it seems at first. The Mosses are juxtaposed to a series of experts who repeatedly underscore the failings of suburbia. The most humorous of these is James Howard Kunstler, the American author of Geography of Nowhere and other similarly titled books, who informs us that 80 percent of all construction in North America has happened since World War II and that suburbia is a crime against social well-being. Mark Kingwell, a philosopher and Torontonian, informs us that suburbia is a form of flight to isolation, a movement that seeks to avoid a life of the close proximity that is the essence of city life. But somehow, humans survive in this barren environment, supposedly devoid of sociability.

Burns and Brown then introduce the viewer to a series of suburban community names—Chaparral, Cranston, Copperfield, and so on—all of which are names of real suburban communities in Calgary. The Moss family lives in “Evergreen,” an imaginary community invented for the film. But the film is always balancing the fictional Moss family with the real experts or with a realtor who praises the “power centre” suburban malls, which are only a “short” drive away. Evan, the father, spends two hours per day commuting on the freeway, while the mother, Anne, spends hours hauling the kids to their various sports events and arts classes in the family van. A graphic tells us that the average North American commuter spends fifty-five work days each year commuting in a vehicle. That means, horrendously, that commuters spend the equivalent of eleven five-day work weeks in their cars every year. Besides
Radiant City (Gary Burns, 2006). Courtesy of Burns Film Ltd.
contributing to obesity, the film tells us, this auto culture also promotes intolerance because of the social isolation of commuters.

An important motif in the film is the fantasy world in which the two Moss males engage, which contradicts the theme of social emptiness. Father Evan, along with other suburbanites, is acting in an amateur production of “Suburb: The Musical,” which is a satire on suburbia being put on at the local community centre. Evan remembers a childhood living on a street where the overhanging tree branches from opposite sides of the street actually met. Son Nick is involved in an amateur video of a paintball game that he and his friends are creating. So Nick does have buddies; he does have a group of friends. Since Evan and Nick are alter egos for Burns and Brown, having the Moss males being creative and artful while living in suburbia is somewhat contradictory. Obviously, the experts in the film who attribute characteristics to suburbia are missing something. Burns and Brown show, therefore, how humans can subvert the dominant narrative.

The female component of the family is more defensive of suburban life. Mother Anne is the harried housewife who defends her preference for big houses in the suburbs over small houses in the city. She is the obvious villain. Another family in the film consists of a single mom and her teenage daughter, who use the bus because they don’t own a car and live in a multifamily unit on the edge of the community. One expert in the film refers to the construction of suburban housing as “social apartheid” because of the way it divides lower-income from higher-income classes. The contrast between the poorer denizens of suburbia who need to use public transport and the better off, two-car families is a core critique. This class analysis is something that Burns carried off well in waydowntown and continues here.

The film ends with the actors dropping their fictional roles and commenting on their own experiences of suburbia, a prerequisite for getting a role in the film. Their anecdotes add an aura of authenticity but no real depth to the narrative. This end-of-story truthfulness confirms that in reality, life in suburbia is not totally negative. It shows the actors in the film accepting the economic necessities that drive them to live there. The film lacks the power of Maddin’s delightfully autobiographical fantasy, My Winnipeg: it simply is not as engaging, but that is to be expected considering the topic. Burns is not creating a sensationalist “Suburban Housewives.” The smiling Moss family in
the closing freeze-frame, which gradually moves to a fuzzy close-up, is a fiction that parallels the “smiling” landscape of happy suburbia. For those following the narrative and trying to be engaged by it, the mixing of genres is not always seamless or comfortable. Perhaps Burns was limited by the inherent didacticism of the documentary mode, which is not open to his inherent comedic inclination, or perhaps the presentation of such an alienating reality in a contradictory way creates confusion. Viewers simply do not want to identify with suburbia, a place without glamour, drama, or excitement, but many of them also live there and know what it feels like to make a life there. For them it is a human place.

The acting in the film, while conceived as an emotional add-on to the documentary mode (the well-known technique of docu-dramatization), makes the talking-heads commentaries seem a bit unreal. The play within the film in which suburbanites critique their situation becomes a metaphor for the whole film. When the fictional Mosses and other families come offstage to reveal their real selves as nonactors, we discover that there isn’t much difference. They are typical Calgarians. This narrative closure is not as effective as the catharsis in waydowntown when the protagonist breaks free. In Radiant City, suburban sprawl continues unabated. The “horror”—as father Evan calls suburban life, referring to the film Apocalypse Now—never ends. In fact, the war metaphor is an underlying one in the film. The reference to the Vietnam War suggests defeat, the implication being that suburbia is a war on society and nature and that it will eventually collapse. When the teenage boys play paintball games in the mud of a suburban construction site, the scene evokes World War I trench warfare, and when they get in between the houses that are going up, it seems like urban guerrilla warfare. In the end, Radiant City’s black comedy and satire comes across as muted in comparison to waydowntown, and the film’s faux documentary elements can be disorienting to the audience.

THE FOREVER YOUNG CITY

Both of Burns’s films have a youthful focus—from the twenty-somethings of waydowntown to the Moss kids of Radiant City. He embraces youth as carriers of a counternarrative that exposes the hypocrisy and idiocy of the world
they inhabit. He also believes that the comic genre is an appropriate one for social criticism, a tradition that is as old as Greek drama. Calgary, whether as a downtown mall or a suburban tract, is forever young in Burns’s universe, because it is always eschewing natural decay. The city’s obsession with newness and disinterest in the old makes it a paradigmatic city for American values. American culture promotes youth culture in consumption, setting trends for the adoption of new technologies and fashions, and as a metaphor for its own perpetual need to stay youthful and alive. The contrast between the Old World of Europe and the New World of America has been characteristic of North American rhetoric for two centuries, but no other filmmaker in Canada has given his native city such a thick American gloss. The comic-book motif of waydowntown is part of that generational orientation toward youth, and the film’s adoption of an iconic American comic-book superhero character only enhances the equation between the embrace of American culture and the worship of the new and young. But the artificial environments that spring from capitalist development are viewed by Burns’s dissident eye with disdain and a certain apocalyptic fear. The grand narrative of success that comes from being upwardly mobile in the capitalist world and living the “good life” in suburbia is one that Burns repudiates and lampoons. He believes in the value of a preserved urban tradition, of an evolutionary urban environment that grows naturally out of older housing stock, and of a world in which people walk rather than drive everywhere. In the newer suburbs, nothing is replaced. The space occupied by the mall, the office tower, or suburbia, which are all manifestations of capitalist values, are turned into dystopias that are socially dysfunctional, intolerant, alienating, polluted, and controlled. The urban body, whether human or architectural, becomes an anti-ecological, psychologically stupefying, and geographically disconnected entity that moves like a robot or a zombie. This world is a world only for the living dead.

In Radiant City, Burns and Brown are upholding the ideology of sustainability-conscious environmentalists and the new urbanists who want to retrofit suburbia into a walkable space. While waydowntown has no temporal signposts because of its abstract futurism, Radiant City carries a certain desire for the past, a nostalgia for what seemed more liveable in the filmmakers’ own lifetimes. This knowledge of another urbanity that Burns enjoys in the century-old community of Sunnyside, which is an integral part of Calgary but is
never represented in his films, is the underpinning of his vision. That Calgary has generated its own prophet of urban doom is a sign of how far down the path of suburbanization his city has gone and how divided it is between preservationists and inner-city enthusiasts, on the one hand, and urban planners and developers, on the other. The multigenerational-family essence of *Radiant City* undermines Burns's universe of singular worlds and probably conspires to make it less effective than *waydowntown*. Burns's Gen-X interest in the slacker figure, the anti-heroic male hero, and the disenchanted dad trapped in suburban meaninglessness was confirmed when another Calgarian, Michael Dowse, made his slacker film about aimless white youth set in Calgary. *Fubar* (2001) developed a cult following because of its resonance with youth, resulting in a sequel, *Fubar II* (2010). It seems that Calgary’s cinematic identity, at least the indigenous one, keeps it young, comic, and discontented.

That self-same youthful unhappiness is portrayed by Mina Shum in her Asian-themed film, *Double Happiness* (1992), in which the generational struggle in an immigrant family becomes a touchstone for Vancouver’s transformed identity as a city that belongs more to the countries of the Pacific Ocean than to central Canada. Likewise, Vancouver’s “youthful” and “playful” identity is also probed in a critical way by Bruce Sweeney’s *Last Wedding* (2001) and is given both psychosocial and historical depth in Bruce McDonald’s meditation on media and celebrity in *The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess* (2005), all of which are discussed in the next chapter. None of them creates a suburbia like that of Burns because so much of Vancouver’s suburban identity has been off-loaded to adjoining cities like Richmond and Surrey. Instead, Vancouver sees itself as a high-rise universe trapped on a tiny strip of land between the ocean and the mountains that rise from it. Vancouver is represented by diversity of perspectives far beyond Calgary’s “slacker” counter-narrative and its suburban monotony.

A generational perspective and a white-male sensibility are the salient features of Burns’s vision that migrate into various aspects of his films’ visuality, spatiality, and orality. The visual treatment that predominates in both films is that of endless sameness, whether it be office cubicles or tracts of suburban housing. The spatiality of the films emphasizes enclosure and imprisonment in either a physical or a psychological space. A mood of sadness emanates from the tedium of a controlled existence. And the orality in both films is the English
of white-collar workers who are supposedly upwardly mobile: in short, the language of the middle classes, who claim to “own” Calgary. What a contrast to the orality of Rude, with its Caribbean inflection, or the joual of working-class Québécois. Burns’s films make their mark by locating urban identity in a white middle-class universe that speaks of a North American stereotype rather than a Canadian particularity. That Calgary should carry such an identity is just another aspect of urban diversity in Canada.