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## In 'Suburbicon,' an uncomfortable mix of film elements

**A**t 4 a.m. on March 16, 1952, a bomb exploded on the first floor of my Aunt Florence's new duplex.

With her earnest young husband, young daughter and master's degree in social work from UCLA, she was planning to change the world.

They were among the first African-Americans to move into the all-white Los Angeles neighborhood of North Adams. The Los Angeles Daily News reported that the bombers left a note in another black family's mailbox made of letters cut from newspaper headlines threatening, "We will bomb off all Negroes."

The neighbors took up a collection to assist with repairs and formed a vigilance committee.

Decades later, at a West Coast Thanksgiving celebration, leaving through family mementos, I came across a news clipping of the event.

"How cool," I said, with the authority of someone who had attended a few college vigils.

"Put that away," she said and left the room. "I don't want to be reminded of that."

To me the clippings described a righteous political stand. To my aunt, they recounted the night someone tried to kill her family.

Even in appreciation, I had treated the matter too lightly.

In his blood-spattered spoof of 1950s suburban dystopia,

"Suburbicon," director George Clooney makes a similar mistake.

Which is not to say his movie is a turkey.

Clooney wants to make the familiar point (driven into our collective consciousness by David Lynch's "Blue Velvet") that while the surface of suburban communities may look perfectly groomed, below this spotless veneer lies hypocrisy, denial and deliberate ignorance — and all kinds of hell are breaking loose.

In the current political climate, Clooney didn't believe he could satirize midcentury suburbia without addressing its racial tension. Restrictive covenants ran with the land beneath the vast sprawl of nearly identical homes that folk singer Pete Seeger described as "little boxes just the same," and middle-class communities in places like Los Angeles, Cicero and Levittown, Pa., selectively terrorized its newcomers.

Clooney addresses this topic earnestly and cautiously and places the integration story gingerly atop the main storyline. Distractingly different in mood and tone, it seems to sit there, precariously, like an odd hat.

In the dominant storyline, Gardner Lodge (Matt Damon) hires goons to murder his wife and make the hit look like a robbery. His sister-in-law Margaret (Julianna Moore) moves in immediately, ostensibly to look



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after Gardner's now-motherless pre-adolescent son, Nicky (the excellent Noah Jupe).

Wound tight to begin with, Gardner can't seem to keep it together as the bodies pile up with comic ferocity, particularly after Bud (Oscar Isaac), the skeptical insurance claims analyst, arrives. Bud can smell the "faint aroma of hanky-panky," but he doesn't smell it here. No, "this one stinks."

Murder, infidelity, child neglect. Ironically, no one ever notices. The commotion is over at the home of the new "Negro" family, the Mayers (Karimah Westbrook and Leith M. Burke), where the neighbors are creating a calamitous noise with

pots and pans meant to drive them away, breaking their windows and entering their home, vandalizing it, then marking it with a confederate flag — events based on the actual account of the first black family to move into the Levittown subdivision in 1957.

"Suburbicon" is a good film, funny with fine performances all around. But it is confusing to laugh at murder, then respectfully sober up for race-mob mayhem. It wouldn't be impossible to craft a storyline for the Mayer family that is both sympathetic and consistent in tone with the rest of "Suburbicon."

Jordan Peele successfully did something similar in "Get Out." As-is, the Mayers seem to exist only to telegraph the goodness of Nicky, through his friendship with their son Andy (Tony Es-pinosa).

This decent midbudget film has been critically maligned partly because expectations are so high for a script originally conceived by the Coen Brothers and with a cast bursting with star power but also to punish Clooney's pretty-boy, Hollywood-style liberalism.

Clooney has said his film is not about the African-American experience but about "white angst" — anxiety and fear of displacement by minorities.

There seems to be plenty enough of that to go around.