What’s The Fence for? Borderlines of the Heterosexual Family Home in *Hand that Rocks the Cradle*.

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The Hollywood thriller *Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (US 1992 dir. Curtis Hanson) starts with an image of a sleeping house on an early morning. In the intro somebody is showed biking in neighborhood. Then comes the opening scene where the white family in the white painted house is waking up. The mother is suddenly scared because she sees from the kitchen window that a strange black man is wandering in the yard. He turns out to be a hired-hand sent by an association for employing mentally disabled. The man, called Solomon, is asked to build a fence around the house.

- Is the fence meant for keeping people out or in? He asks.

It makes the Barel family smile and the answer is, that rather out than in.

This inside / outside or insider / outsider –opposition forms the central dynamic of the thriller, where the real threat for the family comes to be a vicious nanny. The borderlines of the family become visible through the physical borderlines of the house like, the fence, and also the in-between places like the entries, the basement, the attic and the outhouse buildings (a shed, a greenhouse).

The conventions of representing violent women in popular culture took a noteworthy turn in the 1980’s and early 1990’s. According to Chris Holmlund¹ the last decade has brought on screen a bunch of young female sexy killers, who do differ from the earlier representations of violent women. Even if morally flawed, they are not predators as the film noir fatal women and certainly not martyrs as women in melodrama. Holmlund² has pointed out that unlike the 1970’s Hollywood cinema since 1980s Hollywood has pointed

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¹ Holmlund highlights that the new killers come are from many different genres, not just thrillers. For a listing of these films, see Chris Holmlund *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*. London & New York: Routledge 2002, p. 73.
out several motives for fictional female killers. That is also the case with *Single White Female* (US 1992, dir. Barbet Schroeder) and HRC. Because of well-represented traumas, the spectator can relate to the murderers, and in a way begin to understand their actions. They are outsiders with a desire to quit the outsider position and enter the core.

I argue that one of the new types of representations of a destructive woman emerged in the 1980’s was a trespasser moving about and around the heterosexual nuclear family or couple and especially, their home. In these Hollywood thrillers the main conflict in the end is between two women, the good family woman and the deviant and sexually different woman. The new female trespasser\(^3\) fully entered the screen in *Fatal Attraction* (US 1987, dir. Adrian Lyne). In 1992 two trespasser movies came out: *Single White Female* and *Hand that Rocks the Cradle*.

Most of these new representations of violent women have received a shocked reception among feminist critics, and they have been called backlash movies\(^4\). In my forthcoming thesis on representations of violent women in contemporary popular culture I’m especially interested in the trespasser movies because of the female-female-opposition. I’m not willing to nail the interpretation within the good representations – bad representations –dichotomy. This kind of perspective has been considered a narrow politics of representation in queer studies. Ellis Hanson has argued that this perspective produces an overly simplified spectatorship. In search for positive images the scholars start asking how they look at us, how they see us. Hanson claims that both ‘they’ and ‘us’ need to be deconstructed.\(^5\) Therefore my question is, whether these female trespasser movies can be seen in the context of the recent crises of the nuclear family and

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3. She didn’t come from nowhere. Robin Wood argues in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and beyond.* (New York: Columbia University Press 1998, see Chapter 3: The couple and the Other) that this unmarried woman – family woman opposition has been central in cinema from Europe to the U.S. The marriage novel (a genre where woman writers have been well represented from the 19\(^{th}\) century in Northern Europe) has also conventions of picturing a stranger or guest threatening the family harmony. And of course a stranger visiting the family house have had central place in the tradition of horror movies.


heterosexuality and if they could also have interpretations where the vulnerability of the heterosexual family institution is revealed.

My starting point is Lynda Hart’s argument, that the heterosexual woman is a cultural construction, which is often supported by the representations of non-normative people, especially violent women. When analysing the physical borderlines in HRC I am especially interested in the use of the outsider characters to support the white heterosexual family ideology and heteronormativity.

In these trespasser films husbands or future husbands are usually ‘soft’ men. They are usually in a side role since the final conflict is between two women, the traditional family woman and the deviant woman, who is also to some extent expressing non-normative sexuality (like obsessional adultery, interest in sadomasochism, potential bisexuality, expressing pleasure when secretly breastfeeding another woman’s baby).

The family woman can actually have a male trustee or buddy close to her, who’s sexuality doesn’t pose a threat to the heterosexual relationship; in SWF a gay man living in the same building; in HRC a child-like mentally disabled black man, Solomon, who is working in the garden, not much seen inside the house.

**The Plot Summary**

Dr. Mott, a gynecologist, is accused for having sexually molested his patients. His suicide leads his wife to financial troubles and the situation causes her a miscarriage (and she’s also made a hysterectomy). Mrs. Mott (played by Rebecca De Mornay) with the pseudonym Peyton Flanders applies for the nanny position in the family who made the first complaint on Dr. Mott’s behavior. The Bartel family has a kindergarten age girl Emma and a baby-boy Joe. The mother of the family Claire Bartel (played by Annabella Sciorra) is a gardener and needs time for herself because she’s building a greenhouse to

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7 Even though in HRC the vicious nanny tries to frame him a pedophile.
the garden of the house. Her husband Michael (played by Matt McCoy) encourages her to get domestic help. In the garden and around the house is also working a black mentally disabled man Solomon (played by Ernie Hudson) Claire has employed. Peyton’s revenge turns out to be a crusade after Claire. Starting with small things, like destroying Claire’s dress, Peyton ends up to several murder attempts on Claire. She is obviously missing her lost baby and instead of destroying the whole family, it turns out that she wants to be a family mother in the place of the family mother. Peyton also kills a family friend, Marlene Craven (played by Julianne Moore), who has got a hint of Peyton’s actual identity.

Meanings of Home

In my forthcoming thesis on violent women in contemporary popular culture I’m interested in the cultural representations of violence and home in relation to gender, heterosexuality / non-heterosexuality and race. Women’s studies’ discussion on the gendered meanings of home started in the 1980’s when feminists in cultural / human geography started to question their male colleagues’ idealized image of home as a haven. Feminists argued that for many women home is rather a scene of unpaid undervalued work and family violence.

Black feminists argued in response that the idea of household and domestic work as traps is racially differing: for black women in western world the domestic work has historically meant working in the home of somebody else and the children they have provided full time care for have been white children of white families. Since then lesbian, gay and queer studies have also started to discuss the links between the cultural construction of heteronormativity and ‘home’.

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8 My overall interest to this film rises from this woman-woman closeness/competition relationship. Other films I will be rereading within my thesis on violent women in contemporary popular culture are Single White Female and Fatal Attraction. In addition my corpus includes also feminist detective stories by Barbara Wilson (U.S), Laurie R. King (U.S), Minnette Walters (U.K.) and Leena Lehtolainen (FIN)
9 The housewife trap being a white middle-class construct. About these discussions see for example Gillian Rose Feminism and Geography: limits of geographical knowledge. Cambridge: Polity 1993.
In HRC the in-between spaces, like the greenhouse, the attic and the garden with a new fence, become meaningful scenes. Borderlines mark outsider-ness but outsider-ness is also produced by outside places. As a nanny, Peyton has her room in the basement, and Solomon is mostly moving around the house. If he is shown inside the house, he is situated near the entrances or in the stairways. He is never shown in the core of the house, the living room, where Peyton enters to have tea when she applies for the job. Peyton sits in the same dinner table and she even spends time in the master bedroom when Claire is dressing up for a dinner out. When Solomon sees through the window how Peyton is breastfeeding Joe, Peyton threatens him outside the house against the wall and emphasizes that she will be the one whose story the family will believe. While both are servants, they still have a certain hierarchy, mainly because of their mental ability difference, but also because the white nanny is a civilized indoor servant, the black man an outdoor servant able to bring in dust and dirt.

In HRC the main conflict is constructed between the two women: a good family woman and a vicious nanny, who tries to take the wife’s place in the family. Non-normative outsider characters, Solomon and the family-friend Marlene, are used to support this opposition. Suzanna Danuta Walters\textsuperscript{11} has read the death of Marlene (killed by the collapsed glass roof of the greenhouse) as a punishment for women working outside the home: the original reason for a need of the nanny was Claire’s decision to build herself a greenhouse – even if being a mother of a newborn baby. Interestingly Marlene represents the traditional image of an Other woman. She is Michaels ex-girlfriend, she smokes, she makes more money than her husband and she is bossy and rough for her male subordinates in the real estate office she works in. She also represents the City woman (sexy outfit, hectic childless working life style) in contrast to the family woman (cosy outlook, working with her plants and flowers in the idyllic home sphere): Robin Wood (1998) has described. In Opposition to Walters I would rather argue that Marlene is an easy victim: she is the only one whom Peyton manages to kill. The rejection is rather on

of her lifestyle than for Claire’s work outside home. Marlene is needed in the storyline because her brightness and apparent toughness makes her easier to recognize another ‘Other’, Peyton. Marlene finds her suspicious from the very beginning, and she’s the one who warns Claire against letting another woman live in her house because ‘the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world’. In the same way as one of the outsiders, Solomon is the first one who can see the fraud on Peyton’s face.

The closing scene features a duel of the family woman and the Other woman, who is finally destroyed by the family woman. In the end Peyton falls on the fence, which stabs her body though. She ends up lying there, in between the house and the outside world. Solomon is also a helping hand in the final scene in the attic (when Michael lies in basement both feet broken)

According to Robin Wood (1998, 39) patriarchal heteronormativity needs to be banally recreated through the repetition of popular culture, where time after time the madonna-like family woman destroys the whore-like Other woman. He has noted that usually these films end with a madonna image and there is a conclusion in the home. This is also the case with HRC. As you can see, the very last picture is the picture of the family house. The last scene also includes a typical madonna-figure, when Claire is hugging her children. I ask you also to pay attention to Solomon in this scene.

[I will be showing the ending by VCR]

Solomon, who has never really been seen inside the house, is here repeatedly asked to join Claire and Emma downstairs. In the character Solomon the white heteronormativity is produced through his childlikeness, typical for Hollywood conventions when representing black people12, and asexuality as a consequence of mental disability – also a

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Hollywood convention. He can enter the home without threatening its grounds, the white heteronormativity.

First times I saw this film, I was confused when I saw Solomon exiting with swinging the hips. I was wondering if he’s walking was meant to be feminine and gay: sissy behavior. Since it didn’t make much sense, I have been reading it (struggling, like reading a foreign newspaper with a dictionary) as probably meant to be funny, an exhilarating end: a big simple-minded man, so happy he almost dances when the white family asks him carry the baby and come inside.

For my reading position it’s typical that however I understood the shot, I didn’t laugh. In the first place I didn’t notice that I should be laughing here – I argue that the reason is in my case, that my reading position for these movies is an outsiders position. In my spectatorship the main message seams to become that the heterosexual family institution is in constant danger. And that since mid the 1980’s the danger in popular culture has started to lurk behind the closeness of women.

I disagree with those feminist critics who see these trespasser films as simple stories with the subordinating message, that all women should stay in traditional gender roles or they will be punished. The multitude of motives makes the trespassers understandable. Peyton’s character is not totally bad. Her motives contain ultimate losses: she has lost her husband, her fertility, her financial stability and home. With her outlook she doesn’t even fit to the femme fatale conventions (like Marlene does). She isn’t actually craving for the family man, but the family woman’s position. When wanting to be Claire, she is also identifying with her. The fact that she is able to breastfeed Joe shows that the biological mother of a child can be easily replaced. On the other hand the ‘perfect’ family woman is portrayed as weak. Claire is also asthmatic and she can be seen almost suffocating whenever she faces troubles in her family life, and she is not able to protect her daughter.

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13 I mean the phenomenon that Hollywood movies are making spectacular the fact that also mentally disabled people can fall in love.
for kindergarten bullying like Peyton is\textsuperscript{15}. Claire isn’t an ultimate good and succesfull leading character to be identified with.

For me it’s confusing that some of the identification I can experience when seeing / reading some representations of violent women (not all, of course) have not had much space in the lesbian / feminist research tradition. An overly simplified spectatorship is constructed within a context of the narrow politics of representation, and we do not all fit in there -even though, ironically, we have identities (like feminist or lesbian) that are expected to product those moral interpretations. In my forthcoming thesis I would rather see the different representations having many optional interpretations, without the need to operate with the simple dichotomy of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ representations.

\textsuperscript{15} Even if the scene is rather ambivalent.