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Autor: González, Macarena Garcia
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Housewives: Living in a *cul-de-sac*

von Macarena García González

From Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* to the TV series *Desperate Housewives*, a review of the commitment, boredom and frustration of home-making women. This article inquires into how the 1950s model of the perfect housewife has travelled to our days.

In June 1960, Time Magazine’s front-cover story was devoted to one of the hottest topics of the moment: the suburbs, created the previous decade and rapidly spreading to the whole country. The magazine called the readers with a full-page portrait of a (white) lady identified as a suburban housewife: «The key figure in all Suburbia, the thread that weaves between family and community – the keeper of the suburban dream –». Time Magazine was revealing the emergence of a new, utopian lifestyle only possible thanks to those family-committed American women, who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s and became the iconic image of the decade: «In the absence of her commuting city-working husband, she is first of all the manager of home and brood, and beyond that a sort of aproned activist with a penchant for keeping the neighborhood and community kettle whistling». The new modellic woman portrayed in soap, appliances, and food advertising with the kitchen as backdrop had gained a new name: *housewife*, an identity label stemming from the combination of their new-bought houses and their bread-winner husbands.

Since the sixties, the suburban family has been widely portrayed in novels, films, and sitcoms in which the homemaking mothers play a leading role. Most of these portraits ridicule the domestic life of the typical middle class American family, an approach that needs to be understood in the frame of the depiction of the suburbs by the American *creative* class. As Lee Siegel argues, American culture has a long tradition of antisuburban sentiment¹, which may be paired with an *antihousewife* sentiment. The article of the Time,

even with its journalistic tone, satirizes the figure of the women in suburbia: «With the children on her mind and under her foot, she is breakfast getter (you can’t have ice cream for breakfast because I say you can’t), laundress, house cleaner, dishwasher, shopper, gardener, encyclopedia, arbitrator of children’s disputes, policeman (Tommy, didn’t your mother ever tell you that it’s not nice to go into people’s houses and open their refrigerator?)».



Time Magazine June 1960: The perfect housewife

A 1950s’ model

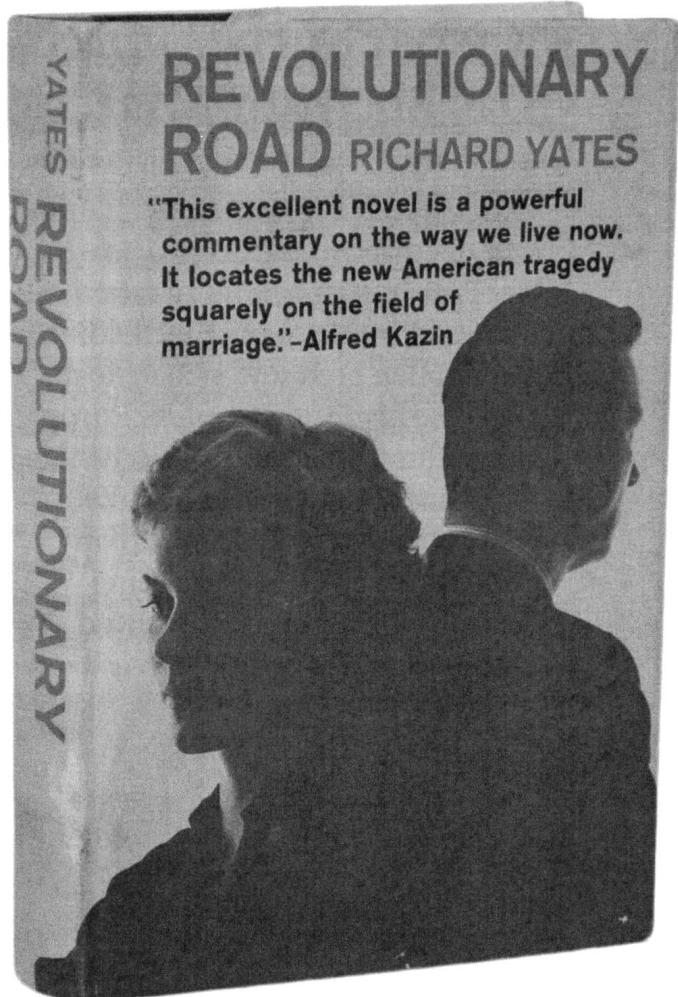
Being a 1950s’ suburban wife involves much more than just being in charge of the household: it involves looking after the children, the maintenance of the two-store house, and even the husband’s career. All ends up on securing the successful family reproduction, which speaks of the post war sentiment and its impact on demographic rates. The Time article satirizes: if she is not pregnant, she wonders if she is.

A critical portray of this is given by Richard Yates in the character of April Wheeler, the anti-heroine in his novel *Revolutionary Road*. April is presented as an atypical suburban wife, whose biggest defect is to have accepted to move there. The novel starts with a 15-page account of April’s failed incursion in a suburban theatre group, which gives a deplorable show and triggers in her a crisis. She, as well as her husband Frank, feels to be superior – cultivated, more intelligent – to their neighbors, and believes the lifestyle they have – his daily commute to Manhattan for a boring job, her stay-at-home motherhood, their boring weekends – is killing the creativity in them. So April comes up with a plan: he shall quit his job, they shall sell the house, and the family shall move to Paris. They feel happy, courageous, and more superior to their suburban friends after the decision. But the escape plan fails, because in the meantime, she becomes pregnant and he gets promoted. He cannot bring up his promotion to refuse leaving, but he does bring up the pregnancy and the need

to offer to the child the means to grow up. The only way to do so – Frank says, the novel says – is staying in the suburbs so to have an affordable and secure life. Only one disruptive character, John Givings, the schizophrenic son of the Wheelers' real estate agent, thinks differently: «Don't people have babies in Europe? [...] What's the real reason? You get cold feet, or what? You decide you like it here after all? You figure it's more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness?» (301) Givings is the truth-teller of the story, the one saying that they are playing the «nice house game». Guessing that the baby cannot be their ultimate reason, he takes it out on Frank, saying to April: «Big family man, solid citizen. I feel sorry for you. Still, maybe you deserve each other. Matter of fact, the way you look right now, I'm beginning to feel sorry for him, too. I mean come to think of it, you must give him a pretty bad time, if making babies is the only way he can prove he's got a pair of balls». (301) The film version of the movie – filmed many years later, in 2008, motivating the republishing and multiple re-readings of the 1960s novel – lucubrates on Frank's reaction, showing him full of rage, drinking whisky, and hitting the table. Adaptations are re-readings that choose an interpretation path according to the sociocultural context of the time they are made in. The movie *says* something that the book does not: that Givings' truth hurts Frank and that the real motive behind his refusal to go to Paris could be as simple as the fear of disrupting the fixed gender roles: man at work, housewife at home. *Revolutionary Road*, both the book and its later film adaptation, may be read as a description of the non-escape situation of 1950s' housewives. At the end, April commits suicide after serving her husband a last, nutritive breakfast, and making sure her two children are happy playing at a neighbors'. The successful film adaptation brings up the question of how contemporary the discourse of desperation of suburban housewives is.

A feminist reaction

To understand how the portrayal of the suburban wife has evolved to our days' needs we need to revise the second wave feminism's impact on women's representation. *The Feminine Mystique*, published by Betty Friedan in 1963, revealed to the great audience how, despite all the material comfort, suburban mothers were deeply frustrated. The enormous success of this book triggered a series of transformations in American society and hugely impacted the representation in popular



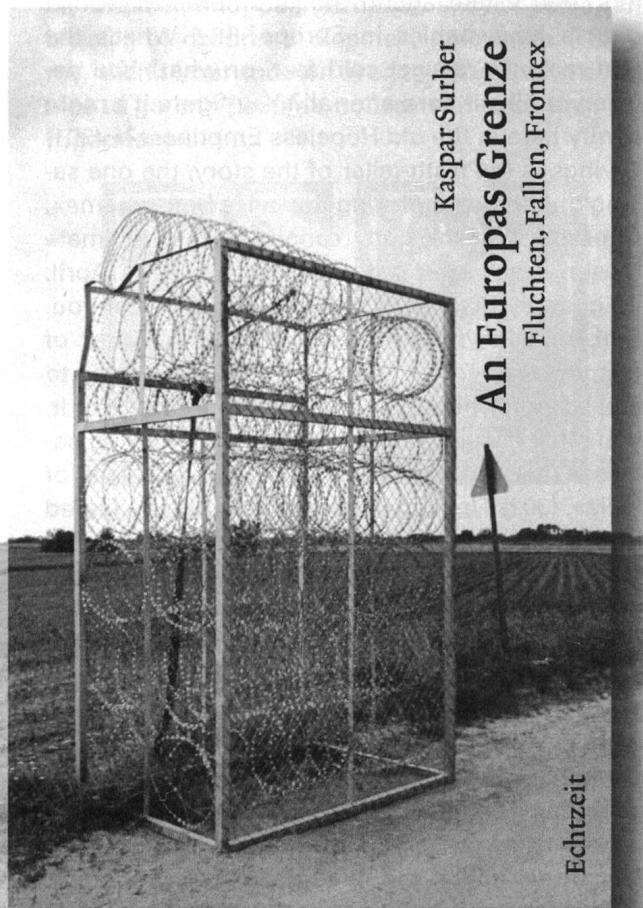
Dead end suburbia

media of the devoted suburban wives.

The feminist response has its better representative in *The Stepford Wives*, published by Ira Levin in 1972, turned into a successful and iconic movie in 1975, and later versioned in TV series, sequels, and remakes. The original story concerns a young photographer, mother of two kids, who moves to the suburbs with her husband eager to start a new life. She soon begins to suspect that the frighteningly submissive housewives in the supposedly idyllic neighborhood are robots. At the end, she finds out that the submissive housewives used to be a feminist group to which the husbands reacted with a man's club where the transformation of every woman into a *perfect* wife was made. As in *Revolutionary Road*, the suburbs are signifying the death of creativity. April could not pursue as an actress; Johanna – the heroine of *Stepford Wives* – is not able to continue taking pictures. The difference is that here, the suburbs are instrumental to a men's fantasy of having docile wives that enjoy

Kaspar Surber unterwegs «An Europas Grenze». Das Buch zur Migrationsdebatte.

«Auf diese Wiese kommt der Zaun», sagt der griechische Grenzwächter. Der Prototyp ist bereits zu sehen. Ein Metallrahmen mit Stacheldraht, zwei Rollen breit und sieben hoch. Hier also beginnt und endet Europa. Lampedusa, Strassburg, Griechenland, Warschau: An diese Schauplätze reiste woz-Autor Kaspar Surber. Entstanden ist ein Bericht, eine Sammlung von Recherchen und Stimmen.



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the housework and are, at the same time, hot partners in bed.

The multiple remediations/adaptations of this story in the following decades, show how the gender-role conflict of the original has been losing importance. In 1980, a made-for-TV sequel was produced, *Revenge of the Stepford Wives*, in which the wives underwent a brainwashing procedure rather than being transformed into robots. At the end, they take revenge killing the mastermind of the men's group. In 1987, when feminism was probably too outmoded for Hollywood, another made-for-TV sequel was made in which both, wives and children, were replaced by robots. Again, it ended with the members of the conspiracy being killed. A third TV-film reversed the plot. In *Stepford Husbands*, released in 1996, the men in the town were brainwashed and turned into perfect husbands. Finally, a remake of the original directed by Frank Oz was released in 2004, *Stepford Wives*. With a more comedic tone, the feminist message of the original was completely erased: the evil mastermind is a powerful woman who perpetrates the injustice on the other women. The remake also includes a gay couple in which one of them has been replaced by a Stepford-drone.

The history of adaptations of this feminist novel speaks of the backlash of feminism, and how the original question of the submission of the housewife has been relativized in later productions. The original 1975-film is a satirical thriller, a horror film, whereas the remake is intended to be come-

dic. The 1970s' novel and film raised consciousness over the frustrated lives of suburban housewives and the model of 'perfection' imposed on them. With the first film version, the phrase *Stepford Wife* entered the American lexicon to «describe a servile, compliant, submissive, spineless wife who happily does her husband's bidding and serves his every whim dutifully»². The following versions erase the feminist message wondering about all other ideals of perfection – the children, the husbands – and *redistribute* the evil taking it even to the female mastermind that plans the robot-transformations in the 2004 remake, missing the opportunity to make a statement about contemporary gender relations.

The modern «choices»

Desperate Housewives tells the story of five women living in Wisteria Lane, a cul-de-sac avenue of a suburban town. The show released eight seasons and scored three times as the most seen show worldwide. In the representation of 21st-century «modern» women, we may trace the 1950s' housewife-model.

As the title of the sitcom shows, desperation appears as the fundamental condition of suburban women. The series is rendered in the narrative voice of Mary Alice Young, a neighbor who commits suicide before the story begins and guides the audience through the secret lives of her female friends. At Mary Alice's wake, her friends wonder why she was so desperate; a conversation



Are the suburbs the end of all creativity for women?

soon concluded by Lynette who says that they all share the desperation. This first chapter sketches the field: suburban women have no escape, and suicide – as it was for April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* – is a way out. One of them is divorced – Susan –, another does not have children – Gabrielle – and a third one had a successful career before choosing to stay at home – Lynette. They apparently have more options than a 1950s’ suburban stay-at-home mother, but these options are only apparent. The housewives are all introduced to the audience with a report of the dishes each prepared for the wake. They are all homemakers and do not work – except Susan, the divorcee, who works at home as a children books’ illustrator. In some cases, they are still asked by their husbands to boost their careers. Gabrielle complains to Carlos, her husband, that one of his business partners is constantly trying to grab her «arse». Carlos replies that if he wants to do so «you let him», because he makes a lot of money from this man. Women are still represented from the male gaze³, there for the male pleasure.

Gabrielle is not the 1950s’ committed housewife, but she shares the boredom of those who married to a suburban lifestyle and the fulfillment of the materialistic *needs* did not content them. Lynette, on the other side, reminds of the 1950s’ focused-on-the-family-housewife. She quits her demanding executive job when pregnant with her fourth child. When she encounters a former colleague at the supermarket and is asked how happy she is, she decides to lie «once more» saying that she is happy as never before. The (sociocultural) context leaves no space for what she feels: completely overwhelmed and stripped from her individuality. In the second season, she returns to work after her husband decides to resign. The show brings the possibility of representing the stay-at-home pa-

renthood as a possibility of gender equality. But soon Lynette – and the show followers – realize that the equality is only apparent and that she will have to cope with the exigencies of a demanding career as well as with the exigencies of a domestic life that her husband is incapable to manage.

The women in *Desperate Housewives* are trapped in the 1950s’ model, but now it is not taken for granted that they will be happy in this role. The depiction of the committed and all-enduring mother has been replaced by the one of a seemingly depressed woman who finds relief in sharing her misfortunes with friends. But the exchange is only superficial, with no real intimate confessions taking place behind the white picket fence.

With the exception of the works crafted in the wake of feminism, popular American media has featured either frustrated women or sedated, ambitionless, perfect mothers. The contemporary depiction of the suburban wives, in fact, speaks of the backlash of feminism and of a revival of the 1950s’ values of comfort and material security even if they are at odds with the *modern* pursue of individuality.

Anmerkungen

¹ Siegel, Lee: Why Does Hollywood Hate the Suburbs?, in: The Wall Street Journal, 27.12.2008. <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123033369595836301.html>> [Stand: 14.02.2012].

² Urban dictionary.

³ Mulvey, Laura: Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in: Screen 16/3, 1975, S. 6–18.

Autorin

Macarena García González is doing her PhD on children’s literature discourses about ethnic difference at the Institut für Populäre Kulturen (IPK). This article was originally part of the project *Little Boxes. All the same?*, an exhibition and publication of the IPK under the direction of Prof. Ingrid Tomkowiak.

macarenagarcia@gmail.com



Obsequies in a cul-de-sac