

On the Un-homely Home: Porous and Permeable Interiors from Kierkegaard to Adorno

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Abstract

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of the home has been intimately linked up with the notion of the uncanny. Etymologically, the German equivalent of this word, *das Unheimliche*, enfolds a pithy slip from homely (*heimlich*) to un-homely or uncanny. In line with this thought, the haunted house, an absolutely central motif in Victorian, Gothic literature, for example, can be emphasised as a prime topos for the nineteenth century uncanny. What creates the uncanny feeling of the haunted house is precisely the well-known interiority of a house in which one can, always up to a point, feel at home. It is thus in the constant vacillation between the homely and the un-homely that the house or the home is destabilised.

In twenty century thought, the idea of the un-homely reaches a level of existential significance. Here, the question is raised whether it is at all possible to be-at-home in the modern world. In a wider sense, this thinking is linked with a more general discourse, originating in the nineteenth century, according to which the private home or house is identified as standing over and against the city. While urban life previously penetrated deep into what is now called the domestic, this is increasingly perceived as a threatening force against which the domestic world has to be sheltered. What literary topoi such as the haunted house can tell us, however, is that not only the city but also the house itself is construed as the source of modern anxiety already in the nineteenth century. In fact, the two phenomena create each other in so far as the emphasis upon private meaning in the home comes to correspond to a distrust of the civic domain of the city.

The relation between the homely and the un-homely thus implies the theoretical unsettling of concepts such as home, interior and private. In this paper, these concepts and their un-homely counterpoints will be discussed taking as a starting point the conflict over the interior played out in Adorno's attack on Kierkegaard in the treatise from 1933 *Kierkegaard – Construction of the Aesthetic*. The paper will aim at providing a theoretical basis from which to discuss the concepts of the permeable house and the porous home central to the workshop, rooted in the on-going discourse on the un-homely home that has been voiced since early Romanticism.

Keywords: the uncanny, Freud, the haunted house, the porous and permeable home, Søren Kierkegaard, Theodor Adorno, the domestic sphere, the culture of the interior, 19th century fiction

The Uncanny House and the Un-homely Home

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of the home has been intimately linked up with the notion of the uncanny. In this respect, the haunted house can be emphasised as a prime topos for the nineteenth century uncanny – and as a Leitmotiv it is absolutely central to the Gothic genres of the Victorian period. What creates the uncanny feeling of the haunted house is precisely a well-known interiority in which one can, always up to a point, feel at home. In the haunted house, the concrete residue of family life and stability is turned inside out. What at first sight appears to be a well-defined, intimate shelter of private cosiness is overturned and invaded by the terror of ‘alien spirits’ (Vidler 1999:17). An illustrative example is E.T.A Hoffmann’s short story ‘The Deserted House’ (2009). Things are no longer what they seem; behind peaceful-looking facades, familiar faces and everyday objects evil spirits with malicious intentions reside. It is thus in the constant vacillation between the homely and the un-homely that the house or the home is destabilised so that the uncanny feeling can grasp hold of us.

The topic of the uncanny has famously been scrutinized by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in a treatise from 1919 (Freud 1969). Etymologically, the German equivalent of this word, *das Unheimliche*, enfolds a pithy slip from *heimlich*, homely, to *unheimlich*, un-homely or uncanny. The dictionary definition of *heimlich*, as provided by Freud, states amongst others that the concept is characterised by ‘arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house’ (Freud 1985:247). This definition emphasises that being at home is not necessarily defined in concrete spatial terms, it also can be characterised as a condition or as a feeling. The uncanny or *das Unheimliche* is thus rooted both by usage and etymology in the environment of the domestic, the sphere in which what is *heimlich* is experienced.

As Freud mentions, the uncanny belongs to ‘that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (Freud 1985:340). It is thus linked to fundamental Freudian concepts such as the impossible desire to return to the womb as an original home or primary interior. More concretely, Freud discusses different psychoanalytical cases and notes that of intense uncanny character are ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’ (Freud 1985:351). In this respect, he resorts to the sphere of the fantastic and mentions waxwork figures, life-like dolls and automata as well as dismembered limbs, which most certainly take on an uncanny quality when these are capable of independent activity. He further mentions phenomena such as epileptic fits and manifestations of insanity as provoking uncanny effects. Here, the inverse process is taking place in so far as the viewer perceives a kind of mechanical activity as having taken control over the human body or psyche.

To our regret, while Freud states that the haunted house constitutes such a paradigmatic instance of the uncanny that it could have been situated at the very core of his investigation, he refrains from doing so. The argument is that this would tie the investigation too closely to ideas of what is purely gruesome. It also means, however, that the Freudian discussion of the concept of the uncanny remains at the level of

psychological processes and does not engage in any great depth with the concrete context in which the uncanny can be experienced.

In the present contribution, the close connection between the idea of the uncanny and the domestic sphere forms the conceptual starting point. The aim is to bring cultural theoretical and cultural historical themes into the discussion in order to move beyond the psychoanalytical discourse. For in fact, the homely core of the concept in question, and its puzzling untranslatability, is of a crucial nature. The transition from homely to strange, which is implied in the notion of *das Unheimliche*, more often than not has its origin in the most intimate realm relating to the body or to the domestic sphere. As for Freud, this allows for a fluid field of operation between the unconsciousness of the individual, and the corresponding spatialities in which the un-homely can be said to operate. It is, however, exactly these spatialities that are at issue here. In this way, the theme of the un-homely can provide an inroad to investigating the institutional quality of the house or the home. Unsettled and negated at the outset, through the slow unfolding at the semantic level from *heimlich* to *unheimlich* the porous and permeable character of the house and the home can be brought to the fore.

Using the haunted house as a back door entrance, this rather theoretical contribution aims at shedding new light on modern domesticity and what I will call the culture of the interior or the domestic sphere. By necessity, the constitution of the nucleus family in the nineteenth century alongside the bourgeois, single-family urban home with little or no public function must be evoked as a primary point of reference. In this period, the socio-psychological boundaries and operations of the home are transformed and moulded into their modern shape (Habermas, 1990:90-106). The theme of the domestic sphere is here proposed as a complimentary concept to the Habermasian idea of the public sphere (Habermas 1990). It is endowed with similar ideal-moral connotations and has an equally significant, if somewhat ambiguous, function for the development of modern, urban society. The designation of the domestic sphere thus emphasises the primacy of the home in modern culture. With the theme of the culture of the interior, furthermore, I suggest a precise characterisation of the form of dwelling, its material culture and institutionally structuring elements, which has the potential to provide an appropriate setting for or equivalent manifestation of the domestic sphere. Here, the interior manifests itself as the absolute primary element in creating the associations of comfort and security significant for the individual experience of home.

I shall return to the discussion of the home as a primary context of reference for the modern individual below, after first engaging a well-known dispute over the interior which quite literally negotiates the deep modern roots of this topic. This is given in Theodor Adorno's critique from 1933 of the idea of the interior in Søren Kierkegaard's writings, an authorship situated in the first half of the nineteenth century. While allowing for a deepening of the understanding of place and significance of the topic of the home for modern thinking it will, in turn, expand the perspective on the culture of the interior also of the present with a more general reflection on the cultural-historical constitution and psychology of the modern home in the tension between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*.

Kierkegaardian Interiorities and Troubled Homes

In the second chapter of the book *Kierkegaard – Construction of the Aesthetic* from 1933, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) regards the importance of the idea of inwardness in Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) thought in the light of the nineteenth century emphasis on the *intérieur* (1962:38-69). This is done by conflation of two parameters. One is a metaphorical level concerned with the space within – an early commitment to psychology, that is, a preoccupation with the consciousness of the individual. The other constitutes a much more literal level concerned with the developing importance of the bourgeois interior for the self-understanding of the nineteenth century middle and upper classes. This means that it also is of crucial importance for the constitution of the bourgeois class-consciousness. As such the two levels mirror each other and are fundamentally intertwined. Adorno thus regards the Kierkegaardian *intérieur* both as a metaphor for subjectivity and as a concrete setting connected with the constitution of the bourgeois home as a stage for the development of the self.

In line with this argument Adorno remarks that 'domesticity' constitutes a privileged 'arena of existence' in Kierkegaard's writings (Adorno 1962:46). This makes Adorno conclude the following very alarming point. The Kierkegaardian *intérieur* links up with the general tendency in the nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity to place the homely world in a balanced relationship with an inner world of the subject that has been radically separated from the world outside. Hence it creates the private sphere as a privileged locus of meaning, a refuge.

Furthermore, Adorno problematises Kierkegaard's focus on inward scrutiny in faith as a way of constituting meaning. According to Adorno this leads to disrespect for the world the subject is placed in and takes part in. This is reflected in an experience of loss of reality, and Adorno writes that for Kierkegaard: 'there is only an isolated subjectivity, surrounded by a dark otherness. (...) Inwardness takes up the 'struggle with itself', on which Kierkegaard, the 'psychologist' reports' (Adorno 1962:29).

With regard to the conflation of the concrete architectural bourgeois interior and the inner world of the subject, Adorno quotes a longer passage from one of Kierkegaard's works. This quotation describes how the interior of the parental living room can become an imaginative exterior, when the father takes the boy, Johannes, on a walk around the flat.

When Johannes on occasion asked for permission to go out, he was most often denied; as an alternative, the father occasionally offered his hand for a walk up and down the hall. At first sight this was a meager ersatz, and yet... something totally out of the ordinary was hidden in it. The suggestion would be accepted, and it would be left entirely up to Johannes where they would go. Then they went out the front door to a nearby garden house, to the beach, just as Johannes desired; for the father was capable of everything. As they now went up and down the hall, the father pointed out everything they saw; they greeted others passing by, cars noisily crossed their way, drowning out the father's voice; the cakes in the bakery window were more inviting than ever (quoted in Adorno 1962:41).

This interior *poétique de la flânerie* is meant to provide an illustration of a city spectacle for the boy who has been denied access to the real city right outside. For Adorno, however, it points to a caesura in the thinking, a moving away from the realities in favour of the limited perspective of the bourgeois interior, the bourgeois mind. By drawing in what does not belong to the domestic world to the interior of the flat, Johannes' father aims at scaling down the complexities of the world of the city and transferring them to the zone of comfort that is the home. Adorno seems to imply that the city is thereby ridden of its core characteristics, that this scene reveals the bourgeoisie's inability to confront itself with the realities of the modern world. By bringing in the imagined city to the domestic sphere, an un-homely element is thus added to the city more than to the home. Precisely because the representation of the urban environment is completely controlled and supervised, it is out-of-touch with the given societal realities. And it is there not something uncanny about the two male figures walking up and down the hall while interacting with non-existing urban scenes and characters? For Adorno, in any case, Johannes represents the epitome of a *flâneur*, but one reduced to his own representation. And, according to this perspective, world reflected as inwardness becomes the *point de vue* around which all of Kierkegaard's philosophy hovers.

As a 'man of private means' (Adorno 1962:47) Kierkegaard manifests the concrete opposite of Adorno's man of the modern world. In *Minima Moralia*, published shortly after the Second World War, Adorno writes that for modern man, 'being-at-home' is an immoral state of mind (Adorno, 2003).[1] Here, Adorno focuses on Kierkegaard's comfortable position with regard to his own living standards, an arrangement that continues to concern commentators.[2] For Adorno the modern world can never provide more than a mere 'Asyl für Obdachlose', an asylum for the homeless (2003).[3] Adorno thus places the historical persona of Kierkegaard, with his notoriously exuberant Copenhagen home as well as his proposition of a possible at-homeness in faith, as the radical opposite to his own position. Kierkegaard hereby comes to identify the ideal-typical bourgeois homemaker, withdrawn from the world, building up a self-sufficient universe of which he is in complete control. In this pairing of the proposition of an existential home and a concrete home, however, we encounter a puzzling interference of biography with oeuvre.

Some commentators have remarked the following point: Adorno's criticism of Kierkegaard's thinking as revolving around the idea of *intérieur* should be seen as closely connected with Adorno's attack on contemporary issues in philosophy and society consistent with for example *Minima Moralia* (Morgan 2003). And indeed, the connotations of the year of publication of Adorno's Kierkegaard book, 1933, are difficult to neglect completely. As Marcia Morgan comments, Adorno concludes his analysis of the Kierkegaardian *intérieur* by seeing in it the elements of magical incantation that he finds in his present and which he connects with fascism (Morgan 2003:3). This leads to an intense dissatisfaction with Kierkegaard which might be interpreted as the source of a blindness on behalf of Adorno himself – his presuppositions with respect to Kierkegaard induces particular conclusions. Interestingly enough one may rather connect this criticism with Adorno's resistance towards contemporary figures such as Martin Heidegger. This

means that part of his criticism is situated in his own present and projected onto Kierkegaard in the book from 1933. It therefore is relevant to question whether, in spite of the illuminating interpretation, Adorno's reading serves to cover up a more deep-seated homelessness also in the Kierkegaardian universe.

In a textual passage typical of Adorno's Kierkegaard book, the nineteenth century bourgeois ideology as manifested in the interior is dissected:

The contents of the *intérieur* are mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use-value, engendered solely by the isolated apartment that is created in the first place by their juxtaposition. (...) – the complete *fata morgana* of decadent ornaments received its meaning not from the material of which they are made, but from the *intérieur* that unifies the imposture of things in the form of a still life. Here, in the image, lost objects are conjured. The self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence. Their illusory quality is historically-economically produced by the alienation of thing from use-value. But in the *intérieur* things do not remain alien. It draws meaning out of them. Foreignness transforms itself from alienated things into expression; mute things speak as 'symbols' (Adorno 1962:43-44).

The intimate and inward-turned world of the bourgeois interior – what Adorno calls spacelessness, *Raumlosigkeit* (1962:66) – reveals itself as a zone of comfort set over-and-against the outside world. It thereby situates itself in the midst of the drama surrounding the nexus of the homely-un-homely. Only because so much significance has been attached to the domestic sphere of the home or the house can this intensity be reached. An intensity which, conversely, allows the phenomenon to fold in up on itself and revert into the un-homely, a home deprived of space. The bourgeois interior leaves no space for movement, for change, for porosity; if anything it arouses feelings of strangulation, rather than the agreeable restfulness and security as given in the Freudian definition. By means of processes moving from the known to the alien or from the foreign to the homely, Adorno describes how mute things come to speak as symbols in an effort to overcome what Adorno sees as the given alienation of thing from use-value in the modern world. These processes of inversion very much align with what was discussed as the processes of vacillation between homely and un-homely with respect to Freud.

Adorno's critical position also can be transferred to the representations of the bourgeois interior as given in Kierkegaard's contemporary world of fiction. Here, the heroes move away from the civic space of the city and live through conflicts, traumas and resolutions in the comfort of the self-representation of the private house. Life is mirrored in a series of objects and spaces that create a self-sufficient context of meaning. Even when, at times, the house is represented as a kind of prison which the protagonists need to get away from in order to realise their happiness, the bourgeois home always is presented as a cultural given and as a marker for moral standards. Adorno's piercing cultural analysis thus is very well suited to analyse the context of which Kierkegaard is part. In the early nineteenth century, the appearance of the culture of the interior can be seen as a cultural effort at making the house un-permeable. Yet, a further reading of the fragment from

Kierkegaard, which will be presented in the below, reveals a potential richness of the dialectics between the inside and the outside, between the imagined and the real city as given by the interior urban walk. This has the consequence that Kierkegaard's relation to the bourgeois interior is, at best, ambivalent, and that it also involves a critical stance with respect to the nineteenth century culture of the interior.

Turning the Outside in: The Nineteenth Century and the Culture of the Interior

The cities of the nineteenth century represent a culture in transition. An important change is the constitution of an increasingly confident urban middle class or bourgeoisie. With this comes a significant re-evaluation of the domestic realm. This is accompanied by changes in the cultural distinctions between exterior and interior, public and private, which can be investigated both on a concrete architectural and on a mental historical level. It is exactly in this period that the intuition that the home, and thereby the house or the dwelling, is imbued with positive connotations finds its first manifestation. It provides the individual with a familiar context of the material culture of the everyday, a private domain of comfort and control. It also is in this period that the home attains the quality of being a safe haven in moralistic terms, removed as it is from the dirt and moral deprivation of the city. The home comes to constitute an existential shelter from the world, placing the qualities of the bourgeois home over and against the city.

This positive evaluation of the home can also be found in bourgeois and Biedermeier cultural representations from the nineteenth century, such as novels or painting[4]. This often is reflected in a clear coupling of a domesticity-private-interior nexus, representing what is morally good, and a civic-public-exterior nexus[5], representing what is morally corrupt, that is, a general grouping of the vice of society. Whereas the female figure is tied to the paradigm of the home, the interior, the man is tied to the public life of the city. The woman at home thus also has the potential to take on a superior position in a moralistic sense, an understanding which counters our intuition of the repressed and empowered woman at home.

In the cultural environment surrounding Kierkegaard, an example typifying this understanding is the work of the female novelist Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773-1856). Gyllembourg is writing under the pseudonym of the 'author of the stories of everyday life', and produces a series of very popular novels in the 1840's (Gyllembourg 1849-, Steiner 2008b). In her books, we encounter a cast of characters comprising a catalogue of types of people and situations characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century city. These relate, in particular, to dramas surrounding the institutions of marriage, family life and social liaisons. Kierkegaard takes special interest in Gyllembourg's stories and publishes a so-called Literary Review on one of them in 1846. Despite the rather pessimistic cultural outlook on the contemporary situation, which he shares with Gyllembourg, contrary to her position Kierkegaard is not anti-urban in the strictest sense. He appreciates that cities have always been places of anonymisation and circulation of people, goods and services, and, notably, that herein lies something genuine about urban

existence (Steiner 2008a). That there is an element of the urban which cannot be domesticated or controlled, something which will always constitute an *other* of the domestic sphere, at the same time as it is something with which the home is inevitable interrelated (Lützen 1998). This means that one should apply a certain care in the reading of Kierkegaard in the context of questions of domesticity and urban life.

As the theme of the uncanny has called attention to, however, at the same time as the modern home is placed over and against the city in the nineteenth century it also is destabilised. We thus become aware of another movement, namely from a homely *unheimlich* to an urban *unheimlich*. Not only the house itself, but also the context in which it is situated can be illuminated by means of the thematic nexus of the homely-un-homely. The theme of the uncanny thus regards both the house as well as its city. Both are construed as sources of modern anxiety in different forms of narrative and representation such as the above given example of Gyllembourg. In fact, the two phenomena create each other – the emphasis upon private meaning corresponds to a distrust of the civic domain of the city, which previously penetrated deep into what now constitutes the domestic sphere. And against which the domestic world has to be sheltered. What is reflected in Gyllembourg is the way the nineteenth century interior closes in on itself and becomes completely self-referential with the consequences suggested by Adorno. Thus, the über-homeliness of the bourgeois interior conceals a deeply rooted alienation – it establishes itself as a negative of the wider context which, in fact, informs this institution.

Yet, if we return to the fragment from Kierkegaard's writings, the imaginary urban walk, it is possible to argue that this does in fact entail a potential for a positive dialectics between inside and outside, home and not-home. The quotation opens the problem of what characterises the urban lifeworld, of how the city is constituted, of how it can be seen and narrated. The quotation, therefore, also opens the question of how the city can be understood. The urban life of the streets has penetrated the interior of the flat and the text states that by narrating the most ordinary praxes of urban life, something 'totally out of the ordinary' is uncovered. Though trapped inside the boundaries of the flat, Johannes' father does not narrow down the horizons of meaning but widens them out. Here, we do not have to do with a manifestations of what Adorno calls spacelessness. Rather, the life of the city right outside the walls of the house is being evoked as precisely that context of meaning in which the house of the home is enfolded.

One way to develop this understanding is to invert the species of the urban un-homely or of the not-homely home, precisely to investigate the fundamental porosity and permeable nature of the home and the house. The uncanny with its accompanying feeling of not being at home thus might offer a potential for surpassing the dialectic of the home and its *other* and move focus to the wider context of meaning in which the institution of the home is situated. And it is exactly at this point that Kierkegaard's writings on the domestic realm and on the city may become helpful. A brief pointing out of this possibility is given in the following quotation in which Kierkegaard gives words to a feeling of agreeable restfulness, comfort and security while sitting in his Copenhagen home. This harks back to the definition of *heimlich*, of the feeling of being at home,

provided by Freud. For Kierkegaard, however, this sentiment is evoked precisely at that moment where he feels most connected to the urban life of the city surrounding his house. This indicates a particular spatial organisation emphasising a continuum between inside and outside; the city penetrates deep into the interior. While Kierkegaard seems to have none or very little visual perception of the city, his aural experience is heightened. Furthermore, he is sitting at a spot where he himself cannot be seen.

An ambulant musician played the minuet from Don Giovanni on some kind of reed-pipe. (I couldn't see what it was as he was in the next courtyard), and the druggist was pounding medicine with his pestle, and the maid was scouring in the yard, and the groom carried his horse and beat off the curry-comb against the curb and from another part of town came the distant cry of a shrimp vender, and they noticed nothing and maybe the piper didn't either and I felt such well-being. (June 10, 1836) (Kierkegaard quoted in Rhode 1960:13)

This, at last, points to a final semantic level of the word *heimlich*: *geheim*, pertaining to what is secret and hidden. Perhaps this allows a final proposition. The suggestion to develop a new way of investigating the home, the house and the city which dissociates itself from binaries such as public-private, exterior-interior or home-city, but sees the city as a continuum of possibilities allowing a particular person to take up a position that is more or less *geheim*, secret, hidden or sheltered, more or less exposed, open and visible. To these situations correspond different sentiments in which one can feel more or less at home or feel more or less not-at-home. As we have seen in this quotation, however, this sentiment is not necessarily coupled to a home-city duality, where the home connotes the highest degree of feelings of being at home. This, in turns, provides us with a conceptual tool to grasp the fundamental porosity of the house or the home, and the institutional ties between city and dwelling. It thus constitutes a re-interpretation of the problem of context, crucial for any investigation committed to working out the relations between an individual and a particular place.

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Notes

[1] In twenty century thought, the idea of the un-homely reaches a level of existential significance. Here, the question is raised whether it is at all possible to be-at-home in the modern world. This is thus part of a larger discourse which is particularly strengthened in the period immediately following the Second World War.

[2] See the debate Tudvad vs. Garff in *Weekendavisen* 2005.

[3] Many commentators have remarked that Adorno's book on Kierkegaard becomes fundamental for the development of his thinking and resonates throughout his oeuvre. This conjunction of themes between the book from 1933 and *Minima Moralia* should be seen as one of those instances.

[4] The turning against the city in the early nineteenth century takes several forms. One of them is represented by Biedermeier culture and motifs in literature, art and popular culture in this period. The term Biedermeier characterises the reactionary, inward-turned sentiments that are common to much of nineteenth century bourgeois culture. It entails a predilection for the domestic sphere, for pretty, innocent, idyllic and sentimental motifs and thus implies a turning away from the complexities that characterise, in particular, early Romanticism. The ideal is the bourgeois family – God, King and Country.

Complexities and problems are pushed aside and sexual life only exists for procreation, everything is harmonious, clean and innocent. (Laufer 1987).

[5] Public meaning in the sense of accessible to everyone.