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# The meanings of domesticity

**Bart Verschaffel**

*Department of Architecture, Ghent University,*
*J. Plateaustraat 22, B-9000 Gent, Belgium*

**The house is more than a place: the 'domus' is the principle of an order and a device for articulating differences and meanings one lives by. In many cultures domesticity – centrality, stability, continuity – is identified with woman. Yet, linking femininity and domesticity or house can only be reductive when one presupposes that the meaning of the house is simple – nothing more than 'place' and 'centre'. In this article I argue, mainly on the basis of seventeenth century Dutch interior paintings, that the pre-modern experience of the space of the house includes the awareness of 'counterforces' to the hearth-making. The female figure is as ambiguous as the house is, and incorporates as well that counter-force and openness that can save one from the suffocating house.**

> *I don't know how to get out of that which doesn't exist, my dear souls! The word inhabits us and inhabits everything to the point where one doesn't see how one can abstain from the imaginary which leaves nothing intact*
>
> *Paul Valéry*

What makes a house a home? What does domesticity mean for those who live too late to experience fully what 'dwelling' really is (Heidegger)? What does domesticity mean for adults who have to *remember* home, who have to become again the child they carry within, because only children can fully know how a house is a beginning?

What is a house? In the pre-modern world, people and things have their place. Traditional societies devote much time and attention to creating a worldview, to defining the identity of people and objects through assigning them their place. One *is* one's place. Societies then develop strategies to fix and keep things, people, animals at their place or keep the world in order. We think of the pre-modern world as static and stable, as a world made of 'strong identities' and 'strong meanings'. Pre-modern architecture gets its meaning and importance to a large extent from its contribution to this making of places. A house is a place where people and things can be at home, where they belong, where they are at their place. A monument always participates to some degree in the dwelling, and assigns life its place – even the grave does. Also, every house participates to some degree in the monumental by measuring the human to the world.

A house is more than a place: the *domus* is the principle of an order, it is a device for separating and bringing together animals and humans, the dead and the living, the feelings and gestures of the night and those of the day, meals and digestion, man, woman, children, etc. The house is a device for articulating differences and defining a hierarchy in the meanings one lives by. The house is the place where order is protected and restored



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when things start wandering around or haphazardly mix, without rules. It is a place that is 'cleaned' every day, where 'symbolic labour' is done in clearing away the mess and the dirt so that everything can start anew and life can go on, so that life is passed on to the next day.

Domesticity is in many cultures identified with woman. 'Huyselyckheid is 't vrouwen kroon cieraad': 'Domesticity is a Woman's crowning ornament'.[1] Domesticity implies centrality, stability, continuity, fixity, caring for the basics, and all this is related to femininity. In many pre-modern societies, woman's place is at home and in the house. The house is the proper place for the pre-modern, female labour: work that is done neither for profit and growth, nor for developing or inventing the new, but that essentially aims at making life possible and at passing it on. The house is *domus*. There is the work that transforms the harvest into food and supplies, work that renews house and clothes, the work of birth. In the bourgeois era the domestic substance is hidden behind a façade and a salon, the housewife becomes a semi-public figure with representative functions and a life of leisure. The pre-modern domesticity is repressed but it survives, hidden away in the kitchen, the basement, or in the back of the house. It even survives modernity – until today.

What happens to femininity when it is linked to domesticity? At first, femininity seems reduced: linking woman and house could be a means to simplify and control the feminine, out of fear or for whatever reason. Because, indeed, she does not stand just for home and hearth and Ithaca, woman is not just the name for what drives homewards, what brings movement and history to a stop, to rest and peace. Woman also lures into the woods and the sea and the night, she invites to danger and death. Woman also embodies the Virtues, even Truth. The meaning of 'femininity' is very complex, more than 'masculinity' for sure, and nobody, neither man nor woman, can relate to the feminine simply. Does the house dominate femininity? Is woman put in her place there? Linking femininity and domesticity or house can only come down to a simplification and limitation when one presupposes that the house is simple, and that domesticity is simple – that it is nothing more than 'place' and 'centre'.

Is the house what it seems to be: hearth, home, microcosm? The old, pre-modern world, a landscape of monuments and houses, seems to be a world made of centred and fixed meanings. In the modern conception, it is modernity – the big city and metropolitan life – that slowly undoes this old world and makes everything 'melt into thin air' (Berman). Modernity introduces exchange, movement and transport, change and openness, it induces the globalisation that weakens identity and deconstructs the home. People who live the largest part of their lives in a-topia, who work, communicate and socialise virtually, become automatically those 'nomadic subjects' who at every moment can (re)define their position and belong nowhere – except exactly in that permanent 'in-transit-condition'. This idea of modernity as an almost heroic, rather violent, forced liberation from the closure and fixity of the old world negates, however, the tensions and ambiguities within the old pre-modern conceptions of space and place. There is

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more to the house than this logic and force that centralises and fixes. More than anything else the house is a space where two equally powerful forces interact, limit each other and create some kind of a balance. This complexity of the meaning of house does not derive from a deconstruction of its centrality, fixity, or safety, by which the familiar then turns strange, the home 'uncanny', or the house 'umheimlich'. Of course, every meaning is a fragile construction, of course no identity is 'full' or saturated. My argument, however, is different: it points to a complexity that is included *in* the representation – in the construction of the meaning – of 'house' and 'home' itself, rather than being an effect of its de-construction.

An article by the historian Jean-Pierre Vernant on the notion of space in classical Greece illustrates my point.[2] When the sculptor Phidias represents the Greek pantheon with the statue of Zeus in Olympia, he represents the goddess Hestia and Hermes as a couple, although the gods are not linked by kinship, nor through common mythical adventures or deeds. They belong together – so writes Vernant – 'functionally': because they represent two complementary basic forces or principles in the structuring of the human world. Hestia and Hermes are praised in one and the same hymn, both are considered to be 'friends of the mortals'. Hestia is the goddess of the hearth, of the fire, the centre, of house and home – she stands for fixity, immobility – she is therefore not one of the Olympic gods. She lives among the humans, and precisely because she is always 'home', she lives no adventures, makes no experiences, inspires no stories. Hermes, on the other hand, is always on the move. He stands for movement, change, exchange, communication. He is invoked at gates, thresholds, at crossroads and bridges, in public places. Hermes is the god of businessmen and thieves, he is the postman, the messenger. *Hermes Angelos*.

The Greeks knew that one cannot pray to one and the same god for safety and protection of hearth and home and to invoke good luck for business and favourable winds for the journey. These are different things, different directions. Certainly, the world is founded, made by a force that centres and accumulates meaning, that attracts, protects – makes a place that is a goal and an end. Humans have to 'arrive' sometimes, they need to go to a place where life somehow comes to a rest. But this force that makes nests, this centralising force that holds fast needs to be balanced by another principle, by something that gives reasons and strength to leave, to go out, to get away. So Hermes, who guards over doors and windows and crossroads, Hermes who opens every lock and every chain, does not deconstruct Hestia, but limits Hestia. A house, therefore, is not just hearth, it is also door and window and threshold. A house that is nothing but centre and place goes insane.

A page from Michel Serres' book *Atlas* provides a second reference and illustration for my argument.[3] Serres tries to formulate what it is that turns space into place: into a site that carries a name. What is it that makes a place, an 'ici'? Places are made from some spatial singularity (a tree, the riverside, a well . . . ) as it mingles with lives – with the singularity of human existences and activities – with artefacts, trash, smell or corpse. These places, made of time, are the answers to the basic

Figure 1. Pieter de Hooch, *Woman and child in an interior*, c. 1658 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Figure 2. Pieter de Hooch, *Woman lacing her bodice*, c. 1661 (Staatliche Museen, Berlin).

questions. Questions like 'Where are you going? where do you come from? where do you pass by?' The answer is always a place and a name: 'I am going there, I come from where I belong, I pass by here.' The world is made of places. But Serres opposes immediately place and 'here' to the road. The road contradicts place and home: 'the road disturbs the *genius loci*, the road goes straight.' So the real answer to the basic questions is never a place, but 'somewhere, elsewhere', 'further, to the land of milk and honey'. 'Where do you come from? I have lost the paradise of "origin", the place I come from was itself already traversed by a road coming from far . . .'

The argument that the meaning of house or the notion of domesticity is complex in itself implies that the meaning of femininity cannot easily be simplified or controlled through linking it to the house. I will illustrate my argument by images taken from the Dutch tradition of interior painting since Pieter de Hooch (Figs. 1 and 2). In these paintings the duplicity and tension that structures the space of the house is made visible through the female figure: sometimes woman is related to opposite dimensions of the house, sometimes she embodies a counter-force to 'Hestia'. For a long time the images of seventeenth century Holland interior painting were considered as realistic representations of peaceful life in the bourgeois homes and towns of Holland. Later, after recognising motives taken from emblem books or from Father Cats, they were seen as moralising pictures representing mostly female virtue. Recently even Peter Sutton wrote about De Hooch: 'The orderly context of de Hooch's interiors and their adjoining

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courtyards and gardens create an eminently comforting home environment, the objective correlative of domestic virtue.'[4] I would like to go into some aspects of these paintings that have, in my view, been underestimated in terms of their significance. I will be concerned here with the way in which their interior space is constructed, and I will look at the relation between the figures and the space they are in – a relation that is very different from the way figures and space are related in portraits and in genre paintings. It seems to me that both aspects can be seen in terms of an analogy to landscape painting.

The Dutch interior scene – Dou, Maes, especially De Hooch, to a lesser extent Vermeer – almost never represents a closed room. The room is 'see-through': the interior is opened up by doors and windows, staircases and archways, but also by mirrors, maps, picture-within-a-picture, etc., to the effect that the space is widened and acquires depth, while a 'secondary scene' is simultaneously created within the image. The practice of dividing the image, and of splitting up a story into episodes, or to comment upon the painting's main subject, is of course very old. In her recent book *An Entrance for the Eyes* Martha Hollander argues that 'the ancillary space in Dutch art (is) both a diagram and a spatial mimetic'.[5] So there is a special and independent interest in an almost illusionistic rendering of the interior space and of how its parts create a 'realistic' whole. 'At the same time these spatial divisions are invested with older, traditional visual codes. The "secondary scene" can serve rhetorically as an ancillary image, a way to enrich the scene with antithesis, parallel, irony, or explanation'.[6] Hollander discusses convincingly a series of examples and interpretations, where the meaning of the image can indeed be developed from bringing together the different situations and characters, and where the spatial division is recuperated as a rhetorical device. Hollander's interpretation doesn't work however, when – as is the case in a series of paintings by De Hooch – the 'secondary scene' stays empty, without story, and shows nothing but space itself. These images can easily be integrated in Hollander's line of thinking, if one just takes her argument one step further. The empty side-rooms and views bring a depth into the house that does to the interior what the distance does within the landscape.

A landscape is essentially a representation of the World – the World being different from and wider than the field of action or the 'environment' of human actors.[7] The World is not the scene or background for human adventures, the world does not 'surround' actors and their interests, but confronts the viewer, and relates to the 'distance' (in most cases the horizon). Figures and situations are situated so that they clearly cannot fill the world – nor the image. In a landscape representation, this World – a version of a Kantian Idea – that is forgotten in life and action, is brought to the fore and offered to meditation. The 'see-through' ('doorsien') as De Hooch uses it, is a means to bring the 'distant' in the interior – as it is done in the landscape – and thereby visualises a dimension of the house that is forgotten in daily life, and that is negated by identifying woman and house.

The interior paintings by Pieter De Hooch are not portraits, showing faces and people in their

environment. They are not like genre paintings that present human situations and anecdotes, in a theatrical mode, so that the 'place of action' is represented also, as a decor. He situates characters and activities in an interior space, but so that these can never occupy or fill the space. They never take over the picture plane like an actor would dominate the theatre scene. They are, exactly like figures in a landscape painting, too small for the world that appears behind and next to them and thereby becomes something in itself. One can see how De Hooch sets up his images to produce this effect: his interiors are not open and directed to the viewer, but to some kind of distant 'elsewhere'. For a spectator used to bourgeois culture, his houses do not only feel empty and rather cold, they don't seem cosy, but they are in an almost unrealistic way open and wide or deep. De Hooch opens up his interior spaces through opening perspectives: views through windows and doors, views into halls and side-rooms, so that one looks out onto landscapes or façades, or so that passing through outside space – as across streets – one looks into rooms and houses again. He opens up secondary perspectives through figures who look out through doors and windows at views that are not visible for the beholder, he shows light falling in without indicating its origin, he uses staircases to suggest vertical depth in the interior space, etc. He often opens up the rooms in two or three directions at once, and so intensifies the sense of depth.

In these interiors De Hooch paints women, most often pursuing their daily, homely activities, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of their maid or children. But at the same time he does not represent the interiors they are in as a hearth. The women are present and 'at home', but their presence and activities do not fill and do not define the space. Peter Sutton notices this when he writes that De Hooch's paintings praise the mothers and housewives, but 'together with the investigation of complex and subtly observed effects of light in the interior space'.[8] There is more 'space' than the intrigue or situation asks for, but Sutton reduces that surplus to an opportunity for demonstrating the painter's ability in the rendering of light effects, unrelated to the meaning of the image. Or he interprets the wideness and openness symbolically: 'In the context and by their nuance and richness' these space-and-light effects supposedly work as a metaphor for 'the wealth of subtle pleasures afforded by burgher home life'.[9] The sense for 'orderly spatial design' is supposed to arise from an interest in 'maternal and domestic subjects'.[10] What Sutton does not see here is that in these images the female personage, indeed reduced to a housewife, is *opposed* to and exposed to an inhabited, empty, almost abstract space. De Hooch gives the house the depth and the distance (or 'elsewhere') of a landscape, and thereby announces the World to the interior – a World these women seem almost unaware of.

The woman can take on a different meaning and position too. Martha Hollander illustrates this with a series of images by Nicolaes Maes (Fig. 3).[11] In these examples Maes divides his painting by means of 'see-through' into two different rooms or scenes, with the woman in two different roles: the housewife catches the maid who in the next room or the kitchen is dreaming away or is flirting.

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Figure 3. Nicolaes Maes, *The eavesdropper*, 1657 (Dordrechts Museum).

Hollander argues very well that these images do not just illustrate moral lessons or encourage the housewife to take care of her household, but also show and associate two sides of the feminine and thereby suggest a 'structural weakness' and unreliability in every woman – and every housewife. De Hooch too associates in some paintings the depth effect with a sometimes tiny, almost hidden female figure, 'waiting' there in the distance as 'elsewhere' In a similar logic he often confronts by way of a picture-within-the-picture the bourgeois or homely scene with a mythological, often explicitly erotic nude: the contrast reveals the hidden dimension of woman that is not Hestia. The femininity is, so it shows, so complex that in one and the same type of image, the female figure can be opposed to the 'distant' but can embody it as well. Many romantic landscape painters – David Caspar Friedrich is a well-known example – also made interior paintings and thereby transferred means to

evoke depth in the interior, and linked depth to woman. The half-dark, the corner, the staircase, and the dim female figure bring the distant close – they create intimacy – just as twilight and dusk make the horizon come near.

The complexity of the relation between domesticity and femininity, and the ambiguity of both terms, comes out even more in the possibility of completely identifying the female figure with the counter-force that can save from the suffocating house and the sick home. In this context the work of the nineteenth century Antwerp painter Henri De Braekeleer is particularly interesting and revealing.[12] A large part of his oeuvre follows the seventeenth century Dutch models that he greatly admired. Yet, his *interiors* and personages have an entirely different 'tonality'. The spaces that open up within, from one room or space to the next, become chaotic and lose their clarity, the interiors become more and more closed and seem to close in on the lives that inhabit them. Even the women at the open windows don't relate to distance, but are fixed at their place in a world without escape or alternative possibilities, a world where everything is stiflingly close by and crowds in, where the rooms and walls move to the fore oppressively. In a period when his Dutch examples were looked at as literal descriptions of daily lives, De Braekeleer, in some paintings, hid secret messages, criticising these interiors and the life they stand for. One of his famous paintings, *The man at the window*, shows an empty, uninhabited room, where a slouching man looks through a window without a view – nothing but roofs and rear sides. But De Braekeleer, a bachelor himself, hides in the man's mirror image reflected in the windowpane, a woman with an earring, a scarf, a fancy hat and a dressed collar (Figs. 4 and 5). In these interiors the secret presence of a woman in street-clothes is all that remains of distance.

Against the tradition that links femininity to the house and domesticity, one can oppose the tradition that links the feminine with the distant that goes against the domestic. Nietzsche evokes this image of woman as a sailing boat that glides across the dark sea of existence, far away, quietly, meditative: 'All big noise makes us locate happiness in silence and distance'.[13] Man who, for himself, struggles with life and creation, sees 'silent magic

Figure 4. Henri de Braekeleer, *The man at the window*, 1973 (Royal Musea of Fine Arts, Brussels).

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Figure 5. Henri de Braekeleer, *The man at the window*, 1973 (Royal Musea of Fine Arts, Brussels) (detail).

creatures pass before him in the distance and longs for their happiness and withdrawal – they are women.'; 'The enchantment and the most powerful effect of women is ... an effect at a distance, *an actio in distans*.' Distance only 'works' – from a distance. Therefore, according to Nietzsche, one primarily ought to keep ... distance! Of course, in reality the world there, far away, is not as it seems. 'My noble dreamer', Nietzsche writes, 'there is always so much noise and petty bustling on those sailing-boats'! Those blue-white distant worlds on the horizon of the paintings of Patinir or Altdorfer are, in reality, small and crowded and noisy, like everything else here!

The idea that both woman as housewife and as seducer are male phantasms, or that the reduction of femininity to hearth and the dream of woman's distance are complementary sides of one and the same strategy, does not bring us any further. Thinking is not about unmasking, but about testing and developing the conditions of meaning. The insight that woman incorporates 'all the quietness and the silence of the world', but only in David Caspar Friedrich's paintings, that rooms are deep like the world, but only in the paintings by De Hooch, and that a woman can be the last secret hope of a life, but only in *The man at the window*, does not *unmask* these images. Everybody knows that meaning is not 'real' and that meanings we live by do not exist as facts. Thinking is not about unmasking as if it were ever possible to be 'outside'. It is about using the one meaning to delineate the claims of the others, so that no single meaning or representation can be appropriated and turned into an absolute. Thinking is about trying out words and images so that the possibilities a culture can offer are formulated and opened up for judgement and life. Thinking is about cultivating the distance and the reserve that is necessary to allow this complexity to be.

## Notes and references

1. I take this seventeenth century motto from P. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, 1629–1684* (London, Yale University Press, 1998), p.73.

2. J-P. Vernant, 'Hestia-Hermès. Sur l'expression réligieuse de l'espace et du mouvement chez les Grecs' in: J.-P. Vernant & P. Vidal-Naquet, *La Grèce ancienne. 2. L'espace et le temps* (Paris, Seuil, 1991), pp. 47–99.
3. M. Serres, *Atlas* (Paris, Julliard, 1994), p.48.
4. P. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, op. cit.*, p.30.
5. M. Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes. Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), p.46.
6. M. Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes, ibid.*, p.47.
7. See B. Verschaffel, 'De Wereld van het landschap', *De Witte Raaf*, 95 (2002), pp. 1–4.
8. P. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, op. cit.*, p.30.
9. P. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, op. cit.*, p.30.
10. P. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, op. cit.*, p.30.
11. M. Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes, op. cit.*, Chapter three: 'Nicolaes Maes: space as domestic Territory'.
12. I wrote on De Braekeleer in 'Het heimelijke van Henri De Braekeleer': B. Verschaffel, *Figuren/Essays* (Leuven, Van Halewyck, 1995), pp. 144–177. The only existing overview of De Braekeleer's oeuvre is the catalogue of the 1988 Antwerp exhibition: H. Todts, *Henri De Braekeleer. 1840–1888* (KMSK, Antwerpen, 1988).
13. F. Nietzsche, *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, II, 60.