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idea journal

**fiction, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

vol. 19, no. 01

2022

**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association**



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this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.⁰¹ Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXlc7HWIc3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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refabulating domesticity: a reparative reading of interior genre painting

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abstract

In the seventeenth century, Dutch artists like De Hooch, Vermeer, and de Witte famously painted interior scenes. These could seem to follow the birth of bourgeois domesticity and the modern sense of intimate, private dwelling. Still, many scholars have pointed out that this realism is deceptive: these interiors are in fact fabulated spaces, at odds with the architectural and social reality of their day.

Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's opposition between a 'paranoid' and a 'reparative' reading of cultural artefacts, we could interpret these interiors in a paranoid mode, revealing the oppressive and exploitative social conditions of the so-called Golden Age in which the genre flourished.

However, as Sedgwick suggests, such an interpretation can be supplemented by a reparative, more speculative, and creative hermeneutics that recontextualises these cultural artefacts. Such an approach can be aligned with the notion of 'fictioning' as developed by David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan: the exploration of fictional worlds and other possible modes of existence they establish. While they mostly discuss rather outlandish forms of mythopoetic imagination, this text-based essay focuses on 'fictioning' the interior as a tool to experiment with the domestic. The essay will follow three artistic concepts: pictorial formalism (focusing on sensations), tropism (focusing on affects), and metalepsis (focusing on characters).

In this essay, I explore the 'impossible' interior of Emanuel De Witte's *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665), an apparent idyllic scene that nonetheless generates a particularly unsettling atmosphere, as a case study. The painting consists of a complex constellation of places and stories; an assemblage of spaces, objects, and characters that resist their original pictorial and discursive frames. As such, it allows for a reparative, creative approach to the antiquated genre of the interior.

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Dutch interior painting, fictioning, reparative reading, tropism, metalepsis



Figure 01.
Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665–70),
Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

reparative fictioning: revisiting a genre

According to architecture professor Witold Rybczynski, in his influential *Home. A Short History of an Idea* (1986), paintings like Emanuel de Witte's *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665–70) reveal the emergence of bourgeois domesticity in the Dutch republic of the seventeenth century. We see a man in a bed and a woman playing at the virginal. The intimacy of the scene suggests they are lovers, married or not. In the background, a female servant is sweeping the floor. A historical reading of this figure places her in

the Calvinist modesty of the Dutch republic, where 'even the wealthiest household rarely employed more than three servants, while a typical prosperous bourgeois family included, at most, a single maid-servant.'⁰¹ These paintings of the so-called 'Golden Age' show a simple, uneventful life indoors, yet worthy of depiction, with scenes of quiet happiness, leisure, playing music after making love: 'It is above all this sense of interior space, and hence of insideness, that distinguishes this painting. Instead of being a picture of a room, it is a picture of a home.'⁰²

However, this apparent realism is a fiction. The seemingly inconspicuous presence of the servant in fact gives the painting an allegorical meaning that goes beyond a mere factual depiction of an interior. Her positioning between the man and the woman invites us to interpret her presence as an allegory of moral cleanliness, leaving unanswered the question whether she represents the 'proper' relation between husband and wife in the foreground, or, on the contrary, is cleaning away the committed sin of adultery.⁰³ And not only the allegorical staging, but also the architectural elements reveal the fictionality of the space. Paintings like de Witte's depict rooms that did not actually exist: both the enfilade and the positioning of ceiling beams were very unlikely architectural features for houses of that period. Interior elements like the black and white marble floor tiles and the brass chandeliers were also extremely rare in actual homes of the time, even those of the very rich.⁰⁴ The play of geometry and depth, light and textures was far more important to the painter than any claim to veracity. Obviously, this 'impossible' interior architecture creates a curious tension between the apparent authentic, lifelike scene, and the staged, fictional environment, a tension that must have been evident to contemporary viewers.

Rybczynski does acknowledge this fictionality, but argues that nonetheless 'the effect is real, and it is above all one of extreme intimacy.'⁰⁵ Still, historical evidence shows that this 'extreme intimacy' may have been a fiction too. Cultural anthropologist Irene

Cieraad challenges Rybczynski's view of these interiors as the supposed 'cradle of female domesticity.'⁰⁶ She juxtaposes these idyllic interiors with actual correspondence between Dutch women and their husbands serving in the military or mercantile fleet. Many of these letters express longing, concern, and mourning, and suggest a very precarious existence. The paintings presented a rosy picture of material wealth and domestic bliss in a time of economic inequality and uncertainty, actual or looming war with other European nations, and different serious outbreaks of pestilence.⁰⁷ As Cieraad argues, this notion of a 'Golden Age' was only a product of nineteenth-century nationalism. Precisely because existence itself was far from gilded, there was a 'compensatory need for these ideal home images' in the seventeenth century, hence the decline of the genre in later, more peaceful times.⁰⁸

The artificiality of these scenes becomes even more problematic if we take Cieraad's critique a step further and contextualise them in a more global perspective. Life in the 1660s was not only very hard for many inhabitants of the Dutch republic. It was also the decade in which trading posts were established along the so-called Dutch Slave Coast in Africa. Unlike the Dutch sailors, the enslaved people bought there for the colonies in America left no traces in the form of letters.

From a contemporary perspective, the 'atmosphere of domesticity' Rybczynski found so appealing in the interiors of these paintings

has become problematic at the very least as an impossible fable that is screening a rather grim and shameful reality. Acknowledging this seems to be the melancholic duty of contemporary scholars when faced with historical artefacts that were long taken for granted: going beyond their apparent realism in order to contextualise them and reveal what remains outside the frame. The implicit guiding principle here would be cultural critic Walter Benjamin's famous quote: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'⁹

As cultural theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously argued, what she called a 'paranoid reading' has become the dominant interpretive mode in cultural studies: 'to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious or complaisant.'¹⁰ The point is of course not that this 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is infrequently required in our relation to cultural heritage. To a large extent, Rybczynski's view is indeed naïve and complaisant. But Sedgwick denounces the idea that this mode should be the only valuable and acceptable way to perform criticism. As a possible supplement, she proposes another mode of critical reading, which she calls 'reparative', borrowing a term from psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.¹¹ Reparation refers to the creative potential in the depressive position following the destructive schizoid/paranoid position in childhood development. In the depressive position, the child is confronted with anxiety as they realise their own destructive impulses. The preceding

paranoid-schizoid division of parts of oneself and the other, of outer and inner reality, into 'good' and 'bad' objects no longer holds. To psychically survive, subjects need to create an interiority that allows them to accept the ambiguity inherent in one's relation to oneself and to others. They do so by becoming creative, by trying to 'repair' the experienced loss, the damage done.¹²

It is important to keep Sedgwick's reference to Klein in mind, because it makes clear that in the formation of subjectivity, this violent paranoid-schizoid position is a necessary step to make sense of the world and cannot be separated from the reparative-creative moment that follows it. What Sedgwick does is to take Klein's view on the individual genesis of the subject and expand it to the relation with culture. There, too, we are confronted with a set of artefacts that both hurt and sustain, constitute, and violate subjectivities. A paranoid reading is necessary to discover the harmful, yet often hidden, implications of specific cultural forms. Still, Sedgwick makes clear that criticism does not have to stop there. Other modes of critical performance are possible, not by denouncing these artefacts as purely 'bad' objects, but by adapting them, fragmenting and transgressing them, coupling them to affects and experiments that change their original outlook. At this point, Sedgwick is inspired by '[t]he many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture — even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.'¹³

In Sedgwick's work, the focus is mostly on the queer experience in a heteronormative society, but her point can easily be extended to all modes of existence that are not sustained by the dominant cultural discourse. In recent decades, many cultural theorists and sociologists have coined new terms to describe a culture under the spell of a 'social acceleration', a 'tyranny of merit', generating a 'burnout society'.¹⁴ What such criticisms have in common is that they consider contemporary society to be unsustainable and increasingly threatening the quality and, in extreme cases, even the possibility, of modes of dwelling.

What then could a reparative reading of the antiquated genre of the interior mean in the light of this socio-cultural malaise? What if we look at these paintings precisely as what they were according to Cieraad — a promise of domestic bliss in an age that threatened it and made it impossible for many — and take this fiction seriously? What if we further fictionalise the fiction of de Witte's rooms? A critical performance that explores the 'dialectical standstill' Walter Benjamin discerned in some cultural images: yes, they are ideological fictions masking an underlying capitalist system of economic exploitation; but precisely this utopian vision holds a 'messianic' promise, 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'.¹⁵ In these ideological dreamscapes, Benjamin discerned the possibility of a critical awakening. From a fake depiction of a past that never existed, these paintings can be turned into a possible

exploration of alternative forms of dwelling. From Benjamin's perspective, these paintings can thus still be interpreted as the cradle of domesticity, but only if we consider it as a domesticity yet to be born.

At this point, the notion of 'fictioning' as developed by cultural theorists David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan might be useful. They define it as 'the writing, imaging, performing or other material instantiation of worlds or social bodies that mark out trajectories different to those engendered by the dominant organisations of life currently in existence'.¹⁶ They relate this to philosopher Felix Guattari's concept of 'fabulous images':

These images, found in literature and life, operate as "points of subjectification." Put simply, for Guattari, fiction is a resource in the production of different kinds of subjectivity and thus, again, of the different kinds of worlds that attend the latter.¹⁷

And while they do not explicitly mention the term 'reparative reading', 'fictioning' can be seen as a specific form of it. Fictioning as a scholarly practice may sound gratuitous, but as a form of cultural repairing it is, to use Sedgwick's formulation, 'no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic' than a more conventional critical performance.¹⁸

However, in Burrows' and O'Sullivan's research into the 'myth-functions' of art and philosophy, the domestic myth is remarkably absent. This becomes obvious when they briefly discuss the work of artist Carolee Schneemann, especially her experimental 'home movie' *Fuses* (1967). They focus on the way Schneemann works with technology, and how the film not only counters the male gaze, but the human gaze in general by 'developing multispecies relations' — in this case, with Schneemann's cat.¹⁹ But the exploration of the domestic, so central to this movie as we will discuss later, remains a blind spot in their analysis. This way, Burrows and O'Sullivan overlook which experimental, alternative 'points of subjectification' are to be discovered in the enclosed, private environment of the domestic itself. The exploration of 'fabulous images' does not require outlandish figures like the cyborg or the shaman, discussed by Burrows and O'Sullivan. These images can also crystallise in a domestic setting. The fact that they emerge from the everyday makes them harder to distinguish from the dominant forms of subjectivity, but at the same time perhaps more effective as well, precisely because the border between the fiction and the everyday becomes porous. Not all of us are into shamanism or science fiction, but we must all make our bed, and interact with the people and objects that make up our domestic environment. Refabulating the domestic imagination, based on the interior fictions provided by painters like de Witte, allows us to explore the forces that constitute the individual dweller, from inner affects to outer socio-cultural structures. Such a refabulation requires some specific artistic concepts

and techniques. First, a pictorial formalism helps to focus on the sensual qualities of the environment; the concept of the tropism makes it possible to distinguish subjective, affective lines that traverse the interior; and, finally, metalepsis enables us to use characters as a way of thinking about different aspects of dwelling.

pictorial formalism and spatial sensations

In 1928, the Spanish artist Joan Miró travelled to the Netherlands, where he became particularly interested in paintings from the seventeenth century. According to art critic Karen Wilkin, this encounter would have a transformative impact.²⁰ Upon his return, he painted three *Dutch Interiors* that would mark a new phase in his work. In Miró's interpretation, the main protagonists were not the figures, but the colours and the shapes: he would change the palette, the scale, and reduce them to more abstract forms. Miró's distortions are interesting because they reveal sensual and compositional qualities that a critical reading tends to gloss over, as it primarily focuses on decoding the historical, narrative, or allegorical meanings. Obviously, in Miró's own work, these transformations are quickly 'encoded' again as recognisable examples of his typical style. Hence, it is more effective to take Miró's gaze back to de Witte's painting, and approach it like Miró would: as a visual constellation of shapes, colours, and forms that can function independently from what they are supposed to represent. In a way, it simply follows to the extreme de Witte's own preference of pictorial composition over realistic depiction.



Figure 02.
Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a
Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665–70)
(fragment). Collection Museum
Boijmans Van Beuningen.

By primarily considering the sensual qualities of de Witte's painting, something strange happens. The suggestion of music being played activates a synaesthetic interpretation, whereby the sense of hearing is transferred

to the visual elements. The inaudible notes from the virginal seem to turn the painting itself into a musical piece, whereby the visual constellation produces harmonies. There is the echo of the water jug in the table leg, as if it reflects itself in some invisible dark water that has flooded the room; the curtains at the windows repeat themselves in the curtains of the bed; and the layout of the black and white tiles stands in a kind of contrapuntal relation to the sunlight and the shadow across the floor. A similar visual rhythm is also at work when our gaze is confronted with the depth of the painting: starting from the left, the line of the sword in the front rhythmically relates to the broom at the wall, and finally with the broom in the hand of the female servant. Starting from the right, the bonnet of the playing woman is repeated first — partially — in the mirror above her, and then in the maid's bonnet. The same, if less outspoken, happens with the man's hat, the bucket, the alcove, the shape of the trees: forms repeat themselves with small variations, fading out. The synaesthetic experience is also present in the light, and the 'warm' colours, as if evoking the sonorous warmth and fullness of the snare instrument: the light from the windows and the notes played by the woman both form a sensual cascade overwhelming the man in the bed, and, by extension, also the viewer. It becomes a musical lesson in how an interior takes shape, not from the layout of the rooms, and the objects and persons in them, but by the constellations, the melodies all these elements form together.



Figure 03.
Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a
Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665–70)
(fragment). Collection Museum
Boijmans Van Beuningen.

Cultural theorist Roland Barthes argues that seventeenth-century Dutch painting 'has washed away religion only to replace it with man and his empire of things.'²¹ For Barthes, the objects in these paintings are completely embedded in the capitalist system of commodities: all things become utilities, 'separated from matter by the sleek, firm film of use.'²² What remains is a pacified space, with the human being in complete control: 'A more complete subservience of things is unimaginable. The entire city of Amsterdam, indeed, seems to have been built with a view to this domestication: few substances here are not annexed to the empire of merchandise.'²³ These paintings show us a 'universe of fabrication' that 'obviously excludes terror, as it excludes style.'²⁴ But Miró's gaze reveals that this victory of use over matter is far from evident. The visual rhythms, and the synaesthetic sensations they provoke in the viewer, seem to oppose Barthes' interpretation of these paintings as the mere expression of human control over its environment. Matter resists this absolute integration in a network of exchange and consumption, including the exchange of meaning: the clothes, the curtains, the broom, the jar, the tiles; they all have an intense presence that goes beyond their possible denotations and connotations and confront us with the stubborn materiality of things. The fact that nothing really happens in these interiors — at least, in comparison to historical tableaux, or religious paintings — makes them a place where one is literally and figuratively brought back to one's senses.

The elements that constitute an interior reveal an intensity of being, a sensual materiality of existence that the intimate sphere of dwelling can open. Obviously, with such a pictorial approach it might appear that the interior is still turned into something useful, perhaps not as commodity or as a symbol, but still subservient to a spectator simply seeking aesthetic pleasure. Still, these sensations generate not only a form of domestic bliss, as Rybczynski interprets the atmosphere of these paintings. While the paintings might be deprived of terror, as Barthes argues, they do relate to other, perhaps more subtle, affects that challenge the way we imagine the subjective engagement with an interior. As we will see, they grasp our attention, not in a calm, meditative way, but quite overwhelmingly.

tropisms: inner movements

At first sight, it seems strange to attribute negative affects to these interiors. If anything, they seem to celebrate dwelling as an aesthetic joy. As art historian Angela Vanhaelen puts it, they succeed in 'freezing a fleeting moment by making the prosaic world shine.'²⁵ Still, as she makes clear in her analysis, this apparent suspension of conflict, this depiction of what the philosopher Hegel called the 'Sunday of life', proves to be more ambiguous.²⁶ For the writer Paul Claudel, 'there is repose and motion at the same time, a state of equilibrium undermined by anxiety.'²⁷ This anxiety subverts the apparent sensual sheen because this 'freezing' of action and meaning confronts the viewer with a material

world that might be very sensual, but also without sense: 'If the viewer is very attentive to the works, sheen breaks apart and larger meanings and communal values dissolve along with it.'²⁸

From this perspective, these interiors already hint at what for the philosopher Martin Heidegger would be the fundamental mood of modernity: a sense of boredom.²⁹ It is this boredom that breeds anxiety: the fact that the world is meaningless, but inescapably there to be dealt with. If de Witte's painting is a 'fabulous image' that can create a kind of alternative 'point of subjectivity', this does not imply a self-satisfied indulgence in passive pleasant sensations, but an active appeal to create sense. For Heidegger, we must confront this existential boredom, 'for its emptiness holds great potential' and 'opens opportunities for introspective reflection on everyday subjective experience.'³⁰ It is this opportunity for reflection that is offered by these paintings. Made in a time when the exposure to images was far less abundant than today, they needed to engage with their viewers over a longer period. They functioned as 'conversation pieces' to be contemplated and talked about, each time triggering new thoughts and sensations. Their suspension of meaning was thus deliberate. Inspired by Heidegger, art historian Hanneke Grootenboer interprets these interiors as pensive images, expressing the act of thinking itself.³¹ Not by simply depicting someone who is thinking and with whom the viewer could identify, but

by showing the process of thinking itself as an environment. These interiors become for Grootenboer the spatialisation of a 'pensive' mood, the wandering of the mind.³² She reads de Witte's interior as a 'contemplative aid that lets thinking get through,' as a 'metaphor for mental processes.'³³ We should keep in mind that these mental processes also involve sensorial and affective aspects: 'thinking' in this sense is more than just an intellectual, cognitive activity. It is not only the mind that starts wandering in the place evoked by de Witte, but also the embodied subjectivity of the spectator. And, as Grootenboer's analysis makes clear, this subjectivity does not reside in an identification with the characters depicted, but with the depicted interior space.

To understand how this subjectivisation of an environment works, writer Nathalie Sarraute's notion of 'tropism' might prove useful. In nature, a tropism refers to the instinctive reaction of living organisms to certain stimuli. In her experimental debut *Tropisms* (1939), Sarraute transposes this notion to instinctive subjective reactions, 'inner movements,' as she calls it: 'These movements seemed to me to be veritable dramatic actions, hiding beneath the most commonplace conversations, the most everyday gestures, and constantly emerging up to the surface of the appearances that both conceal and reveal them.'³⁴ *Tropisms* is a collection of very short chapters, each the registration of a mood, an action, a sudden impulse, a stirring of affect. These fragments of subjective reality are not embedded

in a specific plot or fixed to the point of view of a well-defined character. In fact, what Sarraute says about her own work can easily be used to describe the effect of viewing de Witte's interior:

Nothing could distract my attention from them and nothing could distract that of the reader; neither the personality of the characters, nor the plot, by means of which, ordinarily, the characters evolve. The barely visible, anonymous character was to serve as a mere prop for these movements, which are inherent in everybody and can take place in anybody, at any moment.³⁵

This indeterminacy is indeed inherent to the painting. Rybczynski already remarked:

[...] part of the delight of this genre is the painter's ambiguity toward his subject. Is the woman properly penitent? If so, why is she playing and not weeping? She has her back turned, as if in shame, but in the mirror hanging on the walls over the virginals, her face is tantalizingly not quite reflected. Maybe she is smiling; we will never know.³⁶

Precisely because de Witte does not reduce the elements of the painting to a storyline, the viewer is free to explore the 'inner movements': a possible smile, the man raising his body slightly, the gesture

of sweeping a floor while being distracted by a thought... And, just as with Sarraute's novelistic tropisms, they are not clear-cut, but together create what Sarraute would call 'a hugely amplified present': everything becomes charged with different affects and feelings at the same time.³⁷ It is not that we must choose between shame and joy, bliss and melancholy. By considering de Witte's ambiguous environment as a visual precursor of Sarraute's literary tropisms, we might thus understand domesticity as a place where the narrative consistency of identity may be abandoned, in favour of the exploration of different moods and affects. Normally, we are supposed to present ourselves, and interpret others, as consistent characters, following well-known storylines and predetermined emotional responses to specific situations, from banal to very exceptional. But Sarraute's notion of tropism confronts us with subjective experiences that escape this clear determination. It shows how the domestic can make us aware of the different inner movements that traverse us, often without us realising.

metalepsis: leisure and maintenance

Another effect of the fact that de Witte's interior consists of 'barely visible, anonymous character(s)', to paraphrase Sarraute, is that figures can leave their frame and assume a role in another setting.³⁸ The woman, the man, the pet, and the cleaning lady all belong to a very limited set of stock characters. We recognise them in other scenes of domestic

bliss, but also scenes of seduction, or confidentiality, like when the maid becomes a confidante, in Vermeer's famous *Love Letter*, painted around the same time.³⁹

Narratology uses the term *metalepsis* to refer to these moments when a character 'escapes' the narrative world to which it belongs and enters another level.⁴⁰ This can be the level of narration itself (characters start to narrate the story themselves, or directly address the reader), but also an entirely different fictional world to which the character is transferred. As a narrative technique that breaks the illusion of reality, metalepsis is typical of postmodern, experimental fiction. I want to argue here that this literary technique can also be used in academic writing in which allowing characters to wander into other settings offers new perspectives on the original environment in which we encountered them.

The most prominent characters in de Witte's painting are the man and the woman: while it is unclear whether they are a married couple, or rather illicit lovers, their intimate relationship is obvious. According to Rybczynski, such love relationships were clearly gendered in these paintings:

When a male is included in a Vermeer, one has the sense that he is a visitor — an intruder — for these women do not simply inhabit these rooms, they occupy them completely. Whether they are sewing, playing the spinet, or reading a letter, the Dutch women are solidly, emphatically, contentedly at home.⁴¹

The same goes for the interior by de Witte: the sword of the man connects him to the outside world, just like his clothes thrown on the chair feel like an intrusion, disturbing the quiet order of the house: he is the stranger, she is the 'angel of the house,' receiving him, but only for a while, until he resumes his role in society, and she can restore her routine.

Once we move from art history to social history and juxtapose these stock figures with actual historical characters, their relationship becomes more complex. The scene may depict the morning after a last night together before a long journey, perhaps suggested by the map; or, on the contrary, express the joy of being united after a long separation. The scene might evoke a memory, like the one expressed in this fragment of a captain writing to his wife: 'My dearest wife, I wish I could spend the night with you and just chat [...] I keep thinking of our last night together.'⁴² Or the one in this letter from a sailor's wife to her husband at sea: 'My darling you wrote to me that at night when you are in your berth you take the cushion in your arms and pretend that I am with you, and you also wrote that I should

do the same. However, it does not help. I have to endure the time waiting for your return.'⁴³ Or it can refer to a hope for the future, like the scene evoked in this letter from a trumpeter's wife: 'We will lock the door and send our friends away. When we are happy together all is well, for our friends will not give us this happiness.'⁴⁴

By merging these historical voices with the mute characters depicted by de Witte, the emotional landscape changes: we hear men longing for an intimate privacy in which they are *not* intruders, and women feeling all but at home, precisely because of the absence of their loved ones. The letters also show the fragility of the scene: what we see might just be a fantasy — a sailor-soldier's dream, or that of his wife. And even if their being together is a reality, it is never sure how long it will last before he must return to sea, or to the war, or before health risks (pestilence, but also the risk of childbirth) might end their happiness.

Metalepsis not only enables characters to travel from a fictional to a real context; it also allows these characters to travel into the future. In this case, two forking paths appear: in the first path, the melancholy and anxiety, already lingering in de Witte, becomes dominant in the works of Vilhelm Hammershoi, a painter clearly influenced by these seventeenth-century Dutch interiors. As Grootenboer remarks, a cold light has replaced 'the warm sunlight and the orange-red palette of the Dutch painter,' while his

**Figure 04.**

Vilhelm Hammershoi, *Ida in an Interior with Piano* (1901), via Wikimedia Commons.

figures seem to have lost their original purpose: rather than playing or sweeping the floor, Hammershoi's figures are often just standing, sitting, without doing anything, 'detached from his or her environment.'⁴⁵ Hammershoi seems to anticipate the typically modern neurotic character well-known since Freud's case studies, like the story of Dora in *A Case of Hysteria* (1905): individuals

wrestling with their sexuality, existential angst and boredom, trapped in bourgeois society.⁴⁶ These figures seem not only to be locked in their rooms, but also in themselves, and their malaise taints their possibility to communicate. The space between the lovers has become an unbridgeable gap, each confined to an inner world to which the other has no access.

The other path follows quite the opposite direction, where the domestic does not increasingly become a place of libidinal repression, but rather one of possible liberation. In this time travel, the lovers end up as characters in Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses*, trading the sixties of the seventeenth century to those of the twentieth. *Fuses* is a film diary, registering daily life with her lover James Tenney. The short film features the same dominant elements we also find in de Witte's interior: the curtains, the window, the bed, even the pet (although, in this case, the pet is not a dog, but a cat, Kitch), and, of course, the lovers. Sexuality, only subtly hinted at in the painting, is here made explicit. As art historian Alyce Mahon argues in her analysis of the film, Schneemann looked for a 'more expansive sense of the domestic' that did not reduce the woman to the figure of the housewife-mother.⁴⁷ In *Fuses* the subjective position of desire is not fixed, but switches and shifts, not only between the lovers, but also between the characters and the viewer's gaze: '*Fuses* refuses any safe distance between lovers or between flesh and the camera as it brings the spectator into the domestic space through glimpses of architecture, wallpaper patterns, and lace curtains.'⁴⁸ The point of view is often hard to pinpoint (the cat, Carolee, James, or just the camera registering their lovemaking). We already saw how de Witte's painting created synaesthetic sensations, but Schneemann takes it a step further, and extends it to the texture of the medium itself. Her manipulation of the actual film reel

enhances 'the sense of the film as flesh, to be touched and scratched and played with.'⁴⁹ The film renders sensations and 'tropisms' of domestic life in such an intense way that it engages the viewer to explore this 'space between domestic conformity and erotic nonconformity.'⁵⁰ It demonstrates that the everyday banality of dwelling and the ecstasy of eros are not separate realms, but intermingle and interchange.

If we look at de Witte's interior as if it were an anachronistic pendant of *Fuses*, the apparently conventional scene becomes a provocative reflection on what it means to live together in an amorous relationship. Because we do not know the nature of the relationship between both lovers, the established roles and images culturally fixed to domestic love are challenged. Just like *Fuses*, the painting turns into an invitation to experiment with other forms of living together, to explore the 'domestic as the space where liberation must begin.'⁵¹ Now, the painting not only confronts us with a historical reality (or fantasy), but with a question about how to fabulate domestic love life in the twenty-first century. After the sexual revolution of the sixties, what restrictive images and patterns (gender, work-life, needs, expectations) still haunt the domestic atmosphere?



Figure 05.
Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a
Woman at the Virginal* (c. 1665–70)
(fragment). Collection Museum
Boijmans Van Beuningen

But the lovers present a challenge to our view on domesticity. That is also the case for the character that got lost in this anachronistic merging of de Witte and Schneemann: the female servant in the background. In both a historical or allegorical interpretative frame, her presence as the typical single servant of a bourgeois household, or an allegory of moral cleanliness, seems idyllic, unproblematic. But if we allow her to take up her broom and walk out of the picture into contemporary fiction, her position becomes much more ambiguous and paradoxical.

As literary theorist Sonja Stojanovic argues, the figure of the cleaning lady in contemporary novels becomes a narrative tool that ‘allows us to peer into the intimate world of our main characters in a “realistic” way, for she sees what one usually hides from everyone else.’⁵² As such, she symmetrically mirrors the reader, just like the cleaning lady in de Witte mirrors the position of the viewer: both are witnesses to an intimate, private scene they can never belong to. While her task is indeed to keep the home tidy and clean, by putting everything back where it belongs, she herself is not at home there and remains an intruder. This outsider position is not only a narrative technique, but it also has ideological implications: the cleaning lady belongs to another world, not only in relation to the other characters, but also to the reader and viewer. She is most often from a different class, and in contemporary western societies also increasingly from a different culture.

As such, her presence alone disrupts the self-evident context of the rooms. This is also the case in de Witte's interior, if we allow the maidservant in the background to move to another context. Trading her broom for a vacuum cleaner, she becomes Gaudalupe Acedo, the housekeeper of Rem Koolhaas' *Maison à Bordeaux* and the main character in *Koolhaas Houselife* (2008), a documentary made by architect/artists Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine. Here too, we recognise the same elements that create a sense of domesticity: the shoes taken off (in this case, by tourists visiting), the curtains, both at the windows as in the bedroom, separating the bed from the rest of the room. But in this narrative universe, the lovers are absent — the implicit story is one of mourning, as 'Monsieur' has passed away, and the 'Madame' is still grieving — we see her very briefly, from a distance, alone.

This focus on Acedo's intimate, daily interactions with the building challenges the aesthetic, architectural frame from which it is usually interpreted. In her review of the documentary, architecture professor Hilary Sample quotes Rem Koolhaas' response after viewing the documentary: 'I am completely surprised that something that is as harsh and exceptional as the spiral staircase is treated with a Hoover. It is completely insane.'⁵³ As Sample points out, Koolhaas' 'disappointment is not that the architecture gets dirty, or that the housekeeper is unduly burdened, but that his building has failed to inspire improvisation

and creativity.'⁵⁴ Sample links this to artist Mierle Laderman-Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, the short written part of a performance that wanted to make domestic tasks more visible by performing them in the context of a museum. Laderman-Ukeles wanted to demonstrate how these tasks were a burden on her personal freedom and creativity as a female artist, and how they implied low wages, or even no wage (in the case of a housewife). But, at the same time, she challenged this negative view of maintenance tasks, and claimed they were nonetheless a crucial and vital aspect of existence, and worthy of integration into an artistic practice: 'my working will be the work.'⁵⁵ Or transposed to the *Maison à Bordeaux*: the cleaning of the stairs is as important as designing them, and a mere picture in an architectural magazine does not render justice to this daily, existential practice.

If we now consider the cleaning lady in the background as a combination of Laderman-Ukeles and Acedo, she is no longer a silent, discrete presence reassuring that all the mundane things are being taken care of. On the contrary, she starts to challenge the aesthetic, moral order depicted in the painting: the split between maintenance and leisure, art, and dwelling. In a metaleptic move, she not only juxtaposes the playing of the music, but also the viewing of the painting. How does her cleaning relate to these leisurely activities? And how does the attributed boredom of her menial work perhaps also resonate with

the boredom of the leisure class, just playing music, or visiting a museum, to pass away the time, to fight a sense of purposelessness? How is this boredom of both menial tasks and bourgeois pastime to be related to the potentially creative boredom of (artistic) contemplation, as envisioned by Heidegger? A detour via Laderman-Ukeles' work gives this scene an unexpected urgency, a sense that there is something more at stake. These interiors may evoke Hegel's 'Sunday of life,' but as Laderman-Ukeles quite rightly asks: 'after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'⁵⁶ And maintenance goes beyond the simple act of cleaning: it also refers to the maintenance of love, of friendship, but also the more collective, even global caretaking that must happen, from democratic institutions to the climate. Things inevitably will get dirty or broken and in need of fixing. As such, the position of the cleaning lady seems to merge with the role of the reparative reader: someone who has the perspective of an outsider. Not, or no longer, able to fully belong to the cultural imagination one is supposed to take care of, experiencing how the design is not perfectly fitting (like with Koolhaas' staircase). But at the same time, not prepared to abandon it, taking responsibility for it instead, trying to negotiate with it. Does Acedo's response really lack the creativity Koolhaas expected? Or is Koolhaas' creation just an imperfect starting point for Acedo's future appropriation of the building? Just so, de Witte's painting offers us an unfinished fable of dwelling. It is an invitation to take

a different look at domesticity, and the kind of (inter)subjectivity we establish there. After all these centuries, the question still stands: 'And you, how do you want to dwell?'

These questions are also an invitation for scholars of the history and theory of interior design, and its allied practices, to take care of their field, to maintain it. This means to regularly revisit specific design traditions and opinions, remove the dust, and adapt them to new generations of students, to different scholarly and designerly contexts. It also means keeping the critical perspective of an outsider (in time, in place) to reflect on what is left out of the picture, which actual realities these fictional interior spaces may screen; on what is happening, almost unnoticed, in the background. It also invites scholars to use fictioning as a critical tool for exploring historical interiors to fabulate future interiors, other modes of dwelling, and other experiences of interiority. Adapting techniques from literature and visual arts and based on the sensorial and affective experiences these interiors generate in contemporary bodies, such scholarship can become a creative form of reparative fictioning in its own right.

author biography

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