


Article

POV: A Home of Alterity

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Abstract: Challenging the idea of “home” as a safe refuge, or an enclosure of stability, this article explores ways in which home can be envisioned as an ontological space of becoming, where life is always risked. “POV: A Home of Alterity” is conceived within a deconstructivist theoretical framework and asks the question of how home can be perceived as an open text—a locus of oscillation between inside and outside—for the purpose of revealing home as an inherently traumatic “event,” which presupposes an openness to absolute alterity. To show the traces of otherness in one’s experience of being present (at home), it examines a photograph from Julia Borissova’s project *DOM: Document Object Model* and sets out to interrogate the concept of “home” through three relationships wherein it emerges: (1) between inside and outside, (2) between *the I* and *the other*, and (3) between *the I* and oneself. Consequently, this article seeks to define home as a representational space of one’s own alterity, where one surrenders to one’s non-coincidence with oneself and hence to experience itself, ultimately revealing that, in an aporetic way, home encrypts the very dislocation it “promises” to shield from.

Keywords: home; identity; alterity; deconstruction; Jacques Derrida; trauma; event; encounter; performativity; photography

Til sceal on eðle/domes wyrcean. [A good man must dwell in his ancestral home, gaining glory.]
BL, Cotton MS Tiberius B I, “Maxims II”

A virtuous man, a good man, a man sufficient unto himself, in the way God is—would such a man
need a friend? Would there be a friend for him?
Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*



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1. Introduction

The ubiquity of “home” in everyday discourse makes it a deceptively welcoming concept. The questions “Where are you from?” and “Where do you live?” are asked under the guise of innocence. We speak of a “home” country as an “origin”. Banks trade in the currency of “home” to sell mortgages. “Marriage” and “property” sanctify their union with a “home”. Somehow “home” seems to be the starting point and the destination—a pervasive assumption of belonging—so much that if one loses one’s bearings, one’s identity is labeled as “homeless”. If you are not homeless, by extension, you must have a home (somewhere?).

To strip home of its immediate connotations and re-discover it anew, I propose to begin with a little exercise in linguistic defamiliarization. Let us look not for the strict boundaries of what home is as a concept but rather delineate it as a *mode of inquiry*, looking for its fuzzy frontiers. If a home is to be built (or maintained), then for what purpose?¹ The etymology of the English word “home” is traced to Old English *hām* (“villa, estate, home”) (Green 2000, p. 103; Mitchell and Robinson 2007, p. 374). *Hām* goes back to Proto-Germanic **haima-* (“village”) (Kroonen 2013, p. 201), which itself originates from Proto-Indo-European **koimos*, a derivative of the verbal base **kei-*, meaning “to lie down, be at rest” (Indo-European Language Revival Association 2007, p. 1675).² As a noun, **kei-* is

both “bed” (or “night’s lodging”) and “dear” (or “beloved”), highlighting the link between a resting place and that which is cherished (Riedinger 1995, p. 51).

Another stem associated with home in contemporary English is found in “domestic”. Directly related to, among others, Slavic *dom* (*dom* in Russian), it offers an interesting case study in word archeology. Since “home” constitutes part of peoples’ core vocabulary (along with such concepts as “water”, “sun”, and “mother”), its articulation remains relatively stable throughout time, betraying the belonging of seemingly unrelated languages to the same large Indo-European family. As such, both Russian *dom* and English “domestic” emerge from Proto-Indo-European **dōm* (“home, house”) or **dem-* (“to build”) (De Vaan 2008, p. 178). While **dem-* has the sense of “assembly”, of “putting together”, implying an element of collectivity (“home” is both a “dwelling” and a “village”), **koimos* suggests a certain degree of withdrawal from the outside in an attempt to dream alone: After all, to “be at rest” is not to be bothered by others. Yet, the assonant adverb **kóm*, meaning “beside, by, with” (Pokorny 1959, p. 612), invokes the idea of being with others, while its parent particle **ke-* (Indo-European Language Revival Association 2007, p. 1764), assonant with the root **kei-*, indicates both the deictic “here” and the demonstrative “this”, establishing spatial relationality. Finally, as an adjective, **koimos* also means “kin” (Matasović 2009, p. 220), further entailing a *relation* and suggesting that one sleeps best near those one can trust most.

In such a way, home appears to act as a cherished enclosure where one can seek safety and rest (from the outside); however, it must be built and cultivated first to ensure that this “here”, near the familiar others, can provide a peaceful shelter. One must be a builder, Old English poetry instructs, to raise up a home (“*Sum bið bylða til/ham to hebbanne*”).³ It is not surprising then that Proto-Indo-European **dōm* acquires the additional senses of rule and subjugation, with Latin *dominus* and Ancient Greek *despótēs* (from Proto-Indo-European **dem-s-póti*) denoting “master” or “owner” (Green 2000, pp. 103, 180).⁴ A brief look into etymology reveals that, far from being a simple matter, where one makes one’s bed quickly becomes political. As it turns out, the intimate sense of “being at rest” is pervaded with the questions of external organization: If one is to be sheltered, then when, how, and by whom the building of one’s “night’s lodging” should be supervised? Home, thus, describes not just a state of stationary respite but also one of building and becoming, delineating *a continuum of one’s desire for safety in a peaceful place (near friendly others) to be fulfilled*. A desire that is both temporal and spatial in nature, choosing as its *telos* an actual geographical site. But land cannot but be contested.

Refraining from the perception of home as an enclosure of stability and taking into account the complex nature of the term, pervaded by both inside and outside, in this article, I challenge the impression of home as a safe refuge and instead explore how home can be envisioned as an ontological space of becoming (or overcoming), where life is continuously risked. My aim is to show that, beyond encoding the ideal of self-presence, ownership, and belonging, home conceals an out-of-jointness at its very foundation. While etymology allows us to interpret home as a longing for calm in a place, I argue that this longing is inherently *traumatic*. However, in my analysis of trauma, I abstain from psychoanalysis, diagnosing the wound of a missing origin that has to be treated with the retroactive production of meaning,⁵ and rather define “trauma” within a deconstructivist theoretical framework as an ongoing transformation in the face of encountering *the other* and perceiving one’s own alterity. Trauma is to be conceived as an *aporia* of being. In lieu of defining home as a pursuit guided by the metaphysical *telos* as presence, “POV: A Home of Alterity” questions how home unravels as an open text—as a locus of porosity and oscillation between inside and outside. Consequently, I propose to explore home as an inherently traumatic “event” or an encounter, which, in Jacques Derrida’s words, presupposes receptivity to the absolute other “that I cannot and must not determine in advance, not as subject, self, consciousness, nor even as animal, god, or person, man or woman, living or non-living thing” (Derrida 2002a, p. 12). Home, in the discussion to follow, is to be disclosed as a site of rupture, as an openness (and vulnerability) of *the I* in relation to *the other* and *the I*’s existential involvement in the outside world—as a space

where the ever-shifting boundaries between *the I* and *the other* are continuously erased and created.

Since the concept of “home” implies the act of building and putting together, I would like to assist our exploration by examining a photograph from Julia Borissova’s photographic project *DOM: Document Object Model* (Figure 1),⁶ which itself reflects on the performance of home, its construction, and deconstruction. In this project, titled by the acronym “D.O.M.” (a play on both Russian *дом* and English DOM—a structure for data in formats such as HTML or XML) (Borissova n.d.c), Borissova employs a maquette technique making the constructed-ness of its subject apparent. Furthermore, the photographic medium—imaging a spatial difference between the camera apparatus staying on the outside of the frame and the photographed inside of the frame—allows the artist to depict a perspective, a point of view, which the spectator of the photograph is made to inhabit. In this visualized encounter between *the I* (the spectator) and *DOM* (the image), *the I* steps into a scene and is given a POV to find oneself in relation to home, *probing its own boundaries*. Suddenly home ceases to be an intimately familiar, safe place but rises as a distant, de-familiarized, almost alien environment. One becomes a participant in the event that de-naturalizes one’s presence at home, imbuing one’s perspective with the traces of otherness. The frame contains a “home”, which “looks back” at the spectator, welcoming them not at their “beloved bed” but their alterity.



Figure 1. *DOM: Document Object Model*. Part 3 (Julia Borissova n.d.b).

To describe the experience of being (non-)present “at home” within the theoretical framework of *différance*, which Derrida defines as a thinking “that tries to surrender to the imminence of what is coming or going to come ... and so to experience itself” (Derrida 2002a, p. 11), “POV: A Home of Alterity” sets out to investigate home through three relationships, or three splits, wherein the concept emerges: (1) between inside and outside, (2) between *the I* and *the other*, and, finally, (3) between *the I* and oneself. By using Borissova’s photographic project as its case study, this article seeks to define home as a representational space of one’s own alterity, where one surrenders to one’s non-coincidence with oneself and hence to experience itself, ultimately revealing that home encrypts the

very dislocation it “promises” to shield from. The reader should not fear the discovery of a crack in the wall, for perhaps this dislocation is the very place where life is being lived.

2. Inside and Outside: A Holey Threshold

Borissova’s photograph invites the spectator into a space that is both perturbably static and dynamic. What makes it unsettling is a certain *challenge* that the outside poses to the inside and vice versa. One encounters a room, or more precisely a corner of a room, constituted by three planes: two walls dressed in patterned gold-brown wallpaper and a lush Persian carpet on the floor. One is cornered in a place of robust geometric possibility, looking from the inside at the container of one’s own capture, which could be equally perceived, judging by the dressings, as an ample reception room or a cramped Soviet apartment. What helps to interpret the context of this capture is a window crudely implanted onto one of the walls. The room, it transpires, is a scale model created out of paper and cardboard by the stroke of repetition: The window was cut out of “somewhere” and pasted into this “here” to determine by its outside the identity of the inside as recognizably Soviet. The photograph portrays an illusion; a dollhouse built by the artist to be photographed.⁷ Borissova illuminates the installation through this opening into the world, depicted in contrasting cyan monochrome, that introduces an added dimension: The frame is not just formed by the three planes of the walls and the floor but also reaches into an elsewhere that obeys its own rules of geometry. The inside and the outside seemingly belong to two different systems of coordinates, for the two perspectives do not spatially match. The room, in fact, levitates over the cyan environment as if it were a dirigible balloon, not a concrete structure. What connects the two dimensions is a *stare* that touches us: Outside the window, there is a crowd—dressed in conformist black suits and sportswear reminiscent of the fashion of the Thaw era—looking at *us*, the spectator, smilingly and taking *our* picture. The point of view of the spectator is defined by the gaze that mirrors it: We, the spectator, are on the inside looking at them on the outside, looking back at us.

The other connective tissue between the two spaces is light, as the outside physically penetrates the glass divider, throwing edgy cyan reflections onto the carpet and the opposite wall. If not for the window, populated with interested onlookers, the room would be a dark shadow or a black box. Instead, however, by all appearances, we find ourselves in a *khrushchevka*, one of the many low-cost, concrete-paneled (or brick), same-looking apartment buildings erected *en masse* across the Soviet Union during Nikita Khrushchev’s government. This typical, nondescript *дом* we are in could be located anywhere in the state that occupied nearly one-sixth of Earth’s land surface (Dewdney et al. n.d.). Borissova’s photograph, thus, places the spectator in a space that itself was created, brick after brick and panel after panel, by way of serial production. The photograph contains a copy of a copy that is hyper-aware of it being reproduced. We step inside a scale model created with cut-out elements from photo-reproductions, reproducing a room in a building that was reproduced, opening up a window to a culture clad in factory-reproduced clothing, which itself holds a reproductive mirror to us being reproduced. Not only does a man in the crowd snap a picture from the inside of the frame of our outside perspective (the onlookers are situated on the eyeline of the spectator), but the room also displays a photographic monochrome image in red, depicting a young man’s face looking into his own elsewhere—inanimate, frozen, and already archived. The man is Sergei Yesenin, a famous Russian Silver Age poet of tragic destiny and great lyrical talent. One of his poems—“I have left my endeared home . . .”—is a sorrowful lament for his familial home, his “Russia of blue”, which he will not return to for a very long time, if ever.⁸

Borissova’s home archives time. Yesenin’s image on the wall is static, but only seemingly so. His absent stare is bygone and disengaged, while his presence (manifested in its absence) signals the third temporal dimension—that of time past. On the one hand, this photo imprint is the “deadest” element in the room. Unlike the rest of its decor, the carpet and the wallpaper, the picture is not enlivened by a play of light that just misses it; it is, indeed, the dimmest spot. On the other hand, it signals the measured tempo of the clock: For what has now passed, once was *being*, or was yet *to come*. The color contrast between

the red monochrome of the poet's image and the cyan environment outside is, therefore, significant not only as a marker of spatial but also a temporal difference: The people looking in and *affecting* the inside endow the outside with movement. Their happening is still unfolding; their time is now and yet to come. By penetrating the enclosure of the room with their engaged presence, they are taking us with them into the future. Consequently, with the cyan on the left side of the frame and the red on the right side, the temporal scale of fading into the future and dissolving into the past is established. What dominates the frame and clashes the red-green-blue monochrome patches into a full RGB palette is the moment of current spectatorial perception. By inhabiting a colored room, containing within itself the frames of red pastness and cyan futurity, we are partaking in the act of viewership, looking at the room, looking at the red image inside it, looking at the cyan world outside it, and being anchored in our position by the click of the man's camera and the crowd's reciprocal gaze. Our spectatorial faculty is effectively "join[ing] in a certain way . . . every instance of coming to be and passing away that takes place in the present" (Husserl 2019, p. 34); it indicates an "irreducible spreading-out" (Derrida 2011, p. 52) upon which *to-come* is rendered into *has-been*.

However, the invasiveness of the outside gaze, its indeterminism, affectuality, and ongoing unraveling upset the security of our viewing perspective. The three planes, out of which this "home" is built, do not offer an escape. Rather, they *entrap* our POV within the frame of a certain inside, exposing and directing it to a certain outside. Time flows through us as we stand in a static, solid box, challenged to face *the other*, who in turn attempts to fixate the moment of our "now" with their shutter. Within *DOM*, we are not shielded but being boxed inside a box, doubled, imprinted onto the film that will release our image into the seeming deadness of the past, only to join the host of forlorn ghosts, just like the poet staring into his elsewhere. The safe abode of our quiet contemplation, its "pure actuality of the now" (Derrida 2011, p. 58), is disrupted by an elsewhere that itself captures us as yet another elsewhere, from the outside. Our desire for safety is hence suspended; the undecidability of the event takes hold. *DOM* ("home") is performed in time and space between *the I* and *the other*, welcoming through its holey threshold non-presence and non-evidentness into the self-identity of our perception and raising the question of who the *dominus* is within these walls.

2.1. *The I and the Other: The Emergency of an Emergence*

Throughout the previous section, I referred to the spectatorial gaze as "our" gaze, implicitly signaling that a self-identification occurs between the perceiving subject and the perspective delineated by the image's frame. The beholder is given a view and a point from which to approach it. Consequently, I encounter the photograph, responding to it with *my* personal voice. Ernst van Alphen suggests that what is being communicated during the act of spectatorship is *affect*, or an energetic "intensity" of the experiential state of perception. Building on Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, he notes that affect is relational in nature, for it emerges from "an interaction" and relies on the process of identification, upon which the spectator's psyche is positioned up against *the other* (van Alphen 2008, pp. 26, 28). Furthermore, affect precedes conscious thought; hence, Deleuze describes it as "the encountered sign" that is felt before it can be "recognized . . . through cognition" (van Alphen 2008, p. 22). According to Alphen, the spectator *senses* an alterior presence either "taking the other into the self on the basis of a (projected) likeness" (*idiopathic identification*) or "tak[ing] the risk of—temporarily and partially—'becoming' (like) the other", without casting anything aside (*heteropathic identification*) (van Alphen 2008, p. 28). It is the latter form of "becoming the other" that is particularly affectively powerful, as it compels the spectator, to borrow Louise Burchill's phrase, to "undergo a vacillation of her/his own sense of identity" (Burchill 2009, p. 168). By way of the encountered sign, the spectator becomes at once "*both and neither*: visible and/nor invisible . . . , living and/nor dead, perceptual and/nor hallucinatory" (Burchill 2009, p. 166). Affect blurs the

boundaries between sensible and insensible, present and absent, and reveals the spectator's own spectral nature while making an otherness at the heart of the self sensually known.

Thus, the image's power to seize the spectator resides in its ability to penetrate their sense of being "here" with a certain "over-there". To reiterate, Borissova's photograph achieves this by making the spectatorial position the focal point of the crowd's attention. The process of affective identification is carried out in two steps: First, the viewer idiosyncratically identifies with the POV angle of the frame on the basis of the room's projected geometry, luring them to "step into" the enclosure and look outside from its presumably safe vantage point. Secondly, they are immediately pierced by the reciprocity of the outside's gaze, "becoming" through heteropathic identification the mirroring other and transporting the outside within. The frame of *DOM* and the frame of the window inside the *dom* do not enfold them in a cherished quiet but rather create a channel for the mirroring other to walk straight into the space of the spectator's privileged access. The home of *DOM*, therefore, does not just mark the separation of the two spaces by a porous border but facilitates an encounter, destabilizing *the I* and *the other's* respective claims to sovereignty.

The two words I would like to focus on are "encounter" and "sovereignty". Mentioned side by side in a sentence, they create tension involving questions of power and surrender, safety (in), and danger (from). The kind of tension Derrida was particularly interested in. To him, the notion, or structure, of sovereignty is worrying precisely because it is so pervasive. Not only is it a key concept of political power sanctioned to employ instruments of violence and cruelty;⁹ at a deeper level, it is the very principle of thought and argumentation, which sustains the entirety of Western philosophical tradition, from Plato onwards: "Sovereignty" is "a privileged metonymy for Western metaphysics" (Custer 2014, pp. 43, 47) that names, in Derrida's words, "the domination of presence" (Derrida 1982, p. 63). Briefly, the general concept of metaphysics involves five traits: decision, desire, will, closure, and security. Leonard Lawlor succinctly describes them as follows:

First, it includes a decision as to how to answer the question of the meaning of being. That answer is presence. *Second*, from that answer, a desire flows, a desire for presence. *Third*, in order to fulfill the desire, the will is required. The will wills certain means to the purpose of fulfilling the desire. *Fourth*, the willing of these means (techniques aiming at mastering repetition) makes a circle: what was intended at the beginning is found at the end. Metaphysics is a closed system; it is an enclosure. So, *fifth*, there is security within the enclosure . . . contamination, disease, death, foreignness, and alterity, all of these have been pushed to the outside (Lawlor 2011, p. xv).

Within the enclosure of metaphysics, meaning is formed by way of the *repeatability* and *iterability* of the terms used to express it (Colebrook 2014, p. 62). Iterability institutes an object of knowledge, such as "the I", "home", or "the other", establishing boundaries between concepts and endowing them with sovereignty. Sovereignty, thus, denotes *the domain of power exerted over a certain enclosure of meaning*: "*dom*" ("home") as *my* "safety", "presence" as *my* "identity". "My", however, is itself a replicable institution of *the I*, uttered over and over again not to manifest an instance of its uniqueness but to assert the dominion of one's *iterable* "being", reproducing its own self-identification, or sameness, through repetition. The very act of naming domination over a certain enclosure of meaning betrays itself as a paradoxical gesture, extended to what it excludes; for concepts emerge in response to the need for the conservation (or universalization) of sense so that an utterance can be transferable from one context to another, used across space and time, independently of the identity of any individual speaker (Colebrook 2014, p. 58). On the one hand, to establish boundaries, first there must be *the other* that differs enough to belong outside one's domain; there must be the risk of contamination; there must be the desire to tame and to separate. On the other hand, these very boundaries conserve a sense so meaning can be communicated to *the other*. Sovereignty, in such a way, is only operable when it relates to something other than itself. The wall it erects between the inside and the outside is decided by the *inevitability* of the window. What precedes sovereignty is an encounter.

For Derrida, an encounter (or an event) is an opening into the beyond, a surpassing of any closure; for it presupposes an address to someone or something arising in their absolute non-sameness, forcing one to go “out of tune with [oneself] all the time” (Derrida 2002a, p. 10). A meeting between oneself and this absolute *arrivant* is not a matter of intentional desire but rather that of structural necessity: “Either there is only the same, which can no longer even appear and be said . . . or indeed there is the same *and* the other” (Derrida 1978, p. 128). That is, for as long as there is movement in life, appearing and disappearing, there is a play of colliding *differences*, revealing the working of *différance*—the underlying principle of the continuous deferral of presence and meaning.

Derrida coins the neologism *différance* to describe the operation of positive, productive, and ungrounded differential play, or differencing, from which systems of difference emerge (Derrida 2002b, p. 280); in other words, the very movement allowing for the iterability necessary for the production of meaning. While the term describes the possibility of a particular structure of differences established through temporal deferral and spatial dispersal (Colebrook 2014, p. 63) and subsequently permitting the formation of identities, an ungrounded *différance*, strictly speaking, cannot itself be located, for it is “an ‘originary’ and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *strictu sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions” (Derrida 1982, p. 13). The movement of *différance* slips away and cannot be anchored in the present. Shaping his philosophy under the influence of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology investigating the inner consciousness of time, Derrida postulates that present-beingness is always already split, removed from one by a concatenation of traces. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida defines the trace as a momentary retention of experience once experience splits the fabric of space and time and suggests that each trace emerges not in its being but in its becoming and is incomplete. The trace appears at the moment of its disappearance, never reaching any fixed form. It coincides not with itself in the future or in the past but with its neighboring traces that concurrently emerge and are being effaced. He calls this convergence “supplementarity” to describe how each instance of incompleteness seeks completion, or in other words, how the absence of presentness aspires to acquire presentness but can never succeed. As such, presence dissolves in the multitude of traces and cannot be centered, collected, or logocentric. For Derrida, presence is an emptiness, an abyss, which engenders a play of all possible meanings within a given structure (Derrida 1997). Consequently, he stresses that *différance* is not a concept—it is a force opposite to that of a concept—for it does not produce sameness that can be replicated throughout different contexts but refers to “a strategy of difference [that] would be different on each of its occasions” (Colebrook 2014, p. 59).

Therefore, the enclosure of *the I* has always already been shaped in response to the mere fact of *the other’s* existence. Yet, because there is a difference at the core of their unbreachable, original distance, *the other* remains inappropriable, unrepresentable, and spectral. The architecture of *the I’s* domain is supported by *the other’s* absence because their experience and identity cannot be rendered in full. “The thing itself always steals away” (Derrida 2011, p. 89), and the question “Who’s there?” (Shakespeare 2008, p. 143) is addressed to an everlasting *ghost*, which can neither be retained nor evaded. Reference and deference are made to *the other*, while *the other* returns a gesture of reference and deference. However, “*Tout autre est tout autre*” (Derrida 2006, p. 217). The other remains *wholly* other. Alterity cuts through the eye of *the I*.

For that reason, an encounter is inherently perilous and fraught with danger. It is intrinsically unpredictable and indicates “a relation to what is the other, to what differs in the sense of alterity” (Derrida 2002a, p. 10). Both originary and marked by the possibility of ghostly recall, an encounter is “an absolute spark”, a new openness, and simultaneously a trace of the infinite, re-emerging in new constellations (Derrida 2002a, p. 20). The “now” of the event spills into the future (as a becoming) and the past (as a recall) while constituting the present by means of the dynamic relational difference. Thus, the present reveals itself as a derangement, a dislocation, and an out-of-jointness; an arena of the recurrent traumatism of one’s non-coincidence with oneself in space and in time. An event speaks of a new

emergence, an interlacement, and a discovery of the distance between *the I* and *the other*, which is also an emergency, for it is a displacement before a boundary can be (re-)formed.

At this juncture, let us summarize how “home” is yet another metonymy for the order of the metaphysics of presence. First, there is a desire for quiet and safety to be fulfilled, or rather, a need that is itself a response to the imminent threat of danger. Secondly, there is a will to build protective walls, identifying the boundaries of one’s sovereign domain. Thirdly, the conceptual differences between inside and outside, *the I* and *the other*, nativeness and foreignness, are encircled. What is “home” within becomes “border” without; what welcomes “self” casts off “alterity”. Yet, the very foundation of one’s cherished enclosure is predicated upon the existence of the outside world: It is built in the name of *the other*. Hence, once *the other* is driven to the outside, the solidity, the thickness of the walls between the two spaces becomes not only protective but also prohibitive, impeding the ongoing interplay of relational difference and capturing one on the inside. What necessitates the construction of a peaceful place, where one hopes to be “self-present” and away from danger, also draws a violent line of demarcation and institutes the power of the sovereign, relentlessly reflecting off *the other*.

So when we identify with the inside perspective in Borissova’s photograph, being given the promise of security within a certain ∂OM (“home”),¹⁰ we cannot feel but an unnerving perturbation; for within *DOM* the affectuality of *the other’s* gaze has already pierced our perspective, having preceded conscious thought and saturated our POV with the traces of alterity. *The other* has always already been there before *the I*; *the I* might be a “host” within, but only because, first, one is a “guest” without. By establishing a direct eyeline between the spectator and the onlookers, the former has been made into a “guest” before they can become a “host”, while their meeting in itself is *ghost-ly*.¹¹ While the outside is a dynamic over-there and the inside is a static here, the window establishes the spectral field of *undecidability*, where the rules of the play between “guests” and “hosts” are yet to be drawn. The effect of the image, its inherent traumatism, is not just borne out of fear of the threatening outside but, even more so, out of the spectator’s uncertainty as to how to respond to it. Once inside the box, the assertive yet fearful question “Who’s there?” resonating throughout the photograph cannot but be addressed to the already anterior *I*. What answer can be given from the inter-exteriority of one’s enclosure?

2.2. *The I and Oneself: The Violence of Affirmation*

Inside the permeable space of Borissova’s *DOM*, it is the outsider who lays down the first question: a question of presence. What is being asked is the question of being, or “being-in-question”, of both the question and being (Derrida 2000, p. 3). Put differently, “Who stands before me?”, “uttered” by the click of the stranger’s camera and imprinting a possible answer on its film precedes the “host’s” (i.e., the spectator’s) very same address. However, who has the right to interrogate? Who is the host(age)? And if there is a “home”, must there be a master? Has there been an act of transgression, a trespass?

Let us consider for a moment home as a *place*, as an interval between what does and does not belong to it, as an outline. In *Antigone*, Sophocles refers to a tomb, one’s final destination, as *oikēsis*, a virtual synonym for *oikos* (home) (Gutting 2014, p. 73), which Derrida interprets as *chora*, or a stopping place, placement (Derrida 2000, p. 95). For him, however, *chora* is not simply a “location” but a spacing of difference. It reveals the logic of structural necessity to “[mark] a place apart” (Derrida 1995, p. 124). A force “more situating than situated” (Derrida 1995, p. 92), *chora* testifies to the dissymmetrical distribution of matter, the working out of laws of separation, exclusion, and participation. It is dynamic. Interpreting Plato’s *Timaeus*, Derrida observes that *chora* “names neither this nor that . . . at times [it] appears to be neither this nor that, at times both this and that” (Derrida 1995, p. 89). Yet, it is an interval. A tomb. A home. How then can a place combine the finality of a fixed location with a “textual drift” (Derrida 1995, p. 123), setting it in perpetual motion?

The answer seems straightforward enough: For a place to be “on the move”, it must house a nexus of relations. The working out of differences between sensible and insensible,

life and death, *the I* and *the other*, etc., is located within the confines of a “room”, whose paradoxical function is to entomb difference, give it an identity and a name, but only in relation to another name, which is a name only in relation to yet another. What gives a place to all determinations itself drifts away in an aporetic way. Home, identifying the meaning of belonging and allowing one to distinguish autonomous selfhood from otherness, does not set roots but floats over its own (im)possibility of existence.¹² Home begets a “home”. A working out of differences creates a concept, sitting on a site of rupture. What is a movement perverts its course into a stop. What seeks to differentiate eventually establishes a difference, and from within its border, one is left to believe in the inevitability of one’s own separation.

It is this very separation that Borissova problematizes in her photography, destabilizing the law of sovereign in-/exclusion in four steps. *First*, by naming the project *DOM*, she (mis)leads the spectator to their “domain”, where they can seemingly claim a right to a territory of their own. However, this claim is immediately stripped of its innocence. Because—*secondly*—the mirroring other is transported from the outside inside through the affective address of the image. The “right” *feels* violated. Something is at odds. For either “home” does not provide the promised shelter and is a mere (document object) model, or the onlookers are, indeed, illegitimate intruders and, potentially, hostile subjects. What has been taken away from the “master” of this “home” is the power to close the window to an undesirable stranger. The “master” comes before them to *be looked at*. The ideality of “home” is, thus, disturbed; the outsider shakes up the dogmatism of the host’s rule.

So, *thirdly*, a decision must be made. We, the spectator, must ascertain whether the outsider can be welcomed. To overcome the active-passive state of being watched while watching, a judgment in relation to their identity must ensue. The sovereignty of “home” endows one with the authority to translate *the other* into one’s own language: A belated echoing “Who stands before me?” follows. Here is where the transgression lies. From the internal structure of “my” “home”, the “master”, whose gaze is already contaminated by the other’s gaze, must issue a singular pronouncement upon the self and *the other*, reducing the complexity of lived experience, of the *arrivant*, to a determination. The split *I* of the “host” proceeds to separate from “the other”. *The I* perverts oneself into an iterable concept, speaking from within the given iterable *dom*. “Home”, consequently, imposes its inherent logic of inter/exteriority, suspending “the ordeal of undecidability” but still being haunted by its “ghost” (Derrida 1992, p. 24). A decision, after all, entails risk, remaining open to future reevaluations. While carrying with it the weight of responsibility and not being programmed (otherwise, it would not be a decision), it is nonetheless conceived within a certain structure. In this case, within the solid walls of a replicable *khreshchanka*—a gray apartment block composed of cells like an industrial beehive. Thus, *fourthly*, the final subversion of domestic stability is performed: The *dom* is permeable not just from the outside but from the inside of itself, being inscribed into the larger system constituting its walls—the State that violates the very premise of a home by controlling and penetrating it, invisibly and ever-presently. The “home” “the I” is made to inhabit has always been but a cell—structured, multiplied, situated inside the rigid matrix of flats. This iterated container of Soviet domesticity was never built to delineate private and public or to protect one’s interiority, secrecy, and phenomenality. Rather, its function is to embed “the I” into a “home”. To place. To give a name. To capture. To contain. To have *the I* reduced to a determination. Who is the *dominus* within these walls? What is most solid—the state-built walls; while its captive remains to listen for the bygone voice of Yesenin’s sorrowful poetry, singing of a home he had lost, a home he could not hold on to, for it is a land of blue, an ephemeral feeling, that always “steals away”.

Therefore, what we are facing is the infinite recursion of conceptualization. The “home” is issuing “the I”. “The I” is issuing “the other”. “The other” is issuing “the other other”. “The I” and “the other” are issuing the “home”, the “border”, and “the I”. What answers one’s longing for safety and peace is one’s inherent, structural necessity to establish a certain enclosure of meaning. To suspend the undecidability of inter-relation, to bring a

dangerous interplay to a stop, which is itself traumatic, for all affirmation of borders is violence and division, splitting unpredictability and multiplicity into containable objects. Consequently, all meaning is a cell. Yet without it, no utterance can be transferred; no alterity can be distinguished from homogenous sameness. Its placement, its “stopping place”, is as inevitable as the play preceding it. The spectral play, however, cannot be extinguished as long as there is a difference; its traces intersperse the cell and respond to the call of *the other*, always standing on the opposite side of the window.

In such a way, an interval in time and space is, indeed, a rupture. Any fixed location, any outline of a home, is pervaded with the force of *chora* that marked off a space of interlacement before there was a separation. Within the spacing, hence, there is hidden the lingering of the originary oscillation, of one’s non-belonging to oneself, of the violence of primary assertion. The aporia of home—and it is the aporia following the necessary overcoming of undecidability that I refer to as trauma—is in the contestation of the laws of inclusion and exclusion, relation and disconnection, encounter and sovereignty. To be at home is simultaneously to be with and to be without. However, it is also to be placed, to be embedded. When the embeddedness itself is a cruel inscription into an identity, when one’s home is a totalitarian cell of capture, perhaps, the memory of originary oscillation is the only guiding path out of the established “sovereignty” and into yet another “encounter” with *the other* on the outside. As an embodiment of *chora*, home, therefore, is also one’s own relation to a place, a point of view; while the window one is looking *through* is not just a field of undecidability (and lurking danger) but also one of future possibilities. Perhaps a home, which is not a “home”, embodies in itself a hope for the re-formation of borders, governed not by the law of sovereignty but by a justice of encounter, allowing *the other* to appear as the wholly other and not be feared. By this logic, whereas a “home” is a hiding place from the unpredictability of the encounter, a home with a view of alterity is an openness into an absolute beyond.

3. Conclusions

Aware of the paradoxical frailty of what seems to be most “solid”, in another photograph from the project *DOM*, Borissova depicts a paper maquette of a decrepit *khrushchevka* set in an empty field of snow, consumed in flames (Figure 2). It burns. There are no living creatures in sight. No screams, suffering, or violence seem to emit from the inside. The apartment block in no way aspires to naturalism and is revealed as a mere document object model implanted into a rather unusual environment. It is a concept taken out of context, a theatrical illusion that has served its purpose and is being erased. The spectator looks at it from the safety of their (now) outside position: What is presented as a home from one perspective is seen as a burning in the distance from another. Unlike a real inhabitant of a Soviet *khrushchevka*, the spectator has the privilege to walk in and out of “home”, to step away from one theatrical set and step into another. They have the freedom to get away should there be any alarming smell of smoke. Home is being seen from various angles, while each photograph mediates a field of encounter, probing the boundaries of the meaning of “home”: What if it is a dark corner with a window?; What if it is burning?; What if it is a memory, a feeling? The spectral nature of the photographic medium helps to affect the spectator into a “beyond” of home; to view it is as a spacing with a textual drift running through it. Unlike “home”, however, photography is forgiving: It does not capture for too long. But, likewise, it gives no promise of a resting place, a safe abode, or a home.



Figure 2. DOM: Document Object Model. Part 1 (Julia [Borissova n.d.a](#)).

An exercise in deconstruction runs the risk of being criticized for demolishing the wall between two oppositions, an inside and an outside, and leaving nothing else in place. This criticism misses the mark, however. To destabilize the concept of “home” is not to show that it is untrue or has no right to existence. On the contrary: One traces the genesis of “home” to show its absolute necessity. The underlying play of differentiation, which *différance* stands for, testifies to some unseen law of colliding and splitting off, of an inevitable emerging out of an emergency. If there is death lurking outside, one will most certainly seek refuge. Yet, what the play of *différance* also divulges is that no new emerging is set in stone. It is always ongoing; it is always a “passing through”. The opposition to a given concept is located not on its outside but within it. The thicker the wall and the smaller the size of the window, the more certain one’s own capture inside an unresolvable contradiction. What deconstruction uncovers is the seed of the aporia, which, in this case, undermines the peacefulness and stability of home. However, no concept is homogenous; every word is borne out of strife, and for that reason, it carries a certain truth with it. Hence, what is being put forward is not the demolition of home but a rephrasing of its claim. For what purpose is it built (or maintained)? To expel alterity or to accommodate it?

As the analysis above suggests, *the other* cannot be banished, for it precedes a “home”. What home ensconces is a space of inter-exteriority or relationality. Thus, home must resound with the echo of its *chora*, continuously discovering new distances and proximities between the same and the non-same. For even a tomb, the virtual synonym of home is a passage that speaks of transition and transformation. Perhaps, then, home is not what is claimed in the sovereignty of its domain but what is discovered with the “generosity of giving in being” ([Direk and Lawlor 2014](#), p. 4). The longing for a *chora* of one’s own is positively traumatic, opening oneself to *the other* in the face of one’s alterity, not masking the very fracture of being upon which both *the I* and *the other* stand. Putting four walls around a crack does nothing to the progress of its cracking, for it abides not by the law of walling off but separates under the pressure of necessity. One may only wonder if there was the need for a structure of sovereignty at all, if one’s own fracture of being was respected in the first place, if one’s “closeness of touch always presuppos[ed] the distance of difference” ([Colebrook 2014](#), p. 71)? A redefined question of home would, thus, ask: What would one’s

home look like if one and everyone's absolute right to difference, interiority, and encounter preceded a claim to an "ancestral home"?

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Notes

- ¹ Or, in a Kantian address: Under what conditions the knowledge of home is made possible?
- ² Alternatively, Germanic **haima-* may have originated from Proto-Indo-European **tkoi-mos*, a derivative of the verbal base **tkei-*, meaning "to cultivate, dwell, inhabit". Its direct relative Sanskrit noun *kṣéma* is translated as "tranquility, quiet, safety, peace" ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.a](#)).
- ³ "One is a builder, good at raising up a home" (from The Exeter Book, "The Gifts of Men", 75b-76a, quoted in [Muir 2000](#)).
- ⁴ Proto-Indo-European *domə-* (*demə-*) is also translated as "to tame" ([Indo-European Language Revival Association 2007](#), p. 580). A great many things can be tamed, indeed: Latin *dominus* extends from the household context (the master of a slave, cattle, landed property) to the emperor, the secular or heavenly king ([Green 2000](#), p. 103).
- ⁵ Since Freud, trauma has been viewed as a paradoxical state that manifests itself belatedly, emerging in the form of the traces that it leaves behind ([Michaelsen 2015](#)). Occluded from conscious perceptibility, trauma arises not in its originary givenness but as "the failed translation of an unremembered experience", marked by "the perplexing condition of a missing original" ([Baer 2002](#), p. 73). Within a psychoanalytical framework, the inaccessibility of lived traumatic experience to memory reveals in the structure of human subjectivity the "fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality" ([Caruth 1996](#), p. 91), as consciousness overwhelmed by a heart-wrenching event entraps itself in a vacuous deadlock. Endured in its aftermath, trauma refers in a self-referential loop to a dislocation from within that is mediated indirectly through the procedures of repetition, deferral, and erasure (termed by Freud as *Nachträglichkeit*), resulting in the retroactive production of meaning ([van Boheemen-Saaf 1999](#)).
- ⁶ *DOM: Document Object Model* was exhibited at FotoDepartment in Saint Petersburg in 2014 ([Beard 2014](#)) and published as an art book in 2016 ([Borissova n.d.c](#)). Borissova describes her artistic motivation thus: "I felt the need to go beyond the home, delving into the past in search of memories. The home is a basic concept familiar to everyone, but after a while, people stop thinking about what the home really means. I wanted to transform the concept of the home in relation to passing time ... [emphasizing] not only the nostalgic dimension of the work but also how vague the boundary is between memory and imagination, past and present" ([Beard 2014](#)). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Borissova created the follow-up art book *Home Is ...*, which reflected on the subject of home imprisonment during the lockdowns.
- ⁷ In this article, I explore *DOM* as a photographic project. Hence, I examine the interaction between the spectator and the photograph, not the exhibit. Further theoretical implications can be drawn on the basis of it being a scale model, an installation. However, for our purposes, we will treat *DOM* as a two-dimensional image while also acknowledging the complex process of its creation, its literal "staging".
- ⁸ Yesenin's poem in Alec Vagapov's translation ([Russian Poems in Translation 2023](#)):
I have left my endeared home,
Getting out of my Russia of blue.
Little grove by the pond will warm
My old mother's sorrow anew.

Like a golden croaker the moon
Lies prostrate on the water tranquil.
Grizzly hair, like apple-tree bloom,
In my father's beard will spill.

I will not come back readily, and
Singing blizzard will ring on and on.
Maples guard my blue Russian land,
Standing there, one-legged, all alone.

And I know that it's joyous for those
Who've been kissing the rain of the leaves.
For the maple and I, we both
Are alike, in the head, that is.

- ⁹ It suffices to remember Max Weber's definition of the state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber 1946, p. 78). As the use of the term "legitimate" in this context suggests, the state is not the only actor employing violence but the only one that can *legitimately* authorize its use.
- ¹⁰ The cultural theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes observes that the meaning of the photograph is always conveyed through words (caption, article, title, etc.), anchoring the spectator's interpretation. In Borissova's photograph, we think we encounter an image of "home" only because the title says so. According to Barthes, our civilization is still one of the text and not of the image, and if one wanted to find an image not accompanied by words, one would need to go back to partially illiterate societies (Barthes 1977, p. 38).
- ¹¹ Both "guest" and "host" originate from the same Proto-Indo-European root **g^host-i-*. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "the dual meanings 'host'/'guest' of Latin *hospes* and its progeny are due to customs of reciprocity: a person serving as guest on one occasion would act—and be expected to act—as host on another occasion to a visiting former host" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.b). Proto-Indo-European **g^host-i-* is derived from *ghō s-*, meaning "to eat" (Indo-European Language Revival Association 2007, p. 1113). Although a curious assonance, "ghost" is believed to have originated from **g^héys-* ("confused", "shocked", "angered", "frightened") and is unrelated (Indo-European Language Revival Association 2007, p. 1076).
- ¹² In his writing, Derrida explores various aporias, or antinomies, elaborating a "logic" "in which the only possible x (... any rigorous concept of x) is 'the impossible x'" (Derrida 2001, p. 55). That is, for example, only the unforgivable can be forgiven, only the undecidable can be decided, and only the unwelcomable can truly be welcomed, just like only that which cannot be given at all is a true gift. While a true friend would not ask so much as the name of their friend, not imposing any demands whatsoever is already a demand upon their friendship (Custer 2014). He, thus, reflects on the internal conflict pervading the concepts of forgiveness, decision, friendship, and hospitality, noting that they impose paradoxical requirements to the unconditional, which is given and received under certain conditions as if such concepts were governed by two opposing laws: the law of absolute giving and the law of sovereign protection.

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