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Homely Spaces : Readings of Homeliness in American Culture

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Homely Spaces: *Readings of Homeliness in American Culture*

*In the house of fiction you can hear, today, the deep stirring
of the unbomely.*

Homi K. Bhabha, "The World and Home"

The questions which the present issue of *Kultura Popularna* addresses focus on the constructions and the place of the “ordinary” viewed from the perspective of various “home”-inspired discourses, ranging from housing to domestic policy, through questions of family values, ethics of modesty, simplicity of living, unpretentiousness, individual and domestic security, communities, localities and neighborhoods. The homely, unlike the sublime and the beautiful, seems to be a category which has slipped from the critical horizon of the humanities as unaesthetic and too obvious, which obviousness the texts below problematize. Homely spaces are not simply suggestive of places of residence, as the adjective ‘homely’ also brings to mind some kind of modesty, something unaffectedly natural which need not be either sublime or beautiful but, in the broadest sense, normal – perhaps in the way the very ideas of home and dwelling are inscribed in our everyday lives as unquestionable necessities which lie at the roots of Western culture. Martin Heidegger’s identification of dwelling with building and being in his well-known essay has supplemented this ontological necessity with a peculiar type of technology governed not by the task to be achieved, but by our vulnerability to homelessness which in our inability to think of dwelling and homeliness as troublesome: “What if man’s homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” (“Building, Dwelling, Thinking”).

What is homely hides within its spaces the unhomely, an unwelcome visitor or visitation from its outside which Freud wrote about in terms of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) and which, seemingly standing in opposition to the homely, contaminates its space with irreducible unfamiliarity and strangeness, the irreducible traces of repression. Since *unheimlich* also stands in opposition to *heimisch*, to native and familiar, the space of the homely – in the American context to which the following essays refer – is also the space of colonial bringing of the European home to Others. In the experience of bringing that home, both on the side of the bringer and the brought, a certain disorientation is clearly felt, an *unhomely moment* which, according to Khomi Bhabha, results from the displacement of the division between the world and the home. “In that displacement,” he writes, “the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (“The World and the Home”). The “where” of home is thus a hardly decidable place or location due to its plasticity and expansibility, its spatial rather than topographical whereabouts. It is for this reason that home cannot be simply left behind as it is travel, in movement through space, that the idea of home may come to existence. It is departure from home which, perhaps like human fall from paradise, brings home back as a nostalgia for something lost. Georges Van Den Abbeele notes that the concept of home is only needed (indeed it can only be thought) when home has already been left behind. Rigorously speaking then, one has always already left home, since home can only exist at the price of its being lost” (“Sightseers: The Tourist as Theorist”). This loss may well be imaginary, and yet it seems to be decisive in the work of constructing the domestic, of domesticating both others and ourselves one of whose aspects is the normality, or normalcy, of homely spaces which are, as the papers included in this volume implicitly or explicitly indicate, never exactly normal.

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