North America

"A.M. Homes's The Safety of Objects: People and Feelings as Objects in the American Suburban Home" by Barbara Miceli, Uniwersytet Gdański

A.M. Homes's *The Safety of Objects:* People and Feelings as Objects in the American Suburban Home

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Abstract

A.M. Homes's 1990 collection of stories, *The Safety of Objects,* deals with the theme of life in the American suburbs, those residential areas where upper middle-class live in houses that project an idea of perfection and well-being. Homes's stories, anyway, show a more miserable reality in which those families have become obsessed with things, not only as a symbol of their social status, but also as a substitute, or a surrogate, of feelings and familiar affection they do not feel anymore.

The origin of these neighborhoods and their inner dynamics may be retraced looking back to the Cold War period, when the wide array of consumer goods represented the essence of American freedom and an outpost of security in a time of great incertitude. Moreover, as Stephanie Coontz maintains, consumerism does not only regard material goods, but also emotions and roles, and "our personal identities and most intimate relations", so "we experience a blurring of the distinction between illusion and reality, people and goods, image and identity, self and surroundings" (176).

The aim of my contribution is to highlight all the above-mentioned features of the suburbs' population through some of Homes's stories, showing how objects cause their greatest anxieties, elicit their truest feelings, and constitute, after all, the core of their very being.

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1. Introduction

The golden life in the American suburbs, residential areas where the upper-middle class live, have always been linked to the consumerism culture. Their "polished veneer"[95] and apparently perfect surface, hides very often aspects of misery and a disconcerting set of issues such as "boredom, restlessness, and despair… intermingled with alcoholism, philandering and divorce,"[96] all elements suggesting that for the people living in these places "their lives are meaningless."[97]

This is the picture that the 1990 collection of stories by the American author A.M. Homes, *The Safety of Objects,* depicts through characters whose lives are full of objects but devoid of authentic aims, genuine relationships (even within their own family) and love. They live in the suburb of Westchester, New York, and their apparently normal lives conceal neuroses, fears, spousal issues, drug abuse and a controversial relation with their homes and the objects they contain. In all the stories, objects are the only reliable part of their lives, something that gives them a status, emotions, and, as in the story the closes the collection, "A Real Doll", also a romantic relationship. It is not accidental, then, that the author decided to set her stories in a suburb, the land *par excellence* of consumerism. To comprehend such situation, it is necessary to provide a historical background.

At the end of the Fifties, in a moment of incertitude and danger caused by the Cold War between U.S.A. and URRS, the suburban home had become a way to counterpoise a purely American lifestyle to the Soviet one. In 1959, the famous "kitchen debate" between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushev set the features of the American model, which resided "on the ideal of the suburban home complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members."[98] The roles Nixon was referring to were well defined: "the man would bring wages home from his good job to a wife more than ever occupied with her feminine duties of household management and child care."[99] The wife had also the duty of keeping herself attractive while living in a house adorned with "a wide array of consumer goods."[100] All this represented the essence of the American freedom. Moreover, that family structure, and that kind of home, epitomized, in the

[95] G. McDonald, *American Literature and Culture, 1900-1960* (New York, 2008), p. 35.
[96] P. Later, *A Companion to American Literature and Culture* (New York, 2010), p. 85.
[97] McDonald, cit., p. 35.
[98] E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988), p. 16.
[99] J.M. Hawes and E.I. Nybakken, *American Families, A Research Guide and Historical Handbook* (Westport, 1991), p. 164.
[100] Tyler May, cit., p. 7.

propaganda of the era, an outpost of security in a time of incertitude[101], and a national symbol[102].

The Sixties were the golden age of the suburbs: areas made up of entirely upper-middle class inhabitants, obviously white, who became an example for all the races and social classes that lived in America[103]. These areas were dominated by the consumerism culture, not only of material goods, but also of emotions and roles. As Stephanie Coontz writes, consumerism does not only regard objects, but also "our personal identities and most intimate relations," so that "we experience a blurring of the distinction between illusion and reality, people and goods, image and identity, self and surroundings."[104] This blurring is present in most of the characters of Homes's collection of stories, which takes stock of the situation of the early 90's suburbs, just to show that life in these places has not evolved very much from their golden era, since suburban people are still seduced by the "consumerism's promise that one can become anything one wishes."[105]

2. "Adults Alone"

The first short story in the collection is a good example of Coontz's idea of suburban people's confusion regarding themselves, their possessions and even their children. It is the story of Paul and Elaine, a married couple with two sons, Daniel and Sammy, who are left in Florida at their grandmother's house "like they're dry cleaning,"[106] allowing the couple to be alone at home for the first time after their birth. This occasion gives them the chance to rethink their marriage and to realize how their feelings are shallow and unstable.

The first element that is evident from this story is how the couple, especially Elaine, differs from most of the suburban families in the way they treat their children. The very fact that they leave them in another State as if they were dry cleaning, gives them the status of objects, and lacks the usual fanaticism for kids that dominates the suburban families. Elaine is not the typical housewife only caring for her children, and she certainly does not "spend more time on child-oriented activities."[107] She does not follow the model of those parents "too obsessed with their children" and she does not consider them as "the new American religion," where they are "worshiped with too many toys" and "too much attention."[108] This lack of attention is evident when Elaine goes to the

[101] Hawes and Nybakken, cit., p. 160.
[102] N. Zarestky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill, 2007), p. 4.
[103] M.A. Marty, *Daily Life in the United States 1960-1990, Decades of Discord* (Westport, 1997), p. 79.
[104] S. Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, 1992), p. 176.
[105] Ibid., p. 177.
[106] A.M. Homes, *The Safety of Objects* (London, 1990), p. 15.
[107] Hawes and Nybakken, cit., p. 170.
[108] Ibid., p. 171.

grocery store and consciously buys "items that are strictly for adults only, food her children would never let her buy."[109] She does not feel guilty, and she realizes a few hours later, when Sammy calls her crying, that she is annoyed by her own child. Only at that point she artificially builds her sense of guilt:

She's annoyed, and then she can't believe how selfish she's being. This is her child, her baby. How could she be angry? How could she have gone to the grocery store and not bought anything for him, no animal crackers. Ho-Ho's, nothing he likes?

"Oh, baby, it's all right. I miss you too, you're my boy, I'll call you again later. Tell Grandma to give you another cookie."[110]

Elaine's sense of guilt passes through the action of not buying something for her children, and not through the fact that she does not miss them, and she even feels annoyed by one of them crying on the phone. The only practicable solution to stop her guilt and calm down the child is, once again, distracting him with something: a cookie.

Another feature of this story is the relation the characters have with their house, where they had moved six years before from the city (presumably New York):

She feels like she's been having an extramarital relationship with their home. It isn't even an affair, an affair sounds too nice, too good. As far as she's concerned a house should be like a self-cleaning oven; it should take care of itself.

The last time she was happy with the house was the day before they moved in, when the floors had just been done, when it was big and empty, and they hadn't paid for it yet.[111]

The attitude of Elaine towards her home is "subjugated to the same accelerated obsolescence of any other object of luxury" which makes the house "an object of consumption."[112] The house, which had elicited feelings comparable to "an affair," has ceased being something desirable in the very moment the family has moved in. Now it is something to take care of, to clean, something Elaine is tired of.

In another section of the story, the house becomes rather a symbol of their status. When Paul and Elaine are in their car observing the landscape, she asks her husband if he had

[109] Homes, cit., p. 122.
[110] Ibid., p. 26.
[111] Ibid., p. 16.
[112] J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society, Myth and Structures* (London, 1998), p. 61.

ever imagined being "like this." When he questions her about what being "like this" means, she answers: "Here, in a house, with a station wagon."[113] The house and the station wagon designate their status of middle-class family, an integral part of the establishment. It is something Paul had always fantasized about: "In his fantasy about suburban life the whole family is always in the car together, going places, singing songs, eating McDonald's."[114] But, despite the possession of the car and the house, this latter considered as a liberating space of "self-expression and self-development, particularly through the consumption practices of interior design, home improvement and gardening,"[115] the result is quite disappointing. The image that he projects is totally different: "He looks like a demented version of the suburban man, the Playboy man, the man in his castle."[116] This is a reference to an article that appeared on the magazine *Playboy* in 1956, where a bachelor apartment was confronted with a family house. The apartment was defined as "the outward reflection of his [owner] inner self- a comfortable, livable, and yet exciting expression of the person he is and the life he leads."[117]

The environment where the couple lives forced them to bury their identity as a couple, something that emerges pitilessly as soon as they remain alone at home: "She can't stand him. She can't stand anything about him: the way he thinks, talks, looks, all of it. She knows he hates her too and that makes it even worse. It makes her nuts. She should be able to hate him without any backlash."[118] The only antidote to their stagnant situation seems to be that of coming back to the time they were younger through the consumption of illegal drugs, which, anyway, do not give them the same thrill. The story ends with the couple forced to collect their children ahead of time, because they do not fit with their grandmother anymore, and resume their usual life. Homes decided to write a sequel to this story, and in 2012 she published the novel *Music for Torching*, where Paul and Elaine find the solution to their boredom at the beginning of it: they destroy its symbol, the house, setting it on fire.

3. "Looking for Johnny"

There is an object that can be considered the protagonist of this story as much as the kid, Erol, who recounts in first person what happened to him when he was nine. This object is the TV, which seems to be an obsession both for Erol and his sister Rayanne, a "retarded" girl who talks to the TV as if it were an actual person[119].

[113] Homes, cit., p. 19.
[114] Ibid., p. 18.
[115] D. Southerton (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture, Vol 1* (London, 2011), p. 1398.
[116] Homes, cit., p. 23.
[117] E. Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford, 2009), p. 84.
[118] Homes, cit., p. 24.
[119] Ibid., p. 35.

Erol is kidnapped by a man called Randy and held captive in his house for a couple of days. His house lacks the variety of objects that adorn any normal house, but most of all it does not have a TV. The reason is explained by Randy when he says "Don't say television to me. It'll kill you. It makes you so you can't think. Can you think, Johnny?"[120]. Johnny is the name that Randy gives the kid, although he makes clear several times that his actual name is Erol. In the two days they spend together, Randy tries to instruct the boy to practice less passive activities, such as fishing and splitting wood. Even if he is reluctant, always dreaming of coming back home, "put on dry clothes, talk to my mom, and watch TV,"[121] Erol eventually finds a little bit of pleasure in those activities that are more authentic than the ones he usually practices at home with his mother and his sister. The reason is the absence of any connection to the outside world in Randy's house, such as a phone, which he explains with what can be defined as the only explicit criticism to the cult of objects in the whole collection:

> …Everyone has a phone and a television, and every other one has a videorecorder and washing machine. And they have microwave ovens. It doesn't mean they're smart. Start collecting things and you get in trouble. You start thinking that you care about the stuff and you forget that it's things, man made things. It gets like it's a part of you and then it's gone and you feel gone also. When you have stuff and then you don't it's like you've disappeared[122].

The concept expressed by the man can be equaled to John Kenneth Galbraith's idea that society "evaluates people by the product they possess…the more that is produced, the more that must be owned in order to maintain the appropriate prestige."[123] Yet, even if Randy does not possess any object, he kidnapped the only one he was really interested in: Johnny/ Erol. The boy is something he can shape at his own will, that is why he gives him a new name and he tries to introduce him to new activities he has never practiced before. Even the way he eventually decides to set him free is exemplifying of this attitude. He says that "[y]ou're not the kid I thought you'd be"[124] and he uses the expression "taking you back," which would be used for an object that does not live up to someone's expectations in terms of performance.

Once free, Erol develops a sort of Stockholm Syndrome towards his kidnapper, because everything that he used to like before those days seems different and boring. This feeling reveals itself, once again, through the objects, in this case the clothesline of one of his neighbors, Mrs. Perkins: "I wanted to rip it down. I wanted to take everything down and

[120] Ibid., p. 42.
[121] Ibid., p. 48.
[122] Ibid., p. 44.
[123] J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston, 1998), p. 21.
[124] Homes, cit., p. 54.

tear it into a million pieces,"[125] thinks the kid. The symbolic destruction of something Erol used to like, a physical object, is a metaphor of the new and more authentic life he has discovered in an unexpected place. In the final part of the story, once Erol approaches the house he had missed so much during his captivity, he decides to run away. Perhaps to come back to his kidnapper? Homes, in her vague finale, lets the reader decide it.

4. "Jim Train"

This story is probably the quintessential example of life in the suburbs as the "dysfunctional fringe of the economically and culturally dynamic city."[126] The protagonist, Jim, is a lawyer who works for a firm in New York City, and he commutes by train every day from Westchester to his office. He is a member of the traditional "white middle-class family made up of a male breadwinner, a full-time wife and homemaker, and children."[127] One day, after he has received a plaque that celebrates his being "Man of the Year" at his firm, the office is evacuated due to a bomb alarm, and Jim finds himself with nothing to do but coming back home. Before he leaves, the author shows how the job and the objects related to it are the only things that build Jim's identity and personality. Leaving the office, he is only worried that the briefcase, the jacket and the plaque are still inside of it, which makes him feel "rejected, disconcerted by the absence of his jacket and briefcase."[128]

Although he comes back home, at a quite unusual time, he is forced to stay outside, because the house is empty and his key breaks into the lock. This gives him again a sense of being lost when he sees his belongings and their familiarity from the outside, but he cannot get them.

When his family returns, the reaction of his older son Jake expresses perfectly how the relationships inside the family, probably due to the daily absence of Jim, are not dominated by affection. His daughter Emily hugs him, while Jake only asks him if he has brought him something. When he answers, "Just me"[129] the boy looks disappointed.

The same type of relationship is the one he has with Susan, his wife. She seems to have created a life of her own, filling the house with "all new furniture" where "nothing is familiar" and "nothing is comfortable."[130] This makes him suspicious, especially when he realizes that she does not wear the wedding ring, the physical substitute for the marriage itself. His function as a husband and a man seems to be only that of

[125] Ibid.
[126] M. Dines and T. Vermeulen, *New Suburban Stories* (London, 2013), p. 2.
[127] Zaretsky, cit., p. 5.
[128] Homes, cit., p. 69.
[129] Ibid., p. 73.
[130] Ibid., p. 76.

breadwinner, because, when they realize the dishwasher is broken, and he offers to fix it, Susan says "You certainly can't fix it. You have no idea of what to do."[131]

The next day, Jim is more and more depressed by the fact that the office is still closed. But people working there, his secretary and a colleague, have found a better way to spend their day: shopping. They are both quite excited by a big sale at Macy's, the famous American clothing chain, and they feel that buying stuff will give them a great day, supplying them with what Baudrillard calls "the rapturous satisfaction of consumption" which makes people clinging to objects "as if to the sensory residues of the previous day in the delirious excursion of a dream."[132] But this is not enough for Jim who "is not himself. Without his work, he is a dark and depressed man."[133] The lack of an accepted familiar identity, where he can express himself beyond his role as a lawyer, makes him decide, at the end of the story, that if the office is still close the next day "he will go anyway. He will simply arrive at the office. If the guards won't let him upstairs, he will refuse to go home; he will throw himself on their mercy,"[134] probably a better perspective than staying home where he has no function, no role and no authentic familiar bonds.

5. "Esther in the Night"

This story is about a mother, Esther, who lives an everlasting tragedy following a car accident in which her eldest son, Paul, has fallen in a permanent vegetative state. The family has decided to bring him home to his room, where he floats in his coma, surrounded by machines that keep him alive and a mattress that keeps him constantly moving. The comatose boy has become the center of her life, and the story is set in a night which looks as a normal and routine night. Esther's routine is connected to a series of actions she carries out to be sure that everything is in its right place and that nothing bad will happen. These actions regard the objects that make a house safe: the thermostat, the doors and the smoke detector. The "safety" of these objects makes her harbor the illusion that the chaos that can always break through in a normal life, in the guise of what happened to her son, will be avoided double-checking all the devices that keep her house safe. While she does this, she starts fantasizing about a burglar breaking in the house and stealing things that, she is aware of this, are themselves symbols and not only objects: "He would take things: the television, the VCR, the silver, my jewelry, things I've collected over the years, collected as symbols of my marriage, things that sometimes seem as though they are the marriage. I would help him pack. He would take the things that make me who I am, and then I would be able to be someone else."[135] Esther is also conscious of the fact that the burglar, as soon as he saw Paul in his bed, would flee leaving the things he has stolen behind, because no one wants to "hold anything that had

[131] Ibid., p. 77.
[132] Baudrillard, cit., p. 57.
[133] Homes, cit., p. 81.
[134] Ibid., p. 85.
[135] Ibid., p. 117.

been touched by the magic of the living dead."[136] In this way, the boy, still as an object, becomes the most precious burglar alarm they have.

Esther has another fantasy, that of the house on fire. It would be, in her dreams, a way to destroy all that the house has become after the accident and, conversely, what she has become. She imagines everything melting in the fire, including the tubes that keep her son alive. She focuses her imagination on the oxygen tank, an object that has both the function of life-saver and surrogate of Paul: once Esther had mistaken the tank, standing next to the bed, for her son, and she "thought that everything was all right."[137]

There are no major differences between the tank and Paul, they are both still, and both part of what the house has become after the accident: The Museum of the Modern Dead[138]. Esther compares the house to a museum that contains all the objects which, the night of the accident, had some meaning or function. She imagines a guided visit where she shows visitors the phone that rang to warn them about the accident, the dress she was wearing that night, Paul's medical charts, and all the bills they have paid for the boy's therapies.

The main piece of the museum is Paul in his bed. Esther describes how her daughter Cindy used to show her brother to her friends, leaving him naked in front of them and hearing their marveled remarks when they touched him, and they felt he was warm. "He is not dead", she would answer, and he is not an object.

The actions that Esther has carried out at the beginning of the story are ideally connected to the final part. She does not want to see her house robbed or destroyed by the fire, but she realizes that the only way to free her family and the house from the identity it has given them, that of a family in grief, frozen forever in the night of the accident, is by getting rid of the main piece of the museum. Esther kills her son using a plastic bag to suffocate him and comes back to her bed to lie beside her husband Harold. Life can resume from where it had stopped.

6. "A Real Doll"

The last story of this collection is about a boy who, out of the blue, falls in love with his sister's Barbie doll and starts dating her when the girl is out. The fact that Homes chose a Barbie, and not any other doll, might be yet another symbol of the suburban obsession for consumerism, since Barbie, which was introduced in 1959, "embodied a far-ranging faith in the American economy because its sole purpose was to acquire more clothing and accessories."[139] That is why there are several kinds of Barbie, and the protagonist of this story, who has a voice and is able to speak her mind, introduces herself as "Tropical," in the same way "a person might say I'm Catholic or I'm Jewish" for her

[136] Ibid., p. 118.
[137] Ibid., p. 119.
[138] Ibid.
[139] H. Sheumaker and S.T. Wajda (Eds.), *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life* (Santa Barbara, 2008), p. 132.

clothes that are "a one-piece bathing suit, a brush, and a ruffle you can wear so many ways"[140] define her identity.
This story gives also a view to another aspect of life in the suburbs, and it probably justifies the boy's hallucinations. It is the massive consumption of drugs by underage people, which is more frequent in suburbs than in urban areas[141]. The boy from this story regularly makes use of Valium to calm down and be less anxious, and he gives it also to Barbie to overcome the awkward feeling they both have. He begins taking it at every date, and after a while he develops an addiction to the drug, so that it does not work unless he takes a double dose of it.
In this story, the author emphasizes the difference between real and fake things. The comparison between the boy, with his real genital organs, and Ken, who possesses only "a little plastic bump"[142], is what makes real things triumph, since Barbie unmans her toy companion for not having real genitals.
The logic of consumerism enters the bizarre relationship between the doll and the boy when he decides to buy her a present. To do that, he goes to a toy shop where he experiences the already mentioned "rapturous satisfaction of consumption,"[143] mixed with the sexual arousing deriving from the vision of an entire row of Barbie dolls. The boy almost faints, but eventually he decides to buy a piano, which Barbie welcomes with the comment "[y]ou must really like me."[144] In this story, as in others in the collection, gifts are considered the gauge of one's interest towards his or her romantic partner. The fact that the boy has bought a piano, a precious gift in Barbie's opinion, shows his interest in the doll more than anything else. This attitude can be linked to Baudrillard's concept of "gift." An object, when it is given to someone as a present, is no more an object, but "it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons: it is thus not independent as such."[145] When an object is given, "it can fully signify the relation"[146], but in this case the relationship is between a human being and an object, hence the romantic partner of the boy becomes immediately disposable after the sexual intercourse between them has happened. The final part of the story sees the boy walking away from the doily on top of the dresser of his sister's room, where Barbie lives, finally tired and completely uninterested in the object he had loved and desired.

7. Conclusions

The stories in the collection *The Safety of Objects* show people that, as Baudrillard put it, "are surrounded not so much by other human beings…but by objects."[147] These people

[140] Homes, cit., p. 152.
[141] E. Senay and R. Waters, *From Boys to Men. A Woman's Guide to Health of Husbands, Partner* (New York, 2010), p. 194.
[142] Homes, cit., p. 154.
[143] Baudrillard, cit., p. 57.
[144] Homes, cit., p. 164.
[145] Baudrillard, cit., p. 58.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid., p. 25.

tend to consider even the other people, their family or partners, as objects, and they live in what the philosopher calls "object time," a time where people live at the pace of objects. Some of the characters in Homes's stories are slave to the objects and full of an emotional void that condemns them to repeat their actions over and over in an everlasting succession. This is the case of Paul and Elaine from the story "Adults Alone." The failure of their marriage, left bare from the absence of their children, is, in a certain way, accepted in the name of what they have built: a family and, most of all, a home. The final part of the story shows them relieved to come back to their routine and engaged in the cleaning of the house before the kids come back home. It is only a temporary relief, since, as it has already been said, in the sequel of this story, the characters' restlessness will bring them to set the house on fire.

The same concept applies to Jim from the story "Jim Train." Unable to fulfill the void he feels as a husband, a father and a man, he longs to resume his normal life, to go back to an office where he has a role, something to do every day, and a meaningful life where he can have only a taste of a few hours of a home where he means nothing for anybody.

For the other characters, there is hope. Their hope stems from the rebellion that makes them the iconoclasts of their own religion of objects. They realize that the "safety" granted by them is not safe at all, because objects cannot save them from the emotional sterility they have felt for a long time. So, the only way to save themselves is through the destruction of the objects that symbolize their empty and sometimes desperate lives. As Baudrillard writes: "The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to *destroy* them. The use of objects leads only to their *dwindling disappearance*. The value created is much more intense in *violent loss*."[148] The way the characters lose, or voluntarily destroy, the objects that enslave them is rather violent for each of them.

Erol, the kid from "Looking for Johnny," endures a kidnapping to decide that he does not like so much his life as a boy brainwashed by TV. At the end of the story, he repudiates his former life with the instinct to rip off the clothes line of his neighbor, the symbol of what his old and unauthentic life was.

Esther, the mother from "Esther in the Night," kills her objectified son and, knowing that her family and her house will never be under that "living dead" spell again, she is able to feel something again: the breath of her husband on her hair while he sleeps beside her, as pleasant as a breeze.

Finally, the kid from "A Real Doll" has a glimpse of recognition when he realizes that his lovely Barbie is not real at all. What gives him this epiphany is the fact that her owner, his sister Jennifer, has mutilated and burnt Barbie, making her unrecognizable. The girl has operated a destruction of the fetish object of her brother, and he is the one who gets saved from being obsessed by a plastic partner.

The end of these stories shows, even if not clearly and explicitly, the author's belief that people can recover from their obsession for objects just destroying them to come back to

[148] Baudrillard, cit., p. 65.

more authentic emotions and values. Because an object is just an object and, as Baudrillard claims, "it is in destruction that it acquires its meaning."[149]

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[149] Ibid.