The Feminine/Domestic Landscape and a Search for Identity in Deborah Levy's *Real Estate*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the question of a personal search for identity as well as the broader cultural concept of "feminine identity" in relation to domesticity and landscape in Deborah Levy's *Real Estate*, published in 2021. The third and last instalment of Levy's "A Living Autobiography" series is an account of a woman's search for identity in the context of major life changes: no longer a wife, no longer a mother living with her children, and no longer young, the narrator (who is and is not the author, according to Levy herself) examines her own relationship with home, homeland, and houses in various geographical locations, including her dream house – her unreal estate. The spectral dream house, positioned at the intersection of the past, the present, and the future, together with land and a very specific type of fluid landscape, constitute an object of the narrator's profound desire. By expanding on the topic of this longing, Levy engages in reflection on women's wanting and its habitual subjugation to the needs of others. The paper demonstrates how in this way Levy enters into a dialogue with Sigmund Freud and his famous unanswered question "Was will das Weib?" Most importantly, it is shown how the narrator generally considers women's – including female artists' – place at home and in culture within patriarchy. Applying a feminist and gender studies perspective, as well as by combining hauntology with housing studies, this paper examines the key symbolism of *Real Estate* and ultimately reads the book as a feminist writer's manifesto declaring "my books are my real estate," while placing it against the background of older feminist tradition, represented by such writers as Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, and Annette Kolodny.

Keywords: gender, femininity, feminism, domesticity, patriarchy, home, house, dream house, housing studies, landscape, identity, hauntology.

Introduction

Deborah Levy is a British writer who was born in 1959 in South Africa. When she was nine, her family fled persecution related to the Apartheid, and settled

in London, where she still lives. Levy started her writing career as a playwright; she has written poetry, but mostly fiction, and is perhaps best known for her Man Booker Prize or Booker Prize-nominated novels: *Swimming Home* (2011), *Hot Milk* (2016), and *The Man Who Saw Everything* (2019).

However, the book I will focus on in this paper is non-fiction and the third instalment of what Levy has called "A Living Autobiography." Part I, *Things I Don't Want to Know*, was published in 2013, commissioned by a publisher as a response to George Orwell's 1946 essay "Why I Write." Part II, *The Cost of Living* came out in 2018, and was followed by *Real Estate* in 2021. The author does not plan to write Part IV of her Living Autobiography, and (for now) considers this project to be completed (Politics… 2021; Vancouver Writers… 2021). All the three books are highly interconnected: non-chronological, hybrid – including memoir, travel writing, as well as political and philosophical critique (Vancouver Writers… 2021; Louisiana… 2022; The American Library… 2022). All are narrated by the same persona, whom in multiple interviews Levy has defined as "like myself but not quite myself" (The Center… 2021; Edbookfest 2022; Louisiana… 2022), which justifies the application of the term "autofiction" to the trilogy. For all these reasons, my reading concentrated on *Real Estate* will, nonetheless, refer to the preceding volumes.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the connection between a search for identity and the domestic landscape, as well as the broader cultural concept of "feminine identity" in Deborah Levy's *Real Estate*. I will explore this topic from a feminist and gender studies perspective, as well as by combining hauntology with housing studies. First, I will explain the choice of my interdisciplinary methodology. Secondly, I will discuss the topic on an individual level, and then place it in a broader cultural and historical context, in both instances pointing out key symbolism of *Real Estate*. Finally, I will demonstrate how the book can be interpreted as a feminist writer's manifesto declaring "my books are my real estate," while assessing it in comparison to such earlier feminist writers as Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan, among others.

The Paper's Methodology

Part I of Levy's "Living Autobiography," *Things I Don't Want to Know*, already sets the tone for the trilogy, which is characterised by the personal made political, and by the author's sparse, economic style. Levy declares herself

to be a modernist (Louisiana… 2022) and acknowledges her debt to many writers, from Montaigne to Virginia Woolf to James Baldwin (ibid.). In fact, her autobiographical writing is highly intertextual, as it includes citations from many authors. Arguably, the longest and the most recurrent quotations inspiring the most engaged dialogues in Levy's autofiction come from two feminist writers: Marguerite Duras and Simone de Beauvoir. This choice corresponds with Levy's own feminist, antipatriarchal views, which informs the first two elements of my methodological set: the feminist and gender studies perspective.

The hauntological approach stems from the fact that in *Real Estate* Levy refers to one of the key hauntologists, Mark Fisher, and shapes the book around the conceptual framework of spectrality. In fact, the whole Living Autobiography is haunted by recurrent ghosts: Levy's younger selves from childhood, through adolescence to early middle age, Levy's parents, Levy's marriage, and a problem she calls "the undocumented life" (The American Library… 2022) of "a missing female character" (Levy 2021, 18). This character can be understood in two ways: as the narrator's own identity at a point of the particular transition she undergoes, and, more broadly, as such a character in mainstream literature, film and culture.

This female character is very closely linked to domesticity, which becomes problematised especially in *Real Estate*. In fact, one more set of ghosts haunting Levy's Living Autobiography has to do with home and housing: ranging from Levy's homeland in South Africa, through "the Family House" (Levy 2019, 15) – the marital home, now gone, to the imaginary dream house, which the narrator longs for. The above list of spectral homes already justifies an application of housing studies inflected by hauntology to interpreting *Real Estate*, but the book, and the trilogy as a whole, contains even more housing: the author's two writing sheds, the post-separation and post-divorce apartment in London, and several temporary dwellings, especially rented houses in Majorca and Greece, the "empty nest" apartment in Paris, and others. Finally, it will be shown how in *Real Estate* the term "real estate" acquires a new, metaphorical, literary meaning.

Spectral Unreal Estate: The Dream House for the Self

After the end of her marriage, the death of her mother, and the dismantling of the family house, replaced with an apartment in a large shabby block of flats in north London (Levy 2019, 19) – all described in *The Cost of Living* – the narrator of *Real Estate*, Levy's "I and not I," her literary *alter ego*, faces another major life

change. No longer a wife, she is about to turn sixty, and soon she will no longer be a mother living with her children. Her younger daughter is about to move out to go to university, and her new home is about to become an empty nest. The narrator wonders about her new identity: "I had no idea how to be a nearly sixty-year-old female character" (Levy 2021, 188), living alone, "required to make another life all over again" (8), and faced with the challenge: "how to live a creative life in old age" (124). Trying to find an answer to these questions, the narrator embarks on several literal and literary journeys: her work takes her to India and to Paris, where she first tries out the empty nest condition, as the Paris flat is genuinely almost empty, and surprisingly not a bad way to live (temporarily). However, even more importantly, the narrator takes us, the readers, on an imaginary journey across her perception of the everyday and familiar, even banal London settings, and above all invites us to her dream house, surrounded by ever-changing, distant landscapes.

The book's opening is already symptomatic of this mode of defamiliarization and displacement, and yet paradoxical putting of things in the right place exactly by their transplantation from one context to another. In wintertime English weather, the narrator buys a small banana tree, which soon begins to grow rapidly and, in a surreal manner, becomes *one* solution to the budding empty-nest-syndrome problem. According to the narrator's daughters, their mother develops an obsession with the plant to the point of treating it like her "third child" (7) – one that will not leave. The second chapter also begins with exotic plants, which surround the writer's new writing shed she is renting as her workplace. It is owned by a man from New Zealand who reconstructed a tropical forest in London NW8. As the narrator says, he was haunted by his homeland (10), and she understands it so well, because she is also haunted by *her* homeland, equally exotic South Africa; and even more so, she is haunted by the idea of her dream house, of which the writing shed – so different from her crumbling apartment block – is a small-scale replica, being "very close to the life [she] wanted" (12).

The topic of what the narrator wants – and the object of her desire being a house (cf. Garber 2000) – begins to be formulated on the very first page of *Real Estate*, right after the introduction of the banana tree, sold to the narrator by a woman whose long fake eyelashes – again surreally, in the narrator's imagination – "stretched all the way from the […] grey cobblestones of East London to the deserts and mountains of New Mexico" (Levy 2021, 1). Typically, what might seem like an incongruous clash of incompatible sceneries is rendered

entirely harmonious by Levy conjuring her mental landscapes before the readers' eyes. The next, immediate, and natural association is with Georgia O'Keeffe, her painted flowers, and her "final house" in Santa Fe – "a place to live and work at her own pace" (2), which Levy visited, and whose oval fireplace made her feel at home (3). She felt the same way as the painter: "I was also searching for a house in which I could live and work and make a world at my own pace" (3), she says. But she also admits that "even in my imagination this home was blurred, undefined, not real, or not realistic, or lacked realism" (3). What is very real is the "yearning for a grand old house" (3–4), which the author added to her "imagined property portfolio" – in this sense owning "some unreal estate" (4).

Gradually, it becomes more developed: it starts with O'Keeffe's oval fireplace, then acquires a pomegranate tree in the garden, "fountains and wells, remarkable circular stairways, mosaic floors" (4). Even though the narrator "could not place it geographically" (4), it was "obviously situated in a hot climate" (5), near a lake, the sea, the ocean (5–6), and then a river replacing the fountains (61), because of Levy's need to swim every day (5). "Yes. I wanted a house. And a garden. I wanted land" (46), declares the narrator; but in this gradation it is land, in fact a specific type of landscape that takes priority, as "a humble wooden cabin" (6) would be sufficient as long as it was near a body of water – which would be the actual place where the narrator is most at home, swimming representing the essence of free movement. Clearly, the landscape is fluid in a double sense, because of the closeness to water,[1] and because it keeps evolving. As the narrator says,

> I trawled the flea markets and vintage shops collecting stuff for my unreal estate in the Mediterranean. [...] I was collecting things for a parallel life, or a life not yet lived, a life that was waiting to be made. In a way, these objects resembled the early drafts of a novel. (226)

In this sense, the wish for this property is not only creative, but intensely existential, central to self-identity. As the author says, "I want that house more than anything else. I want the deeds to that house"; "I have been carrying that house inside me all my life"; "I would fall apart without that house to look forward

1 The crucial role of water brings to mind the influence of the French feminist writers, so frequently seen in Levy's work, even if not always mentioned by name: in particular, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray come to mind due to their characteristic association of femininity with fluidity.

to" (83). In a hauntological fashion, the wish for the dream house collapses time, merging the past, the present and the future: the house is futuristic, but spectrally present; it is also old, and thus from the past. As mentioned, the narrator quotes Mark Fisher saying: "Home is where the haunt is" (13). Similarly, in her book, *Hauntology*, Katy Shaw points out the etymology of the word "haunt," namely the fact that

> [it] carries spatial connotations, through reference to a home, or the journey back to an original dwelling place. In Derrida's theory of the spectral, the home is not a safe site, but rather exists as a borderland in which liminal states exist side by side. (2018, 18)

This takes us to *Real Estate's* broader cultural context of the domestic space as traditionally a feminine landscape, and not necessarily a safe site for women, as Levy reminds us through her philosophical and political, because personal, reflections.

She Wants It: Patriarchal Culture and the Missing Female Character

The reason why her dream house haunts the author is economic: she could not afford it due to her "precarious income" (Levy 2021, 26, 4) from being self-employed, and from her early fifties onwards unmarried, and thus independent meaning self-reliant, which is risky for any artist, let alone one over fifty and a woman. As Levy writes in *The Cost of Living*, leaving her marriage, even though it was "the best thing she ever did" (2019, 14), cost her the family house and a shift from financial security to financial austerity (50).

One idea of boosting her income, while realising her untapped potential, is to become a scriptwriter. In yet another version of her fluid dream house, Levy's narrator sees herself "typing at the edge of [her] swimming pool in California" (89). The dream continues in *Real Estate*, where the narrator's friend suggested a sure way to make money: "I should come up with a likeable female character who marries the male lead by the end of the film. Be pragmatic, [the friend] insisted, nail the deal, write the script and acquire your house" (Levy 2021, 82). However, the narrator does not want to write such a script, and follow the familiar patriarchal and commercial scenario, which would mean selling out to it, while promoting it. She is bored with "the same old performance of masculinity

and femininity, written for the major [male] and minor [female] characters" (Levy 2019, 88), and has made a different pitch to film executives. She proposed what has been haunting her for two volumes now: the missing female character – with "desires and conflicts that are not all about men" (Levy 2021, 74), who exists like a male character often does in films, but a female never does, namely:

> she follows all her desires, every single one of them. She is ruthless in pursuit of her vocation, takes up every job offer while her family pine for her. […] she has many affairs with people she will never fully commit to. (77)

In response to this film idea, "the kindest female executive laughed" (77), and "the cruellest female executive asked [her] how the audience were supposed to like such a character" (78) – not a question asked about male characters.[2] Needless to say, the idea was rejected.

What this illustrates is what the writer, director and producer, Jill Soloway, described in her book *She Wants It*, quoting from the writer and critic Lili Loofbourow (2018): the male glance – fully internalised by the female executives. "The male glance is the opposite of the male gaze. Rather than linger lovingly on the parts it wants most to penetrate, it looks, assumes, and moves on" (Loofbourow 2018); or as Soloway puts it, it offers "a farted *pfft* review out of the side of [the] mouth" (2019, 48) given to a story a woman artist wants to tell.[3]

Reflecting on her own rejection, Levy's narrator unmistakeably, as she so often does, evokes the domestic landscape, which is traditionally a feminine landscape. She "guessed that no woman around that table" – that decision-making table, at which they are now seated –

> had [herself] ruthlessly pursued her own dreams and desires at the expense of everyone else. In fact, I knew we felt guilty every time

2 The question is still asked, including about much younger women, as demonstrated by the 2024 autobiographical book on the fashion industry *How to Make Herself Agreeable to Everyone: A Memoir* by the American supermodel and activist Cameron Russel (born in 1987).

3 In the context of the newly emergent #MeToo movement, the frequency of such rejections makes Soloway wonder about all the money in the film industry that has been paid to women for their silence, for keeping quiet about sexual harassment, instead of for their words, stories, and art (2019, 212–213). It is a valid question that would be worth quantifying in a scientific study; however, due to non-disclosure agreements, fully reliable data would be impossible to obtain.

> we absented ourselves from the wishes and desires of those who depend on us for their well-being and for cash flow. (Levy 2021, 78)

In this sense, the abovementioned technique of transplanting images can be seen at work again in Levy's writing. Superimposed upon the CEO decision-making table at which the female executives are seated is the family table at home – where they are mentally seated at the same time due to their sense of domestic responsibility, unlike their male colleagues. That spectral table illustrates how a patriarchally gendered home inhabits most women who carry it around as "a borderland in which liminal states exist side by side" (Shaw 2018, 18). In this way, the memorable line from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Think of a kitchen table […] when you're not there" (1981a, 234) can be evoked, acquiring a new meaning: these words uttered by Andrew Ramsay to Lily Briscoe may be seen as symbolic of the dominant, patriarchal message given to a woman artist (or any professional woman) not only by men, but also by women who have, usually unknowingly, internalised patriarchal norms and thus collude in its preservation, as Gerda Lerner points out in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986).[4]

This is why the missing female character is still so missing. Even if she passes through the gatekeepers, some of them female, those behind the means of production, the money, she is not there for long, like *Thelma & Louise* (1991). For her female character's mobility and freedom Levy uses the metaphor of "a high horse"[5] rather than a car, but she still reaches the same conclusion:

> Is a woman steering her high horse, with desires of her own, likeable?
> Only if she steers her horse off the cliff. She is allowed to be exceptionally skilled at dying. (Levy 2021, 79)

4 Importantly, the question of women's own collusion with patriarchy is a very complex one. As Walby points out, avoiding generalisations and essentialism, "this is not a consequence of false consciousness, but of [individual women's] perception of their own real interests in a patriarchal society not of their making. This is a form of accommodation to patriarchal power" (1997, 126).

5 Inspired by two antique wooden sculptures of horses in Levy's apartment. Additionally, Levy gives some thought to her electric bikes, allowing her freedom of movement, although without the spiritual and transcendental dimension offered by swimming. More importantly, Levy uses several shoes metaphors in her Living Autobiography. Some literally, others figuratively, they are all "character shoes," connected with a fashioning of one's own identity, and with wanting, this time through consumption of branded goods, a consumer's ticket to participation in chosen fashion trends and subcultures – also major components of "the self" in the context of capitalism.

The reference to the cliff is not an accidental turn of phrase but suggests a very specific landscape and associations. Again, typically for Levy, evoked by the one word is, on the one hand, the corporate glass cliff,[6] and, on the other, one more desert scenery: specifically, the iconic final image of Ridley Scott's epic drama of two female outlaws flying in their car above the Grand Canyon.

Conclusions

It is undoubtedly a depressing conclusion to reach about the feminine landscape – i.e. its dominant cultural representation in a Western book published in 2021. Deborah Levy's outlook is certainly shaped generationally, and she is more optimistic about her own daughters and their generation. Levy's narrator, however, despite her high feminist awareness (she rides this high horse herself), was still subjected to patriarchal familial norms in her marital life, and she still recognises omnipresent patriarchal rules. What she paints in the entire Living Autobiography is a very binary gender landscape, informed not by the most contemporary gender theories, but by the subjective lived experience of one nearly sixty-year-old, South-African-British, white, cis-gender, heterosexual middle-class woman. From where this one person is standing, the picture is, perforce, limited and looks essentialistic. There are many girls and women in *Real Estate*, but – apart from some authors Levy quotes – no named major male characters, only anonymous misogynistic male writers and her nameless "best male friend" whom she does not seem to like very much. There is a gender war, and it is black and white: women are good, long-suffering; men are quite or downright bad; women are afflicted by men in this snapshot, not by other women, too. It is a small interior of patriarchy, not a panorama. The book by no means aims to be a comprehensive overview of the Western gender landscape up to the early 21st century – for which the reader is better referred to e.g. Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024). Yet, in its very private way, *Real Estate* is nonetheless political.

The very epigraph to *Real Estate* refers to "this feminine landscape" – in a quotation form Paul Éluard's poem "Ecstasy" – written from the heterosexual male gaze perspective: "I'm in front of this feminine landscape / Like a branch in the

6 "The 'glass cliff' thesis holds that women who break through the glass ceiling into the upper echelons of management tend to be placed in more precarious leadership positions than men. As a result, they are more exposed to criticism than men and are more likely to be held responsible for negative outcomes, even if they were not set in train by them" (Werner 2014, 11).

fire" (trans. Peter Read). Levy flips the point of view, makes it female, cultural and social, in which case the feminine landscape is not an object of desire – consuming, but pleasurably; rather, it consumes her, and her desire – she is not supposed to have any just for herself. And yet she does.

Levy is really haunted by the same questions:

> Why was I so preoccupied with the phantasy of various unattainable houses and why was I still searching for a missing female character? If I could not find her in real life, why not invent her on the page? (2021, 227)

> Who is she? That is the question I was starting to ask in all my books. Not who am I, though that comes into it. How does *she* get along in a world that has avoided her? (254)

With some progress, more in literature, less in cinema, the world keeps avoiding her – in accordance with Mark Fisher's hauntological definition of the logic of lost futures (2022): capitalist culture keeps thoughtlessly reproducing itself. Being patriarchal, it keeps itself trapped in a vicious circle. As recent studies show, rather than becoming more egalitarian, its inequality is being very strongly reinforced by today's media and communications technologies (King's College… 2024), including AI (Scott et al. 2023). In "What Is Hauntology?", Fisher observed that "[t]he future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" (2012, 16) – however, the present cultural production follows algorithmic past formulas forestalling any truly new future(s) (Fisher 2022). What about *Real Estate*? Is it trapped too, or does it offer anything new?

It is mainly, although not solely, *déjà vu*. It is a book about a woman's wanting, and wanting to want. The narrator makes it very clear what she personally wants and repeats it many times. Still, she has to insist on her right to this personal desire unattached to men. However, on a more general level, old patterns are repeated: "You never know what a woman really wants because she's always being told what she wants" (Levy 2021, 164), the narrator says, partly sarcastically, partly employing Bakhtinian heteroglossia. This invites the question if Sigmund Freud's "Was will das Weib?" ("What does the woman want?"; qtd. in Friedan 2013, 110) is really still a cultural question, still with the

19th-century singular woman, as if singular "feminine identity" has ever existed. It is clear that Freud still haunts *Real Estate*, as he did Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* (2013). However, while addressing the same problems, and reiterating some of the same complaints, there is a significant difference in tone between Friedan's incendiary feminist sociological and cultural analysis, which, after all, provided the spark for the Second Wave of Feminism, and Levy's feminist poetical autofiction. The difference lies in women's anger management in culture, inspiring yet another question: what would happen if it was not so well managed?

"I was furious about the pain that men inflict on women and girls. I mean, I had always been furious, but life had to go on," Levy writes (2021, 137–138). Her writing is not furious; it is very controlled, although there is fury simmering underneath the elegant calm sentences, the author's patient interweaving of select images and concepts. In this self-restraint, Levy follows Virginia Woolf's recommendation for women writers from the 1929 essay "Women and Fiction" (1958). Her dream house is *a room of her own*, "a place to live and work at her own pace" (Levy 2021, 2). In fact, Levy's very last words in *Real Estate* directly refer to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Politics… 2021). Taking us to yet another landscape, all-male "Oxbridge" and its inaccessible manicured lawns, the words "play on the grass" (Levy 2021, 297) calmly encourage women to stray from the path and to "audaciously trespass" on patriarchy's turf (Woolf 2018b, 6). On this land, not hers, Levy has been building her *real* "real estate": as she declares, "my books are my real estate" (297). Creating these literary homes for her ideas is her intervention into changing the cultural landscape in which we live.

In the final assessment, one may wonder about Levy's continuation of a feminist strategy from nearly a century ago: what was "audacious" in Woolf's times, must appear only tame today. Silhouettes of obsolete ideals of "feminine identity" may peak through *Real Estate's* final image, (un)wittingly (?) re-enacted in gentle and ladylike, even childlike (supposedly) mere "playing on the grass." However, conversely, a dismissal of such a string of associations as trivial and inconsequential because they are "feminine" may be evidence of "the male glance" at work, which Woolf recognised ninety years before Loofbourow coined the term, writing about "what appears insignificant to a man" (1958, 81). As Annette Kolodny observed in her 1980 symbolically titled essay, feminist literary criticism, and women's writing still require "Dancing Through the Minefield."

One more idea from the history of feminist thought echoed in *Real Estate* is worth mentioning in this limited space: Levy's optimistic (albeit vague) vision of how the feminine domestic landscape could be reappropriated and reclaimed, forming yet another ghost from the past:

> Domestic space, if it is not societally inflicted on women, if it is not an affliction bestowed on us, by patriarchy, can be a powerful space. (138)

> There are many resourceful and imaginative modern women who are heads of their households. […] they experience the full weight of patriarchy's hostility to their holding dominant power in the family. […] After all, if she can create another sort of household, she can create another sort of world order. (164)

This fantasy of a domestic space without men is reminiscent of a late 1970s feminist conceptualisation described as "a separatist strategy" by Sylvia Walby in her *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1997, 102). Realistically, however, it must be deemed far from being able to "create another sort of *world* order" (added emphasis): this kind of female utopia may offer a refuge from the patriarchal world order, but not really an alternative to it.

Feminism, as ever, remains a pluralistic field, which even individual feminist texts can demonstrate (cf. Kolodny 2001, 2162–2163). In the end, it is Levy's symbol of women's "riding a high horse" that stands out, offering more than comforting wishful thinking. Levy's "high horse" echoes Lerner's final diagnosis for any attempt at toppling patriarchy:

> Perhaps the greatest challenge to thinking women is the challenge to move from the desire for safety and approval to the most "unfeminine" quality of all – that of intellectual arrogance, the supreme hubris, which asserts to itself the right to reorder the world. The hubris of the god-makers, the hubris of the male system-builders. (Lerner 1986, 228)

Not inviting men to this new system is not an option – another challenge is to include everyone. There is also a challenge here for women who think

of themselves as embracing feminist views: to become aware of their own unconscious patriarchal indoctrination, to start thinking of women who are different from the patriarchal norm, and from themselves, as those who *make* a difference, as – to state a simple, yet often overlooked fact – difference does not happen on its own, but rather has to be made, acted out, lived, and not just, however creatively, imagined.

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