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THE LOCKDOWN HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUM: THE SUBVERSION OF THE DOMESTIC IDEAL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH BO BURNHAM'S *INSIDE*

LA CASA MUSEO DEL CONFINAMIENTO: LA SUBVERSIÓN DEL IDEAL DOMÉSTICO DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 A TRAVÉS DE *INSIDE* DE BO BURNHAM

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Abstract

American comedian Bo Burnham's musical comedy special *Inside* (2021) can be regarded as a theatrical yet accurate representation of daily life during the lockdown that was imposed due to the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to analyse the manner in which the subversion of the domestic ideal during the pandemic era is depicted in *Inside*, which is characterised by an enforced domesticity with negative connotations and consequences, as well as by abnormally blurry boundaries between the inside and the outside as a result of the almighty nature of the Internet.

Keywords: domestic spaces, domesticity, lockdown, COVID-19, Bo Burnham, *Inside*.

Resumen

El especial de comedia musical *Inside* (2021) del cómico estadounidense Bo Burnham es una representación melodramática pero fidedigna de la vida cotidiana durante el confinamiento generalizado que fue decretado en marzo de 2020 a causa del estallido de la pandemia de COVID-19 a escala global. Así, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la manera en la que Burnham refleja la subversión del ideal doméstico durante la era pandémica en *Inside*, caracterizada tanto por una domesticidad forzosa cargada de connotaciones y consecuencias negativas como por una frontera anómalamente borrosa entre el interior y el exterior debido a la naturaleza todopoderosa de Internet.

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Palabras clave: espacios domésticos, domesticidad, confinamiento, COVID-19, Bo Burnham, *Inside*.

Introduction

"Home, sweet home". "There is no place like home". There are several sayings that convey the positive connotations that have traditionally been associated with the concept of "home". In Bachelard's own words: "Our house is our corner of the world".[1] Although it is necessary to clarify that the said conception of "home" does not sadly reflect the painful realities that many people have to face on a daily basis — such as poverty and violence against women — it can be argued that the idea of "home" lacks a negative meaning in the social imaginary. When we have a bad day, we usually fantasise about getting home as soon as possible, for it is what provides us with a sense of order and safety in an increasingly chaotic universe. Furthermore, our house is not just any house. It is ours. In fact, the use of a possessive in this case quite shockingly indicates a feeling of belonging rather than possession. Conclusively, the biggest danger regarding space is not having one of our own.[2] However, what to do when your safe place becomes a cell? How and where to take shelter from what was once your own refuge?

Interestingly enough, until very recently, we lived in an era in which we generally spent little time at home, especially in the Western world. One of the defining characteristics of late capitalism is the extremely hectic pace that governs the everyday lives of most individuals, who have enormous difficulty balancing work, leisure, and rest. Similarly, the continuous advances in the field of information and communications technology have caused immediacy to become the norm. Nevertheless, after a few months developing in China, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought the aforementioned late-capitalist frenzy to a sudden halt. No one knew what was going to happen the next day, not even the authorities in charge of managing the health crisis. Although there were substantial differences in the reaction time and in the degree of severity of the measures that were adopted in order to stop the spread of the virus, the vast majority of governments established mandatory confinements following scientific guidelines. Thus, the population had no choice but to adapt to a new reality strictly delimited by the walls of their homes.

Undoubtedly, the virus had a series of catastrophic consequences worldwide, its death toll being the most tragic one. According to the World Health Organization, COVID-19 has claimed over 7 million victims as of November 2024.[3] The case of the United States is especially devastating: the country has the dubious honour of being at the top of the pandemic podium with over 103.4 million infections and 1.2 million deaths.[4] However, it should be noted that there are some nations like China that have not provided reliable data and may have higher numbers of deaths and cases.[5]

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that seemingly unstoppable contagious diseases are not something new. In fact, throughout history there

have been pandemics significantly deadlier than COVID-19, the Black Death and the so-called Spanish flu being two great examples. The former killed approximately 200 million people between 1347 and 1351, whereas the latter ended with 50 million lives between 1918 and 1919.[6] Thus, without intending to downplay the seriousness of the matter, it is undeniable that, in comparison, the coronavirus has not been nearly as lethal. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caught a globalised world by surprise at a time when humankind believed itself invincible due to the countless medical, scientific, and technological advances of the last century.

Therefore, the undeniable anomaly of the situation caused a state of initial shock that gradually led to widespread boredom. Despite our characteristic adaptability as a species, human beings are creatures of habit, so the disruption of our usually compartmentalised routines was unequivocally a setback. Thus, in a display of creativity mixed with a dash of desperation, many people took up domestic hobbies that most of them would have probably never started otherwise. Therefore, while some were making bread and others were doing yoga, American comedian Bo Burnham (b. 1990) was busy with his *magnum opus*.

About *Inside*

Inside (2021) is a musical comedy special written, directed, recorded, performed, and edited by Burnham entirely from the privacy of his home — more precisely, from the guest house of his Los Angeles residence — over several months during the 2020 lockdown. Although it is undeniable that the main themes that permeate the totality of the special are the decline in mental health and the omnipresence of the Internet, *Inside* features twenty songs that explore and satirise different aspects related to daily life during the pandemic, such as videocalls and e-commerce. Like the rest of Burnham's work, the special in question is characterised by the combination of social commentary with a provocative tone in order to encourage reflection as well as laughter among the audience.

Burnham rose to fame in December 2006 at the age of sixteen thanks to YouTube. While it is true that, due to his young age, he still has a long — and, considering his meteoric trajectory so far, predictably prosperous — career ahead of him in show business, only time will tell whether he will be able to replicate the success of *Inside*, the work that has made him reach the Hollywood Olympus. This can be evidenced by the incredibly high scores it has on various review-aggregation websites, as well as by the extremely positive media attention it received upon release and the three Emmy Awards (Outstanding Directing for a Variety Special, Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special, and Outstanding Music Direction) and the Grammy Award (Best Song Written for Visual Media) it won between 2021 and 2022.[7]

Contrary to what is often the case, writing about the reception of *Inside* is significantly easier and less controversial than trying to categorise it. "A musical

comedy special shot and performed by Bo Burnham, alone, over the course of a very unusual year". This is how Netflix summarises the entirety of *Inside*, which was released on the streaming platform on May 30, 2021, and classified as "offbeat".[8] However, the category "musical comedy special" seems to fall short when it comes to defining a cultural phenomenon of the calibre of *Inside*. In the first place, with regard to the dimension of Burnham's work on Netflix exclusively, it is extremely difficult to try to label it. Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? Is it a musical? Is it a monologue? Is it a set of sketches? Is it a compilation of behind-the-scenes shots about the creative process? The answer to all these questions is yes. Nonetheless, what makes this particular work so captivating is the fact that it also seems to adopt the form of a documentary. For nearly an hour and a half, viewers fully immerse themselves in Burnham's intimacy and have no choice but to go on the (anti)hero's journey along with him. Ironically, although the typological amalgam I have just alluded to is one of the most critically acclaimed aspects of *Inside*, its creator summarises its essence in an exquisitely succinct manner in the song "Look Who's Inside Again": "Trying to be funny and stuck in a room / There isn't much more to say about it".[9] Despite Burnham's apparent modesty, it is worth mentioning that the general public was dazzled by the said emulsion of genres and formats. In other words, the success of his masterpiece was so remarkable that it ended up transcending the limitations of Netflix. Consequently, Burnham released the album *Inside (The Songs)* on several audio streaming services through Republic Records on June 10, 2021. Likewise, the special made the leap to the big screen and was shown in several cinemas throughout the United States between July 22 and July 25 of the same year, although some ended up adding extra screenings after the said dates due to high demand. Finally, the *Inside* era concluded with *The Inside Outtakes* (2022), a compilation of bonus content and unreleased scenes uploaded to YouTube a year later than the original special.

It can be argued that the overwhelmingly positive reception of the comedian's masterpiece lies in the fact that it is endowed with a certain universality: practically everyone who lived through lockdown can relate to the desperation of a man who is cooped up and on the edge of madness. The various self-referential elements in the special do not actually diminish the said universal quality; instead, they simply imply that the audience has to bear in mind its creator's perspective when interpreting the footage.[10] Deleuze highlights the importance of collective stories in cinema, and there is no doubt that COVID-19 was a global event. Therefore, Burnham may be deemed as "a true collective agent, a collective leaven, a catalyst".[11] Above all, *Inside* is clearly a product of its time. In the special, the comedian becomes the buffoonish troubadour of the pandemic court. Thus, he manages to entertain his audience while making them see their own experiences embodied in his. In order to achieve this, he intertwines extremely raw moments with jokes and numbers with nihilistic, existentialist, and absurdist undertones on different subjects, the gradual deterioration of mental health and the growing and unavoidable

influence of the digital world being the ones that unequivocally conform the backbone of the special as previously stated.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there is another latent theme in *Inside* that is not addressed in such an explicit manner: the passage of time. Burnham's special is ultimately an audiovisual product that entails the creation of a space-time bubble.[12] Thus, even though *Inside* is fictional, the viewer can feel time passing through the evolution of Burnham's own physical appearance and mental state, which is an uncomfortable, invasive, and voyeuristic spectacle that endows the work with an apparent reality that few others have.[13] The comedian begins the special as an average-looking young man, but, over the course of approximately a year of lockdown, we can see how he progressively grows his hair and beard like a shipwreck survivor until he ends up disturbingly — and, probably, more than intentionally — resembling the traditional representation of Jesus Christ. As for his poor mental health, the turning point seems to come in "30", a number in which the comedian confesses that he originally intended to finish the special before his thirtieth birthday. Unfortunately, the filming process did not go according to plan; hence, he promises to stay inside until he accomplishes his goal.

With respect to the aforementioned statement, although he seems to develop a kind of Stockholm syndrome towards the creative process, it is both implausible and unlikely that Burnham never left his Los Angeles residence for a year — however, my hypothesis may be incorrect, for there are performers willing to do anything for art's sake. While it is true that California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide stay-at-home order on March 19, 2020, it was lifted on January 25, 2021. Whether Burnham went out or not, it is obvious that the pandemic experience of a millionaire comedian was not the same as that of the ordinary citizen. This can be evidenced by the fact that the audiovisual product around which the present study revolves does not portray such frequent and conflicting realities as the distribution of domestic tasks and the management of cohabitation. Furthermore, although Burnham tries to create the illusion that the special is entirely recorded from his home, this is not technically true, since *Inside* was filmed in his guest house, which is located a few meters away from the actual house where he lived with his pets and writer and director Lorene Scafaria, his partner at the time to whom the special is dedicated.

Concisely, lockdown was an unavoidable reality that defined 2020. The situation of uncertainty and danger created by the virus made many of us anomalously perceive the duration of the pandemic, as if it were a sudden stop in a historical timeline that used to be unidirectional and in constant forward movement up until then. Nonetheless, even though lockdown was a pivotal moment in the lives of several individuals around the world, each one experienced the passage of time in a relative way.

Finally, this is related to another of the peculiarities that elevate *Inside*. As previously mentioned, Burnham is the only protagonist of his own tragicomedy, as there is no other person who appears on screen throughout the

special. However, it could be argued that there are two silent secondary characters that play a fundamental role in the plot. In the first place, the camera is presented as an inevitable and ominous presence. Although there are various scenes in which Burnham can be seen assembling the filmmaking equipment, the montage gives the impression that the lens is spying on him with the ultimate aim of capturing his most vulnerable moments. Therefore, despite appearing in very few shots, the camera assumes the role of the Orwellian Big Brother of the digital age. The style of the shots in which it appears is also significant: all of them are close-ups, which unequivocally have a spine-chilling property.[14] More precisely, they are "object-shots" that singularise the camera and endow it with narrative value, thus turning an inanimate object into an actant.[15] Not only does its blinking red indicator light act as its heartbeat, but it also signals that the comedian is constantly being surveilled. By setting up the camera and inviting strangers to invade his privacy, Burnham has voluntarily committed himself to the 21st-century iteration of Bentham's panopticon.[16] Secondly, there is the elephant in the room: COVID-19. The viewer is fully aware at all times of the reason why Burnham is locked up in his home, but, intriguingly, he never explicitly alludes to the virus.

The space of *Inside*

Stand-up comedy specials — such as Burnham's *Words Words Words* (2010), *what.* (2013), and *Make Happy* (2016) — are normally recorded in a theatre in front of a live audience. However, *Inside* subverted the genre by relocating to the domestic realm. Thus, the characteristics of the space where it was filmed are one of the main reasons why spectators feel that they are flagrantly invading the comedian's privacy when watching the special. In fact, domesticity is presented as something enforced and unpleasant throughout the footage. Nevertheless, before formally analysing the said space, it is necessary to take into account a series of considerations.

To begin with, *Inside* participates in the morbid fascination with the domestic interior that characterises Western culture. However, it should be noted that visual and material representations of domestic spaces are incredibly useful sources. Although every representation is a self-interested product of a given ideology, homes are places that are constantly changing, so having literary descriptions, paintings, photographs, and videos of them is an essential tool for the study of a particular period and society.[17] Therefore, *Inside* can be deemed as a truly remarkable testimony to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding the film set itself, as previously mentioned, it is located in the guest house of the residence in which Burnham lived when the pandemic broke out. At the time, it was owned by Scafaria, who had bought it in 2013 — although it is worth considering that she sold it at the beginning of 2022, the year in which she and the comedian allegedly ended their romantic relationship after nearly a decade together. Moreover, it is pertinent to note that 1428 North Genesee Avenue is an astoundingly cinematographic location, for it is the same property

in which the widely popular horror film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) was recorded.[18] Thus, in spite of the fact that the iconic slasher and *Inside* were filmed in the main house and in the guest house respectively, there is a permanent sense of unease that seems to tie both audiovisual products together: while Freddy Krueger was the one in charge of torturing the residents of Elm Street in their nightmares, it is Burnham's own thoughts that torment him in real life.

Similarly, it is important to highlight that the interest in the houses of public figures like Burnham is not something new, but rather a tradition with centuries of history.[19] However, it considerably grew in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s due to the stellar rise of mass media, which soon capitalised on the nosy nature of human beings. Thus, the interiors of celebrity homes became accessible to the average citizen, who was really eager to discover the innermost secrets hidden behind the curtain of fame.[20] Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the aforementioned fascination for other people's domestic spaces seems to have been democratised thanks to the expansion of television and the Internet, which have greatly facilitated the intrusion into the daily lives of ordinary people.[21]

Moreover, in a way, it is possible to consider the house where *Inside* was recorded not only as a mere representation of domesticity during lockdown, but also as a kind of historic house museum of the digital age. Although we cannot access it physically, the style in which the musical comedy special is filmed makes the viewer feel as if they were a close companion of the comedian instead of a distant witness, thus breaking the theatrical convention of the fourth wall and suspending time. In other words:

> Heritage houses can thereby reveal and remind of the potential unease of nostalgia. For, whatever their curatorial agenda, they must seek to halt change through deprivation of light, access, air and use. As visitors, we feel both uneasy and yet excited by the idea that when the doors are closed at the end of the day and the lights grow dim we too might be "sacrificed" [...] All the houses and their owners exhibit a profound anxiety for their posterity. [...] All the houses therefore also occupy an ambiguous space between authentic historical truths and fabricated scenarios.[22]

In conclusion, as an audiovisual product, *Inside* is a time capsule with the power to take spectators back to the bleakness that dominated 2020. Pressing play entails entering the peculiar world carefully crafted by the comedian, which is unequivocally an immersive experience. The space in which the special was recorded has been preserved for eternity due to the everlastingness inherent to cinema, thus giving us the opportunity to relive the misery of daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, from the gear that Burnham used to film it to the effects that social media has on him, *Inside* can also be regarded as a faithful representation of the state of technology and the Internet in the early 2020s. Therefore, thanks to the manner in which the special has immortalised

it, it will always be possible to look back on this era — perhaps even with fondness if the online world keeps growing dystopian.

The website of the real estate agency Redfin describes the space of *Inside* as an ideal dwelling: "The detached guest house is charm personified with its own pergola covered patio, kitchen and an additional designer-done bathroom".[23] Nevertheless, in the special it is depicted as a reflection of its creator's psyche; that is, a place where no one wants to be. To begin with, it is noticeable at first glance that its dimensions are rather small. Although I have not been able to find information concerning the exact measurements of the guest house, I have come across a source that upholds that the room must be approximately three and a half meters wide and nine meters long.[24] It is also possible to conclude that the ceiling is not excessively high, since the door seems quite tiny in comparison with Burnham's height, which is close to two metres.[25] However, it should be noted that the central section is higher than the sides as a result of the gable roof, thus giving a little more verticality to the room.

The fact that the walls are painted off-white is also significant. As a colour, the symbolism of white is varied: on a positive note, it is the main representative of the sleek look of modernity. Likewise, white paint can give the illusion of bigger, cleaner, more luminous spaces. Nevertheless, it is also a dull, lacklustre, uninspiring shade devoid of life closely associated with the bourgeois social hygiene movement.[26] In the case of *Inside*, the white walls create the typical aseptic atmosphere inherent to brand-new homes. With regard to the decoration, as it can be seen in the opening shot, the room that will eventually end up becoming the comedian's shelter and prison was virtually empty before he turned it into his chaotic recording studio at the beginning of lockdown: there are just a table, a chest of drawers, a fairly basic wooden chair, and, most importantly, a keyboard that symbolically occupies the central position.

Nonetheless, the space soon becomes a display of postmodern *horror vacui*. Despite the fact that the camera placement is very similar to that of the previous shot, the impression that the audience gets when they see the new arrangement that will dominate the entire footage is very different. From the beginning of *Inside*, Burnham seems to suffer from a kind of creative Diogenes syndrome that only worsens as the special progresses. As a true "active engineer of atmosphere",[27] the comedian has transformed what was originally designed as a guest house into a stage set; in other words, he has paradoxically created a space that is both multifunctional and dysfunctional. The room — which was hitherto uncluttered — is now full of spotlights, microphones, wires, and other filmmaking gadgets, thus evoking a feeling of neglect, chaos, and claustrophobia. Conclusively, the most remarkable thing about the special is not its physical space, namely, the guest house itself; but rather the cinematographic space, that is, the distressing perception that viewers have of the room.[28]

As previously stated, the space of *Inside* mirrors Burnham's mind, for both of them are unwelcoming and hostile. Although the aforementioned architectural characteristics of the guest house do contribute to convey the said impression, the comedian's inner turmoil is captured more accurately by the way

in which the projector and the set of lights interact with the interior so as to create a wide array of backdrops. The white, lifeless, asylum-like walls of the guest house are a blank canvas onto which Burnham can project his own delusions, which are rarely upbeat, often depressing, and always disturbing. Thus, he succeeds in turning the room into a screen in the manner of Diller and Scofidio's experimental projects involving visioning technologies.[29] For instance, just before beginning to sing "Problematic", he appears with his back facing the camera watching the projection of "My Whole Family…", the YouTube video that made him famous. This is a very powerful image: amidst the recording of his most demanding project to date, Burnham is recalling the accidental origin of his career, inferably feeling remorseful rather than proud. Similarly, in the outro of the same number the comedian appears hanging on a light cross while the rest of the room is plunged into darkness, thus presenting himself as the lockdown martyr. He will repent his sins, but he will not die for them — although he will half-jokingly contemplate the idea throughout the film. In relation to this, later in the special Burnham momentarily ditches the wall and projects a video addressing his suicidal thoughts directly onto himself while he is staring at his phone.

While the vast majority of *Inside* is shot facing the door, the dark side of the guest house — which is usually behind the camera — is also occasionally shown to the viewer. It is connected to the main room by an opening in the wall whose shape is reminiscent of the well-known W Barcelona Hotel. Thus, on the right there is a kitchen equipped with storage space, a sink, and various appliances; while on the left there is a wall mirror and a door that leads to the bathroom, which, interestingly, is the only corner of the guest house that does not appear in the special — yet it is worth mentioning that it can be briefly seen on screen in *The Inside Outtakes*.

Additionally, as its title suggests, most of *Inside* takes place in an interior space, but the exterior of the guest house is also of interest to the present study. Although the aforementioned real estate agency maintains that the said building is exquisitely charming, I would dare to disagree, since it is a generic prefabricated module with a white plywood façade. Furthermore, the house does not seem to be a particularly luminous space despite having three windows facing the same side, since the Venetian blinds that cover them are either ajar or closed throughout the development of the special. By the same token, it is noteworthy that the comedian recorded at night the only scene in which the exterior of what was his cave for nearly a year is shown, which arguably makes the audience associate the outside world with a sinister atmosphere. Moreover, in this particular shot — as well as by darkness — Burnham is surrounded by greenery, which, in addition to his unkempt appearance, contributes to create the image of an explorer who is lost in the jungle and alone in the face of danger.

Lastly, I want to note that — besides *A Nightmare on Elm Street* for obvious reasons — the lack of comparisons between *Inside* and other audiovisual products throughout the text is a conscious effort to highlight the singularity of the space in which it was filmed. In general, on-screen fictional homes tend to be

aspirational, especially in television series and films from the United States, as homeownership is at the core of the American dream.[30] The said dwellings broadly fall into two categories: the stereotypical flat of a young urbanite and the traditional single-family suburban house. However, Burnham's guest house is, at best, a — rather mediocre — bungalow, a type of construction representative of the permeability between the private and the public spheres.[31] Furthermore, *Inside* also differs from other audiovisual products in the way in which suspension of disbelief operates in relation to space: whereas, in many films and series, the audience must accept that the characters can afford the places in which they live despite contradictory evidence; in the case of the special, viewers who are aware of its protagonist's celebrity status have to believe that his residence is barely habitable. In conclusion, *Inside* complies with the four components of film architectonics as understood by Alexander: cinematographically, the architecture and space of the guest house create a unique visual identity; symbolically, they epitomise lockdown; dramatically, they represent and reinforce they lowest lows in the special; and psychologically, they emphasise Burnham's poor mental health.[32]

Enforced domesticity and its impact on mental health

For anyone with a basic knowledge of Latin, the origin of the word "domesticity" is obvious. In ancient Rome, the *domus* was a type of house designed for the urban elite that was structured around an open-air courtyard. Although there were other models of dwellings, such as the *insulae* and the *villae* — the equivalent of today's blocks of flats and country houses, respectively — the *domus* has gone down in history as the prototypical Roman residence. Therefore, the meaning of "domesticity" is evident: according to the Cambridge Dictionary, it can be defined as "life at home taking care of your house and family".[33] However, even though the root of "domesticity" dates back more than two thousand years, its origin as a concept is significantly more recent.

This notion arose between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century as a result of the degeneration of the original values of the French Revolution. The creation of the domestic sphere was intended to legally separate the family as an institution from civil society. Consequently, each household — conceived as a kind of small republic within the nation — was presided over by its corresponding *paterfamilias*.[34] In other words, liberty, equality, and fraternity were principles exclusively designed for men both outside and within the home in the eyes of the State. Thus, the identification of the public sphere with masculinity and the private sphere with femininity became gradually stronger and ended up slipping across the borders of France.

The concept of "domesticity" flourished in the Anglophone world. In the United Kingdom, it became one of the most representative characteristics of the Victorian ideal of womanhood, which is faithfully reflected in the poem "The Angel in the House" (1854–1862) by Coventry Patmore. Its title perfectly captures the bourgeois moral code that the work tries to reproduce: in addition

to being a paragon of virtue, women were expected to live by and for their husbands and children while strictly confined in their homes.[35] Despite its initial cool reception, Patmore's text eventually became a tremendously influential work in the later part of the 19th century not only in the poet's own homeland, but also — even more notoriously — in the United States.

After a period during which women's emancipation seemed unstoppable as a result of suffragism and their integration into the workforce during the world wars, the defeat of the Axis powers brought about the resurrection of the cult of domesticity in the West, which reached its peak in the 1950s. The main difference between this new domestic culture and the original is that women were no longer perceived only as mere housewives, but also as consumers.[36] Nevertheless, the said reinvention of the cult of domesticity soon lost momentum due to the achievements of the feminist movement in the following decades. Curiously, so far in the 21st century, everything related to the domestic sphere appears to have shed its negative and patriarchal connotations to a certain extent. Thus, domesticity has become something aspirational and romanticised due to the consecutive crises of late capitalism and the popularisation of social media platforms where users can share multimedia content.[37]

In the same way, the meaning of "home" has also evolved over time along with its material manifestations.[38] However, it is important to note that there are two interrelated constants in the conceptualisation of domestic spaces, for, traditionally, they have been defined in opposition to the outside and have implied the idea of "refuge" — especially during turbulent periods of crisis in which they seem to be under siege, such as the pandemic.[39] At the dawn of humanity, our ancestors began to settle in caves in order to protect themselves from inclement weather conditions and ferocious predators. Since then, our notion of "den" has gradually become more sophisticated. Accordingly, it is worth mentioning that the general consensus among experts in domestic spaces nowadays is that the home is intimately connected with the notion of "identity" and that the diverse and variable meanings it can adopt also derive from the practices that are carried out and the relationships that are established within it.[40] As stated by Stratigakos: "Home [is] not just bricks and mortar, but a place for building and maintaining social relations and meanings".[41] Nonetheless, we still need a physical place to hide from the hostile world out there.

In retrospective, even though it is true that the Victorian domestic ideal was more closely linked to physical well-being due to the enormous influence of the social hygiene movement,[42] the relationship between the home and mental health that was established in 19th-century England is also worthy of attention. Nursing homes managers at the time firmly believed that the representation of domesticity was crucial for their patients' comfort and progress. Hence, they incorporated various elements of the traditional family home into mental asylum interiors.[43] Throughout the 20th century, the bond between the aforementioned notions seemed to weaken, as psychiatric institutions were gradually transformed into impersonal and sterile spaces; but the 2020 lockdown strengthened it again, for it turned the spotlight on the negative impact that the

modern home — which prioritises functionality over habitability — can have on its dwellers' mental health.[44]

Over the last two decades, mental health — which used to be a taboo — has become a hot topic. Although it is undeniable that there is still a certain social stigma that is attached to this subject, there is an increasing number of people who do no longer feel self-conscious when it comes to openly sharing information about their mental health struggles. In fact, Burnham is a clear example of a public figure who has never been afraid to address the said issue both through his comedy and in interviews and has consequently contributed to the inclusion and normalisation of mental health as an important matter in the public debate.

This is due to the fact that the creator of *Inside* began to suffer from anxiety when he was a sophomore in high school. After several consultations, he realised that his stomach problems were not indicative of any type of gastrointestinal disease, but of a mental illness — which, according to him, is closely related to a deep and insatiable need for validation. Likewise, despite being a theatre kid with a lifelong passion for stand-up comedy, Burnham has confessed that he is no stranger to stage fright. However, despite the aforementioned handicaps, the beginning of his career was tremendously favourable and relatively calm. Unfortunately, everything changed in the summer of 2013, when he suffered his first panic attack at the premiere of his show *what.* at the renowned Edinburgh Festival Fringe. From then on, the attacks steadily increased in frequency and intensity and ended up becoming incapacitating. This led Burnham in 2016 to make the decision to step away from the stage, keep a low profile, and focus on other projects, such as the film *Eighth Grade* (2018), his directorial debut on the big screen.[45]

As the saying goes, discretion is the better part of valour: the comedian's mental health started to improve progressively and significantly. In fact, he even managed to stop having panic attacks, which made him begin to consider very seriously the idea of returning to live performances and resuming his tumultuous relationship with the audience at the beginning of 2020. Unfortunately, there was an unexpected setback that he did not count on: a microscopic pathogen came between him and his plans in March of the same year. This is what he recounts in "All Eyes on Me", a song with a spoken interlude that has a remarkably confessional character:

> You wanna hear a funny story?
> So, uh, five years ago, I quit performing live comedy
> Because I was beginning to have, uh, severe panic attacks while on stage
> Which is not a great place to have them
> So I, I quit, and I didn't perform for five years and I spent that time
> Trying to improve myself mentally
> And you know what?
> I did
> I got better

I got so much better, in fact
That in January of 2020
I thought, "You know what? I should start performing again"
"I've been hiding from the world and I need to re-enter"
And then, the funniest thing happened[46]

Although it is clear that this fragment only deals with Burnham's personal experience, the lyrics to "All Eyes on Me" as a whole convey an inescapable sense of futility and helplessness that — despite the song not being the closing number — serves as the final blow after more than an hour of existential despair. Proof of this can be found in the third verse: "You say the ocean's rising like I give a shit / You say the whole world's ending, honey, it already did".[47] Similarly, it is worth highlighting the manner in which he uses the colour blue, which infuses the performance with a halo of sadness and melancholy. Nevertheless, the said hue also acts as a tranquilliser. Likewise, Burnham's slightly distorted voice has a shockingly calming effect, as if he were a nurse who is soothing us in our final moments.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this song neatly captures what was sadly a universal experience. In spite of his privileged position, Burnham can arguably be considered the bard of the pandemic, since he is one of the many who had their plans inevitably changed and their mental health adversely impacted by COVID-19.[48] Unlike the comedian — who, as previously mentioned, was amidst a fairly placid hiatus — a significant part of the population was used to a lifestyle so frenetic that it hardly allowed them to spend time at home. The alienation inherent to late capitalism tends to desensitise subjects to their own reality, thus causing them to naturalise negative emotions, such as stress. Nonetheless, the world abruptly stopped and the oppressive hustle and bustle of postmodernity was replaced by a counterintuitively restless ease.

Furthermore, it should be noted that *Inside* does not exclusively focus on anxiety. Throughout the footage, there are both direct and indirect allusions to depression. These constant references are present from the very beginning of the special as we can see in "Content", the opening number, in which Burnham clearly states that he is going through a rough patch: "Sorry that I look like a mess (ah, ah, ah) / I booked a haircut, but it got rescheduled / Robert's been a little depressed, no".[49] Thus, besides openly verbalising that he has depression, the usage of the third person to talk about himself could be interpreted as a symptom of an incipient dissociative disorder linked to the abnormality of the situation. In fact, this is something that he explicitly mentions later in "That Funny Feeling": "Total disassociation, fully out your mind / Googling 'derealization', hating what you find".[50]

However, as it has been previously established, if it were possible to divide this particular audiovisual work into two halves, "30" would be unequivocally the halfway point, since the hardest moments occur after Burnham closes the eleventh song with the following confession: "It's 2020, and I'm thirty, I'll do another ten / 2030, I'll be forty and kill myself then".[51] After the said devastating

revelation concerning his suicidal thoughts, there is a subtle but evident shift in tone that renders the special darker. Thus, from this point onwards, the comedian's mental health goes into free fall as demonstrated in the already analysed "All Eyes on Me". In fact, there is plenty of evidence: in "Shit" Burnham makes reference to various symptoms associated with depression, such as self-loathing, poor personal hygiene, and lack of motivation; whereas in "All Time Low" he admits that he only feels good when he is asleep, for his anxiety clouds his vision and makes his heart race when he is awake.[52]

Conclusively, it is possible to attribute the aforementioned sharp deterioration in Burnham's mental health to the exceptional nature of the pandemic. Throughout the special, there is no trace of the cult of homelife or of the division of spaces that the bourgeois notion of "domesticity" originally implied in the 19th century, since the creator of *Inside* is locked up in cell-like room by himself. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are countless scenes scattered throughout the footage in which the audience can tell that the protagonist has undeniably hit rock bottom because of lockdown and is chaotically oscillating between dejection and insanity.

Technology as a disruptive element of the inside-outside dichotomy

According to Oldenburg, there exist three different types of places ranked in compliance with the degree of dependence individuals feel towards them in terms of time spent, loyalty, space allocation, and social recognition. The first — and, therefore, the most important — place is the home; that is, the space in which we rest and our private lives unfold. The second place is equivalent to the workplace, which is linked to the public sphere, reduces people to a productive role, and — ideally — serves to improve their material conditions. Lastly, despite seeming more difficult to define due to the multiplicity of forms it can take, the third place has historically maintained the same characteristics. Thus, third places — which are crucial for the creation and celebration of community — must be a neutral ground, serve as a leveller, have conversation as their main activity, be accessible and welcoming, attract a regular clientele, keep a low profile, create a playful mood, and convey the feeling of a home away from home. In summary, in order to live a quiet and rewarding life, it is necessary to find a balance between the aforementioned three places, which must maintain a certain degree of autonomy from each other so as to be clearly distinguished.[53]

On the contrary, during lockdown, the first place had no choice but to absorb both the second and the third; in other words, the home assimilated practically all the functions that had traditionally been performed outside of it. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that physical third places have been losing ground for decades to an almighty virtual third place: the Internet.[54] Just about twenty years ago, it was linked to a tangible space. In general, in order to access the World Wide Web, most cybernauts had to go to the living room, sit down

peacefully, and turn on the desktop computer. As soon as they pressed again the power button, the device and the online world would simply shut down. On the contrary, the Internet is currently an inevitable and alienating reality, especially with regard to the field of socialisation due to the popularisation of social media. Technology companies have turned what was originally born as a tool to facilitate limitless interpersonal communication into a burning need that is impossible to satisfy. In conclusion, digital disconnection, which used to be the natural state of affairs, is now a utopia — although it is important to bear in mind that the virus caused the pre-existing digital divide between the most affluent households and the most disadvantaged ones to grow larger.[55]

Social media was by no means alien to the vast majority of the population prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its invention at the end of the 20th century, its user base has been constantly on the rise due to its uncanny ability to create a sense of community. However, the loneliness and boredom inherent to lockdown led to a significant increase in screen time for recreational purposes, thus making social networks the greatest beneficiaries.[56] Unlike other activities that also experienced a boom during lockdown — for instance, baking and knitting — platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok do not require any kind of effort, for they give users the option of not uploading any content and instead just being completely passive consumers, thereby getting trapped in an endless scroll. In the words of the creator of *Inside* in "Welcome to the Internet": "Apathy's a tragedy and boredom is a crime".[57] This line succinctly summarises what he had already expressed during the press tour of *Eighth Grade*:

> They're coming for every second of your life. [...] It's because these companies like Twitter and, uh, YouTube and Instagram and everything — they went public and they went to shareholders so they have to grow. Their entire models are based off of growth. They cannot stay stagnant. YouTube, uh, Twitter grossed four, five billion dollars last year. [...] We used to colonise land, that was the thing you could expand into and that's where money was to be made. We colonised the entire Earth, there was no other place for the businesses in capitalism to expand into, and then they realised, human attention. [...] They are now trying to colonise every minute of your life, that is what these people are trying to do. Every single free moment you have is a moment you could be looking at your phone and they could be gathering information to target ads at you.[58]

Nonetheless, social media had significantly more negative effects than simply making us lose track of time during the pandemic, such as the spread of fake news and the consequent blurring of the distinction between truth and falsehood, as well as the propagation of anxiety, panic, and the feeling of being a social burden.[59]

Above all, Burnham is the cautionary tale of the digital age: he was a normal sixteen-year-old teenager who became one of the first viral sensations to

come out of YouTube overnight. This is the reason why a great part of his work as a comedian is characterised by his particularly toxic relationship with the Internet. The creator of *Inside* is fully aware that he owes his career to social networks, but he deeply resents them for having severely worsened the mental health problems that he already had prior to stardom. Nevertheless, the comedian does not address the dangers of the Internet as a strictly personal matter, but rather as a generational problem that especially affects millennials like him and zoomers:

> The problem is it — we are hyper-connected, and we're lonely. We're overstimulated, and we're numb. We're expressing our self, and we're objectifying ourselves. [...] But in regards to social anxiety, [...] there's a part of social anxiety I think that feels like you're a little bit disassociated from yourself. And it's sort of like you're in a situation, but you're also floating above yourself, watching yourself in that situation, judging it. And social media literally is that. You know, it forces kids to not just live their experience but be nostalgic for their experience while they're living it, watch people watch them, watch people watch them watch them. [...] What the — social media — it's just the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform. So the market said, here, perform everything to each other all the time for no reason. It's prison. It's horrific. It is performer and audience melded together. What do we want more than just lie in our bed at the end of the day and just watch our life as a satisfied audience member? I know very little about anything, but what I do know is that if you can live your life without an audience, you should do it. [...] And then I realized that this sort of, like, awful sort of D-list celebrity pressure I had experienced on stage has now been democratized and given to everybody. And everyone is feeling this pressure of having an audience, of having to perform, of having a sort of, like, proper noun version of your own name and then the self in your heart.[60]

Thus, even though social media has been a recurring theme throughout Burnham's career, it undoubtedly plays a leading role in *Inside*. This is established from the very start in "Content": "But look, I made you some content / Daddy made you your favorite, open wide".[61] Apparently, the comedian does not conceive his special as a work of art; instead, he treats it as mere and simple "content" — an immensely popular term among users — consequently downplaying its transcendence and intentionality. Moreover, the song explicitly alludes to the parasocial relationship that can arise between a creator and his fans and infantilises its problematic nature, since Burnham treats his audience as defenceless babies who need to be handed entertainment on a silver platter in order to survive. In the same vein, there are multiple references to the detrimental effects of social media throughout the footage, the rant about the oversaturation of opinions and the monologue on the dangers of the economic exploitation of big data by Silicon Valley companies perhaps being the most

notable examples. Is it ironic to express this kind of critical stance against Big Tech on Netflix, the greedy streaming Goliath? Yes, indeed. However, the creator of *Inside* is the contradictory subject par excellence of late capitalism as defined by Ábalos: regardless of ideology, the system has made it impossible not to participate in it.[62]

Similarly, social media giants have made it incredibly difficult to distinguish between the private and the public. Perhaps everything is not worth sharing, but anything can be shared. Intimacy is the currency of social networks, which have successfully monetised the human desire for connection and need for approval. As Burnham puts it in "Welcome to the Internet": "Now, look at you! Oh, ha, look at you! / You, you! Unstoppable, watchable / Your time is now; your inside's out; honey, how you grew".[63] In short — either willingly or unconsciously — we have become consumable. The Internet is the Pandora's box of the 21st century and its accessibility and addictive properties prevent us from closing it for good. Furthermore, the curses it has released into our lives have irreversibly blurred previously well-established boundaries: the world fitting in the palm of our hand implies not only that the outside is continuously infiltrating the inside, but also that the inside can be exposed to the outside at any given time. In this sense, the uncomfortable-to-watch, raw vulnerability that Burnham demonstrates in the special can be interpreted as a perfect metaphor for the exhibitionist and invasive nature of a substantial part of social media content: it should probably not be in the public domain, but it is.

Conclusion

All things considered, the home has traditionally been conceived as a refuge. Paradoxically, as Burnham explores in *Inside*, due to the impossibility of going outside during lockdown, it turned into a prison in which enforced domesticity ruled, which undoubtedly had a negative impact on mental health. Similarly, the unforeseen transition of most facets of life from the physical world to the digital realm is more than palpable in *Inside*, a work that is largely built on the inside-outside dichotomy with a dark twist in line with the catastrophic tone of the pandemic era: while the reality of the outside is presented as a threat in compliance with dualism, the home is stripped of its positive connotations. Thus, although it acted as a shelter during lockdown, the space where Burnham's special takes place is more similar to the mental representation of a bunker than to the typical image of a cosy cabin in the middle of the forest. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the said bunker has severe limitations, for it can easily be penetrated by external agents in digital terms due to the ubiquity of technology. Likewise, it just offers physical protection to its only occupant — contrastingly, peace of mind seems to be a lost cause from the very first minute of the special. However, in spite of how terrible being caged makes him feel, the comedian appears to be firmly convinced that what is out there is infinitely worse for nearly the entire running time.

Nevertheless, in the final minutes of *Inside*, after several numbers in which it is made clear that the protagonist has hit rock bottom, the door that he himself closed at the beginning of the special magically opens by itself. Subsequently, despite being downright scared, Burnham gathers courage and decides to go outside, but only to regret it immediately after, as he panics and tries to open the door again with all his strength in order to go back inside. Unfortunately for him but fortunately for an invisible audience that cannot stop guffawing at his misfortunes, all his efforts are in vain.

Nevertheless, *Inside* ends with a fleeting glimpse of optimism: in the last shot of the special, after nearly ninety minutes on the verge of psychological horror, the comedian appears watching his *magnum opus* inside the guest house while surrounded by laughter, which prompts him to smirk in triumph. Conclusively, even though the future of the domestic sphere may frighten us, we must face it with the same hope that Burnham appears to have right before the curtain falls.

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