

Paradais: the space for violence.

Páradais: el espacio para la violencia.



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Abstract.

This paper is an analysis of the novel *Páradais* by Fernanda Melchor. The focus has been on the spatial scope and how the violence of certain spaces permeates the characters and is transferred to other locations. For this purpose, the concepts of "Chronotope" by Mikhail Bakhtin, "Heterotopia" by Michel Foucault, the definition of "House" by Gaston Bachelard and approximations to the definition of "Violence" have been used. The result has been a dichotomous classification between houses and the perception of violence as the result of different circumstances as well as a phenomenon that perpetuates itself.

Key words: House. Heterotopia. Space. Violence.

Abstract:

The present work is an analysis of Fernanda Melchor's novel *Paradais*. The focus has been made on the spatial aspect and how the violence of determined spaces permeates the characters and it is taken to other locations. The concepts used to achieve this are: Mijail Bakhtin's "Chronotope", Michel Foucault's "Heterotopia", Gaston Bachelard's approach of the "House" and approximations to the definition of "Violence". The result has been a dichotomous classification of the houses and the perception of violence as the result of diverse circumstances and also as a phenomenon that perpetuates itself.

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Páradais: the space for violence

Páradais is the fourth book and third novel by award-winning¹ Veracruz writer Fernanda Melchor (1982). It was published in 2020 by the Penguin Random House publishing group and is her first publication after the commercial success that was 2017's *Temporada de huracanes*. *Páradais* is a narrative in a confessional tone of the series of events and encounters that culminate in the break-in, rape and murder of Marián Maroño at the hands of the young Polo and Franco inside the Paradise residential condominium.

Due to the recurrence of certain spaces within the narrative and the presentation of violence as aggression in different forms that occurs in different spheres, the interest of the work is to highlight how in *Páradais* spaces play a fundamental role in the realization of the routine that establishes violence as the basic interaction and in the very exercise of it. It is also an analytical work that seeks to expose the advance of violence demonstrated in all the spaces it affects within the diegesis.

For this purpose, it is appropriate to begin with the definition of violence by Efrén Ortíz Domínguez as "the transgression of a code" (2020, p. 22) or:

[...]increasingly unknown behaviors of physical, psychological or moral aggression; in short, the order inherent to civilization, to urban life, to the refined manners of social life, is now threatened by the chaos that it predisposes (p. 21).

Since *Páradais* narrates a series of dynamics that take place in specific spaces and become routine, the concept of *Chronotope* was proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and is defined as: "the essential connection of temporal and spatial relations artistically assimilated in literature" (1989, p. 237). The chronotope is thus the linking of space and time determined in turn by the character:

¹ 2019 International Prize in Literature for *Temporada de huracanes* (Enciclopedia de la Literatura en México [ELEM], 2021).

Time is condensed here, compressed, becomes artistically visible; and space, in turn, intensifies, penetrates the movement of time, of plot, of story. The elements of time are revealed in space, and space is understood and measured through time (pp. 237 - 238).

On the other hand, it is evident how individuals transfer violence from one space to another or in different areas: whether in a horizontal direction -as happens with the rapes of Polo and his cousin- or vertical -from parents and bosses to children-, aggression is imported to other spheres and concludes in the affectation of third parties -Mrs. Maroño in this case-.

Since the conclusion of the violent routine of the protagonists is the application of violence in another space, Michel Foucault's concept of *Heterotopia* is relevant for two reasons: first, because it is a theoretical approach to the marginal space -incidentally in a work that deals with spaces and individuals of the social periphery-, and second, because of the idea of neutralization between spaces:

[...] among all those places that are distinguished from one another [by the specific functions performed in them], there are some that are *absolutely* distinct: places that are opposed to all the others, that are destined in some way to erase them, to neutralize them or to purify them. They are somehow *counter-spaces* (Foucault, 2010, p. 21).

The concept of "heterotopia" is useful to analyze and differentiate places that, although similar in their physical form, differ diametrically from each other by those actions that take place inside them, the influence they exert on their inhabitants -or visitors- and the actions they encourage.

Throughout *Páradais* we revisit certain spaces that denote the conformation of a routine existence, but that also propitiate violence in three different ways. They make it part of everyday life, catalyze the violent plan of young people or where young people become victimizers: such spaces consist of homes.

Gaston Bachelard conceives of the home as a realized place: "a space of solace and intimacy, as a space that must defend and synthesize intimacy" (2020, p. 93). That is to say, it must fulfill a function of interaction-action -beyond the simple fact of housing-,² and is primarily linked to the vital protection of the inhabitant and his or her unique existence.

Thus the spaces to be analyzed consist of the intradiegetic homes: specifically Polo's and Franco's as the ones that concretize the routine, the House of the Bloody Countess as the catalyst, and finally that of Mrs. Marián Maroño -house number 7- as the one that suffers the violence.

The first case is Polo's house where his mother's aggression has been cemented as part of the everyday and also consists of a space where he does not belong, since he has been displaced from his own bed and room to yield them to his cousin.

Polo thus lacks a corner of his own within what should be his home: without the intimacy that the space once afforded him, he is exposed to the horizontal aggressions of his cohabitants. In a violent exercise of vertical management, his mother belittles and beats him, justifying herself in her son's poor work performance and taking away his salary. And horizontally he and his cousin have formed a sexually abusive interaction where she manipulates him and blackmails him with her pregnancy while he rapes her.

So the space initially conceived for protection is now inhabited by violence in different manifestations; psychologically with "[his cousin] happy to have the upper hand and the absolute power to ruin Polo's life at any moment she wanted" (Melchor, 2023, p. 108); physical in "[His mother] still slapped him twice more, before sending him to sleep on the living room floor" (p. 107); and sexual when "until he exploded and held her arms and penetrated her furiously" (p. 104).

Expelled from school, Polo goes to work at *Paradise* as a gardener and pool attendant. It is worth noting, before continuing, how in the novel the place names reflect social class

² Although this coincides with the philosophical notions of Michel de Certeau (1996), in which the difference between place and space is the coexistence of given elements and the specific localized result of the interaction between sets, respectively, in the text both terms will be used as synonyms because diegetic spaces are places that imply interaction beforehand.

positions: Progreso is the name of a town invaded by organized crime, while *Páradais* is a mockery of Polo's boss for his lack of knowledge of the pronunciation of the Anglo-Saxon language.

In the residential house he feels humiliated and is abused at work by his boss³, which, together with the domestic abuse, leads him to seek and find an escape from his hostile reality: alcohol. The protagonist's strategy is to escape since he cannot conceive of any method to leave the region or his economic condition: his hometown, Progreso, is plagued by organized crime, and although the young man considers it as his most accessible option, it is impossible for him to enlist. This gives a sense of irony to the place name as he is unable to reach Progreso.

Between a suffocating job and an aggressive home, Polo's displacement is configured as a symbol of his mental and socioeconomic state, given that the journey he makes every day consists of a climb up the road with a mythical tone that refers to Sisyphus. This is explicit since the act of going to the condominium: "it just seemed to him like an exhausting climb up an endless hill" (Melchor, 2023, p. 121). In this way, his mental exhaustion is denoted by living between an abusive job and an abusive home that do not allow him to improve his condition while he lives immersed in the idea of growing based on work and effort.

Aware of this impossibility, his greatest aspiration is to join criminal groups as a way to escape from his daily environment, due to the absence of money and a series of constant mental and physical abuses, which turn his existence into something he can only deal with through alcoholism.

Franco - "the fat one"- is the other part of the duo: a spoiled teenager who has also been expelled from his school environment. He lives with his grandparents in Paradise - since his father is a semi-absent figure whose visits turn into beatings - and lives his days in constant idleness. His economic situation, in contrast to Polo's, is much more comfortable such that if he does not spend his afternoons in his lack of activities and a *flaneurism* within

³ "the arrogance with which Urquiza violated the contract that Polo had signed weeks before with the Compañía Inmobiliaria del Golfo, S.A. de C.V." (p. 34).

the residential, he locks himself in his room where he continues his descent into a vicious vortex of alcohol and pornography, which he consumes at every possible occasion.

The differences between the two are evident as they are the crossroads between two disparate social classes that becomes evident in the spaces they frequent and how they do it; Franco longs to drive his grandparents' car inside the residential, Polo gets around by bicycle; "the fat man" has his own room, "the gardener" has been exiled, one spends entire days working in the garden with swimming pool while the other enjoys these places.

The novel exposes violence as a phenomenon that results from structural conditions and perpetuates itself through individuals. That is to say, in spite of the clear economic differences between Polo and Franco, both young men live in environments where they are violated in one way or another: either through direct aggression inside or outside the home by their family members, this is manifested in psychological, verbal, physical and even sexual ways. This is what Slavoj Žižek refers to as "subjective violence":

[...] it is simply the most visible part of a triumvirate that also includes two objective types of violence. First, there is a "symbolic" violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger calls our "house of being" [...] (2020, p. 10).

But violence also results from socio-economic conditions that result in the social resentment of young people and their quality of marginalized individuals. Since both have been expelled from school, they are perceived as dissidents who are outside the social norm. Thus they orbit around what is expected of them - such as being students - and engage in other activities.

Polo is a worker who wants the minimum solvency to leave his hometown of Progreso, however, his poorly paid job and the abusive attitudes of his boss exacerbate his resentment and lead him to contemplate illicit activities as a valid means to achieve the wealth he seeks: joining organized crime as his cousin did or stealing from the Maroño family.

Franco, on the other hand, is a pornography addict whose desire is for immediate satisfaction: he has grown up in the neglect of his grandparents and the sporadic and violent

visits of his father. As a non-productive, non-duty-bound young man, he has been marginalized, and his addiction to sexually explicit content has increased. Since discipline in his home has been almost nil and he has only been restrained by his father's beatings, Franco's way of thinking is based on the normalization of violence, selfishness and the hypersexualization of women. That is why, for him, breaking into Mrs. Maroño's home and abusing her is a valid means of indulging his lascivious desires.

Polo's inability to climb socially because of his conditions along with Franco's addicted thinking are the result of both symbolic, but also "systemic" violence which Žižek explains as, "the often catastrophic consequences of the homogeneous functioning of our economic and political systems." (2020, p. 10)

The encounter between these two disparate individuals arises when the expulsion from school, being in the Paradise condominium and the incipient alcoholism of both coincide. The latter has to be realized as a mental and physical escape for the protagonist couple as it is an activity that they perform together in a certain space after coinciding in the dock of the condominium.

Although the initial purpose of the meetings is distraction from each other's hostile and anodyne existences-which is not achieved, as for Polo "No matter how much or how fast he drank on the pier, it was never enough to knock him out completely and make him lose his senses" (Melchor, 2023, p. 50)-all they achieve as they descend the stairs to drink in secret is the deepening of their own obsessions, so that it becomes a personal and moral catabasis. Polo is filled with resentment toward his own mother and his boss, authority figures, who engage in belittling him and diminishing the value of his work. Instead, Franco focuses on how to fulfill his perverted ideas fueled by his addiction to pornography with Mrs. Marián, his neighbor in house 7, a stay-at-home mother who is merely cordial to the teenager.

El Muelle is then the meeting point of two obsessions that feed back on each other and involve a third person: Mrs. Marián Maroño. This woman's home becomes, as the novel progresses, a space to be transgressed and disrupted for Franco's personal satisfaction and Polo's solvency.

Although house number 7 is presented as a home in the maximum sense of the *Bachelardian* expression -since she inhabits it with her husband and children, with whom she lives a calm and typical coexistence with a tendency towards homeliness- for the protagonist duo it becomes a target whose invasion represents a solution to each one's obsession. That is to say, violating the home -transgressing physical, moral, ethical and legal limits- is for them the opportunity to satisfy their desire.

As they delve deeper into their own obsessions, the boys are displaced to another meeting point: the Casa de la Condesa Sangrienta,⁴ an old abandoned and dilapidated house, darkened and covered by untamed vegetation, aspects that make it the target of popular legends.

The urban legend surrounding the Casa de la Condesa is that of the original owner as a perverse woman whose hobby was the torture and murder of innocent people⁵ who even as a spirit continues to appear to frighten.⁶ This gives the dwelling a reputation as a violent-aggressive space that predisposes Polo to fear it initially,⁷ but affects him on a psychic level and involves him personally by denting his psyche since: "Sometimes I also dreamed of the haunted mansion" (p. 69).

It is not surprising that the Countess's house acts as a catalyst, since the characters, knowing that they are now in a remote and hidden place from the community that protects them, without any surveillance, are free from the moral and ethical restrictions of society. Here fantasy becomes a serious possibility when Franco details the machination of a plan

⁴ Whose referentiality works both for the Casa del Estero in Melchor's own book *Aquí no es Miami* or for Alejandra Pizarnik's homonymous novel about Countess Bathory.

⁵ "who had ordered the construction of that house in the time of the Spaniards and whom the inhabitants of the estuary had beaten to death for being perverse and diabolical, for her fondness for kidnapping children and youngsters whom she chose from among the population of slaves who worked her land and whom she killed after subjecting them to unspeakable torments to finally throw their remains into a pit full of crocodiles in the basement of the mansion" (p. 67).

⁶ "The specter of the Countess, transformed into a harpy with a face stained by the blood of her victims, wrapped in the rotten shreds of what were once her gala clothes, emerged from the ruins of the mansion and opened her arms to the sky and with horrifying screams invoked the forces of evil that protected her" (p. 67).

⁷ "Polo could not help remembering as he gazed at that crooked face that seemed to look at him mockingly from the other side of the river, until he finally gave up and left the beach before darkness fell all at once" (p. 67.).

that will allow him to satiate his sexual impulse by breaking into the home where he was previously received in a kindly manner in order to finish off the family and satisfy himself with Mrs. Marián.

It is these characteristics that imply the Casona as a perverse *locus amoenus* for alcoholic gatherings. It is noteworthy how after the first encounter in this place Polo loses fragments of memory since he does not remember how he returns to his family and his memories are just unconnected images: the Casona has modified him. Thus the visits gradually determine the violent assault on house 7, first as a joke⁸ in bad taste and then as an aberrant reality, whose conception has been catalyzed by the strange space that "united them momentarily in the darkness of that archway covered with vines" (p. 115).

Although Polo does not believe his friend,⁹ the plan continues to be detailed in subsequent encounters, now always arranged in the portico, which only demonstrates a change in the characters as they find belonging in a *heterotopic* place¹⁰ and the evolution of the plan with aspects such as getting a weapon.¹¹

When at the entrance of the Countess Polo's house he takes the gun, he feels liberated: "In the darkness, surrounded by the feverish chorus of the vermin of the mangrove swamp, he felt like doing gansadas" (p. 119). This initial joy of being able to¹² ends up convincing him to be his friend's accomplice, so that after the laughter, silence becomes present¹³ in a kind of tacit pact that indicates the imminent massacre.

In such a way that the House of the Bloody Countess has been established as a zone of amoral liberation and acceptance of individual lewd and coercive desires nurtured by

⁸ "until they both ended up lying on the rotting brush on the steps, their hysterical laughter bouncing off the rusty walls of the ruins" (p. 120.).

⁹ "It was all the fat man's fault, that's what I was going to tell them" (Melchior, 2023. p. 11), "That's how it all started, I'd tell them." (p. 49), and "At first he thought it was all pure blowjob, pure mental jackets of Franco Andrade" (p. 111).

¹⁰ Etymologically "another place", that is, opposed to a certain one.

¹¹ "a black, solid cuete, a Glock 19" (p. 117).

¹² "Nervous your ass, Polo replied, with a smirk" (pp. 119 - 120).

¹³ "the whispers coming from the mansion behind him [...] died down around him and all that could be heard was the voice of the marrano, speaking almost in whispers" (p. 121).

personal resentment. It is now a space to give free rein to the fantasy provoked by the violence that has been integrated into their individuality and instilled from one's home. Thus it becomes a chronotope of the Machiavellian by allowing the relationships between the characters and their motives to develop and become the decision that leads to the climax of aggression.

While the houses of the protagonists conform the violent routine where they are victims, the House is the rupture and the beginning of a new routine; it is the catalyst of the diegesis as it is the meeting point where the duo is granted the necessary freedom for the planning of abject acts. That is to say, they accept the possibility of becoming the victimizers.

If the houses of the characters are chronotopes for the gestation and development of the hostile personalities, number 7 and that of the Bloody Countess would be of *another* type, one that contravenes the essence of the dwelling. This is due to treating the Maroño home as a space to be conquered and whose trespassing is totally opposed to that established by the most basic notion of protection. On the other hand, the House is a peripheral place where individuals of marginal behaviors are cited.

As can be seen, two pairs have been shaped according to the type of dwelling: the chronotopes for personal development -although this is eventually and secretly perverted with Polo's violence and Franco's addiction-, and the *others* or those in which the actions are aberrant and explicit -since the protagonists' homes preserve certain intimacy-, so a more *ad hoc* concept for the differentiation between these chronotopes is that of heterotopia.

The intradiegetic spaces are defined by their function: the Casona first fulfills the role of being the receptacle of a perverse and violent imaginary of collective thought to later feed that of Polo and Franco in favor of the attack on the house 7 and the erasure of it and its characteristics of shelter and vital dialectics.

Heterotopias are also: "the places that society conditions in its margins [...], they are rather reserved to individuals whose behavior is marginal with respect to the average or the required norm" (Foucault, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, their aim is also the realization of activities

derived from society without it losing its composure,¹⁴ furthermore that they are not limited to being of one form.¹⁵

This description of *heterotopic* inhabitants -to adjectivize them- as individuals outside of regulation allows a new perspective with respect to Franco and Polo: two people who embody a set of characteristics that are neither useful nor productive for society such as addictions and violent impulses, whose proceeding is the erasure of the spaces and individuals they oppose because of their own condition. Even their access to the Casona consists of a rite: alcoholization. Foucault refers to this as:

[...] heterotopias always have a system of opening and closing that isolates them from the surrounding space. In general, one does not enter a heterotopia as if one were at home; one either enters because one is obliged to do so (prisons, of course), or when one has undergone rituals (p. 28).

That entry into heterotopia consists of a rite is significant, for it is not something spontaneous and sporadic, but on the contrary something that requires preparation. In *Páradais*, the attack on house number 7 has taken time to develop and required certain conditions to materialize: conditions that consisted of the progressive advance of violence, not only in its manifestations but also in how it has taken over different spaces until reaching the climax of the novel in which, effectively, the Maroño home disintegrates.

To recapitulate, *Páradais'* novel has been analyzed on the basis of the recurrence of certain spaces, not only in the formation of a routine but also because they denote the integration and normalization of violence as part of daily life.

Thus Fernanda Melchor offers in her book a vision of violence as something more complex and elaborate than a sporadic event. It is the result of socioeconomic circumstances that permeate all the spaces of individuals, and becomes a self-sustaining and omnipresent

¹⁴ He clarifies about brothels, for example, "It was necessary for the first manifestations of virile sexuality to take place elsewhere" (p. 22).

¹⁵ "They can take, and always do, extraordinarily varied forms" (pp. 21-22):

phenomenon as long as it is not fought, which is why the characters in *Páradais* are not exempt in any aspect of it.

Since violence affects all their circles, they cannot escape it: Polo's work environment, the home where he is assaulted by his mother, the violent visits of Franco's father, the verbal hostility between the young people themselves when visiting the pier or the Casa de la Condesa, or even the little intimacy-sexuality that is presented is transformed into hostility against the body, whether of the other -as in the case of Polo or Mrs. Maroño- or their own -as in the case of Franco-, and of course a society surrounded by crime.

However, just as the characters cannot abandon violence, neither do they have the tools to fight it or disarm it: they are not even aware of the aggressive escalation, as they have internalized it as their normality, having been encouraged at home by their relatives and authority figures. Therefore, the only dynamic and possibility conceived by the protagonist duo is precisely to be part of these spaces of aggression, to replicate it and transfer it from their individual nuclei to others -such as the 7th house-.

In conclusion, the spaces in *Páradais* reaffirm the omnipresence of violence, not only in certain points but also as a condition in itself that crosses all aspects of the inhabitants of each space; it is a phenomenon with which the homes are heterotopized and the characters go from being victims to victimizers eventually.

It should be emphasized that reading violent narratives should not only be a receptive activity but an exercise of critical and analytical thinking to avoid being unconsciously immersed in it. Only by becoming aware of violence as a condition that involves everyone to a greater or lesser extent, can the factors that trigger it be identified and thus avoid replicating it.

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