

FROM FANTASTIC TO DYSTOPIAN: THE TRANSGRESSIVE EFFECT OF MARIO BELLATIN'S *SALÓN DE BELLEZA*

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to demonstrate how the fantastic and the dystopian can operate together in order to take full advantage of their inherently transgressive qualities. For this purpose, Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* will be analyzed. The fantastic acts intratextually, by producing syntactic and discursive ruptures, whereas the dystopian provokes an extratextual transgression, by projecting Bellatin's concerns about the exclusion of certain minority communities. Despite their differences, both the fantastic and the dystopian are rooted in reality: the fantastic, in its reliance on what the reader considers possible; the dystopian, in its ability to reveal hidden truths. In this way, the fantastic and the dystopian become a powerful tool in deconstructing — or at least questioning — the reader's world view.

KEY WORDS: fantastic, dystopian, transgressive effect, Mario Bellatin.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene por objetivo demostrar cómo lo fantástico y lo distópico pueden operar conjuntamente para sacar el máximo partido de sus cualidades transgresivas. A este efecto se ha analizado *Salón de belleza* de Mario Bellatin. Si lo fantástico actúa intratextualmente, produciendo rupturas sintácticas y discursivas, lo distópico provoca una transgresión extratextual, proyectando la preocupación de Bellatin por la exclusión de determinadas comunidades minoritarias. A pesar de sus diferencias, tanto lo fantástico como lo distópico están arraigados en la realidad: lo fantástico por su dependencia de lo que el lector considera como posible; y lo distópico porque revela

verdades ocultas. De este modo, lo fantástico y lo distópico se convierten en poderosas herramientas a la hora de deconstruir —o por lo menos cuestionar— la visión del mundo que posee el lector.

PALABRAS CLAVE: fantástico, distópico, efecto transgresivo, Mario Bellatin.



INTRODUCTION

Although fantastic literature is usually associated with supernatural beings and forces, a new generation of Latin-American writers uses their innovative writing techniques to manifest the fantastic. By means of experimental use of language, an author such as the Mexican-Peruvian Mario Bellatin demonstrates the possibility of the impossible. In his novella *Salón de belleza* (1994), the autodiegetic narrator blurs the boundaries between his own life and that of his aquarium fish, pointing out striking parallelisms. As the narration does not explain why the course of the fish's lives runs analogously to the narrator's life, it evidences the lack of causal associations. In consequence, it produces a real, though incomprehensible, (con)fusion between the narrator and the fish, and between the parlor and the aquaria. What is new is that this fantastic sensation is generated not by the narrative theme, but by the narrative act itself, entailing a «fantastic of language or of discourse» rather than a «fantastic of perception» (Rodríguez Hernández, 2010: 4).

With this strategy, Bellatin brings into prominence the fact that our world is actually distorted. *Salón de belleza* tells the story of a beauty salon which degrades into a place where people on the fringes of society — terminally ill homosexual men — go to die. It can thus be read as a dystopian fiction as well. *Salón de belleza*'s transgressive effect can be ascribed to this combination of the fantastic and the dystopian. Consequently, the present article will explore the ways in which Bellatin subtly introduces the fantastic to overtly denounce the categorization of certain minority groups as «human waste» or «wasted humans» (Bauman, 2004: 5).

1. MARIO BELLATIN AND *SALÓN DE BELLEZA*

Mario Bellatin was born in 1960 in Mexico, but brought up in Peru (his parents' homeland), where he lived until the age of twenty-three. Although he had already studied theology and obtained a diploma in communication sciences, he moved to Cuba to enroll at the Escuela internacional de Cine y Televisión. He started publishing, however, in Peru — his first book, *Mujeres de sal*, appeared in Lima in 1986 —, but since 1995 he has further pursued his writing career in Mexico. He continues to live and write there today.

Up to now, he has published more than forty books, many of which have been translated into other languages.¹ His work can be classified as «neo-avant-gardist»,² not so much for its references to the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, but rather on the basis of its aesthetic provocations (Bush, 2015: 275). As the author himself affirms:

La idea es que el texto genere infinidad de textos. Por eso también es mi interés de que se escape a las leyes tradicionales de lo plano de un texto. Sólo enfrentándote al texto por escrito creo que está hecho para que haya muchas lecturas. Tú te conviertes en una especie de co-creador. Lo que quiero poner en tela de juicio es ¿quién es el escritor? ¿Por qué el escritor tiene el rol que tiene? ¿Por qué tiene el tiempo o espacio que tiene? ¿Quién dio las verdades en la literatura? ¿Cómo que los textos no pueden vivir por sí mismos y no pueda el escritor convertirse en un traductor de libros que no existen? (Hind, 2004: 202)

By breaking with traditional literary conventions and expectations, Mario Bellatin seeks to actively engage the reader in his texts' production. Since he explores innovative narrative forms in particular, his work can be characterized, among other things, by its experimentalism, fragmentation, intertextuality and auto-representations. Although many of Bellatin's critics consider these characteristics as important and stress their transgressive power, the potential these textual strategies have to trigger a fantastic transgression remains largely unexplored. This is surprising, since Bellatin's first work was already a landmark in the history of Peruvian fantastic literature. Bellatin was, according to José Güich Rodríguez (2011), one of the first Peruvian authors who «dared to cultivate exclusively the fantastic as part of a

1 For a representative, although not exhaustive, overview of his (translated) work, see *Enciclopedia de la literatura en México* (ELEM, 2018).

2 For the application of this term to Bellatin's work, see Bush (2015) or Donoso Macaya (2010).

project undertaken without being afraid of the risks», and *Mujeres de sal* arose from «a will to break with the conventional and predictable, distancing itself from the usual representations to which the literary system had accustomed us».³

However, it has been noticed that Bellatin's stories have to be situated in a border zone where the referent — the «real» reality — becomes indistinguishable from its representation (Donoso Macaya, 2010: 175). This also applies to *Salón de belleza*, the novella with which Bellatin made his name in 1994 and which was ranked nineteenth on a list of the top hundred best books written in Spanish in the last twenty-five years in 2007. *Salón de belleza* tells the story of its narrator, a cross-dressing beautician, who turns his styling salon into a hospice for people suffering from a mysterious disease. As we will see in more detail in the next sections, *Salón de belleza* lacks concrete spatial or temporal coordinates, but still fulfills a critical and ideological function. More specifically, its narrator encourages the reader to interrogate the reality of the life that we all know. This is entirely in line with Bellatin's poetics:

Creo que la principal es respetar lo que planteé desde mi primer libro, el generar *un no tiempo y un no espacio real o reconocible*. (...) Es decir, un x jugando con distintos imaginarios, referentes de distintas tradiciones, con el fin de hacer lo mismo que hice desde el primer libro, que no exista un tiempo y un espacio reconocibles. Salvo para mí. Para mí sí hay un tiempo y un espacio, una economía del discurso, unos mínimos elementos, pero que no necesito transmitir al lector para que el texto funcione o no. También está (...) *el juego de la verdad y la mentira, el cómo se lee a partir de que se acepta, determinada certeza a partir de lo cual ya no se puede leer de otra manera. Son muchas las preguntas que se van abriendo, y en realidad no hay ninguna respuesta* (Larraín, 2006: 2).

In the present article, we will focus on the underlined elements: how can a narrative that is not situated in a particular time or place lead to a deconstruction of the reader's framework? How can narrative events, whose truthfulness and meaning the reader cannot be certain of, involve a reflection on reality? As we will see in the three following sections, *Salón de belleza* appeals to the fantastic (section 2) as well as to the dystopian (section 3) in order to subvert the reader in this way (section 4).

3 All the translations from the Spanish and the Portuguese are our own unless otherwise stated in the bibliography.

2. THE FANTASTIC

Following the taxonomy of Elton Honores (2011: 29-32), which aims to assign an accurate label to the different tendencies within the contemporary Peruvian fantastic narrative, *Salón de belleza* is a «fantastic-eclectic story». As such, it produces «a tension between the realistic and the non-realistic which generates a certain estrangement, to the extent that there is a certain hybridity in the mixture, a certain experimentalism in the forms» (Honores, 2011: 32). More specifically, *Salón de belleza* connects «the use of certain codes of the fantastic» (Honores, 2011: 32) with the writing of an autobiographical fiction. This blend works particularly well, since «the fantastic always has to start from a realistic perspective» (Risco, 1987: 140). That is to say, the textual world should construct a strong referential connection to the extratextual world, because only by doing so can the fantastic act as a transgression of our paradigm of reality.

Indeed, the novella begins with the narrator-protagonist arousing memories of his beauty salon that, meanwhile, has been downgraded to a place where people go to die. Although these memories are recalled from a first-person perspective, by an autodiegetic narrative voice, they do not allow the reader to form a clear and whole picture of the person behind it. The only information the reader can infer is that the narrator is not an ordinary character, but that, on the contrary, he is immersed in his own reality, which seems to be different from the reality generally considered as normal. Professionally, the narrator-protagonist not only stands out for running a beauty parlor for women as a cross-dressing man, but also because he lets his splendid establishment turn into an accommodation for moribunds. On a personal level, he has been found to be, if not a nihilist, at least a fatalist, who relativizes even death. According to him, dying is inevitable — «Yo me encargo, además, de que no abriguen falsas esperanzas» (Bellatin, 2013: 30) — and definitive, which is why, in his opinion, it is no good appealing to God — «en el Moridero están prohibidos los crucifijos, las estampas y las oraciones de cualquier tipo» (Bellatin, 2013: 31).

The narrator-protagonist remains nameless, and he also maintains the anonymity of the other characters. In various occasions, he indicates that the business is not only his, but that it belongs to «tres personas» (Bellatin, 2013: 16), «tres estilistas» (Bellatin, 2013: 16), that is to say, he operates it together with his «compañeros de trabajo» (Bellatin, 2013: 11, 33), «los únicos amigos que [ha] tenido» (Bellatin, 2013: 19), but he does not specify further who they might be. He does not name the cause of the death of his colleagues and his

guests either, although it is clear that it is an «enfermedad» (Bellatin, 2013: 15). He believes that one guest died from tuberculosis, but at the same time, he thinks that that guest was different from the rest in many respects, so it is likely that that guest also differs from the others in the disease he suffers from. The neighbors, for their part, affirm that the patients are afflicted with the plague. The narrator-protagonist himself, then, describes the symptoms — pustules, swollen glands, wounds all over the body, weight loss — without them pointing to one disease over another, and thus, by doing so, he creates more confusion than there was to begin with. As a consequence, «el mal» (Bellatin, 2013: 12) remains unnamed.

This indefiniteness not only exists at the level of the characters, but also applies to the spatiotemporal realm in which the characters move and in which they interact. With regard to the spatial dimension, the narrator-protagonist defines the beauty salon as «un lugar verdaderamente diferente» (Bellatin, 2013: 25) and the neighbors consider the hospice as «un foco infecioso» (Bellatin, 2013: 21), but no one provides explicit information such as its name, its location or its dimensions. Time-wise, the narrator-protagonist only mentions that his story began «hace algunos años» (Bellatin, 2013: 11) and ends «ahora» (Bellatin, 2013: 37).

These observations corroborate those of David Roas (2018: 75), who found that it is common in fantastic literature that «writing and narrative procedures envelop the notations of the text in ambiguity by means of expressive imprecision». Indeed, in *Salón de belleza*, the story's «[i]ndeterminacy becomes an artifice with which to kick-start the reader's imagination» (Roas, 2018: 76). This is the reason why this feature is commonly found throughout the fantastic, although it does not necessarily make a story part of the genre itself.

For the fantastic to take place, the congruity between the fictional world and the extratextual world, created by the autobiographical narrative, must be disarranged. This is done by describing the behavior of the narrator-protagonist's fish, which clearly deviates from what is conceived as normal. Strangely enough, the narrator-protagonist does characterize the fish in detail, so that the reader learns their names (written with a capital letter just as personal names), their physical features and their conducts. Moreover, the reader receives, at different moments in the story, information about their state of health. From this it can be stated that the narrator-protagonist has a profound affection for the fish. He even feels more sorry for the animals than for the human beings that are passing away. That is why he regrets that the aquaria are more and more empty since the beauty salon has been transformed into a dying place:

«Ahora que el salón se ha convertido en un Moridero, donde van a terminar sus días quienes no tienen dónde hacerlo, me cuesta mucho trabajo ver cómo poco a poco los peces han ido desapareciendo. *Tal vez* sea que el agua corriente está llegando demasiado cargada de cloro, o *quizá* que no tengo el tiempo suficiente para darles los cuidados que se merecen» (Bellatin, 2013: 11). The adverbs of possibility «*tal vez*» and «*quizá*» introduce possible explanations of the fish's loss of lives, but the wording makes it clear that these explanations are not definitive and that the underlying story may be more complex. Since the narrator-protagonist does not establish a cause of the fish's death, he gives the impression that the event, which at first sight seemed ordinary and natural, is not so at all. Indeed, «it is not the terrifying or disquieting nature of the event that makes it appropriate for a fantastic fiction, rather its irreducibility both to a natural cause and a more or less institutionalized supernatural cause» (Reisz, 2001: 197). The suspicion that something extraordinary is at work becomes more founded when a Gupi Real fish also dies, which is supposed to be a more resistant species: «La madre [pez], *sin ninguna razón visible*, murió a los pocos días» (Bellatin, 2013: 11). Once again here — and repeatedly in the course of the narrative — rationality is undermined by the lack of causality. According to Rosalba Campra (2008: 128), «the silence about the cause, about the why, is sufficient to mess up the notion of reality».

However, the fact that some occurrences in *Salón de belleza* «are in a sense opposed to our perception of nature's functioning, of its normality» is not enough to consider the novella on the whole as fantastic (Risco, 1987: 25); the occurrences must be a reason for questioning the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. That is to say, «if, in one way or another, they [the reader and the characters] problematize them and are, no matter how much, taken by surprise because of the nature of the phenomena, the work of reference would correspond to the fantastic» (1987: 26). This is the case in *Salón de belleza*. On the one hand, the reader becomes increasingly unsure whether the incidents have a natural explanation, a supernatural explanation, or no explanation at all. On the other hand, the narrator-protagonist himself explicitly states that the inexplicable conduct of the fish confuses him:

En forma un tanto extraña, con el muchacho perecieron tres peces juntos. (...) Inmediatamente después de su muerte, encontré tres Monjitas rígidas al fondo. (...) Para las Monjitas es preciso contar con un calentador de agua. Había tenido uno enchufado todo el tiempo. En ese entonces, todavía cumplía con las reglas necesarias que me imponían los acuarios. *Considero por eso más que una casualidad que murieran precisamente las tres la noche en que expiró el muchacho.* (Bellatin, 2013: 18)

Lo que más me sorprende es lo fiel que se ha mostrado esta última camada de peces. Pese al poco tiempo dedicado a su crianza, se aferran de una manera extraña a la vida. (Bellatin, 2013: 19)

As these fragments show, the fish appear to reflect the condition of the place's clientele. Actually, the beauty salon was conceived as a big aquarium, so that its customers can be compared to the aquarium fish: «Desde el primer momento, pensé en tener peceras de grandes proporciones. Lo que buscaba era que mientras eran tratadas, las clientas tuvieran la sensación de encontrarse sumergidas en un agua cristalina para luego salir rejuvenecidas y bellas a la superficie» (Bellatin, 2013: 17). And, conversely, the fish mirror the customers. As long as the narrator-protagonist takes care of the beauty salon, the fish are seen in their splendor. However, as soon as he becomes careless, letting his booming business become a place to die, the aquaria start to tarnish. How can these two, seemingly unrelated things — the parallel upon which this story is founded — be explained? According to Roas (2018: 63), the fantastic «is impossible to explain, exceeds the frontiers of language, it is by definition indescribable because it is unthinkable». Indeed, the novella does not solve the question, keeping the reader in a state of suspense far beyond the final page. In that way, it confirms Campra's theory (2008: 130) that «in general, in stories in which the fantastic is explicitly motivated, the transgression is usually clearly indicated on the semantic level, which makes it easy to individualize a “moment” of transgression at one point in the story. The lack of motivation, in contrast, creates a fluctuation that entirely covers the world's coherence, blurring it».

The borders between the characters' reality and that of the fish become even fuzzier when additional analogies are configured. Even so, it should be pointed out that certain analogies lend themselves more readily to confusion than others. The following sentence, for instance, draws a parallel between the narrator-protagonist and the Carpas Doradas — who both have a golden lustre — without being alienating: «cuando me aficioné a las Carpas Doradas, (...) siempre buscaba algo dorado con que adornar los vestidos que usaba en las noches» (Bellatin, 2013: 12). The next passage, on the other hand, is dominated by ambiguity. As such, it shows that «what is by definition indescribable requires employing a “rhetoric of the unspeakable”», that is, «a series of textual marks that signal the exceptional nature of what is represented», such as «comparisons, parallels, analogies» (Roas, 2018: 75). The narrator-protagonist describes his impressions with so many details that

they become vivid enough to be real. That is to say, the (con)fusion between the narrator-protagonist and his fish, between the vapor bath and the aquaria seems to be effected. In this respect, the spatial framework is particularly functional. The steam generated by the baths introduces a physical vagueness on which the doubtfulness typical of the fantastic can rely. The narrator-protagonist's conclusive remark — «se convertían en una realidad que se abría en toda su plenitud» — further accentuates this sensation:

En esos momentos [cuando el narrador bajaba las escaleras de los baños de vapor], siempre me sentía como si estuviera dentro de uno de mis acuarios. Revivía el agua espesa, alterada por las burbujas de los motores del oxígeno, así como las selvas que se creaban entre las plantas acuáticas. Experimentaba también el extraño sentimiento producido por la persecución de los peces grandes cuando buscan comerse a los más pequeños. En esos momentos la poca capacidad de defensa, lo rígido de las transparentes paredes de los acuarios, se convertían en una realidad que se abría en toda su plenitud. (Bellatin, 2013: 14)

Thus, not only the patients of the beauty salon and hospice maintain an unusual relationship with the fish, so does the narrator-protagonist himself. At first, he bares comparison with the fish which, despite the infectious environment, are still in good health: «admirando los peces que aún quedaban con vida o, tal vez, con alguna alusión hacia mi cuerpo, como haciendo ver que aún se mantenía en forma» (Bellatin, 2013: 20). But, as the first disease symptoms appear, he begins to identify more with the contaminated ones: «Me sentía como aquellos peces tomados por los hongos, a los cuales les huían hasta sus naturales depredadores. (...) los peces atacados por los hongos se volvían sagrados e intocables. (...) Cualquier pez con hongos sólo muere de ese mal. A mí tal vez me sucedería lo mismo si me aventuraba a visitar nuevamente los baños o salir a las calles de noche. Quizá nadie se atrevería a golpearme ni a hacerme pasar por situaciones de peligro» (Bellatin, 2013: 32).

The analogies are therefore built around one of *Salón de belleza*'s main themes: deterioration. If we follow the progression of this morbid process, we pass, in Salvador Luis Raggio Miranda's terms (2013: 217), from a «time of beauty» to a «time of waste». It is important to note that the transition between these different temporalities is established «through a subtle play with anachronies» (Raggio Miranda, 2013: 217). At the same time that he describes the regrettable results of his decision to take on the care of one sick person, the narrator-protagonist brings to mind how different and beautiful everything was before. Nevertheless, at the moment of narration, he is in the final stage

of his life. He is unable to change this, he can only undergo his «enfermedad» and «el rumbo que tome» (Bellatin, 2013: 36), just as his last batch of fish do. Given that the situation goes from bad to worse, it is surprising that the story's end does not correspond with the end of this process of degradation, i.e., the narrator-protagonist's death. It is quite the contrary, as the final sentence hints that there is no immediate change in sight: «Ahora, lo único que puedo pedir es que respeten la soledad que se aproxima» (Bellatin, 2013: 37).

The novella's ending seems to be designed to keep the reader thinking beyond the story's limits and, as such, ensures that the fantastic effect is not lost at the story's close. Everyone, including the narrator-protagonist, assumes that time is linear. So, degradation is an obvious sign of death, the end of a linear course. Thus, right up to the ending, the course of the narrator-protagonist's illness is expected to come to a logical conclusion (death). The story's ending is, instead, an abrupt discontinuance of its natural flow. In this way, it demonstrates «how fantastic fiction puts into practice different ways to refute our unidirectional conception of time and, above all, its representation» (Roas: 2012: 113). We argue that the unexpected shift is related to the fantastic, because it brings up the question: is it possible that death stays away from the narrator-protagonist, or is it just an illusion? This open ending creates, in the words of Roas (2012: 112), «a space suspended in the time in which the protagonist is condemned to an endless waiting. A circular time, a time that repeats itself, that recurs and follows the same cycle». This «non-time» (Roas, 2012: 112) is already referred to long before the story's conclusion, when the narrator-protagonist is frightened by «estarse muriendo en forma interminable» (Bellatin, 2013: 31). It is towards the later stages of the story, however, that the narrator-protagonist seems to enter into it. If we take a closer look at *Salón de belleza*'s end, we find that the novella's narrator-protagonist is, indeed, caught in a vicious circle and, inevitably, condemned to endless waiting. In turn, he forces the reader to become part of this perpetual process, where things are no longer linear, but continuously circular and unending.

Certain adjectives support a fantastic interpretation of *Salón de belleza*, as their particular contexts create a fantastic connotation. More specifically, the narrator-protagonist did «algo casi imposible» (Bellatin, 2013: 15), the beauty salon has «un matiz especial» (Bellatin, 2013: 25), and the activity of growing fish assumes «cierto carácter diabólico» (Bellatin, 2013: 30). However, what is most striking is the frequent use of the adjective «extraño». It appears no less than thirteen times in a text of only twenty-seven pages that, for the rest, does not contain many adjectives. Moreover, the almost synonymous adjective

«curioso» and the adverb «curiosamente» are recurrent. According to Campra (2008: 176), together these adjectives constitute «a canonical lexicon in the genre». While not having exactly the same form or meaning, they all serve the same purpose: to underline the oddness of the narrated. The «fantastic characterization» is thus made explicit «by adjectives which say, precisely, that something is "fantastic"» (Campra, 2008: 176).

In conclusion, *Salón de belleza* presents itself as an undetermined narrative that, nevertheless, reveals inexplicable occurrences and unexpected analogies. As such, it leads to the following conclusion: the reality, and also the time frame, the protagonist is in and telling the story from is distorted in such a way that the novella leans towards the fantastic of discourse. In contrary to the fantastic of perception, which is induced by the presence of a supernatural element in an otherwise mimetic text, «exceeding the limits between two orders understood to be incommunicable» (Roas, 2018: 78), the fantastic of discourse, as generated in *Salón de belleza*, puts forward a «linguistic transgression», both «on a syntactical level (narrative structure), above all reflected in the absence of causality and finality», and «on a discursive level, as the negation of the transparency of language» (Roas, 2018: 78). Therefore, the novella's narrative events are normal on a semantic level, but they are abnormal in the fact that they are presented in such an indistinct setting, occur parallel to each other, and there is no plausible explanation for it.

Not only *Salón de belleza*, but also the genre itself is moving away from these traditional fantastic patterns and the derived themes. Initially, the phantasms and vampires that were typical of the modality of perception were used because they went beyond the common perception of what was considered normal. These topics, though, have become «narrativized» to the point of constituting a new literary paradigm (Fludernik, 1996: 31-35). Nowadays, they cannot fulfill this function anymore. Consequently, the genre is forced to redefine itself, creating new forms, because only by doing so can it maintain its unnatural nature. That is why the contemporary fantastic needed to go beyond these pre-established themes and experiment with narration that leads to ambiguity and tensions between the natural and the supernatural. In sum, Campra (2008: 136) is right to argue that «the apparition of the phantasm has been substituted by the insoluble lack of connections between elements of pure reality». From the second half of the twentieth century to the present, the fantastic of discourse is springing up and taking shape. If it has not entirely replaced the fantastic of perception, it has surely relegated it to a secondary position.

3. THE DYSTOPIAN

Moving beyond narrative devices, we see that *Salón de belleza*, content-wise, conveys a society that is losing all sense of morality. At the end of this section, we will provide an overview of its characteristics, but we can already say in advance that it fits the criteria for defining dystopia proposed by Diana Palardy (2018: 10-11).

In the dystopian society that *Salón de belleza* represents, there is no space for homosexuals and other minorities. As proof, we cite the fact that the narrator-protagonist trembles for being confronted with «la Banda de los Matacabras», who gang together to beat, sometimes even to death, the men who dare to go out in drag. In addition, such an attitude can be seen not only in the way individual persons or groups of persons act, but also in the position of public institutions, such as hospitals that refuse to admit these — mostly homosexual — men for fear of contamination. In turn, when they are really infected with the mysterious disease, the only place they can go to is the narrator-protagonist's «Moridero». A striking case in point is that of the first guest, who, as the narrator-protagonist reports, «estaba al borde de la muerte y no lo querían recibir en ningún hospital. Su familia tampoco quería hacerse cargo del enfermo y, por falta de recursos económicos, su única alternativa era morir debajo de uno de los puentes del río que corre paralelo a la ciudad» (Bellatin, 2013: 26). Nevertheless, even the victims of such social and family rejection have to fulfill the conditions the narrator-protagonist laid down in order to enter the Moridero. That is to say, only men are accepted, and only if their body is in an advanced state of decay. Although the sick persons are scrutinized when they arrive at the Moridero, the narrator-protagonist declares that, later on, he reaches «un estado en el que todos son iguales para mí» and that, therefore, «ya casi no individualizo a los huéspedes» (Bellatin, 2013: 17). So the narrator-protagonist's Moridero «deals only with individuals (...), but they are identified (...) only on entering or leaving» (Augé, 2008: 89). This paradoxical situation characterizes what Marc Augé (2008: 63) describes as «non-places». According to him, «a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place». The Moridero indeed turns out to be a space of anonymity, which «creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude» (Augé, 2008: 83). Perhaps it is not so surprising that the narrator-protagonist, as manager of the Moridero, remains — with one exception — emotionally detached from his patients; what is surprising is that the patients do not demonstrate any affection for him, although he takes on the role of caretaker when they so desperately

need it. For example, after the death of his two colleagues, the narrator-protagonist realizes he is all by himself. «Sigo solitario como siempre. Sin ninguna clase de retribución afectiva. Sin nadie que venga a llorar mi enfermedad. (...) ahora tengo que vérmelas yo solo. Debo sufrir la decadencia sin pronunciar palabra. Rodeado de caras que veo siempre por primera vez» (Bellatin, 2013: 33).

The Moridero described in *Salón de belleza* is thus a transit place, whose anonymous inhabitants appear and disappear in an apparently endless cycle. Such places are central to understanding what effect modernization has on our society. This means that it is correct to claim, as Sergio Delgado (2011: 79) does, that «the Moridero emerges from a concrete historical conjuncture». More specifically, a place such as the Moridero becomes a necessity in a society where homogenization, and subsequently marginalization and exclusion, have evolved into a powerful mechanism. Ill people, such as those living in the Moridero, are not functional in the modern economic system, which is why they are expelled. Moreover, they do not fit into the socially accepted stereotypes, because they are not heterosexually oriented. Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 5) categorizes this group of the population as «“human waste”, or more correctly wasted humans (the “excessive” and “redundant”, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay»). In the dystopia that is *Salón de belleza*, the narrator-protagonist is also ejected as waste, since he has been disowned by his own mother for being homosexual — «En esa época me había escapado recién de la casa de mi madre, quien nunca me perdonó que no fuera el hijo recto con el que ella había soñado» (Bellatin, 2013: 24) — and contaminated with the same disease as his guests. As a consequence, none of the Moridero's inhabitants exist for their family nor society, as if they were already dead.

By raising the «waste production» and «waste disposal problem» (Bauman, 2004: 7), *Salón de belleza* affirms that most of the «dystopian novels, principally, published from the decade of the 1990's onwards, reject the mere political reading proposed by the classic dystopias» (Marks de Marques, 2014: 19). Instead of creating a traditional political narrative, Mario Bellatin addresses a social ill that is detrimental to those people who, just like *Salón de belleza*'s characters, belong to a minority group that is considered superfluous. By doing so, he calls into question the «autoimmunity» (Bollington, 2018: 485) reaction of society against such groups, by which is understood the reflex of society to attack part of itself, in order to protect itself against its «social enemy» (Bollington, 2018: 485), that is, the homosexual, the terminally ill. The dystopian dimension of his narrative reveals that to this very day the «auto-

immunitary social logic» (Bollington, 2018: 485) still prevails. This is also why Cecilia López Badano (2014: 137) speaks about *Salón de belleza* in terms of a «discouraging social parable». The novella shows how necessary, but problematic, a place like the Moridero is and, by doing so, criticizes a society that has permitted the development of such places. In short, it is an unmistakable indictment of current social values.

Nevertheless, the fact that *Salón de belleza* conveys a socially charged message does not mean that it is a story without any political orientation at all. As indicated by Delgado (2011: 79), its «political push» can be found «in its capacity to expand our sense of the human». Using «the function of the body as mediator of experience» (Delgado, 2011: 69), the story addresses the question «whether the inclusion/exclusion game is the only way in which human life in common may be conducted and the only conceivable form our shared world may take — be given — as a result» (Bauman, 2004: 133). Nevertheless, *Salón de belleza* does not pretend to have an answer to this question, it merely lays the foreground for a political debate.

Summarizing the above, there are strong grounds for answering yes to all of the following questions:

- Is it a hypothetical society?
- Are the individuals in the society (or in a certain subsector of the society) oppressed (...)?
- Does the work suggest that systemic, sociopolitical problems are to blame for the current state of affairs?
- Are these problems an extrapolation of concerns that are not being dealt with effectively (or at all) in the author's (...) society?
- Is it a deliberately planned society, in many cases intended to be ideal for at least some of its citizens (...)?
- Does the work explicitly or implicitly serve an admonitory function (i.e., warn the reader/viewer to address the sociopolitical problems now while they are not so bad and have not yet reached the dystopian extremes represented in the work)?
- Does the author (...) intend for the implied reader (...) to experience defamiliarization upon entering the world?
- Does the author (...) want the implied reader (...) to question the moral code of the society?
- Is the behavior of the characters monitored and/or controlled (or do they often just feel as if they were being monitored and/or controlled)?
- Does an important character (often the protagonist) experience a process of disillusionment and then attempt to rebel against the system? (Palardy, 2018: 10-11)

As a result, *Salón de belleza* meets the criteria to be considered a dystopia. However, it should be mentioned that the novella also impacts the reader in a positive way. This entails that we, like Keith Booker (1994: 3-4), depart from the idea that the dystopian does not exclude the utopian, but quite the contrary:

[We] consider dystopian literature to include those works that rely on a dialogue with utopian idealism as an important element of their social criticism. Further [we] consider the principal literary strategy of dystopian literature to be defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable.

The events depicted in the narrative can be qualified as dystopian because they happen in an alternative, enclosed space, where death is omnipresent but simultaneously meaningless. Furthermore, the development of the narrative proves that life is extremely hard in such spaces located on the fringes of society, but insinuates that it would not have been so if we had created a more inclusive environment. Nonetheless, besides this critique, we are prone to believe that change is still possible, and that individual initiatives, such as that of the narrator-protagonist, can make a difference. This means that taking action creates the possibility of preventing the situation from getting worse or even reversing it. In other words, «[t]he utopian subtext» of dystopias such as *Salón de belleza* «can be found precisely in this gap between the narrated dystopian present and the anticipated realization of a potential utopian future that classical dystopia evades»⁴ (Mohr, 2007: 9).

4. THE TRANSGRESSIVE EFFECT

The combination of the fantastic and the dystopian creates a transgression that leaves the reader with a sense of dislocation. This effect can be attributed to the fact that *Salón de belleza* unfolds through disruptions, and that these disruptions are made blatant to the reader. According to Peter Rabinowitz (1987: 65), «textual features stand out both when they disrupt the continuity of the works in which they occur and when they deviate from the extratextual norms against which they are read». In *Salón de belleza*, the fantastic

⁴ Emphasis in the original.

produces «intratextual disruptions», intruding in an otherwise mimetic narrative, whereas the dystopian is responsible for the «extratextual disruptions» that arise when the reader finds out that the gloomy scenario described by Bellatin almost corresponds to reality. As far as the intratextual disruptions are concerned, the fantastic contradicts — to use Rabinowitz's terminology — the rules of configuration as well as the rules of signification established by the text: «[i]f a strange event is narrated, it is normally a signal for the narrative audience to look forward to an explanation of its causes. This is different from rules of signification regarding cause; in those cases, we *assume* the causal connections that are not given. In these configurative cases, in contrast, we do not have the necessary [sic] information to determine causes on our own; we thus wait for the text to tell us the causes»⁵ (Rabinowitz, 1987: 138). The rules of configuration permit the readers to form an idea about what to expect further on in their reading. The rules of signification, on the other hand, are used by the readers to try to make sense of what they have read and, in particular, of what attracts their attention. We argue here that *Salón de belleza* goes against both the rules of configuration and the rules of signification because of its indeterminacy, but, above all, because of its fantastic undoing of causality. On a configurative level, the novella does not account for the parallel evolution of the fish and the humans. Focusing on the act of meaning making, we see that it also transgresses the rules of signification, since it makes it impossible for the readers to think of any logical or natural explanation that makes sense within the narrative. With regard to the extratextual disruptions, «any violation of an actual cultural taboo will attract a reader's notice — although, of course, what constitutes a taboo will vary from culture to culture» (1987: 68). This is why the dystopian dimension of *Salón de belleza* catches the reader's interest: it brings up many questions about the connection between homosexuality, AIDS and social exclusion. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that, extratextually, the novella not only deviates from the prevailing socio-cultural norms, but also from certain literary expectations. As we mentioned in the first section of the present article, Mario Bellatin is a writer who is usually not directly associated with the fantastic genre. Therefore, *Salón de belleza* stands out amongst his own work, but not necessarily amongst literature of the same genre.

Indeed, Rosemary Jackson (1981) defines the fantastic as «the literature of subversion» and *Salón de belleza* matches this definition. As we just men-

5 Emphasis in the original.

tioned, *Salón de belleza* is subversive on both an intra- and extratextual level. The novella's doubly transgressive nature can be explained by the intersections between the fantastic and the real. Fantastic literature first makes the reader believe that the narrative world is governed by rules similar to those regulating the real world. Then, it makes the reader apprehensive, by presenting something apparently impossible. As Jackson (1981: 179) insightfully puts it: «[t]o introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny. It is to introduce dark areas, of something completely other and unseen, the spaces outside the limiting frame of the "human" and "real", outside the control of the "word" and of the "look"».⁶

In this respect, it is particularly remarkable — as Harry Belevan (1976: 20) notes — that the fantastic comes into being but that the effect's source can in no way be represented. Yet this is where its power resides: in undermining reality, the fantastic discovers «the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made "absent"» (Jackson, 1981: 4). This is how the fantastic acquires a subversive function. By confronting the reader with a world shaped by ambiguity, it forces one to reassess apparent certainties, in turn opening up new possibilities that were previously unthinkable. As a consequence, the pre-established idea of what is «possible» is challenged with alternatives that, in this world, seem equally «possible». The impossible is somehow possible. This then forces the reader to question how they think about their own world and the validity of their own pre-established notions. What do they believe to be impossible and why do they believe it to be so?

The coexistence of the fantastic and the dystopian is thus not surprising. The fantastic as well as the dystopian are inherently transgressive, and together they force their readers to reflect upon society in general and especially upon their position in it. So if *Salón de belleza* belongs to «[t]he modern fantastic, the form of literary fantasy within the secularized culture produced by capitalism», because its narrative «exists alongside the "real", on either side of the dominant cultural axis, as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other» (Jackson, 1981: 180), it is a dystopian fiction because it imagines a society in which events occur that are so inhuman that they seem impossible or, in other words, fantastic.

6 Emphasis in the original.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out on the basis of Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* has shown how the fantastic and the dystopian can operate together in order to highlight a story's transgressive capabilities. On the one hand, the fantastic distorts and even undermines the narration's representative nature, so that it is hard for the reader to determine what he is ready to consider as real. On the other hand, what the narrator presents as real, is probably not what the reader wants to believe is reality. By disrupting the established order of the world and by providing an alternative view which foregrounds a dystopian part of it, the story criticizes the treatment of people on the fringes of society as «human waste» or «wasted humans». As the narrator focuses on a specific non-place where such people end up, it becomes clear that they are only allowed to stay in locations where, like in the Moridero, no real social structures exist. Despite this critique, *Salón de belleza* does not exclude a utopian reading. Although it is true that the suffering of the terminally ill homosexual men is a central concern of the narrative, it is important to note that the narrator-protagonist's effort to help those men or, at least, to give them a place to die also sets an example of solidarity and shared social responsibility.

The above analysis brings us to the conclusion that *Salón de belleza* can be regarded as a «transgressive utopian dystopia» (Mohr, 2007). This dystopian fiction depicts a society that is rigidly organized. First, it engenders divisions between the human and the non-human, between the normal and the abnormal, and between the self and the other, but then it gives way to understanding that a transgression of these narrow categorizations is possible. Therefore, it lends substance to the idea that utopian aspirations can survive in our dystopian reality. In this way, Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* has allowed us to demonstrate that the fantastic is an outer-directed genre, with a strong ideological commitment.

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