

THE LEAST THOUGHT OF POWER: COLONIALISM AND EMPOWERMENT OF HOUSEHOLD WORKERS ON FILM. THE CASE OF *PARQUE VÍA*

MARIA FRANCISCA UGARTE-UNDURRAGA
UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE CHILE / UNIVERSITÄT KONSTANZ
franciscaugarteu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

I present an analysis of the film *Parque Vía* from a Cultural Studies point of view. The emphasis is on a new way of representing the relationship between the household worker and the housemaster, signed by the empowerment of the worker over her employer which is present in this film and other similar ones. This empowerment questions the colonialism that is implicit in this working relationship from its origins, and it is presented on the ethnic difference as a representation strategy. Although questioning and empowerment destabilize the hierarchies of power, they cannot reverse them definitely, so the colonialism of this activity is preserved.¹

1. Colonialism, household work, and power

Household work in Latin America may be considered an important part of the daily social fabric, starting from the period of the European conquest until nowadays. Though this kind of work may be found all over the globe, in Latin America it has distinctive traces, the main of them being its colonial root.

After the arrival of the conquerors to America, there was a need for establishing the situation of the original inhabitants of the region concerning Spain. According to Contreras (2010) and Salazar (2000), the scenario was: the Spanish crown determined that the inhabitants of America were legitimate subjects of the King and for that reason, could not be forced to work for the Spaniards to which they were entrusted. Nevertheless:

...los flamantes súbditos quedaron obligados, pues, a pagar a su 'soberano' un cierto tributo anual, que podía ser cancelado en dinero, o en productos, o en trabajo. (...) [El Rey] cedió, por periodos determinados, la recolección de los tributos indígenas a los conquistadores más distinguidos. (Salazar 2000, 24)¹

¹ "...the brand-new subjects were obliged, thus, to pay to their 'sovereign' a certain annual tribute, that could be paid in money, products, or labor. (...) [The King] yielded, for determined periods, the collection of the indigenous tribute to the most distinguished conquerors."

These distinguished conquerors received as recognition what was called *encomiendas de indios* (Indian entrusts), a group of indigenous trusted to their charge to collect the tribute and also to instruct them on the faith and “civilization”. This is how personal service performed by indigenous was established throughout America (Lockhart, 1994); and from the gold mining and agricultural labor, it was extended to household work, especially in those places where the indigenous economy did not allow surplus to pay tributes, as in Chile (Salazar, 2000: 25).

The abolition of the *encomienda* system gave birth to other working systems that also included the mestizos, such as *inquilinaje*. Very much like feudalism, on the *inquilianje* —or *hacienda*, as it was also called— the lord commonly took the young daughters of his *inquilinos* (workers living on his estate) to perform household work for him. This is what the anthropologists Bunster and Chaney (1985: 28) establish in their research about household work in Peru, which —like the *encomienda de indios*—, repeats itself all over the American region.

This initial colonialism of the working relationship inside the home will definitely mark the way the such relationship develops in Latin America, configuring two stable groups: the house masters: descendants of the early conquerors, and the household workers: descendants of the entrusted indigenous.

The representations that approach this topic embrace both groups and the ethnic and cultural differences between them, as well as the way they relate to each other. Thus, the so-called familiar novels² always present the character of the household worker on the initial pages, tied up to the house and to the family in an almost everlasting way.

This is the traditional representation both of the household worker and the relationship between these individuals and their employees, the housemasters. This traditional version describes dedicated workers, as submissive, obedient, and confident of their employers, to who they have been attached by years of service. The young girls that will work their entire lives for the same family, raising their children and keeping family secrets, are a constant and comforting presence inside the house; but they are also part of that house and thus, as inheritable as furniture.

Examples are abundant: Nana from *La casa de los espíritus*, Zoila from *La amortajada*, Nacha and Chenchá from *Como agua para chocolate*³, among many others. The same is extrapolated to film and television, especially to soap operas.

The other side of the coin is configured by another kind of representation of the relationship between housemasters and household workers. It is about household workers empowered over their employers, powerful employees that use that power against the house masters, questioning the traditional hierarchies of this type of representation.

Therefore, there are works —novels and films— that choose this other representation of the working relationship inside the house, the one that establishes empowerment of the employees regarding their employers. This empowerment questions the colonialist relationships implicit in the represented society and also in the society that produces such representations. However, it is a questioning that destabilizes the power hierarchies but does not definitively invert them. Reversely, the ethnic difference as a representation strategy affirms the colonialist relationship reflected in the bond between household workers and employers. This is the hypothesis that sustains the analysis of a group of contemporary Latin American films. On this occasion, I will focus on one of them: *Parque Vía*.

² I am referring to the concept used by Margarita Saona, who in her book *Novelas familiares. Figuraciones de la nación en la novela latinoamericana contemporánea* relates the contemporary novels that narrate the lives of entire families to the political situation in Latin America, based on the notions of nation and family.

³ *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, *The Shrouded Woman* by Maria Luisa Bombal, and *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel.

The fact that this research is inserted into the field of Cultural Studies, allows me to work on the film as a cultural object, and therefore, to trace the social and cultural aspects of the society that produces this representation of the film. Keeping the distances that correspond to a film as a fiction product, it is possible, from this perspective, to establish a dialogue between its content and the social and cultural contingency on which it is inserted and from which it is tributary.

From the theoretical point of view, the main concepts involved in this work are colonialism, power, and empowerment. Each of them adapted to the needs of the analysis and of the established hypothesis. In general terms, I use the notion of colonialism as developed by Iris Gareis (2005), who understands it concerning political and economic exploitation and also embraces its cultural aspect. The concept of empowerment follows the approach of Gita Sen who says it is a change in the power relationships, favoring those who did not have power before the change (1998). Power is a much more complex concept, but concerning household work, I understand power from the perspective of Foucault (2012), which ties it to the body through the 'microphysics' of power.

2. *Parque Vía*: where does it come from and where does it go

On the year 2008 the debut of the Mexican director Enrique Rivero, *Parque Vía*, was released. It would turn out to be the precursor of a series of tapes that have several particularities in common: they were released in 2009, they approach the topic of household work and they do so from the perspective of the empowerment of employees over employers. I am talking about the Bolivian film *Zona Sur*, the Chilean film *La nana*, and the Peruvian film *La teta asustada*.

Parque Vía is a movie that specifically embraces household work and the relationship between the household worker and the house mistress. Accordingly, it joins the tradition of representations about this topic not only in film but in literature and other fields as well. Along with the empowered vision of household work and the questioning of colonialism, *Parque Vía* takes one step forward and complements these with what I denominate a “mediated self-representation” and a *mise en abyme* of the household work. All of this is determined by the film's cast, the relationship between those implied, and the director's personal experience.

In an interview, the main characters unveil the framework behind the film. *Parque Vía* is based on the real story of Nolberto Coria. And Nolberto Coria is, at the same time, the one embodying Beto, the movie's protagonist. His co-protagonist is Tesalia Huerta, the actual mother of Enrique Rivero, the film's director. Finally, the house used as the location for filming the movie belongs to the grandparents of Rivero and is the place where Nolberto Coria / Beto has worked his entire life (Ferrari, 2008).

Therefore, we have a real household worker that has served the same family at the same house for several years —Nolberto Coria—, that represents himself in this film under the direction of Enrique Rivero, whom he knows since his childhood because he is a grandson of his employers. And above all that, Coria's co-star is the daughter or daughter-in-law of his actual employer and performs in the films as his employer.

On this complex constellation, the mediated self-representation that I propose occurs when a household worker is empowered to get him outside of the working environment to which he is used to —by making him an actor—, but still following the orders of someone from the family of his employers. Coria represents himself, albeit he continues the traditional —and colonial— labor model on which he has been immersed his whole working life. It is the first step in the

empowerment of a household worker, though it remains mediated by the employers and benefits them.

Parque Vía presents us with a *mise en abyme* of the relationship between employers and employees. The director aims to show the bond between these two characters inspired by the real story of the employer that is performing it. Hence, he reproduces on screen his own experience with Coria at his grandparent's house, and the experience of Coria himself as well—with some fiction added.

Even if Beto—the fictional character—is a real worker and represents his own story, the point of view and the vision about the household work that he is acting and that prevail are the ones from the employers: Rivero and his family; under no circumstance are these the ones from Nolberto Coria or any of his colleagues. It is the world of the employers the one that represents, guides, and acts the representation.

On this point is possible to establish how the coloniality of power—as defined by Anibal Quijano (2014)—operates and determines the controlled power that Nolberto Coria has: the descendants of the first colonizers are the ones that continue articulating race, work, and people for their benefit, in this case, the film that Rivero wants to make. This is how the hierarchies of power that regulate the relationship between the parts involved in household work prevail, and those who order and those who obey remain the same too.

Briefly and in general lines, *Parque Vía* presents the story of Beto, a household worker that has devoted thirty years of his life to serving a family whose head is *señora* (madam)⁴. During the last ten years, Beto has been taking care of the empty house which is on sale and located in a luxurious neighborhood on Ciudad de México. The confinement and isolation in which Beto lives turn out to be comfortable for him, even enjoyable, considering that the main character suffers from agoraphobia that provokes him panic attacks when he goes out. Despite this, he receives the weekly visit from Lupe, a prostitute that is also his friend and confidant. The problem arises when the house is finally sold and he sees himself forced to move out soon. Confronted with this situation, he seeks a solution that arrives most unexpectedly: the madam dies during a visit to the house and the man seizes the opportunity, violently hitting her body with a shovel to give the impression that he killed her and thus continuing his confinement, this time, in jail.

3. He who empowers himself last empowers himself the longest

I will approach the analysis of *Parque Vía* using a methodology that I design specially for working with film using an integrative focus. This methodology combines elements from different sources inside the wide field of Cultural Studies.

Specifically, the methodology that I propose is a narrative analysis of the film. In other words, “to read” it and interpret it from a narrative matrix, considering it as the bearer of a story, the same as a novel. This adds to the analysis of the *mise en scène* that I developed using the proposal of John Gibbs in his book *Mise-en-scène. Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), and complements the narrative analysis with a more technical guide. Finally, the method includes a symbolic level about implications and meanings, starting from the ideas of Ernst Gombrich on *Arte e ilusión* (2012), Edwin Panofsky on *El significado en las artes visuales* (2011), and Stuart Hall on *Representation* (2013).

⁴ This character has no name on *Parque Vía*. Unlike the worker, who is doted with an identity and a name associated with it—the same as his actual name and identity—the woman is only identified by her position on the work dynamics of the household work. This difference is a way of distinguishing and empowering Beto as well.

3.1. Visual meaning level

Following Gibbs' model, the first aspect that stands up regarding the analysis of the *mise en scène* is the casting, the selection of the characters of the film. I have already established that in this work the main characters either play themselves —Nolberto Coria plays Beto— or they play characters extremely close to their real lives —Tesalia Huerta plays a character that is supposed to be her mother or mother-in-law—; therefore we are faced with a perfect casting, where the actors exactly match their characters.

The most visually relevant is the way the two groups involved in household work relations are introduced and differentiated. This is achieved by enhancing and even exploding the ethnic difference between them, which is inherited from colonialism that is at the base of this activity in Latin America. Nolberto Coria has the typical physical features of the Latin American household worker: coppery skin, indigenous traits —broad flat nose, small dark-colored eyes, defined cheekbones, thick dark hair— short stature, and working-man hands. Reversely, Tesalia Huerta is the embodiment of the housemaster of an upper-class family in Latin America: her face displays European features —straight nose, fine lips, and blue eyes— she has white hair styled elegantly, slender body, and is taller than Beto. In her introduction scene, she is presented as a queen: served by a household worker that offers her freshly pressed orange juice while a hairdresser is styling her hair in her bedroom (0:08:48).

The ease of the performance of Beto and *señora* —considering that none of them are professional actors— may be explained by the fact that more than performing, they are replaying the experiences and roles that they have performed over several years, reproducing a relationship model grounded not only between themselves but also throughout the entire continent during centuries.

Therefore, it is possible to establish that in *Parque Vía* the ethnic difference as a representation strategy and as a way of differentiating the world of the employers from the world of the employees, operates from the beginning of the movie as one of the guiding principles of the domestic scope, and as one of the bases of significance on the bond between these two worlds, traces of the colonialism that nourishes this working relationship and that thrives on the articulation of race and work, as proposed by Quijano (2014).

The tape works with the social hierarchies, as Maria Delgado establishes in her review: "The film shows a terrific eye for detail, crafting a portrait of both Beto and the social hierarchies of Mexican society without ever falling in the trap of overdramatization" (2009, 20). On this point, I can add that how the hierarchies are questioned, destabilized, and temporarily subverted is also represented in the film.

Except for the end —which belongs to the fictional part of the film— what is displayed on the screen is the recreation of situations that have happened in that same house, performed by those same people during some years. This reinforces the second part of the hypothesis proposed in this research: although Beto empowers himself or is empowered and subverts for a moment the hierarchies of power in his relationship with *señora*, this is something that stays in the fictional world, because she remains doing what he has always done by obeying the indications of the members of the family for whom he works in reality and fiction.

The ethnic difference correlates with the way that light and darkness are treated on the *mise en scène* of this film. During this work, Rivero maintains a tension between light and shadow while presenting the inside and outside of the house. In the first scenes of the film, when Beto is introduced smoking on the door frame, facing the exterior of the house, the movie begins to develop a dichotomy between the cold light of the exterior and the warm shadows of the interior.

During that same initial scene, after finishing his cigarette, Beto turns around and goes back inside the house and is pursued by the camera on a following pan that enhances the blinding effect of going from the cold light to the semi-twilight of the house, where the character moves more comfortably and confidently (0:01:26).

It becomes evident that Beto feels better inside the house and the work with the light emphasizes that. The interior is cozy, safe, comfortable, and silent both for Beto and the viewer, even though it is almost empty and without much furniture. On the contrary, the exterior—with the sole exception of the walled garden—is depicted as threatening and uncomfortable, with a cold blinding light that forces Beto to squint his eyes and seek refuge inside. It is interesting because through this fine work with illumination it is possible to create the idea of positive darkness and negative light, reversing the traditional way of representing both poles: positive light and negative darkness. It is even more relevant while considering that on several occasions the world of household work and the one of their employers are also located on one of these two poles.

This is, for example, the case of numerous novels, especially those by José Donoso, who places the employers on the side of the light, beauty, and reason; and the employees on the side of darkness, fearfulness, madness, and monstrosity⁵. Accordingly, it is very relevant that this film vindicates the darkness of the interior of the house as something positive in opposition to the light from the outside.

Regarding the space, it is fair to say that Beto understands the house as a prolongation of *señora*, and that may explain the respect and care he shows for it.

Despite living alone in the huge house, he stays always in the places designated for the household workers. There is only one exception: on one of her visits, Lupe asks Beto if there is something he would like to do before he leaves the house after it is sold (1:05:55). He replies that there is nothing he would like to do, nevertheless, a few seconds later there is a scene of him taking a bath in a fancy bathtub, the same one that he has cleaned in other scenes of the film (1:06:09).

This is the first sign of Beto's empowerment over the space and the things of the house. An intrusion on the employers' terrain and an act that would have been severely condemned by *señora*, if she ever found out. Beto allows himself this trespassing due to the extraordinary circumstance of the house being sold and as a way of saying goodbye to the place where he has lived and worked for thirty years. The scene may have some humorous traces—Beto covered by foam and wearing a ridiculous bath cap—, but it is quite sad, as a lonely farewell from the house and *señora*.

3.2. *Symbolic-narrative level*

Throughout the film, there is a series of scenes that configure symbolically, the relationship between the main characters and its traditional fashion that is maintained until the end of the movie, when it suddenly breaks.

In the first real conversation between Beto and *señora*, he tells her that he is comfortable with the confinement at the house and that he fears the moment when it would be finally sold (0:42:00). It can be inferred that after talking with him about his lockdown, the woman tries to revert the confinement of Beto—an amount of guilt over this lockdown may be foreseen on the woman—and "help" him. She tells him that she would pick him up to join her in buying groceries. After a harrowing car trip (0:44:15), they reach the marketplace. Once there, Beto limits himself to walking behind *señora* carrying her shopping bags.

⁵ Such is the case of novels like *Este domingo*, *Coronación*, *Casa de campo*, and especially *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*.

From the symbolic point of view, it is very meaningful that Beto always walks behind the woman: in the first scene they share screen, as *señora* leaves the house (0:11:28); then, at the marketplace (0:45:01), and finally before the death of his employer (1:10:31).

The scene has strong colonialist reminiscences, it reminds the first women that came from Spain into the continent, and that had indigenous women following them down the street and calling them *señora*, this way, they would acquire the status they longed for when they left Europe. That is exactly what Beto does with his indigenous looks and his “*si, señora*” (“yes, madam”) as a reply to everything the woman requires, walking behind this descendant of the conquerors. Lockhart addresses this point while depicting the way of life of the early Spaniards in America: “An artisan’s wife could be expected to have a considerable staff, who would call her “*señora*” and relieve her of most of the burden of daily housekeeping” (1994, 159).

Thus, *señora* has the respect and absolute obedience of her trustworthy worker. She honestly thanks him for his work and the dedication that he has put into it for years, but she still keeps a distant and severe attitude.

Nevertheless, as the film develops it is possible to see a gradual approach between both, sheltered by the intimacy of the house. The first meaningful conversation between *señora* and Beto happens only in minute 41 of the film, during the second visit of the woman to the house. At this point, the film has slightly changed the way it shows Beto. The fact that he has already invited Lupe to the house reveals that the respect he seems to profess for his job and the house is huge; still, it has some fissures: the visit of this companion is evidently a transgressor act towards rules of his job and Beto is aware of that—he invites her in the middle of the night and tries to hide her, asking her to step away from the window to avoid being seen (1:05:32), makes her leave through the back door (1:05:44) and asks her to use that same door when he calls her to give her some of his belongings (1:12:56).

Hence, Beto takes some liberties on his job: small empowerment or misconduct, because the man does something that he knows he should not do and that his employer would condemn. Despite that, he does not cease to be respectful.

The approach between them begins later when the woman initiates a conversation on a much personal note: “*¿Te gusta estar aquí, Beto?*” (Do you like being here, Beto?) (0:41:09). She looks into his eyes with a smile and the tone of her voice is sweeter than usual. The hierarchies of power slowly start to blur on a symbolic and visual level or rather destabilize. From the visual perspective, it is possible to see how they are slightly leveling: while they talk they are facing each other, looking into each other's eyes and, despite the ethnic differences, their heights look similar in this scene. The framing allows us to observe that the two characters are wearing light-colored clothes and are framed by a window, receiving the outside light from the side. Both of them are smiling and their body languages seem relaxed, it is fair to say that it is an honest conversation, deeper than the previous exchanges between them.

From the narrative perspective, the dialogue reveals a personal approach and an interest of *señora* in Beto as a person and not only as an employee: “*¿Te gusta estar aquí, Beto?*” (Do you like being here, Beto?) and his reply: “*Pues sí. Ya me acostumbré, este, pues tantos años de estar aquí. No sé, el día que se venda la casa o se rente...*” (“Well, yes. I'm already used to this, well, so many years of being here. I don't know, the day the house would be sold or rented.”). She interrupts him:

“*¿Tú crees que mucha gente viva como tú?*” (“Do you think many people lives like you do?”) and he tells her about his experience during the last ten years: “*Pues no, porque este encierro es muy duro. Ya aquí, ya me acostumbro. Los primeros días, ahí, pues, sentí que era duro estar aquí encerrado. Inclusive los señores que han venido a ver la casa para comprarla, me dicen ‘oiga, ¿no le da miedo estar aquí?’, ‘pues, no’, les digo ‘ya me acostumbré’, ‘¿y no oye ruidos*

extraños? 'pues sí, pero ya me acostumbré a ruidos extraños'". ("Well, no, because this lockdown is very hard. Right here, I'm already used to it. The first days, well, I felt it was hard being locked here. Even the people that have come to see the house to buy it, tell me 'hey, aren't you afraid of being here?', 'well, no', I tell them 'I'm already used to it', 'and don't you hear strange noises?' 'well, yes, but I'm already used to strange noises'") (0:42:00).

Right after finishing speaking Beto laughs and *señora* too. They both laugh together in a moment of trust and relaxation that is very far away from the dynamics of their relationship up to this point, which has been signed by severity and formality.

Despite Beto recognizing that confinement was hard for him at the beginning, he also says that he likes it and insinuates his fear about the possible sale of the house. *Señora*, on the other hand, opens herself to a more personal dialogue with him. A more human and empathic dimension is presented toward the person that has been working for her for so many years.

This sequence proposes an approach between them, the possibility of talking face to face and looking into each other's eyes—as peers—, a situation that will only repeat itself towards the end of the film and again motivated by an attempt of *señora* to approach Beto and help him on the way she believes is the most appropriate. The intention of helping Beto—essentially positive—is still proof of a patronizing view of the employee, a feature associated with colonialism.

The next scene where it is possible to see a dialogue that reconfigures the bond between them presents a step forward on Beto's path of empowerment. The house has already been sold and *señora* visits Beto to talk about this and discuss his future. Like the previous time, she initiates the conversation: "*Los nuevos dueños entran la semana que viene. ¿Qué vas a hacer?*" ("The new owners will move in next week. What are you going to do?") and he replies that he does not know. Facing this, the woman tells him: "*Te quiero ayudar y no se cómo*" ("I want to help you and I don't know how") and Beto confesses: "*No me quiero ir*" ("I don't want to go"), which is also a cry for help regarding what the woman just told him, and can also be interpreted as empowerment, a claim, a way of asking her to change the situation on his behalf.

Nevertheless, this time the communication is not achieved, the woman disregards his request and suggests he marry again, which he refuses. Then, she comments: "*Han sido muchos años*" ("It's been many years"), Beto replies: "*Sí, señora, treinta*" ("Yes, madam, thirty"). And finally, she asks: "*¿Me puedes dejar sola, Beto, por favor?*" ("Can you please leave me alone, Beto?") and Beto replies one more time: "*Sí, señora*" ("Yes, madam") and leaves (0:54:35).

The scene is fractured in two cuts. In the beginning, it only shows a close-up of Beto's face, while listening to *señora's* voice in off; she is not on scene. Beto is leaning against a window, looking inside. There is a cut and the framing of the profiles of both characters. Beto is in the foreground, maintaining his position against the window and facing inside, while we can see *señora's* profile in the background but facing the window, covered by the light from the exterior and holding a glass of water over a white plate while she talks. Even though they are having a conversation, each of them is looking in opposite directions. There is no laughter anymore, the expressions are sad and tired.

There is a dramatic tone, a distressing farewell. The face of Tesalia Huerta receives the external light, while Coria's is covered by the inside shadows. This strategy of illumination enhances the evident ethnic differences: the whiteness of *señora's* hair and skin and the darker tone of Beto's hair and skin are increased by the shadow and his dark clothes.

This sequence is especially relevant to the analysis I propose.

Señora looking outside is a symbol of what is coming, a change in both of their lives, leaving confinement and taking one step ahead to something new and unknown. In her case, it can also be understood as a symbol of death that is coming closer, of watching the "light at the end of the tunnel", that supposedly precedes death. She is facing that light forehead in the company of Beto,

who will also be with her later, at the moment of her actual death. The transparent glass of water, the white plate, and the pearl earrings she is wearing complete her ethereal and even ghostly look: she is pale and close to her end.

On the contrary, the man keeps his sight, attention, desires, and fears inside the house and backward the light and the frightening exterior. He wants to remain in the house, he even states it clearly: "*no me quiero ir*" ("I don't want to go"). Just as *señora's* coming future is outside, Beto's should be inside. The situation is complicated and obscure for the man. He is facing a problem that he does not know how to solve.

Symbolically and more than in any other sequence on *Parque Vía*, each of the main characters is on the opposite side of the other, and together, they perfectly configure the binomial that the writer José Donoso depicts for the relationship between household workers and employers: light and shadow, white and black, exterior and interior, European and indigenous, reason and madness/illness.

Señora says she wants to help Beto, but the help she can give him is not the one that he needs. Without looking at each other and facing opposite directions, they think about the situation from irreconcilable points of view: she wants to help him, he says he does not want to leave. There is tension between two forces: the one of *señora* who feels a responsibility about Beto's destiny and wants to help him, and the interests of Beto, who wants to remain at the house and openly speaks his mind. This tension increases when they talk about the number of years. It is not established, but it is safe to assume that when the woman says it has been many years, she is referring to the time Beto has dedicated to serving her family, an entire life working for her, and that carries responsibilities and consequences for the woman.

When the house is sold, everybody knows that a new problem is generated: what will happen with Beto? He is aware of it, of course, but also *señora* and the rest of the family. As a matter of fact, one of her sons asks: "*Oye, mamá, ¿qué va a pasar con Beto?*" ("Hey, mom, what is going to happen with Beto"?) (0:51:16) and the question remains unanswered, uncomfortably floating on the air.

The entire family, and more concretely *señora*, feels responsible and a bit guilty and tries to do something about it. The first thing is talking with Beto, as discussed above. After this, she starts looking for a new job for him and makes some phone calls (0:56:22). Finally, she reaches what she considers a good solution for Beto: she gives her a pension, a big amount of money, enough for: "*para que vivas tú y otra persona cómodamente*" ("you and another person to live comfortably") (1:09:28) and thus, she is liberating him from the need to work ever again.

One of the main guidelines of *Parque Vía* is the relationship between the employer and the household worker from the emotional perspective of both when they have shared so many years and are reaching the end of that cycle. The actions of the woman and the worrying of the rest of the family seem to be destined to show that the employers know that they have a contractual responsibility, but also a moral or emotional one with the person that has dedicated his life to serving them. When Beto tells her that it has been thirty years of work, of life; she asks him to leave her alone, maybe overwhelmed by the responsibility of having disposed of someone for such a long time or for the pain of terminating a long relationship. She knows that the change is harder for the man, and that also influences her willingness to help him.

The moment when a household worker finishes her or his working contract is complex on different levels. From the legal point of view, most of the legislation and labor codes in Latin America do not establish a retirement pension system for household workers. Therefore, most of them are left helpless and without any other pension than the minimum they get from the State if any⁶.

⁶ About the legal situation of household work in Latin America, and specifically about the working hours, the resting days, and the pension system or social security established for this activity, consult "Capítulo 1. Aspectos jurídicos y económicos del trabajo doméstico remunerado en América Latina" by Gabriela Loyo y Mario

Additionally, there is the much more complex emotional angle that means leaving a job that usually lasts for several years and that facilitates the most complete loneliness of the worker. Household workers not only become unemployed, but most of them also become homeless and lose the people that they consider to be their family —especially those who worked under the live-in mode—; once their working contract is over, so are their social relationships.

On other representations that also embrace household work, it is possible to see cases that illustrate this situation and the way the employers face it, or not. One case is the novel *La casa de los espíritus* (The House of the Spirits) (1982), by Isabel Allende, which describes the traditional representation of a woman that worked her entire life for the same family and dies at the house during an earthquake. Allende narrates the farewell of the household worker by the women of the family:

Antes de irse fueron al cuarto de la Nana en el patio de los sirvientes. (...) No había más que un poco de ropa, unas viejas alpargatas y cajas de todos los tamaños, atadas con cintas y elásticos, donde ella guardaba estampitas de primera comunión y de bautizo, mechones de pelo, uñas cortadas, retratos desteñidos y algunos zapatitos de bebé gastados por el uso. Eran los recuerdos de todos los hijos de la familia Del Valle y después de los Trueba, que pasaron por sus brazos y que ella acunó en su pecho. (...) sentada en el camastro, con esos tesoros en el regazo, Clara lloró largamente a esa mujer que había dedicado su existencia a hacer mas cómoda la de otros y que murió sola (2003, 165)⁷.

Nana dies alone, and some time later the family takes over that death. Clara mourns her and appreciates those years of love and decides to mend a little the loneliness and helplessness of the woman's death. Thus: "*Hizo trasladar su cuerpo al mausoleo de los Del Valle, (...) porque supuso que a ella no le gustaría estar enterrada con los evangélicos y los judíos y hubiera preferido seguir en la muerte junto aquellos que había servido en la vida*" ("Had her body moved to the del Valle mausoleum, (...) because she assumed that she would not like to be buried with the Evangelicals and Jews, and she would prefer to stay in death next to those whom she served in life") (165).

On the one hand, it is a recognition to that "being part of the family" idea that usually appears related to this job; Nana buried with the rest of the Del Valles. But on the other hand, she is not part of the family and the last sentence of this paragraph is brutally clear on that point: Nana is buried as a servant, near to those she served and probably to continue to serve them.

The same situation repeats itself with Brígida of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (The Obscene Bird of Night): she is also buried "provisionally" on the grave destined to her employers, to continue to work for her there on death: keeping the grave warm for her employer, so when she dies, her bones will not be cold (Donoso, 2006, 14). Maybe, just like *señora*, lady Raquel Ruiz feels that the death of her lifelong employee is the end of an important stage of her life and the death of a part of herself.

This describes a service even after death, the impossibility for household workers to rest or disconnect from the family for who they worked in life, and the idea that the employers have about their employees' last wishes, assuming that they would like to stay with them somehow like in the case of Nana or fulfilling a promise made before death, like on Brígida's case. At least in

Velásquez, on the book *Trabajo domestico: un largo camino hacia el trabajo decente* a cargo de la Oficina Internacional del Trabajo, OIT, 2009.

⁷ "Before leaving they went to Nana's room in the servant's backyard (...) There was nothing but some clothes, some old espadrilles, and boxes of all the sizes, tied up with ribbons and elastic bands, where she kept First Communion and Baptism stamps, locks of hair, clipped nails, faded portraits, and some worn-out baby shoes. Those were the memories of all the children of the Del Valle and later the Trueba family that went through her arms and that she cradled on her chest (...) sitting on the bunk, Clara lengthly mourned that woman that had dedicated her existence to make someone else's more comfortable and that died alone".

the case of Allende's Nana, there was the idea of eternal rest along with the remains of the members of the family. On the contrary, Brígida is buried in her employer's grave to continue working: keeping the grave warm for her employer, when lady Raquel Ruiz dies, Brígida will be removed and put ~~who~~ knows where—and it seems it does not matter.

Here the colonialism of household work appears clearly, the empowerment of the employees may question this colonialism but not defeat it: systems such as *encomienda* and *inquilinaje* meant lifelong service, the same way it has happened in the more contemporary household work (Bunster and Chaney; Araya), and how it is depicted on these representations.

In *Un mundo para Julius* (A World for Julius) a novel by Alfredo Bryce Echenique, two household workers die and in both cases, this creates a problem for the employers. The children from the family and other household workers are those who suffer the most from the death of the two women.

The first of them, Bertha, dies at the house: “...pero la pobre acababa de morir por lo de la presión tan alta que siempre la había molestado. Antes de sentirse al borde de la muerte, tuvo la precaución de poner el frasco de agua de colonia en un lugar seguro para que no se fuera a caer” (“...but poor thing just had just died because of the high blood pressure that always bothered her. Before feeling on the edge of death, she took the precaution of putting the cologne bottle in a safe place, so it wouldn't fall”) (2010, 20). That absolute humbleness that aims not to cause any disturbance and ease the life of the employers at all costs, is one of the characteristics of several household workers on different representations. The situation, however, is a problem for employers and the search for the most discreet solution. But it is the children who realize the differences. In this case, Cinthia compares the death of her father with the one of her nursemaid and does not understand the pomposity of one and the invisibility of the other:

...pero ahora de pronto se acordaba y relacionaba con la manera en que se llevaron a Bertha, en una ambulancia, mami, por la puerta falsa. Pero ahí se atracaba y titubeaba y es que no encontraba las palabras o la acusación para expresar la maldad, ¿de quién?, cuando se llevaron a Bertha por la puerta falsa, bien rapidito, como quién no quiere la cosa (21)⁸.

From the children's perspective, there is no way of justifying the different treatments, especially towards the woman that took care of them every day. As a matter of fact, a way of interpreting this novel is the focusing on the way Julius becomes aware that he moves between two different worlds—one of the household workers that surround him daily and the one where he socially belongs as the child of an upper-class family in Lima—and learns how the members of these two worlds relate to each other and how he must behave about it. Part of this process is the death of Bertha and the way he faces it with his sister: considering the complete lack of a farewell ritual, it is the children who organize a symbolic funeral where the rest of the household workers also participate (22-23). Later on, Arminda, the washerwoman dies alone in the house while ironing the shirts of the housemaster (445). Her case is different, she had earned the respect of her employer because of the excellent job she made on ironing his shirts, this is why she receives a funeral “*de primera*” (first-class) (447) where the entire family is present.

On other occasions, it is not death but incapacity that finishes the working lives of these characters. This situation is depicted in *El obscuro pájaro de la noche* (The Obscene Bird of Night) and turns out to be more common than expected. Hence, the Azcoitia family transforms what used to be a convent into a shelter for former and elderly household workers. This is where all the old household workers from this family and other upper-class families of Santiago end up.

⁸ “...but suddenly she remembered and related with the way they took Bertha, on an ambulance, mommy, through the back door. But there she stopped and hesitated since she did not find the words or the accusation to express the evil, whose? When they took Bertha through the back door, very fast, as if nothing happened.”

In all of these cases, the loneliness of those who dedicate themselves to this job is painfully evident and highlights that their house is their job and vice-versa.

This is why Beto's case is so complicated and at this point is important to remember that it is the vision of the director Rivero that is been presented —as belonging to the world of the employers — regarding the bond between Beto and *señora*. Therefore, he displays the image of a family concerned about the future of the man that has helped them for decades and a woman determined to find a solution for him, until she reaches what she believes is the best scenario for the man. It is, thus, the portrait of a grateful employer. Severe, but concerned about his fate after leaving the house. Looking for a solution for Beto's situation is the last activity she does before dying as if she needed to have this matter solved, be grateful to Beto, and offer him a future before leaving this world. This way, once the matter is settled —under her perspective—she dies and allows Beto himself to find the most adequate settlement for his particular needs.

This arrangement will come at the end of *Parque Vía* and marks the point where the employer/employee relationship changes dramatically. It all starts with the last visit of *señora* to Beto in the house: she looks more pale than usual, somber, and so tired that the first thing she does is ask Beto for a glass of water (1:08:49). There is a cut on the sequence and after that, both characters are standing in the kitchen facing each other and framed by the light that comes through the window cutting their profiles in the backlighting and keeping their faces in the dark. Beto hands her the glass of water and performs a slight and respectful inclination with his head (1:09:08); a gesture that is almost unnoticed on the scene but is the clearest proof of the existing colonialism through these acts of submission, of servitude that surprises in the XXI century.

All these things considered, is evident that up to this moment, the film still depicts the traditional and hierarchic model of the relationship between employers and employees, nevertheless, as the sequence rolls on, this destabilizes to the point of inversion.

Once she receives the glass of water, the old lady resumes the dialogue: "*Te tengo una sorpresa*" ("I have a surprise for you") and Beto immediately replies: "*La casa no se vende*" ("The house is not for sale") and then she, again: "*No, no es eso, pero no te preocupes. Aquí tienes, para que vivas tú y otra persona cómodamente*" ("No, it's not that, but don't worry. Here you have, for you and another person to live comfortably") (1:09:28), while she takes an envelope from her purse and gives it to Beto. It is not possible to see clearly but is logical to assume that the envelope contains a big amount of money. After handing over the envelope there is a cut and then a close-up of Beto receiving the money, silently and looking down. This is followed by another cut and a close-up of the profile of *señora* speaking again: "*Te quiero dar las gracias por todo este tiempo y cómo has cuidado de la casa*" ("I want to thank you for all this time and for the way you have taken care of the house") (1:09:43). Once she says this, she approaches Beto with her arms extended as if she were to hug him, but she does not; instead, she grabs his shoulders and looks into his eyes. After that, she lets his arms go and looks down ashamed or searching for Beto's hands, she finds them, holds them, and says: "*Gracias, de verdad*" ("Thank you, really") (1:09:52). This is the last time she is heard speaking in the film and once she finishes, she exits the scene, leaving the man alone in the kitchen. With this gesture, the old lady seems to have put an end to the relationship with Beto.

The fact that she gives him money has several ways of interpretation and is especially meaningful in *Parque Vía* because it happens twice. On the one hand, the fact that money is so visible in the relationship between them serves the purpose of highlighting that this is a working bond and that it stays on that level only. On the other hand, in the last described sequence, once she gives him the money, *señora* seems to have freed herself from that working bond and allows herself to touch him and leave behind the severity she has maintained for years. It can also be interpreted as a way of paying debts after all the years Beto has dedicated and the confinement he has accepted.

Another interpretation is that *señora* gives him a generous retirement pension that he deserves, as recognition for all his years of work and the possibility of living comfortably without the need of working. Finally, this gesture can be understood as the liberation of a slave —symbolically and keeping all the distances that correspond— that is granted his freedom by his owner after decades of loyal service. In this sense, the word "liberation" seems to adjust exactly to what happens seconds later, because Beto complements the action and intention of the old lady, transforming her idea of liberation into the liberation that he needs: absolute and permanent confinement. This is how Beto finally empowers himself and subverts the power hierarchies of his relationship with *señora*; he uses her —actually, her dead body— to get what he wants, to his benefit. After this, all debts are paid and they are even.

Afterward comes the farewell and the death of the woman. The scene presents Beethoven's sonata while the camera shows *señora* walking through the house followed by Beto. Using big close-ups of her neck and lips intercalated with big close-ups of the intrigues expression of the man creates an erotic and romantic tone for the sequence. Accordingly, the music plays, she walks, he follows her, she stops to tell him something that is not heard over the music —probably asks him for something—, he is about to carry out that order when he sees her laying on the floor. At that point, the music suddenly stops and Beto approaches her to discover she is dead.

Starting from this moment, it is possible to see a complete change in Beto's attitude and actions. This is the instant when he empowers himself and starts carrying on the plan that will lead him to accomplish his goal: to remain confined, if not in the house, then in jail. And he will use *señora* to achieve it. Beto acts with a calculated coldness that is only suspended when he effectively says goodbye to her and takes a moment to mourn her (1:14:12) and then kisses her lips (1:15:19). This gesture, very chaste, is the culmination of the farewell and the previous sequence. It is like an inversion of the tale of Sleeping Beauty or Snow White: *señora* does not awake to the kiss of her "prince", she remains dead and he uses her dead body.

This is the real empowerment of Beto: he uses the body of his employer to his benefit. The moment when he wields a shovel to crush the body of the old lady to pretend a crime he did not commit, it is he who decides how she will "help" him and his complete liberation. In this sense, it is also empowerment facilitated by the woman —evidently, she does not agree for her body to be crushed after death, but she gives him the opportunity he needs. It is like if after all the years Beto gave his own body to work for the family, now he received the body of *señora* in return, as a "payment" for his service and as a way of liberating himself definitively from household work—or any other work, as it was her plan when she gave him the money before dying.

It is important to highlight that despite the violence of the action of Beto, of the brutality of beating with a shovel the head and body of a dead woman, this violence remains in the act and does not seem to be motivated by hate, anger, or resentment of Beto towards *señora*. It is not revenge, but rather an act of instrumental violence that allows him to be confined, as he wishes. From another point of view, the money that she gives him to prevent him from needing to work again serves that objective, but not as the woman expected. Beto uses it to pay for the "benefit" of having a private cell in jail, granting his confinement, his loneliness, and tranquility. This way, she gives him the comfortable life she wanted. And also the part of assuring it for him and another person, because despite not living together, Lupe continues with her weekly visits to Beto in jail. This is possible because Beto makes sure that there is a crime severe enough to lock him down. If by any chance, it can be proved that the lady died of natural causes, it is impossible to deny that the man was guilty of violently profaning her dead body.

Back to the relationship between Beto and *señora*, is crucial to establish that it is closer when they are alone and sheltered by the house. Outside this environment, it is ruled by severity and coldness, but inside the house, they can speak with some intimacy, look at each other, touch, and

connect. It is that displayed intimacy that allows affirming that Beto does not act motivated by hate, but rather against his feelings. That is why he kisses her goodbye and as an apology; he also makes sure that she would not suffer from his actions.

Another way of understanding his actions is that at the moment of attacking her body, Beto is not only liberating himself from household work and the fear of facing the outside world, but also a way of consummating the relationship he had with *señora*. The fact that he kisses her and the sequence that precedes, suggest a romantic tension between them that is impossible to resolve in life. Although it is common for the men employers to maintain sexual relationships with the women household workers —sometimes without consent—, it is less likely to happen between women employers and men household workers. In the case of *Parque Vía*, it seems almost certain that a physical approach between the characters never happened until the end of the working relationship. Crushing her with a shovel is —in a symbolic way— also a way of intimacy, of penetration that would have been impossible any other way. It is the climax of their failed relationship.

4. At the end of this journey

So, is the empowerment of Beto successful and definitive or it is something transitory that destabilizes the hierarchies and even inverts them, but temporarily, given that after it the old colonial order of household work is restored?

In this sense, *Parque Vía* is a challenge. It is difficult to establish the characteristics of the sudden power of Beto over his co-protagonist; it has at least two ways of interpretation. The first one, states that it is evident that Beto has physical power and that he uses it against the corpse of *señora*; but not for killing her, as a matter of fact, the woman does not notice this violence. That power, from this perspective, is an empty gesture that does not have a repercussion over his employer.

Nevertheless, the second way of understanding it is from the family's and the rest of the world's perspective: Beto kills her or at least, violently intervenes in her body and that is empowerment. Besides, the effect of that power is definitive and impossible to erase: Beto goes to jail and accomplishes his objective. Therefore, from this point of view, his power definitely inverts the power hierarchies and would contradict —or at least challenge— the hypothesis proposed since it would demonstrate that household workers can invert the power relationships between employers and employees and establish a new kind of relationship. At least on the representation level.

But *Parque Vía* transits through blurred terrains, opens contradictory possibilities, and suggests interpretations in different directions. Thus, it is also possible to describe how the hypothesis is demonstrated in the film. Beto's power is effective over the dead body of *señora*, therefore, she does not notice that power, and this situation makes it lose its strength because it does not allow it to configure a new kind of relationship between them. In other words, as one of the parts is dead, it is impossible to know if Beto's empowerment influences the future of the relationship, since this is finished.

It is a power circumscribed to a specific moment: the end of the bond. But it does not establish in a lasting way, a new kind of working relationship for household work, determined by a powerful employee and a submissive employer. Additionally, there is the fact that Beto's empowerment acts only over *señora*, the most important but not the only figure from the world of employers. Once his crime is unveiled, it is safe to assume that the power of the rest of the family and the Law is activated. Moreover, it is possible to state that Beto counts on the action of that power — that he realizes is superior to his own— to achieve his objective: if the family does not accuse

him and search for punishment for him, he could not be condemned by the Justice system, and therefore, he could not go to jail confinement. Hence, the empowerment of the main character is still conditioned by the power of others, among them, the employers. Therefore, the hierarchies of power have not been inverted.

Regarding the result of Beto's actions, the situation is also unclear. Within the logic of the film, the man accomplishes what he wanted: being sent to jail for the rest of his life is the solution he finds for avoiding dealing with the outside world. The last scene, which depicts him nicely watching television in his private cell while waiting for Lupe's visit (1:17:45), is the confirmation of the success of his plan and shows that Beto got the kind of life that he wanted and used the body of *señora* for that purpose.

While considering the perspective from the exterior of the film, Beto receives punishment for a crime he did not commit and is destined to be locked in jail for the rest of his days after already dedicating thirty years of his life to household work. This would mean a failure of his empowerment. This interpretation—though valid to some extent—is not strong enough, because it is not based on the film logic but the "real world" logic.

There is an undeniable, violent, complete, and determinant empowerment of the worker toward the employers. As a matter of fact, in this representation more than in others, it is possible to establish that the employee is empowered *over* his employer and exerts his power *against* her, against her body, and in a physical way, and the result of this empowerment benefits the employee.

Regarding the effect of such empowerment and its ability to invert the hierarchies of power and eliminate the colonialism that affects the relationships in household work, I can say that in *Parque Via* the power of the household worker, though effective and definitive in its action, is transitory and does not invert the power hierarchies. Despite the actions of Beto, the *status quo* of the working relationships inside the house is maintained, with the usual ones holding the power and the usual ones obeying.

Therefore, colonialism reflected, for example, on the ethnic difference as a representation strategy, prevails and has a bigger influence than the possible empowerment of a household worker, a situation that may find its explanation through the coloniality of power.

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