Humanity vs. Animality: Spatial Oppression in *Tender is the Flesh*

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Agustina Bazterrica's 2017 novel *Tender is the Flesh* critiques a capitalist society for its ability to dehumanize some in service for others. This is done through the portrayal of cannibalism and selective oppression based upon select spatial circumstances. This paper provides a spatial analysis of the novel by bringing the plot and the system within into context of Henri Lefebvre's book, *The Production of Space*, which shows how space can be used as a tool to bring oppression into a society. The novel shows how language and spaces with predetermined expectations represent and build oppression. This helps us to understand, through an extreme example, the overall system of oppression.

Content Warning: This article contains sensitive content, including discussion of cannibalism, which some readers may find disturbing.

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Tender is the Flesh and Spatial Theory

Agustina Bazterrica's 2017 novel *Tender is the Flesh* imagines a dystopian society in which space is organized so that some human bodies are meat for consumption while others retain their humanity in the eyes of society. Reading this novel through spatial theory clarifies how this division is produced. Henri Lefebvre argues that space in a capitalist society is a social product that functions as a tool of control. In *Tender is the Flesh,* the government uses language and spatial organization to determine who does what in what spaces, assigning people one of two roles—the products and the humans.

A portion of the human population in the novel is commodified, resulting in the kind of oppression described in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*:

> Today the realm of commodities has extended its sway, along with that of capital, to the entire planet, and it has consequently assumed an oppressive role. (217)

Oppression and commodity are directly correlated with one another. Commodification becomes a tool of oppression, reflecting the priorities of those who control the system.

Literary Devices and Spatiality

The novel *Tender is the Flesh* develops its gruesome idea of a society using literary devices such as zoomorphism, which attributes animal characteristics or qualities to non-animal beings or things. This means that humans can be depicted through ways that we would normally depict animals. Zoomorphic language—words like crawl, growl, or attack—dehumanize people and makes it easier to see them as animals fit for consumption.

In this dystopian novel, the

government has banned the consumption of animal meat, following a virus that has contaminated all animal flesh, and forced its society to go on a cannibalistic diet. The story follows the main character, Marcos, and his experience of working in the human-meat processing plant. This novel shows how an oppressive society can emerge through spatial arrangements (cages, slaughterhouses, even zones of captivity in private homes) and development of figurative language (zoomorphism) to allow society to accept oppression and consumption of its own members.

The novel also uses space as a tool for ordering this cannibalist society. Lefebvre argues that space is inherently social. He argues that spaces are made and remade through social relations. He focuses on the grasp of power through space, as well as the relationship between the product and producers of a society. Lefebvre argues that produced space impacts thought and action, explaining:

> that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. (26)

The slaughterhouse in *Tender is the Flesh* is a perfect example: it is more than a building where bodies are processed, but a space that teaches people to think of some humans as "heads" rather than persons. This all comes down to control and domination of space.

Tools for Oppression in the Novel

The system that is presented in *Tender is the Flesh* is dystopian, yet familiar. It exaggerates existing logic of industry and advertising rather than inventing a world without connection to our own. The system of values and structure is particularly evident within the slaughterhouse. As Marcos walks through the slaughterhouse, the primary focus is production and maintaining a very direct expectation of the space. As Lefebvre would note, the space within the walls creates a dominating power. Because of the power that space holds, its values spread, dominating the society as a whole.

Language is crucial to this expansion of control. The government makes strict rules

on how citizens may refer to the people being eaten, both before and after production. The human meat they eat after its production is strictly called "special meat," which is clearly just an attempt to conceal violence, where language is the root of order once again. Advertising perpetuates sanitized terms for human product, creating an order in which the purported value of products distracts from the reality of cannibalism. Most of the people being raised as food are pumped with growth hormones and other chemicals to produce more quickly, as people do not grow nearly as quickly as pigs and cows and other animals that would normally produce edible meat. Although, just like normal livestock, the meat that is grown most naturally is considered higher quality. In the novel, these people are called First Generation Pure, or FGP for short. These individuals consume no growth hormones and are considered to be higher quality meat, which costs more. Using these terms for individuals being slaughtered is essentially utilizing the zoomorphic tool to bring them as far from humanity in the eyes of society as possible.

Advertising works as a tool to support desensitization in *Tender is the Flesh* as well. In the novel, there is a commercial about special meat, in which they are advertising the consumption of human flesh just as if it were regular animal meat, maybe even better. The layout of the commercial presents what feels like an early 1950s "nuclear family." The woman in the commercial is a mother to three children. She is beautiful and "dressed conservatively" (Bazterrica 7) with her whole family smiling as she serves 'special meat.' She says, "I serve my family special food, it's meat, like I've always served, but tastier" (Bazterrica 8). Society adapts to eating human meat because commercials like this speak to the part of the people that crave comfort and normality. The commercial is trying to make people strive for that ideal life of normalcy, hinting at the fact that the primary way to attain it is to follow the societal norm of cannibalism.

In his review of psychological strategies of dehumanization, Nick Haslam describes strategies by which societies dehumanize people, which primarily involves denying their human characteristics and nature. We have already discussed the "animalistic" forms, but Haslam

also notes "mechanistic" forms. The form of "depersonalization involves a view of others as fungible [goods, assets, or currency] and lacking individuality" (261). The novel presents this form of dehumanization literally, showing humans being treated as marketable goods. In the novel, Marcos states, "He doesn't call it special meat. He uses technical words to refer to what is a human but will never be a person, to what is always a product" (Bazterrica 8). Haslam explains that the process of dehumanization requires people to deny heads individuality and uniqueness. This kind of dehumanizing is key to transforming the individuals who are being eaten, so that they can be cannibalized freely. Haslam cites a study by Leyens and colleagues, in which:

> They conceptualize dehumanization as a motivated phenomenon serving individual, interpersonal, or intergroup functions (relief from moral emotions, self-exoneration, enabling or post hoc justification for violence, epistemic certainty in the face of nonnormative behavior, provision of a sense of superiority, enforcement of social dominance) (255).

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social spaces and power within spaces further clarifies the separation between types of bodies. Bourdieu notes:

> Social distances are inscribed in bodies or, more precisely, into the relation to the body, to language and to time-so many structural aspects of practice ignored by the subjectivist vision. (17)

It is important to note the mention of social distances, or in other words, social structures/roles within relationships, language, and time. All factors fall into what determines that social structure. Society creates separation between humans and "heads," through their "spaces" (cages, processing plants, etc.). Just as language creates separation between types of bodies, most "humans" in this society keep their distance from spaces assigned to "heads." This is a way that they can separate the product from the people. The society sets a very strict spatial order, which simply reinforces the power of society's oppression.

Marcos and Jasmine

The main character, Marcos, works at the slaughterhouse and, therefore, exists in a unique

space within the social order. He, himself, retains the status of human but is in close contact with "livestock." Marcos registers the limitations on language very early in the novel: "They've all normalized cannibalism, he thinks. Cannibalism, another word that could cause him major problems" (Bazterrica 4). Physical oppression happens on the farms and in the slaughterhouses to people being eaten, and Zoomorphism is used to keep that control. First, producers take away any sense of self and character and make "heads" physically unable to govern themselves. This is done through intense mutilation: cutting vocal chords to take away any ability to speak, thus taking away their chance to utilize the power of language and persuasion on their own; branding, typically in the middle of the forehead so that there can be no mistaking them for the rest of society; most disturbing of all, however, is when they get to the pregnant women:

> Some are in cages, others lie on tables. They have no arms or legs. He looks away. He knows that at many breeding centers it's common practice to maim the impregnated females, who otherwise would kill their fetuses by ramming their stomachs against the bars of their cage, or by not eating, doing whatever it takes to prevent their babies from being born and dying in a processing plant. (22)

Early in the novel, main character, Marcos, can be seen standing out from the rest of society. He is shown making comments of disapproval of the system and of cannibalism.

Later, Marcos is given a female by a business associate, perhaps as a kickback. He keeps her, though he expresses that he really does not want to. He houses her in the barn, feeding and caring for her as an animal. Gradually, he begins to form a connection, naming her Jasmine. He eventually brings her into his home, dresses her, feeds her real human food and not the feed they give to the other livestock.

Jasmine is a unique and seemingly simple character in this novel. She starts out as a prized FGP (First Generation Pure) head because she has not been fed growth hormones to accelerate her growth, so she ages just like any other human does in a normal society. Disturbingly, FGP's are most like the people in the rest of society, yet they are considered the highest quality for eating.

Despite being a free gift of the best possible quality, Marcos initially refuses to slaughter her. Marcos never explicitly says why, though as the novel continues, it is clear that he starts noticing the humanity showing through the animalistic mask she is forced to wear. When she is put into a different space, her tastes and feelings become noticeable: "She spends hours watching television, sleeping, drawing, staring at a fixed point. At times, it seems she's thinking, like she really can" (136). Marcos never fully acknowledges Jasmine as a true human being, not to the same extent as the rest of society, but he registers her difference from the dehumanized livestock she is meant to be.

Once he gets Jasmine pregnant, Marcos has a change of heart. After living with her as a culturally unorthodox family, he calls his wife (from whom he had been separated) to help Jasmine give birth, despite her having no knowledge of the child or Jasmine. Once Jasmine gives birth to a healthy child, he takes the baby, and bashes Jasmine's head with a bat, killing her. He carries her out of the domestic space of the home to his barn (an appropriate space for a "head") to be butchered. It's a shocking moment in the novel and the only explanation comes when Marcos simply states to his wife, "she had the human look of a domesticated animal" (209). In saying this, Marcos reestablishes the oppressive social order he once critiqued. While throughout the novel, it is clear that there *is* that separation between the people being eaten and the people living in society, Marcos seemed to have been going in the opposite direction with Jasmine, treating her like a person on the other end of the social structure than what she originally started out as.

This notion that she looked "domesticated" in comparison to the other heads is fascinating. It seems strange that he would be troubled by this breakdown of categories, since he has spent the novel critiquing the social order. In the beginning of the novel, once he first interacted with Jasmine, she was viewed as an inconvenience. Then, she gave him pleasure. But when she gives birth to a child, Marcos is afraid of the implications of breeding with a "head." Early in the novel, we learn that he had been burdened by the loss of a child, which may have been the actual cause of his discontent. When Jasmine gives him a child, and

he brings his estranged wife back home, Marcos has an opportunity to claim a proper domestic order. Despite the fact that we watched him providing that domestication to Jasmine, she is now in the way. When Marcos kills Jasmine, he restores the oppressive social system he had been questioning--because now it serves him well.

Conclusion

The article, "Morality in the Evolution of the Modern Social System" by Bryan R. Wilson discusses the intent of a productive society, saying that it is,

> held together' by the commitment of individuals to a shared pattern of norms and moral dispositions that determined the character of social action and social relationships. (316)

Social norms in *Tender is the Flesh* are distorted to present cannibalism not only as a possibility, but a necessity for stability. It is an extreme and disturbing example, yet it has the effect of illuminating oppression within our own society.

The novel suggests that space is not merely where oppression happens, but the means by which it is produced. This production is characterized not only by supply and demand of goods, but also the production of moral systems. Within the novel, characters choose to continue oppressing people like Jasmine to sustain their social order. Bourdieu explains in "Social Space and Symbolic Power" that people often choose rank over anything else in society, describing the importance of the "sense of one's place" (Bourdieu 17). It is this sense of one's place which leads people labeled in French as "les gens modestes" (common folks) to keep to their common place, and the others to "keep their distance," to "maintain their rank," and "not get familiar" (Bourdieu 17). Those who chose to encourage and fuel the oppression of others are essentially choosing to maintain their space, rather than disrupting the order to help those who never got the choice in the first place. They don't want to familiarize themselves with what happens to the oppressed, but rather, push that oppression more, dehumanize them, and normalize it to both prove and fuel their power. Bazterrica's novel suggests that when humanity is desensitized enough to dehumanize and oppress people to the point of cannibalism, humanity was never truly there.

There is a scene in the novel in which Marcos is sitting alone in a

secluded section of an abandoned zoo, surrounded by graffiti. On the wall, one section of the graffiti stands out amongst the rest. It shows a Venetian mask beside a message that reads:

> The mask of apparent calm, of mundane tranquility, of the joy, at once small and bright, of not knowing when this thing I call skin will be ripped off, when this thing I call mouth will lose the flesh that surrounds it, when these things I call eyes will come upon the black silence of a knife. (110)

The abandoned zoo, which is secluded and marked off from the rest of society, is the only place that remains open to individual thought. In this space, removed from dominated society, Marcos encounters the kind of open space Lefebvre describes, which allow genuine thoughts *and* action. The truth of the graffiti in such a forbidden place illustrates how, when space is captured and weaponized, the limitation of thoughts and actions becomes a secluded, dark cave.

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