

## Narrative processes for the distortion of being in its reality in Pablo Katchadjian's novel *Qué hacer*.


Procesos narrativos para la distorsión del ser en su realidad en la novela *Qué hacer* de Pablo Katchadjian.

DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31.e0213

Montserrat Cano Aparicio

Autonomous Metropolitan University  
(MEXICO)

CE: montsecano\_1201@outlook.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1015-5490>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Received: 07/11/2025

Review: 21/11/2025

Approval: 27/12/2025

### Abstract:

*Qué hacer* (2010) by Pablo Katchadjian is an experimental novel composed of different elements that we will analyse in this article: the fascination with discontinuous temporality and each of the fragments that make it up, such as deviations in time and place and fragmentations. This novel makes a very important contribution to the study of contemporary literature, as it contains highly relevant elements that serve as excellent examples of the evolution of well-crafted combinations of different elements. The game it plays with the reader is extremely appealing, and with each rereading, new ways of analysing it are found, making it an endless loop of theories. In this sense, it is very assertive in terms of the reader's curiosity. Thus, this article proposes some of the theories from which this novel is analysed, broadening the spectrum of its study a little further.

**Keywords:** Experimental novel. Discontinuous temporality. Contemporary literature. Spectrum. Literary analysis.

### Resumen:

*Qué hacer* (2010) de Pablo Katchadjian es una novela experimental compuesta con diferentes elementos que analizaremos en este artículo: la fascinación por la temporalidad discontinua y cada uno de los fragmentos que la conforman, como los desvíos de tiempo y lugar y las fragmentaciones. Esta novela tiene aportaciones muy importantes para el estudio de la literatura actual, ya que contiene elementos muy oportunos que permiten ejemplificar muy bien la evolución de las combinaciones de diferentes elementos bien hechos. El juego en el que atrapa al lector resulta sumamente atractivo, y en cada relectura se encuentran mayores formas de analizarla, haciéndola un bucle interminable de teorías. En este sentido, es muy asertiva para la curiosidad del lector. De esta manera, este artículo propone un poco de esas teorías desde las cuales se analiza esta novela, amplificando un poco más el espectro de su estudio.

**Palabras clave:** Novela experimental. Temporalidad discontinua. Literatura actual. Espectro. Análisis literario

*We are all afraid of ourselves.*

*What might we do?*

*We do not know, and that is the problem.*

*What would we be capable of?*

Pablo Katchadijian, *What to Do*.

Pablo Katchadijian published his first novel, *Qué hacer*, in 2010. It is a narrative novel characterised by being experimental from start to finish, where the author plays with repetition, spatial deviations, spatial and temporal fragmentation, and the capacity for variation in both the settings and the characters themselves. Being an experimental work, it does not have a logical causal continuity of actions; it plays with the repetition loop of situations, where the different settings appear to become infinite and shipwrecked in other possible ones that are created through an indeterminate succession. In this article, I will show some narrative processes that will help to understand the process of constructing the novel, as well as the impact that this has on the main character, in order to see how, from a point of immersion, the narrative of the story acquires a nature of its own. This writing phenomenon seeks to cause a feeling of estrangement, as it contains an existential symbolic charge, which is sustained by the implicit fragmentary structure of the narrative itself; the infinite scenarios play with the units of time and space, thereby creating affective loops in the temporality of the action, an entity in which the character interferes to enable a paradox of being.<sup>1</sup>

Given the above, it would seem that the novel somehow fails by not having a narrative thread and linear storyline, since, lacking continuity, it is perceived as a kind of equation due to its abstraction, as proposed by Victoria Cocco:

[...] an equation or algorithm, in that the chapters—and, within them, the sentences—function as a matrix for combining narrative elements (characters + setting + objects +

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from the edition cited in the bibliography, so from now on I will indicate the page number in brackets.

actions) [...] but one that is not concerned with solving the result but with continuing the story, that is, with continuing to write. (2022, p. 35).

A chronology of actions without a logical continuous temporal sequence, a fragmentation that appears in each episode and shows different settings: an action that resembles a blink, whether due to some significant detonations caused by certain objects, characters or phrases that contain a symbolic charge that is decisive for the characterisation and narrative development of the main character.

For example, we can see a little of the structure of the novel in the following quote: 'Alberto and I are teaching in a classroom at an English university [...] Then Alberto and I appear in a square [...] Then we appear in the bathroom of a nightclub. For some reason, we are in the women's bathroom.' (pp. 7-8). Repetition allows metaphysical spaces to appear and makes them infinite, as Deleuze mentions when trying to understand the action of the settings: "It is not a matter of adding a second and a third time to the first, but of raising the first time to the  $n$ th power" (2009, p. 22). The repetition of scenarios is a recurring theme in the novel's narrative. This allows the reader to generate an unusual tool for interpretation, as the constant memory amplifies the spectrum, recovering the spaces in which the character finds himself involved and, by exaggerating them, amplifying his unfolding; a stylistic and aesthetic aspect with which the novel is constructed. The situations, although repetitive, offer a new paradigm, a construction that appeals to a kind of disguise containing different elements that trigger the protagonist's consciousness, taking him to a scenario already set out, playing with the different elements shown in each of the episodes, which will result in an experimental recreation with the reader's perception and with the representation offered by the narrative image in the story. The significance of recovered spaces is proposed by Jara Calles, who mentions: "that representation and perception create new modes of reality" (2022, p. 75). Thus, the character is transported to another reality, but the recovered spaces are a constant that generates new worlds, albeit with elements in common, where it is clear that the first situation with the element of recovered spaces elevates the spectrum of the setting to the  $n$ th degree in its most

significant sense, which does not correspond to a traditional nature for its decoding. For example, the following excerpt, compared to another, gives that sense of similarity, but diverges from it by attempting to show another significant dimension that goes beyond the scene shown at the beginning:

(1)

At this moment, I discover that we are on a bridge, but at the same time we are on a boat. However, it all seems very natural to me. I ask Alberto what he thinks about it; he replies that it seems very natural to him. At this moment, the boat (now nothing more than a boat) begins to sink (p. 13).

(2)

Alberto and I, lying on a park bench, watch an old man who is a pigeon with completely broken wings fly away [...] and just before he completes his journey, we appear in a toy shop talking about Léon Bloy (p. 91).

This is how the equation mentioned by Cócáro appears, but combined with Calles' theory on what he calls "poetics of recovered space." This allows us to visualise how the same characters and settings play with the same objects or even with the characters who are performing the actions, all within the temporal loop affected in its sequential meaning. Faced with this type of phenomenon, Deleuze mentions that: "repeating a word whose meaning is vague, to make it vibrate in itself" (2009, p. 35). Presenting the same thing and repeating it in a different formula, but keeping a similarity in composition, transforms it into a new meaning of the primary meaning of an action. We see this in the creation of new spaces that appear in the novel and are constructed with elements seen previously, passing them off as a new reality. This means that the strength and nerve centre of the novel's narrative is constructed again and again in each episode, so that everything, even if it is not continuous, gives the reader the feeling that they are on the same narrative level, albeit in different dimensions of meaning and significance. This feeling attempts to reproduce what the characters have experienced, thereby creating an identification or representation in the reader of what has been experienced in the fictional entity of the novel.

The exaggeration of situations, as can be seen, is very chaotic and, as Victoria Coccoaro describes, "Experimental literature thus becomes a laboratory of narrative forms and expressions of other logics, temporalities, and new potential worlds" (2022, p. 36). This, together with the innovation of non-continuity and the relationship between the spaces that are recovered, means that the worlds offered by the novel begin again, conditioned by the fragmentary existence of the character and by the structure of the novel itself. The situation conditioned to exist fragmentarily by the narrative allows us to understand why the narrative action is composed in this way and why the character is also constructed in the same way; everything is conditioned to exist in a dystopian way, in a place that does not exist in reality, but which materialises in order to survive in a fragmented way. This phenomenon represents the distorted entity that gives rise to the character's own identity, making this the best place despite its existence and determined timeless permanence, but which is there, marked by becoming conditioned by the narrative itself.

For example, in the novel, the character is seen in several segments constructed from narrative fragmentation, but where this phenomenon is most clearly visualised is in the following quote: "Alberto points tearfully; when we are not there, it is not clear because the sensation is one of darkness; and when we are there at the same time. in two places, it is a conflict-free overlap between being and not being" (p. 73). This spatial and, therefore, temporal overlap in which the character is shown to us is where we will constantly find ourselves shipwrecked by the N number of situations that extend—at least, one intuitively—infininitely, but with the conditioning factor of a reality altered by its very constitution. The idea of existing and not existing is a constant that does not seem to stop in the narrative; the intimacy of the narrator's space—which is the same—is shown, giving rise to questions about whether or not the main character exists and where the narrative begins to take on a deeper meaning, beyond the mere stylistic aspect of the discourse, since, as the story is a fragmentary action, at any moment we can realise or perceive that the main character could be configured as a puzzle, whose pieces, not strung together in a logical way, give everything meaning and sense, and that nothing is exposed gratuitously. The main character begins the narration and

each story—as he is the protagonist at all times and, at the same time, the recipient of what happens, but through a subtle detachment from his personality—of the actantial sequences with the phrase: "It's Alberto and me." This marks the existence of two possible characters, but what if this were not the case? It would seem that Katchadjian's narrative strategy shows that both fictional entities correspond to the same narrator-character, presenting themselves and making themselves known in a fragmentary way, remastering consciousness through an entity called Alberto and possibly a third entity, thus extending their identity into various projections that form a whole and at the same time break into a diversity of pieces of that whole.

The above can be intuited from textual segments such as:

Alberto and I feel that our heads are shrinking; Alberto asks me, 'What are we going to do with our hands when we no longer have heads? [...] At that moment, we feel the atmosphere is somewhat balanced [...] Alberto tells me, 'This is what I call balanced terror. (p. 33).

This reading proposal allows us to question and observe why it is not possible that, where there is similarity, two or three people-entities perceive, feel, and experience everything at the same time; therefore, they live and perceive everything in the same way through the senses: the person balances that terror in the other entities, making the sensitive and sensitive what connects at all significant levels to the fragmentation of the character, rolling everything up in the same time and space of its situational occurrence. For example, to affirm from this analytical perspective that both can be the same fragmented person, one can read the following:

Unlike the above, the fact that things fly away from us causes me enormous regret. I ask Alberto if he feels the same way and he says yes. At that moment, we understand that we had the regret before we began to feel it. (p. 37).

Once again, the preference for the sensory plane is repeated, and it is shown how the common element of these entities is the same regret in the situation in which they find themselves involved. These events constitute the significant component where we can see these small

flashes of union and, at the same time, separation; revelations that indicate that there is indeed a fragmented person and where a third person-entity is brought up:

The person above continues to take notes, we ask the person above who he is [...] we ask him what he does and he tells us that we are his reality, we start to laugh a little nervously [...] To keep laughing, we ask him if he means that we are his or that he is ours (p. 16).

Here we can see the appearance of this third entity, where the author offers a key to understanding from this position and we can decode the character's split personality. This can be seen in the last part of the quote, where we can see the possibility that this entity is part of them or that it belongs to them. The above can be analysed from two perspectives: in the first, it could be perceived as a nod from the author who would have a kind of immersion in the novel, where, at the time of writing, the characters are part of his reality and he is part of them; in the second, they are part of him, since the author is writing them and does not stop this act of writing. The immateriality of the author's ideas materialises in the writing, as proposed by Álvaro Llosa Sanz (2022) in his article "Poéticas exocanónicas de la interfaz para una ficción literaria española del siglo XXI" (Exocanonical poetics of the interface for 21st-century Spanish literary fiction), who points out how the possible interface that the author is showing us is a meeting point for an immersive reading experience, an involvement of all the fictional entities that appear in the story, even seeking a similar effect on the reader due to the supposed chaos created and the feeling of belonging that leads them to delve deeper and deeper into the fiction.

Another possible interpretation of this fictional situation is that there is a physical person who has these two entities in their subconscious. Here, the following creative and receptive formula appears: he is part of them, or they are part of him, where this fragmentary structure reappears. But one element in common is that in both possibilities, they play at being God and that, together with the idea of free will—the author with the idea of being the creator of the characters—conditions them to this repetitive and fragmentary world, where they have

no freedom of choice, since they are creations written in the author's image. In the other scenario, a person is placed who, let us remember, is in the image and likeness of God, and has the possibility of creating these two entities in his subconscious, where this fragmentary world is emphasised, condemning them to live everything repetitively. But in this questioning, the novel is revealing, as we can see the similarity with everyday life, in that it exposes a parallelism with the willingness to live: a world where, although the idea of the creator of free will and autonomy is presented, in the end one is at the disposal of a creator; in this case, for our everyday life, the idea of God.

The novel depicts human beings living in constant personal warfare, always searching for answers and meaning, as follows—and we can see this in the following text segment:

War is a nervous state [...] a two-metre-tall student asks me, 'Is war a state of the soul?' [...] Alberto tells me: we should have said the following: the nervous state is one of the ways of living in war. (p. 52).

War takes on a revolutionary meaning in the context both inside and outside the novel. It makes us see that the character, like us human beings, lives in a conflict between being and existing, and is on a relentless quest to find meaning in this question.

Fragmentation seen as a war or a crisis suffered by the character is where the novel offers certain elements to visualise the different perspectives of this segmentation; for example:

How could one know that what one sees is half of something, that is, that it is not simply something complete that has the appearance of half of something? Alberto and I want to believe that the other half is hidden, but somehow available [...] the students say that they are appearances of halves that are actually complete things and not halves (p. 60).

This leads us to wonder whether the protagonist is a complete being made up of halves that are seen as a whole, and the halves that are not seen form a whole, making this a whole,

forming the halves into a single being; here we can see the immateriality of the character's consciousness, which becomes chaotic when it cannot find an answer.

Through this analysis, the novel reveals temporal segments that are not continuous: these infinite and fragmentary spaces, these tears, temporal holes that tend towards a continuity without resolution in the narrative and a constant recovery of these spaces constitute a whole; but, at the same time, they give the impression of independent units that contain their own nature of occurrence, without ever reaching a certainty of forming any defining entity in the time and space of the narrative. A kind of absence of narrative information that accounts for the stylistic background of the novel, which is a representation of the narrative action with which the character has been constructed. The different combinations that make this narrative infinite, conditioning it not to end a logical narrative sequence, but to follow its course freely, offer the sensation of a false return to the future, which could be seen as the constant recombination of the present itself. By presenting this supposed anomaly in the narrative, we can see how there are certain spaces that act as gaps in logical information and, at the same time, the narrative shows this in an indeterminate material form when changes in different scenarios are presented, in which the character or characters interact and we see an individual in a continuous state of doing and being without stopping to look at other aspects that make them up. Thus, for this diversified fictional entity, the future does not exist in a determined way, since it is thanks to a recombination of the present itself that the unfolding of its own being appears; a moment in which we clearly see that there is a loss of identity due to the multiplicity of indefiniteness with which it constructs its actions and reactions to what is presented before it.

In the novel, we see how the main character becomes accustomed to living in these scenarios. It is no longer the amazement or curiosity about what might happen; what might happen to us, as readers, when reading the novel during the changes in the scenarios narrated. The protagonist accepts and normalises this in his daily life. A key element in each scenario is that, when everything becomes chaotic and spirals out of control, the character returns to university to teach in that ever-present setting, where we can see a glimpse of reality; this

action shows that the character is completely absorbed by his entire context. And it is in this temporal loop that existence is assumed as a temporality that becomes a constant recurrence to recreate the character's own nature, although at times it is chaotic, because the novel is seen as a form of equation in which the character's life is a constant reformulation in which he increasingly loses his identity. A lack of singular essence that disappears due to the eternal illogical continuity of events that construct him as a fragmentary entity. Faced with this, as readers, we witness a weakening of the character's own identity and particularity, a constant shift from what he is to what he could be.

With this novel, Katchadjian gives a clear example of what our own lives can become: a representation of how chaotic the 21st century is, by presenting a protagonist who represents the fall of a human being who has completely lost his way or the meaning of life and lives in a constant recombination of his present in order to understand his past and face a future characterised by the uncertainty of what will happen and what possibilities lie ahead. The novel functions as a mirror, seeking to create an effect—similar to that faced by the protagonist of the story—in the reader, who will possibly ask themselves if they know who they are in their reality; if life has meaning for them or if they are simply absorbed by their daily routine without questioning the purpose of their actions in their existence or the social role they have to play; whether there is a God who allows them to have freedom, or whether they decide to live life according to their worldview or by asking what they want. A constant reformulation of what reality is, with its twists and nuances, where we can read the novel as a possible effect of life itself.

### References

- Calles Hidalgo, J. (2022). Poetics of recovered space. From "Wittgenstein, architect (the uninhabitable place)" to "Kiruna Forever". Writing practices to find and explain the present and its past. In D. Escandell Montiel (ed.), *Hispanic writings from the exocanon* (pp. 71-84). Iberoamericana Vervuert.

- Cóccaro, V. (2022, May-August). Infinity and subtraction in Pablo Katchadjian's *Qué hacer*: the novelistic on the neoliberal horizon. *Anclajes*, 26(2), 31-48. <https://doi.org/10.19137/anclajes-2022-2623>
- Deleuze, G. (2009). *Difference and Repetition* (M. S. Delpy and Hugo, trans.). Amorrortu.
- Katchadjian, P. (2010). *What to do*. Bajo la luna.
- Llosa Sanz, Á. (2022). Exocanonical poetics of the interface for 21st-century Spanish literary fiction. In D. Escandell Montiel (ed.), *Hispanic writings from the exocanon* (pp. 133–147). Iberoamericana Vervuert.