



Flâneurs in Flores:

A Spatial Perspective on César Aira's Short Novels



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Metaphysics is a consequence of not feeling very well

Fernando Pessoa, *The Tobacco Shop*

Somos Barrio

Miguel Vitagliano

(My professor of literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires)

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Index

Introduction: Aira and Space?.....	5
Chapter 1. <u>Space, Imagination and Globalization</u>	
1.1 Aira, space and literature.....	11
1.2 Postmodernism and <i>literatura postautónoma</i>	18
1.3 ‘Belated’ Argentina and globalization.....	23
1.4 Benjamin in Buenos Aires.....	27
Chapter 2. <u>The Map: Aira’s Urban Space</u>	
2.1 <i>Isla urbana</i>	32
2.2 Non-place.....	41
2.3 Heterotopia.....	43
2.3 <i>Real-and-imagined space</i>	49
Chapter 3. <u>The Tour: Flâneurs, Benjamin & Buenos Aires</u>	
3.1 Aira’s <i>zona urbana</i>	59
3.2 Boredom and adventure.....	63
3.3 Play, crime or killing time.....	71
3.4 Memory and nostalgia.....	78
Conclusion.....	84
<i>Bibliography</i>	88

Introduction: Aira and Space?

Frivolous, extravagant and foolish are adjectives that recur in the descriptions of Aira's extensive body of work (Raillard 53; Fabry 11). In particular since the nineties – one of Aira's most productive years – literary critics have studied his work comprehensively. Aira's work is analyzed by Latin American researchers such as Sandra Contreras (1996) and Graciela Speranza (2005). In addition to literary critique from the United States and Canada, also in Europe Aira's work constitutes a highly appealing object of study.¹ Aira's writing is the object of literary research of several recent and extensive doctoral theses by Juan Juárez Montoya (2010) and Djibril Mbaye (2011), both studies from Spain.²

Geneviève Fabry and Ilse Logie distinguish between two different 'aesthetic groups' in Argentinean literature from the nineties. A writer such as Juan José Saer is placed in the context of the "post-Borges" project whereas the or "post-pop" (or "post-Puig") of Aira finds itself on the other side of an "almost paradigmatic axis" (Fabry; Logie 11). Yet, the critics also call Aira "inclasificable" (11).³ The labeling of Aira as post-pop or post-Puig stems from the fact that Aira clearly 'recycles' and makes use of "lo kitsch audiovisual, los productos serie b de la televisión, el cómic, el grotesco-tecnológico" (2010: 138). Moreover, his work is often called *Duchampiano* and even linked to the *ready-made*.⁴ Aira's own essay *La Nueva Escritura* also makes clear that a strong interest or admiration for Surrealism and other vanguard artists underscores his work. Aira's *procedimiento* - on which the writer himself comments in his theoretical essays⁵ - stems from this interest and thus influences his 'working procedure', based on 'coincidence' and hence to some extent inspired by the automatic writing of the surrealists and the working procedure of avant garde artists.⁶

¹ Montaldo 1998; Holmes 2008; Raillard 2003. Juárez Montoya 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010; Mbaye 2011; Decock 2003, 2005.

² Montoya: *Realismos del Simulacro: Imagen, Medios y Tecnología en la Narrativa del Río de la Plata*, 2010
Mbaye: *La Obra de César Aira: Una Narrativa en Búsqueda de su Crítica*, 2011.

³ The distinction is also often made by labelling contemporary Argentinean writers as either adherent to César Aira or either to Ricardo Piglia. In this sense, Raillard argues, that it is common to speak of two groups; "los de Piglia y los de Aira" (Raillard 54).

⁴ See: Juárez (2010): "La recuperación del surrealismo y el dadaísmo, de la literatura como ready-made Duchampiano (...) una vuelta a la vanguardia" (139). Also see Mbaye (2011): 225, 229.

⁵ Aira: *La Nueva Escritura* 2000; *Cumpleaños* 2001.

⁶ He takes Cage's piece *Music of Changes* (1951) as an example of an artwork that was created "mediante el azar"; one cannot say it was 'composed' in the sense that it was deliberately invented or thought through. The musical notes are chosen according to a system that depends completely on coincidence. A piece like this may sound arhythmic, without melody or tonality, but, on the other hand, it may hold all those aspects if 'fate' wants it. The only thing Cage did was "decidir el procedimiento" (169).

Yet, at other times Aira is also studied in relation to Borges' literary production.⁷ Metaphysics provides the main underpinning of Borges' stories, Swanson affirms (46). Borges' oeuvre is characterized by a strong interest in the nature of reality and the notions by which we understand for example space and time.⁸ This interest in metaphysics – and questions about the nature of reality – is ultimately also present in Aira's work. It is significant that many critics point to something that they consider to be a defining aspect of Aira's work, which is the *continuum* or, *el continuo*.⁹ Montoya points out that Sandra Contreras was one of the first to speak of this concept (Montoya 2006 s.p.). Also according to Raillard continuation and transformation mark Aira's literature both on a formal level and a thematic level (54). With regard to form or structure, critics demonstrate a strong interest in Aira's narrative technique and 'metatextualidad'.¹⁰

In general, critique focuses strongly on formal aspects considering the fact that much what is written is preoccupied with narrative structure, procedure¹¹ and 'metatextuality'. This is not surprising as Aira's texts always seem to be highly 'conscious' of themselves and thus not only play with the way we conceive of reality, as a theme or idea, but also the way we conceive of fictional reality; thus how a story is constructed and read (form). Juan Montoya Juárez, finally then, is a critic who carried out elaborate research that focuses more specifically on the role television and mass media play in Aira's novels.¹² On the thematic level, media, urban life, childhood, questions of gender, realism (and also orientalism) all play a role in Aira's work.

Margarita Rémon-Raillard distinguishes between different periods in Aira's work. When Aira starts writing in the seventies he is particularly interested in traditional Argentinean themes such as the pampa, the Indians and figures such as the gaucho. This interest is best reflected in a series of novels which are published during the eighties (53).¹³ Together with some 'excentric' novels such as *Una novela china*, those novels can still be called

⁷ See: Montaldo, 1998.

⁸ Under the supervision of Prof.dr.Folger I wrote a paper on Borges entitled "*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* and The PostHuman: (Hyper)Reality, Metaphysics and The Self" (June 2012).

⁹ See Speranza (2005).and also see Sandra Contreras (2011): "propio es en Aira el sostén de un relato que renaciendo siempre intacto en cada repetición exige, sin embargo, para constituirse, un continuo de invención"

¹⁰ Intertextual play in Decock (2005/6); Metatextualidad in Rémon- Raillard (2003); Realismo in Speranza 2005; Postmodern irony in Montoya (2006).

¹¹ Rémon-Raillard (59): "una faceta clave de la obra de Aira"

¹² J. Montoya Juárez, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010.

¹³ *Enma, la cautiva* is one Aira's more well-known and most discussed titles (other titles are *El vestido rosa* 1984, *El bautismo* 1991 and *Las ovejas* 1984.

‘reasonable’, Rémon-Raillard states, but especially from 1990 onward Aira’s work becomes every time more complex (53).

The novels¹⁴ studied here – *Los fantasmas* (1990), *La guerra de los gimnasios* (1993), *La villa* (2001) and *El mármol* (2011) - are indeed all novels published after 1990 which are altogether no longer ‘reasonable’. Aira himself contends that “[l]a profesionalización puso en peligro la historicidad del arte; en todo caso recluyó lo histórico al contenido, dejando la forma congelada. Es decir, que rompió la dialéctica de forma-contenido que hace a lo artístico del arte”.¹⁵ The writer thus gives a ‘reason’ for why his work is so absurd and indefinable; he feels he is a ‘vanguard’ writer who has no other possibility than to ‘reinvent’ the form (of, in this case, literature) in order to create something new.

Now then, starting out from the idea that (ir)reality and metatextuality seem to be the most obvious preoccupations in Aira’s work and of his critics, I would like to depart from another concept that encompasses some the former one’s, but at the same time has a different perspective on Aira’s work: I will depart from a *spatial* perspective and design a theoretical framework on *space*. In doing so I will not merely look at space as the ‘material’ or static decor in Aira’s narratives (houses, buildings etc). Space serves as a starting point also for the study of Aira’s (metatextual) idea’s on ‘real’, social space (Buenos Aires) and equally refers to the spatial ‘outlining’ of his absurdist short novels, thus, to form.

Warf and Arias (2009) stress how researchers from all kinds of disciplines are increasingly interested in spatial theory and spatial questions (instead of only temporal and historical perspectives). Likewise Liesbeth François calls attention to the ‘spatial turn’ as a new paradigm to which also literary theorists have yielded.¹⁶ It is within this context that I want to make *space* the point of departure for the analysis of Aira’s novels and see how a this approach may enhance our understanding of his work. Moreover, this spatial viewpoint sheds light on Aira’s (debated) *realismo* since the spatial perspective demands that the ‘real’, urban reality (of Buenos Aires) is taken into consideration. In a broader context, this thesis first explores how a spatial perspective can be of value while analyzing literature and secondly it also demonstrates how literature can be of interest with regard to more cultural and social questions. Therefore I will look into the debate on postmodernism and globalization from a less ‘literary’ or (philosophical) stance, hence, not beforehand reducing reality itself to a mere ‘simulacre’.

¹⁴ The dates for the novels mentioned here are the original dates of publication. In the bibliography I indicate which specific publications I use.

¹⁵ César Aira, *La Nueva Escritura*: p.166

¹⁶ Forthcoming (2014)

Aira's narrative take place mostly in Buenos Aires and more particularly 'his' neighborhood (*barrio*) Flores. Considering Aira's work from a spatial perspective could be seen as a new, but logical step. Even though Aira is not a (politically or socially) 'engaged' writer and foremost interested in creation itself, he does nevertheless depict a 'certain Argentinean reality' and has a detailed attention for 'real', social and political facts of life in Buenos Aires. Juárez points towards this strange mix of realism that becomes interrupted or dislocated constantly by a fantastical or surreal reality (Juárez 2010: 140).

Linking spatial theory to literature will make clear how and why space can be an interesting starting point when analyzing literature in general and Aira's work in particular. Since the chosen perspective is one that highlights the abstract concept of *space* (the idea of space encompasses metaphysical, temporal, sociological, political aspects, etc.) an in-depth understanding of contemporary Buenos Aires obviously enhances and enriches the understanding of fictional spaces in Aira's work. As in a relatively new field such as cultural memory, which connects real, historical events (World War II, the Dirty War etc.) or collective experiences to literature or to film, departing from the concept of space and linking it to a novel also demands that at times 'bridges' have to be built between the novel and 'our' concrete world or reality.

This will be done mainly by looking at theory on globalization and the supposed belated modernity of Argentina, in order to place spatial questions in their context. For the design of a spatial, theoretical framework I will primarily draw on social (and geographical) theory on space, particularly by the geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja, who himself resorts to Henri Lefèbvre. Additionally, Josefina Ludmer and her essay *Aquí América: Una Especulación* (2010) serves as a source of reference that is itself literary, culturally and sociologically inspired and that speaks of both space and time. In a similar way as Ludmer, I will work with spatial and 'social' *concepts* within *a literary analysis*. Naturally, I am not studying any social or spatial reality.

With respect to categorization, the Argentinean critic Josefina Ludmer characterizes Aira's novel *La villa* as typically 'global', and considers it as an expression of what she calls *literatura postautómoma*, literature that "can no longer be read as literature" (149). Ludmer 'divides' contemporary literature by means of a temporal and spatial 'system'. The global literature of for example Aira is, according to Ludmer, opposed to 'national' writings that are still preoccupied with time, nation, memory and a traumatic past (i.e. peronism, the Dirty War) but also with the future. Aira's novel is, on the contrary, straightforwardly postmodern and global and fixated only on the present, Ludmer claims. Nevertheless, thinking of the

concept of “glocalization” there is much to say for that Aira’s novels remain *at the very same time* decidedly *local*, and thus still concerned with both past as future.

Therefore I want to argue that when considering Aira’s writings from a spatial viewpoint, it is debatable whether Aira is (only) a postmodern writer, as most critics postulate, however neither can his work be said to be modern. Regardless of labels and classification, Aira’s critics do seem to be preoccupied with the fact that Aira often is difficult to ‘situate’ or locate.¹⁷ This may be due to Aira’s complex writings, the absurdism of his narratives and the ambiguous discourse that his writings generate. A spatial perspective can eventually show how Aira’s writings may be regarded as both postmodern and more modern (or at least something more than merely postmodern) at the same time. I will not plainly contend that Aira is a ‘modern’ writer.

Most critics convincingly show why and in what way Aira is a postmodern writer. However, they do so mainly by looking at the underlying discourse on media in Aira’s novels or focus merely or too fervently on structure and form. A spatial analysis is particularly suitable while looking at form, content and metafiction. The themes Aira is interested in sometimes ‘support’ the postmodern (fragmented) narrative or structure, but at other times, contradict them. When they support the fragmented and arbitrary course of the narratives, we conceive of the characters as subjects living in a reality that is uncertain, without meaning and marked by an ‘eternal present’. Apathy and melancholy characterize this literary, urban imaginary. Nonetheless, at other times, the urban setting provokes opposite feelings, such as empathy, curiosity, longing and desire for adventure. There is more than irony and fragmentation to Aira’s work. As modern flâneurs they all long for ‘experience’, cross (social) borders and are interested in the marginal figures of the city. The Dutch critics Vermeulen and Van den Akker give a new name or label to the oscillation between the postmodern and the modern in their article “Metamodernism” (2010). I will argue that this oscillation is also present in Aira’s work.

I will initially focus on postmodern concepts used by critics such as the *isla urbana* and the non-place. The tension between the modern/postmodern will be layed bear by designing two chapters: first I draw the spatial landscape in Aira’s short novels - a landscape that indeed seems highly postmodern. This ‘map’ of the literary, urban imaginary revolves around the city of Buenos Aires. Subsequently, in the second chapter, I will do a more ‘modern’ reading of Aira and look more closely at the characters or subjects in that space, and see how they affect

¹⁷ See for example Margarita Rémon-Raillard 2003, p.55; Montoya 2010, p 138.

or are affected by their environment. In this chapter I will follow the ‘tour’ of Aira’s characters. I will therefore take up Benjamin’s (modern) notion of the flâneur.¹⁸

Martín Kohan is critical of the fact that the notion of flâneur is often taken up by critics and used in many different contexts. Nevertheless, in this spatial, literary study I will indeed ‘displace’ Benjamin’s notion to Aira’s contemporary, literary urban setting. I feel I can justify this ‘dislocation’ since the theoretical framework for my analysis is based on studies that in itself are inspired by geography, urbanism and sociology (e.g. Lefebvre, Soja, Bauman). Additionally, Jenks & Neves (2000) indicate how the concept of flâneur increasingly serves “as an instructive metaphor for the sociologist’s relationship with modernity and urban life” (1). In line with Lefebvre’s ‘trialectics of space’ I divide this thesis into three chapters. Ultimately I borrow my theoretical division from Michel De Certeau, who opposes the ‘map’ and the ‘tour’, or in other words, place and stability opposed to space and mobility. De Certeau looks at narrative and stories in order to better understand space. In thesis I want to do the opposite; depart from space in order to better understand Aira’s narrative.

¹⁸ I write flâneur with a circumflex. In English, both flâneur and flaneur are used. I follow Susan Buck-Morss (1991) example who likewise uses the circumflex (104, 228). Flaneur is used by McDonough (2002). Shaya (2004) uses *flâneur*.

1. Space, Imagination and Globalization

1.1 Aira, space and literature

Even though ‘bridges’ have to be built between literary *space* in Aira and the spatial reality of Buenos Aires, this thesis, naturally, is not a critical social study of contemporary Buenos Aires or of any other concrete social, political or economic developments. Nor is it possible to claim that the space one speaks of in *fiction* is ‘real’, material space or that it is directly linked to our ‘real’ world. What is more, the mere idea of a tangible, concrete reality (outside the text *and* independent from our minds) in itself already poses a problem in metaphysical terms. When it comes to (social and physical) scientific research the concept and definition of ‘space’ at times confronts researchers with the problematic nature of the question of what space is. Philosophers, at a more abstract level, have to struggle with the binary opposition of space as a ‘concrete’ materiality or the idealist idea that an ‘extern’ reality merely exists in the mind. So, why then should the highly complex concept of space serve as a departing point for a theoretical stance on literature?

Modernization was marked by an interest in time and historicism, but postmodernism is increasingly characterized by a focus on space (and related concepts such as globalization or cyber- or virtual space). In *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2009) Warf and Arias want “to provide the reader with a sense of how space has entered into a variety of domains of knowledge” (2). The critics affirm that geographers are increasingly being read by scholars in the humanities and other social sciences. “Recent works in the fields of literary and cultural studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, history, and art history have become increasingly spatial in their orientation. From various perspectives, they assert that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of the different histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena” (Warf & Arias 1). As the critics point out, also literary studies are increasingly becoming spatial, while literature was always mainly seen as a *temporal* art form (François chapter 2, my emphasis).

Modern thinkers such as Hegel or Marx subordinated spatial questions to questions of time. Their thinking was teleological and “paid little attention to space, human consciousness, or the contingency of social life” (2). However, in the 1960s Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault were one of the first ones to suggest that space played an important role in the functioning of capitalism as a whole. Subsequently, social theory - especially through the (Marxist) works of David Harvey - “repositioned the understanding of space from given to

produced, calling attention to its role in the construction and transformation of social life and its deeply powerladen nature” (3).

Liesbeth François, then, in the same manner as Warf and Arias, affirms that Henri Lefebvre’s *La production de l’espace* (1974) was one of the first real contributions to spatial theory.¹⁹ Lefebvre wanted to do away with two different assumptions or visions on space that he sees as incomplete or not useful; the ‘realist illusion’ that reduces space to its material form, and a more idealist idea of space as a (mental) construct. Lefebvre, François outlines, proposes to understand space as a combination of the two, hence a ‘social product’, which is both material and constructed. Soja, in his turn, stresses the tridimensional aspect of Lefebvre’s understanding of space, for Lefebvre’s space is “simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...)” (Soja 11).²⁰ Soja calls Lefebvre’s notion of space a “trialectics of spatiality” that regards space as three different kind of spaces:

- *perceived* space of materialized Spatial Practice;
- *conceived* space Lefebvre defines as Representations of Space;
- *lived* Spaces of Representation (or Representational Spaces).

Edward Soja, geographer and urban planner, is thus also drawing upon Lefebvre’s configuration of space when he introduces the concept of *Thirdspace*. Notice has to be taken of the capital T. Thirdspace is Soja’s own design and conception of the term that, as he himself points out, comes near to Lefebvre’s *lived* (thus third) space; “this third space of Lefebvre closely approximates what I am defining as Thirdspace”, Soja says (68). Additionally, Soja refers to third space and Thirdspace as real-and-imagined’ space (or *realandimagined*) (11).

The concept of *lived* space (Lefebvre) or Thirdspace (Soja) are in fact rather political; “it is political choice, the impetus of an explicit political project, that gives special attention and particular contemporary relevance to the spaces of representation (..) Lived social space, more

¹⁹ “[O]thers have chosen alternative transdisciplinary perspectives – to thread through these complexities [of space]. Lefebvre, however, was the first to explicitly do so through space, or more specifically the (social) production of (social) spatiality” (Soja 57).

²⁰ Soja explains Lefebvre’s complex vision on space (Thirdspace 1996): “I find it useful to recall that old shibboleth that asks: ‘Is it consciousness that produces the material world or the material world that produces consciousness?’ The answer implied in Lefebvre’s trialectics is ‘yes’ to both alternatives, and/also something more: a combinatorial and unconfined third choice that is radically open to the accumulation of new insights, an alternative that goes beyond (*meta*) the mere acceptance of the dualized interrogative” (65).

than any other, is Lefebvre's limitless Aleph, the space of all inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Soja 68).

Connecting Aira with spatial theory remains a *literary* undertaking. This study is not only and exclusively about literary space nor does it solely look at social (actual) space. Space – as a term, or matter of interest - will serve as a departing point for my approach to Aira's work, thus functioning as a sort of umbrella that justifies the choice of specific (short) novels in which spatiality clearly plays a role.²¹ Subsequently, in a similar way as in the academic discussions of space outlined by François, space can play a role in Aira's literature both on a 'material' and on a more 'idealist' level. Along these lines, one can study space as a more 'static' or material element of the narrative, or as François calls it, as the 'static decor' of the narrative (e.g focusing on buildings, streets, houses, city, coast). But the most important manner of looking at space here consists in regarding space in the more 'idealist' way and hence as a 'construct'. In this case not the "social product" of Lefebvre but a *literary* product: one that 'unwraps' itself in the narrative but at the same time constitutes the 'building blocks' for that same narrative (i.e. content and form).

This literary product of space firstly entails material or perceived (fictional) space and refers also to *form*; narrative techniques and the structure that constitute and construct the narrative. Secondly, we are dealing with *literary* representations of space; a spatial, fictional narrative that indeed refers to actual, spatial reality (e.g. *las villas* or Chinese supermarkets in Buenos Aires) (conceived space). Lastly, then, the concept of *lived* space complicates the alignment with Lefebvre's 'trialectics' of space: it is hardly possible to find a corresponding term that expresses exactly what Lefebvre wanted to designate. Most geographic imagination revolved around dual thinking and looked either at perceived (material, real) or conceived (mental, imagined) space - or, as Soja also calls them, Firstspace and Secondspace. The lived space "was typically seen as a combination or mixture of the the 'real' and the 'imagined' in varying doses" (Soja 10).

Here, we are speaking of literary space. So if we regard material space as form and the conceived space alluding to content (representations), the *third* space ultimately is Aira's literary (instead of social) product: the space that consists of the 'real' and the 'imagined' or, theoretical thought (comments) and the fictional narrative.²² The third space thus stands for

²¹ *La mendiga, La guerra de los gimnasios, Los fantasmas, La villa, El mármol*

²² "La complejidad de la escritura de Aira reside así en un juego de vaivén incesante entre la teoría y la anécdota" (Rémon-Raillard 54).

the overall literary ‘product’ and more particularly points towards the *metafiction* - the “fábula metatextual” - that serves as a bridge between form and content.²³

Aira’s fictional characters exist, live and perceive their world from this ‘third space’ The absurd and surreal elements in the life of the characters stem from this space: the representations of space (e.g. a gym or supermarket) take on a different (with Aira often bizarre) meaning while Aira comments on his own representation. The characters visit space – in ‘real’ social life a space that is produced and takes on meaning when it is *lived* – but in literature is a space that is produced and placed in a certain discourse by the writer himself. Lefebvre’s *lived* spaces of representation, Soja contends, are “echoed” in Foucault’s idea of the *heterotopia* (Soja 69).²⁴

Foucault distinguishes the utopia from the heterotopia in order to explain his concept; utopias “are fundamentally unreal places”. They “present society in a perfected form”. Heterotopias, on the contrary, function like counter-sites, “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites (...) are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind “are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault 24). Heterotopias can be places like a boat (outside of all places, but possible to indicate its location), and even the colony (an ‘effectively enacted utopia’), but also places like libraries, hotels and psychiatric institutions (Dehaene 4). Because of diffuseness of the term, besides Foucault’s *Of Other Spaces* (1986), I will also look at the study on heterotopia by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Post Civil Society* (2008). They place Foucault’s notion in a contemporary (architectural) context and look at how public space is shaped today (4). They look for example at places such as the shopping mall, a contemporary heterotopia. Also Zygmunt Bauman points out how the shopping mall “may be in the city (if not erected, symbolically, outside the city limits, off a motorway), but is not a part of it; not the ordinary world temporarily transmogrified, but a ‘completely other’ world” (98).

The French critic Michel de Certeau²⁵ opposes the concepts of place and space. In a *place* “the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct location, a location it defines”. The concept of *place* thus “implies an

²³ Rémon-Raillard: 59

²⁴ Nonetheless, heterotopia is a diffuse term: “frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent” – but somehow resembling the notion Third Space, Soja states (Soja 162) Also Dehaene and de Cauter state: “But one also gets the feeling that it lacks definition and is perhaps too encompassing” (4).

²⁵ “Spatial stories” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall, 1993.

indication of stability”. (De Certeau 117). *Space*, on the other hand, implies mobility; the idea of space encompasses “vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables” (117). In this spatial analysis of Aira’s novels it is important to take De Certeau’s distinction into account for it is comparable to the notion of *lived* space (Lefebvre) or Third space (Soja). Space, De Certeau says, “*is a practiced place*” (117 emphasis in original). He exemplifies this by saying that a street defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by the walkers. The place is ‘practiced’ and transformed by subjects and therefore becomes space (117).

When De Certeau makes a distinction between *place* and *space*, the French anthropologist and ethnologist Marc Augé distinguishes between the *place* and the *non-place*, the latter being typical of ‘supermodernity’.²⁶ Augé points out that his distinction between places and non-places derives from De Certeau’s opposition between place and space. However, De Certeau himself does not oppose place and space in the way that Augé opposes place and non-place (Augé 79). Space is for De Certeau a “‘frequented place’, ‘an intersection of moving bodies’” (Augé 79).²⁷ Augé, however, tries to understand the contemporary “non-places” in the context of the debate on postmodernity, or as he prefers to say, supermodernity. Rather than regarding place as ‘static’ and space as ‘mobile’²⁸, Augé departs from the notion that a place can be anthropological; a place “of identity, of relations and of history” (52). “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 77-78).²⁹

De Certeau’s *practiced* space and Augé’s anthropological place both resemble *to some extent*³⁰ Lefebvre’s conception of *lived* space – or Soja’s Third space – *in that they all imply a subject that ‘practices’ and lives (transforms) that space and thus produces (social) space*. In short, those concepts all entail an element of ‘mobility’ and hence all assert that space is not merely ‘static’ or material. De Certeau ultimately links spatial theory to stories and narrative. The opposition between place and space also refers to “two sorts of determinations in stories”: one is a *being-there* of something dead, the second is “a determination through operations which, when they are attributed to a stone, tree, or human being, specify ‘spaces’

²⁶ “‘Surmodernité’ is translated into “supermodernity” in John Howe’s translation of Augé’s *Non-places* (1995)

²⁷ For De Certeau “it is the pedestrians who transform the street (geometrically defined as a place by town planners) into a space” (Augé 80).

²⁸ Or “space as an animation of these places by the motion of a moving body” (Augé 80).

²⁹ De Certeau refers to Merleau-Ponty who makes a distinction between ‘geometrical space’ and ‘anthropological’ space; he considers those concepts analogous to his idea of place (static) and space (mobile). See: De Certeau (1993) p.117; Augé (1995) p. 80. However, I do not go into this at this moment for Merleau-Ponty’s notion is again of a different order.

³⁰ I will look at this more in detail in my analysis of the novels.

by the actions of historical subjects”. So, in a way, De Certeau is speaking of the static elements (places) in a story that become spaces when they are ‘practiced’ – the latter resembling Soja’s lived or Third space (118).

In addition, he indicates that a place can become space and vice versa; these passages back and forth hence may ‘put something to death’ or make it alive again (“the awakening of inert objects”). “*Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places*” (118 my emphasis). Out of this follows a distinction – as Augé says – between ‘seeing’ and ‘doing’, or, as De Certeau explains himself between the ‘map’ and the ‘tour’ (Augé 80; De Certeau 118). In the same way, the map implies stability and the ‘tour’ movement. It is in this context that Aira’s stories will be read; while De Certeau looks at narrative and stories in order to analyze spatiality, here a spatial perspective enhances the understanding of narrative. It provides the framework for understanding why a static place (like a fitness centre) takes on different meanings as it turns into (mobile) space.

It is also De Certeau who essentially takes up Benjamin’s idea of the flâneur and employs the concept in the context of twentieth-century urban experience. If space is ‘practiced’ or transformed by its subjects, one necessarily has to get hold of how and in what way those subjects do this. Or, how do they behold their spatial environment and which underlying ideas or assumptions influence their spatial experience? In “*Marches dans la ville*” (1980) the critic argues that one of the consequences of modern life – and the city ‘inaugurated’ by a utopian and urbanist discourse – is the perspective that changes; he speaks of the walker’s view from above and that converts walkers (strollers, the flâneur) into voyeurs (171-175).

De Certeau relates this view to a (‘perverse’) human, desire for knowledge, “de ‘voir l’ensemble’, de surplomber, de totaliser le plus démesuré des textes humaines” (172). Likewise, Augé points towards the quest for meaning. He feels that ‘supermodernity’ generates an overabundance of events and images. The explicit and intense daily need to give meaning to the world is the price we pay for this excess, he contends (Augé 29). Augé considers non-places to be part of supermodernity (“surmodernité” in French). It is important to note that he does not equal supermodernity with the more nihilist postmodernism:

We could say of supermodernity that it is the face of a coin whose obverse represents postmodernity: the positive of a negative. From the viewpoint of supermodernity, the difficulty of thinking about time stems from the overabundance of events in the contemporary world, not from the collapse of an idea of progress (Augé 30).

Also the Argentinean critic Martín Kohan looks at the modern idea of the flâneur and reflects on the imaginary city that represents all of Benjamin's 'city thinking'. This 'imaginary city' consists of the four different cities Benjamin wrote about³¹. According to Kohan all of Benjamin's city writings are about this specific 'zone' which Kohan calls *zona urbana*. This concept of *zona urbana* denotes a multiple, plural and non-existing city and hence also a theoretical invention or abstraction by Kohan himself.³² When relating 'Benjaminian' theory to Aira's Buenos Aires I depart from this *zona urbana* that stands for all of Benjamin's 'city' thinking. The notion of *isla urbana* is linked to the postmodern view on Aira. Studying Aira in relation to the flâneur another demands for a different urban setting.

Kohan feels that critics all too often try to "textualize it all" by assuming that for Benjamin cities are like texts, and that walking through the city is similar to reading or writing: "Las representaciones urbanas de Walter Benjamin resultan ser un objeto más que propicio para esta tendencia a reducir lo que sea al estatuto de una textualidad, o de una representación que carece de referente, o de una representación para la cual el referente ya no importa" (24). This reinforces the idea, says Kohan, of the city as a text. According to Kohan the problem rests in the fact that ("en el afán teórico) the notion of reality is limited to the *representation* of reality, and therefore every representation becomes reduced to a mere "simulacro" So it becomes more difficult to pose the question in which the 'empoverishment of experience' really consists (25 my emphasis). Hence, from a spatial perspective, the 'materiality' of reality becomes, unjustifiably, less important.

Studying Aira's flâneur in his (literary) reality unavoidably means to look at *text*; I am interested in the urban imaginery and thus also the city in Aira's novels. Hence, looking at a (literary) representation. In this case however, *spatial reality* of Buenos Aires is not lost out of sight. More so cause I start off from spatial (and geographical) theory. Consequently, I am not postulating "la liquidación del principio de realidad" or even any 'end of experience in a mass mediated society' as Kohan points out is the case in some theoretical stances (25, note 13).

³¹ Paris, Moscow, Berlin & Naples

³² Kohan (2007): "Puede decirse, entonces, que hay en Benjamin un orden espacial bien delimitado; pero ese orden espacial no se define en una sola ciudad, ni siquiera en París, sino, en todo caso, en una 'ciudad' imaginaria e imposible que integra y contiene al menos cuatro ciudades. (...) Esas ciudades definen además, en la escritura de Benjamin, cuatro variantes genéricas: los textos críticos (París), el diario de viaje (Moscú), la 'reseña de turista' (Nápoles) y los textos autobiográficos (Berlín). (...) La multiplicidad de las referencias urbanas se resuelve también, por lo tanto, en la multiplicidad de los registros del discurso y en la multiplicidad de posiciones y miradas del sujeto" (16).

In this literary study of Aira, space as a term will be used as a reference to geographic, material spaces (supermarkets, gym, *villa*) inside the novel ('static' decor). Those representations are to some extent connected to 'real spatial and social reality' and other issues that the study of space calls to mind (such as globalization). But ultimately, since this is not a social but a literary study, space, naturally, continues to be employed metaphorically. Linking the critical concept of space to a novel or work of literature may not always prove to be productive. In the particular case of Aira, however, this perspective generates valuable insights, particularly because Aira 'switches' constantly from anecdote to theoretical thought (with actual, concrete references to 'his' Buenos Aires), ultimately also showing how fiction (images, media, stories, representations) and reality correlate and influence each other.

1.2 Postmodernism and *literatura postautónoma*

When speaking of space, when cannot leave out time; "space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space" (Foucault 22). With regard to spatial questions, it is essential to see how the question of time and temporality, affects thinking about space. In this thesis I want to situate Aira by looking at the 'space' in his work. Therefore it is necessary to see why Aira is considered to be a very postmodern writer. Josefina Ludmer distinguishes in Aira's novels a connection between space and a postmodern (and global) discourse.

Although Raymond Leslie Williams still categorized Aira as a Postboom writer, writing in a 'modernist' vein,³³ Aira's work is often called postmodern.³⁴ Aira's novels present themselves "como un reciclaje de planteamientos ficcionales tomados de la vanguardia que superan la negatividad de otras poéticas contemporáneas como las de Piglia o Saer", but, argues Jesús Montoya Juárez, "desde una lógica de un cierto posmodernismo" (Juárez 2010: 138). Juárez claims that this postmodern aspect resides precisely in Aira's 'metaficcionalidad', its irony and the preoccupation with the relation between fiction and reality; all three derived from and linked to the omnipresence of the audiovisual discourse and its influence in the construction of (what we understand to be) reality (138). Also Mbaye confirms that Aira's work is postmodern, especially for its metafiction: "La ficción

³³ Raymond Leslie Williams (2003) p. 207: Aira participated in the 1990's in the continuation of the Postboom, says Williams, and, like others wrote historical novels, only now "the attitude about the potential of being historical voices" was different (209). Williams feels that *La liebra* (1991) still is a (not so ambitious) historical novel, but, later novels such as *La Mendiga* (1998) lacks "historical ambition" (210).

³⁴ Ludmer (2010), Montoya (2006, 2007, 2010), Rémon-Raillard (2003).

postmoderna se caracteriza por una fuerte tendencia autorreflexiva. La metaficción, ficción que reflexiona sobre sí misma, se ha convertido en poética y una de las grandes marcas de la Postmodernidad, aunque puede considerarse como herencia de la vanguardia” (37).

For Fredric Jameson, says Juárez (2007), “schizophrenic” postmodern time confers to our present a problematic relation with the historical past. When not only fiction but as well reality comes to be seen as an artificial construction, then, what does this do to our conception of space and time? The past is now perceived as a a ensemble of various, disconnected presents (Juárez 887). This, naturally, makes it more difficult to capture a general image of our present; “[l]a sensación de realidad se esté perdiendo ante la omnipresencia de infinidad de imágenes fragmentadas y contradictorias de lo real que saturan la capacidad de interpretación de los sujetos” (887).

In the same way, adds Juárez, Baudrillard speaks of the “simulacre” and is interested in the diffuse boundaries between what is ‘real’ and what is not (887). ‘Simulacra’ are “exact copies or representations of everyday reality that somehow substitute for the real itself”, also Soja explains (19). According to Baudrillard we live in a hyperreal society; “Disneyland est là pour cacher que c’est le pays ‘réel’, toute l’Amérique ‘réelle’ qui est Disneyland” (Baudrillard 25). With regard to Baudrillard’s understanding of reality, Soja adds that “we no longer have to pay to enter these worlds of the ‘real fake’ [such as Disney] for they are already with us in the normal course of our daily lives, in our homes and workplaces, in how we choose to be informed and entertained” (19). Hence, the ‘real fake’ now is everywhere. In the same way, in her essay *Aquí América Latina*, Josefina Ludmer coins the term *realidadficción* (47). According to Ludmer, in our contemporary world reality is fiction, and fiction becomes reality.

In literature the postmodern derives from the (Hegelian) question of the death of art, Juárez states. Because when the world itself is no more than an ‘artificial construct’ (or reality being entirely a ‘simulacre’) the believe in the power of literature or art weakens:

La concepción positivista de la ciencia, cuya influencia se había dejado sentir en la literatura realista y modernista, que entra en crisis a partir de la inclusión de la idea del azar en las teorías científicas y el proceso de descentramiento de las identidades, consideradas construcciones lingüísticas, hace desarrollarse la que ya era una idea moderna, la pérdida de confianza en que la literatura pueda representar el mundo, porque el propio mundo no es más que el constructo artificial que percibimos de él: un *simulacro* (Montoya chapter 2).

Ludmer likewise calls attention to the question of the ‘end’ of art: “[e]l fin del movimiento hacia adelante, el fin del tiempo, no solo es el fin de un relato sino el fin de una historia de la literatura y del arte” (91). ‘Global’ time is apocalyptic; it announces the ‘end’ of many things such as “el fin del futuro, de la historia, de la utopía, del significante, de la literatura y de la clase obrera” (91). Ludmer in one sentence pronounces many ends, including the end of (‘autonomous’) literature. She introduces a new label for the contemporary literature³⁵ she speaks of in her essay: *literatura postautónoma*. Postautonomous literature is of a ‘global’ order, no longer looking at past or future, but *referring to a reality that itself is “constructed by media, technology and science”*, or, that is itself fiction: “la realidad cotidiana no es la realidad histórica referencial y verosímil del pensamiento realista y de su historia política y social” (151). This new reality

no quiere ser representada *porque ya es pura representación*: un tejido de palabras e imágenes de diferentes velocidades, grados y densidades, interiores-exteriores a un sujeto, que incluye el acontecimiento pero también lo virtual, lo potencial, lo mágico y lo fantasmático. ‘La realidad cotidiana’ de las escrituras postautónomas, exhibe, como en una exposición universal o en un muestrario global de una web, todos los realismos históricos, sociales, mágicos, los costumbrismos, los surrealismos y los naturalismos. Absorbe y fusiona toda la mimesis del pasado para constituir la ficción o las ficciones del presente. Una ficción que es la ‘realidad. (Ludmer 151-152, my emphasis).

According to Ludmer one does not know – and nor does it matter – whether those ‘postautonomous’ writings can be called literature or not, for their very ‘function’ or meaning is to help to create the present: “se instalan localmente en una realidad cotidiana para *fabricar presente* y ese es precisamente su sentido” (149 my emphasis). Ludmer is turning reality itself into a mere representation – and in doing so precisely does what Kohan disturbs: reducing every representation itself to a mere ‘simulacro’.³⁶ For Ludmer, it seems, the (political and cultural) cause of literature losing its autonomy, then, has to be found in this ‘overabundance’ or excess of images and space that Augé already pointed toward. The excess of images generated by globalization (television, cyberspace and now also internet) reinforces the quest for meaning, the difficulty of grasping a general image of our present when everything seems fragmented and disconnected.

³⁵ Her ‘Sistema Literario Argentino’, as she calls it, looks at contemporary, national novels, mainly written or published in the year 2000 (87).

³⁶ See the first part of Chapter 1; Kohan points at the theoretical stance that looks at reality itself as a mere representation (a ‘simulacro’) (in Benjamin’s case: all too easily reading the city as text and the text as city).

In her essay Ludmer ‘speculates’ (as she calls it herself) about temporalities, space and literature in Buenos Aires in the year 2000 (the year just before the Argentinean economic crisis sets in). She makes a division between the sorts of ‘literatures’ she reads in that typical ‘apocalyptic year’ while distinguishing between national temporalities and global temporalities (91). Consequently, she designs a categorization³⁷ of Argentinean contemporary writers based on temporalities and space (87). Ludmer contextualizes Aira’s novel *La villa* as *literatura postautónoma* (132, 134). In a novel like this there remains nothing more than “un puro presente formal eterno que está como afuera y adentro del tiempo a la vez” (91). It refers foremost towards itself before (or at the same time) it looks at reality and the outside world, consequently “habla de su propio fin” (91).³⁸

Literatura postautónoma is marked by what Ludmer calls “la destemporalización del presente” (91). This notion implicates a time ‘undone’ from time: a present that no longer is understood in a temporal context with a past and a future. The present becomes perpetual, an eternal present. With regard to literature, this means that novels can no longer be fundamentally interested in history (or future) nor can they be politically (or socially) engaged. By departing from the notion that reality itself is a mere representation – or, that “ficción y que ficción es la realidad” this implies that literature has, naturally, less to ‘say’ or that it loses its meaning for it is part of what constitutes that reality (a fiction) (151). But is it true that Aira is only writing about this ‘eternal present’, speaking and only referring towards itself, something that would also justify calling his literature overtly postmodern?

I hold on to Kohan’s idea that there remains a difference between what is and what is not literature. Some texts do have more to say than others, and thus also ‘maintain’ their autonomy. Kohan is agitated by one of Ludmer’s definitions of ‘posliteratura’: Ludmer states that it does not matter whether writings are literature (literary) or not - or, as Kohan says, whether we deal with good or bad literature. In Kohan’s opinion Ludmer should distinguish between a crisis of the (literary) institution and esthetics. She does not go into the notion of “l’art pour l’art” nor the protest of the vanguardia who wants to “reunite art with life”.³⁹ In Aira’s case this is particularly troublesome, I think, for Aira considers himself to be writing in

³⁷ Attention has to be paid to the fact that this is a rather personal, and maybe even arbitrary, distinction. As she admits herself, her system is a “sistema hecho de tiempos y de visibilidades”, without a centre nor a periphery, without a bottom or a top (89).

³⁸ “El fin del movimiento hacia adelante, el fin del tiempo, no solo es el fin de un relato sino el fin de una historia de la literatura y del arte” (Ludmer 91).

³⁹ See Martin Kohan (Sobre Postautonomía 2013) p.312

a “vanguard” tradition.⁴⁰ That is why I think it would be bold to state that Aira’s novels - which indeed are very much interested in the creation of its own narratives⁴¹ – do not have to say anything about external (social) reality or the time and space we live in. Even though his literature tells us about a present ‘undone’ from time (or awareness of historical time), it still, then, speaks of that very (eternal) present we live in - just as Ludmer shows herself by taking Aira’s novel *La villa* as an example.

Moreover, for a reader not familiar with Argentinean history, politics or social reality - and more specifically with regard to the capital Buenos Aires – Aira’s novels are not easy to take hold of. Aira makes numerous and direct references to specific places (restaurants, supermarkets, the unfinished buildings, squares and even television series) in the city, something that accounts for, instead of a global, a highly *local* element of his work. Hence, it is important to observe that Ludmer’s labelling of a novel as *La villa* as ‘global’ literature is a categorization within the context of contemporary Latin American and Argentinean literature and critique. Within this context she is indeed right in claiming that Aira’s work is of a different order than for example the popular, historical novels in Argentina, which continue to be obsessed with history and nation.

Aira’s inventions – la Patri, Ferdie, Maxi or the nameless protagonist from *El mármol* - are undeniably living in a sort of eternal present. Space is intrinsically tied up with time; as if both concepts were equal to each other and time were space and vice versa. But the people in it transform and ‘dislocate’ space, even travel *on* and *in* the images. In the end space itself – as Lefebvre and Soja point out – remains a sort of ‘palimpsest’, it is historical, social, political at the same time and, most important, experienced in different ways by different subjects. Space – and also Aira’s literary space – necessarily also contains local elements and is bound up with time rather than being *merely* global and virtual.

Finally, Ludmer is right in stressing the fact that images (or fiction) play a great role in also Aira’s novel. To the concept of Lefebvre’s idea of *lived* space – recasted by Soja - and space as something that becomes produced, we can indeed connect Ludmer’s term *realidadficción*.⁴² This notion is a logical coinage considering Ludmer’s idea of the mutual influence between fiction and reality. It describes how the public imaginary is at the same time influenced and ‘constructed’ by audiovisual media, novels and fiction and how literature (or art more generally speaking) becomes affected by postmodern reality. Reality and fiction

⁴⁰ La Nueva Escritura

⁴¹ Or, “autoreflexiva” (Montoya 2007: 888).

⁴² *Aquí América Latina: Una Especulación* (2010): 47.

become interwoven to such a degree that the boundaries between them start to blur. Our spatial reality (besides being material, anthropological, geographical etc.) is ultimately also a fiction: (to speak in Lefebvre's terms) we construct it and are at the same time a 'product' of it (*lived space*). The concept of space itself is therefore equally a *realidadficción*.

1.3 'Belated' Argentina and globalization

How does space relate to this 'eternal present' that Ludmer finds in a novel as *La villa*? After looking at temporalities in literature, Ludmer turns to a spatial perspective. She rather speaks of territory (*territorio*) instead of space and of the subjects (*sujetos, cuerpos*) that cross these territories.⁴³ Ludmer's territory encompasses the concept of *isla urbana*. Ludmer points out that this concept can also be used as a literary concept. It is "un adentroafuera verbal y narrativo, y no solamente social y humano" (134).

Territory is a "noción abstractoconcreta", (...) una delimitación del espacio y una noción electrónica-geográfica-económica-social-cultural-política-estética-legal-afectiva-de género-y-de sexo, todo al mismo tiempo" (122). In this sense, Ludmer's conception of territory to some extent resembles that of Lefebvre's *lived space* for they are both politically and socially motivated concepts. Lefebvre's "Third worlds can be found at all scales, in the corpo-reality of the body and mind, in sexual subjectivity, in individual and collective identities from the most local to the most global. They are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation" (Soja 68). Yet, the *isla urbana* appears to the opposite of this political lived space; the urban island – somewhat like Augé's non-place - is no longer historical or related to identity. History and subversion occur only inside the (social) city (Ludmer 131). The urban island is "un espacio final" with a "límite de significación" (133).

Aira's stories very often take place in Argentina and a great deal of his narratives are placed in the city of Buenos Aires. Not only the typical *porteño* neighborhoods or *barrios*, but also the notorious *villas* (the shantytowns) play a spatial role in his work. The *villas miseria* in Buenos Aires have rapidly grown over the last two decades. This development adds to an incredible fragmentation of the city, and apart from the fact that it alters the geography and spaces of Buenos Aires, naturally it also involves cultural and social changes for people

⁴³ Ludmer (2010): "La imaginación territorial en América Latina tiene una historia, que en el siglo XX constituye a los clásicos: Borges con las orillas, Rulfo con Comala, Onetti con Santa María, García Márquez con Macondo" (122).

on both an individual and collective level.⁴⁴ It is thus not surprising that Ludmer looks specifically at Aira's novel entitled *La villa* since it represents one of the many 'urban islands' in the city.⁴⁵

What marks the spaces of contemporary Latin American literature, Ludmer argues, is an ambiguous conception of what is or finds itself inside or outside. In those spaces one is at the same time *adentro y afuera*. The shantytown is such a place: "se puede entrar: tiene límites pero está abierta, como si fuera pública" (Ludmer 131). Nevertheless, those boundaries are blurry because everybody can enter this space, yet at the same time not everybody can. Contrary to the luxury condominium or country clubs where only the house-owners and people of high-class enter⁴⁶, the shantytown, in principle, is not excluding those who do not live there. However, these boundaries are, as it were metaphorical - for they are built out of fear. As will become clear, in Aira's novels diffuse boundaries recur in different forms, hence not only in the shape of a shantytown.

When speaking of space, the discussion on what globalization means in the context of contemporary Latin America certainly has some relevance. It is necessary to look shortly at the very extended debate⁴⁷ on the supposed 'belated' modernity in Latin America and more particularly in Argentina in order to better understand the notion of globalization. George Yúdice called attention to the fact that critics in relation to Argentina, and in extension to Latin America, often spoke of a "pseudo-modernidad" instead of postmodernismo. Postmodernism could not be spoken of in relation to Argentina when modernism itself had never even really arrived. "La única modernidad", in Argentina, "es la del retraso" critics such as Carlos Waisman stated (Yúdice 105). Andrés Avellaneda in addition claimed that – speaking of the literary field – young, postmodern Argentinean writers hence could merely wrote "copias, simulacros" of Western genres (105).

Even the *present* itself may, in a way, not have arrived yet in Latin America, claims Idelber Avelar. The present of the countries in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Uruguay, Chile), he states, is *untimely* – which may be interpreted as premature, or, inopportune. This means that the problem for these countries resides not only in coming to terms with their past.

⁴⁴ See Sarlo in: Huyssen (p 48)

⁴⁵ Ludmer indicates that all kinds of places "can function as islands"; buildings, rooms, and other places marked by "precise borders" (130).

⁴⁶ See Jordi Borja (2003): 190-192

⁴⁷ The very extended debate which goes back to the eighties on belated modernity or postmodernity in Latin America: e.g. George Yúdice (1988); Carlos Rincón (1989); Beverly and Oviedo (1995); Avelar, Idelber (1999). Beatriz Sarlo (1994), Santiago Colás (1994), Francine Masiello (2001); Idelber Avelar (1999), Beatriz Sarlo (2008);); David Antonio Muíno Barreiro (2012).

They also need to define their position in the new present which is “ushered in by the military regimes: a global market in which every corner of social life has been commodified” (Avelar 1). “The dictatorship’s *raison d’être* was the physical and symbolic elimination of all resistance to the implementation of market logic” (Avelar 1).⁴⁸

In his work *Modernity at Large* (2005) Appadurai looks at the cultural dimension of globalization. He asks “what is new about globalization” and explores how “the interconnectedness of migration and modern mass media affects the imagination and defines notions of neighborhood, nation and nationhood” (Oonk 157). Electronic mediation and mass migration impel the work of imagination, and “together create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation” (Appadurai 4). In view of the fact that both mass media and migration play a role in Aira’s short novels, we can dwell on his claim that the relationship between “mass-mediated events and migratory audiences defines the core of the link between globalization and the modern” (4).

Appadurai introduces five “-scapes” – which constitute the different “dimensions of global cultural flows” – and consequently one of them is the “mediascape” (33). This is one of the building blocks of the globalized ‘imagined worlds’ in which many people live in today.⁴⁹ Today, viewers are no longer tied to a specific local or national place and images circulate everywhere (4). Moreover, people are always travelling, migrating, moving or else have a friend who comes home with ‘stories’. Consequently, he speaks of the ‘work of the imagination’ - a “space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practice of the modern” (4). Appadurai’s work appears to some extent ethically motivated since he also speaks of the imagination as a “staging ground for action” (7).

This is a quite positive view compared to other globalization theory. One of the most obvious effects from the processes of globalization, Saskia Sassen (2000) argues, is “the production of new spatialities and temporalities” (215). In the same way, Zygmunt Bauman (1999) points towards the ‘compression of time and space’ and argues that “la globalización divide en la misma medida que une: las causas de la división son las mismas que promueven la uniformidad del globo” (8). Instead of having a (possible) emancipatory power, media and television produce different ‘temporalities’ and ‘spatialities’ for everyone and create therefore also (social) division:

⁴⁸ In a paper written under the supervision of Prof. Rigney I investigated this concept of untimeliness and premature modernity (“Memory and Amnesia in Post-Pinochet Chile: The Unwillingness to Remember in the Private and Public Sphere” 2012).

⁴⁹ Inspired by Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (Appadurai 33).

Segregados y separados sobre la Tierra, los locales conocen a los globales a través de las transmisiones televisadas desde el cielo. Los ecos del encuentro reverban globalmente, ahogan todos los sonidos locales a la vez que se reflejan en las paredes locales, cuya solidez impenetrable, semejante a la de una prisión, queda con ello revelada y reforzada (73).

For people of the ‘first’ world, “el espacio no rige”, for they can cover any distance instantaneously. They live in a perpetual present, “atravesan una sucesión de episodios higiénicamente aislados (...) siempre ‘escasos de tiempo’”(116). While “las personas atascadas en el mundo opuesto están aplastados bajo el peso de un tiempo abundante, innecesario e inútil, en el cual no tienen nada que hacer” (117). In Aira’s work mass media and migration play a significant, thematic role. Contemporary Buenos Aires is characterized partly by migration from China and Korea, a relatively recent development, as also Sarlo points out (49). In Aira the theme of migration is ‘depicted’ by the Chilean migrants in *Los fantasmas* and the Chinese community in Buenos Aires (*La guerra de los gimnasios, El mármol*).

In Aira’s urban setting rich and poor encounter each other and are all influenced by the same media, however they live in an intrinsic different world, ruled by different ‘temporalities’. Departing from the idea of a modernity that had ‘never really arrived’ – but was ‘artificially’ imposed by dictators such as Pinochet and the Argentinean militaries during the Dirty War, it is not strange that globalization causes tensions within the country, the city and even a neighborhood (*Flores*) itself. As ‘modernization was ushered in’ it caused great incongruities for the inhabitants both on an economic and cultural level.⁵⁰

In the collective volume *Other Cities, Other Worlds* (2008) Andreas Huyssen puts together a range of essays that all deal with cities - and their “urban imaginaries” - of the non-Western world, such as São Paulo, Istanbul and Buenos Aires.⁵¹ The attention for these different urban imaginaries should help to “dislocate accounts of modernity from the West” (Huyssen 2). Huyssen wants to move away from the idea that modernity is merely a western phenomenon that influenced the former colonies in a unilateral way; the ‘global’ thus simply imposing itself on the ‘local’.⁵² In the same way Appadurai explains that the globalized world

⁵⁰ Chile’s contemporary distribution of wealth is for example one of the most unequal of the world. (Jan de Kievid, “Neo-liberalisme en Onderwijs in Chili” www.lachispa.eu, 21.18h, 25-10-2011.)

⁵¹ “In the wake of Charles Taylor’s use of the term social imaginary and Henri Lefebvre’s argument about the social production of space, the notion of urban imaginaries has become quite commonplace”, Huyssen states (5).

⁵² Huyssen (in *Public culture*, 2000) : “Indeed, questions of discrepant temporalities and differently paced modernities have emerged as key to new and rigorous understandings of the long-term processes of globalization, which supplant rather than merely adjust Western modernization paradigms” (22).

should no longer be divided into traditional and modern societies or cultures. The world “has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models” (Appadurai 32). Warf and Arias take up the term glocalization and confirm that “as numerous scholars have shown, globalization does not play out identically in different places (..); rather, context matters, and the incorporation of unique places into the global division of labor changes not only those locales, but the world system as well. Glocalization, therefore, is a two-way street” (5).

In this view, then, it becomes also problematical to regard Latin America’s modernity as ‘belated’, for it departs from the typically Western (and teleological) notion that necessarily alludes to the (old-fashioned, imperialist) idea of a centre that still exercises his power onto the periphery, thus, the process of modernization as a one-way-street. Additionally, Montoya quoting Volek, points out that “el contexto posmoderno es más propicio para la reinención de la identidad latinoamericana; porque fue mucho más difícil, para el latinoamericanismo, buscar una identidad a través de conceptos importados que lo colocaban en posición de inferioridad” (Montoya 2007, 888). This is opposed to Avellaneda’s notion that Latin American writers could only write copies of Western novels, for Volek points towards the ‘liberating’ power postmodernism in Latin America can have.

Considering, then, Aira’s literature not within the context of specifically Latin American critique, but from the broader, social and cultural debate on globalization and postmodernism, one could indeed regard his writings as (literary) examples that depict this ‘glocalization’; they speak of a specific modernity, no longer a modernity that is opposed to European modernity, but of its own, particular “urban imaginery”. Aira ‘creates’ space on various levels; he produces fictional spaces in his novels (such as the gym, the supermarket, the shantytown) and although those spaces remain fiction, they are directly *inspired* by the spatial reality of Buenos Aires. The characters inhabit an environment that continues to be local - but influenced by television programs, soaps, and migrants who come to live in their city and change the urban space. Aira’s Buenos Aires’ is an inherently *glocal* urban imaginery.

1.4 Benjamin in Buenos Aires

In *Aquí América* the Argentinean writer Hector Libertella speaks with Ludmer about Buenos Aires and refers to the remark of a Spanish friend that he never has met people which so much “densidad urbana”. Libertella ponders over this remark which he finds striking. What would that mean, *densidad urbana*? (109 my emphasis). “Acaso habrá querido decir que hay algo

como una prótesis o un fantasma de ciudad encarnado en cada uno de nosotros?” (109). Then Libertella goes on to consider the centre in the city that used to be rich, full of bookstores, and were it was as if one could take a cab directly to Paris – making an allusion to the former ‘grandeur’ or spirit of Buenos Aires that was similar to city such as Paris. Everything was hypermodern and seemed to anticipate “un mundo por venir”. Although, he asks between parenthesis “(habrá llegado alguna vez)”? (Ludmer 110).

Belated or not, (‘European’) modernity in some way also arrived to Buenos Aires (or, as it is often called the ‘most European city of Latin America’).⁵³ The allusion to Paris, to the city as ‘palimpsest’ and to remembrance leads inevitably to Benjamin, his city writings, the flâneur or the “*mémoire involontaire*”. With regard to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* Susan Buck-Morss relates how the covered shopping arcades of the nineteenth century were “the first international style of modern architecture, hence part of the lived experience of a worldwide, metropolitan generation”. The arcades were imitated throughout the world; “(..) from Buenos Aires to Melbourne” (40).

The writings about Paris are predominant in Benjamin’s theory on the city, states Argentinean critic Martín Kohan, however, there does not exist *one* theory on *the* city in general, nor is Benjamin solely preoccupied by Paris (15). According to Kohan, Benjamin studied an “imaginary and impossible city that at least was constituted by four cities”: Paris, Moscow, Naples and Berlin. If there is one city in Benjamin, he contends, it is this multiple and non-existing city, a “zone made up of other cities” (16).

Kohan makes a point out of demonstrating how all four cities influenced Benjamin’s urban thinking and how notions such as the flâneur, memory (of childhood) or the gaze of the traveller are connected to this imaginary urban zone. He points towards Beatriz Sarlo who gives a “clear warning” when it comes to critics making extensive abuse of “benjaminian concepts” such as the flâneur, for example in an article called significantly “Olvidar a Benjamin” (1995). Kohan’s undertaking is foremost preoccupied by showing how Benjaminian theory is sometimes misunderstood and read as a theory on ‘the’ city while ultimately each city in Benjamin presents a particular way of ‘thinking’ the city (e.g. Berlin being the city of Benjamin’s childhood, thus of memory and remembrance). Yet, those four particular cities were ultimately just the cities that marked Walter Benjamin’s (spatial) life experience and, *coincidentally* “had become points of his intellectual compass” (Buck-Morss 40 my emphasis).

⁵³ “Argentine culture is deeply embedded in translation, but the idioms it translates derive from almost every point of Western Europe” (Sarlo 29).

For that reason, instead of looking at theory on one city in particular I will depart precisely from Kohan's *zona urbana* or the imaginary, Benjaminian city – in the end also an invent or (theoretical) construct by Kohan himself. While appropriating the benjaminian concepts such as flâneur, at the same time I will exactly do what Sarlo proposed and partly, then, 'forget Benjamin' for I shall use the notion of the flâneur anyhow and thus dislocate it. Flâneur as a concept is very fruitful and can be displaced and used in other and new contexts, yet always keeping Benjamin's original ideas in sight. As I will argue that Aira's novels actually do display more local (and even more typically modern) elements - although they at first sight may appear to be plainly postmodern and global – this displacement of the concept of flâneur now may be deemed reasonable.

The non-place is no longer historical, relational or anthropological (Augé 77-78). Accordingly the wanderer, spectator, subject - or just as well the 'flâneur' of non-places (or of contemporary space) - is no longer necessarily linked to the modern flâneur of Benjamin, for now, he is 'without' or 'free from history', he is wandering through an eternal present. In relation to spatial theory, there is need for a subject that moves and transforms the (literary) spaces and instead of calling this particular subject constantly the character, subject or another similar term I will continue to make use of the concept of flâneur. This concept also gives way to other terms related to the idea of flâneur, such as the flâneur as detective and the different 'gazes' or perspectives such as that of the child.

From now on, the notion of flâneur is used in a specific context. The 'flâneur aireano/a', stands for the fictional character of Aira's novels carrying names such as Ferdie, Maxi, Rosa or La Patri. Nevertheless, we will not lose Benjamin out of sight neither forget his "general urban outlook" as Kohan warns anyone using this Benjaminian concepts (15). I will maintain that Aira's fictional characters are almost all (reinvented) flâneurs, maybe not so much postmodern flâneurs, but contemporary flâneurs of Aira's fictional, urban imaginary. If it is true, as Ludmer tries to demonstrate, that the subjects of the Latin American cities – "ciudades brutalmente divididas" - are at the same time outside society (*isla urbana*) and inside the (social) city (131), then it is necessary to see whether the borders between these different worlds exists, in what kind of forms, whether they can be crossed and by who and if this division eventually also implies a 'being in time' and 'being outside time'?

Contemporary cities consist of different, isolated islands, Ludmer indicates; "edificios, habitaciones y otros espacios que funcionan como islas, con límites precisos. (..) "Los habitantes de la isla (los personajes que la narración puede multiplicar, fracturar y vaciar) parecen haber perdido la sociedad o algo que la representa en la forma de familia, clase,

trabajo, razón y ley, y a veces de nación” (130-131). Thinking of Baudelaire’s flâneur or De Certeau’s notion of the flâneur’s ‘view from above’, we can ask from where this contemporary ‘flâneur aireano/a’ is looking. Since the specific social, Latin American reality is of a complete different order (than nineteenth century Paris, for example) - marked by cultural, social and economic class differences and divisions – the different subjects might be looking also from different positions. This different position may be one of inside/outside – as Ludmer already indicated, instead of a view from below or above. The ‘eternal present’, a temporality characteristic of the *islas urbanas*, also affects life outside the urban islands. Ludmer contends that our (present) time is an “utopía” and that this utopic time is a “suerte de no-lugar” (Ludmer 94). I therefore want to see how this ‘time equalled to non-place’ affects Aira’s subjects.

As will become clear, Aira’s characters indeed are sometimes migrants or ‘marginal’ figures (*cirujas, cartoneros*). Most of the protagonists however (Maxi, Ferdie) are similar to the modern flâneur with leisure time. Maxi, Ferdie, but also the nameless man of *El mármol* are people from the Argentinean middle-class and all enter into contact with the more ‘marginal’ figures of the city. Benjamin is particularly interested in the minutiae and marginalia of the urban setting” He gives voice to the “periphera, the experiences of those whom modern forms of order strive to render silent and invisible (Gilloch 7;9). Aira makes his protagonists live an ordinary, daily life that suddenly becomes disrupted or transformed, foremost by the encounter with the ‘other’.

When dislocating Benjamin’s notion, however, one cannot avoid the question whether such a concept can actually be displaced. It accounts for the tension provoked by using a quite ‘modern’ concept in a ‘postmodern’ context. It is indispensable to reflect on what it means to apply such a concept - useful in relation to spatial thinking – in a postmodern context in which Aira’s writings, as pointed out above, are situated most of the time. Rémon-Raillard concludes that Aira’s work is a work in constant movement; “por un lado debido a su producción incesante y por otro porque está en pleno proceso de erigirse en paradigma de algo que todavía carece de nombre pero que el nuevo milenio quizás le dará” (63). She also points a finger to a specific aspect of Aira’s literary characters and explains it by connecting it to another characteristic of Aira’s novels; as Aira fairly often declares some apocalyptic ‘end’ (of Argentina, of the world) his narratives - as indicated before – are marked by continuity and transformation, something that has its impact on the characters:

El fin del mundo como retorno a una situación inicial implica hacer tabla rasa de todo lo conocido y aprendido abriéndose así el camino de la innovación. Dentro de esta perspectiva la tipología del personaje airano corresponde a los imperativos de la innovación. Soñador, inadecuado con respecto a su entorno, en conflicto perpetuo con su cuerpo y sus sentimientos, el personaje airano *deambula* en la ficción realizando una trayectoria de iniciación marcada por las típicas inquietudas humanas: la relación con los progenitores, el amor y la búsqueda de la identidad propia (Rémon-Raillard 57 my emphasis)

Aira, on the one hand does not appear to be interested at all in actual, ‘real’ problems, but first and foremost in the process of creation (and literature) itself. Yet on the other hand, neither does he ignore or show an indifference towards the societal problems of Argentina; on the contrary, Aira has a great attention for contemporary Argentinean reality. Rémon-Raillard - although she states not to know where to locate Aira - is aware of this; “[e]s cierto que la literatura de Aira no se caracteriza, dados sus temas algo estrambóticos, por ser un reflejo directo o una denuncia abierta de cierta realidad nacional. De hecho, Aira rechaza la llamada literatura comprometida así como rehuye de la novela histórica. Sin embargo, sus novelas no dejan de reflejar, a su modo, *cierta realidad argentina*” (55 my emphasis). Just as Montoya vaguely states, as outlined above, that Aira writes “desde una lógica de un *cierto* posmodernismo” (Montoya 2010: 138 my emphasis) we should try to understand how we might conceive of space and time in Aira’s novels and what it makes so particular.

2. The Map: *Aira's Urban Space*

2.1 *Isla urbana*

Buenos Aires “invented itself from scratch”, Beatriz Sarlo states (31). It is a city characterized by a “historical vacuum”: in the Río de la Plata region the Spanish colony was poor “and did not flourish in the style of baroque artifice of the great viceregal capitals of the New World such as Lima, Bogotá or Mexico”. On this ground - that was deprived of much of the “rich documents of colonial history” – a city was constructed almost entirely according to the rigid, “geometric principle of the urban grid” (30-31). In the twentieth century visitors were surprised by the strange city that seemed very monotonous and “avoided all picturesque beauty” (31).

Buenos Aires is also a city almost entirely made up of immigrants; especially in the beginning of the twentieth century many people migrated to Argentina. This triggered the search and creation of a new identity, a “cultural internationalization of a Latin American country” (Sarlo 39). Sarlo points out how this identity process was therefore at the same time a process of internationalization and a process of compulsory nationalization, “both faces of the same reality”. Radio, soccer, journals and tango provided the fundamentals for – in Benjamin Anderson’s term- the (modern) imagined community. The fundamentals for Argentina’s ‘imagined community’ thus were different from that of other Latin American countries which were more connected their a pre-columbian past. Hence, the country and city had to invent ‘itself from scratch’.

Yet, after building that community it unfortunately also had to ‘dissolve’ again; with the introduction of mass society and mass culture the development of Buenos Aires also started to generate discontent. Suddenly the masses were a “menacing shadow”. Those masses were no longer only formed “by the children of the immigrants (which began to constitute their better part)”, Sarlo says, “but by the new immigrants, coming from the backwards regions of Andean Argentina. These new masses invaded the city and lived in *villas miserias* near it” (42).

Peronism set foot in this context, Sarlo says, in a “predominantly white city even though it was occupied daily by workers of mestizo origin, who lived in the outskirts” (42). Finally, the military dictatorship was responsible for an “authoritarian modernization” and

expelled the poor from the city, moving them, through compulsory relocations, to the worst suburban zones; they consolidated material differences that divided the rich from the poor; they technologized the city grid and

services, abandoning, at the same time, what had been a balanced pattern of distribution, transportation, and access; they sorted out the traits of a new communications and urban profile that responded to economic globalization and followed, without interference, the interests of concentrated capital (Sarlo 43).

This has turned contemporary Buenos Aires into a “broken city”, a fragmented city, Sarlo states. “Argentina’s economic crisis (a typical globalized cul-de-sac) is to be held responsible for the darker accents of the city” (44, 45). It is also against this (temporal and spatial) background that Ludmer analyzes the interwovenness of fiction and reality (*realidad/ficción*) in Argentina and looks in particular at literature from 2001, a year that she regards as a breakpoint because of the ‘apocalyptic’ elements it held.

Not without reason Ludmer chooses to read *La villa* (2001), at first sight maybe the most ‘postmodern’ novel of all novels dealt with in this analysis and strikingly also regarded as typically ‘realist’. As the title of her article indicates, Speranza (2005) speaks of “realismo idiota”: César Aira (..) es bien mirado un realista. (..) Ahí esta (..) para demostrarlo, su novelita *La villa*, inmersa desde el título en el paisaje más asuciante de nuestra realidad social, la villa miseria, sensible desde la primera línea a la condensación más flagrante de la crisis argentina, las huestas de cirujas en la calles de Buenos Aires, cuya reproducción geométrica Aira en el 2001 parece profetizar” (5).

Indeed, *La villa* pictures quite ‘realistically’ a part of this fragmented city. As in most novels, Aira makes his stories take place mainly in the *barrio* of Flores. With respect to this spatial setting Mbaye speaks in fact of Aira’s “mapping” of the Flores *barrio* (55). The shantytown to which the title refers is part of the “villas miserias del Bajo de Flores”, situated near the place where the protagonist Maxi lives (“en la esquina de Bonorino y Bonifacio”) (14). Aira refers in great detail to the geographical environment (mentioning streetnames, such as the big avenue Rivadavia), something that amounts to the so-called ‘realism’ of the novel.

Ludmer connects her notion of *isla urbana* to *La villa* (among other novels from other writers). What marks the urban island according to Ludmer is an ambiguity about its position in the city (or, alternatively, the society or the nation); it is at the same time “afuera-adentro” (135). In a place like the shantytown “se puede entrar: tiene límites pero está abierta, como si fuera pública”. The *isla urbana* is a “territorio físico pero también un yo o una institución: la isla es un mundo con reglas, leyes y sujetos específicos (..) los límites o cesuras identifican a la isla como zona exterior/interior: como territorio adentro de la ciudad (y por ende la sociedad) y a la vez afuera, en la división misma” (Ludmer 131). Ludmer’s idea of *isla*

urbana hence exceeds the geographical and urban space as she also uses it more metaphorically.⁵⁴ In her notes she refers among other critics to Davis (2006) and Virilio (2004). But obviously she also lends her concept from urban studies that equally is interested in the notion of being in- or outside (inclusion or exclusion). En *La Ciudad Conquistada* (2003), Jordi Borja affirms that “[e]n *la ciudad actual*, el proceso de metropolización difusa fragmenta la ciudad en zonas *in* y zonas *out*, se especializan o se degradan las áreas centrales y se acentúa la zonificación funcional y la segregación social. La ciudad se disuelve y pierde su capacidad integradora” (205).

Ludmer calls the shantytown in *La villa* explicitly an example of the urban island in literature; this concept of *isla urbana* appears to apply quite effortlessly to Aira’s *villa* for it evokes easily the ‘real’ *villas miserias* in Buenos Aires, hence, the shantytown as a social and economic concept and problem. The *villa*⁵⁵ in *La villa* obviously continues to be fiction. What is interesting is to look at how in Aira this so-called ‘realist’ representation of spatiality and actual social problems is drawn, and, how it serves the narrative. Especially since Ludmer categorizes *La villa* and other contemporary novels as *literatura postautónoma*, or, literature that strongly speaks of an eternal present that is losing some of its former ‘modern’ autonomy and appeal. Its ability to ‘speak’ or ‘comment on reality’ for “reality is fiction and fiction is reality”, as if there were not any difference between them.⁵⁶ The *villa* (in the novel) can be regarded as a representation of space, or, as (literary) ‘conceived’ space, as I do not beforehand reduce reality itself to a mere ‘simulacre’.

The protagonist of *La villa*, Maxi, is a young adolescent. At the end of the summer he begins to take walks after he finishes his workout in the gym. People who see him walking would immediately think he is a “patovica”, “una montana de músculos sin cerebro” – and they are not far from the truth, Aira adds (8). There is no clear cause or reason why Maxi takes on his new occupation but in any case he does not have a real plan for the future nor does he know what he should ‘become’; he starts to help out the *cartoneros* with carrying the

⁵⁴ For example, the Argentinean ‘piqueteros’ who “están afuera del trabajo (y en ese sentido la sociedad) y totalmente adentro de la ciudad (que es lo social) porque lo ocupan y lo manejan como propia” (145).

⁵⁵ *Villa* is the Rioplatense Spanish for ‘shantytown’

⁵⁶ See Kohan (2007): “el afán teórico de limitar la realidad a su representación y de limitar a su vez toda representación a un simulacro” (25). Baudrillard, Alison Landsberg says in her work *Prosthetic memory* (2004) - on media, mediation and remembrance- is preoccupied by the proliferation of the media that dissolve the relation between “the authentic and inauthentic”. Baudrillard presupposes “the existence of a real” which is actually of no importance; people’s relations to the past always have been mediated through representation and narrative” (Landsberg 32-33).

garbage they collect in his neighborhood.⁵⁷ Ludmer argues that the urban island has a “transversal” function for society; “it mixes at least two different classes”, or, many contemporary narrations place this social encounter at the centre of their story (132). However, this is a movement that can only start at the outside of the island and is directed inwards. “La subjetividad central” Ludmer speaks of is in this case Maxi (132). Maxi, as also Ludmer indicates, indeed is the subject which can move between this in- and outside and cross the borders to enter the shantytown.

Subsequently, Ludmer feels that this ‘central subjectivity’ crosses the border “impulsada por una necesidad o fuerza ciega (accidente-enfermedad- peste-hambre-sueño-sexo)” (132). Yet, the reason why particularly the innocent Maxi finally enters the shantytown is ambiguous. Maxi does not *need* anything from the people he meets, neither is he crazy, ill or is there anything in specific that *drives* him towards it. Maxi is undeniable a ‘dreamy’ character - like many characters of Aira.⁵⁸ Yet, paradoxically, he does not have or cherish any dreams. Quite the opposite; Maxi does not have a clue what to do with his life. Likewise, it is impossible to state that Maxi should have, then, any personal reasons or convictions – or even call him an idealist. Maxi “lo hizo por casualidad, naturalmente, al cruzarse con un niño o una mujer embarazada (..) sin poder mover casi una enorme bolsa, que él tomo de sus manos sin decir nada y levantó como si fuera una pluma y llevó hasta la esquina donde estaba el carrito” (10-11). Although he is helping the inhabitants of the shantytown every day, he is not an idealist, or even altruistic, character. I contend that nothing in particular motivates or drives Maxi, except simple curiosity. A frontier, border or margin has the intrinsic power to create curiosity and the desire to know what is behind it.

The shantytown in Aira’s *Flores* finds itself both ‘literally’ (in the novel) and metaphorically *inside* and *outside* the city. Its geographical location is at the margin of the city, yet, the transition (or passage) from outside-inside – or from the ‘city’ to the island – is diffuse and not clear. The following passage demonstrates well the vagueness surrounding the entrance to the shantytown:

La calle Bonorino, desde que nacía en Rivadavia, se llamaba en los carteles ‘Avenida’ Esteban Bonorino, y nadie sabía por qué, porque era una calle angosta como todas las demás. Todos pensaban que eran uno de esos frecuentes errores burocráticos, una confusión de los distraídos funcionarios que habían mandado a pintar los carteles sin haber pisado jamás el barrio. (..) Dieciocho cuadros más allá, pasando una cantidad de monoblocks y

⁵⁷ “Hundreds of homeless people roam the streets of Buenos Aires; hundreds work in the re-collecton of garbage” (Sarlo 45).

⁵⁸ See Rémon-Raillard (2003): p.57

depósitos y galpones y baldíos, donde parecía que la calle ya se había terminado, y donde ni llegaba el más persistente caminador, la calle Bonorino se ensanchaba transformándose en la avenida que prometía ser desde el comienzo. Pero no era el comienzo, sino el fin (17).

Precisely there where the big avenue seems to get shape, it ends. Avenues belong to the city; at the place where city becomes the divided *isla* – or, the shantytown – the avenue all of a sudden ceases to be avenue. Aira is showing how the passage from inside-outside is vague and uncertain, for Maxi does not know what to expect beyond this passage. This only increases his curiosity. The Bonorino street is a little street, with the ‘promise’ of an avenue. “The street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” says De Certeau (117). As Maxi walks the street, this place becomes space, it is ‘practiced’ or ‘lived’ and takes on a specific meaning. It is a metaphorical passage inside to outside, or, from the middle class city to the poor *isla urbana*. For Maxi it is the *end* – the margin – of his city and of his safe environment. For the people in the shantytown it is the *beginning* of the city or even (political, economic) society; they are forced to cross the border everyday in order to recollect the garbage they recycle and to make a living.

Yet, nothing of importance pushes Maxi towards the shantytown;

Maxi nunca había llegado hasta allí, pero se había acercado lo suficiente para verla, extrañadamente iluminada, en contraste con el tramo oscuro que debían atravesar, casi radiante, coronada de un halo que se desdibujaba en la niebla. Era casi como ver visiones, de lejos, y acentuaba esta impresión fantástica el estado de sus ojos y el sueño que ya lo abrumaba. A la distancia, y a esa hora, podía parecerle un lugar mágico, pero no era tan ignorante de la realidad como para no saber que la suerte de los que vivían allí estaba hecha de sordidez y desesperación” (18).

His curiosity even leads him to think of that strange, unknown place as a ‘magic place’. Maxi is standing at the exact border between two worlds and contemplating the landscape, as a tourist, a middle class young guy ‘travelling’ his neighborhood that apparently still holds so much mysteries to him. The little passage towards the shantytown is an empty street which merely functions as a ‘bridge’ or a transitional place (just as non-places as airports or train station are places of transition).

In this sense, Maxi experiences Bonorino as the non-place to which “movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude” and a “of taking up a position, the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, ‘strikes the pose’ and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and

sometimes melancholy pleasure” (Augé 87). Maxi is increasingly fascinated by the shantytown and strikes repeatedly this contemplating, wondering pose. He keeps helping out the *cirujas* and repeatedly returns to to the ‘entrance’ of the *villa*, to after a while finally enter there. The passage towards the villa exercises an attraction on Maxi: since he feels he cannot really cross it, the shantytown represents the unknown, it remains a mystery to him. Just as the tourist at the airport (a more typical non-place) does not know what awaits him at the other destination, Maxi is curious and eager to cross the frontier even though he does not know what he will see there.

Clearly, the shantytown is an element of the narrative that provides for all kinds of *movements* inside the novel. De Certeau⁵⁹ is making use of narrative and stories in order to better understand spatial practices: “The ways of ‘conducting’ a story offer (..) a very rich field for the analysis of spatiality” (123). De Certeau states that it is “the partition of space that structures it”: “Everything refers in fact to this differentiation which makes possible the isolation and interplay of distinct spaces. (..) from the home (..) to the journey (..) from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers”(123). In *La villa* it is not the *villa* itself, but the passage towards it that is at the centre of the narrative. The Bonorino Street is a metaphorical *bridge* that, when crossed, leads to another (isolated) world.

By considering the role of stories in delimitation, one can see the primary function is to *authorize* the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits, and as a consequence, to set in opposition within the closed field of discourse, two movements that intersect (setting and transgressing) in such a way as to make the story a sort of ‘crossword’ decoding stencil whose essential narrative figures seem to be the *frontier* and the *bridge* (De Certeau 123)

It is this delimitation that structures the overall narrative of the novel. Aira’s spatial landscape and the figure of the shantytown (understood as an *isla urbana*) function as a central element of the narrative around which all other side stories turn; Maxi carrying out his ‘job’, the police officer Cabezas who becomes suspicious (and curious) and follows Maxi on his walks. Additionally, also Maxi’s sister Vanessa and her friend Jessica eventually get involved in those former storylines.

Everytime when Maxi sees the shantytown from a distance he marvels at it, as if it definitely has something magic and mysterious about it; “la villa, brillando como una gema

⁵⁹“Spatial Stories” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall, 1993.

encendida por dentro. El espectáculo era tan extraño que se quedó inmóvil” (27). It is remarkable then, that the day Maxi finally enters the shantytown is ‘historical’ to him; “y al fin, en una noche histórica para él, llegó franquear los límites de la villa, a entrar unos pasos nada más aquella primera vez, *en ese reino encantado* donde no se escatimaba la luz” (29 my emphasis). The shantytown, or the isolated urban island takes on a surreal and magic element while at the same time reality and the harsh living conditions of the *villa* are never lost out of sight.

For Ludmer, “[l]a isla urbana constituye una comunidad que reúne a todas los demás; un grupo genérico de enfermos, locos, prostitutas, okupas, villeros, inmigrantes, rubios, mano de obra, monstruos o freaks. Están afuera y adentro al mismo tiempo: afuera de la sociedad, en la isla, y a la vez adentro de la ciudad, que es lo social, donde se demarcan nítidamente los niveles y ocurre la historia y también la ‘subversión’” (131). Continuing Ludmer’s sometimes rather blunt statements, “aquel que no puede vivir en sociedad (..) no puede ser nunca miembro del Estado; es un bruto o un dios” (Aristotle 41). Aira’s ‘subaltern’ characters are indeed often a migrants or people from the lower class. However the *isla urbana*, due to both its geographical and metaphorical location, has undeniably an ambiguous position (*afuera/adentro*), it is problematic to state that the isla is “afuera de la sociedad”; the island, although marked by segregation and isolation, also remains part of society.

There always seems to be a ‘bridge’ through which the people in the island stay connected with that society. The reason, then, that the connection between the two classes can be made only from someone outside the island inwards, and not the other way around, is the fact that the ‘inhabitants of the island’ *do* cross the bridges all the time. What is more, they enter the city (or ‘society’) very often, since they need to work. They are dependent of the work (collecting paper, cardboard etc.) that can only be done outside the urban island (the shantytown). Therefore they are dependent of this spatial movement that implicates the crossing of this frontier or bridge between two worlds. Maxi is clearly not. He is well aware of the reason why he and his friends never go that place with “tanta luz artificial”, “una iluminación de feria”:

Podía haber apostado que ninguno de sus conocidos del colegio, del gimnasio, del barrio, o amistades de sus padres o parientes, habían entrado nunca a una villa, ni entrarían. ¡Y estaba tan cerca! A la vuelta de su casa, podría decirse. De modo que no era gran cosa, pero a la vez si lo era. No entraba nadie que no perteneciera, por un solo motivo que cubría todos los demás: por miedo (31).

Aria connects his fiction to his thoughts about reality - fiction here turns into metafiction through which we enter the ‘third space’ of the novel. Obviously, it is the character Maxi who comments. He feels that he never really had a reason or motive to enter the shantytown, and then thinks that this reasoning must be “parte del miedo”. That very fear, he suddenly realizes is the key to all places, “los lugares sociales y también de todos los otros, incluidos los imaginarios. El miedo era la matriz de los lugares (31). While he wonders about this fact, “hubo una radical inversión de una creencia previa”, he always had thought that the people he was helping— and who always went their own ways at the entrance of the *villa* – did not ask him to enter out of *shame*. By an intervention from the narrator, we are pulled into the literary ‘third space’ again; how were these people going to be ashamed of showing Maxi their house, “después de haberse exhibido ante él hurgando en la basura y llevándosela para comer? Era una interpolación estúpida burguesa” (32). It has to be the other way around, Maxi thinks. He now ‘realizes’ that he was earning his way in by helping them carry their garbage for months. *They* had not judged *him* “digno, por bien vestido, por clase media, por señorito (..) Fue como una revelación para él” (32). Aira clearly makes alludes to the general fear that the *porteños* feel when it comes to the shantytowns or shady neighborhoods.⁶⁰ He ironically demonstrates how people may have prejudices and assumptions with regard to the *cartonero* or *ciruja*, the other they do not know.

Ludmer points out how inside the isla urbana everybody is ‘equal’. Once inside the *villa*, Maxi is welcomed by the inhabitants who then also speak with him when they are outside the shantytown. Being ‘located’ outside the city (or society), the territory of the *villa* “exhibe el mecanismo de la desdiferenciación: borra las divisiones sociales y también, casi borra la diferencia entre humanos y animales. Es lo que conecta y une y aparece como el fundamento de la sociedad naturalizada de la isla: un espacio final o límite de la significación, que no tiene más allá” (133).

Maxi, in a rather Borgesian way, is ‘imagining’ the shantytown as a labyrinth, a ‘hidden’ “ciudad de la pobreza *dentro* de la ciudad” that lives according to its own rules (33 my emphasis). Noticeably, Maxi also considers the urban island to be situated *inside* his city. He constantly mentions the incredible light in which the *villa* bathes and is highly fascinated by the ‘design’ of the shantytown. When Maxi ponders about the place from a distance one cannot fail to remark inside this apparently ‘realist’ account a small trace of romanticism or

⁶⁰ See Borja (166): Borja refers to the division of the city into a ‘formal’ sector and a ‘informal sector’ to which also the *villas* belong. Also see Thuillier: “El impacto socio-espacial de las urbanizaciones cerradas: el caso de la Región Metropolitana de Buenos Aires” (2005).

even exoticism; of a *desire* and longing to know what is beyond those lights and wondering who that other (Other) is.⁶¹ While beginning to read *La villa* the reader himself becomes increasingly curious about that strange place where life must be hard for the inhabitants, but, that with Aira eventually has the attraction of a weird *feria* or circus which one cannot resist to enter. But in making Maxi ‘strike a pose’ and marvel, Aira demystifies that very aura of strangeness and holds a mirror up to the reader or that very frightened society he is speaking to. Fear is the key to places, “also the imaginaries”. Fear triggers the imagination; it is indeed also *imagination* that ultimately creates places, that in a way constitutes them and “lo que hacía que hubiera lugares y uno pudiera moverse por ellos. Estar o no estar en uno dependía de un complejo sistema de acciones, y ya se sabe que el miedo nace y prospera en la acción”. (31)

This fear, as Aira writes in *El mármol*, often is a “supersticioso temor a la pobreza” (*El mármol* 68). As Soja shows in his ‘trialectics’, space is not only constituted by material aspects, nor is it merely a mental construct. It only comes into existence when it is *lived*, or, thinking of De Certeau, *practiced*. As long as the middle-class man does not cross this ‘borders’ (which also only really exist in their imagination, there is no institution who particularly refrains people to cross this imaginary limit) or come into contact with the other (*ciruja, cartonero*) the island also continues to be an (isolated) island. People themselves become ‘complicit’ in maintaining the social division. As long as a place remains unknown, fear can trigger imagination in a negative way.

For Maxi, however, less superstitious than others, the shantytown brings fantastical things to mind. Especially the abundance of light generates this magical atmosphere: “Maxi alzaba la vista hacia el interior con insistencia, y ya fuera ilusión, ya confusión, le parecía ver, rumbo al centro inaccesible, torres, cúpulas, castillos fantasmagóricos, muralla, pirámides, arboledas” (36). Aira is referring in a humorous and ironic way to Buenos Aires’ reality; it is a well known fact that in the shantytowns electricity is illegally tapped.⁶² On the historical day, when Maxi finally enters the shantytown his imagination keeps working at a high pace, “lo invadió un sentimiento de maravilla que ya no lo abandonó en adelante”. What is more, “se creía un *privilegiado*, y no sabía por qué. No era ningún privilegio entrar por ese laberinto maloliente de casillas de lata, donde se hacían los más pobres entre los pobres” (31 my emphasis).

⁶¹ Also Amanda Holmes points out that orientalism can be seen as a characteristic of Aira’s work, especially in novels such as *Una novela china*, but also, I feel, in for example *El mármol* (Holmes 2008).

⁶² <http://www.eldiarionline.com/notix/imprimir.php?id=02245>, 8-6-2014, 22.03h.

As Ludmer argued, the ‘transversal’ function of the *isla* works like a one-way street: the encounter (between two different social classes) has to come from outside the urban island (Ludmer 132). Hence, Maxi’s sense of being privileged. Noticeably, when the *cartoneros* left the shantytown and entered the city in search for garbage to recollect, “[s]e habían hecho invisibles, porque se movían con discreción, casi furtivos, de noche (y sólo durante un rato), y sobre todo porque se abrigaban en un pliegue de la vida que en general la gente no prefiere ver” (10). The people of the shantytown look like spectres or phantoms who can only be seen when one pays attention, reinforced by the idea that the *cirujas* all look like each other – just as the Chinese migrants in *El mármol*⁶³. Maxi becomes every time a more well known figure among the people of the shantytown but it is Maxi himself who cannot distinguish between the people he meets (12). Strikingly, at the end of the novel, the *cartoneros* even save Maxi’s life. He safely wakes up in a bed in the shantytown, effectively still being privileged.

2.2 Non-place

Another urban island is the unfinished building of *Los fantasmas*, or, maybe more precisely the roof of the building, on which the Chilean migrant family of the carpenter/concierge Raul Viñas lives. This building, just as the shantytown, is also the place in the narrative around which all action occurs and all parallel stories depart from. Here too it is regarded as a representation of space, a literary representation inspired by the abundant, unfinished properties that Buenos Aires indeed holds.⁶⁴

However the protagonist la Patri⁶⁵, discovers that there are phantoms living in the building (hence the title of the novel) – she and her family are also almost like ‘specters’ – invisible to the people from the higher middle classes - like the *cirujas* from *La villa*. Before the new homeowners of the property can actually install themselves, this Chilean family watches over the building while temporarily living on the roof. The building had to be finished before the end of the year, but “como suele suceder, hubo una demora” (7). When one walks through Buenos Aires it is indeed common to see many unfinished buildings, Buenos Aires, is as it were, constantly ‘under construction’.

⁶³ “Me alarmé, pero no por crearme ante un fenómeno sobrenatural. Me alarmé por mí, por ese eurocentrismo del que no me creía portador y que sin embargo me estaba haciendo culpable del feo defecto de percibir iguales a todos los chinos.” In *El mármol*, p.73

⁶⁴ This is a personal observation and refers - in any case - to the years 2009 until today.

⁶⁵ Aira speaks during all the novel of la Patri, therefore I will also leave the ‘la’. As la Patri is a Chilean migrant, Aira probably plays with the idiosyncratic differences for in the neighboring country Chile people often place an article before someone’s name.

Yet, to the Chilean family the roof constitutes another isolated urban island - they literally need to climb many stairs to reach the roof. They have to descend everyday to work and to do groceries. La Patri - the oldest daughter - watches over her brothers and sisters. The new homeowners do not have any reason 'to climb' the stairs and visit the family. They only pass by to attend meetings with the architect or decorators of their apartments. According to Zygmunt Bauman, in a globalized world nobody can 'stand still; "uno no puede 'quedarse quieto' en la arena movediza" (104). Speaking of how globalization affects the rich and the poor Bauman distinguishes between 'tourists' ('people from 'the first world') and 'vagabonds'('second and third world'): *turistas* se desplazan o permanecen en un lugar según sus deseos (..) los *vagabundos* saben que no se quedarán mucho tiempo en un lugar por más que lo deseen" (122). The mother, Elisa, has the opposite wish and actually feels she does want to move ('before the end of the year') but is forced to stay because of financial questions.

"The wealthy homeowners especially take pleasure in the period before they can move in; "[l]os copropietarios se hacían su propia idea anticipada de la felicidad; la veían envuelta en una demora que los hacía felices desde ya, una cierta lentitud de desarrollo" (13). They could even imagine the Chilean family living in happiness in that unfinished building. 'Hasta podían imaginarse la felicidad de estar aquí, en lo provisorio, *en el borde de tiempo*' (20 my emphasis). The roof, to the Chilean family indeed has "algo poético" but they also suffered a terrible cold in the wintertime (20). If the homeowners-to-be would not have had children, "habrían preferido vivir en hoteles" (10). For them the uncompleted building thus serves as a non-place. The non-place, for the middle-class man or the rich, can be a positive place. Precisely because it is a place without a past or identity - not relational, historical, and concerned with identity (Augé 77, 78). The non-place for the 'turistas' can be pleasant; the 'tourist' can be always on the move. He has the freedom (and money) to do so. The feeling of solitude the non-place produces is completely different from the experience of living in a *isla urbana* such as the shantytown or on a chilly rooftop, as the latter generates rather a feeling of isolation. Even though the subject in the non-place may feel melancholy or solitude (or precisely because of this feeling) it is possible to enjoy the non-place for one has chosen to be there.

Strikingly – and strangely - Augé's concept of the non-place is applicable to both a hotel and a shantytown (or even a refugee camp); the only thing those two places have in common is that they are both 'out of time'. In many ways, Ludmer's notion of *isla urbana* is better applicable to places such as shantytowns. (One has not 'chosen' to be in a shantytown or

refugee camp). Whether a place is an *isla urbana* or a non-place (in Aira's novels) depends on interpretation. As pointed out, this is also due to the vagueness of the concepts.

As will become clear, the non-place often is rather a place of the *turistas* (or middle-class or wealthy people). Ludmer maintained that in the *isla urbana* historical time no longer rules, it is a 'final' space and in this sense quite apocalyptic. Zygmunt Bauman in the same way points towards this non-time of the *isla*, and relates it specifically to the people of the lower social classes: "[I]os residentes del primer mundo viven en el *tiempo*; el espacio no rige para ellos, ya que cualquier distancia se recorre instantáneamente. Por su parte, los residentes del segundo mundo viven en el *espacio*: pesado, resistente, intocable, que ata el tiempo y lo mantiene fuera de su control. Su tiempo es vacío, en el, "nunca pasa nada". (Bauman 117

This 'heavy' space, 'attached to time' and that seems to make time go slowly equally marks the setting of *Los fantasmas*. Felix Tello, the architect and "profesional surgido de la clase media" communicates with both the wealthy families and the poor carpenters and construction workers. Pondering on how much those classes resemble each other ("su completa ausencia de delicadeza cuando se trataba de dinero"), the architect Felix thinks of his favourite novel, *L'Assommoir* by Zola (15,16). This reference is not surprising because it is characteristic of the 'atmosphere' the reader can almost feel while reading *Los fantasmas*; the mother Elisa at a certain point is doing the laundry (like Gervaise in *L'Assommoir*) while the heat is suffocating and she worries about her husband with, of course, drinking problems. From this perspective, *Los fantasmas* is a novel particular to Latin American contemporary time – an account of class difference, poverty and a typical contemporary 'urban imaginary - just as *L'Assommoir* gave a very specific and 'realistic' image of the problems of the nineteenth century.

In those contemporary *islas urbanas* it is often as if time is 'erased'. Today we are living in a "utopía" Ludmer states. This utopia is a "suerte de no-lugar" (94). Hence, in a way Ludmer defines our *present time as space*. "El tiempo de la utopía (..) es el puro presente del o del después del fin" (94). If one lives in *time* that is itself a sort of *non-place* – thus an eternal present – then it is as if one (merely) 'lives in space', a sort of timeless space. Nevertheless, in Aira's novels some places that actually also could be called non-places, are of a different order. An example is the fitness centre in *La guerra de los gimnasios*. With regard to the fitness centre in this particular novel, Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*⁶⁶ comes

⁶⁶ 'hetero-topias' are literally 'other places' (Dehaene & Decauter 4)

to mind. A closer look at the place of the gym in this story will shed light on the difference between the two terms.

2.3 Heterotopia

Heterotopia is a diffuse term, Dehaene and De Cauter state. It is a vast concept that can refer to many different places⁶⁷, from psychiatric institutions, to theaters and to sauna's. Dehaene and De Cauter state that the heterotopia is the opposite of the non-place (5). Nevertheless, it is arguable whether it is really 'opposed' to the non-place, for in actual fact the two notions also bear resemblance to each other: Foucault mentioned the hotel as a heterotopia, but likewise Augé regards the hotel as a non-place. According to Dehaene and De Cauter the heterotopia "realizes places-to-be in the non-place":

In other words, heterotopia embodies the tension between place and non-place that today reshapes the nature of public space" (...) In our contemporary world heterotopia is everywhere. Museums, theme parks, malls, holiday resorts, wellness hotels, festival markets – the entire city is becoming 'heterotopian' (5).

The heterotopia is a public place and part of the city and society: "While often particularly exclusive, heterotopias belong to the inclusive character of the *polis*. The *polis* – the ideal of the city-state – tries to realize the good life via equilibrium between *oikos* (private sphere, household, hence economy) and *agora* (public sphere, the place of politics)" (Dehaene 4). Typical non-places are also places of transition (they even include vehicles and transport) such as the airport (Augé 78). The heterotopia seems to be more 'deliberately' designed or established - with the idea to fulfil a certain (ambiguous) function.⁶⁸ It may be for this reason that it belongs to public space and is more political (either enhancing social and cultural division or fulfilling an emancipatory function) than the non-place. Moreover, Soja pointed out that Foucault's notion of heterotopia reminds him of his concept of Third space (Soja 69). Third space and heterotopia are *lived* or *practiced*, the non-place (such as a waiting room) above all allows for experiences of "only solitude, and similitude" (Augé 103).

⁶⁷ For example: "the school, military service, the honeymoon, old people's homes, psychiatric institutions, prisons, cemeteries, theatres and cinemas, libraries and museums, fairs and carnivals, holiday camps, hamams, saunas, motels, brothels, the Jesuit colonies and the ship" (Dehaene & De Cauter 4).

⁶⁸ Thinking of the examples Foucault gives, this function is almost always ambiguous: libraries and museums have an educational function, however they may be less easily accessed by people from, let's say, the shantytown. A prison at the same time excludes people as it wants to prepare them for reintegration. They are both inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

At first sight, the fitness centre called Chin Fú in Aira's short novel in *La guerra de los gimnasios* is a non-place. For this reason I do not regard non-place and heterotopia as such contradictory notions. According to Bauman (2000), a non-place like a shopping mall is 'purified space'. I think that in the same way the fitness centre is a

self-enclosed 'place without a place' (..) Not that it has been cleansed of variety and difference (..) But the differences inside, unlike the differences outside, are tamed, sanitized, guaranteed to come free of dangerous ingredients - and so be unthreatening. They can be enjoyed without fear (99).

But the (absurd) the gym in Aira's novel is a radically 'other'⁶⁹ or heterotopic space. Moreover, the gym in the novel in the end provokes fear or at least a very uncomfortable feeling, when the place changes into a warzone. Maybe herein lies the difference with the non-place that stays always 'the same' and which is often established to provide comfort (a vehicle, a waiting room, the airport or even a refugee camp has this function). It seems that the non-place is characterized by a 'lack' of meaning, while the heterotopia can continuously take on different ones.⁷⁰ The heterotopia, I think, is rather linked to experience (think of Foucault's examples as the library, cinema, schools, hammams and the colony).

The space of the fitness centre is proper to contemporary (western) and Argentinean culture. According to Foucault heterotopias "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory (..) or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications [such as inhammams or sauna's] (Foucault 25). It is hence possible to call Aira's Chin Fú a contemporary heterotopia. The ambiguity about the accessibility of the heterotopia – its inclusion in the city and its (doubtful) character as a public place, also characterize the gymnasium Chin Fú. The gym is not necessarily a real 'public' place as an inscription in a fitness centre is expensive and not accessible to people from the shantytown.

Noticeably, *La guerra de los gimnasios* can be analyzed from a gender or queer theoretical perspective.⁷¹ This is not surprising considering the 'spatial nature' and

⁶⁹ Soja: "an(Other) form of spatial awareness" p.11 (Thirdspace 1996)

⁷⁰ See Foucault (1986): The heterotopia of the cemetery, until the eighteenth century, was a place at the heart of the city, "only from that start of the nineteenth century that cemeteries began to be located at the outside border of cities". This shows how heterotopias do not have a stable or fixed meaning and that a society "can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion" (25).

⁷¹ Mariano García (2008): "César Aira también ha replanteado el modelo con el que construye la sexualidad, o quizás más específicamente el gender de los hombres, las mujeres y especialmente todos aquellos personajes que se encuentran en el terreno de indecibilidad genérica que transitan sus pobladas páginas" (s.p.)

'otherness' of the gymnasium; in this novel it is particularly the space (and culture) of the gym that generates a discourse on contemporary culture, thoughts on gender and on media. The protagonist, the young actor Ferdie Calvino starts to work out so he can "provocar miedo a lo hombres y deseo a las mujeres" (5 my emphasis). He needs to get a subscription and Ferdie enters a complete new world; "la sensación de hallarse en otro mundo" (20). In the dressing room he meets four guys acting crazy and dressing like girls, playing in front of the mirror. After a while he suddenly doubts whether he entered the dressing room for women, instead of men. This fragment sets the tone for what comes afterwards.

The space of the gym becomes imbued with all kinds of meanings; it literally takes on a different meaning every time. The gym used to be a factory for lingerie, in Hokkama (the enemy of Chin Fú) flourishes a drugsbusiness and in the fitness centres of the neighborhood Flores a war is going on, thus changing the gym into a warzone. As Foucault said with respect to the heterotopia, a society "can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (25).

The different meanings Aira ascribes to the fitness centre are not complete arbitrary. Fitness centres are everywhere in Buenos Aires of today and play an important role in contemporary Argentinean culture that is fairly focused on beauty and appearance.⁷² The fitness culture gives way to a discourse on masculinity/femininity and virility. Aira humoristically engages in reversing and playing with gender 'roles'. Subsequently, Aira refers to the Asian migrants who are now living in Buenos Aires and therefore calls to mind the problems surrounding the Chinese mafia in Buenos Aires.⁷³ Consequently, he makes two Asian 'fitness centres' play out a war in which - ironically - the future of Argentina is at stake. As becomes clear, however this story is completely absurd and surreal, the novel never ceases to refer to a 'real', external reality.

Chin Fú could be read as a "counterspace", another word Soja uses for his notion of Third space (68). Heteropia is a much more 'political' place than the non-place. In the same way, Third space or 'counterspaces':

⁷² See for example: "Schoonheid in het lichamelijke verouderingsproces in Buenos Aires: Schoonheidsidealen, gender, leeftijd en het lichaam" by J. Bronwasser & D. Van den Bogaert (Scriptie Universiteit Utrecht, 2013).

⁷³<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1286003-con-mano-de-obra-local-la-mafia-china-extorsiona-y-mata>, 12-06-2014, 19.51h. & <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1286003-con-mano-de-obra-local-la-mafia-china-extorsiona-y-mata>, 12-06-20.00h.

are vitally filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination and subjection. (...) the spaces of the peripheries that can be found at all scales, in the corpo-reality of the body and mind, in sexuality and subjectivity, in individual and collective identities from the most local to the most global (68).

On Ferdie's first day, when he enjoys his workout, the gym actually still is the typical non-place of our time, space in which time has no importance; "el gimnasio es eterno" (94). He feels strangely melancholic - just as Maxi in *La villa* looking out over the shantytown: "Otra vez volvía la melancolía, que había sentido al fin de la tercera ronda de aparatos, la insatisfacción, como si hubiera algo, o todo, sin hacer"(20). Again, also here it is space that 'rules' and that is similar to Ludmer's 'eternal present'. In this eternal present time melancholy seems to be a symptom of a strange longing for time; "era comprensible si los aparatos realmente lo ponían en contacto, como había pensado cuando estaba en ellos, con el infinito y la eternidad" (20).

But then the most strange things happen in the gym of Chin Fú (Chin Fú is also the friendly giant and the owner of the gym). The fitness centre (in the novel) is visited foremost by young people. Foucault speaks of "crisis heterotopias", "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents", for example (Foucault 24). Also Ferdie is young and insecure, "quería ponerse a tono con su vida adulta (...) no le faltaba la confianza ciega en la gimnasia" (31). As his little "frasecita" implied, Ferdie believes in the 'urgency' or necessity of what he is doing (23). But, on his first day at the gym two Asian looking men enter the building – in a scene that seems 'extracted' from an action movie they enter via the terrace when the windows break into thousand little pieces. Ferdie is shocked but Julio, his trainer, tells him to just to continue to work out and keep up the rhythm; "Ferdie pedaleaba contra una fuerza inhumana; el viento inmóvil de la bicicleta se había multiplicado por mil, había pasado a otra dimensión" (10). The gym becomes a space of crisis (a reflection of Ferdie's crazy mind or else the television series Baudrillard in which he actually acts?) and turns briefly into a warzone. The employees of the gym are used to the violence and remain indifferent, but when Ferdie almost faints after doing sports they are upset and worried; things become turned upside down, absurd and surreal.

With respect to the 'counterplace', the gym Chin Fú most of all is a place of *inversion* and *reduction*: men at times act typically 'feminine' (Julio the trainer is worried like a

(stereotypical) woman when Ferdie faints); one day Ferdie wants to enter the dressing room but suddenly realizes he is in the girlsroom. He is all confused but then finds out that the dressing rooms every week alternate; “los vestuarios se alternaban” (52). The muscled, big guys from the gym are compared to little girls (61); the guys, ironically, also take ‘feminine’ hormones (80); the ‘giant’ and owner of the gym lives inside a tiny room and also the apartment of Ferdie’s parents is “miniscule” (37); the trainers of Chin Fú themselves work out at the enemy Hokkama, the trainers from Hokkama go to Chin Fú (even though a war between them is going on) (47). Most significant for this aspect of inversion and reduction is a passage as the following:

a feminine trainer works at the gym, she is incredibly beautiful, “era alta, delgada, muy atractiva, con una enorme masa de rizos tenidos de un rubio metálico (...) se oía su voz enumerando los ejercicios, y se la veía, en el vaivén de los espejos, asimétrico ya de por sí, haciendo los estiramientos con una perfección sobrehumana. Se llamaba Alida. Ferdie no se había dado cuenta de que le faltaba el brazo derecho” (43,44).

Fragments like this almost function like a *trompe l’oeil*. The reader first imagines one thing to discover later on a strange or absurd aspect that transforms the situation or the person. These transformations and sudden changes of scenery are very cinematic, they oblige the reader to visualize the strange scenes. Rémon-Raillard calls attention to Aira’s strong interest in the visual: Aira is interested in perception and the problem of representation. “Los soportes de este discurso consisten en referencias a diversos tipos de arte visual: cine, televisión, pintura” (60).

Dehaene and De Cauter indicate how heteropia, apart from a spatial construct also relates to language and discourse. Utopias – in language – tell stories about imaginary non-places, heterotopias “destroy syntax that holds words and things together” (...) “heterotopias” however, “as spatial constructs or figures of thought, are differentiations inserted into the city or discourse that appear out of place, abnormal or illusory. They contest the normal order of things.” (55). In this sense, the gym Chin Fú, as a fictional, spatial *construct* (not a representation) is a heteropia. Chin Fú is not a representation of space (a literary representation of a fitness centre /conceived space) but a space of representation (a lived spaced), a counterspace that undeniably contests the “normal order of things”.

As pointed out in the first chapter, heterotopias function like counter-sites. They are “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites (...) are simultaneously represented, contested, and *inverted*. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be

possible to indicate their location” (Foucault 24 my emphasis). A place like a hotel can be called a heterotopia (Foucault), and at other times a non-place (Augé). Dehaene and De Caeter stated that those places are opposed. I argue that they also resembled each other. Also the gym Chin Fú functions both as an utopic non-place and a heterotopia. The heterotopia, as it ‘contests the normal order of things’ is a ‘counterplace’, in Aira it is apocalyptic or dystopic. It can basically convert into all kinds of places but it is never a ‘perfected’ form of society, or, a utopia.

The gym, or the “mundo-gimnasio” in *La guerra de los gimnasios* is a utopic non-place, but it is more: it is also inversed and chaotic, a place with all kinds of people, a space of crisis and even a warzone. The gym is principally a non-place, both in reality as in the novel; a ‘purified space’ used by rich and middle-class people. But Dehaene pointed out how the heterotopia often “realizes a place in the non-place” (5). As Aira’s fitness centre becomes transformed and ‘lived’ by the characters, it becomes a place that takes on all kind of meanings (that range from being an inversed place when it comes to gender and where the manliness of men is questioned; or as a very postmodern site where Ferdie finds himself in the middle of an absurd action film). The ‘real’ (empty, ‘meaningless’) non-place changes into a surreal place (to which different meanings or values are ascribed) and becomes a place related to a strange sort of desire. When the gym turns into a warzone, it is as if one enters a film or has a glimpse of another temporal and spatial dimension. It is not without reason that Ferdie – first as a *turista* visiting the gym so to obtain a perfect body– continues to visit the non-place when it gradually changes into a absurd *place* that now suddenly holds a promise of adventure.

2.4 Real-and-imagined space

Soja calls Third space as well *real-and-imagined* (or *realandimagined*) space, a notion that at this point is more suitable. Especially because the space studied here is of a different order than the more geographical and anthropological notions such as *isla urbana* and non-place. These notions refer principally to representations of space (*conceived space*) inside the novel (the shantytown, the uncompleted building). The *real-and-imagined* space is applied to Aira’s metafictional narrative, in which spatial thinking functions as a starting point. But it also is an allusion to places that are conjured up or called to mind (such as dreams) or that refer to the (postmodern) discourse on media and virtuality. Naturally, the spatial perspective

at present also lays bare the limitation and ironical paradox that the space analyzed here is imagined and invented in its totality and that we always speak of a literary, spatial construct.

In the very ‘third space’ of the novel - or in the metatextual discourse - spatial elements indeed enhance all kinds of other thoughts on reality and imagination. As I have pointed in the first chapter, space can be understood as more than material or geographical space. Michel de Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life* how also stories, and even memories or dreams can be considered as places and space. Significantly, says De Certeau, the word metaphor in itself holds a spatial dimension, as the old Greek ‘metaphorai’ were vehicles of mass transportation. In the same way as vehicles, stories “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (115).

In *Los fantasmas* architecture serves as a starting point for comments on reality, dreaming and art. The protagonist la Patri has a dream about the building she lives in and is sleeping in while she dreams. At this point Aira associates la Patri’s dream – part of the fictional story – to metafictional thought. The building in la Patri’s dream looks a lot like the real building she lives in. The ‘spatial’ dream then leads to a metafictional contemplation on dreams, art, time and space. It is striking, Aira comments, how reality and dream are two different things but the more they resemble each other the more obvious the difference is; “en este caso la diferencia se reflejaba en la arquitectura, que ya de por sí es un reflejo entre lo que se ha construido y lo que se construirá. Y el puente de los reflejos era un tercer término, que es prácticamente todo en la materia: lo no-construido” (62). As the building in *Los fantasmas* could be seen as a sort of non-place to the wealthy families, Aira here expands on this aspect of ‘negation’ that characterizes the unfinished building which finds itself “en el borde del tiempo” (20). Aira’s concept of the *no-construido* ultimately is a mental construction, it is imagined space and as will become clear is linked to utopic thinking.

“Lo no-construido” is a characteristic of art: “El caso más típico es el cine; cualquiera puede pensar en una película por hacer, pero las trabas que imponen el saber hacerla, los costos, el personal, hacen que noventa y nueve veces de cada cien la película no se haga’ (63). Aira continues saying that “[c]on los demás artes, en mayor o menor medida, pasa lo mismo”, however, he adds, there might be an artform on which reality almost does not impose its limitations: “Quizás existe, y es la literatura” (63). In this sense, Aira writes, “todas las artes tienen una base literaria, fundada en su historia y su mito. La arquitectura no es una excepción” (63). The buildings under construction lay bear a tension between what is already built and still needs to be built. La Patri’s dream has some “architectural analogies” that

clarify the tension between the constructed and the ‘non-constructed’; for this reason, in the dream different nomad cultures⁷⁴ all over the world are explored, in opposition to our western sedentary culture - in which also anthropologists (and their thinking about the function of space in all kinds of tribes) are made fun of. The key, then, to all those analogies,

es la huida del tiempo en dirección al espacio”. Esa huida es el sueño. (De modo que el de La Patri no por capricho era una arquitectura). (..) Y mientras los hábitos, sedentarios o nómades, están hechos de tiempo los sueños están libres de él. El sueño es espacio puro, disposición de la especie en la eternidad. Tal exclusividad es la que hace de la arquitectura un arte. A partir de ese punto lo no-construido, materia mental sin tiempo, sale del campo de la posibilidad, deja de ser el fracaso personal de un arquitecto al que no le financiaron esta o aquella edificación arriesgada, se hace absoluto (67).

The dream is “espacio puro” - as also De Certeau indicated, a dream can be considered a place. The metaphor of the dream – and the metafictional narrative that stems from it - serves the narrative of *Los fantasmas* and ‘links places (in the novel) together’ (De Certeau 115):

Firstly, the dream connects places: it takes Aira to linger on far-away tribes and their living habits to eventually connect this to the building under construction in Buenos Aires. The latter apparently is a product of our time. Departing from the the idea of the “no-construido” and the dream, Aira actually ends up deliberating on *urban space* and the city. “[L]a huida del tiempo en dirección del espacio” relates to the *destemporalización* that Ludmer speaks. When our contemporary time – as it were – is nothing more than an eternal present, we live in space that is no longer historical, anthropological or related to identity (Augé 77,78). Hence, this space encompasses non-places and contemporary sites such as the unfinished properties:

El urbanismo en las sociedades civilizadas reduplica hasta vaciarla su función simbólica; si en las primitivas sociedades nómades la disposición del campamento llenaba la función que no llenaba la construcción de la casa, es decir lo propiamente social, en el urbanismo de las grandes ciudades contemporáneas (..) el urbanismo repite una función ya llenada, y termina careciendo de ella (llena más bien una función de tipo simbólico policíaco). O bien de debería decirse que deja allí un ‘simbolismo vacante’, una energía de simbolización no ocupada por ninguna necesidad actual (68).

⁷⁴ [L]os enanitos, pigmeos mbutu” (“el mbutu de veras sociable viviría en la casa todo puertas, es decir sin casa; y la inversa, que la construcción hecha y completa se basa en la enemistad”) (65) & “los bosquimanos” who place at the centre of their camp a ‘symbol’ ,a tree, the chief and a fire (65) & “los zulúes” (65)

Jordi Borja states that all the city is ('and should be') public space, but urbanization is not equal to the city (29,30). Urbanization creates social division and produces *isla urbanas*. The Chilean family in *Los fantasmas* indeed live in a world completely different from that of the architects, the decorators and homeowners. Furthermore, the entire city – that in a way ceases to be city but turns into a mere urbanized area – becomes a non-place itself, a non-city because it loses gradually more and more social functions. The houses, buildings and streets almost become the 'residues' of what once was a (social) city, a city unlike "Baudelairean modernity" (Augé 79). The "función de tipo simbólico policíaca" serves to keep order, and ultimately maintain the division between the people in the urban islands (shantytowns, poor areas) and the more wealthy in the luxury properties with swimmingpool (like in the building in the novel) or the condominiums for the rich.⁷⁵

Secondly, on the level of the fictional story la Patri appears to be living all the time in a dream. What is more, the moment when her Elisa Vicuña, la Patri's mother comes home, it is as if la Patri has waken up and the story continues. Yet, from this point in the novel on we cannot be certain anymore of the veracity of 'reality' or anything that occurs in the story; the metafictional narrative generates confusion about the nature of what is real and what is a dream.

Aira plays indeed with highly postmodern ideas about the nature of reality; reality as a 'simulacre', or, in a more Borgesian way, existence as dream.⁷⁶ "Lo no-construido (..) \ puede considerarse como un fenómeno mental como el sueño o el juego en general de las intenciones" (67). Then, "la mente a su vez puede considerarse dependiente del fenómeno de lo no-construido del que lo arquitectónico es la manifestación ejemplar" (67). In some societies "lo no-construido" is the basis for everything, for the nature of reality: everything that exists is dreamt and 'conjured up'. The aboriginals, "los viejos solteronas de provincia (..) sin construir nada, los australianos se limitan a pensar y soñar despiertos con el paisaje en el que viven hasta hacer de él, a fuerza de cuentos, una completa 'construcción significativa'" (67). This happens everyday, of course, Aira adds, think for example of literature; "la arquitectura no-construida, ¿será la literatura?" (67).

Subsequently, a more detailed explanation is given of the Australians who build their society 'by dreaming'. In a former "época del sueño" people would sleep and the 'constructor originario' designed a landscape. During the time all this was created the Australians closed

⁷⁵ Or, "el mundo sin vagabundos es la utopía de la sociedad de los turistas. En ella, la política (..) la obsesión por la ley y el orden, la criminalización de la pobreza (..) se explica en gran medida como un esfuerzo tenaz, constante, para elevar la realidad social, contra todos los obstáculos, al nivel de ese utopía" (Bauman 128).

⁷⁶ Think of Borges' *Las ruinas circulares* (Ficciones 2010).

their eyes. When they woke up, they woke up to a dream. “La historia verdadera (..) tuvo lugar mientras dormían” .“La época del sueño”, “dadora de sentido”, is the equivalent of our language (69). Language is of a course another ‘construct’, a tool by which (‘real’) reality can be represented. Furthermore, the landscape of the Australians is marked by the *point* and the *line* (or, the *map* and the *tour*). Through a point,

por el preciso punto del punto, el hombre puede, como la aguja de la costurera, pasar al otro lado, al lado del sueño y entonces la línea se cambia de propiedad: el itinerario alimenticio se vuelve itinerario mítico. Lo que le da una tercera dimensión al dibujo del destino. Pero sucede que el pasaje por el punto se da a cada momento pues no hay puntos privilegiados. (..) El hombre entra en la época del sueño no mediante un prodigioso vaje peligroso sino con el movimiento ambulante de todos los días (70).

Here, many interpretations are possible. One of them is that men always search for the ‘originary’, the meaning of the world, the origins of language (etc.). We think or pretend that this meaning cannot be recuperated anymore, that it is lost and belongs to a time gone by. We search it – as it were – on a map, but fail to see the ‘third dimension’, or, “lo mítico”. Yet, this fragment says we never lost anything and meaning is always obtainable: it is there when we look, open our eyes and live our daily life. When we we *practice* space (calling to mind De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*) and follow the paths of life - or simply walk through the city (the tour). ‘Third space’ obtains here a spiritual dimension.

Hence, it is possible to discern in Aira’s novels a line of thinking more spiritually inspired, holding elements about awakening and consciousness (Buddhism, for example). In *Los fantasmas* orientalism and exoticism are equally present. Noticeably, Borges showed a strong interest in oriental cultures and Buddhism.⁷⁷ At times it is as if Aira resorts to Borges, ironically ‘reworking’ this fascination, using examples from tribes, oriental cultures and societies to construct his own ontological discourse on reality, space and time (65).⁷⁸ Aira’s metafictional narrative could be interpreted as a highly postmodern discourse about the uncertain nature of our contemporary reality. This is how Juárez interprets Aira’s novels, that in his opinion are inspired by a “paradigma posmoderno en tanto cuestionamiento de la ontología que bebe de la tradición nihilista” (2007: 900). Aira’s work in many ways indeed is

⁷⁷ See for example: *Jorge Luis Borges: Zeven Avonden/ Siete Noches* (1983) & *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (Obras completas 2010)

⁷⁸ Amanda Holmes states that Aira can be seen to be part of a group of contemporary Argentinean writers who use the exotic lanscape for fictional experimentation and even call themselves “casi paródicamente, ‘Shanghai’”: “Novels published in this era such as Daniel Guebel’s *La perla del emperador* (1990), Alberto Laiseca’s *La hija de Kheops* (1989) and *La mujer en la muralla* (1990) use ‘exotic’ settings, Malaysia, Egypt and China respectively” (71). Holmes is here specifically referring to Aira’s novel *Una novela china* (1987).

postmodern. However, and as I will demonstrate in the last chapter I do not think that Aira remains faithful to one specific discourse, let alone a mere nihilist one.

As indicated before, contemporary Buenos Aires (in reality) is marked by the unfinished constructions. That is why the metafictional discourse on the *no-construido* indeed is also ironical. When Aira's (thematical) interests in the nature of reality call to mind a Borgesian interest in metaphysics, dreams and also in representation (Aira's deliberation on art), at the same time Aira never ceases to make allusion to the contemporary world he lives in. It is for this reason that Aira every time is regarded as a sort of 'realist', although he is never understood as a realist in the traditional sense.⁷⁹ Ultimately, the *no-construido* makes up for a discourse on urban space, the nature of reality (metaphysics) but also on art and literature. In short, *spatial thinking* here is the point of departure and provides ways for thinking about the nature of reality.⁸⁰ The *no-construido*, as the building that is not yet completed but that 'lives' in the architect's mind, the dream or the art of literature is utopic. As opposed to the heterotopia (or any other substantial places) it is not an "effectively enacted utopia". It is not (yet) enacted but pure construct. The dream is 'pure space' (*espacio puro*), Aira says. Aira thus also regards space as something 'constructed' or even imagined. The postmodern, literary notion that describes reality as a dream (for example in *Las ruinas circulares* by Borges) actually *equals* our present time with space. In a dream we likewise live in a "presente siempre eterno". If reality is a fiction, simulacrum or a dream, our time *is* space (or in Ludmer's words 'tiempo como suerte de no-lugar').

Real-and-imagined space also clearly points to the postmodern discourse on media and Ludmer's notion of *realidadficción* is at this point even more accurate. Fragments relating to media, television, film and virtuality recur in many (at least the more recent) of Aira's novels. As already much has been said about Aira's literature in relation to media, television, soaps and camp⁸¹ I do not go into this too extensively. Especially Juárez dedicates most of his analyses to this play with reality and the media (famous Argentinean soaps, reality series, videogames etc.).⁸² From a spatial perspective, however, some aspects of this underlying discourse on media are of interest here. Aira's realism, or the presence of 'reality' in his

⁷⁹ See: Speranza, 2005; Kohan, 2005.

⁸⁰ Strikingly, exoticism, orientalism, questions of gender and culture are all present in Aira's novels. This equally justifies the use of a spatial perspective and the notion of Third space in relation to Aira, since Soja links Third Space also to Said's Orientalism and to Bhabha's Third space (*Third Space* 1996).

⁸¹ "En Jameson la virtualidad y los medios son elementos clave en la construcción del espacio y tiempo posmodernos, descritos por él mediante las metáforas del 'pastiche' y la 'esquizofrenia'. Representar el espacio como 'pastiche' supone conciliar elementos de culturas diversas y productos incluso catalogados como de mal gusto o kitsch, reciclarlos e incorporarlos como códigos del discurso artístico" (Juárez 2007: 887).

⁸² Juárez 2007; 2008; 2010.

literature is one side of Ludmer's term *realidadficción* - the other part is about how fiction itself already has influenced reality, hence, regarding postmodern reality as a 'simulacre', or, a 'fiction'. This latter aspect of her argument, however, is precisely the question (and tension) Aira plays with:

[L]a densidad pseudofilosófica como estrategia verosimilizadora del absurdo de lo planteado en el texto, las novelas airianas se proyectan como una paradoja en la que se explicita simultáneamente un concepto de real vinculado a la idea de simulacro que el posmodernismo ha venido haciendo habitual y, a la vez, una burla que pone en crisis dicha tematización del simulacro, proponiendo una distanciamiento irónica que busca superarlo a través de un irresistible sentido del humor y la sola reivindicación del poder de la imaginación en el contexto contemporáneo (Juárez 2010, 139).

The postmodern notion of reality as a simulacre is an 'infinite' argument, it can turn around in a vicious circle eternally since there is no origin or a possibility to indicate a point where 'reality' still was pure and representation was only a representation of that fixed reality. Aira's playful style is highly humoristic for he constantly refers to the world as a postmodern 'non-place' and *at the same time* to our, 'real', temporal world in which time does have importance and where miserable things happen. Aira's work, hence, oscillates between being a representation of a representation (reality as simulacre) and being a mediation of the real.

Baudrillard's "theory of the postmodern relies heavily on the notion of a (con)fusion between the real and the fake and a subsequent concept of hyperreality" (Killiam 2006). With regard to the latter viewpoint, I want to call to mind Bolter and Grusin (2000) who state that Baudrillard's work *Simulacres et simulation* is overtly political. They argue to some extent against Baudrillard by saying that *all mediations are themselves real* (55, my emphasis): "Our culture still needs to acknowledge that all media remediate the *real*. Just as there is no getting rid of mediation, there is no getting rid of the real" (56 my emphasis).

Everything in Aira, on the one hand, is out of time and eternal. This provides for the slight sense of nostalgia and a vague sense of melancholy. When Ferdie finishes his first work out he feels as if something is left unfinished. It makes him feel depressed:

Había querido hacer algo distinto y sentía como no hubiera hecho nada. Suponía que el efecto en su cuerpo se daría de todos modos, a la larga, si el persistía. Pero desde ya podía anticipar que el efecto sería imperceptible en el tiempo. No había nada visible, ninguna sorpresa, y si no había sorpresa, no había nada. Para que hubiera algo, el debería tener el poder de hacerse a sí mismo un buen relato de lo que sucedía, como si todo hubiera pasado ya, tiempo atrás. (..) y no sabía hacer el relato. Era como todo hubiera pasado ya (30,31).

Jameson explained how the past now seems an ensemble of various, disconnected presents (Jameson qtd. by Juárez, 2007:887). This feeling of fragmentation makes it more difficult to comprehend the very present in which we live. In the same way, Ferdie cannot make a coherent story of things that happen. The narrator points out repeatedly how Ferdie cannot justify or explain his questions. He is even surprised by them, “Ferdie era de esas personas que nunca saben dar el motivo a sus intereses” (79).

Ferdie is an actor and, ironically, his own life seems to develop as in a television series. He meets an old class mate on the street who apparently already knew that is Ferdie inscribed in the gym, while it was actually impossible for him to know: “¿como había sabido que Ferdie iría hoy al gimnasio, si había tomado la decisión esa misma tarde, y no se lo había dicho a nadie?” (24). With respect to his famous little phrase, an old class mate, Gerardo, asks Ferdie; “¿Quién te la dió? (..) No te la escribió tu guionista?” (28). In this sense the ‘reality’ in the novel is a script⁸³, a film in which the most absurd things can happen yet - they were already known beforehand (“como si todo ya hubiera pasado”). But it is also Ferdie’s ‘real’ life and while he is not acting or at work deliberates on that same, strange reality.

On the other hand, nothing ‘already took place’ and everything is still to come. Ferdie (but also Maxi en la Patri) in spite of the eternal non-place he is living in, tries to stay ‘realistic’ all along the story (something that naturally has an even more absurd and humoristic effect): “Los van a matar todos, los van a borrar del mapa . “-A quienes? – A todos los del Chin Fútbol. –A los socios también? – A todos. En la guerra vale todo. [Ferdie:] –No creo. Los gimnasios viven de los socios” (66).

What is more, he (ironically) desires and longs for reality. Particularly, when it comes to love: “cuando la realidad irrumpiera en su mundo libresco, fantasmal, de representaciones... sería hermoso. Sería la belleza misma tomando cuerpo entre sus manos”. Yet, when it would arrive, “él no debería ser realista” (57). Ferdie has a desire to experience things, to know and in the same way he never stops longing: he is waiting for *something real* to happen. He longs for a world or a reality that ‘takes form between one’s hands’, that is graspable, hence, more ‘material’. When love would finally arrive, “[I]a realidad no debería anular las fantasías (..) sino que debía incorporarlas, hacerse totalidad. Eso era el amor: la realidad como fantasía superior” (57).

In spite of all, then, Aira ends up where he started and shows how ‘reality’ is no longer something fixed; “Del fracaso del realismo clásico ya impracticable, precisamente, nace

⁸³ Likewise, Rémon-Raillard indicates that Gerardo, Valencia’s fiancé, is the “escritor depravado autor de una función de títeres que reproduce a los personajes de la novela” (Rémon-Raillard 59).

fresca la literatura de Aira” (Speranza 6). Classical realism is “impracticable”, as Speranza outlines, for reality, and everything part of that uncertain reality (like love) itself has become a superior ‘fantasy’ of our mind. Aira here thus plays with the idea that a concrete, tangible, material reality itself has become a ‘fantasy’. In this view it is not strange that Ferdie longs and ‘fantasizes’ about reality as something desirable. As things become constantly inverted, now Aira makes his characters (living in a ‘dream’ / simulacre) long for reality as if it were an desirable object, where, normally, people dream to ‘escape’ from (daily) reality.

There are many ways to conceive of Aira’s novels as Aira continuously refers to the story he is creating. “Aira hace girar los saberes pero no fija ninguno y se consagra a una sola idea – el continuo omnívoro – que solo cobra sentido a la luz de la empresa total” (Speranza 5). Also Pablo Decock points towards the fact that Aira’s novels (in this case also *La guerra*) never hold one, ultimate meaning: “En la narrativa de Aira esta proliferación infinita de sucesos, esta multiplicación de códigos y estereotipos externos, no dejan que se establezca el sentido. Al contrario, siempre se desvía, siempre se posterga”(Decock 5). Hence, from my viewpoint the *continuo* in Aira is a circle that has no beginning nor end and does not it adhere to simply one way of thinking or one specific discourse, but continuously diverts. From a spatial perspective, because Aira when he writes never knows in which direction he is going (due to his ‘procedimiento’) he constantly takes strange, absurd and ‘transversal paths’ that cause the surreal or absurd to happen.

3. The Tour: *Flâneurs, Benjamin & Buenos Aires*

3.1 Aira's *zona urbana*

After having sketched a rather postmodern, urban imaginary, I will now look how Aira's characters move through this scenery. Instead of the very postmodern landscape characterized by the *isla urbana*, the characters of the novels often do not seem to belong to – or fit in - that quite negative, urban imaginery. Therefore I use here Kohan's term *zona urbana*, a term that the Argentinean Martín Kohan uses with the purpose of demonstrating that Benjamin's theory on the city is not a theory on one city in particular, nor on 'the' city on general, but a specific zone constituted by four cities. I merely borrow this term, principally in order to make clear that this territory encompasses all the city (or, as Jordi Borja stated, all the urbanized area) without making any (social) divisions, but see how the subjects themselves regard and transform these spaces. Secondly, Kohan is slightly displeased by the fact that the concept of flâneur is used so easily in all kinds of contexts. I will displace the concept (to 'his' city of Buenos Aires) anyway for I am also 'dislocating' the postmodern view on Aira towards a slightly different one. The concept of the flâneur goes together with *zona urbana* (not the *isla urbana* for precisely the division or passage is constantly crossed by Aira's flâneurs).

Sarlo points out that the critics of Buenos Aires's (lack of) aesthetics failed to see that the very "monotony of the city grid embodied a trait of modernity absent from many of the Spanish and Italian towns" they visited (32). Hence, Buenos Aires may not have 'skipped' modernity entirely, as for most immigrants the city was already more 'modern' than their European hometowns they had left behind. Still, Sarlo points out how this 'modern' city in many ways was of course not modern as European cities already were.

The question of 'belatedness' of the Latin American continent is, as Yúdice explains, highly complex. He does not see modernity and postmodernity as 'structures' of feeling' or modes of thinking that come after each other chronologically in time. Yúdice wonders whether we can even "speak of postmodernism in Latin America" (Yúdice 105). As opposed to for example Paris, Buenos Aires "lacked historical style: its style was to be found not in the past, but in the future" (Sarlo 36). It is often said, Sarlo adds, that Buenos Aires was based on Paris' architectural style. It was indeed the city that was most admired by - and reflected the desires of - the cultural elites. Most of all, however, Buenos Aires always needed to (re)invent itself (and start from scratch). The city "results as much from imitation as much as it does from bricolage and recycling" (30). The difference between the Argentinean city and the

modern European cities ultimately resided in the feeling of “being deprived of the density of the past” (33).

“The presence of a past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it”, in this reconciliation lays the essence of modernity, Augé resumes the definition of modernity by Jean Starobinski (Augé 75). Contrary to European cities, Buenos Aires could not lay claim to a long or rich historical past (only to a brutal one) on which to ‘built’ its present. Besides, capitalism was brutally imposed in the twentieth century by the militaries. In many ways, the city (and country) did not even have sufficient time to think of that future for it was suddenly ‘imposed’ by capitalism and globalization, while the (traumatic and ‘short’) past was marked by colonialism and despotism.

This makes it look like the continent was ‘doomed’ from the beginning on to live in Ludmer’s “puro presente eterno”, time as a “suerte de non-lugar”. Following Ludmer’s line of thinking, the entire continent, then, could be said to be an *isla*, marked by ‘non-time’ and non-space’ (hence her concepts of *destemporalización* and *desdiferenciación*). This would imply that the continent always already had been ‘postmodern’. Consequently, as Jameson pointed out how postmodern time makes the past look like a series of disconnected presents, the understanding of the present itself is also frustrated. Nevertheless, Yúdice puts a finger on precisely this question; first, he quotes Osorio who said, “donde no ha arraigado modernidad no puede haber postmodernidad” (Yúdice 106). Then, Yúdice points towards the idea of Octavio Paz that Latin America was ‘already postmodern before Europe and the United States’.⁸⁴

Since history and nation are less and less topics of interest⁸⁵, Ludmer argues, literature and art can only base themselves in a world that is no longer concerned with identity or the nation. Altogether, Ludmer’s view on autonomous literature which becomes ‘postautonomous’, Nancy Calomarde says, is also “en algún punto, nihilista, ya que inscribe una especie de cartografía de la negación: no espacial, no teleológica y no utópica” (Calomarde s.p.). The spatial view on Aira’s literature shows that Aira indeed strongly engages with our ‘postmodern’ time and space. However, Aira’s surreality, absurdism and

⁸⁴ “Según él, la lógica contradictoria (tradicción de ruptura) de la modernidad se exhausta (“el fin de la estética fundada en el culto al cambio y la ruptura”) en el momento en que los países centrales del imperialismo capitalista se descentran y se hacen tan “marginales” como la periferia” (Yúdice, 107).

⁸⁵ This, also, is contradictory. Historical novels and chronicles are very popular today in Argentina. Aira’s literature, however very well known, is regarded as much more ‘obscure’. This only reinforces the idea that the crisis lies rather in the ‘institution’ – as Kohan explains – than in aesthetics, form, or literature as artform itself. It also adds force to the idea that a difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ literature (literature vs. Literature) still exists.

also exoticism causes his literature to be more than, or something different from, mere postmodern, ironic and textual play.

Rather than irony or indifference, at times it is as if a feeling of wonder, curiosity and interest in the world characterizes Aira's novels, although an ironic undertone always underlies his writings. As shown in the first chapter, most critics categorize Aira as a postmodern writer but feel that his work leaves the critic and the reader with a sense of wonder and doubt. Rémon-Raillard actually writes: 'La obra de Aira, que cada vez se hace más inasible para la crítica, es una obra en movimiento perpetuo: por un lado debido a su producción incesante y por otro porque está en pleno proceso de erigirse en paradigma de algo que todavía carece de nombre pero que el nuevo milenio quizás le dará' (63).

Then, however this may be provocative it appears to make sense to try to see whether Aira's literature cannot be considered from a different perspective. I think it is possible to look at Aira from the viewpoint of something called 'metamodernism'. Metamodernism is "[i]nspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility" (5). The Dutch art critics Vermeulen and Van den Akker coin and introduce this new term, which they regard as a new "structure of feeling"(2).⁸⁶ They feel that even though many commentators on postmodernism declare its end or demise⁸⁷, they do not introduce a new idea or alternative of what, then, came in its place. The critics affirm that they do not think all postmodern tendencies are done with but that they are taking a new shape:

metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and from or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern (5-6).

This defiant notion is applied foremost to visual art forms (paintings, film) and aesthetics, but Vermeulen and Van den Akker also include literary works (such as that of Roberto Bolaño). The metamodernist label can be applied especially for the reason that Aira's characters are

⁸⁶ "Metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism" (2).

⁸⁷ Hutcheon, 2002: "The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it—and name it for the twenty-first century" (165-166).

almost all naive, dreamy, innocent characters and have difficulties finding a place or feel comfortable in society. Additionally, as indicated before, Aira is very much attracted by visual artforms such as cinema and paintings. Rémon-Raillard points a finger at the connection that is sometimes made between Marcel Duchamp and César Aira. According to her, Duchamp is an “artista que, de hecho, Aira reivindica como una de sus mayores influencias, precisamente porque no se trata de un escritor” (60). This ‘visual’ interest or preoccupation of Aira reinforces the idea that it is not just an arbitrary or capricious act to situate Aira within this metamodernist ‘paradigm’.

A novel as *La villa* demonstrates clearly the oscillation between knowing (*realismo*, the *isla urbana*, the misery of the shantytown and the division of society etc.) and a clear naiveté that is most obvious in the portrayal of the characters. These characters are often naive flâneurs of a world they want to understand (empathy) but which at the same time they are indifferent to (apathy). Finally, Aira’s novels are almost all at the same time *frivolous* and *apocalyptic*. A silly, light undertone accompanies stories about the end of Argentina. This strange tension (and also oscillation) may originate from this ambiguity about Latin America’s ‘place’ in time. With the end of colonization it became necessary to look towards a new future, yet, the short and brutal past obstructed economic, political and cultural processes. The rapid implementation of capitalist systems made that ‘future’ suddenly arrive early. The apocalyptic element in Aira’s novels might stem from this typical Latin American question (and doubt) about the future - while at the same time that future already has arrived and there seems nothing new to come, since now we are living in a ‘everlasting present’.

Inherent to Aira’s metafiction is that the underlying discourse always is a discourse on art and creation. One can think again of (meta-)fragments such as in *La guerra de los gimnasios* about the *no-construido* as literature. Although Aira writes ‘frivolously’, regarding the metatextuality of his novels he does seem to be highly preoccupied by literature’s function. Then, considering the strong connection with a (spatial) reality of contemporary Buenos Aires, it is possible to deduce an interest - not (merely) in the social reality of Argentina, nor a wish for (merely) showing how diffuse and unreal that reality is – but, as a contemporary Baudelaire, in exploring in how far literature can transmit the *experience* of *contemporary* life.

“Una determinada realidad barrial es particularmente representada en las novelas recientes de Aira”, Juárez says (2010, 140). As I tried to have shown, this reality of Buenos Aires and the neighbourhood Flores is *overtly* present; this realism cannot be denied since Aira makes reference to highly local elements such streets of names, places and practices. In

other words, I think that a reader completely unfamiliar with Latin American or Argentinean culture and society misses out on things while reading Aira - and that (for this obviously happens all the time when reading foreign literature) this is of particular importance when it comes to Aira's work due to the strong, realistical elements. Instead of saying (as Ludmer does) that a novel as *La villa* is of a 'global order' and 'out of time', I would rather state that Aira's work depicts a 'glocalized' world. It is a literature strongly rooted in Argentinean tradition referring to *local* elements, while it shows at the same time how the global 'comes in' and affects the subject living in this contemporary space.

Ludmer's idea of "*destemporalización del presente*" (91) implies a present in which time is 'unraveled, undone, or untied' from space. Opposed to the image of the divided city (in outside/inside, hence through the *islas urbanas*) as an eternal non-place, one can draw another image in which temporality continues to play a significant role. This image looks specifically at the characters in the novels and at notions that are fundamentally 'temporal', such as desire and memory. As a consequence this chapter rather looks at the *experience* in - or *practice* of - space.

3.2 Boredom and adventure

Strollers and wanderers appear in many forms: in Aira's novels innocent dreamers pass by, but also curious flâneurs, adventure seekers and bored detectives. All of them observe the world around them, a world often constituted by marginal figures. "Aira toma como epicentro del fenómeno postmoderno el barrio de Flores (Buenos Aires), Mbaye states (35). Yet, however clearly marked by postmodern urban (non)space, fragmentation and an incertain relation between reality and fiction, *Flores* is more than that. This specific, Latin American, Argentinean and porteño – hence local – setting is also a space that reflects social problems and where the subjects have experiences that are necessarily connected to time. "For Benjamin", Graeme Gilloch says, "the urban complex is the quintessential site of modernity. The social totality is crystallized in miniature in the metropolis" (Gilloch 5). Strikingly, Aira indeed depicts a contemporary image of a "social totality" and makes – literally - very often mention of the 'miniature'.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ The "miniatura" recurs in all four novels. E.g. in *Los fantasmas*: "Debía de ser por eso que los niños jugaban todo el tiempo, y lo hacían con modelos reducidos de cosas reales: autos, casas, personas. Un teatro en miniatura" (57).

One particular fragment in *La guerra de los gimnasios* links the miniature literally – not only to society – but to urban space (and ultimately also to the brain and the mythical “liebra”, a recurring aspect of Aira’s novels)⁸⁹. Ferdie always sees from the gym the balcony of the house where he used to live in as a child, and, where he remembered to have seen the giant Chin Fu. (The play with big, muscled “patovicas” and ‘good giants’ – apart from Aira’s play with genres – is also part of this discourse on the miniature):

The balcony was so little that Ferdie and his twin sister had to play each on one half of the balcony; “Yo había hecho un sistema con mis fantaseos con la terraza [en frente] que consistía en igualar la terraza con el balcón, y hacía las equivalencias con los tamaños. Entonces, los autitos con que jugaba (..) tenían que ser verdaderas miniaturas, del tamaño de una uña” (89). This memory of Ferdie’s youth reminds Julio of the myth of ‘the twins’:

Los Mellizos en esa historia están en su cielo, que es una semiesfera dividida por la mitad, como los dos hemisferios cerebrales. La superficie pequeña en la que están, como en una isla desierta, representa al mundo extenso. (..) la corteza cerebral es una superficie toda arrugada que si se estirara cubriría todo el mundo, creo. Por ese lado, la fábula se refiere a la vida urbana, el costo del metro cuadrado, la falta de espacio, los niños encerrados en departamentos (92,93).

Spatial thinking, or a spatial view, again underlies this strange myth; a myth or legend that in itself provides for thought on many different topics, such as the mind and metaphysics. The balcony is a miniature, urban island. Yet, an island of middle-class children living the consequences of strong urbanization (expensive rents and little space).

Moreover, for Ferdie Calvino “[e]l mundo era el barrio” (55). For Maxi counts the same and as well for la Patri who rarely leaves the building she lives in. Also the protagonist in *El mármol*, a middle-class man without a job (and without a name) never leaves his neighbourhood. All characters live in the neighbourhood of *Flores* – representing a “social totality” in ‘miniature’, or, a society on a small scale.

“‘Human beings’, Lefebvre contended, “do not stand before, or amidst, social space; they do not relate to the space of society as they might to a picture, a show, or a mirror. They know that they *have* a space and that they are in that space. They do not merely enjoy a

⁸⁹ See Rémon-Raillard (55): La liebra ‘legibreriana’ is a genetically manipulated species that functions as a motive in *La liebre*, *Embalse*, *La guerra*, *Los misterios de Rosario*: “El día de su nacimiento se llevaría a cabo la continuidad de los territorios (..) y por consiguiente el fin del mundo. Este es uno de los aspectos, más bien temático, en los que se pone de manifiesto el retorno a una situación inicial ya que la continuidad de los territorios alude a la Pangea, a la masa continental existente antes de su separación en continentes” (55). The “liebra” also returns in *Los fantasmas* (p.130).

vision, a contemplation, a spectacle – for they act and situate themselves in space as active participants” (294 emphasis in original). The postmodern view on urban space sometimes has a tendency to look at the ‘numbing’ of the subjects in that space; the view on the *isla urbana*, for example, depicts a rather ‘passive’ view of the subjects living in that space. Bauman, as we saw, even speaks of ‘tiempo pesado’ in which ‘nunca pasa nada’.

Bauman (2000) holds that this time-space compression is characterized by its ‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ (2). “He uses the idea of “fluidity” as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era.⁹⁰ “The extraordinary mobility of fluids is what associates them with the idea of ‘lightness’ (..) We associate ‘lightness’ or ‘weightlessness’ with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move (2). This lightness may have something positive for the lives of the ‘turistas’ who can easily travel and move through space. Nonetheless, the local ‘vagabundos’ “quedan detenidos en su ‘localidad’ (Bauman 1999: 8,9). In Bauman’s line of thinking, as time becomes increasingly ‘light’ and meaningless in our globalized world, space ‘weighs’ heavily on the shoulders of the poorer, of migrants, *vagabundos* or ‘marginalized’ people.⁹¹

Yet, I am looking at how the characters relate to their environment and to others, regardless of the (social) borders within the city, within a more ‘solid’ modernity. I am not really looking at (along Appadurai’s lines of thinking) at how space (solid/liquid or *adentro/afuera*) may indeed be used socially and politically and can have real emancipatory power. Yet, this more solid modernity in Aira’s writings seems to refrain from declaring any ‘end’ of meaning or reality, but tries to search the points or places of ‘escape’ from this eternal present space. Aira’s characters as a consequence search something which remains ‘solid’ (and thus *material*) or as Ferdie says, things “tomando cuerpo entre sus manos” (*La guerra* 57).

Aira’s characters are most of the time naïve dreamers. “The flaneur ambles, saunters and strolls, but must not hurry. He is fundamentally out of step with the rhythms of modern life. Herein lies his heroism” (Gilloch 155). In Aira’s novels, the flâneurs are ‘out of step’ for they

⁹⁰ “Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant) , fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but ‘for a moment’. In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake” (Bauman 2).

⁹¹ “Solo el tiempo virtual de la televisión tiene una estructura, un ‘horario’; el resto pasa monótono, va y viene, no exige nada y aparentemente no deja rastros. Sus sedimentos aparecen de improviso, sin ser anunciados ni invitados. Este tiempo immaterial, liviano, efímero, carente de cualquier cosa que le dé sentido y por ende gravedad, no tiene el menor poder sobre ese espacio verdaderamente real donde están confinados los residentes del segundo mundo” (Bauman 1999: 117).

are often all too naïve, dreamy and innocent, as if they cannot keep up with time or adjust to their environment; “soñador, inadecuado con respecto a su entorno, en conflicto perpetuo con su cuerpo y sus sentimientos” (Rémon-Raillard 57).

La Patri, also an adolescent and a young girl still ‘searching’ her way in life. Her mother laments that she does not have any real passions or interests:

Era la edad, por supuesto, pero aún así constituía un caso alarmante. Todo lo que empezaba lo abandonaba, no tenía constancia, no tenía gustos verdaderos. ¡Si tan siquiera se enamorara! (..) Pero ¿y el colegio? Eso también murió, porque no quiso rendir las equivalencias. Quiso ser electrotécnica. Qué ridículo! (..) El problema central (..) era la frivolidad de la Patri. ¿Había existido en el mundo una jóven más frívola? No se tomaba en serio lo que era serio, porque para ella lo serio era lo otro. Vivía en un mundo al revés, esa pequeña soñadora (75,76).

Similarly, Maxi is protagonist and anti-hero of a “modesta leyenda realista” (*La villa 16*). Maxi does not have any clear idea about his future: “en dirección al futuro, tanto él como sus padres se habían ido convenciendo de que no volvería a estudiar nada nunca más: no había nacido para hacerlo, y era inútil. (..) Así que su única actividad fue el gimnasio” (8,9). In both novels (as also in other novels such Rosa’s case in *La mendiga* 1998) Aira often turns to the question of ‘vocation’ and the insecurity of adolescents regarding their professional future. Maxi’s actions (voluntarily helping the *cartoneros*) seem inexplicable;

Su intervención era individual, casual, artesanal; pero quizás producía un efecto general y aliviaba a todos los cartoneros. Si era así, era inexplicable, y sólo podía adjudicarse al misterio de la caridad. (..) En el fondo, lo que pasaba era que nadie se había puesto a buscar la utilidad social de Maxi, y él la había encontrado por sí mismo, sin buscarla, llevado por el azar de la ocupación del tiempo. (..) ¿Cómo descubrir lo que puede un hombre? No existe una ciencia de vocación. Cada cual cae en su lugar por azar, y la inadecuación es la norma (23,24).

Maxi thus finds a new occupation by coincidence when he strolls through the street and starts helping out people from the shantytown; “había quedado librado a sus propias fuerzas (24). He is a sleepy person that suffers from night-blindness, who needs to get up early and sleeps alot. It is also his strange daily rythm that leads him to help out the people from the shantytown. In summer he wakes up at five and makes the time pass by wandering (“caminatas”) through the neighborhood. None of the dreamy protagonists hurry, neither do they seems to have any goal or objective in life. The nameless (first person) protagonist in *El mármol* does not have a job; “debo decir que desde la forzada desocupación, y la dependencia

económica de mi esposa, me obligaron a ocuparme de las tareas de la casa, soy frequentador asiduo de supermercados” (74). The ‘tour’ through Flores of this *I* consists in going to supermarkets. However, as will be explained later on, his tour is also a trip through memory.

Ferdie Calvino, besides his daily and ‘urgent’ visits to the gym, at one point leaves this setting and actually ‘enters’ the barrio, where the ultimate adventure takes place; the war between Chin Fú and Hokkama will come to its (mythical) end and Ferdie’s head (literally) – or rather his *brain* - is at stake: *Se lo van a dar a comer el cerebro de Ferdie* (113 emphasis in original). Hokkama is after Ferdie’s brain in order to gain control over Argentina. “Todo la idea es un dominio mental que al empezar a ejercerse sobre el gigante [Chin Fú], se hará nacional: Hokkama se propone nada menos que el control de la Argentina” (117). All this drama started (naturally, and ironically, also on a structural and formal level) with Ferdie’s little phrase “provocar el miedo a los hombres y el deseo a las mujeres”. The next fragment is intrinsically ‘aireano’, it includes all of Aira’s absurd motives (postmodern discourse on media, play with gender themes, realism, absurdism, apocalyps, etc.):

Tu frasecita, Ferdie, le dio la pista a Hokkama. Le vino como anillo al dedo. Habría sido un milagro que no se aferrara a ella. Sobre todo porque vos ya estás difundido en la sexualidad social, gracias a la televisión. Ahora, con tu cerebro en su poder, tiene la máquina infalible para dominar la reproducción de hombres y mujeres en la Argentina. Tengan en cuenta que nuestro país es un campo virgen en este aspecto (118,119).

Ferdie, however, does not seem to worry all too much. He listens quite passively to others (as if watching a film) and once again his desire for something – something *real* – to happen arises again. Ferdie longs for the real, for reality, where things have causes and consequences; it is as if he is a character in a film on television but cannot break through the screen. In this view, Ferdie is a postmodern subject, yet, one who is not happy or does not feel *at ease* in that role. During his adventures, obviously he still is bored, for nothing seems (is) real:

El tragaluz del baño, que clásico de las aventuras, pensó Ferdie con ironía. Se produjo en él un movimiento curioso: fue como si se doblara en un ángulo de aventura absoluta, ya sin consecuencias. De no ser por Julio, a quien sentía preocupado en serio, habría soltado la risa. Al mismo tiempo, paradójicamente, sintió que en unos segundos comenzaría a aburrirse. Es que para él las consecuencias lo eran todo. (..) Si el mundo se volviera en una pura serie de acontecimientos, Ferdie no le encontraría el gusto, y ni siquiera el sentido (129,130).

A desire for reality, cause and effect, where one can *actually experience an adventure*⁹² (something can only be exciting when the adventure implicates unforeseen consequences instead of being a series of separated, fragmented events) all add up to the longing for the ‘temporal’ (and, ironically, the logical?) or the material. At this moment I want to call attention to the form and structure of Aira’s narratives. Decock indicates how many readers are sometimes frustrated by Aira’s (sometimes) complete illogical narratives. In some situations, entirely arbitrary and absurd events ‘disrupt’ the logical order of things. But, strikingly, Decock (2003) says, “Aira defiende esas secuencias narrativas en las que la explicación queda suspendida en su ensayo dedicado a Copi: ‘El reino de la explicación es el de la sucesión causal, que crea y garantiza el tiempo. El relato reemplaza esta sucesión por otra, por una intrigante e inverosímil sucesión nocausal’”(1,2).⁹³ Consequently, my comparison demonstrates that Aira not only plays with the disruption of causality and consequence on a structural level but also on the more *thematic* level.

When Ferdie goes to the gym every day it is because it bears some kind of promise: “no faltaba nunca, se quedaba dos horas, a veces tres.. Mary, la recepcionista, a veces el mismo Julio, lo felicitaban con su constancia. El se inquietaba un poco al oírlos, temía que un día le dijeran, ‘pero vos, vivís en el gimnasio’” (50). On a superficial level, this promise is a perfect, muscled body that additionally will cause men to fear him and women to desire him. But this perfect body is only attainable by working out, by *practicing* everyday. Promise and desire remain eventually intrinsically bound up with time. But Aira (as in a circle or a continuous stream of alternating ideas) makes Ferdie feel often depressed and melancholic, for he knows that, how much he may work out, “desde ya podía anticipar que el efecto sería impercibible, no habría nada visible, ninguna sorpresa, y si no había sorpresa no había nada” (30).

If Ferdie does not want to feel so melancholic he maybe should stop going to the gym ironically points out another character in the novel *La villa*. In *La villa* is even referred to Ferdie’s fitness centre Chin Fú. To go to the gym, Jessica thinks, is “una pérdida de tiempo” (134). The place (non-place) itself - so characteristic of our time (and Argentinean reality) - is pure (present) space; hence it is logical that one *loses time* by being always in non-space.

La Patri meets some strange ghosts in the building she lives in and who invite her to a

⁹² Gilloch: “The bold Parisian did not have to look far for the new hero of modernity, only into the mirror. As an escape from the ennui of modern urban existence, the tedium vitae produced by the noting-new of fashion and the faceless uniformity of the metropolitan crowd, the city was transformed by Poe, Dumas and Sue into a place of adventure” (148).

⁹³ Aira (Aira, César 1991: 54) quoted by Decock.

party; el Gran Reveillon at twelf o'clock on the last day of the year (105). In *La guerra de los gimnasios* the fitness centre constituted the starting point for a meta-narrative or discours on gender (particularly, on the question of what are, or what not, "hombres de verdad"). In *Los fantasmas* the ghosts fulfil the same function. The ghosts (all men) walk around in the building, all naked, and according to Elisa, la Patri's mother, they are all "maricas" (135). Something that clearly worries la Patri. La Patri's 'tour' consists of her marches through the unfinished building. In reality, la Patri is also on the search for adventure, an adventure related to love or sexuality. The discussions between la Patri and her mother affirm this. Those discussions particularly deal with the Chilean 'versus' the Argentinean men – discussions with quite 'local' aspects that become more interesting when one has some knowledge about the cultural differences between the South American countries.

As la Patri comes into contact with the spectres, she becomes increasingly curious and tries to follow the ghosts, deliberating on whether she has to accept the invitaton or not, for, the only condition to enter the party, is that she needs to *die* (or, become a ghost as well). La Patri for the first time is obligated to actually think, something she does not like considering her frivolous character. La Patri, bored, or seeking for adventure, decides to jump from the building so she can go to that notorious party, "lo frívolo por excelencia: una fiesta" (112):

Pero una fiesta (..) tenía algo de serio, de importante. Era una suspensión de la vida, de todas las seriedades de la vida (..) El tiempo, estamos acostumbrados a verlo siempre dentro del tiempo mismo, y cuando está afuera? Lo mismo sucede con la vida, a la que es corriente (..) concebirla dentro de un marco general de la vida. Sin embargo, había otras posibilidades, y una de ellas era la fiesta, la vida fuera de la vida (133).

What calls attention at this point is that critics, in relation to Aira, and also Aira himself, often refer to the writing of the Surrealists.⁹⁴ Benjamin, Graeme Gilloch says, points out that for the Surrealists "the city was a dreamscape of the magical and the mysterious. To surrender oneself to such enticements, to roam the enchanted metropolis in pursuit of desire and distraction", such motives inspired surrealists as Aragon and Breton (Gilloch 103). Aira's postmodern flâneurs long for this experience; for excitement, distraction and adventure.⁹⁵ However, just as for the modern flâneur, this longing sometimes is counterproductive or even fatal. "The attempt to avoid boredom becomes the shortest, surest route to it (Gilloch 151).

⁹⁴ Montaldo, 13; Aira (La Nueva Escritura)

⁹⁵ "The bold Parisian did not have to look far for the new hero of modernity, only into a mirror. As an escape from the *ennui* of modern urban existence, the *tedium vitae* produced by the nothing-new of fashion and the faceless uniformity of the metropolitan crowd, the city was transformed by Poe, Dumas and Sue into a place of *adventure*" (Gilloch 148 my emphasis).

Aira's character Ferdie is taken up by the 'absolute' adventure (a complete, absurd mythical ending) while la Patri jumps from the building to arrive at the 'eternal' party, "fuera de la vida". We cannot even be sure whether la Patri ever woke up from her dream (and did she really die?). Ultimately, the characters remain 'caught up' in the 'simulacre' of reality, for the 'real' experience *in time* is no longer possible. In a world constituted by non-places and 'on the border of time'⁹⁶ everything is absolute and eternal. Frivolousness (but also indifference) and fatality are the result of this strange world. Before la Patri decides she will jump, she looks at her family and feels "una especie de nostalgia". Yet, she thinks, "todo sacrificio es viable, si vale la pena" (126). And so, la Patri saltó al vacío. Eso fue todo" (145). Dying for a party as the ultimate, frivolous act.

Ultimately, Aira's flâneurs "want to escape the ultimate terror of contemporary existence: namely, boredom" (Gilloch 51). Boredom, as opposed to waiting, is not escaped easily Buck-Morss states: "It threatens the gambler, the drug user, the flâneur and the dandy who appear to choose their fate freely (..) Benjamin calls boredom an 'index of participation in the collective sleep'. But it is a sleep in which class differences are crucial. (..) [t]he workers cannot afford to stop working, any more than that lives off this labour can afford to let history go forward. 'We are bored when we do not know what we are waiting for'". (Buck-Morss 105). What is striking is that in the end all of Aira's characters experience a certain boredom, no matter whether they are living in Bauman's 'heavy' space of the immigrant (la Patri) or experience the 'lightness' of the turistas, the middle-class adolescents Maxi and Ferdie. The same counts for the unemployed men from *El mármol* and inspector Cabezas (in *La villa*) who appears to suffer from a mid-life crisis (and taking drugs while working for the police).

Yet, also in Aira's literature class differences remain crucial. Adelita, the servant in *La villa* 'lost' her boyfriend ("el linyerita" or Alfredo) who suddenly disappeared. All she could do was *wait* for him to come back, but the intervention of Maxi is needed to bring them back together. Maxi, who visits the "linyerita" everyday, 'matches' the two lovers again, a 'game' he ultimately undertakes by coincidence and simply for fun. It is just one of the adventures on his way, while for Adelita it is a very important matter and probably even life changing. Adelita however was never bored, as she knew *what* she was waiting for (for her lover to come back). This opposes Bauman's idea of how time functions for the people of 'el segundo mundo (or, vagabundos); "Solo el tiempo virtual de la televisión tiene una estructura, un 'horario'; el resto pasa monótono, va y viene, no exige nada y aparentemente no deja rastros",

⁹⁶ Ludmer: "la temporalidad del fin y después del fin" (90)

he says (Bauman 1999: 117). Yet, Maxi, the middle-class child does not have anything better to do, boredom leads him to undertake this sort of adventures, while Adelita and Alfredo actually were waiting for each other.

3.3 Play, crime or killing time

For Benjamin, “the cityscapes offer a phenomenology of the marginal figures of the metropolitan environment. They relate the experiences of the child, the prostitute, the beggar, the rag-picker and others.” (..) It is important to realize that the rag-picker, the prostitute and the beggar are principally metaphorical figures for Benjamin, constituting emblems or models of and for redemptive practice.” But he also draws upon “the middle-class child, the poet, the flâneur, the dandy and the gambler” (Gilloch 15). These characters effectively remind us of the inhabitants of the *isla urbana* (the poor, migrants, the *cartoneros*) but also the middle-class child appears in Aira. Aira’s ‘anti-hero’ la Patri is herself a migrant in Buenos Aires. Maxi, the young, spoiled adolescent (as a sauntering flâneur) comes into contact with the *cirujas* of the shantytown and the vain actor Ferdie (a self-conscious dandy) encounters Chinese criminals. Finally, the nameless protagonist from *El mármol* engages in an adventure with the Chinese immigrants of the city.

Mbaye states that Aira “[r]escata de los escombros de la Modernidad a seres marginales (..) El mapa de la marginalidad (cartoneros, niños, travestis, punks, pequeños monjes budistas, magos, seres patológicos, tribus²⁵, etc...) ocupa una gran superficie en la literatura aireana. Sin embargo, este auge no traduce de ningún modo un afán totalizador, una dominación de las minorías. Cultura alta y cultura popular, clase alta y clase baja, norma y trasgresión comparten el mismo espacio, se comunican dialógicamente. Ya está abolida la hegemonía” (Mbaye 33,34).

Mbaye is saying that Aira does not really distinguish anymore between people or classes, “está abolida la hegemonía”. The temporal context of Aira’s writings is a different one than that of Benjamin and it is true that Aira himself does not (re)establish or confirm any hegemony. Aira makes indeed communicate low and high class and does not focus on the one or the other. And when it comes to gender roles, Aira even inverts and subverts existing ideas and notions. However, he does not ignore or declare the end of the existence of class differences. He straightforwardly plays with existing, social class divisions and in doing so actually shows that the *ciruja* from the shantytown and the middle-class adolescent are still

living in different worlds; or that the Chilean migrant comes from a country with a culture that is noticeably different than Argentinean culture and mentality.

Mbaye also states that the characters all seem to live in the same space (“el mismo espacio”) – yet I showed this is not (always) true. It is precisely from this strange tension and through the silly relations between ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture (or poor and middle-class/rich) that Aira’s novels are so playful and humorous. Aira shows that boundaries and differences exist (between high/middle class urban area and the shantytown, or, between different migrant cultures such as the Argentinean, Chilean or Chinese) and he makes those boundaries function as appealing bridges that can be crossed; once the bridge is crossed strange adventures happen and new worlds or dimensions come into sight.

The combination of Aira’s (postmodern) irony and a sort of engagement with the social reality of today makes Aira’s work so ingrassable. Fragments inspired by the postmodern discourse account for the ironic distance and skepticism towards an uncertain and floating – or in Bauman’s term’s a liquid – reality. But Aira’s literature is not merely constituted by this postmodern fragmentation, uncertainty or his metafictional comments.

On the more thematic level, contemporary reality is presented as a playground with many different actors, a world still marked by division and in which the reality of the poor is different than that of the middle-class man. Aira ‘establishes’ – as De Certeau said of space and narrative - a dramatic scene that is seized with emotion. *El mármol*’s protagonist’s boredom and apathy are disrupted by the acquaintance with the unknown, a different, adventurous world (entered through the supermarket). And when la Patri jumps and (actually) commits suicide we do not know whether to be happy or sad. This is due to Aira’s meta-discourse that constantly oscillates between reality as ‘simulacre’ (or even a dream) and reality as ‘material’ and real. In the first case, la Patri might still be ‘living’, her jump does not have any meaning or consequence. In the latter case, (in a material world) la Patri indeed died. This last scenario is in the end more ‘dramatic’ and realist. It turns *Los fantasmas* in a ‘realist’ novel about a migrant family living on a roof top and a silly girl so bored (and apathic) that she jumps from the building on New Year’s Eve. In short, with respect to intertextuality in Aira, from the first perspective *Los fantasmas* is closer to a story such as Borges’s *Las ruinas circulares*, in the second view we should rather look at a realist novel by Zola.

But now let us completely forget about the dream-reality or reality as ‘simulacre’ and assume Aira ‘remediates the real’ (Bolter & Grusin 56). For Benjamin, “the hallmark of modern metropolitan experience was the encounter with the crowd, the reaction of the individual to the great assemblage of strangers that forms the urban populace. In the great

metropolitan centres of Europe, the individual was confronted for the first time by the unknown, unknowable multitude” (Gilloch 139-140). Only, in Aira’s novels it is not the new, unknown multitude or crowd walking down the boulevards, but the unknown crowd living in the *villas*, on rooftops or mysterious communities of migrants in their (Chinese) supermarkets that provide for the ‘new’ encounter. This crowd – however not particularly ‘new’ (for Benjamin also speaks of the poor or marginalized) – nevertheless has become increasingly characteristic of our globalized world, more and more divided into *turistas* and *vagabundos*.

“The city is a landscape which the observant traveller must learn to identify and read”, Gilloch points out, “to wander the streets of the city, deciphering its spaces and structures as one walks, is the joy of the flaneur and the physiognomist. The concept of the urban complex as a maze and the desire to lose oneself within it are the most important motifs in Benjamin’s writings on the city” (26). Aira’s urban setting does not particularly lend itself to the *flânerie* like that of Baudelaire in Paris. When looking at Aira’s flâneurs we look at their experiences, the impact of the city on the flâneurs, not so much at the ‘impact of modernization on the city’. This impact was of particular importance to Benjamin with regard to Paris, Kohan explains, but in for example Berlin, it is not about the impact of modernization on the city, but rather the impact of the city on the subject: “Una cosa es la ciudad objetivamente transformada por el impacto de la modernización, y otra cosa es la transformación de una ciudad por medio de ciertos mecanismos de la percepción, de la memoria y de la experiencia del sujeto” (31).

For Benjamin, Berlin, as opposed to Paris, is a city “that ofrece resistencias a la *flânerie* (Kohan 31). As well Aira’s *zona urbana*, which is basically the neighbourhood of *Flores*, certainly imposes obstacles for *flânerie* in the traditional sense. Noticeably, although it is a good example of a contemporary non-place, Aira does not write about shopping malls or the (luxurious) centre of Buenos Aires that – as indicated – at times (still) has a resemblance to the grandeur of a city like Paris. *Flores* is in actual fact even within Buenos Aires a quite ‘peripheral’ zone, and as Aira writes in his novels, the *barrio* also functions as a border or limit for it is situated immediately next to the shantytowns.⁹⁷

The marginalization from Naples could not be compared to the underworld of Paris, Benjamin pointed out. “El mundo subterráneo [in Naples] se encuentra en la superficie” (Kohan 97). “Aquí la miseria conduce hacia abajo como hace dos mil años conducía a las criptas” (Benjamin qtd. by Kohan 97). In Aira’s novels we not only deal with the *barrio* of

⁹⁷ See the map of Buenos Aires: http://aktuelresim.com/resim/caba_mapas_de_buenos_aires.jpg, 06-07-2014, 12.52h. Or see the cover of this thesis.

Flores, but also “el ‘Bajo’ de Flores” as the shantytowns are also called, an ‘underworld’.⁹⁸ Significantly, when Ludmer points to the Latin American *islas urbanas* she likewise makes use of the metaphor of the underworld, “un sótano, una ciénaga” (133). The ‘marginality’ of Naples was of a different order than the marginality of Paris (the centre), “tal vez, porque considerada desde Paris, toda Nápoles es ya margen” (97). This brings us back to Argentina’s history, and its ambiguous relation with past, present and future but also with its (peripheral) distance from Europe. Sarlo equally calls attention to Borges’ metaphor of the *orilla* (the border) and Buenos Aires eternal, ‘marginal’ position.⁹⁹ Buenos Aires, as a city, is marked by a “marginal condition”, “characteristic of a city built in the nineteenth century at the most remote point of America, *finis terrae*” (Sarlo 33). Then, the image of Flores, the limits with the shantytown and particularly the transitional ‘bridges’ that lead to the shantytown (for example Bonorino Street) constitute the ultimate border or margin; Aira, as if he were using a magnifying-glass, zooms in at the ultimate *finis terrae* of the Latin American continent: Latin-America, Argentina, Buenos Aires, Flores, and finally the *villa* (el ‘Bajo’ de Flores). To this we may accordingly connect Aira’s recurring allusions to the notion of the miniature or miniscule. And as in Benjamin’s Naples, the marginalized world neither is an ‘underworld’ but visible and accesible, just two steps away from the ‘globalized’ world.

Benjamin in “On some motifs on Baudelaire”¹⁰⁰ looks at Edgar Allen’s Poe (1840) story *The Man of the Crowd* (172). Poe was not interested in the “oppressed masses”, but in “people, pure and simple”, Benjamin says. “There was something menacing in the spectacle they presented.” And, “it is precisely this image of big-city crowds that became decisive for Baudelaire” (172). If Baudelaire

succumbed to the force by which he was drawn to them and, as a *flâneur*, was made one of them, he was nevertheless unable to rid himself of a sense of their essentially inhuman make-up. He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them, only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt. There is something compelling about this ambivalence where he cautiously admits to it. Perhaps the charm of his ‘Crépuscule du soir’, so difficult to account for, is bound up with this (172).

⁹⁹ “Borges produced one of the basic ideologemes of his literature; he coined an image – “las orillas” (the border, the edge) – that represents Buenos Aires’s geographical situation and also the Argentine’s writer’s place in reference to European culture” (Sarlo 33).

¹⁰⁰ In *Illuminations* (edition of 2007).

Remarkably, Aira makes often mention of “el crepúsculo” of Flores, as Ferdie in *La guerra* and Maxi in *La villa* stroll through the neighbourhood’s streets. And particularly when night falls, this unfamiliar, fear-provoking and marginalized ‘crowd’ (or ‘other’) appears:

Flores estaba cada vez más oscuro por la noche. (..) Y con el crepúsculo salía una población extraña, provista de sus propias leyes. Venía de los suburbios lejanos, de las villas, de las lugares que Ferdie no terminaba de imaginarse del todo y que quizás eran el desierto inimaginable. Eran los cirujas, los cartoneros (..) Su momento era la caída de la noche, entre la hora en que la gente sacaba la basura y el paso de los camiones que se la llevaban (..) Ferdie nunca había visto sus ojos, no podía extrañarle, ya que él era una criatura de luz. Encabalgado en el centelleo electrónico que llevaba su imagen a todas partes (63,64).

The very innocent and naïve Ferdie is also a somewhat arrogant dandy – he considers himself to be a ‘star’ (the star of the screen) – in a way looks down upon the poor, the marginalized just living some meters outside his own neighbourhood. However, if his gaze does not really hold exactly contempt, it is maybe a strange sort of curiosity. The inhabitants of the shantytown – through Ferdie’s eyes – become themselves converted into ‘criminals’. Ironically, their ‘crime’ is that they are the ones who never left (or escaped) from reality, from the real world (with all its concrete issues and problems). Ferdie particularly feels offended when he sees the cirujas doing their work “a la luz del día”. (..) “Llegó a la amarga conclusión que de había gente que sacaba provecho de que la realidad fuera real.” Moreover, “el nunca lo haría. Se lo prometió como si le hiciera un juramento a su madre” (55). Ferdie constantly longs for the ‘real’ and for reality, but never seems to be able to arrive in that real world.

The *cirujas* – caught in their reality - in Ferdie’s eyes seem to possess something he no longer can. This leads him to romanticize ‘reality’: in contradiction to Bauman’s view that the *vagabundos* are stuck in heavy, empty space, to Ferdie the *cirujas*, taking ‘advantage’ of reality, still hold on to time. Just as Adelita in *La villa* still has something (love) to wait (and thus long) for. The *isla urbana* effectively remains marked by temporality, cause and consequence. But at the same time, Ferdie, as the middle-class *porteño* (a naïve child, or, closed-minded, immature person..) does in reality not know what he longs for, and therefore even ‘mystifies’ (as we saw Maxi in *La villa* does) what is unknown to him - and that what basically generates fear.

The naïveté derives especially from the fact that Ferdie (nor Maxi or la Patri) “[e]n más de un sentido el no había salida de la infancia” (56). Aira’s characters indeed are “out of place” as also Rémon-Raillard pointed out. Adolescence and childish behaviour in Aira’s novels

serve as a symbol for an attitude marked by indulgence, resignation and fear, typical of the inhabitant of contemporary Buenos Aires. As well Maxi who puts his empty days by doing 'charity' work is eventually using his time 'playful', being a 'matchmaker' for two lovers and (unwillingly) getting involved in a crime:

There was the pedestrian who would let himself be hostled by the crowd, but there was the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure. Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the preambulations of the *flâneur* only if as such he is already out of place (172).

Aira's naive characters all roam through the streets – often without a (predetermined) goal. La Patri – who is not able to adapt to the world around her because of her 'frivolousness' – chooses to go enjoy a (maybe 'fatal') party. But it is also because of her frivolousness that La Patri can make such a decision and it is precisely Maxi's inadaptability and lack of future goals that make him set foot in the shantytown; in both cases the personality of the characters and their diffuse position in society make them overcome fear for the unknown. In an eternal present the future becomes less important; in fact, the characters cannot envision this future anymore. Consequently, Aira's novels become characterized by these strange, apocalyptic endings such as in *La guerra de los gimnasios*. Nonetheless, it is as if all characters readily accept that this is the case and therefore are only on the look for distraction, adventure, play or crime.

While killing time, whether their actions are positively or negatively motivated – or, thus more likely, not motivated at all – Aira's characters encounter the unknown other (*cirujas*), crime (as La Maxi and Cabezas) but also ideas and presumptions (about men, gender, about Argentina) they were initially not looking for or not intending to engage with - and that provide Aira with material to make elaborate comments on all kinds of aspects of contemporary society (his metafiction or 'la fábula metatextual'). It is precisely because of their innocence or dreamy nature that precisely these characters are the ones to cross social borders (whether 'real' or metaphorical) and overcome the average man's fear to enter into contact with the unfamiliar. As a child, their playfulness or curiosity is just what it is, playfulness or curiosity and nothing more. In the same manner, Gilloch indicates, Benjamin calls to mind his memories of his childhood in Berlin and his desire to cross boundaries the adult would not cross:

For the child, the city is strictly divided into areas which are permitted and those which are forbidden. A recurrent theme of the Berlin texts is Benjamin's desire to cross topological (hence class) thresholds. He writes, somewhat crassly, 'a feeling of crossing the threshold of one's class for the first time had a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street'. To recognize yet disregard the invisible boundaries of the cityscape – this is the desire of the child and the regret of the adult. It is intimately bound up with straying, with losing oneself in the labyrinthine streets of the city. (To surrender oneself to the pleasure of distraction, to allow oneself to be led by fancy and caprice, is the fundamental basis of the heedless wanderings of the dawdling *flâneur*.) (Gilloch 85).

The man or woman experiencing fear towards public places, or places they regard as 'isolated' experiences to some extent a sort of *agoraphobia* (Borja 206). "Una ciudad compartimentada, segregada, de guetos ricos y pobres, de zonas industriales, y de campos universitarios, de centros abandonados y de suburbios chaletizados es producto de la agoraphobia urbana, del temor al espacio público" – that, today "se intenta a combatir con el automóvil y con el habitat protegido por las 'fuerzas del orden'" (206). Only the naïve child – it appears – can "recognize yet disregard the *invisible* boundaries of the cityscape' (Gilloch 85 my emphasis). Benjamin (as Gilloch affirms) thus also calls attention to the fact that these urban boundaries are often merely metaphorical, not 'real', but constructed out of fear, such as the 'transitional' streets and places adjacent to the shantytowns. Moreover, also Borja implies that people are 'complacent' in maintaining those boundaries.¹⁰¹

Besides overcoming fear, the child indeed is curious, on the outlook for play or adventure and thus 'crosses' borders also in other ways. La Patri wanders through the unfinished building she lives in as it were a labyrinth that holds secrets which the other family members do not pay attention to (the ghosts wandering around). In *La guerra de los gimnasios* Ferdie lives with his parents in a (of course) 'miniscule' and dark apartment, where hardly is place for him and his sister to sleep. And so the child indeed "also seeks to overcome the claustrophobia of the 'gloomy parental appartement' through the clandestine crossing of thresholds" (85).

Tom Mc'Donough cites Benjamin's following quote¹⁰²: "No matter what trail the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime" (101). In Mc'Donough's view there are consequently two ways of conceiving of the *flâneur*:

¹⁰¹ But also the poor (or the inhabitants of the urban island) "necesitan protegerse y generar su autodefensa" (206).

¹⁰² Mc'Donough takes this quote from: Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 41.

This citation from Benjamin gives rise to two opposed possible readings. On one hand it provides us with a portrait of the flaneur, the solitary urban stroller, as detective, tracking down the transgressions committed in the metropolis and imposing a species of social control over that lawless formation known as the crowd. Yet it also allows for another, precisely opposite, reading; for here we also can see the flaneur as himself criminal, his wanderings through the city streets as themselves perhaps criminal acts, inevitably leading him into crime (Mc'Donough 101).

Maxi, when he becomes more curious enters everytime 'deeper' into the shantytown. On his morning walks he also meets el "linyerita" and after a while checks on him daily. He certainly has a 'detective' role without having intended to take on this role. Inspector Cabezas, when he takes notice of Maxi's walks to the *villa*, becomes suspicious of him; but he cannot grasp what it is that Maxi is doing. He subsequently follows Maxi from his police car. Through his own curiosity (also for the shantytown which he eventually enters as well) he cannot explain Maxi's actions or motives (which is in the end also curiosity).

Cabezas could never understand Maxi's behaviour, Aira writes, for Maxi was at the beginning of his life while the inspector already lived a great deal of it; "De ahí surgía un malentendido esencial, que tendría graves consecuencias. La diferencia se manifestaba en el formato de sus respectivas empresas (..): La de Maxi era lineal, *una aventura abierta a la improvisación*, que se perdía de vista a lo lejos como un camino. La de Cabezas, en cambio, se parecía al desciframiento de una estructura" (41 my emphasis). Cabezas's tours obviously are 'planned'; Cabezas is the detective-flâneur trying to 'solve' his case (where there is no case). Strikingly, his flânerie also leads him to crime. The real detective-flâneur, ironically, is at the same time also a sort of 'criminal-flâneur'. He takes drugs ("la proxidina") and eventually commits a murder inside the shantytown.

It is possible to consider the innocent, dreamy and childlike characters as a persistent theme of Aira's work. Thinking of the discourse on the *no-construido* (and also non-places and heterotopia) we may regard this as another aspect of Aira's work that deals with the notions and tension between utopia/dystopia. The child – or, rather childhood – as an innocent phase or state of life, to some extent resembles the idea of that what is dreamlike, ideal but not (or no longer) unattainable - only through memory when we remember our childhood. Gilloch points out how the child and also memory were important to Benjamin's city thinking: "The child on the metropolis is a figure of utopian dreaming in the very space of the frustration, inversion and distortion of dreams; for this is the pre-eminent locus of the myths of modernity. It is here that play is transformed into toil, curiosity into fetishism, reciprocity into tyranny, spontaneity into drudgery" (Gilloch 91). As Aira actually engages with many social

and socio-political issues of contemporary Argentina he turns his characters purposefully into children or innocent characters, so they can freely explore the uncanny, urban terrain.

According to Buck-Morss we can distinguish three types of flâneurs in Benjamin's writing: "the gambler is just killing time, the flâneur who 'charges time with power like a battery'" and "a third type: he charges time and gives its power out again in changed form: - in that of expectation." The last type, Buck-Morss argues, is the revolutionary, "for whom 'boredom is the threshold of great deeds'"(105). According to this 'division', we may have a different look on Maxi, who, at first sight seems to be 'killing time' when helping out the *cirujas* or simply playing when matching Adelita and "el linyerita". But his innocence and playfulness convert his ambiguous 'charity' work (ironically) into pure altruistic or even philanthropic deeds. From this perspective, Maxi is a hero, unselfishly trying to improve – however on a small scale - the world he lives in.

3.4 Memory and nostalgia

Benjamin wrote extensively on the memory and urban space. I did not yet look more extensively into Aira's short novel *El mármol*. The reason therefore is that this novel engages more directly with memory and time. Nevertheless, the novel is at the same time also another spatial excursion through Flores. It deals in a similar way with non-places, particularly the Chinese supermarket (and equally refers to Flores and the borders of the shantytown). Yet, ultimately *El mármol* is the 'tour' through the memory of the protagonist, and as De Certeau pointed out, memory can provide for the space in which the events occur. Gilloch points out how "[f]or the urban physiognomy, the city is a series of monuments. Like the *mémoire involontaire*, it interweaves forgetting and remembering. The cityscape stimulates recollection; it serves as a mnemonic device" (76). In *El mármol* the nameless protagonist in a similar way tries to remember what happened to him while he describes to the reader the trails of his adventures; here Flores serves as the 'mnemonic device'.

The protagonist of *El mármol* remembers one particular feeling of complete happiness: he remembers a moment where his pants were down and that he was sitting on cold marble (8-11). Now, he needs to write everything down in order to preserve "una felicidad que por mínima e inmotivada no habría tenido, de otro modo, en qué apoyarse" (11). Strikingly, he suspects vaguely that this happiness (more than with the outcome of the adventure) had to do something with the recuperation of the 'concrete' and the 'tangible', of feeling his body;

quizás, fue lo que causó la feliz sorpresa de constatar la persistencia de mi volumen animal. Fue como volver, inesperadamente, de lo abstracto a lo concreto, de lo exótico e inexplicable lo más íntimo y cotidiano, y darse cuenta de que por lejos vaya el pensamiento el cuerpo y sus atributos siguen ahí, donde estuvieron siempre” (13).

The protagonist then tries to ‘map out’ his memories – as in a diary – in order to try to reconstruct the story (and adventure) that he experienced. He has trouble remembering everything that happened to him. This seems another reference to the disconnected and fragmented pasts by the more ‘postmodern’ Aira. But it also resembles Benjamin’s modern notion of experience, memory and shock: “The hallmark of modern experience is ‘shock’. This in turn engenders forgetfulness and a distinctive form of memory, the *mémoire involontaire*.” (Gilloch 7). “[I]n the maelstrom of modern urban life, (..) conscious recollection becomes impossible. For Benjamin, the shocks and multiple stimuli encountered in the city cannot be assimilated by the individual, and are redirected into the sphere of the unconscious.” (Gilloch 69).

The nameless protagonist is a middle-aged and middle-class man, but since he lost his job due to his bad physical health he is always at home; he is either going to the supermarket to do groceries or watching television programmes that promise you all kinds of prizes. Every time he watches these games on television he fantasizes with winning a lot of money: “En la relativa impotencia en que me encuentro, es bastante lógico que deje deslizar mi imaginación al campo de las soluciones mágicas. Y como imaginación no tengo, me adhiero a las que proporciona la televisión” (42).

A certain immaturity and innocence also marks this character. Instead of regarding him as an immature adult, we could persist to look at him as sort of grown-up child. There are many indications in the novel that make this character comparable to the one’s already discussed. As boredom marks his life as well, he equally gets caught up in an absurd and fantastical adventure that (again) entirely occurs inside the *barrio* of Flores. This adventure brings the man into contact with the ‘magical’ which appears to be a welcoming distraction in his monotonous life. The adventure starts off when he does his daily shopping at the Chinese supermarket, those groceries shops that are very characteristic of his neighborhood; “estos establecimientos proliferan hasta el exceso” (28).

What happens at the supermarket is related to the (eternal) lack of change and a highly typical custom of the Chinese community in Buenos Aires.¹⁰³ As the Chinese employee cannot give the exact number of change back to the protagonist, he offers him to choose between some very little toys. Aira comments in an ironic way on the ‘absurd’ situation; “Había que dar vuelto, y surgía el eterno problema del cambio (..) en un país civilizado esas cosas no pasaban: si el monto de la compra hubiera sido, como puse por ejemplo hipotético, de treinta y seis con cuarenta, el vuelto sobre los cuarenta pesos habría sido de tres con sesenta” (15,16). The employee wants to make sure the client is offered enough little toys, so *El mármol’s* protagonist goes home with five, useless silly objects.¹⁰⁴ Those strange objects are magical and result to be the key to the solution of a strange game the man ends up playing. When he leaves the supermarket another Chinese man (Jonathan) insists that he has to come along with him. He eventually gets up on the motorbike of the Chinese guy and enters – thinking of Ferdie’s allusion to “la aventura absoluta” in *La guerra* – the absolute adventure, an adventure marked even by magic. Subsequently, the little toys ‘map out’ the route of the trail this flâneur character. They constitute, not surprisingly, the objects that decide in an arbitrary way what the man has to do and what comes next: Aira’s *procedimiento* once again here decides the absurd succession of events.

Through this adventure the protagonist conceives of a different way of his city – as if he entered another dimension. But what happens is rather that he looks with different eyes at the city, its migrants, and eventually life itself. Benjamin in Berlin intends to take on a “mirada del alienado”; “extrañificar la ciudad, o lo que es lo mismo, convertirse en ella en un extraño” (30). By doing this the flâneur adapts the perspective of (ironically) the ‘tourist’ (31). This position is characterized by a tension between ‘belonging’ and ‘estrangement’ (on the level of space and also on time) (32). Being lazy and not having any discipline or morals, the protagonist suddenly looks with a certain curiosity and amazement at the things happening around him. While sitting on the motorbike it is as if he ‘wakes up’ from his tedious reality: “La velocidad me produjo una exaltación desconocida. Era como si me despertara a una realidad que había estado latente hasta entonces” (61).

This new reality may be a fruit of his imagination, but also a sort of ‘awakening’ and renewed interest in what is different and strange to him. The latter aspect irrevocably reminds us of Borges, as at the end of *El mármol* Aira’s metafiction alludes again to thoughts on

¹⁰³ Here, my only source of inspiration is my personal experience and can only ask the reader to rely on this information.

¹⁰⁴ ‘unas pilas AAA; un ojo de goma; una tabla de proteínas; una hebilla dorada; anillo de plástico dorado’

reality (creation through the mind) and metaphysics. In my view it does not matter whether his strange adventure is real or dreamt. What is important is that he willingly engages in this absurd game, “en el plano de los absolutas” (146).

Jonathan takes the man, not to the *villa* but again to the borders with the shantytown: “No habíamos llegado a las regiones de riesgo, aunque estábamos en el borde” (64). Flores finally is also a labyrinth for it is a more or less demarcated space through which the characters saunter without ever really leaving that space. Following Benjamin, the labyrinth is the typical space of the flâneur. Moreover, he uses the memory as a metaphor for the labyrinth: “Benjamin links time and space in two ways: the journey into the past is a voyage into the distance, and movement in memory is like that in a labyrinth.” Those images are antithetical, says Gilloch;

To move in a labyrinth is a circling around in which one revisits the same places. And yet, such motion indirectly leads towards the heart of things. To journey into the distance is to be a traveller; to journey within a labyrinth is to be a flâneur, one who wanders without destination, one who is able to lose him or herself in the metropolis. For Benjamin, time is not a linear progression. The past is not left behind as one moves on, but, like spaces in a labyrinth, is continually encountered again, returned to, though approached from different directions. Motion in the city and in memory is a persistent going nowhere in particular that constitutes a perpetual rediscovery (68).

The man in *El mármol* - just as the other characters - moves through the city and those movements are indeed everytime a “persistent going nowhere”. There is no goal, objective, idea or plan that needs to be followed. However, in *El mármol*, on a structural level we read not only about an excursion through urban city, but also a ‘tour’ through the protagonist’s memory. It is not surprising then that this novel engages more directly with nostalgia, a notion usually linked to time and the (irrecoverable) past.

During the strange chain of events he has to help Jonathan to solve a (what looks like a virtual) game through which they can win the entire (desolated) supermarket. The supermarket, then, appears to be a sort of ‘stationery’ for the Chinese; they travelled - like aliens - through space and time and arrived in Argentina. Their vehicle for travelling are ‘images’. The protagonist constantly makes fun of the Chinese and their curious behaviour, but he also finds out more about them. Especially about their feelings on being a migrant and about nostalgia. He suspects that the Chinese set up this entire game in order to be able to go back to their country, “era la nostalgia lo que les daba la urgencia de regresar” (“y esta urgencia había dictado todo el Operativo Sapo y la reconstitución del mármol”) (110). The

Chinese suddenly “habían empezado a sentir una nostalgia intolerable de su mundo (..) no pude menos que preguntarle si ese mundo de ellos era muy distinto del nuestro” (105). But they answered: “No, es idéntico”. –Cómo idéntico? Parecido, querrá decir? – Idéntico, hasta el último detalle. Hasta la molécula, sería más exacto. (..) –Y entonces porqué la nostalgia? – Por eso mismo!” This is very illogical, the protagonist thinks,

que seres tan avanzados como para cruzar el Universo de dejaran vencer por una emoción tan primitiva como la nostalgia. Me lo expliqué del modo siguiente: el viaje había introducido una diferencia en lo idéntico, y esa diferencia, si era cierto que todos los mundos del Universo eran idénticos, había causado un desequilibrio cósmico que ellos estaba padeciendo y llamaban ‘nostalgia’. (106, 107).

Or, maybe the explanation was the following; lo idéntico eliminaba el tiempo” (107).

In this novel the aliens (or the Chinese) are the point of departure for Aira’s metafiction: his discourse on nostalgia serves as a bridge between the surreal (aliens) and the real (the Chinese migrants in Buenos Aires who ‘al look like each other’). The Chinese, as Sarlo indicated, are a rather new migrant community in Buenos Aires. Aira humoristically and strangely converts them into extraterrestrials, pondering on how they would feel in Flores, ‘of all places’. As the Chinese travel *on* and *in* images, it makes it reasonable that these visitors had chosen Flores; “la proliferante delincuencia del barrio era la excusa perfecta para instalar todas las cámaras que quisieran” (112). Since the camera’s provides for a lot of images which can be used as ‘vehicles’. It does not matter how absurd the story turns, Aira never ceases to make allusion to the actual reality of his neighbourhood. This time he speaks of crime, the vigilance and robberies which take place in the supermarkets of Flores..

El mármol’s ambiguous discourse speaks of reality, time and nostalgia. The extraterrestrials literally had ‘burn their ships’, “un modo de desafiar a la nostalgia y comprometerse en el combate contra ella, pero también un estímulo a esa misma nostalgia, al hacer imposible el regreso” (124). Nostalgia is normally related to time. Hutcheon (1998) points out that nostalgia “in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility” (Hutcheon s.p emphasis in original). Aira however here connects nostalgia to space, and uses the expression “quemar las naves” not with regard to time, but literally to the burning of the extraterrestrial ships that make it impossible to go back to that other space. Nostalgia hence is felt not only with respect to time, but also arises in the eternal present space, or a world that resembles a non-place and in which everything is increasingly identical.

But to Aira, it appears, nostalgia is a negative sentiment to which we should not hold on to. The Chinese, on their ship, “[c]omprendieron que a la larga la nostalgia sería su perdición: el virus que haría que todo dejara de valer, que les quitaría las ganas de vivir. Y juntos a ellos mataría al universo entero” (125). Just as in *Los fantasmas*, the story about the watchmaker serves in a similar way Aira’s discourse on nostalgia: “Viejo avaro y estúpido, el tiempo pasa, las tecnologías se renuevan, pero la codicia humana no, y en ese ‘atraso’ de algunos hombres está la fuente de la melancolía, que ha amargado la vida de los fantasmas” (133). Hence, in our world the focus effectively shifts from the temporal towards the spatial (or to the watchmaker from the analogous watches to the digital ones). So if you chose not to keep up with time obviously melancholy arises. Yet, at the very same time Aira’s metafictional narrative showed in the other novels how it is impossible to avoid to feel melancholic. As the characters lose their ‘grip’ on reality one cannot refrain from longing for the ‘real’, the material and the concrete, or, a world with causes and consequences.

In a way, this character is the only one of the characters of the discussed novels that ultimately does obtain a certain happiness, since he comes into contact again with the concrete, the real which is expressed through the sensorial and bodily feelings of sitting on the cold marble stone. He remembers that his body, his feet and arms him all remind him of the fact that “lo animal en mí seguía vivo, lo biológico, la representación individual de especie; un recordatorio de potencia de acción, una promesa de tiempo y movimiento” (7,8).

As opposed to the other novels (and noticeably *El mármol* is also the most recent of the novels) this novel does not culminate in a strange adventure; it relates an adventure and ‘narrates’ it with the help of memories. The structure of the novel is hence a more classical one, as we are supposed to read the account of the life of the narrator. Suddenly, it seems, it is possible again to recount the past and turn it into a fairly coherent story. The protagonist, in a way ‘escapes’ from the absurd, unreal reality he first finds himself in. As he leaves the events behind him (or wakes up from the silly dream) he regards reality just the way he sees it before its eyes; he speaks of his “resistencia a las vanidades de la ciencia ficción” (as Aira’s strange adventures always remind the reader of this genre) and knows that he can regard the world ‘just as it is’(136).

Conclusion.

Finally, a spatial perspective on Aira's novels has proven to be both productive and to hold limitations. What calls attention is that spatial concepts such as non-place and heterotopia are at times very diffuse. According to Augé the non-place can be both a hotel but also a refugee camp or shantytown. Then, also to Foucault the hotel is a heterotopia, but Dehaene and Decauter state that the two concepts oppose each other. This shows that these spatial notions are concepts or 'constructs' taken up every time in a different way. The spatial concepts are not always so 'solid' or clear and require a clear definition and explanation of how one uses or interprets them. Dehaene and Decauter, in their work on urbanism and architecture, basically try to get a finger on what heterotopia may mean and what not. In a literary analysis such as this, the spatial notions constitute a point of departure or productive 'tool' for interpretation maybe precisely because of their diffuseness. Spatial notions always provide a way for thinking about both time and space. When one starts reading from a spatial perspective, the temporal aspect – more 'common' in literary critique, as Liesbeth François already indicated - naturally cannot be put aside and it is also the overall space/time compression (as Bauman calls it) which is the most interesting while studying contemporary culture, art or literature. "Time is distinguishable but not separable from space", Lefebvre said (175).

Lefebvre and Soja's spatial trialects and also the concept of Third space provides a sort of fundament to effectively study space *in* novels; this space in literature is in the end a 'third' space, a constructed space, in the way that Lefebvre stressed that (actual) space never can be only material nor merely conceived but ultimately is also a construct. Space, in our real world, never is one or the other but a 'product' as it is used, lived or transformed. Accordingly, a novel is its form (and even its 'material' book cover) and its content (representations, images etc). The 'third' element in Aira is his metafiction or 'fábula metatextual'. The meta-narrative is of a very great importance as it serves really as a bridge; it mediates between the structure (letting the reader know a story is being written) and a actual story. What is more, 'third' space eventually also refers to the act of interpretation, the theoretical 'construct' which is the product of my reading: as De Certeau affirms, "an act of reading is the space produced by

the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs” (117).

Yet, this analysis may have proved to be quite abstract and often tempted me to deal with Aira’s *fictional*, spatial constructs as if they were spatial constructs indeed (which they are clearly not, of course). This was also due to the more ‘realistic’ focus the thesis gradually obtained, particularly by looking at class differences, dividing between *turistas* and *vagabundos* and using the notion of flâneur. Nonetheless, the partition of space in Aira’s novels inevitably leads one to make these distinctions. And so I think this thesis has also shown that Aira undeniably gives the reader an image of contemporary Buenos Aires (and more particularly Flores) which is characterized by class differences, the arrival of new migrants, a preoccupation with gender roles and (physical) appearance and especially fear for the (often, poor) other. Accordingly, the spatial perspective thus also did shed a new light on Aira’s *realismo*. If one sees through Aira’s absurdism, it is possible to confirm that Aira indeed is a sort of realist (as others, such as Graciela Speranza already outlined).

I might say here that Aira also gives an image of Argentina or Latin America, however, this in the end, is not really the case. In order to comprehend the postmodern/modern tension in the novels, it was indispensable to look at the more extensive debate on (post)modernity and Latin America and Argentina and so to situate Aira’s literature. As Kohan is preoccupied with the delimitation of Benjamin’s ‘city’ (consisting out of four cities) – hence, not only Paris – he chooses to call this city *zona urbana*. This ultimately is also a theoretical (and spatial) concept or invention. Along these lines, Aira’s *zona urbana* in the novels studied here is not Buenos Aires, but Flores, the neighbourhood which the characters practically never leave.

This urban zone of Flores is very absurd. But it is also a zone inspired by the ‘real’ Flores and constituted of non-places and isolated urban islands – as Ludmer stated with respect to *La villa* in her essay *Aquí América* (2010). Although the urban setting (of particularly the shantytown) may look like that of other Latin American novels by other writers, Aira’s urban imaginary is very ‘local’. The typical Chinese supermarkets, the comments on Argentinean versus Chilean people or the unfinished properties are aspects characteristic of Argentina, Buenos Aires and Flores. Ludmer is (partly) right when she states that Aira’s *literatura postautónoma* is literature which is no longer interested in history or the nation. Aira may not be interested in grand narratives of the nation, Argentina’s colonial past or even the dictatorships per se, however, this does not take away anything of his ‘power’ or ability to speak of (our tangible) reality. The more ‘modern’ Aira strangely and in an absurd way

engages with the (eternal) present, transforms what we see while we look at it and shows how (our) time can never be equal to a non-place (or how space cannot be ‘untied’ from time). Everytime space becomes empty and ‘heavy’, melancholy arises to remind the characters of the ‘temporal’, of time but also of the material and the ‘concrete’. The characters long for experiences, adventures, love and ultimately simply “la realidad” with its materiality, (temporal) causes and consequences.

But – and this is the ‘postmodern Aira’ - it seems very hard to escape this eternal space (or break through the ‘screen’) in which only exists coincidences and that is constituted of a “una pura serie de acontecimientos” (*La guerra* 130). Consequently, Aira’s *realist* literature ultimately becomes interrupted by absurd, silly things. The postmodern resides in the absurd structure of the narratives. Eventually, none of the characters can really ‘escape’ from this fragmented space and time. The endings of the novels are not very ‘positive’, hopeful or happy; *la Patri* dies and *La guerra de los gimnasios* abruptly finishes in a bizarre, apocalyptic end. Ultimately, Aira might remain a more ‘postmodern’ than a ‘modern’ writer. Yet, due to Aira’s ‘postmodern’ exaggerations – his very ‘metafictional’ narratives – he appears to ironize or even mock the very postmodern tendency to reduce everything in our reality to a representation from a representation. Aira’s contemporary, short novels are no longer typical postmodern novels, but almost function as an overstatement or hyperbole of the postmodern novel.

Finally, then, Aira can be said to be a metamodernist writer as he transmits constantly a ‘double’, ambiguous view. I tried to show how the real and surreal constantly exist next to each other and that this does not ‘weaken’ the ability of the novels to speak of our (real and material) reality. In Aira’s novels we find not only a confusion between the real and the surreal, but between both a comment on a reality that is itself already mere representation (*realidadficción*) and a discourse that actually does ‘mediate the real’ - the actual reality of Argentina, Buenos Aires and more specifically Flores.

“Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find”, Vermeulen and Van den Akker stated (5). Critics already pointed out (Speranza, Decock) that Aira never ‘fixes one meaning’ or discourse. Aira writes for the sake of writing without wanting adhering to either nihilist ideas or very optimist ones. Vermeulen and Van den Akker indicate that “new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. (..) They express a (often

guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse” (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2 emphasis in original).

Kohan is right in pointing out that if there is any ‘crisis’ in literature this has nothing to do with aesthetics (but institutions). Aira’s principal preoccupation is style and form and this becomes expressed through the highly ‘entertaining’ and absurd stories. Those stories, nonetheless are *always* combined with a metafictional narrative that reflects on reality (*realismo*). Yet, however Aira refers to poverty, crime and social problems, his work is not principally interested in ethics and engagement. In my view the four novels discussed here are effectively *aesth-ethical* novels. Also the romanticism of some of Aira’s characters (which even leads them to romanticize the shantytown) underscores this metamodernist aspect, as Vermeulen and Van den Akker point towards a Romantic (or neoromantic) turn in contemporary aesthetics (2).

Aira indeed combines a ‘feigned sincerity’ (or what most critics would call irony) regarding social, political, urban and actual problems with a (guarded) hopeful undertone that narrates the (stereotypical) stories of life, desire, love, adventure. Those latter aspects are all things that ‘celebrate’ life and also the idea of cause and consequence and thus logic. Aira’s novels, then, are surreal and absurd novels that (ironically) celebrate logic and the material world. The Dutch critics affirm that “history is moving beyond its muchproclaimed end.” But, “[t]o be sure, history never ended” (5). Aira’s novels say in a *ironic* way that *hopefully* space will remain connected to time - a time characterized by causality and consequence. A time equalled to a non-place - or as Ludmer says time as “suerte de no-lugar” – indeed generates melancholy, feelings of fragmentation and social division. But there is no other way for people than to ‘keep up’ with time, as history or reality *will not come to any end*; “[t]he current metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist” (5). Hence, Aira enthusiastically declares over and over again the apocalyptic end of Argentina and his frivolous characters, who cannot do anything else but continue to play life’s game.

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