

Jörg Dünne\*

# Lines of Flight and Aquatic Environments. The Pampa as Experimental Space of the Aesthetic in the Novels of César Aira and Juan José Saer

<https://doi.org/10.1515/iber-2022-0008>

**Abstract:** Historians and literary critics have described the Argentinean Pampa as a space predominantly connected to the foundational acts and discourses of the Argentinean nation. At the same time at which Argentina emerged as a nation, foundational discourses modeled the sparsely populated region lying beyond the capital Buenos Aires as a flat, unstructured landscape, as the allegedly empty space of a “desert”. The article analyzes how these geopolitical discourses are rewritten in two Argentinean novels from the last decade of the 20th century, César Aira’s *La liebre* (The Hare, 1991) and Juan José Saer’s *Las nubes* (The Clouds, 1997), which both perform an act of un-founding by creating alternative literary environments. In doing so, both novels also enact a narrative transculturation of spatial concepts drawn from European cultural theory by reterritorializing them on the territory of the Pampa.

**Keywords:** Argentinean Pampa, foundational fictions, literary environments, scapes, topes

The Argentinean Pampa has been described by historians and literary scholars as a space predominantly connected to the foundational acts and discourses of the nation: foundational discourses are generally discernible in that they postulate,

---

**Note:** The first version of this paper was presented at a workshop on “Aesthetic Environments”, organized together with Roger Lüdeke whom I would like to thank for his invaluable comments and suggestions that led to this present version of this text. This article was translated from German by Andrew Patten.

---

\*Corresponding author: Prof. Dr. Jörg Dünne, Institut für Romanistik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, D-10099 Berlin, E-Mail: joerg.duenne@hu-berlin.de

to borrow from Carl Schmitt,<sup>1</sup> a nexus between political (or in a broader sense: cultural) “order” [*Ordnung*] and geographical “localisation” [*Ortung*]. In Argentinean literature, *nation building* is inextricably connected to the rhetoric of appropriation, reflecting both the appropriation of an empty territory and of a specific geographic orientation of compass direction – in this sense, what the West is to the USA, is to Argentina the South.<sup>2</sup> The making of the Pampa or Patagonian steppe into a blank surface for the projection of an emergent nation is in no way a natural process in itself: before a nation can construct itself in empty space, the space must first undergo a process in which it is made “empty” – in its foundational violence, it is such a process of emptying that led notoriously to the bloody nineteenth-century “campañas del desierto”.<sup>3</sup>

These campaigns were accompanied by a discursive groundwork of topical semanticization through which the landscape began to appear as “desierto”, as desert.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the annexation of territory was also associated with a narrative of cultural foundation, occurring at the threshold between *civilización* and *barbarie*, shifting ever further toward the South – exemplified by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo*<sup>5</sup> – with the figure of the gaucho as the precarious border-crosser.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time that the Argentinean nation emerged from the Pampa, foundational discourses modeled the Pampa in a way that would remain predominant in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth; it is the figure of the Pampa as a flat, unstructured landscape, emptied to become a “desert.”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, it is not as if an empty *blank space* had simply awaited the arrival of heroic figures of civilization; rather, the Pampa was first constructed as an empty space at the mo-

---

1 See C. Schmitt: *Nomos der Erde*.

2 See J. Andermann: *Mapas de poder*.

3 According to D. Viñas: *Indios, ejército y frontera*, the Indios are the first “desaparecidos” of Argentina preceding the military dictatorship by a century. See also C. Torre: *Literatura en tránsito*.

4 This is illustrated clearly at the beginning of Esteban Echeverría’s long poem *La cautiva*: “Era la tarde, y la hora /en que el sol la cresta dora /de los Andes. El Desierto /inconmensurable, abierto, /y misterioso a sus pies /se extiende.” [...] (E. Echeverría 2001: v. 1–6). “It was the evening hour /when the sun guilds /the crest of the Andes. /The desert, mysterious and incommensurable /opens at its feet, and expands. [...]” [translation according to E. Kristal 1999: 222]).

5 D. Sarmiento: *Facundo*.

6 For the figure of the gaucho, see specifically J. Hernández: *Martín Fierro*.

7 See F. Rodríguez: *Desierto para la nación* for a polemic reference to Halperín Donghi’s 1982 *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, one of the central works on the history of the Argentinean nation.

ment in which the founding acts and discourses of the emergent nation were established within this void.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the following sections are not concerned with the conception of the Pampa – prevalent since the nineteenth century – as an “empty,” desert-like landscape, functioning simply as a surface of projection for the act of operational inscription.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the focus rests on the transformation of such a conception in two texts of nearly contemporary Argentinean literature, leaving aside the question whether or to what degree this shifted perspective of the Pampa was already established in earlier texts of twentieth-century Argentinean literature.<sup>10</sup>

The two 1990 novels I would like to turn my attention to, namely César Aira’s *La liebre* (1991) and Juan José Saer’s *Las nubes* (1997), are significant in several ways:

1. Both novels refer to what has now become the *topos* of the foundational fiction<sup>11</sup> of the Pampa as an empty, horizontal surface, or desert. At the same time, however, they also rewrite the discursive tradition that is linked with it; and this rewriting of the geopolitical discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be viewed as an act of un-founding, or “effondement” to follow Gilles Deleuze.<sup>12</sup>
2. Not only does the “un-founding” in the novels of Aira and Saer have a deconstructive character; in terms of spatial theory it also demonstrates how the historical landscape of the Pampa may be understood as something other than simply an “empty” space: while empty spaces presuppose a fixed border between active agents and the spatial setting “in” which they operate, the Pampa as it appears in the novels of Aira and Saer form two differing types of how literature establishes its own situatedness. In this process, the difference between “spatial practice” and the surrounding space, or the space emerging from it, appears as always incomplete: in the following sections, these types of situation-formation shall be referred to as *scapes* and *topes*.
3. Finally, both texts may also be described as a particular approach to cultural descriptions of space: by way of their literary realization through specific to-

---

**8** Concerning this original gesture of inscription and the criticism thereof in terms of the early-modern historiography of the “Americas,” see M. de Certeau: *L’Écriture de l’histoire* and J. Rabasa: *Inventing America*.

**9** On the desert as foundational myth of Argentina, see B. Sarlo: “Origen de la cultura argentina”.

**10** Neither will the notion of the Pampa be linked here to the historical background in the “Atlantic World” and its transformation from once grazing pastures for cows to a growing region for soy fields, shifting the historical stage of globalization to the Pacific theater with greater intensity.

**11** On the importance of “foundational fictions” in Argentina and in nineteenth-century Latin-American literature in general, see D. Sommer: *Foundational Fictions*.

**12** See G. Deleuze 1969: 303–304.

pographies they represent a sort of theory fiction that serves to further develop and perhaps even modify the theoretical models of space with which they themselves operate. In this context, I propose that aesthetic environments may be conceived of as a means of positing an interaction between cultural theory and literature that is not to be understood merely in the sense of an abstraction of general models of space from literary texts and other cultural practices, but also in contrary terms as spatial theory in “practice,” allowing possible fictional worlds to emerge from and to transform cultural-theoretical concepts. To this end, I will demonstrate how the Argentinean Pampa functions as a stage for the re-territorialization of Deleuze and Guattari’s reflection on nomadic the lines of flight in Aira’s novel whereas Saer renegotiates the difference between inside and outside alongside Foucault’s perspective on the history of madness.

## 1. Line Practices and scapes in César Aira’s *La liebre*

The Pampa in the era of Argentina’s national consolidation is the central focus of a novel cycle by the immensely productive Argentinean author César Aira (\*1949). Thematically, these works employ motifs of the Argentinean conquest of the “wild South”, including attacks by indigenous peoples on settlements, the so-called “malones” in *Ema la cautiva*<sup>13</sup> as well as European travels to the Pampa, for example, in *Un episodio en la vida del pintor viajero*,<sup>14</sup> a novella dedicated to the painter Moritz Rugendas. In the context of *La liebre*, the novel of my present focus, the journal entries of Charles Darwin provide a crucial background.<sup>15</sup> And yet, Aira also liberates the Pampa from the sublime horizontality of an empty projection surface that merely serves the needs of political and scientific intentions. Although Aira’s Pampa remains a largely horizontal surface, it is more than just a projection surface for scientific enterprises or geopolitical discourses of foundation; instead it is a matrix reflecting lines of varying sorts in relation to their narrative potential. An exemplary expression of Aira’s narrative craft, or – to borrow from the title of Sandra Contreras’ book-length study<sup>16</sup> – his devious *vueltas* or “twists,” may be observed through the way in which he allows the wild hooks and

---

13 C. Aira: *Ema la cautiva*.

14 C. Aira: *Un episodio*.

15 Ch. Darwin: *Journal of Researches*.

16 S. Contreras: *Vueltas de César Aira*.

turns of the titular hare to become a node of different modes of movement. In so doing, the traditional geopolitical forms of foundational fiction become crucially overwritten. The extent of this rewriting is such that a seemingly Eurocentric journey into barbarism is transformed into a journey towards the origin of indigenous peoples, turning from what at first glance appears to be the military domination of indigenous civilization by men, into an adventurous or Romanesque family saga governed by female cunning.

Aira's novel builds on a snapshot of nineteenth-century Argentinean history: it takes place during the 1841 conclusion of a peace treaty between the powerful Mapuche general Cafulcurá (whose historical name is "Calfucurá") and the dictator Manuel Rosas, who epitomizes political power achieved through barbarism. At the beginning of the novel the narrator introduces the English naturalist Tom Clarke as Darwin's brother-in-law. With Rosas supporting his scientific intentions, that is, the search for a species of hare with significance for the theory of evolution, Clarke wishes to travel to the Cafulcurá-controlled area of the Pampa in what is today the province of Buenos Aires. As time goes by, however, the journey of the European naturalist is revealed to be a crafty "twist" of the novel's temperamental narrator, uncovering the secret of another story that proves Clarke to be Cafulcurá's son. This origin has been cleverly concealed by Clarke's mother, because it involves the birth of a twin, who due to a tabu of the Mapuche Indians would not have been permitted to survive. The fictional plot thus deconstructs the very demarcation of a border between European-metropolitan civilization and the indigenous-provincial barbarism that is essential to the foundational discourse of the Argentinean nation: The European traveler, who shapes the perspective of the narrative, turns out to be Mapuche in reality – and instead of proof of Darwin's theory of evolution, he finds his own family tree in the end.

I am particularly interested in how the novel deals with the horizontality of the Pampa: for Aira,<sup>17</sup> this is not a "geometrical" cartographic space; emerging specifically from movement, it is, rather, a "nomadic" space in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari which cannot be mapped and must be understood, instead, as a "local space of pure connection".<sup>18</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in the perhaps most crucial passages of the novel in which the war between the Indian tribes is depicted. According to the narrator, traditional lore has come to know this war as the "Guerra de la Liebre" or War of the Hare. And it is through his involvement in this war that Clarke begins unknowingly to follow in the foot-

---

17 This reading draws on F. Rodríguez (2010: 88–94).

18 G. Deleuze/F. Guattari 1980: 615 (translation J.D.).

steps of Cafulcurá: yet this warfare is different from a territorial conquest by means of a general provided with a strategic overview of the entire area; instead, it shows the construction of space emerging from movement, a space that is shaped solely by the “directionality” of topographical relations:

Descartó de entrada la postura clásica del general sobrevolando el campo entero de la acción: él no era un pájaro, y además la pampa, con su falta de topografía, no se prestaba para esas gracias. Era un terreno puro, una geometría: tratarla como tal habría sido una redundancia. Peor: habría sido contraproducente, una ineficiencia. Los ejércitos circulaban por un plano cuyas pendientes ellos mismos producían e invertían en instantes. Todo se reducía a crear líneas, cuánto más rápido mejor; líneas de llegada y de partida que se entrecruzaban mágicamente en cada uno de sus puntos, no en uno privilegiado. (Aira 1993: 172)

From the outset, he rejected the classical position of the general who hovers high above the entire battlefield: he was no eagle, and anyway the pampa, with its complete lack of topographical features, did not lend itself to such a perspective. In itself it was pure terrain, a geometry: it would have been superfluous to deliberately treat it as such. Indeed, it would have been counterproductive, a waste. The armies maneuvered in a space whose gradients they themselves produced and instantly inverted. Everything was a question of creating lines, as quickly as possible; lines of arrival and departure, which magically intersected each other at every point rather than at any especially privileged one. (transl. 2013: 204)

Through this description one can have the impression of Aira’s novel as something of a fictionalization of the “war machine” in the treatise on nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari’s 1980 *Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>19</sup> Yet there is another decisive point that puts the operationality of the thousand plateaus in a new light: the Pampa is not only the space in which the “war machine” is constructed; instead, the plane also becomes a diagrammatic surface for the operation of other cultural techniques, such as the visualization of temporal markers referring to the genealogical lineage of Clarke’s family. Movement within directional space thus serves a specific mode of temporal experience that is also demonstrated in the depiction of Indian war techniques.

[A]l trazar las distancias, las reducían a cero; a poner en evidencia las posturas de tránsito relativas como líneas en un pasado aplastado contra un presente, las ponían todas en un mismo plano de acontecer, que era el plano de la llanura. (1993: 165)

[B]y calculating the distances, they abolished them; by emphasizing the relative dispositions for movement as lines in a past crashing into the present, they put them all on the same plane of events, that of the flat pampas. (2013: 195)

---

<sup>19</sup> The “war machine”, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the way of occupying a territory that corresponds to a nomadic way of dealing with “smooth” space, as opposed to the “striation” of a territory through fixed boundaries of the state (1980: 434–527).

As “plano de la llanura,” the Pampa becomes a “flat”<sup>20</sup> space of operation and inscription. It is a space that is neither “empty” nor purely “directional,” but one in which multiple types of lines intersect to form what Timothy Ingold calls a meshwork, a fabric of the lines of geneological movement.<sup>21</sup>

At the level of the story’s narrative, the constant back-and-forth between these various lines is driven by the variety of meanings of the *huilliche*, the Indio language in which all these varying meanings are said to coincide but which is initially unintelligible for Clarke and the others: For example, the repeated allusion to a “*liebrecita blanca [que] que había levantado vuelo*” (1993: 30) – that is, of the small white flying hares – apparently already entails a much more far-reaching understanding for the events occurring for the *huilliche* speaking Indios (for example, the indigenous expression for “white” supposedly also means “twin,” thus pointing toward Clarke’s hidden family history). While expressions in this foreign-language remain unverifiable for the reader, the various line-practices become comprehensible on the aforementioned “plano de la llanura”, that is, through the movement in the Pampa.

The Pampa becomes the epitome of a spatiality that demonstrates a utopian network connectivity of different *scapes* in the sense of a set of spatial relations detached from a fixed preliminary topography<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, these connections become projected onto the Pampa, that is, abstract and deterritorialized *scapes* begin to manifest in the form of a *landscape* that is topographically describable and the depiction of which stems from historical travel accounts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

More specifically, it is the genre of the adventure novel that forms the framework in which the lines as they intersect and are projected onto each other can be observed in their entirety. It is through Aira’s virtuous manipulation of these narrative conventions that the many twists and turns of the narrative are finally able to lead to a collective destination, where not only the entire configuration of characters is united, but also where the genealogical lines merge together to form a common “family constellation” in this location.

In the tradition of the pre-modern novel, the titular hare becomes a mark of identification worn by the son Clarke and his twin sister as a birthmark on the buttocks. A final anagnorisis thus retrospectively “straightens” the narrative’s

---

20 On “flatness” as a condition of operationalization in terms of “immutable mobiles”, see B. Latour: “Visualisation and Cognition.”

21 T. Ingold: *Lines*.

22 The concept of *scapes* in this sense has first been introduced by A. Appadurai, who detaches the suffix *scape* from its first element *land* to which it used to be attached (2000: 33).

23 Concerning *scapes* in general, see J. Dünne: “Dynamisierungen”.

highly “crooked” plot. And this occurs, as announced early in the novel, when the supposed detours of the narrative join together in the “straight” line of a fantastic conclusion:

Y al mismo tiempo sin demorarse en esas desviaciones a la derecha e izquierda, que por un efecto secundario de la práctica del trayecto dejan de ser desviaciones y se vuelven una forma particular de la línea recta. (1993: 27)

[...] although at the same time we ignore their deviations to the right and left, which due to a secondary effect of the trajectory end up of course not being deviations at all, but a particular kind of straight line. (2013: 30)

In other words: In *La liebre*, Deleuzian nomadology is rewritten as a family story in the tradition of the Hellenistic adventure novel. This seemingly paradoxical *réécriture* of Deleuze and Guattari serves to convert the dissemination of vanishing lines into a set of connecting lines that form a unified whole. However, this formation of unity, which is realized by the adventure novel’s topos of anagnorisis, is not to be understood as an attempt toward a normative sense of closure according to which complex environments would be dissolved and naturalized into simple family stories. Rather, this narrative unity refers to the way in which fictional worlds have the capacity to create environments in which line dynamics of various kinds can be observed in synchronicity.

## 2. Aquatic Environments and toposes in Juan José Saer’s *Las nubes*

Juan José Saer (1937–2005) spent a large part of his life as a writer in France. Since his earliest novels and short stories, he has been considered a novelist of the so called “pampa húmeda”, the humid part of the Argentinean flatlands, and particularly of the aquatic spaces on the shores of the Paraná near Santa Fe, the region of his birth. The 1997 *Las nubes* is not the sole of his historical novels to be set in the Argentinean Pampa or the vast river landscape of the Paraná.<sup>24</sup> Among these novels, *Las nubes* may be regarded as paradigmatic in rewriting the nineteenth-century narrative of national foundation. In this respect, meteorology takes the place of geography (or geology<sup>25</sup>), the paradigm traditionally at the center of geo-

---

<sup>24</sup> See otherwise, in particular: J.J. Saer: *La ocasión*.

<sup>25</sup> See I. Podgorny: *Sendero del tiempo* on the appropriation of geological stratigraphy, or the appropriation of paleontology for national history with special regard to the creation of the *homo pampeanus* from the allegedly ancient fossil remains of human civilization in Argentina.



political discourses of foundation. As a result, the “orillas,” or the border between land and water,<sup>26</sup> a theme which Saer constantly revisits and reinvents, is transformed into a metabolic space in which the texture of the landscape begins to change along with the aggregate conditions of its internal waters.

The story is set in the year 1804, two years before the founding of the oldest psychiatric institute in Latin America by the name of “Las Tres Acacias” (existing only fictionally in the story) on the outskirts of Buenos Aires; it is here that fantasies of the French Revolution thrive in the form of heterotopias of freedom, although and ironically only until the foundation of the Argentinean nation, which the institute does not survive. Born in Argentina and educated in France, a young doctor by the name of “Dr. Real” tells of an episode from the time of the institute some 30 years prior: he receives the order to deliver a group of five “enfermos mentales” from Santa Fe to the institute near Buenos Aires: the five patients – among them the self-proclaimed quixotic world-revolutionary Troncoso and the erotomaniac “sor Teresita”, a literal practitioner of the bridal mysticism of Teresa de Ávila – as well as their companions assemble an arsenal of characters referencing not only canonical texts of world literature, but also the thematically significant figures of the Argentinean Pampa and of Gaucho literature.

In the same way as Aira’s *La Liebre* may be viewed, to some extent, as a literary dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari from a Latin American perspective, Saer’s novel can be read as a counterfactual revisioning of a specific aspect of Foucault’s *History of Madness*:<sup>27</sup> *Las nubes* is situated precisely at the time of great upheaval that Foucault refers to when he describes the liberation of the prisoners of the Parisian Salpêtrière as a transit point leading from the “Great Confinement” to the psychiatric treatment of madness in the nineteenth century. However, Saer’s aquatic landscape is not only a stage for otherwise obvious developments in the history of subjectivity and knowledge. Rather, my reading will focus on the spatial description of the meteorological environments where such change can unfold in the first place; in this regard, the environment which forms the matrix on which the narrative formation of situatedness in Saer’s novel is based crucially precedes the question of subjectivity or power.<sup>28</sup>

---

**26** See, among others, J.J. Saer: *El río sin orillas*. See B. Sarlo: *Borges* on the significance of the “orillas” as the boundary between city and countryside in the literature of twentieth century with particular reference to Jorge Luis Borges.

**27** M. Foucault: *Histoire de la folie*.

**28** “Environment” is used here in approximately the same sense as the French term “milieu”. On the history of the of the concepts of “milieu” and “Umwelt”, see the classical study by L Spitzer: “Milieu and Ambiance”.

In this context, the exceptional whims of the climate which are at the very heart of the novel's plot play another role; they serve as a vehicle for Saer to introduce a paradigm in which the "empty" topography of the Pampa is transformed into a complex space with a precarious meteorological balance. According to Michel Serres, meteorology may even be considered the very paradigm of the topological dynamization of spaces.<sup>29</sup> As the title indicates, the subject of *Las nubes* is comprised of meteorological field relations rather than of heroes acting autonomously in an "empty" space. On the basis of these relations, a spatial environment is created to which the narrative ascribes a degree of agency that is, although not strictly deterministic, a formative force when it comes to modeling specific forms of situatedness.

This is apparent from the onset of the narrator's introductory summary of the story, which highlights the significance of the meteorological in the sense of a preemptive *mise en abyme* of the narrative proper:

Ríos por demás crecidos, un verano inesperado y esa carga tan singular: así podrían resumirse, con la perspectiva del tiempo y de la distancia, para explicar la dificultad paradójica de avanzar en lo llano, nuestras cien leguas de vicisitudes. (Saer 2002: 17)

Rivers swollen to excess, an unexpected summer, and that most-peculiar cargo: With the perspective of time and distance, these three things could sum up our hundred leagues of troubles, explaining the paradoxical difficulty of crossing the flatlands. (transl. 2016: 9)

Saer's narrative specifically consists of meteorological events that deviate from the norm: in August of 1804, a "terrible helada", a sudden cold snap, occurs in the Pampa, causing the ground to freeze. What begins with this unusual winter weather while Dr. Real is travelling to Santa Fe, continues on his way back with the five patients. The initial, unusually severe flooding of the river landscape gives way to the onset of a no less brutal heat wave, which leads in its resulting dryness to fires in the Pampa. And so the seasons of an entire year become condensed within the course of a few days.

Compared to the persistent deviations of the protagonists and of the narrative in Aira's novel, movement in Saer's story is extremely slow, at times appearing even to come to a halt in passages that prove decisive for the development of the plot. Yet, these scenes of seemingly static description deal in fact with the unfolding of a field of complex forces. Different from Aira's *Liebre*, they do not create a pattern of lines of movement, but they form a sort of biotope, which retroactively

---

<sup>29</sup> See specifically M. Serres: "Solides, Fluides, Flammes", where he opposes the static spatiality of Newtonian solid-state-physics to the dynamic spatiality of thermodynamics beyond local equilibrium, such as in fluids or turbulences.

impacts the coexistence of the people living within. Unlike the ongoing interconnection of different elements and actors in Aira's Pampa, which may be thought of as being bound together by the multiple connections implied in the suffix *scape*, Saer's Pampa follows a type of situation-formation that is perhaps best described by the suffix *tope* inasmuch as it designates a local relation between an entity and its environment which is modeled upon the concept of *biotope* for living organisms:<sup>30</sup> it forms a mutually constructive, or co-creative, relation between inside and outside. Yet without a form of topographical manifestation, this situation would remain unimaginable: only through the meteorological paradigm it becomes possible to observe how the seemingly strict divide between reason and madness, between a secure and an insecure mode of perception, begins to dissipate and give way to a specific microcosm including its own set of norms.

El viaje, prolongándose más de lo habitual, nos había incitado, de modo imperceptible, a crear nuestras propias normas de vida, y los caprichos del clima, que hacían sucederse las estaciones inapropiadas con la rapidez con que se suceden los días y las horas, sumados a la composición singular de nuestra caravana, nos habían incitado a crear un universo exclusivo [...] (2002:169)

The unusually prolonged trip had forced us, imperceptibly, to set our own standards of living, and the whims of the climate, which made the untimely seasons follow one another with the speed of days and hours, added to the singular composition of our caravan; we had had to create a peculiar universe [...] (2016: 148)

Shortly before the end of the novel, the formative role of this environment becomes apparent when the travelers are trapped between the burning Pampa on one side and the flooded grassland of the vast river landscape on the other. A subsequent scene depicts the construction of an improvised fortress of wagons in shallow water for protection from the front of fire, drawing on connotations of uterine regression and multiple intertextual references to literary and artistic representations of hell fire, among other things. But the distinct feature of this description occurs when the blind search for a bearable middle ground between fire and water is told; here, geographic orientation in cartographic space becomes increasingly unclear, and in the end not even the "solid ground" of the grass land can offer sanctuary, leaving only the water:

A la madrugada, ese fuego nos alcanzó. [...] El incendio iluminaba todo el campo alrededor, que asumía el brillo excesivo de una fiesta un poco ostentosa, y como las llamas se duplicaban al reflejarse en la laguna, cuyas aguas se habían vuelto de un color naranja ondulante, los que estábamos adentro, metidos hasta el cuello en ese elemento llameante y rojizo, te-

---

**30** See J. Dünne: "Dynamisierungen", on the distinction between *scapes* and *topes* as abstract models for the constitution of spatial dynamics.

níamos la impresión de estar atrapados en el núcleo mismo del infierno, sobre todo porque, a causa quizás de la tierra recalentada y de la interminable extensión de las llamas, nuestra piel podía percibir cómo la temperatura del agua iba aumentando, a tal punto que empezábamos a preguntarnos, en nuestro fuero interno desde luego, porque aparte de los hermanos Verde, que no había modo de hacer callar, nadie hablaba, si de un momento a otro no iba a hervir. El humo, que a la distancia parecía firme y duro como una muralla, era de cerca un fluido turbulento que se retorció locamente [...] (2002: 177–179)

At daybreak, the fire reached us [...] The blaze lit up the entire countryside, which took on the excessive brightness of a rather flashy party, and the flames doubled when reflected in the lake, whose waters had turned an undulating orange, so we were within it, up to our necks in that reddened and flaming element, had the impression of being trapped in the very heart of the inferno, especially because, perhaps owing to the overheated earth and endless expanse of flames, our skin could detect the rise in water temperature to the point that we began to wonder – to ourselves, of course, for apart from the Verde brothers, who were impossible to silence, nobody spoke – whether it might begin to boil at any moment. The smoke, which at a distance appeared firm and sturdy as a wall, was a wildly writhing, turbulent fluid up close [...] (2016: 157–158)

The Pampa as solid ground and earth beneath the feet is dissolved in the metabolic space of a great circulatory system of water in which the body acts as a thermometer; at the same time, spoken language falls silent among the travelers, largely giving way to the intensely corporeal experience of a pre-linguistic environment which encompasses all the characters involved.

In contrast to the continuous deviations of Aira's narrator, Saer's meteorological environment leads to the limits of language and to the limits of reliability in terms of the narrator's memory. This is also evident in the complex narrative framework of the text that forms a narrative within the narrative. Connected to this diegetic doubling Saer's *Las nubes* uncovers the transatlantic space of memory and imagination between Argentina and France. Layering opposite seasons and weather conditions between the northern and southern hemispheres of the earth, this space transforms the non-simultaneous into simultaneity. As a result, readers are led to assume that the narrator's memory after 30 years and now situated in Europe is ultimately also governed by a "meteorological" logic of sorts; and the same may be said of the frame story, which takes place in a hot French summer of the present day twentieth century. From there, Saer's *Las nubes* opens up a transatlantic space of memory and imagination where opposed seasons and climates in the Northern and the Southern hemispheres of the globe begin to overlap. Between fire and water, between summer and winter, the Pampa becomes ultimately something of a hybrid "world environment" in which the figures of the global appear condensed within a confined space.

In conclusion I would like to return to examining the extent to which Saer's work may be considered a revisionist fictional *réécriture* of a "spatiality of madness" alongside Michel Foucault. It is not so much the end of Saer's story, the

ultimate delivery of the patients to the psychiatric institute, that matters in this regard. Rather, it is the delayed arrival and the in-between-space unfolding on the way to Buenos Aires through which this alternative history of madness is told. In place of a pure transformation of the strictly drawn boundaries that separate the “inside” of reason and the “outside” of madness – on which Foucault’s epistemology is based – Saer’s novel features a fictional scenario that initiates the demarcation of precisely these limits, embedding madness within an aquatic environment. This *milieu* parallels remarkably the Foucauldian description of a pre-modern form of madness to which he ascribes a “liquidité essentielle”, an essential liquidity and also a metonymic neighbourhood to aquatic environments in a short text from 1963.<sup>31</sup> Saer returns to this connection between water and madness and, thereby, reflects a pre-modern “placelessness”. At the same time, he transforms the modern theory of environments as *milieus* into a concrete fictional situation by inventing a specific narrative plot (the deferred fictional foundation of the first modern madhouse in Argentina at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and a specific transfer of a primal scene of modern the European epistemology of reason to the shores of the Paraná river in Argentina.

### 3. Environments and literary situations

The goal of this article has been to demonstrate that the selected novels of César Aira and Juan José Saer provide not just a literary counter-discourse to the political dimensions of foundational discourses: accordingly, the two works do not simply serve a predetermined historical context, nor do they constitute a self-contained fictional world which succeeds in positioning itself as a “counter-world”. Rather, they suggest the possible formation of “environments” as a surrounding world that emerges from the literary texts themselves.<sup>32</sup> In order to avoid reducing “geography” to a given earth surface as if it were a purely natural landscape, the conceptualization of such environments needs to be considered inseparable from their manifestation in geographic situations, that is, environments must be understood in relation to their bio-spherical or bio-technical situations. To what extent this form of situation-formation is a specific achievement of literary texts has been demonstrated by examining how two novels from the 1990s transform the geographic space of the Argentinean Pampa. The traditional “emptying” of the

---

<sup>31</sup> M. Foucault continues to state that, on the contrary, water was administered in the nineteenth century as shock therapy the form of cold showering to combat insanity (1994: 268).

<sup>32</sup> On such a conception of fictional environments in opposition to the traditional distinction between text and context see R. Lüdeke: “Reading Practice”.

Pampa into a desert, or its becoming a projection space for the acts and discourses of national-state founding, is superseded by an assemblage of complex structures; this assemblage emerges either from a complex network of spatial-temporal relations (as in César Aira's journey through a family genealogy oscillating between European and indigenous backgrounds), or from the establishment of aquatic environments which dissolve the boundary between inside and outside, between reason and madness (as in Juan José Saer's *milieu* experiment with the "whims of the climate").

Fictional forms of situation-formation are not merely self-contained literary worlds, doubling, as it were, the "real" world without any claim to validity; rather, they are worlds on which the entire structure of the "extra-literary" world is based.<sup>33</sup> The fact that fictional worlds wander through "traversable" spaces can be seen in the example of the two novels: both in Aira and in Saer's abstract topological relations (for example, the genealogical ties between family relatives or the demarcation of the boundary between reason and madness) are connected to their re-territorialization in more or less concrete, topographically describable places, or to movements of travel. However, as I have attempted to show, not only does this nexus leave its mark in writing the history of a specific region, such as the "Argentinean history"; in both novels, the Pampa also becomes an experimental space of transformation enabling the manifestation and transformation of theoretical concepts of space. Far from functioning simply as mere post-modern allegories of specific theoretical notions of space, "illustrating," as it were, the nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari or Foucault's thinking of the "outside", they demonstrate that spatial concepts such as "lines of flight", or "the boundaries between inside and outside", are inconceivable without their persistent conversion into concrete topographies. This conversion can shed a new light on the appropriation and transformation of key concepts of European cultural theory in Latin America through literary fiction as a specific version of what the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama has called "narrative transculturation" (1982).

## Bibliography

Aira, César (1981): *Ema la cautiva*, Buenos Aires: Belgrano.

Aira, César [1991] (1993): *La liebre*, Buenos Aires: Emecé [English translation (2013): *The Hare*, trans. Nick Caistor, New York: New Directions].

Aira, César (2000): *Un episodio en la vida del pintor viajero*, Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.

---

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Latour describes the character of "beings of fiction" as a limitation of both the "modes of existence", fiction and reference [FIC • REF] (2013: 250–252).

- Andermann, Jens (2000): *Mapas de poder. Una arqueología literaria del espacio argentino*, Rosario/Berlin: Beatriz Viterbo/edition tranvía.
- Appadurai, Arjun [1996] (2000): *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Certeau, Michel de (1978): *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Contreras, Sandra (2002): *Las vueltas de César Aira*, Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.
- Darwin, Charles [1839] (1845): *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H. M. S. Beagle Round the World, Under the Command of Capt. FitzRoy*, London: Murray.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1969): *Logique du sens*, Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, Gilles/Félix Guattari (1980): *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie II*, Paris: Minuit.
- Dünne, Jörg (2015): "Dynamisierungen: Bewegung und Situationsbildungen", in: J.D; Mahler, Andreas (eds.): *Handbuch Literatur & Raum*, Berlin et al.: De Gruyter, pp. 41–54.
- Echeverría, Esteban [1837] (2001): *La cautiva*, ed. Leonor Fleming, Madrid: Cátedra.
- Foucault, Michel (1972): *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel [1963] (1994): "L'eau et la folie", in: M.F.: *Dits et écrits*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, Paris: Gallimard, vol. 1, pp. 268–272.
- Halperín Donghi, Tulio (1982): *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina.
- Hernández, José [1872-9] (2007): *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, ed. Luis Sáinz de Medrano, Madrid: Cátedra.
- Ingold, Tim (2007): *Lines. A Brief History*, London et al.: Routledge.
- Kristal, Efraín (1999): "Captive in the Wilderness: An Argentine Adaptation of an Anglo-Saxon Image", in: Frank, Armin Paul; Essmann, Helga (eds.): *The Internationality of National Literatures in Either America: Transfer and Transformation*, Göttingen: Wallstein, vol. 1, pp. 215–230.
- Latour, Bruno (1986): "Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together", in: Kuklick, Henrika (ed.): *Knowledge and Society. Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, 1986, pp. 1–40.
- Latour, Bruno (2013): *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lüdeke, Roger (2015): "Reading Practice in Narrative Environments. Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*", *Poetica* 47.1–2, pp. 25–50.
- Ludmer, Josefina (2000): *El género gauchesco. Un tratado sobre la patria*, Buenos Aires: Libros Perfil.
- Podgorny, Irina (2009): *El sendero del tiempo y de las causas accidentales. Los espacios de la prehistoria en la Argentina, 1850-1910*, Rosario: Prohistoria.
- Rabasa, José (1993): *Inventing America. Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*, Norman/London: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Rama Ángel (1982): *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI.
- Rodríguez, Fermín (2010): *Un desierto para la nación. La escritura del vacío*, Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia.
- Saer, Juan José (1988): *La ocasión*, Barcelona: Destino.
- Saer, Juan José (1991): *El río sin orillas*, Madrid: Alianza.
- Saer, Juan José [1997] (2002): *Las nubes*. Barcelona: Muchnik [English translation (2016): *The Clouds*, trans. Hilary Vaughn Dobel, Rochester: Open Letter].
- Sarlo, Beatriz (1995): *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, Buenos Aires: Ariel.

- Sarlo, Beatriz (2007): “En el origen de la cultura argentina: Europa y el Desierto”, en: B.S.: *Escritos sobre literatura argentina*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, pp. 25–29.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino (1990/1845): *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie*, ed. Roberto Yahni, Madrid: Cátedra.
- Schmitt, Carl (1997/1950): *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- Serres, Michel (1980): “Solides, Fluides, Flammes”, in: M.S.: *Hermès V. Le Passage du Nord-Ouest*, Paris. Minuit, pp. 40–66.
- Sommer, Doris (1991): *Foundational Fictions. The National Romances of Latin America*, Berkeley et al.: University of California Press.
- Spitzer, Leo (1942): “Milieu and Ambiance. An Essay in Historical Semantics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3.1, pp. 1–42, and 3.2, pp. 169–218.
- Torre, Claudia (2010): *Literatura en tránsito: la narrativa expedicionaria de la Conquista del desierto*, Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- Víñas, David (1982): *Indios, ejército y frontera*, Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI.